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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US-Russian military talks prove useful

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — U.S.-Russian talks on their separate fights against the Islamic State group are improving and becoming more frequent, American officials said, with each side trading information in real time and even outlining some of their strategic objectives in the months ahead. The progress dispels the notion that ties between the former Cold War foes are “frozen.”

In the discussions, Russia has made clear its counterterrorism priority in Syria is retaking the ancient city of Palmyra, officials said. The U.S. is determined to pressure the Islamic State group’s headquarters in

the Syrian city of Raqqa.

The closer contacts have developed despite the former Cold War foes’ bitter accusations against one another over the devastation in Aleppo and Moscow’s claim that relations are now “frozen on all practical levels.”

The confidential military discussions aren’t focusing on the two countries’ opposing positions in Syria’s civil war, where Russia is fighting alongside the government and the United States has backed rebel groups, officials said.

But U.S. officials with knowledge of the ongoing conversations are crediting both sides with putting aside much of the

public animosity, which has included Washington’s accusations of Russian war crimes in Aleppo and Moscow’s charges of American support for terrorist groups such as al-Qaida.

Much of the talk has concerned the two nations’ immediate operations.

Since Dec. 15, the U.S.-led coalition has conducted airstrikes on about two dozen locations around Palmyra, destroying air defense weapons, tanks, aircraft shelters, storage bunkers and other vehicles and equipment. At the same time, U.S. and Russian officials having been ensuring that the two militaries’ don’t cross paths in the airspace above the city that Islamic State militants seized

for the second time earlier this month, and that American strikes don’t mistakenly hit Russian or Syrian forces.

But the talks have gone beyond the granular and even touched on broader U.S. and Russian plans, according to several U.S. officials, who weren’t authorized to speak publicly on the confidential discussions and demanded anonymity.

The Russians have spelled out that after they retake Palmyra, they want to move on Islamic State militants congregated in Deir el-Zour, a city closer to the Iraqi border. Succeeding in Deir el-Zour, according to one U.S. official, could take Russia several months.

Groups concerned commissary reforms could hurt markets

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Commissary-brand pasta sauce or breakfast cereal? It could be a reality for military shoppers next year.

New products with commissary labels along with new pricing on staples such as bananas, milk and soda are set to begin hitting store shelves in May. About 1,000 new items will be rolled out by the end of 2017.

The changes will mean new choices and some deals for shoppers. But they also signal a profound transformation of commissaries behind the scenes — a shift that groups representing troops and manufacturers worry could fail and imperil the on-base supermarkets.

Commissaries will for the first time try to make a profit by selling to military shoppers as part of a new business model being rolled out to save the global chain of 238 stores, which has

seen falling sales for four years straight and is facing increasing pressure to slash its budget.

“Without lower commissary operating costs, we believe the future of the benefit is at risk,” Chris Burns, executive director for business transformation at the Defense Commissary Agency, said in a statement to Stars and Stripes.

The agency’s solution is to begin operating like off-base competitors such as Wal-Mart and Albertsons to cover its \$1.4 billion annual funding. That means aggressively pressing manufacturers to reduce costs, introducing a wide range of its own products and shifting prices at the local level.

If the test is deemed a success over at least six months, the Defense Department can permanently cut off commissaries’ annual federal funding and let the stores subsist on profits, according to a law passed this month by Congress.

It is a risky move for the

military community — troops, families, retirees and disabled veterans — that depends on the stores, said Eileen Huck, government relations deputy director for the National Military Family Association.

“If you break this system, how possible is it going to be to right the ship?” Huck said. “This is an entirely new business model.”

For shoppers, the changes will bring a raft of new products beginning in May. The Defense Commissary Agency says its polling found about 60 percent of commissary customers say they would buy store-branded products. Many commercial grocery stores sell their own products that compete with well-known national name brands and typically sell for less.

Some shoppers will also see lower prices on staples such as bananas, milk, detergent and soda in a move to make those products more competitive with off-base grocery store prices. But some name-brand

products will be pushed from commissary shelves and prices will increase on others, the Defense Commissary Agency has acknowledged.

Huck said shoppers could be turned off by the changing product selection and shifting prices and could abandon on-base grocery shopping, opting to go outside the gate.

“First of all, I think families will notice when private-label [commissary] products are introduced, especially if there is not room on the shelves for some of the national products that have been there,” Huck said.

An exodus of shoppers could spell trouble for other military businesses and recreation programs.

“If shoppers buy groceries at locations other than commissaries, they won’t shop their exchanges as often,” Mike Immler, deputy director of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service, wrote in an email to Stars and Stripes.

Latest littoral combat ship set for '17 commissioning

Associated Press

MOBILE, Ala. — The Navy's latest littoral combat ship has completed testing in the Gulf of Mexico and is set for commissioning in the middle of next year.

Constructed by Austal USA in Mobile, Alabama, the \$475 million USS Gabrielle Giffords was handed over to the Navy on Friday.

Giffords, the former Arizona congresswoman who was shot in the head during an assassination attempt in 2011, helped christen the ship in 2015.

It's part of a hotly debated program that congressional critics slam as flawed and too expensive but that Navy lead-

ers defend as a critical new step in naval warfighting.

The 421-foot-long Giffords will be the ninth in a series of high-speed vessels designed to navigate in shallow coastal regions known as littoral waters. Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has cited the \$12.4 billion spent for 26 littoral combat ships as the worst example of wasteful Pentagon spending.

The ship's name also has become a target for conservatives who see it as promoting stricter gun laws, a cause Giffords has promoted.

Some critics lampooned the ship as being gun-free, a bit of parody and fake news that was debunked on snopes.com.

The Navy said it chose to

name the ship in honor of Giffords because of the perseverance she showed after the shooting.

"Courage comes in many, many forms — physical, mental, spiritual and political. Gabby has truly modeled courage and resilience," Vice Admiral Philip Cullom said at the christening ceremony.

Constructed from aluminum and featuring a distinctive trimaran design, the Giffords is armed with missiles, machine guns and fast-firing weapons designed to hit a variety of targets.

Its normal crew of 40 sailors and officers can be supplemented as needed for missions.

Recorder in Russian air crash found

Associated Press

SOCHI, Russia — Rescue workers on Tuesday found a flight recorder from the Russian plane that crashed into the Black Sea over the weekend, the Defense Ministry said.

All 92 people aboard the Russian military's Tu-154 plane are believed to have died Sunday morning when it crashed two minutes after taking off from the southern Russian city of Sochi. The 84 passengers included dozens of singers from Russia's world-famous military choir who were going to the Russian Air Force base in Syria to perform at a New Year's concert.

The Defense Ministry said in a statement that one of the flight recorders was found early Tuesday morning about a mile away from the shore. State television showed footage of rescue workers on an inflatable boat carrying a container with a bright-orange object submerged in water. The ministry said the "black box" would be immediately flown to Moscow.

Mourners on Tuesday continued to bring flowers to the pier of Sochi's seaport as 3,500 people, 45 ships and 192 divers swept the vast crash site for bodies of the victims and debris. Rescue teams so far have recovered 12 bodies and numerous body fragments.

Divers found fragments of the fuselage, parts of the engine and various mechanical parts overnight, the Defense Ministry said.

Officials still have not announced the cause of the crash, but they have been anxious to squelch speculation that it might have been caused by a bomb planted on board or a portable air defense missile.

But some aviation experts have noted that the crew's failure to communicate any technical problem and the large area over which fragments of the plane were scattered point to a possible explosion on board.

Okinawa runway work resumes

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND CHIYOMI SUMIDA

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Work resumed Tuesday on a controversial new U.S. military runway after local opposition shut down the project for 10 months.

Workers began preparing to reset floats around the construction area in Oura Bay at Henoko, according to Okinawa Defense Bureau officials.

The move came a day Gov. Takeshi Onaga abided by Japanese court rulings and retracted his cancellation order on a landfill permit for the runway. The permit was issued by his predecessor as part of the process of closing Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and relocating it to Camp Schwab.

"In accordance with the final decision by the Supreme Court, the government will carry out the landfill work," Japan's

Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga said Monday. "To reduce the burden and potential danger associated with the military presence, as well as maintaining its deterrence power, moving the operations to Henoko is the only solution."

Onaga revoked the permit in October 2015. The Japanese government temporarily suspended construction in March while his actions went to arbitration, then the courts.

In September, the Fukuoka High Court ruled that the permit revocation was illegal. Onaga appealed to Japan's Supreme Court, which let the high court ruling stand last week.

Onaga called for dialogue with Tokyo before work resumed. That didn't happen.

"Now, I've returned to the starting line and I have renewed my resolve to never allow them to build a new military base at Henoko," he told

reporters Monday.

Onaga often calls the project a "new" base. It actually is expansion of an existing base.

"I have other authorities as governor that could influence the project," he said. "If no consideration is given to Okinawa, I have no alternative but to take a hardline attitude."

Onaga released a 13-point plan earlier this month laying out other ways he could block or delay the project. The list included other permits that are likely to cross his desk, surveys of soil pollution and buried cultural property, a review of environmental protection measures and tests on soil brought from outside the prefecture.

Onaga won election by promising to shutter Futenma, block construction at Henoko, relocate Marine air operations off island and remove MV-22 Osprey helicopter-plane hybrids from Okinawa.

Fighters near Syria dam held by militants

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Kurdish-led fighters are approaching a strategic dam controlled by the Islamic State group in northern Syria after days of fighting that killed a senior Islamic State military commander, a spokesman for the U.S.-backed forces and others said Tuesday.

Talal Sillo, of the Syria Democratic Forces, said the fighters, with the support of U.S., French and British special forces, have driven the Islamic State from dozens of villages and farms in recent days and are now about 3 miles from the Euphrates Dam.

The SDF, a coalition of Kurdish and Arab fighters, has been on the offensive in Raqqa province since early November,

advancing with the aid of U.S.-led airstrikes. The operation is aimed at encircling and eventually retaking Raqqa, the de facto capital of the extremist group's self-declared caliphate.

The city is home to nearly 200,000 mostly Sunni Arabs and an estimated 5,000 Islamic State fighters.

"The ongoing operation is the second phase west of Raqqa," Sillo said, adding that the first phase was north of the city. "More phases will come later to isolate the city and then to begin liberating it."

The capture of the dam, which controls the flow of water to parts of Syria and neighboring Iraq, would deal a major blow to the extremist group, which has held the facility for more

than two years. Behind the dam lies Lake Assad, which at 247 square miles, is Syria's largest reservoir.

Both sides claim to have inflicted heavy casualties on the other. The Islamic State-linked Amaq news agency reported Monday that 24 SDF fighters were killed in the area, while Sillo said his forces had killed dozens of extremists.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights said the fate of a top Islamic State military commander known as Abu Jandal al-Kuwaiti is still unknown after he was targeted by U.S.-led coalition aircraft. The Syrian army said Abu Jandal was killed fighting in the Tabqa area near the dam. Islamic State supporters on so-

cial media confirmed he was killed.

The U.S. Central Command said coalition aircraft conducted nine strikes near the city of Raqqa on Monday that engaged three Islamic State tactical units, destroying vehicles rigged with explosives, a bridge, a fighting position, and a supply cache. It said two airstrikes near the Ein Issa area to the north of Raqqa hit two Islamic State tactical units and destroyed two fighting positions.

Sillo said that in recent days, the SDF has captured 502 square miles. He said their next target is the town of Tabqa, home to a military base where Islamic State fighters killed scores of captured Syrian troops in 2014.

Did Afghan vice president go too far?

The Washington Post

KABUL — For 30 years, Gen. Abdurrashid Dostum has reigned as northern Afghanistan's untouchable warrior-king: first as a ruthless pro-communist general, later as an armed U.S. ally against the Taliban and finally as a reliable, if unsavory, political boss who could deliver votes from his ethnic Uzbek followers.

Dostum has long been infamous for his cruelty. He has reportedly ordered tanks driven over enemies' legs and been accused of suffocating hundreds of Taliban prisoners in sealed truck containers. He is also known for violent and abusive rages. But none of the accusations ever landed him in serious trouble. He was either too intimidating, or too important, to challenge.

Now, Dostum may have gone too far.

His latest alleged victim, a 63-year-old former provincial governor named Ahmad Ishchi, has accused Dostum on television of imprisoning him, beating him and ordering him raped in November. Ishchi has also submitted to medical tests at a U.S. military hospital. This time, Dostum, 62, is not a war-

lord but the first vice president of a government backed by the United States and Europe — a heartbeat away from replacing President Ashraf Ghani.

And this time, Afghans nationwide — including members of Dostum's once-quiet Uzbek minority — are reacting with outrage. Social media has exploded with unprintable jokes and images of Ghani and his aides wearing steel trousers. The burly strongman, who long controlled a strategic border region with Central Asia and publicly forced supplicants to kiss his hand, has become a national embarrassment.

Ghani, a former World Bank official, is under pressure from Western donors to prosecute Dostum and suspend him from office. Many Afghan analysts are calling this a make-or-break chance for Ghani to install the rule of law in a society where warlord culture has long prevailed. The attorney general announced last week that the allegations are being investigated "professionally" and "neutrally."

"If Dostum is not arrested, it will be a huge dishonor, and the government will lose all credibility," said Akbar Bai,

70, an Uzbek businessman who claimed he was beaten by Dostum in a drunken outburst in 2006. The incident ended with police surrounding the former general's house in Kabul for months until he finally agreed to fly into exile in Turkey.

Many Afghans are skeptical that Ghani will be able to bring the former warlord to justice. His government has been weakened by internal divisions and a perceived lack of legitimacy, with legislative elections delayed repeatedly. That has made it vulnerable to pressure from outside groups, several of which are led by other powerful ex-militia leaders, including rivals of Dostum.

The president, who took power in 2014 promising to reform and modernize Afghan democracy, is also haunted by his own political compromises. He once denounced Dostum as a war criminal but then invited him to join his presidential ticket in a bid to secure the Uzbek vote. His predecessor, President Hamid Karzai, had also courted Dostum's support despite the allegations of battlefield atrocities.

Iraq: Reporter snatched from home by gunmen

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Unidentified gunmen broke into the house of a female journalist and activist in Baghdad late Monday night and kidnapped her, Iraq's Interior Ministry said on Tuesday, a reminder of the dangers journalists face in a country where authorities have struggled to maintain security nationwide.

The ministry's statement didn't give details on the circumstances surrounding the abduction of Afrah Shawqi al-Qaisi from her house in Baghdad's southwestern Saydiyah neighborhood. It called on residents to report any information that might benefit the investigation.

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi ordered the security forces to investigate the kidnapping and to "exert the utmost effort" to save her.

Al-Qaisi, a veteran journalist and an employee of the Iraqi Culture Ministry, is considered one of the critics of the country's endemic corruption.

Trump: UN just a club for people to have 'good time'

By VIVIAN SALAMA
Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — Donald Trump is questioning the effectiveness of the United Nations, saying it's just a club for people to "have a good time," after the U.N. Security Council voted last week to condemn Israeli settlements in the West Bank and east Jerusalem. The president-elect wrote Monday on Twitter that the U.N. has "such great potential," but it has become "just a club for people to get together, talk and have a good time. So sad!"

On Friday, Trump warned, "As to the U.N., things will be different after Jan. 20th," referring to the day he takes office.

The decision by the Obama administration to abstain from Friday's U.N. vote brushed aside Trump's demands that the U.S. exercise its veto and provided a climax to years of icy relations with Israel's leadership.

That was only one subject on which Trump tweeted Monday. In an evening post, he wrote that he believes his election as president has boosted the economy.

"The world was gloomy before I won — there was no hope," he said in a verified post on his Twitter account. "Now, the market is up nearly 10 percent and Christmas spending is over a trillion dollars."

Markets are up since Trump won the general election, although not quite by that much. The Standard & Poor's 500 is up about 6 percent since Election Day, while the Dow has risen more than 8 percent.

As for holiday spending, auditing and accounting firm Deloitte projected in September that total 2016 holiday sales were expected to exceed \$1 trillion, representing a 3.6 percent to 4 percent increase in holiday sales from November through January.

Trump also used social media to complain anew about criticism of the Donald J. Trump Foundation. In one post, he said, "The DJT Foundation, unlike most foundations, never paid fees, rent, salaries or any expenses. 100% of the money goes to wonderful charities."

Trump had said Saturday that he wanted to dissolve his charitable foundation amid ef-

orts to eliminate any conflicts of interest before he takes office next month.

On the Middle East, Trump told The Associated Press last December that he wanted to be "very neutral" on Israel-Palestinian issues. But his tone became decidedly more pro-Israel as the presidential campaign progressed. He has spoken disparagingly of Palestinians, saying they have been "taken over" by or are condoning militant groups.

Trump's tweet Monday about the U.N. ignores much of the work that goes on in the 193-member global organization.

This year, the U.N. Security Council has approved over 70 legally binding resolutions, including new sanctions on North Korea and measures tackling conflicts and authorizing the U.N.'s far-flung peacekeeping operations around the world.

The General Assembly also has approved dozens of resolutions on issues such as the role of diamonds in fueling conflicts; human rights abuses in Iran and North Korea; and alleged war crimes in Syria.

Mall brawls send patrons scrambling

Associated Press

BEACHWOOD, Ohio — Fights broke out at malls around the country Monday night sending shoppers, who were looking for post-holiday deals, scrambling for the exits.

No one was seriously injured in the mall melees which, during the panic, also prompted numerous false reports of gunfire.

Police in Ohio told Cleveland.com that officers used pepper spray to disperse a large crowd following a fight at an upscale shopping mall in Beachwood, just outside Cleveland.

A report of shots fired was later determined to be unfounded.

One male juvenile was arrested for allegedly trying to hit an officer during the incident, which police said appeared to have been "loosely organized on social media."

There were similar disturbances at malls around the country including in New York, New Jersey and North Carolina, where chaos erupted at a mall in Fayetteville and emergency medical personnel were called in to assist someone who had a medical episode while fleeing.

In Memphis, Tenn., police arrested several people following fights at two malls there. No one was injured and no gunshots were fired, despite reports indicating otherwise.

"Somebody yelled 'gun!' and youths stampeded through the mall," Deputy Chief Terry Landrum told The Commercial Appeal.

In suburban Denver, police evacuated a mall Monday after an arrest led to hundreds of young people converging on the site, with several fights breaking out, authorities said.

No one was seriously injured but five juveniles were arrested at the Town Center at Aurora, police spokesman Sgt. Chris Amsler said.

There was no official word on whether any of the fights, which were also reported in Arizona, Texas, Indiana and Connecticut, were connected.

Cell service considered for Mount Rainier

Associated Press

SEATTLE — On a recent snowshoeing trip on Mount Rainier, Nancy Spears brought her cellphone along but was happy not to have coverage. It gave her time to connect with her snowy surroundings rather than her social media accounts.

Spotty or no cellular service has been the norm at the nation's fifth-oldest park south of Seattle but that could change soon.

Mount Rainier National Park is considering proposals by two carriers to provide cellular service in the park, setting off

debates about whether people enjoying the park and surrounding wilderness areas should have access to calls, Facebook, Instagram and other technology while communing with nature.

Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile have applied for permits to install telecommunications equipment on the visitor center at Paradise, one of most heavily used areas in the park. No towers would be built; antennas would be located below the roofline of the visitor's center. There are currently no cellular installations in the park.

Some say cell service would

improve safety and provide a convenience for visitors. Others don't want it, saying the proliferation of phones will distract from the natural beauty of the surroundings.

Spears, a Seattle nurse, has mixed feelings. For safety reasons, she'd like to call for help if needed. But the 33-year-old, who grew up with the internet, also appreciates time away from it.

Park officials say they are required by federal law to consider all telecommunications proposals on park lands.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Couple has baby on Christmas Day, again

CO DENVER — A Colorado couple welcomed the birth of a baby on Christmas Day — again.

Meghan and Tony Bader's daughter, Caroline, was born Sunday at Sky Ridge Medical Center in Lone Tree, exactly two years after her big brother, Benjamin.

Tony Bader, of Centennial, told The Denver Post they're trying to figure out how they'll wrap celebrating Christmas and two birthdays into one day. For now, they're thinking of having smaller "birthday trees" for Benjamin and Caroline with half the day devoted to Christmas and half the day devoted to their birthdays.

They're also considering letting the kids pick a second "birthday" for celebrations with classmates and friends.

ATM stolen early Christmas Day

IA ROCKWELL — Authorities said an ATM was stolen from a Rockwell bank early on Christmas Day.

The Mason City Globe Gazette reported that the ATM was taken from First Security Bank a little after 3 a.m. Sunday. The Cerro Gordo County Sheriff's Office reported that the bank property sustained extensive damage.

Nosey bear 'interacts' with cars on road

WI GLEASON — Motorists in northern Wisconsin had an encounter with a nosey bear that would look into their cars.

The Lincoln County Sheriff's Department said a state trooper responded Friday after sev-

eral callers reported the bear was walking around on a state Highway 17 north of Gleason and "interacting with traffic."

The trooper found the bear would stand on his hind legs and peer into passing cars.

Wild Instincts, a Rhinelander-based nonprofit animal rehabilitation center, was contacted and transported the bear to its facility. The center said the 90-pound bear is about 2 years old.

The bear will be allowed to hibernate at Wild Instincts for the rest of the winter and will be evaluated in the spring.

Number of permits for concealed carry rises

OH COLUMBUS — The number of concealed-carry permits issued by the state of Ohio this year is on pace to far exceed the number of permits issued in 2015.

Records from the Ohio Attorney General's Office shows nearly 94,000 permits were issued through the first nine months of 2016. That's compared with 51,000 for the same period last year and 72,000 for all of 2015.

Jim Irvine, of the Buckeye Firearms Association, told The Columbus Dispatch that concealed carry has become "mainstream" in Ohio, with 574,000 active permits.

Suspected thief caught after swimming river

NH MANCHESTER — Manchester Police say a suspect in a theft from a department store swam across the Merrimack River while fleeing state and local officers before being apprehended.

Manchester police responded Friday night after Bedford police reported a suspect who was

being detained about a possible theft from a store had fled and his tracks led to the Merrimack River.

Manchester police began searching on their side of the river after a resident reported a man had just come up from the river, which is almost 600 feet wide in the area.

Police said the suspect, Timothy Winslow, 22, of Manchester, was soaking wet when apprehended early Saturday.

Chinese symbols mark fake US money

IA MASON CITY — Fake American money marked with Chinese symbols has been showing up in Mason City.

The Mason City Police Department said last week that bills were found at a business and in a bank deposit. Officials said the bills are not valid currency and are typically used to train bank tellers in China.

The fake bills also have been reported in the Sioux City area.

Trump rally tree will be made into birdhouses

AL MOBILE — Alabama officials say a tree cut down in a city park and used as a prop at President-elect Donald Trump's recent rally will be used to build cat scratching posts and birdhouses.

Colby Cooper apologized for his role in having the large cedar tree cut down and decorated for Christmas. Cooper is chief of staff for Mobile Mayor Sandy Stimson.

Cooper said he was "overzealous" in trying to meet expectations of Trump's team for the president-elect's Dec. 17 "thank you" rally.

City officials said Thursday the tree branches will be given to Girl Scouts so they can create

cat scratching posts for animal shelters. The city said the tree trunk will go to Boy Scouts to make bluebird houses and bird feeders for nursing homes and assisted living facilities.

Woman who stole from league gets jail

MI THREE OAKS — The former treasurer of a baseball league in a small Michigan town has been sent to jail for stealing \$37,000.

Meanwhile, the Three Oaks Baseball Association is holding bake sales and scrambling to raise money to buy uniforms for the next season.

Amanda Macias was sentenced to six months in jail Thursday in Berrien County. Judge Scott Schofield said she stole "from the children of Three Oaks."

Love of sewing patterns leads to big collection

RI SOUTH KINGSTOWN — If a costume designer wanted to recreate a World War I era wraparound dress, a 1940s zoot suit or even a bodice from 1875, the sewing patterns are in Rhode Island.

The University of Rhode Island has the largest known collection of sewing patterns in the world, experts say.

About 50,000 are on paper and 62,000 are in an electronic database. They're at the university because of Joy Spanabel Emery's love of patterns. A former costume designer, she donated her personal collection of patterns and periodicals to the university years ago.

This year, the United States Institute for Theatre Technology honored Emery for her unique archive.

From wire reports

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After loss, Lions in must-win situation

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Texas — Matthew Stafford moved on quickly from another loss to his hometown team.

The Detroit quarterback was already thinking about his home field, where the Lions will play Green Bay for the NFC North title in the regular-season finale Sunday after missing a chance to clinch a playoff spot in a 42-21 loss to the Dallas Cowboys.

“If we get a win, we win the division and get a home playoff game,” said Stafford, who lost Monday night on the same field where he dropped to 0-2 in the playoffs with a wild-card loss two years ago. “That’s the focus right now, and I can just see it standing right there.”

The Lions (9-6) lost a second straight game coming off five consecutive victories, with Dez Bryant throwing his first career touchdown pass between a pair of scoring catches while rookie sensation Ezekiel Elliott rushed for two more TDs for the Cowboys (13-2).

Dallas, which tied a franchise record for wins reached two other times, had already

clinched the top seed in the NFC.

Detroit faces a short week after a long flight home, looking to avenge a 34-27 loss at the Packers in Week 3. Green Bay (9-6) has won five straight.

“I know it’s a long trip back home, but by the time we land, we’d better start thinking about Green Bay,” said coach Jim Caldwell, looking for his second playoff trip in three seasons with the Lions. “Guys are hurting right now. It’s a huge game, but I think our guys are resilient.”

Stafford, a championship-winning high school quarterback in the Dallas area, had a 1-yard scoring plunge, but was sacked four times — matching a season high.

He was 26-for-46 for 260 yards, including an interception that set up Elliott’s 1-yard touchdown run early in the third quarter to break a 21-all halftime tie.

“We’ve got a one-game season left at our house against a club that we know really well,” said tight end Eric Ebron, who had game highs with eight catches for 93 yards. “That’s our only focus right now.”

Takeaways from the Cowboys’ first win in the regular season against the Lions since 2010:

Dazzling Dez: Before his lefty lob to 14th-year tight end Jason Witten for an easy 10-yard touchdown and a 35-21 lead on a trick play, Bryant made a juggling 25-yard catch in the end zone while fighting off pass interference by Johnson Bademosi.

It was the 66th touchdown receiving for Bryant, breaking a tie for second with Hall of Famer Michael Irvin on the club’s career list. He added his 67th in the second half, putting him four behind another Hall of Famer, Bob Hayes. “Dez is like a little brother to me,” Witten said. “I’ve told you guys how proud I am of him and who he’s become.”

Vanishing run: Detroit’s 29th-ranked rushing offense got a career-high 64 yards and two touchdowns from Zach Zenger in the first half against the NFL’s top rushing defense and the only one that hasn’t allowed a 100-yard rusher this season. But he had just two carries for 3 yards after halftime. The Lions could use that first-half

balance against the Packers.

“I think a lot of it was situational, just the way the game was going as far as having to throw the ball more,” said Zenger, a little-used second-year player from South Dakota State. “And I don’t need an explanation.”

Elliott’s chase: The NFL rushing leader had a 55-yard touchdown and finished with 80 yards on 12 carries. He needs 178 yards in the finale to break Eric Dickerson’s 33-year-old rookie rushing record of 1,808 yards. He’s up to 15 touchdowns, two behind league-leading LeGarrette Blount of New England. “I always want to be out there, but I always know there is a bigger plan,” Elliott said. “You don’t want to risk anything.”

Missing piece: Detroit cornerback Darius Slay was out with a hamstring injury that also sidelined him for two games in November. It hurt the Lions against Bryant, and it could be an issue if he’s not back against Aaron Rodgers and Jordy Nelson. “I never look at it as who we miss and all of those things,” Caldwell said. “I talk about the guys we have.”

Bills fire Ryan with one game remaining in the season

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — The Bills fired coach Rex Ryan on Tuesday, ahead of their last game of the season after he failed to lead Buffalo to the playoffs.

Bills officials announced Ryan’s firing on Twitter on Tuesday, after a Week 16 loss to the Dolphins dropped the Bills to 7-8 and officially eliminated the team from playoff contention. The loss extended the NFL’s longest active playoff drought to 17 seasons.

Assistant head coach and offensive coordinator Anthony Lynn takes over as the interim, and is expected to be a candidate to replace Ryan on a full-time basis. The Bills close the

season in a meaningless game on Sunday at the New York Jets (4-11).

Lynn is a longtime Ryan assistant and was promoted to offensive coordinator after Ryan fired Greg Roman following an 0-2 start.

Ryan was 15-16 in two seasons with Buffalo.

The Bills also said on Twitter that Ryan’s brother, Rob Ryan, was fired from his position as an assistant head coach with the responsibility to oversee defense. Rob was hired in January to improve a defense that finished 19th in the NFL last year.

Rex Ryan came to Buffalo saying this would be his last job after six seasons with the Jets.

The Bills owners, Terry and

Kim Pegula, hired Ryan as a defensive specialist with the belief that he could bring the team back to relevance.

Buffalo’s drought is tied for the fifth-longest in league history, and the longest since the New Orleans Saints failed to make the playoffs during their first 20 NFL seasons (1967-86).

The Pegulas are now on their third head coach since October 2014, when they finalized purchasing the Bills from the estate of late Hall of Fame owner Ralph Wilson.

Ryan replaced Doug Marrone, who opted out of his contract following a 9-7 finish in 2014.

The Pegulas made the decision to fire Ryan after attending Saturday’s game and

then spending Christmas at their second home in the Adirondacks.

Though Buffalo’s offense has featured the NFL’s top running attacks over the past two seasons, Ryan was undone by his failings on defense, which was supposed to be his specialty.

Last year, the Bills finished 19th in yards allowed — the worst ranking for Ryan in his 11 years as a head coach or coordinator. Buffalo also managed just 21 sacks, a franchise-low for a 16-game season, and after the defense led the NFL with 54 the previous season under coordinator Jim Schwartz.

The defense has underperformed once again this year, despite Ryan’s offseason vows that it would be improved.

BC builds big lead, holds off Maryland

Associated Press

DETROIT — Boston College blew a fourth-quarter lead in a loss to Georgia Tech in its season opener in Ireland. In the Eagles' finale, they showed they had learned how to hold on for a victory.

Patrick Towles threw two touchdown passes and caught a pass for a score in the first half, helping Boston College beat Maryland 36-30 in the Quick Lane Bowl on Monday.

The Eagles (7-6) led by 16 at halftime, 23 points early in the third quarter and then had to force Maryland to turn the ball over on downs late in the game to seal their first bowl victory since beating Michigan State at the 2007 Champs Sports Bowl.

"We started to really develop a resolve that you see in the players' eyes," Boston College coach Steve Addazio said. "The most critical thing in building your program is having that. And, I really believe we have finally set that platform forward and that's the most exciting

thing to me of all."

Maryland (6-7) had the ball at its 35 with 1:48 left with a chance to drive for a go-ahead TD.

"That's all you can ask for," Maryland coach DJ Durkin said. "You'll take that in any game."

But the Terrapins didn't gain a yard before Harold Landry helped finish them off with a possession-ending sack.

Maryland made some big plays on offense, but four turnovers, eight sacks allowed, 11 penalties and poor field position proved to be costly. In the first half, Perry Hills threw an interception, lost a fumble and was sacked four times. On the Terrapins' first snap of the second half, Hills handed off to Ty Johnson and the running back's fumble was recovered in the end zone by Boston College.

With 4:02 left, the Terrapins got to the Boston College 1 with a chance to cut into their nine-point deficit and Hills lost a fumble after bobbling a snap.

They got the ball back less than a minute later when Boston College's Jon Hilliman fumbled at his 6, and were forced to settle for a field goal.

"The program is headed in the right direction, but we have to learn to not beat ourselves," Durkin said.

It's tricky

On a reverse and pass from receiver Jeff Smith, Towles scored on a 20-yard TD catch in the second quarter to give Boston College a 23-7 lead.

"I was just glad I caught it and didn't get ran down," Towles said.

Big plays

Johnson had 62- and 30-yard TD runs in the first half and a 29-yard run early in the fourth quarter that gave Maryland the ball in Eagles territory, but it turned the ball over on downs at the 41.

"He's consistently been a big-play guy for us all year," Durkin said.

Hills threw a 63-yard TD pass to Teldrick Morgan and a 52-yard pass to Levern Jacobs for a score to get Maryland within nine points.

Shining star

Landry was the only player in the game on The AP All-America team, earning second-team honors, and showed why he merited the recognition. The 6-foot-3, 250-pound junior entered with 15 sacks, tying with Florida State's DeMarcus Walker for the most in the nation, and had 1½ sacks against Maryland. Landry also had a one-handed interception and deflected passes on consecutive plays on Maryland's drive late in the fourth quarter that ended with a fumble.

Missing for Maryland

The Terrapins were without their leading tackler, linebacker Shane Cockerille, who was ruled ineligible. Durkin and school officials declined to provide details.

Blocked FG helps Mississippi State down Miami (Ohio)

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — Mississippi State's sideline erupted in celebration, relieved to escape with a victory to end a challenging season.

Nick Fitzgerald rushed for 142 yards and two touchdowns in another strong performance by the dual-threat quarterback; however, the heavily favored Bulldogs had to block a field goal in the closing seconds to hold off Miami (Ohio) 17-16 in the St. Petersburg Bowl on Monday.

"Great game. Not exactly how we drew it up," coach Dan Mullen said after defensive tackle Nelson Adams got a hand on Nick Dowd's potential game-winning kick that would have helped Miami finish a stunning turnaround from a 0-6 start to the season to a winning record.

Instead, both the Bulldogs

(6-7) and the RedHawks (6-7), who won six straight games to become bowl eligible, finished with losing marks.

"You know what, it's been an interesting year. We've battled. Throughout the year we've lost some tough games on the final play of the game," Mullen said. "I told the guys in the locker room afterward, we're here because we didn't give up. We found a way to go make that final play. Even though we missed a lot of opportunities, we made the final play when it mattered."

Fitzgerald, who led the Southeastern Conference in total offense, scored on runs of 2 and 44 yards on the way to his eighth 100-yard rushing performance of the season.

Gus Ragland threw for 257 yards and two touchdowns for Miami. He also threw his first interception of the season early

in the fourth quarter, and Mississippi State turned the mistake into a 36-yard field goal that put the Bulldogs ahead with 12:03 remaining.

"We were one play ahead of them for most of the game, if not more than one, but they were one play ahead of us at the end," Miami coach Chuck Martin said. "We had opportunities. When you look at it, it didn't need to come down to that last kick, but it did. They made one more play than us. Tough way to end. That's sports, and that's competition."

The RedHawks drove the ball into Bulldogs territory on their next two possessions, turning the ball over on downs at the Mississippi State 32 midway through the fourth quarter and reaching the 17 before Dowd had his kick blocked with 5 seconds left.

James Gardner and Ryan

Smith caught TD passes for Miami, which also had an extra-point blocked in the opening half.

"We had noticed on film that the kicker kind of did line drives. All that was going through my head was get your hands up as quick as you can," Adams said. "It's been a tough year for us. The only thing going through my mind was make a play, make something happen, and that's what I did."

Takeaway

While there's a tendency to minimize the importance of games played before New Year's weekend, Mississippi State and Miami both felt fortunate to be in St. Petersburg. The Bulldogs had a losing record for the first time since 2009 but qualified for a postseason berth because of the program's NCAA Academic Progress Rate.

NC State has easy time with Vanderbilt

Associated Press

SHREVEPORT, La. — North Carolina State quarterback Ryan Finley has a simple philosophy when it comes to getting do-everything threat Jaylen Samuels involved with the offense.

“Just give him the ball in as many ways as possible,” Finley said.

The method of choice on Monday was by air, and Finley found Samuels for three touchdown passes in North Carolina State’s 41-17 win over Vanderbilt in the Independence Bowl.

North Carolina State (7-6) won three of its final four games to finish with a winning record. The Wolfpack built a 28-3 lead midway through the third quarter — largely thanks to Samuels’ touchdown catches of 9, 55 and 17 yards — and then held off a brief Vanderbilt rally.

Samuels was named the game’s Most Valuable Player on offense and his three touchdown catches were an Independence Bowl record. Finley, who completed 19 of 30 passes for 235 yards, hit Samuels six

times for 104 yards.

North Carolina State coach Dave Doeren said Samuels’ big night wasn’t necessarily planned, but when Vanderbilt loaded the defense to stop the run, he was the man who was open. The 5-foot-11, 223-pound junior often has had an unorthodox role on the offense and is listed as a tight end and fullback.

“We were just taking what they were giving us,” Doeren said. “And then our receivers did a great job of blocking for him.”

Vanderbilt (6-7) had a lot of momentum going into the game thanks to surprising wins over Mississippi and Tennessee to end the regular season. But the Commodores’ offense — which scored a combined 83 points against the Rebels and Volunteers — struggled for most of the night.

“We looked a little rusty,” coach Derek Mason said. “All the way around — special teams, offense and defense. We just didn’t look like the Vanderbilt team that came out of the regular season.”

Vanderbilt’s Kyle Shur-

mur completed just 19 of 46 passes for 158 yards and three interceptions.

“There’s a fine line between being aggressive and careless,” Shurmur said. “And I crossed it a few times.”

Even so, the Commodores briefly made things interesting, closing to 28-17 early in the fourth quarter. But that’s when NC State’s Nyheim Hines responded with a 100-yard touchdown on a kickoff return to put the game out of reach.

The takeaway

Vanderbilt: The Commodores’ offense took a step backward after some late-season improvement. Veteran running back Ralph Webb had another nice game with 111 yards rushing and a touchdown, but Shurmur’s struggles throwing the ball were too much to overcome.

NC State: The Wolfpack end a frustrating season with an impressive win. They were fantastic on defense for most of the night and the Finley-to-Samuels connection couldn’t be stopped by Vanderbilt.

Webb breaks record

Webb’s 111 yards rushing gave him a school-record 1,283 yards for the season. The junior, who already is Vanderbilt’s career rushing leader, said during the postgame press conference that he plans to return for his senior season.

Defensive MVP

North Carolina State’s Airius Moore was named the game’s defensive MVP after leading the Wolfpack with nine tackles, including two sacks.

Up next

Vanderbilt: The Commodores took a major step forward this season by making a bowl game in Mason’s third season. Vanderbilt will have a few holes to fill, but should return several key players in 2017.

NC State: The Wolfpack are still struggling to push into the upper tier of the Atlantic Coast Conference. NC State finishes with another winning season under Doeren, but the program feels a little stuck.

James takes night off in Cavaliers’ loss to Pistons

Associated Press

AUBURN HILLS, Mich. — Tobias Harris scored 21 points to help the Detroit Pistons snap a five-game losing streak by beating the Cleveland Cavaliers 106-90 on Monday night while LeBron James sat out resting.

James missed his third game of the season, and Cleveland has lost all three. The Cavaliers had their five-game winning streak snapped on a night they never led.

Cleveland was playing its fifth game in seven days and coming off a thrilling win Sunday over Golden State. So James sat, and the Pistons took advantage.

Detroit scored the first eight points, led 50-44 at halftime

and took control near the end of the third quarter. Harris and Kentavious Caldwell-Pope made three-pointers early in the fourth, and the Pistons led 82-65.

Kevin Love had 17 points and 14 rebounds for Cleveland.

Nuggets 106, Clippers 102: Nikola Jokic had 24 points and 10 rebounds, and Danilo Gallinari and Will Barton each scored 23 to lead visiting Denver past undermanned Los Angeles.

Pelicans 111, Mavericks 104: Anthony Davis had 28 points and 16 rebounds and host New Orleans beat Dallas.

Langston Galloway made all five of his three-point shots and finished with 17 points for the Pelicans, who’ve won three of four.

Rockets 131, Suns 115: James Harden had 32 points and 12 assists in three quarters and host Houston never trailed in a win over Phoenix.

Bulls 90, Pacers 85: Dwyane Wade scored 21 points, Nikola Mirotic added a season-high 20 and host Chicago overcame a poor shooting performance to beat Indiana and snap a three-game skid.

Wizards 107, Bucks 102: Otto Porter scored 32 points and grabbed 13 rebounds, John Wall had 18 points and a season-high 16 assists, and host Washington came from behind to beat Milwaukee.

Timberwolves 104, Hawks 90: Karl-Anthony Towns had 22 points and 11 rebounds, and Zach LaVine hit six three-pointers to lead host Minnesota

over Atlanta.

Magic 112, Grizzlies 102: Aaron Gordon scored 30 points, and Serge Ibaka and Elfrid Payton had 16 apiece to help host Orlando beat Memphis.

Nets 120, Hornets 118: Randy Foye made a three-pointer to beat the buzzer and give host Brooklyn a victory over Charlotte.

Raptors 95, Trail Blazers 91: Kyle Lowry scored 27 points and Toronto won its franchise-best seventh consecutive road game by beating skidding Portland.

Kings 102, 76ers 100: DeMarcus Cousins made a go-ahead three-pointer with 20.9 seconds remaining and added a clutch free throw moments later, lifting host Sacramento over Philadelphia.