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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Damaged USS McCain arrives at Yokosuka

BY LEON COOK
Stars and Stripes

The USS John S. McCain is back at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan, to receive repairs for damage suffered in a deadly Aug. 21 collision near Singapore.

Ten sailors were killed and five were injured when the Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyer crashed into an oil tanker east of the Straits of Malacca.

The ship will undergo extensive maintenance at the U.S. Naval Ship Repair Facility and Japan Regional Maintenance Center, the Navy said in a statement issued Nov. 28.

“[The facility] is making preparations to begin remediation and repair efforts immediately once the ship is dockside,” Lt. Cmdr. Sandra Wyman, a Navy spokeswoman, said in the statement. “The project

will be one of the largest [the facility] has undertaken.”

After the collision, the McCain sailed under its own power to Changi Naval Base, Singapore, where crewmembers, technicians and divers recovered remains, assessed damage and prepared the ship for travel by patching sections of the hull and performing maintenance on key systems.

The McCain left Singapore Oct. 5 aboard the heavy lift ship MV Treasure heading for Yokosuka, but diverted to Subic Bay, Philippines, after a new crack was discovered on its starboard side.

At Subic Bay, extra support was added to the stricken vessel aboard the Treasure, which departed for Yokosuka on Nov. 28, the Navy said.

The ship arrived at Tokyo Bay on Dec. 5, but couldn’t dock at nearby Yokosuka until

the crew prepared it for a safe offload.

The vessel anchored near its sister ship, the USS Fitzgerald, which left Yokosuka on Dec. 8. It’s bound for Ingalls Shipbuilding facility in Pascagoula, Miss., to repair damage caused by a June 17 collision with a container ship that killed seven of its sailors.

Although the McCain collision was deadlier, the ship suffered less damage, allowing it to be repaired at its homeport, officials said.

“Damage is less significant, impacted fewer systems compared with [Fitzgerald],” 7th Fleet spokesman Cmdr. Clay Doss previously told Stars and Stripes. “For example, there was no significant damage to the superstructure, which is more likely to require U.S.-based shipyard repairs.”

DOD identifies GI killed in Afghanistan accident

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The Pentagon on Tuesday identified a soldier who was killed in a vehicle incident in eastern Afghanistan this week.

Staff Sgt. David Thomas Brabander, 24, of Anchorage, Alaska, died Monday from injuries sustained in a noncombat vehicle accident in Nangarhar province, the Pentagon said in a statement.

Brabander was assigned to 3rd Battalion, 509th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division, based at Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson, Alaska.

“Just yesterday, we were reminded of the constant danger our United States, coalition and Afghan partners are in every day here in Afghanistan,” Brig. Gen. Lance Bunch, chief of future operations at the U.S.-led NATO mission in Afghanistan, told reporters earlier Tuesday.

“We send our most heartfelt condolences to his family.”

Brabander, an airborne infantryman, enlisted in the Army in March 2012 and was assigned to U.S. Army Alaska in November 2015 after previously serving in Hawaii, the command said in an emailed statement. A squad leader, he deployed to Afghanistan with the brigade in September.

Two other servicemembers wounded in what officials have described as a “vehicle incident” were taken to a medical facility for treatment of non-life-threatening injuries, Bunch said. Six others in the vehicle were being evaluated for possible traumatic brain injuries.

Not much is known about the accident, which Afghan media described as a “traffic incident,” based on the military statement.

The Pentagon said it is investigating.

Senators urge Congress to revise war powers

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — As global threats to the United States escalate, Congress will need a new war authorization to remain relevant in current and future military engagements, a Senate panel said Wednesday.

The hearing was one in a series held in the last several months to re-examine, and potentially rein in, the president’s authority to use military force, or AUMF, powers.

Some lawmakers signaled President Donald Trump’s administration appears to be running amok as far as such war powers are concerned.

“The Trump national security team is greatly expanding the deployment of U.S. military forces on the ground worldwide with minimal congressional consultation, minimal buy-in from the American people ... and minimal transparency,”

said Sen. Ben Cardin, of Maryland, the committee’s ranking Democrat.

The current war powers were issued in 2001 after the 9/11 terrorist attacks and in 2002 when the United States went to war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Concern about the war authorizations has been debated for years, but it has reached a fever pitch in recent months in light of recent, deadly military encounters, such as the attack in Niger on Nov. 4 that left four soldiers dead and the rising tensions with North Korea.

Stephen Hadley, national security adviser for former President George W. Bush, and John Bellinger III, former national security council attorney for the Bush administration, agreed Congress could pre-empt presidential military action against North Korea by issuing a new war authority and setting parameters for any potential encounter.

Window from Super Stallion falls onto Okinawa playground

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND HANA KUSUMOTO
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A window from a Marine Corps CH-53E Super Stallion helicopter inexplicably fell from the sky Wednesday and landed on a field where schoolchildren were playing — the latest in a string of U.S. military aircraft mishaps on Okinawa.

The window hit the ground about 10:10 a.m. at Futenma Daini Elementary School, which is next to the fence line on the northern side of Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, said officials from the Okinawa Prefectural Board of Education and the Marine Corps. The piece measures approximately 3 feet by 3 feet.

There were 30 to 40 students on the field for physical education class at the time of the incident, a board of education spokesman said. A boy sustained a minor injury on the back of his hand after a small stone was sent airborne. There was no damage to school buildings.

Marine officials said the Super Stallion's crew "immediately" returned to Futenma and reported the incident.

"We take this report extremely seriously and are investigating the cause of this incident in close coordination with local authorities," Marine officials said in a statement Wednesday afternoon. "This is a regrettable incident and we apologize for any anxiety it has caused the community."

Japanese Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshihide Suga expressed concern during a press conference with reporters.

"An incident such as this not only gives concern to the

people affiliated to the school but to the people of Okinawa, and it should never happen," he said.

The Japanese government will continue to gather information and will notify local officials of their findings, said Suga, who vowed to take "appropriate measures."

State Minister of Defense Tomohiro Yamamoto met Wednesday with U.S. Forces Japan commander Lt. Gen. Jerry Martinez and requested that the U.S. military voluntarily refrain from flying Super Stallions.

Condemnation came swiftly from Okinawa's anti-base Gov. Takeshi Onaga.

"The fact that it fell right in the middle of the playground is terrible and unforgivable," he told reporters during a visit to the school, according to Japanese public broadcaster NHK. "The children are the ones that we have to protect the most. It has been repeated over and over again and I don't have the words to describe my feelings."

Protesters planned to rally at Ginowan City Hall on Wednesday night to call for the withdrawal of U.S. military bases from Okinawa. Organizers said they expect about 300 people to turn out.

The incident is the latest in a string of mishaps involving U.S. military aircraft on the southern island prefecture. Last week, a plastic part thought to belong to a U.S. military aircraft landed on the roof of a local day care, leading to demonstrations in front of U.S. military facilities.

Off-base drinking ban, curfew lifted for troops in Japan

BY LEON COOK
Stars and Stripes

YOKOTA AIR BASE, Japan — The U.S. military has lifted alcohol restrictions and a midnight curfew for Japan-based servicemembers imposed last month after a fatal vehicle accident on Okinawa.

"As of noon today, normal liberty and alcohol consumption policies are back in effect for U.S. military members located or operating in Japan," said an Air Force statement issued Wednesday.

The order reversed restrictions put in place Nov. 19 after Marine Lance Cpl. Nicholas James-McLean, 21, was involved in a head-on collision that killed a 61-year-old Okinawan man. The Marine was operating a government vehicle while off-duty and reportedly had a blood-alcohol content of 0.09 — three times Japan's legal limit.

The military responded by

ordering a total alcohol ban and restricting off-duty Okinawa-based personnel to their quarters. The order was later amended to include a midnight-to-5 a.m. curfew for all Japan-based servicemembers.

Troops have been allowed to buy and consume alcohol on base or in their off-base homes since Nov. 30; however, the curfew and off-base drinking ban remained in place.

The return to normal liberty and alcohol policies means a 1-to-5 a.m. curfew for lower enlisted troops and a ban on off-installation drinking during those hours for all ranks.

On Monday, James-McLean was charged with negligent driving causing death and driving under the influence of alcohol, a spokesman from the Naha District Public Prosecutors Office said. He faces substantial fines and up to 10 years in prison with hard labor if convicted on both charges.

Actor's group offers \$10K prize to top military playwright

BY DAN STOUTAMIRE
Stars and Stripes

WIESBADEN, Germany — Aspiring playwrights in or formerly in the military now have thousands of reasons to put their ideas on paper.

Arts in the Armed Forces, the nonprofit organization of actor Adam Driver — who portrays archvillain Kylo Ren in the latest pair of "Star Wars" films — is putting up a \$10,000 prize, known as the Bridge Award, for the best full-length play written by a current or former servicemember, with submissions due

before March 1.

All full-length, unpublished plays — which need not have a military theme — will be considered by a group of judges that will include Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright Suzan-Lori Parks.

In addition to the \$10,000 prize, the winner will be able to see their play performed by professional actors next fall. Find more information at <http://aitaf.org/the-bridge-award/>.

Driver, who joined the Marines shortly after the Sept. 11 attacks and served for just under three years, has long been an ardent supporter of arts in the military.

Unusual alliance yields Ala. upset

Associated Press

MONTGOMERY, Ala. — Democrat Doug Jones assembled an unusual Deep South alliance to claim a Senate seat Tuesday in Republican-dominated Alabama, combining strong turnout among blacks and white liberals with enough crossover support from conservatives who couldn't stomach scandal-ridden Republican nominee Roy Moore.

Among those disaffected GOP voters was the state's most powerful Republican, Sen. Richard Shelby, who very well may have handed Jones his victory margin of about 1.5 percentage points.

The six-term senator made a late campaign show of declaring he couldn't vote for Moore, an evangelical populist, after allegations from multiple women who said the 70-year-old molested or sexually pursued them decades ago, when they were in their teens and Moore was in his 30s.

Shelby, who was the last Democrat to win a Senate seat from Alabama in 1992 before switching parties two years later, declared the charges credible, despite Moore's denials, and the senior senator said he'd write in another Republican. Incomplete returns showed that about 1.7 percent of the more than 1.3 million Alabama voters did the same thing, almost certainly denying Moore votes that would have gone to any other Republican.

The result, driven also by surprisingly high turnout for a holiday season special election, upended the partisan splits in a state President Donald Trump won by 28 percentage points just 13 months ago. Republicans hold every other statewide office and six of seven U.S. House seats and they dominate the state Legislature.

Jones, 63, a former U.S. attorney, will take the seat held previously by Attorney General Jeff Sessions.

Jones closed Democrats' usual gap by posting wide margins in the state's four most populous counties that fall along the Interstate 65 corridor, from Mobile County on the Gulf Coast to the NASA hub of Madison County near the Tennessee border. He also dominated the counties of the Black Belt, named for the color of its soil, and added wins in the counties of the state's two largest college campuses, the University of Alabama and Auburn University. Jones also narrowed GOP advantages in several other counties, though Moore dominated in many small towns and rural areas where his evangelical appeal is strongest.

The pattern copied the second of Moore's statewide victories for Alabama chief justice — but in that 2012 race, the Republican managed to survive with a 4-point victory. This time, voter turnout tended to be higher in Jones' strongholds than in Moore's.

Agent removed from Russia probe called Trump an 'idiot'

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Two FBI officials who would later be assigned to the special counsel's investigation into Donald Trump's presidential campaign described him with insults like "idiot" and "loathsome human" in a series of text messages last year, according to copies of the messages released Tuesday.

One of the officials said in an election night text that the prospect of a Trump victory was "terrifying."

Peter Strzok, a veteran FBI counterintelligence agent, was removed over the summer from special counsel Robert Mueller's team following the discovery of text messages exchanged with Lisa Page, an FBI lawyer who was also detailed this year to the group of agents and prosecutors investigating potential coordination between Russia and Trump's Republican campaign.

Hundreds of the messages, which surfaced in a Justice Department inspector general investigation of the FBI's inquiry

into Democrat Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server, were being provided to congressional committees, which had requested copies, and were reviewed by The Associated Press on Tuesday night.

The existence of the text messages, disclosed in news reports earlier this month, provided a line of attack for Trump, who used the revelation to disparage FBI leadership as politically tainted. Republicans have also seized on the exchange of texts between two officials who worked for Mueller to suggest that the team is biased against Trump and its conclusions can't be trusted.

The messages — 375 were released Tuesday evening — cover a broad range of political topics and include an exchange of news articles about the race, often alongside their own commentaries. There are some derogatory comments about Democratic officials, but some of the harshest comments are reserved for Trump.

Lieutenant governor named to fill Franken Senate seat

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — Minnesota Gov. Mark Dayton appointed Lt. Gov. Tina Smith on Wednesday to replace Sen. Al Franken until a special election in November, setting up his long-time and trusted adviser for a potentially bruising 2018 election.

Smith was widely seen as Dayton's top choice from the moment Franken announced his resignation last week, and she said she would run in the November special election to complete Franken's term through 2020.

"I will run in that election and I will do my best to earn Minnesotans' support," she said at the news conference where Dayton announced her appointment.

Smith had previously declined to run for governor, raising questions about whether she would launch a Senate campaign that would be in the national spotlight. But Dayton was under pressure from fellow Democrats in Washington to ensure his pick would use the appointment as a springboard for the November election.

It's not clear when Smith will head to Washington. Franken, who resigned under pressure from his own party after he was accused of improper behavior by at least eight women, announced last Thursday that he would resign "in the coming weeks." His office said Tuesday that he had not yet set a final departure date.

The appointment won't change the balance of power in the Senate; both Franken and Smith are Democrats.

Smith, 59, served as Dayton's trusted chief of staff for four years before ascending to become his No. 2 when he needed a running mate in 2014. Dayton has long treated her as an equal in the office, and it was that deference that fueled speculation she was being groomed to succeed him.

Next year's race to fill the final two years of Franken's term is certain to be one of the nation's most closely watched and expensive. Republicans immediately floated former two-term Gov. Tim Pawlenty as a possible candidate, but many others were said to be weighing a run.

Abbas: US unfit to broker peace deal

Associated Press

ISTANBUL — Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas told Arab and Islamic leaders on Wednesday that the United States is no longer fit to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal and should be replaced as mediator by the United Nations, outlining a significant policy shift in response to President Donald Trump's recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

In an impassioned speech, Abbas said his people will no longer accept the United States as a peace broker but added that they remain committed to international resolutions which have

formed the basis of the process.

Abbas was speaking at the gathering of heads of state and top officials from Islamic nations at a summit in Turkey that is expected to forge a unified Muslim world's stance against Trump's move.

Abbas said Trump's decision was a "crime" that came at a time when the Palestinians were engaged with Washington in a new push to reach what he said was anticipated to be the "deal of our times."

"Instead we got the slap of our times," Abbas said. "The United States has chosen to lose its qualification as a mediator. ... We will no longer accept that it

has a role in the political process from now."

The speech marked a significant shift in Abbas' approach toward the United States after years of focusing on courting U.S. goodwill because of Washington's role as sole mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Immediately after Trump's announcement last week, Abbas had said the U.S. effectively disqualified itself as a broker, but Wednesday's speech was more sharply worded and delivered to a global audience. It was also part of a speech that called on the gathering for specific steps to counter the U.S. decision on Jerusalem.

In his more than hourlong speech, Abbas also urged Muslim nations and countries with relations with Israel to take necessary political and economic measures against Israel "to force it to abide by international consensus" to end its occupation of Palestinian territories, including east Jerusalem.

Jerusalem's status is at the core of the decadeslong Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Trump's Dec. 6 announcement was widely perceived as siding with Israel. Most countries around the world have not recognized Israel's 1967 annexation of east Jerusalem.

Calif. wildfires still posing risk to communities

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — After announcing increased containment on one of the biggest wildfires in California history, officials warned that communities remain at risk and the threat could increase as unpredictable winds whip up again.

Red Flag warnings for fire danger due to Santa Ana winds and a critical lack of moisture were extended, with a possible increase in gusts into the end of the week.

Evacuations continued Wednesday for the seaside enclaves of Montecito, Summerland and Carpinteria and the inland agricultural town of Fillmore.

Officials announced Tuesday night that crews had carved containment lines around one-quarter of the blaze straddling Santa Barbara and Ventura counties.

The so-called Thomas fire has burned more than 900 structures, at least 700 of them homes, since it broke out Dec. 4.

It stretches across nearly 370 square

miles of Southern California, making it the fifth-largest in state history.

Elsewhere, fire officials announced that a cooking fire at a homeless encampment sparked a blaze last week that destroyed six homes in the Bel Air neighborhood of Los Angeles.

Arson investigators determined that the so-called Skirball fire near the world-famous Getty museum was started by an illegal fire at a camp near a freeway underpass, city fire Capt. Erik Scott said.

Officials: Accused NY bomber followed radical preacher

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The man accused of carrying out a bomb attack in New York City's subway system was influenced by the sermons and writings of a radical Muslim preacher, Bangladesh officials said Wednesday in the hours before the man was expected to have his first court appearance in the U.S.

Akayed Ullah, a Bangladeshi immigrant living in Brooklyn, had asked his wife in Bangladesh to read the writings and listen to the sermons of Moulana Jasimuddin Rahmani, the imprisoned leader of a banned group called Ansarullah Bangla Team, said Monirul Islam,

a top official of Bangladesh's counterterrorism department.

The group has been linked to killings and attacks on secular academics and atheist bloggers in Bangladesh. Rahmani is serving time for his involvement in the killings.

The wife was questioned in Bangladesh and told investigators that her husband discussed Rahmani's writings with her during his last visit home, Islam said.

Ullah, 27, was expected to make his first court appearance Wednesday in New York, where he is in a hospital being treated for burns from a pipe bomb he strapped to his body and detonated in a pedestrian

tunnel linking two busy subway stations.

Prosecutors in New York said that after his capture, Ullah told interrogators he was on a mission to punish the U.S. for attacking Islamic State.

"His motivation," Acting U.S. Attorney Joon Kim said, "was not a mystery."

Investigators found bomb-making materials in his apartment. They said he carried out the attack after researching how to build a bomb a year ago and planned his mission for several weeks. The bomb was assembled in the past week using fragments of a metal pipe, a battery and a Christmas tree light bulb, along with the

metal screws, authorities said.

He was charged with providing material support to a terrorist group, use of a weapon of mass destruction and three bomb-related counts. He could get up to life in prison.

Relatives and police said Ullah last visited his wife and newborn son in Bangladesh in September, after which he returned to the United States.

Counterterrorism officials questioned the wife and her parents before releasing her Tuesday night, Islam said, adding that investigators were questioning his brother-in-law and also planned to question any known close associates.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Armed robber steals man's cheeseburgers

CT HAMDEN — Connecticut police are looking for the suspect in the theft of a bag of cheeseburgers.

Hamden police Capt. Ronald Smith said the 23-year-old victim was walking on the street carrying the bag of cheeseburgers Saturday night.

The New Haven Register reported he was held up by an armed man, who fled on foot with the cheeseburgers.

Masked men invade hotel, steal an ATM

TX HOUSTON — Houston police are looking for seven to 10 men who invaded a luxury hotel in the city's Galleria area and walked out with the hotel's ATM.

Authorities said the men, all wearing masks, stormed into a Marriott hotel about 2:30 a.m. Tuesday, threatened an unarmed security guard and a cleaning person and headed for the money machine in the hotel lobby.

Police said the robbery was particularly easy because the ATM wasn't bolted down, so the men tipped it and carried it out the front door. They dumped the machine in the back of one of their three cars and drove away.

No customers were in the lobby at the time of the heist.

Public asked to return cash stolen in robbery

CA RIVERSIDE — Law enforcement officials are asking anyone who picked up money thrown onto Interstate 15 after a Lake Elsinore bank robbery to return the evidence.

According to Riverside Coun-

ty sheriff's investigators, a man threw the money onto the freeway Saturday as he was being pursued by Riverside County sheriff's deputies.

The Press-Enterprise reported Sunday that witnesses saw motorists driving on the freeway stop to pick up the money and drive away. A statement from the sheriff's office did not specify whether the evidence was only cash or if there were other items.

The man has been arrested on suspicion of robbery, felony evading and parole violations.

Man who fled prison in 1997 is arrested

PA ERIE — An inmate who disappeared 20 years ago from a federal prison in Pennsylvania is set to be returned to the state for arraignment on an escape charge.

The Erie Times-News reported that Ghassan Saleh, 66, was arrested last month after flying into New York from Lebanon, his native country. Deputy U.S. Marshal Chad Sensor said Saleh was aware that he was wanted when he decided to return to the country.

Saleh was working on a grounds crew when he escaped from the federal prison near Bradford in 1997. He had been serving a sentence of almost six years after being convicted of cocaine trafficking in Michigan.

Saleh is scheduled to be arraigned in federal court in Erie on Tuesday.

Jailed ex-officer tries to contact teen victim

NC LOWELL — Authorities said a former police officer serving prison time for impregnating a then-14-year-old girl in North Carolina has violated the restrictions set

by his plea agreement by attempting to contact her.

The Gaston Gazette reported James "Paul" Blair, 52, was sentenced to 12 years in prison after pleading guilty to statutory rape of a child in March. The victim's mother said Blair sent a letter to a family member to forward to the teen.

The victim's mother said her daughter has been sickened by these attempts and hospitalized.

Department of Public Safety officials confirmed the infraction. Gaston County District Attorney Locke Bell said it's up to corrections officials to determine discipline.

The maximum term on the range of the former Lowell officer's plea agreement was nearly 20 years.

Ex-deputy jailed for sex with inmate

MS PASCAGOULA — A former sheriff's deputy in Mississippi will serve two years in prison for having sex with an inmate while on duty.

The Sun Herald reported that Johnathan Jenkins, 33, was sentenced Friday on one count of unlawful sexual activity.

In his plea, Jackson admitted to having sex with a female inmate for two days in September 2016 while on duty as a Jackson County deputy.

Jenkins will serve three years under post-release supervision and will pay a \$1,500 fine. He'll have to register as a sex offender for the rest of his life.

Man acquitted of plotting ex's murder

NH NEWPORT — A New Hampshire man charged in a failed murder-for-hire plot involving his ex-wife

has been acquitted.

The Valley News reported jurors on Tuesday found Maurice Temple, 64, not guilty of criminal solicitation of murder, conspiracy to commit murder and attempt to commit murder.

Temple and his mother, Pauline Chase, 83, were arrested in July after the supposed hit man, Mark Horne, went to police and agreed to secretly record phone and video conversations. Chase was found not competent to stand trial.

Prosecutors say Temple owed his ex-wife, Jean Temple, money after their divorce and was in favor of arranging to have her killed.

Temple's lawyer claims her client was set up by Horne and Jean Temple.

Snowplow used to capture theft suspect

MI LAWTON — A store owner said he used a snowplow to help capture a man who allegedly stole lottery tickets from his southwestern Michigan store.

Carl Trumbla told WWMT-TV the masked man walked into Country Lakes General Store in Van Buren County on Monday with a scratch-off ticket, claiming it was a winner. Trumbla said he turned his back to scan the ticket, and the man fled on foot with other tickets.

Trumbla said he chased the man using a truck and yelled at him to stop before slowing down and knocking him over with the truck's plow. He said the man got up and kept running, so Trumbla tackled him.

The sheriff's department said the suspect, who had a machete in his pants, had possible broken bones and will face charges.

From wire reports

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Chargers' Rivers enjoying resurgence

Associated Press

COSTA MESA, Calif. — Deep in his 12th season as the Chargers' starting quarterback, Philip Rivers is playing some of his best football.

In his first game since turning 36 years old, Rivers carved up the Washington Redskins' secondary on the way to 319 yards and two touchdowns in Los Angeles' 30-13 victory Sunday.

That blowout win was just the latest big game in Rivers' string of savvy performances for the Chargers (7-6), who have won four straight heading into Saturday's showdown with Kansas City (7-6) for first place in the AFC West.

While the Chargers have an increasingly impressive defense and several offensive playmakers, the quarterback with the three-hour daily commute from San Diego is the engine driving them toward the postseason.

"We've been on a good little run the last few weeks," Chargers offensive coordinator Ken Whisenhunt said Monday. "A lot of it has to do with Philip

and the way he's playing."

During the Chargers' winning streak, Rivers has 1,348 yards passing with eight touchdowns and four straight passer ratings over 100. He also hasn't committed a turnover during that four-game stretch, the longest turnover-free streak of his entire career.

"He's unstoppable," said receiver Tyrell Williams, who caught a beautiful 75-yard TD pass from Rivers on Sunday. "I don't even have a word for him. He's just playing great. I know he's going to keep doing what he's doing, and if he keeps playing like that, we're going to be a hard team to beat."

Not bad for a quarterback who threw a career-worst 21 interceptions last season and then wondered if the end of his Chargers career was near when they started 0-4 in their relocation season.

"(There were) a lot of different emotions," Rivers recalled Sunday. "A little bit of, 'You've got to be kidding me! Could it be any worse right now? We moved up the road. We've lost four in a row. Is this my last 12

games here?' You have all of those thoughts."

Instead, the Chargers have won four straight home games while moving above .500 for the first time since September 2015.

The Chargers have given themselves the chance to be the first NFL team since the 1992 San Diego Chargers to make the playoffs after starting 0-4. A win in Kansas City would put the Chargers on an inside track to their first division title since 2009, the last of four straight AFC West champions led by LaDainian Tomlinson, Antonio Gates and Rivers.

"While it's been real exciting, we've been right here before on the cusp, and we lose the last two or three, and you end up a game out," Rivers said. "While everybody is excited and feeling pretty good about what we've done to get back in it, we've got to make sure nobody relaxes. ... You hear all this positive stuff about the Chargers now, but we have to make sure we continue to move forward like we have been."

In some previous seasons

in San Diego, Rivers and the Chargers got off to outstanding starts before fading down the stretch, either due to nagging injuries or slumping performances by a team that has made the playoffs once since 2009.

This season has been something different: Rivers completed just 63.3 percent of his passes and made five turnovers during the 0-4 start, only to improve steadily as the season progressed.

Rivers has moved up to fourth in the NFL with 3,611 yards passing, behind only Ben Roethlisberger, Tom Brady and Matthew Stafford. His 23 touchdown passes are fifth in the league, and he has thrown only seven interceptions all season — just three in the past 10 games.

Most importantly, Rivers and his offense are playing with palpable confidence while winning seven of their past nine games overall. Rivers said he felt good about the Chargers' chances against the Redskins after just one look at their scripted plays for the start of the game.

Chiefs rookie Hunt bounces back in key AFC West win

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — Kareem Hunt's eyes must have gotten wide when he took a handoff from Alex Smith and plunged toward the line of scrimmage in the first half of Sunday's game against the Oakland Raiders.

For once, he didn't have a massive defensive tackle ready to give him a bear hug.

Hunt wound up slicing past the line of scrimmage for a 6-yard gain, a modest success by some standards but a run that must have felt like freedom.

It was a third of his total two weeks ago against Buffalo, and set the tone for what would be a massive bounce-back performance.

Hunt wound up rushing for 116 yards and a touchdown,

and caught three passes for 22 yards, to help the Chiefs to a 26-15 victory in a crucial showdown for the AFC West race.

"Honestly, I would feel this way if we win no matter what my numbers look like. It is just huge to go out there and get a big-time win and keep it going," said Hunt, who had not eclipsed the 100-yard mark since a Week 5 win in Houston. "Now we just have to keep doing what we are doing."

It wasn't just a bounce-back performance for Hunt, of course. The victory snapped a four-game skid and put the Chiefs in solid position with the Chargers coming to town Saturday night.

Those teams are 7-6 and tied atop the AFC West.

The Chiefs won their first

meeting in Los Angeles, and Hunt was a big reason why. The rookie with the wide smile and never-go-down attitude churned 17 times for 172 yards and the clinching touchdown in a 24-10 victory, one of many highlights during what became a 5-0 start.

Things soon began to go sideways for Hunt and the Chiefs, though.

Injuries along the offensive line hurt chemistry. Defenses began to stack the box to take away the sensational first-year player.

Balance went out of the offense and a group flying high after wins over New England and Philadelphia had ground to a halt.

Hunt was held to 21 yards in a loss to Pittsburgh. He gained

87 yards against Oakland and 46 against Denver. He managed 37 against Dallas and 73 in a loss to the Giants, when the Chiefs failed to score a TD.

There was the lousy performance in Buffalo and a struggle two weeks ago against the Jets, when he gained 40 yards on nine carries in a 38-31 defeat.

All the while, the Chiefs kept going to him.

It was only a matter of time, quarterback Alex Smith said, until Hunt broke loose again.

He finally did on Sunday. And even though he didn't have any of those long touchdown runs that were a hallmark of his first few games, Hunt consistently fell forward, giving the Chiefs positive yardage just about every time he touched the ball.

Machado could switch teams, position

Associated Press

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Baltimore Orioles star Manny Machado could be on the move. To a new position — or a new team.

Big names emerged in trade talk Tuesday, with Machado, New York Mets pitcher Matt Harvey and Detroit pitcher Michael Fulmer heating up the winter meetings.

And no surprise, the busy New York Yankees are looming, looking to boost a ball-club getting more formidable by the day.

For the moment, no deals for that trio of All-Stars.

“Everything else is — today — moot,” Mets general manager Sandy Alderson said of a Harvey deal.

Pitching is always at a premium, and the Chicago Cubs completed two-year contracts for reliever Brandon Morrow and pitcher Drew Smyly, expected to miss next season while recovering from Tommy John surgery.

Morrow’s deal includes a 2020 club option that could become guaranteed depending on his performance. Smyly’s contract is worth \$10 million.

The Yankees made another trade, too. Nothing close to the magnitude of getting NL MVP Giancarlo Stanton from Miami, but nonetheless a deal that could help them very soon. New York sent third baseman

Chase Headley, pitcher Bryan Mitchell and \$500,000 to San Diego for outfielder Jabari Blash.

“The biggest motivation from our end is it creates a lot more financial flexibility,” Yankees general manager Brian Cashman said after dumping a \$13 million salary.

That could lead to another starter for the Yankees’ rotation, such as Fulmer. The 2016 AL Rookie of the Year was an All-Star last season, going 10-12 with a 3.83 ERA for the Tigers.

A more intriguing possibility, for any club, is Machado.

At 25, he’s already a three-time All-Star and two-time Gold Glove at third base. Plus, he’s a power bat, hitting 33 home runs with 95 RBIs last season.

Machado had an \$11.5 million salary last season, is eligible for arbitration and can become a free agent after next year’s World Series. That’s prompted questions about whether the last-place Orioles can afford him, or if he’d even want to stick around Camden Yards.

Or if they’d be better off trading him to guarantee something in return.

In the meantime, Machado is indicating he’d like to shift over to shortstop. The spot is open, now that J.J. Hardy has become a free agent.

Machado made his big league debut as

a third baseman in 2012 with the Orioles and has made 49 starts at shortstop, most of them in 2016 when Hardy was hurt.

Baltimore manager Buck Showalter said Machado has long expressed an interest in playing shortstop.

“Always has, since the day he signed,” he said. “To say that Manny and I haven’t had conversations about it over the years, I wouldn’t be truthful.”

“Obviously, we’re not there yet, but it’s something that Manny — I found that players need to know about that, not February 15th or March 15th. They need to know about it back then — Manny’s capable of playing both real well,” Showalter said.

Then again, Machado could be playing either spot for some other team. The Yankees would love to slot him in, but no telling whether the Orioles would trade him to an AL East rival.

Baltimore owner Peter Angelos didn’t get along great with former Yankees owner George Steinbrenner, their animosity ratcheted up after the teams got into a vicious brawl in 1998.

“I’ve got a real gut feeling about how it’s going to work out, but I want to make sure we cover all the bases before whatever direction we go in,” Showalter said.

College basketball roundup

Cincinnati hands Mississippi St. its 1st loss

Associated Press

HIGHLAND HEIGHTS, Ky. — No. 25 Cincinnati had plummeted to the fringe of the rankings and needed a confidence boost. The Bearcats got it against a previously unbeaten team.

Jacob Evans III had 24 points and eight rebounds as Cincinnati recovered from its back-to-back losses and handed Mississippi State its first defeat, 65-50 on Tuesday night.

The Bearcats (8-2) were coming off losses to crosstown rival Xavier and Florida that dropped them from No. 11. They ended the slump with a solid defensive showing against the Southeastern Conference’s last unbeaten team, blocking 11

shots.

“We needed to get this win for us to build our confidence and get this thing back on track,” Evans said.

Mississippi State (8-1) was off to its best start since 2003-04. The Bulldogs struggled to make shots in their first game against a ranked team. They missed 10 straight in the first half and 14 in a row in the second as Cincinnati blew open a close game.

“I think we took a multitude of things away from them,” said Kyle Washington, who added 16 points. “We knew what we wanted to do on defense. We were locked in on how they played well as a team. We just wanted to take all of that away.”

Aric Holman matched his career high with 18 points and

had 10 rebounds for Mississippi State, which shot a season-low 30 percent from the field. The Bulldogs weren’t ready for Cincinnati’s defense.

“We lost the game tonight because of our inability to attack that zone,” coach Ben Howland said. “We were standing way too much, not enough ball movement, not enough cutting and getting the ball inside.”

No. 15 Seton Hall 84, Saint Peter’s 61: Angel Delgado had 18 points and 11 rebounds, his 57th career double-double, leading the Pirates in a rare game at their old campus location: Walsh Gym.

Desi Rodriguez scored 17 points and Khadeen Carrington added 11, as Seton Hall (9-1) raced out to an early lead

and never looked back, winning for the 20th time in the last 21 meetings against the Peacocks (4-5).

Davauhnte Turner scored 13 points and Nick Griffin had nine to pace Saint Peter’s.

The Pirates displayed a stifling defense in the early stages of the game to take control, forcing the Peacocks to misfire on 11 of their first 12 field-goal attempts.

Army 76, St. Francis 64: Alex King pumped in a season-high 24 points and the visiting Black Knights rebounded from a 29-point drubbing by Wake Forest.

King scored 13 of his points in the first half, sparking Army to a 14-point halftime advantage, 44-30.

NBA roundup

Porzingis leads Knicks past Lakers in OT

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Lonzo Ball was having a dazzling stretch, every basket bringing his father farther and farther off his courtside seat for an emphatic celebration.

By the end, the New York Knicks were the ones celebrating.

Kristaps Porzingis had 37 points and 11 rebounds, Michael Beasley made the biggest plays in overtime, and the Knicks beat the Los Angeles Lakers 113-109 on Tuesday night.

Beasley finished with 13 points, including the tiebreaking follow shot, and had an assist in the extra period as the Knicks went back over .500 at 14-13. Thirteen of their vic-

tories have come at Madison Square Garden.

Rookie Frank Ntilikina went the whole fourth quarter and overtime in a strong defensive effort that helped slow down Ball (17 points) after his third-quarter flurry.

Mavericks 95, Spurs 89: J.J. Barea scored 14 of his 16 points in the second half, and host Dallas spoiled the season debut of San Antonio star Kawhi Leonard.

Leonard missed the first 27 games because of right quadriceps tendinopathy, a condition that causes pain and weakness in the knee.

Cavaliers 123, Hawks 114: LeBron James had 25 points and tied a career high with 17 assists for host Cleveland.

James was 11-for-13 from the field, had seven rebounds and was given a standing ovation when he was removed from the game with 2:34 remaining.

76ers 118, Timberwolves 112 (OT): Joel Embiid returned to the lineup to score 28 points, and Philadelphia topped host Minnesota in overtime.

Embiid, back in action after missing two games with back tightness, hit two free throws with 14.8 seconds remaining to force overtime. He then scored seven points in the extra session, including a three-pointer that gave Philadelphia a seven-point lead in the final two minutes.

Nets 103, Wizards 98: Rondae Hollis-Jefferson and Caris LeVert each scored 16 points,

and Brooklyn overcame blowing a double-digit second-half lead and took advantage of a costly mistake by visiting Washington in the final seconds.

A timeout by Washington advanced the ball past halfcourt, but Tomas Satoransky was unable to inbound the ball in time, drawing a 5-second violation. LeVert then made two free throws to seal the win.

Kings 99, Suns 92: George Hill had 18 points and seven rebounds in his return to the starting lineup, and host Sacramento rallied late in the fourth quarter to beat Phoenix.

Nuggets 103, Pistons 84: Jamal Murray scored 28 points, and Denver handed host Detroit its seventh straight loss.

NHL roundup

Lightning blank Blues in matchup of top two teams

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Nikita Kucherov and Brayden Point scored, Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 32 shots and the Tampa Bay Lightning beat the St. Louis Blues 3-0 on Tuesday night in a matchup of the NHL's top two teams.

Tyler Johnson added an empty-netter as Tampa Bay (22-6-2) earned its fifth straight win. It was Vasilevskiy's third shutout this season and the seventh of his career.

Jake Allen made 22 saves for St. Louis, which had won four in a row. The Blues (21-9-2) were shut out for the third time at home this season.

Devils 5, Kings 1: Taylor Hall scored twice and host New Jersey ended Los Angeles' eight-game winning streak.

Travis Zajac, Brian Boyle and Brian Gibbons also scored for the Devils, who snapped a two-game skid. Cory Schneider made 16 saves.

Capitals 5, Avalanche 2: John Carlson scored a tiebreaking goal in the second period and host Washington defeated Colorado for its eighth win in 10 games.

Brett Connolly, Matt Niskanen and Devante Smith-Pelly added third-period goals for the Capitals, and Braden Holtby made 22 saves. Jakub Vrana scored early, and Evgeny Kuznetsov had three assists.

Blackhawks 3, Panthers 2 (OT): Patrick Kane scored 2:24 into overtime and host Chicago topped Florida for its third straight win.

Blackhawks captain Jonathan Toews tied it at 2 with 6:02 left in the third period after a terrific pass from Brandon Saad. Toews and Saad each had a goal and an assist. Chicago rookie Alex DeBrincat added two assists.

Oilers 7, Blue Jackets 2: Connor McDavid had a goal and three assists, and Lau-

rent Brossoit stopped 28 shots as visiting Edmonton routed Columbus.

Mark Letestu, Matt Benning and Jesse Puljujarvi each had a goal and an assist for the Oilers, who chased Vezina Trophy-winning goaltender Sergei Bobrovsky at the end of the second period.

Hurricanes 3, Golden Knights 2 (SO): Cam Ward earned his 300th career win when Phillip Di Giuseppe's goal in the fifth round of a shootout lifted visiting Carolina over Vegas.

Marcus Kruger and Trevor van Riemsdyk scored for the Hurricanes in regulation. Ward, who made 22 saves, became the 32nd goalie in NHL history to reach 300 wins.

Sabres 3, Senators 2: Evander Kane, Kyle Okposo and Benoit Pouliot scored in the second period to lead host Buffalo past sinking Ottawa.

Rasmus Ristolainen had two

assists as the Sabres extended their season-best point streak to four games at 2-0-2. Robin Lehner made 24 saves against his former team.

Flyers 4, Maple Leafs 2: Sean Couturier scored the tiebreaking goal with 2:55 left and host Philadelphia beat Toronto for its fourth straight victory.

Couturier and Claude Giroux each had a goal and an assist, and Travis Konecny also scored as the Flyers halted a six-game home losing streak. Scott Laughton added an empty-netter, and Brian Elliott made 20 saves.

Wild 2, Flames 1 (SO): Mikael Granlund scored the winning goal in a shootout and host Minnesota edged Calgary.

The shootout reached the fifth round before Granlund beat Mike Smith. Alex Stalock stopped Michael Ferland to give Minnesota its third straight victory, the first two coming in overtime.