

# STARS AND STRIPES®

Wednesday, December 4, 2019

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

## NATO touts progress amid rifts, threats

BY JOHN VANDIVER

*Stars and Stripes*

President Donald Trump and fellow NATO leaders approved a defense plan for the Baltics and Poland on Wednesday, overcoming resistance from Turkey, which had threatened to block it unless other alliance members designated Kurdish fighters in Syria as terrorists.

Speaking at the end of two days of talks in London, Trump heaped praise on Turkey when asked about the Baltic defense plan. While there are conflicting views within the alliance over Ankara's invasion of northern Syria and its plan for containing Islamic State, Trump offered support.

"Frankly, a lot of people have great respect for Turkey for the work that they've done," Trump said.

NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said allied leaders didn't discuss the Kurdish YPG militia before passing a revised defense plan for the Baltics and Poland. Lithuanian President Gitanas Nausėda said in a statement that the agreement was a "huge achievement not only for our country, but for the whole region."

Although NATO managed to take steps

forward in London, there was acrimony among some of its leaders.

Trump and French President Emmanuel Macron traded barbs at the start of talks Tuesday, and later that evening Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau was captured on tape, purportedly poking fun at Trump's lengthy news conferences as he chatted with Macron and British Prime Minister Boris Johnson.

"He's two-faced," Trump said of Trudeau during a brief news conference alongside German Chancellor Angela Merkel on Wednesday. He paused and said, "And, honestly, with Trudeau, he's a nice guy. I find him to be a very nice guy."

Trump said Trudeau was likely angry over his repeated demands that Canada spend more on defense.

The dispute with Turkey also had threatened to drive a wedge between allies. Macron on Tuesday accused Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan of aligning with ISIS elements to further Turkey's agenda in Syria.

"The common enemy today is the terrorist groups. I'm sorry to say, we don't have the same definition of terrorism around the table," Macron said Tuesday alongside

Trump. "When I look at Turkey, they are fighting against those who fought with us shoulder-to-shoulder against ISIS, and sometimes they work with ISIS proxies."

Erdogan, who met behind closed doors with Trump on Wednesday, did not speak publicly during the NATO meeting.

Also on Wednesday, Trump and Stoltenberg touted a defense spending increase of a combined \$130 billion by the European allies and Canada since 2016. By the end of 2024, that figure is expected to rise to \$400 billion, said Stoltenberg, who credited Trump with pushing members to spend more on defense.

"This is unprecedented. And it's making NATO stronger," Stoltenberg said.

Allies moved forward with other priorities, including implementing a plan that calls for nations to have 30 warships, 30 fighter-bomber squadrons and 30 land battalions available for combat in 30 days, Stoltenberg said.

In a first for the alliance, NATO also held formal talks among its leaders about China's security implications. Throughout its 70-year history, NATO has focused primarily on threats to the trans-Atlantic region and its immediate surroundings.

## Heated impeachment hearing begins in Judiciary

*Associated Press*

WASHINGTON — The House Judiciary Committee's first impeachment hearing quickly burst into partisan infighting Wednesday as Democrats charged that President Donald Trump must be removed from office for enlisting foreign interference in U.S. elections and Republicans angrily retorted there were no grounds for such drastic action.

The panel responsible for drafting articles of impeachment convened as Trump's team was fanning out across Capitol Hill. Vice President Mike Pence met behind closed doors with House Republicans, and Senate Republicans were to huddle with the White House counsel as GOP lawmakers stand with the president and Democrats charge headlong into what has become a one-party drive to impeach him.

Chairman Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., gav-

eled open the hearing saying, "The facts before us are undisputed."

Nadler said Trump's phone call with Ukraine's president last July wasn't the first time Trump sought a foreign power to influence American elections, after Russian interference in 2016, and if left unchecked he could do it again in next year's campaign.

"We cannot wait for the election to address the present crisis," Nadler said. "The president has shown us his pattern of conduct. If we do not act to hold him in check now, President Trump will almost certainly try again to solicit interference in the election for his personal political gain."

Republicans protested the proceedings as unfair to the president, the dredging up of unfounded allegations as part of an effort to undo the 2016 election and remove Trump from office.

"You just don't like the guy," said Rep. Doug Collins, of Georgia, the top Republican on the panel. He called the proceedings a "disgrace" and a "sham."

Several Republicans immediately objected to the process, interjecting procedural questions, and they planned to spend much of the session interrupting, delaying and questioning the rules.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi said Democrats "haven't made a decision" yet on whether there will be a vote on impeachment. She was also meeting privately with the Democratic caucus. But a vote by Christmas appears increasingly likely with the release of a 300-page report by Democrats on the House Intelligence Committee that found "serious misconduct" by the president.

The White House declined an invitation to participate Wednesday.

# Charges dropped for most Marines in trafficking case

*The San Diego Union-Tribune*

CAMP PENDLETON, Calif. — Military prosecutors dropped human trafficking and drug charges against most of the two dozen Marines recently arrested in front of their Camp Pendleton battalion, days after a court ruled those arrests were an unlawful violation of their rights, Marine Corps officials confirmed Tuesday.

The Marines' cases will be dealt with administratively, outside the military court system, according to a 1st Marine Division statement. Many of them will be discharged from the Marines.

"Thirteen Marines submitted and have approved pretrial agreements requesting separation in lieu of courts-martial or waiving administrative separation boards," the Marines statement said.

Also, six Marines have pleaded guilty at courts-martial, and four still face criminal charges, the statement said.

On July 25, 16 Marines were called to the front of their unit — 1st Battalion, 5th Marines — and accused of human smuggling. They were arrested by a swarm of 40 to 50 law enforce-

ment agents and marched away in handcuffs.

Another eight Marines suspected of unspecified drug offenses also were taken out of formation. Some of them were detained by battalion personnel and taken to the Camp Pendleton brig, Lt. Col. Eric Olson, the battalion commander, said during testimony at a court hearing Nov. 15.

Marines in the formation that day testified at the hearing that their commanders called the accused Marines a "cancer" on the battalion.

The cases against the Marines fell apart after that hearing. The judge ruled the mass arrest — conducted in front of an 800-person battalion — was an unlawful violation of their rights, attorneys involved in two of the cases said.

Marine Capt. Charles Whitman, who represents a Marine charged with drug offenses, successfully argued that the arrests amounted to unlawful command influence.

"After that ruling, I think the government saw the writing on the wall and wanted to get this out of the court system," Whitman said in an interview Tuesday.

# Navy launches site to assist sailors' assignment process

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Navy has changed how sailors search and apply for billets with the upcoming launch of MyNavy Assignment on Thursday, the service announced.

The website is replacing the Navy's Career Management System-Interactive Detailing website, with more search features and transparency in the assignment process, according to a news release Tuesday from the Navy's personnel command.

"We based these changes on sailor input from around the Navy," Rear Adm. Rick Cheeseman, director of the Career Management Department at Navy Personnel Command, said in a statement. "As we continue to transform our Navy, our goal to increase transparency, flexibility and choice for all sailors and MyNavy Assignment is a huge step in the right direction."

Enlisted sailors who are looking for their next job in their Navy career can work with a "detailer" who considers their goals and available openings across the service. The website will function as a "detailing marketplace," where sailors can search for vacant jobs in the Navy as well as future opportunities. It will have an improved

look, according to the Navy.

Sailors in the reserves will see the changes in future updates but no timeline was given.

Last week, during an online town hall event, Vice Adm. John Nowell, chief of naval personnel, highlighted the transparency in the billet process on the new website.

"Let me assure you, there is no secret list of billets," Nowell said. "... We're going to show you all the billets. We are going to prioritize what's most important and they will get filled first. But you can go in and you can bookmark billets so that you follow them over successive cycles."

The push for a new career management website is from the Navy's Sailor 2025 initiative, which includes modernizing the personnel system and improving user experience, according to the Navy.

On MyNavy Assignments, sailors can submit seven applications, up from five, and track the status of those applications.

The website will also have a résumé feature. Potentially interested commands and detailers can also view the information listed on their résumé.

Sailors interested in other job fields will be able to see where their skills and experience match.

# Okinawans seek \$1.8M over noise at US bases

BY AYA ICHIHASHI  
*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Neighbors of two U.S. air bases on Okinawa have filed new lawsuits seeking compensation from the Japanese government for physical and mental damage from aircraft noise, according to local media reports.

Two suits, both filed Saturday, seek \$1.8 million in compensation: \$1.16 million for 110 residents around Kadena Air Base and \$642,00 for 102 residents near Marine Corps Air Station Futenma.

A spokesperson for the Okinawa Defense Bureau, an arm of the Japan Ministry of Defense, said it had not yet received the complaint and declined comment. A plain-

tiff's lawyer was unavailable for comment.

In April, the Fukuoka High Court Naga Branch reduced by \$3 million a \$22.6 million award in a similar suit involving MCAS Futenma and dismissed the plaintiffs' demand to halt flight operations there.

A separate lawsuit filed in 2018 by 2,800 residents near Futenma seeks \$10 million in damages and is still pending.



## GAO: 102 bases in US at risk of water shortages

BY COREY DICKSTEIN  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — More than 100 U.S. military installations face water shortage risks, according to the Government Accountability Office, which warned that the Pentagon needs better standards for monitoring and determining the bases that could be affected.

The federal watchdog cautioned in its Nov. 27 report that bases in the United States had already experienced water shortages that affected critical operations and said more installations were likely to be affected by climate change-related issues and increasing severe weather events.

In all, GAO listed 102 military locations in the United States as vulnerable, noting the Defense Department relies on billions of gallons of water to operate — some 84 billion gallons in fiscal year 2018.

The Pentagon defines water scarcity as a lack of enough water to meet needs for a wide range of critical missions on installations including military training, weapons testing, firefighting and providing drinking water, hygiene and sanitation services.

Vulnerable installations stretched from Naval Air Station Key West in Florida to Joint Base Lewis-McChord in Washington state. Mountain Home Air Force Base in Idaho, Francis E. Warren Air Force Base in Wyoming and Marine Corps Air Station Yuma in Arizona have experienced some level of water shortage in recent years, the GAO reported.

The new report also examined a trio of assessments conducted this year by the Office of the Secretary of Defense on energy- and climate-related issues. The Pentagon looked at water supply issues at its properties and compared results with similar studies conducted separately since 2017 by the three military departments.

The evaluations often did not match, the GAO reported. Only 42 bases of 95 identified by the Pentagon were considered at risk of water scarcity in more than one of the three OSD reports and the three separate military department assessments. The GAO blamed the OSD, criticizing its data collections practices as not following the same standard for analysis the departments of the Army, Air Force and Navy followed.

The GAO identified installations facing drought — as many as 43 bases — as those most vulnerable. The federal watchdog said Pentagon officials agreed to its recommendation to implement better practices for assessing water shortage vulnerabilities and conduct a new, departmentwide analysis.

## Senators seek base housing deficiencies accountability

BY ROSE L. THAYER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Senators expressed outrage Tuesday over the lack of accountability among military and business leaders who oversee base housing amid continuing complaints of poor living conditions for military families.

“There’s got to be somebody who can be held accountable here in what looks like endemic nonenforcement,” said Sen. Angus King, I-Maine, who was frustrated that private companies were not forced to hold up their end of the deal. “I want somebody who can be fired.”

The Senate Armed Services Committee last heard from the military’s top brass in March on their plans to fix problems such as mold and vermin infestations, lead paint exposure and substandard maintenance that plague on-base housing.

Tuesday’s hearing, the committee’s third on the subject this year, was meant to garner an update on fixing the problems. But progress has been disappointing, Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., committee chairman, said in his opening statement.

“We continue to hear regularly from families across the country about questionable practices, poor workmanship and about housing contractors not caring about the families they’re supposed to be serving,” he said. “When is enough enough?”

Since the Senate’s March hearing with military leaders, all three services have new secretaries. At Tuesday’s hearing, Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy, acting Navy Secretary Thomas Modly and Air Force Secretary Barbara Barrett sat alongside their service chiefs, the commandant of the Marines and a representative from the Government Accountability Office. For two hours, committee members pressed them on housing solutions, with an emphasis on how to hold someone accountable for allowing such poor conditions.

In McCarthy’s opening statement, he said one-third of housing on Army bases is rated in poor condition and needs to be replaced, one-third is considered in good condition and the rest falls in between.

At Keesler Air Force Base in Mississippi, where all housing had to be replaced after Hurricane Katrina in 2005, 1,084 of its 1,188 homes have experienced moisture and mold, primarily because of a mistake made while installing air conditioning units and ducts, said Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss.

Six months after the last hearing, Sen. Tim Kaine, D-Va., said maintenance crews tried to reuse moldy insulation during re-

mediation of a house at Fort Belvoir, Va.

“[The management companies] all operate in the private sphere and compete hard,” Kaine said. Then they “treat military tenants like they’re captives, like a captive audience.”

Though contracts, most spanning 50 years, require management companies to meet federal and state standards, service secretaries were quiet when King asked who within their ranks is responsible for making certain those guidelines are met.

“Is the problem the contracts or the enforcement of the contracts?” King asked.

“I think it’s both,” said Elizabeth Field, director of defense capabilities and management with the Government Accountability Office, who testified based on a report released Tuesday that she authored on military housing privatization. “In many cases, the contracts were not written in such a way that the services could truly hold the partners accountable for everything they should be holding them accountable for.”

Sen. Tammy Duckworth, D-Ill., expressed concern that no garrison commander, an officer who typically functions like the base’s mayor, had been fired as a result of not holding private companies accountable at their base.

“If you had a tank gunnery range, an aerial gunnery range or a door gunnery range that was constantly hurting the troops operating at that range, and that range was not up to standard, that garrison commander would be held responsible for whether or not they held responsible whatever contractor was running that range for you and keeping it safe. So I don’t understand why not a single garrison commander has yet been fired over a failure to maintain these standards,” Duckworth said, garnering applause from the military families who filled the committee room.

Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., pointed his blame toward the private companies, asking if any criminal charges have been referred related to housing. While McCarthy and Modly said no, Barrett said the FBI and the Air Force Office of Special Investigations are looking into instances of fraud reported by the media.

“Some housing issues invite concern about possible allegations that some owners manipulated data to increase their incentive awards,” Barrett said in her opening statement.

“I’m deeply disappointed that there has been no such referral,” Blumenthal said before thanking Barrett for opening an investigation.

# US peace envoy in Kabul seeking new talks

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — Washington's special peace envoy, Zalmay Khalilzad, was in the Afghan capital, Kabul, on Wednesday to launch an "accelerated effort" to get Afghans on both sides of the protracted conflict to the negotiation table to plot a road map to a post-war Afghanistan.

His next stop will be Doha, Qatar, where he will restart talks with the Taliban, according to a U.S. State Department statement. The talks would be the first official round since September, when President Donald Trump declared an all-but-done deal dead after a surge in violence killed 12 people in the capital, including a U.S. soldier.

In Kabul on Wednesday, Khalilzad met

with several Afghan leaders, including President Ashraf Ghani, who repeated his call for a cease-fire.

Hekmat Karzai, chairman of the Kabul-based Center for Conflict and Peace Studies, tweeted photographs of his meeting Wednesday with Khalilzad in Kabul, saying they "spoke about the way forward."

A Taliban official said the group has held informal talks with the Americans, without specifying where or who participated. He spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss the talks.

Khalilzad's visit comes just days after Trump visited U.S. troops in Afghanistan for the Thanksgiving holiday, when he hinted at a resumption of peace talks with the Taliban.

Trump said the U.S. and Taliban have

been engaged in talks and insisted the Taliban want to make a deal after heavy U.S. fire in recent months.

The State Department statement said Khalilzad's Kabul and Doha talks are a follow-up to Trump's recent visit and to discuss how best to support accelerated efforts to get all parties to intra-Afghan negotiations.

In Doha, Khalilzad will be pushing for a cease-fire or at least a reduction in violence with an eye to an eventual end to fighting.

The Taliban official said the U.S. has been pressing for a cease-fire, even a temporary one during the time of an agreement signing. While there has been no formal announcement of a reduction in violence, Taliban attacks at least in the cities appear to have decreased in recent weeks.

## North Korea lashes out at US threat of force

By KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea lashed out Wednesday at President Donald Trump's threat to use military force if necessary to achieve denuclearization, warning that "the use of armed forces is not the privilege of the U.S. only."

Trump called on North Korean leader Kim Jong Un on Tuesday to live up to promises to rid his country of nuclear weapons.

"Now, we have the most powerful military we ever had, and we are by far the most powerful country in the world, and hopefully we don't have to use it," Trump told reporters at the NATO summit in London. "But if we do, we'll use it."

Those remarks drew a sharp response

from Pak Jong Chon, the chief of the general staff of North Korea's army, who said he and Kim Jong Un were "displeased" to hear Trump's comments.

"One thing I would like to make clear is that the use of armed forces is not the privilege of the U.S. only," Pak said. "I clearly state here that if the U.S. uses any armed forces against (North Korea), we will also take prompt corresponding actions at any level."

North Korea and the United States "are still technically at war and the state of truce can turn into an all-out armed conflict any moment even by any accidental case," he said in a statement published by the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

Both sides have ratcheted up their rhetoric as nuclear talks remain stalled ahead of

an end-of-year deadline imposed by North Korea for Washington to offer concessions such as sanctions relief and security guarantees.

Trump has frequently touted his friendship with the North Korean leader as progress, despite a resurgence of weapons tests by the communist state in recent months.

On Tuesday, however, the president reverted to using his nickname "rocket man" for the North Korean leader, while insisting they maintain a "very good relationship."

Kim "likes sending rockets up, doesn't he? That's why I call him 'rocket man,'" Trump said.

Trump spoke hours after the North said it was preparing a "Christmas gift" for the United States if Washington fails to offer a more flexible stance in talks.

## China and US clash over Xinjiang, Hong Kong bills

Associated Press

BEIJING — Already strained relations between China and the United States were further muddled after Congress overwhelmingly approved a bill targeting Beijing's mass crackdown on ethnic Muslim minorities Wednesday, less than one week after President Donald Trump signed separate human rights legislation on Hong Kong.

China's ruling Communist Party has long regarded Hong Kong and the far west Xinjiang region as crucial areas for asserting territorial sovereignty, and it has

responded with fury to what it considers foreign meddling.

"Xinjiang is China's Xinjiang," said a statement from China's National Ethnic Affairs Commission, echoing another government mantra: "Hong Kong is China's Hong Kong."

Tensions over the recently passed U.S. bills have cast doubt over the potential for a trade deal between the two countries, which have been embroiled in a 16-month tariff war. Trump said Tuesday that he has "no deadline" for striking an agreement and that he may wait until after next year's presidential election.

The Uighur Human Rights Policy Act denounces the detention of an estimated 1 million Uighurs, Kazakhs and others in Xinjiang, home to the predominantly Muslim minority groups. It would require the State Department to evaluate whether Chinese officials would meet the criteria for sanctions for their roles in enacting oppressive policies.

The bill "disregards the facts and mixes up black and white," the Foreign Affairs Commission of China's legislature said in one among a slew of strongly worded rebukes from government departments.



# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Bald eagle smashes into window, flies off

**VA** NORFOLK — A bald eagle made an unexpected appearance at a Virginia tax preparation office, slamming into a window and then apparently flying off without serious injuries.

The Virginian-Pilot reported the mature bald eagle struck a window at an H&R Block office in Norfolk, leaving a hole nearly three feet wide and scattering glass shards over the office floor.

Harry Patterson Jr., who runs a neighboring insurance office, said he was on the phone when he saw what he thought looked like a stuffed animal.

Patterson said the office is closed until tax season.

## Elk gets tangled up in resident's hammock

**NC** MAGGIE VALLEY — An elk is running around western North Carolina with a shredded hammock on its head, and apparently a love of apples is to blame.

News outlets reported Jim Beaver told the Haywood County Sheriff's Office on Thanksgiving that an elk was stuck in his yard with its antlers tangled up in a hammock. The sheriff's office on Facebook says Cpl. Ken Stiles climbed onto the roof, cut the hammock and freed the animal.

Beaver said elk often eat apples in his yard and play with his hammock.

## Urine sample prompts theater evacuation

**WA** NORTH BEND — A movie theater in the small Washington city of North Bend was evacuated after authorities said a package labeled

as containing a "highly contagious human substance" was sent there in error.

KOMO reported the package contained a urine sample.

Sgt. Paul Graham, with Snoqualmie Police, said the package arrived at the theater and the theater manager found a box with the labeled liquid inside. The theater was evacuated, and local streets were closed as hazmat crews responded.

Graham said the package was supposed to have been delivered to a medical clinic.

## 19 people report illness on cruise ship

**CA** LOS ANGELES — Authorities said 19 people aboard a cruise ship reported flu-like illnesses as they reached a Southern California port.

The Los Angeles Fire Department said authorities were called to evaluate patients after they fell ill on a Norwegian Cruise Line ship.

Authorities said the patients were evaluated and they declined to be taken to the hospital.

The Los Angeles Times reported that paramedics responded to the same ship a week earlier after a report that passengers were ill and four were sent to a hospital for treatment.

## Evacuation slide falls from jet near airport

**MA** MILTON — Authorities said no one was hurt when an evacuation slide fell from an airliner into the yard of a suburban Boston home.

A company spokeswoman confirmed to the Boston Herald that the uninflated slide fell from a Delta Air Lines flight from Paris to Boston's Logan

International Airport.

The Federal Aviation Administration said the pilot reported a loud noise as the plane approached Logan and landed safely.

Police in Milton south of Boston alerted the FAA that the slide had been found in the yard of Wenhan Huang.

## Man finds ring lost in sand for 50 years

**FL** WINTER HAVEN — A man using a metal detector on a Florida beach found a high school ring that another man lost nearly 50 years ago.

Kenneth Board said he lost the Auburndale High School ring on Cocoa Beach the day after the 1970 senior prom.

The Ledger reported Jerry Pope was sweeping his metal detector across the sand on Melbourne Beach, some 20 miles from Cocoa Beach, when he found the ring. He cleaned the green growth off of it and discovered the initials "H" or "R" as well as the last initial, "B."

Jake White, a testing coordinator at Auburndale High, took the initials and graduating year and found the match in Board.

## Sign from drive-in will be preserved

**NJ** WALL — Officials said a clown sign that has smiled on motorists at a now-demolished New Jersey drive-in for two-thirds of a century will be preserved.

NJ.com reported that developers of a strip mall at the Wall Township site said they will donate the Circus Drive-In sign for preservation and display elsewhere.

The Route 35 drive-in, a vestige of car culture with a white-and-red striped roof resembling an old-fashioned cir-

cus tent, closed in 2017.

Developer Circus Partners LLC bought the site then, demolished the building last year and last week won planning board approval for the strip mall.

## Garage fire displaces people and reptiles

**CA** OXNARD — Authorities said a fire in a Southern California garage displaced three people and a large number of reptiles.

The Ventura County Star reported that Oxnard firefighters found a dozen or two dozen reptiles after battling an electric fire in a detached garage.

Oxnard Fire Department Battalion Chief Steve McNaughten said the animals included a boa constrictor and a six-foot-long lizard.

He said several animals died in the blaze in the city about 60 miles west of Los Angeles.

## Historic hardware store is closing

**LA** LOGANSPOUT — A 122-year hardware and department store that once saw a visit from Bonnie and Clyde is closing in northwest Louisiana.

N.J. Caraway & Co. has been serving customers in the town of Logansport since 1897.

Store owner Janet Palmer told KSLA-TV she's ready to retire. She's having health issues, and her husband died nine years ago. The couple had run the store for nearly 40 years.

N.J. Caraway & Co. survived two fires and even received a visit from the notorious duo Bonnie Parker and Clyde Barrow, looking to buy ammunition, which the store didn't sell.

The store's final day of operations will be Dec. 28.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

# Bills are in thick of NFL playoff chase

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — It was only a few weeks ago when the Bills had a 7-3 record, and quarterback Josh Allen acknowledged he and his teammates had taken a peek at the playoff picture.

"I wouldn't say we've started talking about it, but you do want to keep an eye on what everybody else is doing," the second-year starter responded, before making a cautious projection. "At the end of the day, I think you need at least 10 wins to get in."

Two weeks and two wins later, the question for Allen now might be why stop there?

Returning from an extended weekend off following their convincing 26-15 win at Dallas on Thanksgiving Day, the Bills are in the thick of the AFC playoff race.

At 9-3, the Bills will play the two teams ahead of them in the standings over the next three weeks, starting with the conference-leading Baltimore Ravens (10-2) coming to town Sunday, and Buffalo playing at New England (10-2) on Dec.

21.

Coach Sean McDermott on Monday promptly cooled talk of having any AFC East title aspirations by saying he's solely focused on the immediate challenge ahead and noting how the dynamic Lamar Jackson-led Ravens might well be the league's best team.

"They just can beat you in so many different ways," McDermott said of the Ravens, who have won eight straight and had outscored their previous five opponents by a combined margin of 202-62 before eking out a 20-17 win over San Francisco on Sunday. "I don't think there's really been a defense that's cracked the code to this point, so to speak."

And yet, McDermott appreciates the national attention the Bills are suddenly generating in having matched the team's best record through 12 games in 23 years.

The latest sign of respect came Sunday, when the NFL flexed Buffalo into its most prestigious TV spot by moving the Bills' game at Pittsburgh from a 1 p.m. start to prime time on Dec. 15. It will

mark the first time Buffalo has played on Sunday night since a 56-10 loss to New England in 2007.

"We talk a lot about things being earned, and the guys have earned that. So, I don't think we shy away from that standpoint," McDermott said. "But we also know there's a lot of work ahead of us, a lot of runway to go yet."

Buffalo might still have much to prove, especially considering how it built much of its record by taking advantage of a soft early season schedule.

The perception toward the Bills, however, is beginning to change based on the dominance they've shown in winning three straight.

Allen, selected seventh overall in the 2018 draft and 25 spots ahead of Jackson, is finding his rhythm. He's overseeing an offense that has combined for 1,204 yards and nine touchdowns — seven of them passing — in its past three.

The uptick in production coincides with coordinator Brian Daboll introducing a

no-huddle dimension.

And Buffalo's defense has added a more attacking element by combining for 15 sacks over the past three games after managing just 22 in its first nine.

Bills players note there is also a difference between this year's team and the one that sneaked into the playoffs on the final day of the 2017 season by clinching the AFC's final wild-card berth only after Baltimore was eliminated by giving up a last-minute touchdown in a loss to Cincinnati.

"That was a whole different team," safety Micah Hyde recently said, noting how the roster was already in transition following the arrival of McDermott and general manager Brandon Beane earlier that year.

"It was kind of one of those seasons where we didn't know what to expect," said Hyde, one of 12 remaining holdovers. "I think going into this year, we expected to do something great. And that's still where our mindset is."

## Panthers fire Rivera with four games left in season

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Panthers owner David Pepper said he would have preferred to wait until after the season to make a coaching change.

Pepper ultimately decided he wanted to get a jumpstart on his search for a new coach, so he fired Ron Rivera, the franchise's winningest coach, on Tuesday with the Panthers (5-7) all but out of playoff contention following a four-game skid.

"I was informed of other teams doing different types of searches out there and I'm not going to start a search and not tell Ron Rivera," Pepper said Tuesday. "(He's) too good of a man, and I have great respect for Ron. He's a great human

being and I'm not going to disrespect anybody like that, especially Ron Rivera."

Rivera said Wednesday that he doesn't believe his coaching career is over.

In his final news conference at Bank of America Stadium Rivera said he will take the next four weeks off but is eager to coach again next season.

"I do believe I will get another opportunity, and I will coach again," Rivera said.

The 57-year-old Rivera opened his news conference by adamantly defending his accomplishments in his nine seasons in Carolina. He took over a 2-14 team, won three straight NFC South titles and led the Panthers to the Super Bowl.

He leaves with a 73-61-1 re-

cord, more wins than any Panthers coach.

But Rivera was a coach with a defensive background, and Pepper said the NFL has implemented rules that favor the offense. The owner said that benefits teams with a head coach that has an offensive background.

"That's why you're having more people go that way," said Pepper, who bought the Panthers in 2018 and did not hire Rivera, who was already in place. "I think you have a lot of people on that side accepting the more modern processes."

Pepper has spoken repeatedly about his distaste for the "long-term mediocrity" that has plagued the organization.

Rivera said he believes the team's struggles the past two

seasons are directly tied to quarterback Cam Newton's injuries. Newton struggled through shoulder problems in the second half of last season and played only two games this season because of a foot issue that might require surgery.

"The biggest thing that contributed to our long-term mediocrity the last two seasons is that we didn't have our quarterback situation settled," Rivera said. "... Our problems didn't start until when? Until our quarterback got hurt."

Rivera said he was surprised Pepper fired him with four games left in the season.

"I thought, if anything, it'd happen at the end of the season. ... but at the end of the day you have to win football games," Rivera said.



## College basketball roundup

# No. 1 Louisville shuts down Michigan

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Louisville players and coach Chris Mack cared more about protecting the basket against Michigan than defending their new perch atop the rankings.

Fulfilling that priority helped the Cardinals succeed in their season debut as the nation's No. 1 team.

Jordan Nwora had 22 points and 12 rebounds, and Louisville held No. 4 Michigan to a season-low 26% shooting mark for a 58-43 victory Tuesday night in its first game since returning to No. 1.

The Cardinals (8-0) shot just 37% but their defense stifled Michigan (7-1) much of the

night as they earned a signature victory in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge one day after claiming the top spot in the AP Top 25 for the first time in six years. Though their second-year coach has downplayed rankings, the win was significant for a program he has guided back into the national championship discussion following a sex scandal and the school's involvement in a federal corruption investigation of college basketball.

Players seem more focused on building on it.

"Our season's not over yet," Cardinals guard Lamarr Kimble said. "No. 1's just a number. We're going to continue to get better."

**No. 10 Duke 87, No. 11 Michigan State 75:** Vernon Carey Jr. had 26 points, 11 rebounds and three blocks to help the visiting Blue Devils dominate the Spartans.

**No. 15 Memphis 71, Bradley 56:** Alex Lomax scored 17 points, Boogie Ellis added 12 and the host Tigers overcame a poor shooting performance to beat the Braves.

**Indiana 80, No. 17 Florida State 64:** Devonte Green scored a career-high 30 points and Trayce Jackson-Davis added 15, leading the undefeated Hoosiers past the visiting Seminoles in the Big Ten/ACC Challenge.

**No. 18 Baylor 78, Maryland Eastern Shore 46:** Jared Butler made six three-pointers and scored 20 points, Devonte Bando added 14 points and the host Bears led throughout against the winless Hawks.

**No. 19 Dayton 99, Houston Baptist 68:** Obi Toppin scored 17 points and had a soaring, one-hand slam off one of his 10 rebounds, and the host Flyers celebrated their return to the rankings by beating the Huskies.

**No. 24 Butler 67, Mississippi 58:** Kamar Baldwin scored 31 points, helping the Bulldogs remain unbeaten with a victory over the host Rebels.

## Ohio State tops CFP rankings going into title game

Associated Press

Ohio State will go into championship weekend as the top team in the College Football Playoff selection committee's rankings, followed by LSU, Clemson and Georgia.

Utah, Oklahoma and Baylor are on deck, and that could turn out to be the great debate by Saturday night.

Utah was fifth, Oklahoma sixth and Baylor seventh in the committee's second-to-last top 25 released Tuesday. The final rankings to set the pairings for the national semifinals come out Sunday after each FBS conference plays a championship game. The most pivotal games will be LSU-Georgia in the Southeastern Conference championship game Saturday; Oklahoma-Baylor in the Big 12 championship Saturday; and Utah-Oregon — 13th this week — for the Pac-12 title Friday night.

### What next?

A team has never lost its conference championship game and made the College Football

Playoff. Conventional wisdom suggests that could happen this season with LSU and Ohio State. Clemson might be in the same situation, but a loss to a four-touchdown underdog might give the committee some pause. It is also really unlikely Clemson will lose to Virginia, so let's not waste too much energy debating that unlikely hypothetical.

In a world where the undefeated Tigers (purple), Buckeyes and Tigers (orange) stay undefeated, the fourth and final playoff spot could become a Pac-12 vs. Big 12 debate.

Utah appears to be on deck to slide into No. 4 if Georgia is bounced, but Oklahoma and Baylor are lurking.

Committee chairman Rob Mullens, the athletic director at Oregon, said the most vigorous debate among the 13-member panel this week was between the Utes and Sooners.

"We spent considerable time on it. More time than anywhere else on the board," Mullens said.

How the games play out this weekend while the committee

is watching, all together at a resort hotel in Grapevine, Texas, could swing the decision. But here are the résumés going in:

### Utah (11-1)

Victories against CFP ranked teams — 0.  
Victories against .500 or better FBS — 5.  
Victories against 8 wins or more FBS — 0.  
Loss — at USC (8-4), 30-23.

Average scoring margin — 23.7 (5th in FBS).

Offense (yards per play) — 6.91 (9th in FBS).

Defense (yards per play) — 4.20 (4th in FBS).

**Analytics/computer ratings**  
ESPN FPI — 11th.  
SP+ — 7th.  
FEI — 6th.  
SRS — 6th.  
Sagarin — 9th (strength of schedule 54th)

### Oklahoma (11-1)

Victories against CFP ranked teams — 2.  
Victories against FBS .500 or better — 5.  
Victories against FBS 8 wins or more — 3.  
Loss — at Kansas State (8-4),

48-41.

Average scoring margin — 16.4 (12th in FBS).

Offense (yards per play) — 8.36 (1st in FBS).

Defense (yards per play) — 5.33 (42nd in FBS).

**Analytics/computer ratings**  
ESPN FPI — 8th.  
SP+ — 6th.  
FEI — 8th.  
SRS — 8th.  
Sagarin — 6th (strength of schedule 22nd).

### Baylor (11-1)

Victories against CFP ranked teams — 1.

Victories against FBS .500 or better — 4.

Victories against FBS 8 wins or more — 2.

Loss — vs. Oklahoma (11-1), 34-31.

Average scoring margin — 15.8 (16th in FBS).

Offense (yards per play) — 6.56 (17th in FBS).

Defense (yards per play) — 4.77 (18th in FBS).

**Analytics/computer ratings**  
ESPN FPI — 15th.  
SP+ — 14th.  
FEI — 14th.  
SRS — 17th.  
Sagarin — 15th (strength of schedule 42nd).

## NHL roundup

## Marchessault's hat trick lifts Knights

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — Jonathan Marchessault gave the Devils' day of change an all-too-familiar ending.

Marchessault scored three straight goals in the third period to rally the Vegas Golden Knights over New Jersey 4-3 Tuesday night, hours after the Devils fired coach John Hynes.

Marchessault scored twice in the first 5:04 of the third to give the Golden Knights a 3-2 lead. He added a power-play goal midway through the period, and Vegas held on even after New Jersey's Nico Hischier scored 20 seconds later.

The Golden Knights have won four straight to improve to 15-11-4.

Malcolm Subban had 32 saves, and Chandler Stephenson scored in his first game since being acquired Monday from the Washington Capitals.

Hynes was fired Tuesday after a 9-13-4 start that left the team in last place in the Metropolitan Division and with the NHL's second-worst record.

**Capitals 5, Sharks 2:** John Carlson had a goal and two as-

sists in the opening period to reach 40 points for the season, Nick Hathaway and Jakub Vrana each scored twice and visiting Washington beat San Jose.

Carlson had a hand in all three Washington goals during a span of 3:01 in the first period that put the Capitals in control in the opener of their three-game California swing. He assisted on the first goal of the game for both Hathaway and Vrana and then scored his own, giving him nine goals and 31 assists through 29 games this season.

**Flyers 6, Maple Leafs 1:** Claude Giroux scored the go-ahead goal midway through the third period and host Philadelphia had three goals in the final 2:06 to get its fifth straight win.

Travis Konecny had a goal and an assist for Philadelphia, which has earned points in seven straight games (6-0-1). The Flyers had an NHL-best 24 points in November, going 10-2-4 to tie a franchise record for most points in a month.

**Canadiens 4, Islanders 2:** Phillip Danault, Brendan Gallagher and Shea Weber each

had a goal and an assist, and host Montreal beat New York to snap an eight-game losing streak.

Jeff Petry also scored and Carey Price stopped 21 shots to earn his 11th win of the season for Montreal, which ended an 0-5-3 skid.

**Lightning 3, Predators 2 (OT):** Nikita Kucherov scored at 2:35 of overtime to give visiting Tampa Bay a victory over Nashville.

Victor Hedman and Ondrej Palat also scored and Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 30 shots as the Lightning snapped a three-game skid.

**Bruins 2, Hurricanes 0:** Charlie Coyle scored late in the third period, Jaroslav Halak stopped 24 shots for his second shutout of the season, and host Boston beat Carolina for its eighth straight win.

David Krejci also scored for Boston, just 1:08 after Coyle got the Bruins on the scoreboard.

**Jets 5, Stars 1:** Kyle Connor had a goal and two assists, and host Winnipeg handed Dallas its fourth straight loss.

Nikolaj Ehlers, Josh Morrissey, Patrik Laine and Mark

Scheifele each had a goal and assist for Winnipeg, which is 4-1-0 in its past five games.

**Coyotes 4, Blue Jackets 2:** Darcy Kuemper stopped 33 shots and visiting Arizona beat Columbus behind goals by Clayton Keller, Christian Fischer and Lawson Crouse.

Carl Soderberg had an empty-net goal and assisted on two of the earlier goals.

**Wild 4, Panthers 2:** Carson Soucy scored the go-ahead goal early in the third period to lift visiting Minnesota over Florida.

Luke Kunin, Mats Zuccarello and Jason Zucker also scored as the Wild won their fourth straight game and earned a point for the 10th straight game (7-0-3).

**Canucks 5, Senators 2:** Antoine Roussel scored in his first game back after being sidelined for eight months with an injury, and host Vancouver beat Ottawa.

Zack MacEwen got his first NHL goal, and Tanner Pearson, Elias Pettersson and Oscar Fantenberg also scored for Vancouver, which won for just the fifth time in 15 games (5-8-2).

## NBA roundup

## Heat win in overtime, hand Raptors first home defeat

Associated Press

TORONTO — Jimmy Butler delivered a triple-double to beat Toronto, then turned his focus to Miami's next opponent with an unbeaten home record.

Butler had 22 points, 13 rebounds and 12 assists, Duncan Robinson scored 22 points and the Heat spoiled Kyle Lowry's return to Toronto's lineup by beating the Raptors 121-110 in overtime Tuesday.

"I'm not going to say that this one is more special than any other one," Butler said of Miami's third consecutive win and second straight on the road.

"Just two good teams going at it. We were fortunate enough to do our job."

Butler scored eight consecutive points in 55 seconds to begin the extra session as the Heat recovered after blowing a seven-point lead in the final two minutes of the fourth quarter.

Miami also won at Milwaukee on Oct. 26, a 131-126 overtime victory. The Heat are the only road team to beat the Bucks this season.

Miami closes its three-game road trip at Boston on Wednesday. The Celtics (7-0) are one of three NBA teams yet to lose at home this season.

**Lakers 105, Nuggets 96:** LeBron James had 25 points, nine assists and a crucial dunk off a miss late in the fourth quarter to lead visiting Los Angeles over Denver.

**Clippers 117, Trail Blazers 97:** Montrezl Harrell scored 26 points, Paul George added 25 and host Los Angeles pulled away in the second half to beat Portland.

**Mavericks 118, Pelicans 97:** Luka Doncic scored 15 of his 33 points in the third quarter and grabbed 18 rebounds in just 28 minutes to power visiting Dallas over New Orleans.

**Magic 127, Wizards 120:**

Evan Fournier scored 31 points, D.J. Augustin added 16 of his 24 in the fourth quarter and visiting Orlando beat Washington.

**Pistons 127, Cavaliers 94:** Blake Griffin scored 24 points, Andre Drummond had 17 points and 14 rebounds, and visiting Detroit routed Cleveland to win consecutive games for the first time this season.

**Spurs 135, Rockets 133 (2OT):** Lonnie Walker IV had a career-high 28 points and host San Antonio overcame James Harden's 50 points by rallying to beat Houston.