

STARS AND STRIPES®

Tuesday, December 24, 2019

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

'A cornucopia of goodwill'

Troops in Syria get stockings stuffed with goodies delivered by helicopter

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

DEIR EL-ZOUR PROVINCE, Syria — Donning Santa hats and riding in Chinooks instead of sleighs, a combined military mission delivered holiday cheer to U.S. troops at several austere camps on what one general called the “outside edge” of America’s military footprint in eastern Syria on Monday.

Several high-ranking officers and NCOs in the U.S.-led coalition to defeat Islamic State brought gifts and goodies, as well as surprise recorded video messages from home for men and women deployed to Deir el-Zour and Hassakeh provinces, where last month U.S. troops resumed large-scale operations with Kurdish-led partner forces against ISIS, after a brief pause earlier this year.

The helicopter rotors might have kicked up a little too much dust, as some of the service members watching the videos appeared to get watery eyes

during the brief celebrations.

One of the first to view a message from home, a bearded man whom Pentagon officials asked not be photographed or named, quickly flipped his sunglasses down over his eyes as the message from his young children ended.

“Eyeball sweat,” someone teased from the crowd of a few dozen troops, who applauded and said “aww” behind him.

The videos were part of what unclassified labels on boxes of stockings called Operation Holiday Express, though an official asked that one of the destinations handwritten on the box not be photographed due to its sensitive nature. At some sites, which officials said had not before been visited by media, they asked that identifying features not be photographed, and at one site, Stars and Stripes was not allowed to take photos at all — though it was too dark anyway.

At several sites, a loose formation of soldiers, some bearded and anonymous, oth-

ers clean-shaven and bearing unit combat patches, awaited the arrival of their visitors, who included Lt. Gen. Pat White, commander of the U.S.-led coalition, and his staff — several of them wearing Santa hats.

“Just a little bit of merriment today, then you’ve got to get back to work,” White told one of the groups after thanking them for all that they do. “All right, get back to work. No, just kidding. God bless you guys.”

At a couple of sites, Command Sgt. Maj. Daniel Hendrex, the senior noncommissioned officer for Inherent Resolve, grabbed razors from care package boxes brought along on the visit and handed them out to long-whiskered special operations troops, joking that he’d be a bad sergeant major if he didn’t ask them to shave.

Cpl. Calvin Kenno is deployed to a site in the country’s eastern Deir el-Zour province with a company from an attack helicopter battalion of 1st Cavalry Division’s 1st Air Cavalry Brigade — his second Christ-

mas away from home in three years.

The first, he was a newlywed on a nine-month rotation to Europe, he said, and now he’s missing a chance to make holiday memories with his two young children.

Kenno stood in front of a music stand holding a tablet computer that played a video of his family, with the audio piped through a portable loudspeaker. Apache attack helicopters stood not far behind him, black smoke from an oil fire rising in the distance.

When his wife asked how many presents Santa would bring daddy, Kenno’s son counted: “One, two, wee, fow, five.”

As in all the messages, the family expressed pride, best wishes and sadness about their loved one’s absence.

“That was a tear-jerker,” Kenno said after the clip ended and a buddy clapped him on the back. Moments later, he added, “It just makes me happy.”

Trump calls GIs ahead of Christmas, is coy on N. Korea

Associated Press

PALM BEACH, Fla. — President Donald Trump called members of all five branches of the military stationed across the world to share greetings ahead of the Christmas holiday.

Speaking Tuesday by video conference from his private club in Florida, where he is on vacation, Trump said, “I want to wish you an amazing Christmas.” The group included Ma-

rines in Afghanistan, an Army unit in Kuwait, a Navy ship in the Gulf of Aden, an Air Force base in Missouri and a Coast Guard station in Alaska.

Trump praised the armed forces for their efforts this year to eliminate the last of Islamic State’s territorial caliphate and for killing ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi.

“You make it possible for us to do what we have to do,” Trump said, thanking them for

their service.

Trump had just finished thanking the troops when he was asked about North Korea. He opted for a wait-and-see approach.

“Maybe it’s a present where he sends me a beautiful vase as opposed to a missile test,” Trump said. “I may get a nice present from him. You don’t know. You never know.”

Nuclear talks between the U.S. and North Korea have

been stalled since a February summit between Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un fell apart.

To our readers

Stripes Lite will not publish on Dec. 25. It will return on Dec. 26.

DOD: NJ soldier killed in Afghanistan

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — A 33-year-old American soldier was killed in combat Monday in Afghanistan, the U.S. military said. The Taliban claimed they were behind a fatal roadside bombing in northern Kunduz province.

In a statement Monday night, the Pentagon identified the casualty as Sgt. 1st Class Michael J. Goble, of Washington Township, N.J. Goble was assigned to 1st Battalion, 7th Special Forces Group (Airborne), Eglin Air Force Base, Fla.

Goble's unit was engaged in combat operations in Kunduz province, Afghanistan, when he suffered fatal injuries, the

Pentagon said. No other details were provided.

Twenty U.S. deaths have been recorded in Afghanistan this year. There have also been three noncombat deaths in 2019. More than 2,400 Americans have died in the nearly 18-year conflict.

The Taliban stage near-daily attacks targeting Afghan and U.S. forces, as well as government officials — even as they hold peace talks with a U.S. envoy tasked with negotiating an end to what has become America's longest war. Scores of Afghan civilians are also killed in the crossfire or by roadside bombs planted by militants.

Shortly after the initial U.S.

military statement on the latest fatality, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid tweeted that the U.S. soldier was killed in the Chardara district in northern Kunduz province where U.S. and Afghan forces were carrying out a joint raid. Mujahid said the insurgents had planted a roadside bomb that killed the service member. He even tweeted a purported photo ID of the slain U.S. soldier, without saying how it was obtained.

The U.S. military did not comment on the tweet or the Taliban claim.

The Taliban have a strong presence in Kunduz province. The provincial capital, the city of Kunduz, briefly fell to the

Taliban in 2015, before the insurgents withdrew in the face of a NATO-backed Afghan offensive. The city is a strategic crossroads with easy access to much of northern Afghanistan as well as the country's capital, Kabul, about 200 miles away.

Also in Afghanistan, a bomb went off Monday morning at the funeral of a village elder in eastern Laghman province, killing at least three civilians and wounding seven, according to Asadullah Dawlatzai, the provincial governor's spokesman.

No one immediately claimed responsibility for the attack but the spokesman blamed the Taliban.

Baltics: \$175M in US cash to help air defense

Associated Press

HELSINKI — The United States has allocated \$175 million in military aid to the Baltic countries of Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania for 2020, the Estonian Defense Ministry said Monday.

The three countries are NATO members and all of them border Russia.

The Estonian Defense Ministry said that along with \$125 million in general military aid, Washington has for the first time earmarked a separate \$50 million budget line to boost air defense capabilities of the three ex-Soviet republics — seen by many military experts as a weak area in their

current defense.

The overall aim of U.S. military aid to Tallinn, Riga and Vilnius is to strengthen “the deterrence and defense posture in the Baltic States including in the area of airspace and especially in the field of air defense,” Estonian Defense Minister Juri Luik said in a statement.

The three Baltic nations, which joined NATO in 2004, are all staunch allies of Washington.

They have been highly worried over what they have perceived to be waning interest by President Donald Trump's administration in trans-Atlantic relations and NATO's

joint defense commitment, particularly since Trump had earlier called the military alliance obsolete.

But Estonia sees the U.S. military aid as a sign that Washington's commitment to NATO and the Baltic states is strong.

“Our (U.S.) ally clearly confirms its commitment to (NATO's) collective defense on Europe's eastern flank,” Luik said in a statement, referring to the financial aid.

As Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania have no fighter aircraft, NATO fighter jets are responsible for policing Baltic airspace on a four-month rotational basis from bases in Estonia and Lithuania.

Submarines named after ships hit in Pearl Harbor raid

The Honolulu Star-Advertiser

Navy ships named the USS Arizona and the USS Oklahoma will return to active duty with the announcement Tuesday by acting Secretary of the Navy Thomas Modly that two new Virginia-class attack submarines will be named after American heroes of the greatest generation who perished on the famed Pearl Harbor battleships.

The move brings back into service the hallowed ship names 78 years after both were badly damaged in the surprise Japanese attack on Dec. 7, 1941. Most of the Navy casualties that day came from losses on those two ships.

“I am honored and humbled to name the next two Virginia-class nuclear fast-attack submarines to be built as the USS Oklahoma (SSN-802) and the USS Arizona (SSN-803),”

Modly said in a news release. “It is my fondest wish that the citizens of the great states of Arizona and Oklahoma will understand and celebrate our Navy's desire to memorialize the 1,177 heroes who perished in USS Arizona (BB-39) and the 429 more in USS Oklahoma (BB-37) in Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941.”

Approximately 1.8 million people annually visit the Pearl Harbor National Memo-

rial, which includes the USS Arizona, USS Oklahoma and USS Utah memorials, six officer bungalows, three mooring quays and the Pearl Harbor Visitor Center.

“This ship and the name, ‘USS Arizona,’ hold special meaning for our country, its history and the people of Arizona — and today, that legacy begins a new chapter,” Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey said in a news release.

Campaigning Dems test voter response to impeachment

Associated Press

GUTHRIE CENTER, Iowa — Rep. Cindy Axne happily talked about trade, health care and agriculture with about three dozen constituents who gathered in a farm bureau office the weekend before Christmas. Missing from the Iowa Democrat's talking points: her recent vote to impeach President Donald Trump.

Over the course of an hour, the issue that most clearly represents Washington's Trump-era polarization came up just once. And even then, it was from a questioner who thanked Axne for supporting the two articles that cleared the House last week in a party-line vote.

Axne seemed a little surprised by the muted reaction.

"I thought we'd have more," she told The Associated Press. "I get plenty of feedback, and we get plenty of calls into our office from folks who are on both sides."

It was a stark difference from one of the last times Axne was back in her congressional

district, which stretches from the state capital, Des Moines, across rural, southwestern Iowa. During that trip over the Thanksgiving break, the crowd was testy about the prospect of impeachment and one constituent implored her to "get stuff done."

Axne's effort to stay laser-focused on policy may be the playbook vulnerable Democrats across the country deploy over the next year as they try to navigate the unpredictable political fallout from impeachment. Trump and his Republican allies insist voters will punish Democrats who backed impeachment. But the notable lack of protest at Axne's event could give Democrats hope they can survive one of the most controversial votes they've had to take in recent memory.

Axne is facing a potential rematch against David Young, the GOP incumbent she deposed. Republicans have been running impeachment-focused television ads against her since early October.

Bryan Mowrer, 64, a farmer who opened up the farm bureau's office for the town hall, said the tepid response was partly a result of timing. It was an unseasonably warm weekend afternoon just days before Christmas and farmers were about two months behind on their planting for the upcoming spring.

While the crowd at Axne's town hall was mostly favorable, down the street at the only restaurant open in town on Saturday evening, the dinner crowd seemed more characteristic of the county overall.

"As a taxpayer, (impeachment is) a waste of time and money. The Democrats have not done anything in the last three years, and they could've done this USMCA a year ago but they didn't. They drug it out," said Clete Steensen, 68, who came to enjoy dinner with his wife.

Steensen, a farmer, had been working all day "or I would've come in and given her a piece of my mind," he said of Axne's town hall.

Ex-governor calls for Gabbard resignation

Associated Press

HONOLULU — A former Hawaii governor on Monday called for long-shot presidential candidate Tulsi Gabbard to resign from Congress after she voted "present" on two articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump.

Gabbard must resign her seat "the sooner the better," representing Hawaii in the U.S. House of Representatives because "she's missing votes on almost everything," said Neil Abercrombie, who was governor from 2010 to 2014. Before that, he represented Hawaii in the U.S. House and resigned to run for governor.

Gabbard said last week she was "standing in the center" by voting present. She announced earlier this year she would not run for reelection to the House so she could focus on her presidential campaign.

This decision came after she spent much of the year traveling to Iowa and New Hampshire.

According to the website govtrack.us, Gabbard missed 88.7% of the 141 House votes taken in the past three months.

Abercrombie is co-chair for the campaign of Kai Kahele, a Democratic state senator running to succeed Gabbard in Congress.

A spokesman for Gabbard said she has a strong commitment to serving Hawaii.

"Hawaii is Congresswoman Tulsi Gabbard's home and her heart. Just this session, she has secured major legislative wins for Hawaii including better reporting on Red Hill aquifer protection, consultation between the military and Native Hawaiians, helping our veterans affected by toxic burn pits, opportunities for defense contracting for Native Hawaiian companies, and more," T. Ilihia Gionson said. "Her pursuit of the highest office in the land has not compromised her and her team's commitment to serving the people of Hawaii."

House Judiciary Committee mulls adding to impeachment articles

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The House Judiciary Committee held open the possibility Monday of recommending additional articles of impeachment against President Donald Trump as it pressed anew for the testimony of former White House counsel Don McGahn.

The committee wants a federal appeals court to order McGahn to testify as it examines potential obstruction of justice by the president during special counsel Robert Mueller's Russia investigation. The committee says McGahn's testimony could also be useful for any Senate impeachment trial.

A judge last month directed McGahn to comply with the House Judiciary Committee subpoena, and a Washington-based appeals court is scheduled to hear arguments Jan. 3.

In a court filing Monday, lawyers for the com-

mittee said McGahn's testimony remains essential even though the House has already voted to impeach Trump on two charges related to his interactions with Ukraine rather than on actions uncovered during Mueller's Russia probe.

"If McGahn's testimony produces new evidence supporting the conclusion that President Trump committed impeachable offenses that are not covered by the Articles approved by the House, the Committee will proceed accordingly — including, if necessary, by considering whether to recommend new articles of impeachment," lawyers for the Democratic-led committee wrote.

The committee also said McGahn's testimony is important for the committee's oversight role of the FBI and the Justice Department, "including in determining whether those agencies are operating free from improper political interference."

The Justice Department has asked the appeals court to dismiss the case.

Putin: Russia leading in hypersonic weapons

Associated Press

MOSCOW — President Vladimir Putin said Tuesday that Russia has got a strong edge in designing new weapons and that it has become the only country in the world to deploy hypersonic weapons.

Speaking at a meeting with top military brass, Putin said that for the first time in history Russia is now leading the world in developing an entire new class of weapons unlike in the past when it was catching up with the United States.

The Russian leader noted that during Cold War times, the Soviet Union was behind the United States in designing the atomic bomb and building strategic bombers and intercontinental ballistic missiles.

“Now we have a situation that is unique in modern history when they are trying to catch up to us,” he said. “Not a single country has hypersonic weapons, let alone hypersonic weapons of intercontinental range.”

The Pentagon and the U.S. military services have been working on the devel-

opment of hypersonic weapons in recent years, and Defense Secretary Mark Esper said in August that he believes “it’s probably a matter of a couple of years” before the U.S. has one. He has called it a priority as the military works to develop new long-range fire capabilities.

The U.S. also has repeatedly warned Congress about hypersonic missiles being developed by Russia and China that will be harder to track and defeat. U.S. officials have talked about putting a layer of sensors in space to more quickly detect enemy missiles, particularly the more advanced hypersonic threats.

The administration also plans to study the idea of basing interceptors in space, so the U.S. can strike incoming enemy missiles during the first minutes of flight when the booster engines are still burning.

Putin said that the first unit equipped with the Avangard hypersonic glide vehicle is set to go on duty this month, while the air-launched Kinzhal hypersonic missiles already have entered service. The Rus-

sian leader first mentioned the Avangard and the Kinzhal among other prospective weapons systems in his state-of-the-nation address in March 2018.

Putin said then that the Avangard has an intercontinental range and can fly in the atmosphere at a speed 20 times the speed of sound. He noted that the weapon’s ability to change both its course and its altitude en route to a target makes it immune to interception by the the enemy.

The Kinzhal, which is carried by MiG-31 fighter jets, entered service with the Russian air force last year. Putin has said that the missile flies 10 times faster than the speed of sound, has a range of more than 1,250 miles and can carry a nuclear or a conventional warhead. The military said it’s capable of hitting both land targets and navy ships.

The United States and other countries also have worked on designing hypersonic weapons, but they haven’t entered service yet.

San Francisco cafes are on cup crusade

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — A new cafe culture is brewing in the San Francisco area, where a growing number of coffee houses are banishing paper to-go cups and replacing them with everything from glass jars to rental mugs and BYO cup policies.

Celebrated chef Dominique Crenn, owner of the three-star Michelin restaurant Atelier Crenn, is opening a San Francisco cafe next year that will have no to-go bags or disposable coffee cups and will use no plastic. Customers who plan to sip and go at Boutique Crenn will be encouraged to bring their own coffee cups, said spokeswoman Kate Bittman.

On a bigger scale, the Blue Bottle coffeehouse chain, which goes through about 15,000 to-go cups a month at its 70 U.S. locations, says it wants to “show our guests and the world that we

can eliminate disposable cups.”

Blue Bottle is starting small with plans to stop using paper cups at two of its San Francisco area branches in 2020, as part of a pledge to go “zero waste” by the end of next year. Coffee to-go customers will have to bring their own mug or pay a deposit for a reusable cup, which they can keep or return for a refund. The deposit fee will likely be between \$3 and \$5, the company said.

Larger coffee and fast-food chains around the U.S. are feeling a sense of urgency to be more environmentally friendly and will be watching, said Bridget Croke, of New York-based recycling investment firm Closed Loop Partners, which is working with Starbucks and McDonald’s to develop an eco-friendly alternative to the disposable coffee cup.

Feds: Gang members’ ‘sextortion’ from prison hit GIs, netted \$140K

The (Columbia, S.C.) State

Gang members in prison in South Carolina made at least \$144,000 in a “sextortion ring” involving nude photos and smuggled cellphones, federal officials say.

At least a dozen people have been charged and several have pleaded guilty, including a convicted murderer who was already sentenced to decades behind bars, prosecutors say.

Now eight more people have been indicted for money laundering in connection with the scam.

Earlier this year, prosecutors said more than 400 members of the military were scammed by the “sextortion ring” run from South Carolina prisons. Prosecutors said the scheme netted \$560,000 for the inmates and their accomplices on the outside.

The indictment, filed recently in federal court in Flor-

ence, accuses the eight people of accepting nearly 75 “fraudulent money transfers” from victims.

As part of the scheme, prison inmates used cellphones with internet connections to target men in the military on dating apps, federal prosecutors say. The inmates would pretend to be women and send nude photos to the victims, according to prosecutors.

The inmates would then pretend to be the angry father of an underage girl and threaten the victims with going to police and accusing them of soliciting nude photos from a minor, according to court filings.

One Army veteran killed himself after being targeted by the scammers, a family told The Greenville News.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Man fired gun, swung ax while drunk

DE HARTLY — Police in Delaware said they arrested a man after he fired a gun and swung an ax at friends while in an apparent drunken rage.

The News Journal of Wilmington reported that the incident occurred Saturday near the town of Hartly.

Delaware State Police said Michael Rhinehardt, 20, was charged with five counts of reckless endangering, five counts of aggravated menacing and one firearms charge.

Witnesses told police that Rhinehardt had started an argument with friends before grabbing a gun and firing multiple shots into the floor and wall. Friends intervened and threw the gun out of the house.

Police said Rhinehardt then ran outside, grabbed an ax and swung it at two friends.

Coast Guard: Shark encounter 'terrifying'

CA SANTA BARBARA — A shark reportedly bit a surfer Saturday afternoon off Southern California in a "truly terrifying situation," the U.S. Coast Guard said.

The 37-year-old man had been surfing near Santa Rosa Island, one of the Channel Islands, during the attack, according to a news release. A friend aboard a nearby boat applied a tourniquet to his leg and called the Coast Guard for help, the news release stated. A helicopter crew flew the man to the Santa Barbara airport for treatment, and he was in stable condition Saturday evening.

"This was the best possible outcome to a truly terrifying situation," Coast Guard Lt. Benjamin McIntyre-Coble said.

Mailman credited with saving Christmas gifts

KS OSAWATOMIE — A U.S. postal employee rushed to rescue gifts after the engine of his mail truck caught fire in rural Kansas.

The Osawatomie Fire Department said in a Facebook post Sunday that "Your Prime delivery may have just lost its Prime. The good news is, the mailman saved Christmas!"

Photos show packages lined up long a country road just south of Osawatomie.

Police: Worker shot over child's haircut

TX KATY — A dispute over a child's haircut ended with gunfire Saturday at a Texas barbershop, according to authorities.

Deputies are looking for a man who shot an employee of a barbershop in the Houston suburb of Katy during an argument, the Harris County Sheriff's Office said in a tweet Saturday. Witnesses said the argument was over a haircut given to the man's son.

The alleged shooter left in a grey, four-door sedan, according to the sheriff's office.

The employee was shot three times and was in stable condition at an area hospital, KPRC-TV reported Saturday.

Police: Man robbed 47 storage units in hour

MD KENSINGTON — Authorities in Maryland are searching for a man they say robbed 47 storage units in about an hour.

Surveillance video shows the man entered the facility in Kensington on Dec. 2 about 9:40 p.m., The Washington Post reported, citing Montgomery

County police. He got into the facility by closely following a car that had access to a security gate, according to a police statement.

The man is seen leaving the facility in a white sedan about 10:52 p.m.

During his time in the facility, the man broke the locks to 47 storage units, stole property from them and rummaged through two cars, police said.

Police collect more than 236 tons of food

KY FRANKFORT — Kentucky State Police collected more than 236 tons of food for Kentucky families with the 10th annual "Cram the Cruiser" food drive.

"Helping those in need is the core of what being a member of the KSP family really is — service to others," Sgt. Josh Lawson, spokesman for the state police, said in a news release.

State police initiated the program in 2010. Since then, the agency has contributed nearly 2 million pounds of food to shelters, food banks and churches around the state.

Aquarium takes in cold-stunned turtles

NC MANTEO — Cold weather is causing a problem for some sea turtles off the North Carolina coast, and an aquarium has taken in dozens of them for treatment.

TV station WVEC-TV reported 96 turtles were taken to the North Carolina Aquarium on Roanoke Island after a drop in temperatures on Thursday and Friday. More are expected to be treated there in the coming days.

Dropping water temperatures can cause cold-stunning, a condition similar to hypothermia that makes turtles unable

to swim properly.

The recovery process involves gradually warming the turtles up over a few days.

According to the TV station, the center closed to the public beginning Sunday to accommodate all of the turtles.

Church to pay \$5.3M in family medical bills

CA LOS ANGELES — A Los Angeles church is paying off \$5.3 million worth of medical debt for nearly 6,000 households in Southern California, according to one of the church's pastors.

Christian Assembly purchased the debt for \$53,000 and is working with a nonprofit organization to pay the outstanding bills for 5,555 families in 28 neighborhoods, co-lead pastor Tom Hughes said in a video posted online Thursday.

Flight has rough landing in Denver

CO DENVER — A United Airlines flight from New Jersey's Newark Liberty International Airport had a rough landing in Denver.

The crew aboard Flight 2429 reported a mechanical issue after the Boeing 737-800 landed safely shortly after 7 p.m. Sunday. It was not clear what was wrong; however, some passengers said they saw sparks on the runway.

Passengers used a stairway to get off the plane and were bused to the terminal where they were assisted by customer service teams.

"The aircraft has been taken out of service and is being inspected by our maintenance teams," United said in a statement.

No injuries were reported.

From wire reports

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Packers top Vikings, clinch NFC North

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Sporting fresh division-title shirts that few expected them to wear, the Green Bay Packers had the message printed across their chests in the jubilant visitors' locker room: "The North is not enough."

With Aaron Rodgers taking a back seat while the ground game and the pass rush led the way, the Packers became NFC North champions for the first time in three years and delivered Minnesota's first defeat at home this season.

Aaron Jones rushed for 154 yards and two touchdowns, Za'Darius Smith had five tackles for loss to lead a stifling performance by the defense, and the Packers beat the Vikings 23-10 on Monday night.

"There's really nothing like checking that first box on the goal list," said Rodgers, who threw an interception without throwing a TD pass for the first time in 18 games.

The Packers (12-3) made Matt LaFleur the 10th rookie coach in NFL history to reach

12 victories, winning for the first time in four tries at U.S. Bank Stadium with a dominant finish after trailing 10-9 at halftime. Green Bay stayed in position for a first-round bye in the playoffs, and the top seed — with home-field advantage until the Super Bowl — is still in sight.

"Like I've been telling the guys the last few weeks, the only thing I want for Christmas is a hat and a T-shirt, and they came through with it, man," said Smith, the team's top free-agent signing. "My Christmas gift is here already. I'm happy."

The Packers stormed back from three first-half turnovers, including the rare interception by Rodgers, to silence the deafening crowd and seal the Vikings (10-5) into the sixth playoff seed. The green-and-gold-clad fans in attendance squeezed some "Go, Pack, Go!" chants in during the ample down time as the Packers took control in the second half.

Kirk Cousins was sacked five times, with a whopping 3½ by

Smith, and he threw an interception in the third quarter that set up the first score by Jones, who leads the league with 16 rushing touchdowns. The Vikings had 139 total yards, as Cousins fell to 0-9 in his career in Monday night games.

"When you don't convert third downs, go three-and-out, you just don't have that many plays. You don't have many bites at the apple to get going," Cousins said. "We certainly did not play well enough from start to finish."

The Vikings had only seven first downs and never netted a drive longer than 31 yards in this concerning regression. They wasted a fine performance by their defense, which has produced 10 turnovers in the last two games.

"Give Green Bay some credit. They did some good things, and that's what happens when you don't play as good as you can," Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said.

Minnesota's frustration over a stalled offense that averaged nearly 30 points over the previ-

ous 10 games only increased in the second half. Stefon Diggs caught a 28-yard pass on third-and-18 in the third quarter, but Cousins was intercepted later on the drive when Diggs was tangled up with Jaire Alexander and Kevin King made a leaping grab before a 39-yard return.

The Vikings punted on fourth-and-1 from their 45 to white-flag their ensuing possession.

Cousins cost Minnesota the completion of a comeback from a three-touchdown deficit at Green Bay on Sept. 15, when his second interception of the game, also by King, came on an off-balance throw into end-zone coverage on first-and-goal late in the fourth quarter of a 21-16 defeat. Since that iffy first month of the season, Cousins had played as well as nearly any quarterback in the league to help the Vikings clinch a spot in the playoffs when the Los Angeles Rams lost on Saturday. That was by far the best thing to happen to them this weekend.

Lynch returns to help Seattle's running back situation

Associated Press

RENTON, Wash. — The Seattle Seahawks have reunited with Marshawn Lynch.

The bruising running back known as "Beast Mode" signed a contract with the Seahawks on Monday night, his agent confirmed on Twitter.

Seattle is in desperate need of running backs after Chris Carson (hip) and C.J. Prosise (arm) both suffered season-ending injuries in Sunday's 27-13 loss to Arizona. Coach Pete Carroll said earlier Monday on his radio show that Lynch was flying to Seattle to undergo a physical.

Carroll said reports are that Lynch is in good shape.

Lynch, 33, has not played in more than a year. His last game was Week 6 of last season with the Oakland Raiders before a

core injury ended his season.

The best stretch of Lynch's career came during his six seasons in Seattle. He arrived via trade from Buffalo early in the 2010 season and became the face of a franchise filled with stars during his time. Sometimes difficult to deal with, but almost always productive on the field, Lynch rushed for 6,347 yards and 57 touchdowns in the regular season during his time in Seattle.

Lynch will always be remembered for his touchdown run in the 2010 playoffs against New Orleans that helped establish the "Beast Mode" persona. It was the top of the long list of highlights with the Seahawks.

"My relationship with him, it was really fun for me for the most part," Carroll said. "There were some hard times with it

because he challenged the system so much. He challenged so many different aspects — the things with the media and all those kinds of things — he was hard on the regular routine of this job in some regards, but he always played and he'd always bring it and I loved the spirit that he'd bring and the toughness he brought. He's a very charismatic person and player and he affected a lot of people and he affected this program in a big way."

Ultimately, Seattle needs production and that will be the big question with a 33-year-old running back.

Lynch averaged 4.2 yards per carry and 62.7 yards per game before getting injured last season. The Seahawks would take that kind of production to help make up for the loss of Carson,

who finished the year with a career-high 1,230 yards and 4.4 yards per attempt.

Lynch might not be the only reunion for Seattle. Former running back Robert Turbin posted a picture from the Seahawks locker room on social media late Monday. There was no confirmation from the team that Turbin has signed, but he had been in for a workout with the team last week.

Turbin played for Seattle from 2012-14 and was Lynch's backup.

"Happy to be back home," Turbin wrote on Instagram.

Lynch visited Seattle's facility earlier this month but the team said it was simply to see some friends. The team had to report the visit to the league because Lynch has not officially filed retirement papers and could be signed by any team.

College basketball roundup

No. 18 Dayton bounces back from first loss

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Ibi Watson's first collegiate start ended with a pair of pressure-packed free throws and a career high in points.

Watson scored 30 points and No. 18 Dayton recovered from its second loss of the season by beating Grambling State 81-53 on Monday night.

The Flyers (10-2) were missing point guard Jalen Crutcher, who fell and hit his head late in a 78-76 overtime loss to Colorado on Saturday. He was having concussion symptoms, so Dayton shuffled its guard rotation.

Watson made an immediate impact after being introduced as a starter for the first time.

"It was definitely special to be able to go out there and start the game with your brothers," the junior said.

Watson had 15 points in the opening half, three shy of his career high. He scored 10 during a 17-2 run that put the Fly-

ers ahead.

"It shows we have a lot of depth," Watson said. "We have a lot of guys who can score. Without Jalen, we knew we had to step up."

The Tigers (6-7) cut a 20-point deficit to 52-42 midway through the second half before Rodney Chatman hit a pair of three-pointers and Watson had a four-point play that put the Flyers back in control. Chatman added 17 points. Watson went 8-for-12 from the field, including 4-for-5 from beyond the arc, and made all of his 10 free throws. He became the first Flyer to score 30 points since Josh Cunningham had 32 against Rhode Island on Jan. 20, 2018.

"I think his teammates understood he had the hot hand and they were able to take advantage of it," coach Anthony Grant said.

Watson got the chance to reach the mark when he was fouled with 2:25 to go and went

to the line for a pair of free throws.

"Everybody was telling me I needed to make both of them for 30," Watson said. "There was more pressure on those last two."

Kelton Edwards had 13 points for Grambling State, which went only 2-for-19 from beyond the arc.

The Tigers suffered an early setback when 7-foot-1 center Travon Bunch picked up three fouls — including a technical — in the first 10 minutes. He and Dayton's Ryan Mikesell got tangled up while going for a rebound and had to be separated by the officials. A few seconds later, Bunch got a technical for something he said.

Bunch finished with two points and one rebound in 11 minutes

No. 21 Washington 72, Hawaii 61: At Honolulu, Isaiah Stewart had 26 points and 13 rebounds to lead the Huskies over the Rainbow Warriors

in the Diamond Head Classic semifinals.

Quade Green added 11 points and seven assists for Washington (10-2), which will play Houston for the tournament title on Wednesday. Jaden McDaniels had nine points and 13 rebounds, and Nahziah Carter chipped in with 10 points.

Stewart made 13 of 21 shots from the field. He scored 16 points in the first half and finished with his fourth straight double-double.

Hawaii got within six on Zigmars Raimo's basket in transition with 5:28 to play, but went scoreless for more than three minutes while the Huskies reeled off an eight-point run to stretch their lead to 59-45 with 2:04 remaining.

Justin Webster had 16 points and Raimo added 15 points with 15 rebounds to lead the Rainbow Warriors (8-4), who shot a season-low 28%.

Central Florida gets 10th victory in Gasparilla Bowl

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Central Florida is best known for a high-powered offense, but the Knights are capable of big plays on defense, too.

Richie Grant and Tre'mon Morris-Brash had first-quarter defensive touchdowns, Dillon Gabriel led three third-quarter scoring drives and UCF beat Marshall 48-25 in the Gasparilla Bowl on Monday.

"We finished the season the right way," UCF coach Josh Heupel said. "The turnovers were critical. I thought defensively we started about as fast as you can."

Grant had a 39-yard interception return on Marshall's third play from scrimmage 56 seconds into the game, and Morris-Brash recovered a fumble and ran it 55 yards for a score that helped UCF go up

21-0 with 7 minutes left in the first quarter.

Gabriel threw a 35-yard touchdown pass to Otis Anderson, connected on a 75-yard score with Marlon Williams, and added a 3-yard TD run as UCF went ahead 45-22 with 6:39 remaining in the third.

Gabriel completed 14 of 24 passes for 260 yards as the Knights (10-3) reached 10 or more wins in a school-record third consecutive season. Williams caught seven passes for 132 yards and Greg McCrae had 80 rushing yards on 14 carries.

"We're happy with the 10-3, but at the same time we know what we could have done," Gabriel said.

Isaiah Green went 9-for-23 for 173 yards with a TD and had a rushing touchdown for Marshall (8-5). Brenden Knox,

the Conference USA MVP, had 103 yards on 26 carries.

"I thought our kids fought their tail off," Marshall coach Doc Holliday said. "They fought the entire game."

Green had a 3-yard rushing touchdown and hit Willie Johnson on a 70-yard TD pass, and Justin Rohrwasser made a 50-yard field goal during the third quarter.

Marshall got within 21-7 with 12:28 to go in the second when Micah Abraham picked off backup quarterback Darriel Mack Jr.'s pass and returned it 75 yards for a touchdown.

Abraham's father, Donnie, played his home games with the Tampa Bay Buccaneers (1996-01) at Raymond James Stadium, the site of the Gasparilla Bowl.

McCrae had a 26-yard TD run early in the first and Dylan

Barnas made a 36-yard field goal as time expired as UCF took a 24-7 halftime advantage.

The takeaway

UCF: The Knights had no letdown after playing in New Year's Day bowl games the previous two seasons, beating Auburn two years ago in the Peach Bowl and losing to LSU in the last season's Fiesta Bowl.

"You look at this season, there's goals that we didn't accomplish, right?" Heupel said. "But I hope we never get to the point as a program and a fan base where fans and outside voices aren't really appreciative of what our kids do every single day."

Marshall: It was the first bowl loss for the Thundering Herd under Holliday, who entered 6-0 in bowls at the school.

NHL roundup

Bolts halt Panthers' winning streak at 3

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — The Tampa Bay Lightning got off to a good start in a stretch of six consecutive games against division opponents.

Victor Hedman had two goals and an assist, Brayden Point had a four-point game and the Lightning scored three power-play goals in a 6-1 win over the Florida Panthers on Monday night.

Point had a goal and three assists, Nikita Kucherov added a goal and two assists and Alex Killorn and Mikhail Sergachev each scored power-play goals as the Lightning snapped a two-game winless skid.

Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 29 saves and improved to 15-9-2 on the season.

"These are the teams we're chasing," Lightning head coach

Jon Cooper said.

Florida's Sergei Bobrovsky allowed a season-high six goals on 34 shots.

Jonathan Huberdeau scored the only goal for Florida, which had its three-game winning streak halted.

Bruins 7, Capitals 3: Brad Marchand and Anders Bjork scored 27 seconds apart in a four-goal first period that chased Braden Holtby, and Charlie Coyle added a short-handed goal to help host Boston beat Washington.

Maple Leafs 8, Hurricanes 6: Mitch Marner scored twice and added an assist in a wild 59-second span midway through the third period, and host Toronto beat Carolina.

Wild 3, Flames 0: Devan Dubnyk recorded his first shutout of the season and Joel

Eriksson Ek and Luke Kunin scored as host Minnesota blanked Calgary.

Flyers 5, Rangers 1: Kevin Hayes and Travis Sanheim each scored a pair of goals to lead host Philadelphia over New York for its fourth straight victory.

Blue Jackets 3, Islanders 2: Vladislav Gavrikov scored late in the third period to lift surging Columbus over host New York.

Senators 3, Sabres 1: Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored two goals, leading host Ottawa over Buffalo.

Predators 3, Coyotes 2: Roman Josi had a goal and an assist, Pekka Rinne made 26 saves and host Nashville edged Arizona.

Canadiens 6, Jets 2: Tomas Tatar and Phillip Danault each

scored two goals and visiting Montreal won its fourth straight game, beating Winnipeg.

Devils 7, Blackhawks 1: Travis Zajac capped his team's dominant second period with a short-handed goal, and visiting New Jersey pounded Chicago.

Blues 4, Kings 1: Brayden Schenn scored twice in his team's four-goal first period and visiting St. Louis won its sixth straight.

Canucks 4, Oilers 2: Quinn Hughes' power-play goal midway through the third period was the winner as host Vancouver won its third straight game.

Avalanche 7, Golden Knights 3: Pierre-Edouard Bellemare and Nazem Kadri each scored two goals, leading visiting Colorado past Vegas.

NBA roundup

Holiday's threes help Pacers edge Raptors in overtime

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Aaron Holiday likened the back-and-forth test of resiliency against the defending NBA champions to that of a playoff game.

Each time the Indiana Pacers or Toronto Raptors sank a dramatic shot, the intensity level increased that much more, the escalating emotion eventually spilling into overtime.

That's when Holiday hit his two most important attempts, both three-pointers, to help the Pacers snap the Raptors' five-game winning streak with a 120-115 overtime triumph on Monday.

"It's a big win for us," said Holiday, who finished with 19 points in getting the start at point guard for the injured Malcolm Brogdon. "It's fun playing with emotion, especially in big games."

His fourth three-pointer of

the game gave the Pacers a 116-113 lead with 2:05 remaining in overtime. His fifth and final three-pointer provided a 119-115 advantage with 54 seconds remaining.

"It just shows the toughness, 48-plus minutes, we're going to be relentless on both ends," said T.Y. Warren, who along with Myles Turner led the Pacers with 24 points apiece. "I'm glad the way we responded, tough shots and we got some key stops at the end."

The Pacers (21-10) set a franchise record with 42 three-point attempts and matched a season high with 18 made. That included four in the fourth quarter and overtime.

Heat 107, Jazz 104: Jimmy Butler scored 20 points, Bam Adebayo added 18 points and 12 rebounds and Miami beat Utah to improve the NBA's best home record to 13-1.

Rockets 113, Kings 104: James Harden scored 34 points, Russell Westbrook had 28 and visiting Houston overcame one of its worst fourth quarters of the season to beat Sacramento.

76ers 125, Pistons 109: Tobias Harris scored 35 points against his former team and Ben Simmons had a triple-double as visiting Philadelphia beat Detroit.

Pelicans 102, Trail Blazers 94: Jrue Holiday scored 21 points, Brandon Ingram had 19 points and 11 rebounds, and visiting New Orleans capitalized on Damian Lillard's shooting struggles to beat Portland.

Spurs 145, Grizzlies 115: LaMarcus Aldridge scored a season-high 40 points, DeMar DeRozan added 26 points and 10 assists, and visiting San Antonio Spurs shot 67% from the field to rout Memphis.

Nuggets 113, Suns 111: Jamal Murray had 28 points,

including a tiebreaking jumper with 3.2 seconds left, Nikola Jokic finished with a triple-double and visiting Denver rallied past Phoenix.

Magic 103, Bulls 95: Terrence Ross scored a season-high 26 points to help host Orlando beat Chicago and break a three-game losing streak.

Cavaliers 121, Hawks 118: Collin Sexton scored 25 points, rookie Darius Garland had 21 and host Cleveland held off a late Atlanta comeback.

Wizards 121, Knicks 115: Bradley Beal scored 30 points, Troy Brown Jr. added 26 off the bench and short-handed Washington outlasted host New York.

Warriors 113, Timberwolves 104: D'Angelo Russell scored 30 points, Alec Burks had 25 points and eight assists, and host Golden State beat Minnesota.