

USS Reagan sailors return to Yokosuka

By ALEX WILSON
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Hundreds of sailors dressed in their blues manned the rails of the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan as it steamed in Tokyo Bay on Friday on the final leg of its annual Indo-Pacific patrol.

Despite icy winds off the bay, hundreds of the crew's friends and family members gathered along the pier as the Ronald Reagan returned to Yokosuka, the home of the U.S. 7th Fleet, after more than six months at sea.

The pier also hosted entertainment for the arriving sailors and waiting families, including catered refreshments, live music by the 7th Fleet Band and various special guests, including Santa Claus and a mascot stylized as the ship's namesake, the late President Ronald Reagan.

The festivities were a livelier contrast to the sparse, no-contact arrivals of the past two years of the COVID-19 pandemic.

"On behalf of the 5,460 sailors aboard the Ronald Reagan today, I'd like to thank you for the warm welcome back to Yokosuka

and to thank all the folks here at Fleet Activities Yokosuka for making our return so seamless," said Capt. Daryle Cardone, the ship's commander, during a pier-side press conference. Cheers erupted from the pier and the ship around 11 a.m. as the Ronald Reagan made its final docking procedures.

"As you can see, the crew is very excited to get back home to reunite with family and friends after more than six months at sea," Cardone added.

The Ronald Reagan arrived without the aircraft of Carrier Air Wing 5 and its roughly 300 personnel, which returned to Naval Air Facility Atsugi and Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni between Dec. 9 and 15.

During its patrol, the Ronald Reagan repeatedly worked alongside allied nations, including Japan, South Korea, Australia and the United Kingdom, according to Rear Adm. Michael Donnelly, commander of Carrier Strike Group 5.

"These combined operations and exercises show our common integration and our combined commitment and resolve to maintaining a free and open international order in the Indo-Pacific," he said at the

news conference.

The second half of the Ronald Reagan's patrol involved frequent responses to actions by North Korea, which has test-launched a record number of ballistic missiles this year.

The carrier steered into the Sea of Japan, also known as the East Sea, in early October after the communist regime fired an intermediate-range ballistic missile over Japan.

The guided-missile cruiser USS Chancellorsville and guided-missile destroyer USS Benfold, part of the Ronald Reagan strike group, on Oct. 6 practiced missile defense in the same region alongside Japanese and South Korean warships.

Donnelly praised the U.S., Japan and South Korea partnership and said the exercises served as an example of "our credible combat capability."

Last month, the Ronald Reagan participated in Exercise Malabar alongside Japan, India and Australia in the Philippine Sea.

The four, known as the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue, or Quad, constitute an informal group regarded as a strategic buffer against China's military expansion.

North Korea fires missiles toward East Sea

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korea on Sunday fired a pair of medium-range ballistic missiles toward the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan, South Korean military officials said. The missiles were launched from Dongchang-ri, northwest of Pyongyang, at 11:13 a.m. and 12:05 p.m., the Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a message to reporters. They were fired at a high angle and flew around 310 miles.

South Korea's military is "maintaining a full readiness posture" and is closely cooperating with the United States in light of the launch, the Joint Chiefs said.

Hours later, U.S. Indo-Pacific Command said in a news release that the launch did not "pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies."

The recent launch marks the first such test by North Korea in a month. Pyongyang last fired an intercontinental ballistic missile on Nov. 18, which splashed down in the sea less than 150 miles from Japanese territory.

That missile, according to South Korea's military, was a Hwasong-17, which can theoretically carry multiple warheads and reach the U.S., according to North Korea monitoring group 38 North.

The North has fired roughly

70 missiles in 34 rounds of testing so far this year, a record. The Korean Central News Agency, a state-run media outlet, claimed in a report Friday that the regime had successfully tested a solid-fuel rocket motor for a "new type" of weapon system.

The communist regime has responded to restarted military drills between the U.S. and South Korea with hundreds of artillery fires and by flying aerial sorties.

One day after the allies conducted live-fire artillery and rocket launch system exercises starting Dec. 5, North Korea fired about 80 artillery rounds into the sea, the South's military said.

Washington and Seoul resumed their large-scale military exercises after a five-year pause, including their five-day Vigilant Storm training that included roughly 240 aircraft. The training follows South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol's pledge to reinforce and expand his country's alliance with the U.S. and respond firmly to the North's provocations.

The latest ballistic missile launches come four days after the establishment of U.S. Space Forces Korea at Osan Air Base. The new subordinate command is the Space Force's first in the Far East and will coordinate space operations and assist with missile warnings, according to U.S. Forces Korea.

Senate approves \$847B DOD spending package

BY SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Senate passed sweeping defense legislation Thursday that will end the military's vaccine mandate, raise service member salaries and boost defense spending by \$75 billion from last year.

The \$847 billion National Defense Authorization Act for the 2023 fiscal year, which began Oct. 1, cleared the upper chamber in an 83-11 vote after winning overwhelming approval in the House last week. The bill, a policy blueprint for the defense budget, now moves to the White House for President Joe Biden's signature.

"It sends the message to the world that our country is and will remain the global military leader," said Sen. John Cornyn, R-Texas.

The bill notably rescinds Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin's August 2021 order requiring troops to be vaccinated against the coronavirus or face dismissal. About 8,200 service members were discharged from the military for refusing to get the vaccine.

A Republican-led amendment that would force the Defense Department to reinstate

the dismissed troops with back pay failed to muster enough support in the Senate on Thursday. The measure fell 20 votes short of passage, with Democrats decrying attempts to weaken the authority of a lawful Pentagon directive.

The defense policy legislation approved Thursday increases spending for the military and other defense programs by \$45 billion more than the White House's budget request, largely to account for inflation. About \$817 billion is for the Pentagon and another \$30 billion is for nuclear activities in the Energy Department.

Congress still needs to pass a government funding package by the end of next week to allocate money for the priorities outlined in the authorization bill.

Among them is a 4.6% raise for service members and the Defense Department's civilian workforce that will take effect Jan. 1. The increase is the largest pay hike for troops in 20 years. Maximum special pay and bonuses are set to rise by more than 30% under the bill, which also creates a new special pay for troops stationed in harsh weather locations such as Alaska.

Defense bill may reimburse pet relocation costs

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN
Stars and Stripes

Service members preparing for a military move with their pets may get some much-needed relief from exorbitant shipping costs, following the Senate's approval Thursday of the \$847 billion defense spending package.

Buried in the 4,000-page document is a small provision that for the first time authorizes the Pentagon to reimburse military members for household pet transportation fees.

Those costs have soared in recent years, with fewer commercial airlines allowing pet owners to transport their animals in the cabin or as cargo.

With limited pet spaces on military flights, more families have been forced to use pet shipping services, which can cost thousands of dollars, depending on pet size and destination.

The Defense Department up until now did not reimburse service members for pet shipping fees, though some help was available through no-interest loans and grants offered by military relief societies.

The legislation approved Thursday says each of the military services' secretaries "may reimburse a member for any cost related to the relocation of a pet" up to \$4,000 per move to or from a duty station outside the continental United States and up to \$550 for a move within the United States.

The measure is part of the sweeping National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal year 2023, which began Oct. 1. The bill awaits President Joe Biden's signature. The founder of Leave No Paws Behind USA, a nonprofit organization that assists military families with pet transportation costs to and from overseas, said the provision will go a long way in defraying expenses.

The proposed reimbursements are "huge, regardless of what rank or where you are in your military career," Liz Hensel said Friday.

This will help "military families of all branches alleviate some of that financial burden," she said.

It's unclear from the language in the NDAA provision whether the benefit can be applied retroactively to military families that paid for pet transportation after the start of the 2023 fiscal year.

Delays strand hundreds of Patriot Express passengers for two days

BY JONATHAN SNYDER
Stars and Stripes

Weather and flight regulations combined to strand nearly 200 military air travelers for two days at Misawa Air Base in northeastern Japan.

The regularly scheduled Patriot Express bound for Seattle with 192 passengers arrived from Osan Air Base, South Korea, at 4:45 p.m. Tuesday, Air Force Master Sgt. Corydon Coombs, Misawa's contracting officer representative, told Stars and Stripes by phone Friday.

"When they got to us, their crew duty day ended here," he said.

A crew duty day is the maximum amount of time that crewmembers are allowed be-

fore a required rest period, according to the Electronic Code of Federal Regulations website.

On Wednesday, bad weather and problems deicing the airliner caused another delay, according to Coombs.

The American Red Cross at Misawa mobilized volunteers and other agencies to provide the stranded passengers with basic hygiene kits, diapers and snacks provided by the commissary, Lorie Warchol, the Red Cross station manager, told Stars and Stripes by phone Friday.

The Patriot Express finally departed at 5:58 p.m. Thursday, Coombs said. He said the Misawa First Sergeants visited the passengers that day with cookies.

Senators: Cap lawyer fees in Lejeune cases

By SVETLANA SHKOLNIKOVA
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The first payments to Marines sickened by toxic water at Camp Lejeune are set to begin in January and senators are racing to ensure the compensation does not unfairly enrich attorneys.

Sen. Dan Sullivan, R-Alaska, and Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin, D-Ill., are haggling over legislation that would cap fees that lawyers can charge when representing victims harmed by contaminants at the Marine Corps base in North Carolina decades ago.

More than 14,000 claims have been filed in the U.S. District Court for the Eastern District of North Carolina since the PACT Act was signed into law in August. The legislation expanded health care benefits for veterans exposed to toxic substances and allowed civil suits against the government for Camp Lejeune-linked illnesses.

Law firms unleashed an aggressive advertising campaign for their legal services in the aftermath, targeting veterans and military families who served or lived at the camp be-

tween August 1953 and December 1987. The ads urge potential victims to call lawyers to see if they are eligible for financial compensation.

The Department of Veterans Affairs estimated last month that trial lawyers have poured more than \$1 billion into advertising, Sullivan said. He has described many of the ads as scams and he said Congress needs to immediately pass legislation limiting how much lawyers can collect from damages awarded by the government.

"I don't blame Marines for dialing these 1-800 numbers, they're getting bombarded. They're sick, they think they're going to get cured," said Sullivan, a colonel in the Marine Corps Reserve. "The problem right now is if a Marine calls one of these numbers, there is no limitation on what the trial lawyer representing the Marine can take on the Marine's award, no cap on contingency fees, no cap on anything."

The omission of caps from the PACT Act has opened the door for Marines to get crumbs and trial attorneys to get rich, Sullivan argued Thursday on the Senate floor. He said there

are reports of some law firms charging 50% or 60% contingency fees, which are sums of money an attorney receives if a case is won.

Camp Lejeune victims have two avenues for recovering money: they can either file a claim with the Navy or if that is rejected, pursue a lawsuit in North Carolina federal court.

Sullivan wants to limit attorney fees for cases filed in federal court before Aug. 10 to 10% of the award money and put a 2% cap on fees for cases filed after that date. Durbin, meanwhile, said he is proposing a 20% cap on filing administrative claims and a 33% cap on fees for lawyers who go to trial in federal court.

Durbin argued Thursday that no competent attorney would work for the 2% and 10% fee limitations floated by Sullivan. He said the Democrats' figures were much more in line with ordinary practice as well as federal tort claims law.

"You're doing the veterans no favor by saying that they can't pay more than 2% contingency," Durbin said. "I'm sorry to say you won't find a lot of good lawyers at a 2% contingency fee, that's just the reality."

Analysis: Toxic water affected more troops than DOD claimed

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department miscounted the number of troops and their family members impacted by contaminated drinking water at military bases by hundreds of thousands, according to an analysis by an environmental advocacy group released Thursday.

The Environmental Working Group, a Washington-based nonprofit that specializes in research and advocacy in agricultural subsidies, toxic chemicals, drinking water pollutants, and corporate accountability, analyzed a Pentagon report in April that found about 175,000 service members and their families lived at 24 installations around the world where drinking water was contaminated with dangerous levels of toxic "forever chemicals."

Per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, are known as forever chemicals because they build up in human bodies and never break down in the environ-

ment. The national Centers for Disease Control and Prevention states human health effects are uncertain, though some research has linked them to an increased risk for cancer, reproductive and immune system harm, and other diseases.

The EWG analysis concluded the chemicals can be found at 116 military bases worldwide with about 640,000 people drinking contaminated water annually.

"The number of service members served contaminated water may be even greater than EWG's estimate, which relies on a review of publicly reported water system tests and DOD records," the group said in a news release.

The group's findings show higher numbers of affected people at military bases, in part, because two months after the Pentagon report was released the Environmental Protection Agency announced a new standard of what is an acceptable, safe amount of the chemicals in drinking water.

Senator seeks pay extension to aid jailed Navy officer's family

By JOSEPH DITZLER
Stars and Stripes

The Defense Department will deny a plea from Navy Lt. Ridge Alkonis to extend his pay and allowances while he serves a three-year prison sentence in Japan, according to U.S. Sen. Mike Lee, of Utah, on Thursday.

During a speech from the Senate floor, Lee said he spoke Nov. 29 with Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin after three weeks of requests for a phone call. Lee said he asked Austin for an update on the request for an exception to the policy Alkonis made in June to keep his benefits flowing when his leave runs out.

Without Alkonis' pay, his wife, Brittany Alkonis, and their children, still living in Japan, would be "kicked to the curb" at Christmastime, Lee, a Republican, said during his 23-minute speech on the Navy lieutenant's plight.

"Secretary Austin callously informed me that day that the request for the exception to policy

would not be granted," Lee said. "I asked him why. He believed it wasn't appropriate for the department to do that."

Alkonis, 34, of Claremont, Calif., was convicted in October 2021 by a three-judge panel in Shizuoka District Court of negligent driving causing the deaths of two people and injuring a third in May 2021 in Shizuoka prefecture. The Tokyo High Court in July upheld his conviction on appeal, and he reported that month to the Tokyo Detention Center to start his sentence. Alkonis, a weapons officer aboard a destroyer based at Yokosuka Naval Base, was driving his family through Fujinomiya after a trip to nearby Mount Fuji when he lost consciousness due to acute mountain sickness, he testified at his August 2021 trial.

Lee argued that DOD should make the exception in Alkonis' case that the law allows. In "unavoidable situations," DOD may continue pay and allowances for absent service members, he said.

Snow hits Northeast; thousands without power

Associated Press

BOSTON — Utility crews raced Saturday to restore power to tens of thousands of customers across New England and New York after a powerful storm dumped 2 feet of snow in some places.

More than 160,000 customers in New England were in the dark as of the afternoon and another 20,000 were without power in New York as heavy snow brought tree limbs onto power lines, according to poweroutage.us,

which tracks outages across the country.

Restoration efforts were complicated by snow still falling in some places, making travel dangerous. Doug Foley, Eversource president of electric operations in New Hampshire, said snow-covered roads were making it tough for workers to reach communities in order to assess damage and make repairs.

"We are still taking on system damage in parts of the state where heavy, wet snow continues to fall,

and hundreds of additional crews are coming to New Hampshire to support our restoration effort," Foley said in a statement.

As of Saturday afternoon, Eversource had restored power to nearly 61,000 customers in New Hampshire since the beginning of the storm, but another 40,000 remained without power, according to the utility.

Green Mountain Power, which serves customers in Vermont, said more outages were possible there with temperatures not ex-

pected to warm up enough in the next couple of days to melt the snow.

"Clearing downed trees to get to outage locations has been slow and difficult," Mike Burke, the utility company's vice president of field operations, said in a statement.

More than 2 feet of snow was recorded in parts of Vermont and western New York, and many communities across the region saw more than a foot, according to the National Weather Service.

Capitol suspect looked to kill federal agents

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Newly unsealed court documents show that a Tennessee man arrested for his involvement in the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection also conspired with another person in a failed attempt to kill dozens of federal agents involved in the investigation.

More than 880 people have been charged with crimes related to the attack on Jan. 6, 2021, the Justice Department said. Earlier this year, Edward Kelley, 33, was one of many rioters arrested on charges of illegally entering the U.S. Capitol and assaulting an officer.

According to the FBI, Kelley later discussed plans with 26-year-old Austin Carter to kill law enforcement personnel who had worked on his criminal investigation, and made a list of targets. Court records show that a witness provided the list of 37 names to a local Tennessee police department on Tuesday.

Kelley and Carter discussed collecting information and plans to law enforcement officials on the list, which also included on the FBI's Knoxville field office.

"You guys are taking them out at their office," said Kelley, who was recorded by the unidentified witness on Wednesday.

"What you and Austin need to do is recruit as many as you can, call who you need to, and you're going to attack their office."

When the witness asked if the attack was taking place at the Knoxville office, Kelley said yes.

Carter later told the witness that "this is the time, add up or put up" and "to definitely make sure you got everything racked, locked up and loaded."

Both Kelley and Carter made their appearance in court on Friday in Knoxville before U.S. Magistrate Judge Jill E. McCook. They are charged with conspiracy, retaliating against a federal official, interstate communication of a threat and solicitation to commit a crime of violence.

"Federal law enforcement agents put their lives on the line every day to protect the public," U.S. Attorney Francis M. Hamilton III said in a press release Friday. "Planning and threatening violence against them is among the most serious of crimes. It is absolutely unacceptable and will be vigorously investigated and prosecuted."

The two men are scheduled for a preliminary hearing on Jan. 3. Meanwhile, Carter's detention hearing is scheduled for this Wednesday.

US to expand military combat training for Ukrainian troops

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will expand military combat training for Ukrainian forces, using the slower winter months to instruct larger units in more complex battle skills, the Defense Department and U.S. officials said Thursday.

The United States has already trained about 3,100 Ukrainian troops on how to use and maintain certain weapons and other equipment, including howitzers, armored vehicles and the High Mobility Artillery Rocket System, known as HIMARS. But senior military leaders have discussed expanding that training for months, stressing the need to improve the ability of Ukraine's company- and battalion-sized units to move and coordinate attacks across the battlefield.

Air Force Brig. Gen. Pat Ryder told Pentagon reporters Thursday that the U.S. expects to train about 500 Ukrainian troops each month and will begin "in the January timeframe." Ryder, the Pentagon's press secretary, added that it is not likely to require additional U.S. forces to conduct the training.

According to U.S. officials, the training will take place at the Grafenwoehr training area in Germany. And the aim is to use the winter months to hone the

skills of the Ukrainian forces so they will be better prepared to counter any spike in Russian attacks or efforts to expand Russia's territorial gains.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details not publicly announced, said the Pentagon views the expansion as a logical next step for the Ukrainian troops.

They said it would mirror, to a limited degree, the types of training that U.S. forces get at Defense Department training centers, such as those in California and Louisiana.

Ryder said it would include classroom instruction and field work that would begin with small squads and gradually grow to involve larger units.

Until now, the U.S. focus has been on providing Ukrainian forces with "immediate battlefield needs" as they defend their country, including specialized equipment training, he said.

"Now as we continue to see Ukraine make progress in terms of pushing Russia back," said Ryder, "the idea here is to be able to give them this advanced level of collective training that enables them to conduct effective combined arms operations and maneuver on the battlefield."

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Driver cited for carpooling with inflatable Grinch

AZ PHOENIX — The Grinch came early for an Arizona driver who tried to pass off an inflatable figure of the Dr. Seuss character as a passenger.

The Arizona Department of Public Safety said a state trooper noticed a car in a high-occupancy vehicle lane on Interstate 10 in Phoenix with a “Seusspicious-looking” green passenger.

While the gag may have caused the officer’s heart to grow, it did not stop the driver from getting cited for being in the HOV lane during a restricted time.

Officials said they appreciate the “festive flair” but the driver’s action was still illegal.

They are urging motorists to follow traffic laws.

Inmate’s ‘excessive’ 162-year sentence cut

TN MEMPHIS — A Tennessee man who has served 25 years of a 162-year prison term for theft and forgery convictions will be released from prison after a judge and a district attorney found the sentence excessive.

Courtney Anderson was sentenced in 2000 to the long prison term after Anderson was found to be a repeat offender, the Shelby County district attorney’s office said. The judge gave Anderson the maximum amount of time on each conviction and required the sentences to be served one after the other.

Appeals were denied. But in April, Anderson filed a motion in criminal court to “correct an

illegal sentence,” the DA’s office said.

Judge Paula Skahan, who did not give Anderson the long sentence, asked the DA to investigate, and legal ground for reopening the case was found. Skahan cut Anderson’s total sentence to 15 years.

“This was clearly an excessive sentence, the kind of overreaction that sows distrust in our system and doesn’t make us safer,” Shelby County District Attorney General Steve Mulroy said.

Anderson, 54, told the judge that he committed the crimes because of a past cocaine addiction. Anderson plans to live in Virginia with his sister.

Arrows found all over neighborhood homes

CA HUNTINGTON BEACH — Residents of a Southern California neighborhood have been finding arrows embedded in roofs and elsewhere on their properties, police said.

The Huntington Beach Police Department said in social media posts that the arrows have been found in recent weeks in the southeast section of the city.

“HBPD is concerned about the possibility of someone being struck by 1 of the falling arrows & is seeking assistance from the public regarding anyone being seen in the area with a Crossbow, Compound Bow, or other device used to shoot arrows,” the department said.

Resident Colin Kelley said that on the morning after Thanksgiving his wife found an arrow stuck in their roof. The Orange County Register report-

ed.

“It’s pretty terrifying, this was a legitimate hunting arrow,” Kelley said.

Student from China charged with stalking

MA BOSTON — A Berkeley College of Music student who is a citizen of China was arrested for allegedly threatening and harassing an individual who posted a flyer in support of democracy in China, according to federal investigators.

Xiaolei Wu, 25, was charged with one count of stalking.

According to Department of Justice investigators, an individual posted a flyer near the Berklee College of Music campus in Boston that said, “Stand with Chinese People,” as well as, “We Want Freedom,” “We Want Democracy,” and “We Want Food on Our Tables.”

Investigators said that over the next few days, Wu made a series of communications via WeChat, email and Instagram directed at the individual who posted the flyer. Authorities said Wu threatened to “chop” the individual’s hands off if the person posted more flyers and pledged to inform the public security agency in China about the individual’s actions.

The individual is a permanent U.S. resident originally from China with family members who still live there.

Joyride on airport tarmac ends with crash, charges

ME AUGUSTA — A Maine man who took a joyride on an airport tarmac before crashing through a gate is facing charges.

The 28-year-old motorist was involved in a fender bender near a fast-food restaurant before heading onto the airfield at the Augusta State Airport, police said. Then he proceeded to plow through a gate after an airport employee approached him, police said.

The man was charged with two counts of aggravated criminal mischief, operating a motor vehicle without a license, criminal trespass, driving to endanger and violating probation, police said.

Police determined the motorist was already out on bail for a different incident, and he remained in the Kennebec County Jail.

2 hit, killed by train after exiting car on tracks

NV WINNEMUCCA — Authorities in northern Nevada are investigating the deaths of a man and woman who were hit by an approaching train in Winnemucca moments after they emerged from a car that appeared to be stuck on the railroad tracks, police said.

Winnemucca police said patrol officers saw a vehicle that appeared to be high-centered on the railroad tracks at about 2 a.m. when the guard arms activated and the train rapidly approached with its horn blaring.

An officer instructed the male driver of the car to quickly move away from the car to a safe distance from the tracks, and he complied.

But as the driver walked toward the officer, a man and a woman then “exited the vehicle and walked directly into the path of the oncoming train,” Winnemucca police said.

— From wire reports

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Messi, Argentina take home World Cup

Associated Press

LUSAIL, Qatar — Lionel Messi's once-in-a-generation career is complete. The Argentina superstar is finally a World Cup champion.

Messi scored two goals and then another in a shootout as Argentina beat France 4-2 on penalties Sunday to claim a third World Cup title despite Kylian Mbappé scoring the first hat trick in a final in 56 years.

Now there's no debate. Messi is definitively in the pantheon of soccer's greatest ever players, alongside Pelé — a record three-time World Cup champion from Brazil — and Diego Maradona, the late Argentina great with whom Messi is so often compared.

Messi achieved what Maradona did in 1986 and dominated a World Cup for Argentina. The torch will one day pass to Mbappé, whose late goals lit up one of the most dramatic finals in the tournament's 92-year history and made him the first scorer of a hat trick in a final since 1966,

but not just yet.

"Let's go, Argentina!" Messi roared into a microphone on the field in the post-match celebrations.

Messi put Argentina ahead from the penalty spot and played a part in Angel Di Maria's goal that made it 2-0 after 36 minutes.

Mbappé scored two goals in a 97-second span to take the game to extra time, and then Messi tapped in his second goal in the 109th minute. But there was still time for another penalty from Mbappé to take the thrilling game to a shootout.

Gonzalo Montiel scored the clinching penalty kick after Kingsley Coman had an attempt saved by Argentina goalkeeper Emi Martínez and Aurelien Tchouameni missed for France.

Europe's run of four straight World Cup winners came to an end. The last South American champion was Brazil, and that was also in Asia — when Japan and South Korea hosted the tournament in 2002.

Argentina won its previous World Cup titles in 1978 and 1986. In Qatar, the country backed up its victory from last year's Copa America, its first major trophy since 1993. It's quite the climax to Messi's international career, which might not yet be over at the age of 35 because he is playing as well as ever.

It was quite the finale, too, for a unique World Cup — the first to be played in the Middle East and the Arab world.

For FIFA and the Qatari organizers, a final between two major soccer nations and the world's two best players represented a perfect way to cap a tournament laced in controversy ever since the scandal-shrouded vote in 2010 to give the event to a tiny Arab emirate.

The yearslong scrutiny since has focused on the switch of dates from the traditional June-July period to November-December, strong criticism of how migrant workers have been treated and then unease about

taking soccer's biggest event to a nation where homosexual acts are illegal.

On Sunday, there was one narrative at play for most people: Could Messi do it?

He could, despite the 23-year-old Mbappé — Messi's teammate at Paris Saint-Germain — doing all he could to emulate Pelé by winning his first two World Cups.

Messi became the first player to score in the group stage and each of the knockout rounds at a single World Cup.

Maradona never scored in a final, though. Messi has, allowing him to erase memories of his only other World Cup final — in 2014 when Argentina lost to Germany 1-0 and Messi squandered a great chance in the second half.

On that night at the Maracanã Stadium in Rio de Janeiro, Messi stared down at the golden World Cup trophy that escaped him for so long.

Eight years later, he raised it aloft.

Vikes set record with historic comeback against Colts

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — With the Minnesota Vikings gathered in their humbled locker room at halftime in a huge hole, cornerback Patrick Peterson set the tone for an historic escape by promising his offensive teammates the defense would do its part to hold the Indianapolis Colts.

"You just need five touchdowns," Peterson told them. "That's nothing."

This rally sure was something, though.

The Vikings completed the biggest comeback in NFL history, erasing a 33-point deficit by beating the Colts 39-36 on Greg Joseph's 40-yard field goal with three seconds left in overtime Saturday to win the NFC North

division in their typical dramatic fashion.

Kirk Cousins passed for 460 yards and four touchdowns to lead the Vikings (11-3), who trailed 36-7 late in the third quarter and became just the third team in league history to win 10 games in a season by eight points or fewer.

The Colts (4-9-1) landed on the infamous side of this list, just ahead of the Houston Oilers in the 1992 postseason. They blew a 32-point lead (35-3) and lost to Buffalo (41-38) in overtime.

Bills 32, Dolphins 29: Tyler Bass hit a 25-yard field goal as time expired, and host Buffalo wrapped up its fourth consecutive playoff berth on a snow-slick field in rallying past Miami.

The Bills (11-3) overcame a 29-21 deficit by scoring on their final two drives. Josh Allen tied it with a 5-yard pass to Dawson Knox and the quarterback then leaped over the line for a two-point conversion to tie it at 29 with 9:02 remaining.

Allen then oversaw a 15-play, 86-yard drive that ate up the final 5:56 to set up Bass' field goal, which led to numerous Bills players diving head-first to slide in the snow.

The Dolphins (8-6) entered the weekend in second place and as the AFC's sixth seed. They've now lost three in a row in their bid to qualify for the postseason for the first time since 2016.

Browns 13, Ravens 3: Deshaun Watson threw a touchdown

pass in his home debut, leading Cleveland to an ugly win over AFC North-leading Baltimore, which needs injured star quarterback Lamar Jackson to get back quickly.

Watson wasn't spectacular, but he did enough in his third game since being reinstated from an NFL suspension to help the Browns (6-8) keep their minuscule playoff hopes alive.

Watson, who was banned for 11 games for alleged sexual misconduct, connected with Donovan Peoples-Jones on a 3-yard TD pass in the third quarter to put the Browns up 13-3 — the biggest deficit the Ravens (9-5) have faced all season.

Watson finished 18-for-28 for 161 yards and added 22 on the ground.

Booker, Suns come back against Pelicans

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Devin Booker dribbled toward the left corner three-point line with two Pelicans in hot pursuit before rising up for an off-balance jumper. Coach Monty Williams wasn't sure that was a great idea.

"I couldn't make that shot," Williams said grinning.

But Booker can. And he did.

The three-time All-Star put on a show with one of the best scoring games of his career, pouring in 58 points to nearly single-handedly push the Phoenix Suns past New Orleans 118-114 on Saturday night.

The Suns earned the comeback win barely one week after losing to the Pelicans twice in New Orleans. Booker prides himself as a team player and a willing passer, but on Saturday night, he realized he had the hot hand.

"Once I get it going a little bit, shooting over a hand is the right play," Booker said.

It's the second time this season Booker has topped 50 points — he scored 51 against Chicago at home Nov. 30 in just three quarters. He had a career-high 70 points at Boston in March 2017 and had 59 at Utah in March 2019.

This effort brought the Suns back from a 24-point deficit. The three-time All-Star made 21 of 35 shots, including six of 12 three-pointers. He added five rebounds, five assists and played the entire second half.

Zion Williamson led the Pelicans with 30 points and McCollum added 27. Williamson had a solid game, but it was overshadowed by Booker's performance.

"You got to give respect when it is due," Williamson said. "He put on a clinic."

Thunder 115, Grizzlies 109: Memphis star Ja Morant was ejected just before halftime and undermanned host Oklahoma City ended its opponent's winning streak at seven.

Morant was ejected with 43 seconds left in the half when he was called for his second technical foul after apparently making remarks to courtside Memphis fans that were derogatory about the officiating.

The Thunder, playing without stars Shai Gilgeous-Alexander and Josh Giddey, ended a five-game losing streak. Lu Dort scored 24 points and Isaiah Joe had a season-high 23 points, hitting five three-pointers.

Heat 111, Spurs 101: Jimmy Butler scored 26 points, Bam Adebayo had 22 points and 13 rebounds and Miami extended its winning streak to four, beating San Antonio in the first NBA game in Mexico City since 2019.

Tyler Herro added 21 points and Duncan Robinson and Max Strauss had 12 each for the Heat. Keldon Johnson scored 22 points for San Antonio. The Spurs are last in the Western Conference.

Cavaliers 100, Mavericks 99 (OT): Jarrett Allen's dunk with

2:01 remaining in overtime lifted host Cleveland past Dallas and kept it unbeaten in five OT games this season.

Donovan Mitchell scored 25 points and Darius Garland had 18 points, seven rebounds and 12 assists for Cleveland, which has the best home record in the NBA at 14-2.

Clippers 102, Wizards 93: Kawhi Leonard scored a season-high 31 points and host Los Angeles rallied in the fourth quarter to beat Washington, extending the Wizards' skid to a season-worst nine games.

Bucks 123, Jazz 97: Bobby Portis had 22 points and 14 rebounds starting in place of Giannis Antetokounmpo, and host Milwaukee also played without Khris Middleton in a victory over Utah.

Trail Blazers 107, Rockets 95: Anfernee Simons scored 32 points, Damian Lillard added 25 and visiting Portland beat Houston.

Edey has 29 points, 16 rebounds; No. 1 Purdue tops Davidson

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Purdue center Zach Edey kept taking his shots when Davidson sent multiple defenders at him Saturday night.

Eventually, Caleb Furst found a few openings, too.

Together, they gave the top-ranked Boilermakers an unbeatable combination. Edey finished with 29 points and 16 rebounds and Furst scored all 12 of his points in the second half to help No. 1 Purdue fend off Davidson 69-61 in the Indy Classic.

"You know the thing about Zach, don't take him for granted. I know I don't," coach Matt Painter said. "He's great, he's fabulous and he's unselfish, which makes for a great teammate."

Apparently, a great team, too, now that the Boilermakers (11-0) are positioned to keep the top spot for an unprecedented second straight week. Purdue earned its first No. 1 ranking last December, then lost its next game on a buzzer-beater at Rutgers and didn't regain the No. 1 ranking until this week.

Sam Mennenga had 14 points and Foster Loyer added 11 points and 10 assists for David-

son (7-4). The Wildcats fell to 0-11 against No. 1 foes and 18-116 against Top 25 teams.

No. 3 UConn 68, Butler 46: Adama Sanogo had 27 points and 14 rebounds, helping visiting Connecticut beat Butler in the Big East opener for both.

No. 15 Gonzaga 100, No. 4 Alabama 90: Drew Timme tied his season-high with 29 points and the Bulldogs overcame Brandon Miller's 36-point outburst to beat the Crimson Tide in the C.M. Newton Classic in Birmingham, Ala.

No. 9 Arizona 75, No. 6 Tennessee 70: Azuolas Tubelis scored 19 points, Oumar Ballo added 18 and host Arizona turned the physical tables on Tennessee.

No. 8 Kansas 84, No. 14 Indiana 62: Grayden Dick scored 20 points to lead six Kansas players in double figures scoring, Dajuan Harris Jr. added 10 points and 10 assists and the host Jayhawks romped past the Hoosiers.

No. 10 Arkansas 76, Bradley 57: Freshman Jordan Walsh scored a career-high 18 points to lead host Arkansas past Bradley and extend the Razorbacks' winning streak to six games.

No. 16 UCLA 63, No. 13 Kentucky 53:

Jaime Jaquez Jr. had 19 points and 12 rebounds as the Bruins turned back the Wildcats in a matchup of college basketball royalty in a CBS Sports Classic game at Madison Square Garden in New York City.

No. 17 Mississippi State 68, Nicholls State 66: Dashawn Davis made two clutch free throws with 5.6 seconds remaining and Tolu Smith had 15 points and eight rebounds to help the host Bulldogs hold off Nicholls State.

No. 18 Illinois 68, Alabama A&M 47: Matthew Mayer had 21 points and seven rebounds to help the host Illini overcome Alabama A&M's comeback try.

North Carolina 89, No. 23 Ohio State 84: Pete Nance made a jumper at the buzzer to force overtime, RJ Davis iced a much-needed victory for scuffling North Carolina with two late free throws and the Tar Heels beat the Buckeyes in the CBS Sports Classic.

No. 24 Virginia Tech 74, Grambling State 48: Sean Pedulla scored 21 points to lead host Virginia Tech past Grambling State.

No. 25 Miami 91, St. Francis 76: Isaiah Wong had 22 points and 10 assists, Wooga Poplar scored a career-high 20 and host Miami beat St. Francis.

Gustafsson, Capitals blow past Leafs

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Alex Ovechkin called for fans to throw hats on to the ice to celebrate a three-goal performance not from him, but rather one of his least likely teammates to pull that off.

While Ovechkin will have to wait for his next milestone, Erik Gustafsson recorded his first career hat trick to help the Washington Capitals beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 5-2 Saturday night.

All eyes were on Ovechkin at 800 goals, one back of tying Gordie Howe for second on the NHL career list, until the focus shifted to Gustafsson registering the third hat trick by a defenseman in franchise history.

"It's not going to happen too often," said Gustafsson, who had yet to score in his first 31 games this season since signing with Washington. "When you're kind of feeling it, you just shoot the puck and tonight it went in."

Ovechkin was held off the scoresheet but still had an impact. He checked Maple Leafs defenseman Conor Timmins into the bench in the second and heard plenty of "Ovi! Ovi!" chants as a result.

Hurricanes 5, Stars 4 (OT): Martin Necas scored 2:19 into overtime and host Carolina stretched its point streak to 10 games.

Stefan Noesen, Andrei Svechnikov, Teuvo Teravainen and Seth Jarvis scored for the Hurricanes, who won their fourth straight game.

Rangers 6, Flyers 3: Jimmy Vesey scored early in the third period, helping visiting New York to its sixth straight win.

Artemi Panarin, Barclay Goodrow and

K'Andre Miller each had a goal and an assist for New York.

James van Riemsdyk, Scott Laughton and Morgan Frost scored for the struggling Flyers, who have lost 17 of their past 20 (3-12-5). Carter Hart finished with 29 saves.

Bruins 4, Blue Jackets 2: David Krejci, David Pastrnak and Taylor Hall each had a goal and an assist, sending host Boston to the win.

Boston remained unbeaten in regulation at home. Tomas Nosek also scored for the Bruins, and Jeremy Swayman made a season-high 30 saves.

Panthers 4, Devils 2: Sam Reinhart scored twice, Sergei Bobrovsky made 29 saves and visiting Florida handed first-place New Jersey its fifth straight loss.

Gustav Forsling and Carter Verhaeghe also scored for Florida, which beat New Jersey for the fifth time in six meetings.

Lightning 5, Canadiens 1: Brandon Hagel had two goals and an assist, and visiting Tampa Bay earned its fifth consecutive win.

Nicholas Paul, Anthony Cirelli and Nikita Kucherov also scored for Tampa Bay.

Senators 6, Red Wings 3: Drake Batherson had two goals, Claude Giroux snapped a third-period tie and visiting Ottawa earned its fourth consecutive victory.

Thomas Chabot, Tyler Motte and Austin Watson also scored for the Senators, who improved to 8-2-1 in their past 11 games.

Ducks 4, Oilers 3: John Klingberg scored early in the third period and Lukas Dostal stopped 46 shots, leading visiting Anaheim to the victory.

Ryan Strome had a goal and an assist for

the Ducks, who won in regulation for the just the third time this season.

Avalanche 3, Predators 1: Mikko Rantanen and Alex Newhook scored in the second period and host Colorado beat Nashville.

Cale Makar scored into the empty net in the final minute and Alexandar Georgiev stopped 25 shots for Colorado, which bounced back from a loss to Buffalo in the opener of its five-game homestand on Thursday night.

Sabres 5, Coyotes 2: Tage Thompson scored the tiebreaking goal on a power play midway through the third period, and Jeff Skinner had two goals and an assist in his return from three-game suspension to lead visiting Buffalo.

Tyson Jost and Kyle Okposo scored empty-net goals in the final 90 seconds to seal the Sabres' third straight win to improve to 5-1-1 in their last seven games.

Kings 3, Sharks 2 (SO): Trevor Moore scored the shootout winner for the second straight game to lead host Los Angeles.

Phillip Danault had a power-play goal and Jaret Anderson-Dolan also scored in regulation as the Kings won consecutive games for the first time since the end of their four-game winning streak on Nov. 12.

Islanders 5, Golden Knights 2: Semyon Varlamov stopped 35 shots before leaving with an injury in the third period, and visiting New York beat Vegas.

Zach Parise and Brock Nelson each had a goal and an assist for the Islanders.

Jets 5, Canucks 1: Kyle Connor extended his points streak with a goal and an assist to lead visiting Winnipeg.

No. 17 Oregon St. pounds Florida in Las Vegas Bowl

Associated Press

LAS VEGAS — The only uncertainty Saturday was whether No. 17 Oregon State would shut out Florida and end the nation's longest scoring streak.

Adam Mihalek's 40-yard field goal with 37 seconds left finally put the Gators on the scoreboard, one of Oregon State's few disappointments in an otherwise dominant 30-3 Las Vegas Bowl victory.

The Beavers reached 10 victories for the third time program history and the first time in 16 years. They first accomplished the feat in 2000, when coach Jonathan Smith was the team's quarterback.

Oregon State (10-3) won seven of its final

eight games. The Gators last were shut out in 1988, a span of 436 games and 57 games longer than any other team.

Celebration Bowl

North Carolina Central 41, Jackson State 34 (OT): At Atlanta, quarterback Davius Richard scored on a 1-yard plunge in overtime and the Eagles beat the Tigers to spoil coach Deion Sanders' bid for an undefeated season in his final game with the Tigers.

The Eagles (10-2) made a goal-line stand on Jackson State's first overtime possession to preserve the victory. Tight end Hayden Hagler's drop on third down from the 1 set up an incompleteness by Jackson State quarterback Shedeur Sanders to end the game

regarded as the championship of teams from historically Black college and universities.

Sanders is taking over as coach at Colorado.

LendingTree Bowl

Southern Miss 38, Rice 24: At Mobile, Ala., Frank Gore Jr. ran for an NCAA bowl-record 329 yards and accounted for three touchdowns to lead the Golden Eagles.

Gore, the son of the former NFL star, had a 64-yard scoring run in the second quarter, threw an 18-yard touchdown pass in the third and ran for 55 yards for another score in the fourth. He also ran 59 yards to set up the go-ahead touchdown.