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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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# US kills, captures members of ISIS

BY LARA KORTE

*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. forces killed at least seven members of the Islamic State group and captured another 18 during a series of strikes in Syria this month, U.S. Central Command announced Tuesday.

The attacks follow the killing of two U.S. soldiers and a civilian interpreter in central Syria on Dec. 13.

The U.S. military and its partner forces carried out 11 missions between Dec. 20-29 that killed or captured a total of 25 ISIS members, CENTCOM said in a statement.

The operations also destroyed four ISIS weapons caches, CENTCOM said.

"We will not relent," Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of

CENTCOM, said in the statement. "We are steadfast in commitment to working with regional partners to root out the ISIS threat posed to U.S. and regional security."

Two members of the Iowa National Guard and an American interpreter were killed Dec. 13 when a lone gunman ambushed U.S. and Syrian forces. President Donald Trump characterized the deaths as an "ISIS attack" and vowed swift and forceful retaliation.

In addition to the 11 missions announced Tuesday, U.S. forces conducted another large-scale strike in Syria on Dec. 19 with Jordanian partners using fighter aircraft, attack helicopters and artillery to attack more than 70 ISIS targets, according to the

release.

"This is not the beginning of a war — it is a declaration of vengeance," Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said in a social media post following the Dec. 19 strike.

The U.S. has maintained a military presence in Syria for more than a decade, primarily as part of its anti-ISIS mission.

Although the group was territorially defeated in 2019, pockets of ISIS fighters and sympathizers in the country still pose a threat to American and regional security, U.S. military officials say.

About 1,000 U.S. troops remain in Syria, working alongside Kurdish partners in the Syrian Democratic Forces and

the newly installed government led by President Ahmed al-Sharaa.

ISIS has inspired at least 11 plots or attacks against targets in the United States this year, according to CENTCOM.

In response, the command and its Syrian partners have conducted operations that resulted in more than 300 terrorists being detained and more than 20 killed, the command said in the statement on Tuesday.

"Continuing to hunt down terrorist operatives, eliminate ISIS networks, and work with partners to prevent an ISIS resurgence makes America, the region, and the world safer," Cooper said.

# DOD strike kills 2 in attack on suspected drug boat

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

U.S. military forces struck a suspected drug smuggling vessel in the Eastern Pacific on Monday in the 30th known drone strike on alleged narcotics boats in waters off South America since September.

Two alleged male "narcoterrorists" linked to an unnamed "designated terrorist organization" were killed in the attack Monday as part of Operation Southern Spear, according to a U.S. Southern Command news release.

President Donald Trump and others in his administration have said most of the Southern Spear strikes have targeted Venezuelan criminal organization Tren de Aragua, which the U.S. has labeled a

foreign terrorist organization.

Drone video footage released by SOUTHCOM shows at least two missiles striking the vessel before it appears to catch fire. SOUTHCOM provided few other details about the strike, including its exact location.

"Intelligence confirmed the vessel was transiting along known narcotrafficking routes in the Eastern Pacific and was engaged in narco-trafficking operations," the SOUTHCOM statement reads.

The latest strike brings to at least 107 the number of individuals killed in the U.S. military drone strikes since the first on Sept. 2.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has insisted the U.S. military knows via intelligence exactly who it has killed in the

strikes, but he has declined to make any such evidence public.

Some U.S. lawmakers — mostly Democrats — have been critical of the campaign, deeming the strikes illegal and unauthorized by Congress.

Trump has claimed the strikes have led to an about 97% drop in drug trafficking by sea.

The latest strike comes just days after the U.S. attacked a facility on Venezuela's coast on Dec. 24, Trump announced last week. He said the facility was used to load drug-smuggling boats.

That drone strike — the first known U.S. attack on Venezuelan soil — was conducted by the CIA, according to the New York Times, who cited un-

named American officials.

The facility was believed to be used by Tren de Aragua in drug smuggling operations, the Times reported.

No one was killed in that attack.

Trump in recent weeks has also increased his pressure campaign on Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro. Trump has said he wants to see Maduro leave office.

The U.S. has built up a large maritime force in the region that includes thousands of sailors, Marines and special operations forces.

And Trump has announced a blockade on sanctioned Venezuelan oil tankers.

The U.S. has since seized two oil tankers and pursued a third, U.S. officials have said.

# Guard to patrol New Orleans for New Year's

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS, La. — A National Guard deployment in New Orleans authorized by President Donald Trump will begin Tuesday as part of a heavy security presence for New Year's celebrations a year after an attack on revelers on Bourbon Street killed 14 people, officials said Monday.

The deployment in New Orleans follows high-profile National Guard missions the Trump administration launched in other cities this year, including in Washington and Memphis, Tenn. But the sight of National Guard troops is not unusual in New Orleans, where troops earlier this year also helped bolster security for the Super Bowl and Mardi Gras.

"It's no different than what we've seen in the past," New Orleans police spokesperson Reese Harper said.

The Guard is not the only federal law enforcement agency in the city. Since the start of the month, federal agents have been carrying out an immigration crackdown that has led to the arrest of at least several hundred people.

Harper stressed that the Guard will not be engaging in immigration enforcement.

"This is for visibility and just really to keep our citizens safe," Harper said. "It's just another tool in the toolbox and another layer of security."

The Guard is expected be confined to the French Quarter area popular with tourists and

won't be engaging in assisting in immigration enforcement, Harper said. Guardsmen will operate similar to earlier this year when they patrolled the area around Bourbon Street following the vehicle-ramming attack on Jan. 1.

The 350 Guard members will stay through Carnival season, when residents and tourists descend on the Big Easy to partake in costumed celebrations and parades before ending with Mardi Gras in mid-February.

In total, more than 800 local, state and federal law enforcement officials will be deployed in New Orleans to close off Bourbon Street to vehicular traffic, patrol the area, conduct bag searches and redirect traffic, city officials said Monday.

The extra aid for New Orleans has received the support of some Democrats, with Mayor LaToya Cantrell saying she is "welcoming of those added resources."

The increased law enforcement presence comes a year after Shamsud-Din Jabbar drove around a police blockade in the early hours of Jan. 1 and raced down Bourbon Street, plowing into people celebrating New Year's Day. The attacker, a U.S. citizen and Army veteran who had proclaimed his support for the Islamic State militant group on social media, was fatally shot by police after crashing.

In the immediate aftermath of the attack, 100 National Guard members were sent to the city.

## Estonia: There's no signs of Russia plan to attack NATO

BY JOHN VANDIVER  
*Stars and Stripes*

STUTTGART, Germany — Russian provocations in Eastern Europe are on the decline, according to Estonia's spy chief, who says President Vladimir Putin shows no signs of wanting to attack NATO in the coming year.

The threat assessment out of Estonia, a NATO frontline state on the border with Russia, also indicated that increased allied military maneuvers in the Baltics are having a deterrent effect.

"We've seen that, as a result of our responses, Russia has altered its behavior following various incidents that have occurred more broadly in the region. So far, it's still clear that Russia respects NATO and is currently trying to avoid any open conflict," Foreign Intelligence Service Director General

Kaupo Rosin told public broadcaster ERR in an interview.

Rosin's analysis of the current security situation contrasts with recent statements by other top officials in Europe, including NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutte, who warned earlier this month that the prospect of war loomed over Europe.

"We are Russia's next target, and we are already in harm's way," Rutte said during a speech in Berlin.

Rosin, however, said that Russia has taken note of NATO countries' efforts to ramp up investments in military firepower. Efforts to track Russian activities around the Baltics also have altered the Kremlin's calculus, he said.

The past year has been marked by a series of high-profile incidents that has sparked NATO to take a more vigilant stance on its eastern flank.

## Louisiana, Finland to build 6 Coast Guard icebreakers

BY GARY WARNER  
*Stars and Stripes*

Shipyards in Louisiana and Finland will jointly build six new Arctic Security Cutter icebreakers, the U.S. Coast Guard announced Monday.

Bollinger Shipyards of Lockport, La., and Rauma Marine Constructions Oy of Rauma, Finland, received the contracts as part of an international agreement negotiated by the Trump Administration.

The contract with Rauma Marine Constructions Oy is for two cutters to be built in Finland, with delivery in 2028.

The Bollinger contract includes up to four ships, with delivery in 2029.

"This plan is designed to take immediate advantage of our Finnish partners' icebreaker expertise while coordinating the on-shoring of that expertise in the United States in the long

run," the Coast Guard said in a statement.

The U.S. Coast Guard currently has one heavy and two medium icebreakers in its active fleet.

The 50-year-old Polar Star is the only heavy icebreaker operated by the U.S. Coast Guard and is normally tasked to operate several months a year on Operation Deep Freeze, which opens shipping channels for scientific stations in Antarctica.

Congressional critics have called for action to close an Arctic region "icebreaker gap" with Russia and China.

Russia, which has a long coastline on the Arctic, operates about 40 icebreakers of various sizes; some are nuclear powered. The Russians have also fielded the first of its Ivan Papanin-class of armed icebreakers, carrying an AK-176MA 76mm gun in a turret on the foredeck.

# \$8.6B deal to upgrade Israel's F-15 fleet after Netanyahu visit

BY LARA KORTE

*Stars and Stripes*

Israel will receive more than two dozen F-15s in accordance with a contract signed this week with American firm Boeing, according to the Pentagon.

The \$8.6 billion deal was announced Monday shortly after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Donald Trump met in Florida to discuss the next steps of the U.S.-brokered ceasefire agreement in Gaza.

Boeing will deliver at least 25 of the fighter jets over the next decade, and Israel has the option to order another 25, the Defense Department said in a statement.

The F-15IA is Israel's model of the Boeing F-15EX Eagle, which can carry hypersonic weapons and has a greater payload capacity than any other fighter jet, according to the company.

The ceasefire halted two years of war between Israel and the Iran-backed Islamic militant group Hamas, which had been in control of the Gaza Strip.

Since the Hamas attacks on Oct. 7, 2023, that started the war, the U.S. has provided at least \$16.3 billion in direct military aid to Israel, according to the Council on Foreign Relations.

After the meeting with Net-

anyahu, Trump told reporters that the U.S. may have to launch new attacks if Iran looks to reconstitute its nuclear program.

American airstrikes in June targeted several key nuclear enrichment sites using "bunker buster" bombs. At the time, the Pentagon said the Iranian enrichment sites had been completely obliterated by the operation.

But new concerns have arisen that Tehran may be continuing nuclear development outside those facilities, The Associated Press reported Monday.

"Now I hear that Iran is trying to build up again," Trump said. "And if they are, we're going to have to knock them down."

## Homeland Security starts probe in Minn.

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Homeland Security officials were conducting a fraud investigation on Monday in Minneapolis, Department of Homeland Security Secretary Kristi Noem said.

The action comes after years of investigation that began with the \$300 million scheme at the nonprofit Feeding Our Future, for which 57 defendants in Minnesota have been convicted.

Prosecutors said the organization was at the center of the country's largest COVID-19-related fraud scam, when defendants exploited a state-run, federally funded program intended to provide food for children.

A federal prosecutor alleged earlier in December that half or more of the roughly \$18 billion in federal funds that supported 14 programs in Minnesota since 2018 may have been stolen. Most of the defendants are Somali Americans, they said.

Minnesota Gov. Tim Walz said then that fraud will not be tolerated and that his administration "will continue to work with federal partners to ensure fraud is stopped and fraudsters are caught."

Noem on Monday posted a video on the social platform X showing DHS officers going into an unidentified business and questioning the person working behind the counter. Noem said that officers were "conducting a massive investigation on child-care and other rampant fraud."

The action comes a day after FBI Director Kash Patel said on X that the agency had "surged personnel and investigative resources to Minnesota to dismantle large-scale fraud schemes exploiting federal programs."

Patel said that previous fraud arrests in Minnesota were "just the tip of a very large iceberg."

## Arctic blast with snow, wind slams US

Associated Press

A surge of Arctic air brought strong winds, heavy snow and frigid temperatures to the Great Lakes and Northeast on Tuesday, a day after a bomb cyclone barreling across the Midwest left tens of thousands of customers without power.

Blustery winds were expected to add to the chill, with low temperatures dipping below freezing as far south as the Florida panhandle, the National Weather Service said.

The wild storm hit parts of the Plains and Great Lakes this week with sharply colder air, strong winds and a mix of snow, ice and rain, leading to treacherous travel. Forecasters said it intensified quickly enough to meet the criteria of a bomb cyclone, a system that strengthens rapidly as pressure drops.

Nationwide, more than 115,000 customers were without power Tuesday morning, around a third of them in Michigan, according to Powerout-

age.us.

As the storm moves into Canada, the frigid air trailing behind it will spread across much of the eastern two-thirds of the country, the National Weather Service said, powering the lake-effect "snow machine" in areas downwind of the Great Lakes.

Some areas in western and upstate New York saw a foot or more of snow Monday and their totals could reach up to 3 feet this week, forecasters said. Strong winds on Monday, including an 81 mph gust in Buffalo, New York, knocked down trees and wires across the region, the weather service said.

"At this point, the worst does seem to be over, and we are expecting conditions to improve especially by later today," said Andrew Orrison, a weather service meteorologist.

Videos on social media show people struggling to walk in the windy conditions and a waterway in downtown Buffalo clogged with tree branches and

other debris stemming from a windblown surge from Lake Erie.

Whiteout conditions were still possible in some areas, forecasters said, and New York Gov. Kathy Hochul warned people in impacted areas to avoid unnecessary travel.

Dangerous wind chills across parts of North Dakota and Minnesota plunged as low as minus 30 F on Monday.

And in northeast West Virginia, rare nearly hurricane-force winds were recorded on a mountain near Dolly Sods, according to the National Weather Service.

On the West Coast, strong Santa Ana winds with isolated gusts topping 70 mph brought down trees in parts of Southern California where recent storms had saturated the soil. Downed powerlines forced the shutdown of a freeway north of Los Angeles for several hours on Monday. Blustery conditions were expected through Saturday.

# Saudis bombs Yemen due to UAE arms sale

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Saudi Arabia bombed Yemen's port city of Mukalla on Tuesday after a weapons shipment from the United Arab Emirates arrived for separatist forces in the war-torn country, and starkly warned that it viewed Emirati actions as "extremely dangerous."

The bombing followed days of tensions over the advance of the separatist forces known as the Southern Transitional Council, which is backed by the Emirates.

Despite the warning, the Council and its allies issued a statement supporting the UAE's presence, even as others

allied with Saudi Arabia demanded Emirati forces withdraw from Yemen in 24 hours' time.

The confrontation threatened to open a new front in Yemen's decades-long war, with forces allied against the Iranian-backed Houthis possibly turning their sights on each other in the Arab world's poorest nation long stalked by famine and disease.

It also further strained ties between Saudi Arabia and the UAE, neighboring nations on the Arabian Peninsula that increasingly have competed with each other over economic issues and the region's politics, particularly in the wider Red Sea region.

"I expect a calibrated escalation from both sides. The UAE-backed Southern Transitional Council is likely to respond by consolidating control," said Mohammed al-Basha, a Yemen expert and the founder of the Basha Report, a risk advisory firm.

"At the same time, the flow of weapons from the UAE to the STC is set to be curtailed following the port attack, particularly as Saudi Arabia controls the air-space."

A military statement carried by the state-run Saudi Press Agency announced the strikes, which it said came after ships arrived there from Fujairah, a port city on the UAE's eastern

coast.

"The ships' crew had the disabled tracking devices aboard the vessels, and unloaded a large amount of weapons and combat vehicles in support of the Southern Transitional Council's forces," the statement said.

"Considering that the aforementioned weapons constitute an imminent threat, and an escalation that threatens peace and stability, the Coalition Air Force has conducted this morning a limited airstrike that targeted weapons and military vehicles offloaded from the two vessels in Mukalla," it added.

It wasn't clear if there were any casualties from the strike.

## Russia: Nuclear-capable Oreshnik missiles active

Associated Press

Russia's Oreshnik missile system has entered active service, Russia's Ministry of Defense said Tuesday, as negotiators continue to search for a breakthrough in peace talks to end Moscow's war in Ukraine.

Troops held a brief ceremony to mark the occasion in neighboring Belarus where the nuclear-capable missiles have been deployed, the ministry said. It did not say how many missiles had been deployed or give any other details.

Russian President Vladimir Putin said earlier in December that the Oreshnik would enter combat duty this month.

He made the statement at a meeting with top Russian military officers, where he warned that Moscow will seek to extend its gains in Ukraine if Kyiv and its Western allies reject the Kremlin's demands.

The announcement comes at a critical time for Russia-Ukraine peace talks. President Donald Trump hosted Zelenskyy at his Florida resort Sunday and

insisted that Kyiv and Moscow were "closer than ever before" to a peace settlement.

At a meeting with senior military officers Monday, Putin emphasized the need to create military buffer zones along the Russian border. He also claimed that Russian troops were advancing in the eastern Donetsk region of Ukraine and pressing their offensive in the southern Zaporizhzhia region.

Moscow first used the Oreshnik, which is Russian for "hazel-nut tree," against Ukraine in November 2024, when it fired the experimental weapon at a factory in Dnipro that built missiles when Ukraine was part of the Soviet Union.

Putin has praised the Oreshnik's capabilities, saying that its multiple warheads, which plunge toward a target at speeds up to Mach 10, are immune to being intercepted.

He warned the West that Moscow may use it against Ukraine's NATO allies who've allowed Kyiv to use their longer-range missiles to strike inside Russia.

## UN Command firm on Korean border authority

BY SETH ROBSON  
AND YOOJIN LEE

*Stars and Stripes*

CAMP HUMPREYS, South Korea — The United Nations Command reasserted its authority over the border between North and South Korea amid a series of recent border crossings from the North.

Tensions remain high at the Demilitarized Zone, the 160-mile-long, highly-fortified corridor that surrounds the border.

South Korean troops in October fired warning shots at 20 armed North Korean soldiers that temporarily crossed the military demarcation line. A similar incident involving 30 North Koreans occurred in August.

"The United Nations Command reaffirms its commitment to maintaining the Armistice Agreement, including the MDL (military demarcation line), and to supporting measures that prevent escalation and promote stability within the Demilitarized Zone," the U.N. Command said in a statement emailed

Monday by spokeswoman Song Ho Chong.

The command provides security on South Korea's side of the DMZ and investigates potential violations of the armistice that paused hostilities in the 1950-53 Korean War.

Since 2024, the South's military has relied on markers in the DMZ when responding to North Korean armistice violations and to avoid accidental clashes, said Col. Lee Sung-jun, a spokesman for South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff, at a Dec. 22 press briefing.

Critics claim the South's military relies on a line south of the actual border when determining whether a crossing has occurred, South Korea's Yonhap News Agency reported Sunday. That gives an edge to North Korea, according to the report.

For example, South Korea's conservative People Power Party chief spokesman Park Sung-hoon, in a Dec. 22 statement, characterized the border move as ceding territory to North Korea.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### State hopes stricter laws will quiet fireworks

**HI** HONOLULU — Mike Lambert heard fewer illegal fireworks exploding in his suburban Honolulu neighborhood in the months after a chain of blasts at a house party last New Year's Eve led to the deaths of six people, including a 3-year-old boy.

As the director of Hawaii's Department of Law Enforcement, Lambert wondered if the tragedy had sparked a shift in Hawaii residents' penchant for igniting illegal fireworks.

Police can now issue \$300 tickets to those who shoot off fireworks, while repeat offenders and people who cause serious injury or death could get prison time for felony crimes.

As of earlier this month, Honolulu police said officers had issued 10 fireworks citations. The number is an improvement from zero in past years. He expects it to jump dramatically on New Year's Eve.

### Man fatally shoots neighbor blocks away

**OK** COMANCHE — An Oklahoma man firing a gun he bought as a Christmas present has been charged with manslaughter after authorities say a stray bullet left his yard during target practice and fatally struck a neighbor who was sitting on a porch a half mile away.

Cody Wayne Adams, 33, was charged Friday with first-degree manslaughter.

Stephens County deputies were called to a home north of Comanche on Christmas Day after Sandra Phelps was shot while sitting on the front porch

of a home and holding a child, according to a sheriff's affidavit. Witnesses said Phelps said "ouch," and then collapsed.

Investigators determined Phelps suffered a gunshot wound, and she was pronounced dead about 20 minutes after deputies received the call about the shooting, the affidavit states.

Authorities contacted Adams, who told deputies he had recently bought himself a .45-caliber handgun and had been shooting at a can in his yard, about a half-mile from where Phelps was shot. When deputies told Adams they suspected he shot Phelps, "Adams became visibly upset and began to cry," Stephens County Sheriff's Capt. Timothy Vann wrote in the affidavit.

### State loses \$540M in climate-related grants

**MI** DETROIT — What a difference a year (and a political leadership change) makes.

At this time in 2024, Michigan was expecting a windfall of federal funds to fuel a transition to clean energy, along with billions of dollars' worth of green manufacturing projects subsidized by the Biden administration's signature climate spending bills.

But since President Donald Trump began his second term in January and began scrapping federal climate programs he refers to collectively as "the green new scam," Michigan has seen a wave of project and grant cancellations, along with renewed investment in fossil fuel-based manufacturing and power generation.

Roughly \$540 million in cli-

mate-related grants to Michigan have been canceled or held up since Inauguration Day, according to a national database compiled by Atlas Public Policy, while shifting market forces and the end of federal tax credits for electric vehicles have caused clean manufacturing investments in Michigan to whipsaw from billions annually in recent years to \$3 billion in canceled investments this year.

### Group receives \$3.4M to build opioid clinic

**WY** CASPER — When Nebraska's Department of Health and Human Services announced its plan to divvy up millions in opioid settlement money, one recipient stood out: The Central Wyoming Counseling Center.

The Wyoming nonprofit is the only out-of-state group slated to receive some of Nebraska's Opioid Treatment Infrastructure Cash Fund, receiving \$3.4 million to build a crisis stabilization center in Kimball County, which borders Wyoming.

Other grants awarded in this round are: \$4.4 million to Heartland Counseling Services for a crisis stabilization center near South Sioux City; \$2 million for Centerpointe, which operates in Lincoln and Omaha, to expand short-term residential treatment; \$350,000 for Bryan Medical Center in Lincoln; and \$276,000 for ARCH in Omaha.

### Man charged with trying to aid Islamic State

**TX** DALLAS — A 21-year-old Texas man who authorities say provided bomb materials and money to people he believed were affili-

ed with the Islamic State group has been federally charged with international terrorism, the U.S. Department of Justice announced Monday.

John Michael Garza Jr. of Midlothian is accused of giving bomb-making materials to an undercover federal agent who he believed was an "ISIS brother," the Justice Department said, using a different abbreviation for the Islamic State group.

The Dec. 22 sting operation came after an undercover New York City Police Department employee found a social media account belonging to Garza that followed several accounts supporting the Islamic State group.

Garza is accused of sending the undercover employee small amounts of cryptocurrency in November and December, allegedly believing his money was supporting the Islamic State group.

### Anonymous funding fuels attacks on official

**GA** ATLANTA — It's the biggest mystery in Georgia politics right now: Who's paying for the attacks on Republican Lt. Gov. Burt Jones?

Someone operating under the name "Georgians for Integrity" has dumped around \$5 million into television ads, mailers and texts. The attacks claim Jones, who already has President Donald Trump's endorsement in his run for governor next year, has been using his office to enrich himself.

The Jones campaign is hoping mad, threatening legal action against television stations if they don't stop airing ads that a lawyer calls "demonstrably false" and slanderous.

— From Associated Press

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## Reporting World, National and Military News

# INTs cost Rams, Stafford's MVP case

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Matthew Stafford reached a career milestone, though his three interceptions hurt the Rams' chances of winning a game and perhaps his own of winning the NFL's MVP.

Stafford set a career high in touchdown passes in a season with 42 when he hit Puka Nuku for an 11-yard score with 2:46 to play, but the Falcons answered with a 51-yard field goal with 21 seconds left and upset the Rams 27-24 on Monday night.

Stafford was 22 for 38 for 269 yards with two touchdowns and a season-high three interceptions, one of which was returned for a touchdown. It was the quarterback's first three-interception game since Week 1 of the 2022 season.

"He's a total stud," Rams coach Sean McVay said. "We wouldn't be in a lot of the great

situations we're in without him. But tonight was, it was a night that he's capable of playing better."

Stafford helped rally the Rams from a 24-3 second-half deficit to tie the score at 24 on his scoring toss to Nakua. His first touchdown was a 27-yard pass to Terrence Ferguson in the third quarter that pulled the Rams within 24-10.

Stafford was also sacked three times, which matched a season high, but didn't feel like the Falcons' pressure was overwhelming.

"Every week is a new challenge," Stafford said. "Just because you play good one week doesn't mean you're going to play good the next, and vice versa. So just got to go out there and continue to trust what we've done all year, and then we got to just show up and make the plays on game day."

Stafford's previous high for touchdowns in a season was 41, which he accomplished twice. He had 41 in 2011 with the Lions and in 2021 with the Rams.

## MVP Race

Stafford was the betting favorite to win the first MVP award of his 17-year career ahead of Patriots second-year quarterback Drake Maye. On Sunday, Maye had a near-perfect afternoon against the Jets, presumably closing the gap on Stafford. Maye was 19 for 21 for 256 yards and five touchdowns in New York as the Patriots rolled to a 42-10 win. He played the first six possessions of the game and led the Patriots to six touchdowns.

Stafford is averaging 278 passing yards per game to Maye's 262.7, has 42 passing TDs to Maye's 30 and the quarterbacks are even with eight in-

terceptions apiece. Maye's big day against the Jets pulled him virtually even with Stafford in passer rating prior to the Falcons game.

Maye also has 409 rushing yards and four rushing touchdowns while Stafford has -2 rushing yards and no rushing touchdowns on the season. Maye's completion percentage, which leads the NFL, is 71.7 to Stafford's 65.2 (18th).

The Patriots clinched the AFC East on Sunday and enter Week 18 with a 13-3 record, while Stafford's Rams are 11-5 and will enter the playoffs as a wild card.

The Patriots will close the regular season at home against the Dolphins and still have a shot at the No. 1 seed in the AFC, so Maye figures to play. Los Angeles will host the Arizona Cardinals and McVay said Monday his starters will play.

# Harbaugh hopes Jackson can return to face Steelers

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — John Harbaugh said he had some coaches and players over to watch the Pittsburgh-Cleveland game that could have eliminated his Baltimore Ravens from the playoffs.

When the Browns won, saving Baltimore's season for now, the reaction was what you'd expect.

"It was uncorked man. It was raucous," Harbaugh said. "It was great. Everybody was jumping around and fired up and happy. A lot of hugging."

Now it's time to get back to business for the Ravens, who improbably have a chance to win the AFC North on Sunday night when they play at the Steelers. To stay alive, Baltimore needed a win at Green Bay last weekend and a loss by Pittsburgh. Both those results happened.

The Ravens (8-8) managed to

beat the Packers 41-24 on Saturday night despite Lamar Jackson's absence. Jackson has been nursing a back injury, but Tyler Huntley improved to 2-0 as the starting quarterback this season and Derrick Henry ran for 216 yards and four touchdowns.

Then Cleveland pulled off a 13-6 upset against the Steelers on Sunday. Harbaugh said he wasn't watching that game like a coach.

"I'm in fan mode to be honest with you," he said. "I'm complaining about the play calls."

Harbaugh said he'll have a better sense Wednesday about Jackson's status for this next game, but the Baltimore coach shot down the idea that Huntley's success would make the Ravens at all hesitant to bring back Jackson.

"The fact that we have a lot of confidence in Tyler is a real big positive, a real plus, but it

doesn't factor into whether Lamar plays," Harbaugh said. "If Lamar's ready to go, he's playing."

Jackson has missed four games this season because of injuries, but he played earlier this month when Baltimore lost at home to Pittsburgh, 27-22.

The rematch will be the final game of the entire NFL regular season — a major showcase on national television.

That's after both teams struggled for much of the season and neither was able to pull away with the division.

"It's a great opportunity. We'll be playing a division championship game on Sunday," Harbaugh said. "We've worked hard to get to this position. There's a lot of different paths in football, and there's a lot of different paths in life, and this is the path of the 2025 season. So here we are, and our goal is to make

the most of it."

It's the second straight season the Steelers and Ravens are playing an elimination game. Baltimore beat Pittsburgh 28-14 in the playoffs back in January.

If Jackson is able to play, this will be a chance for him to move past a rocky stretch. He hurt his hamstring in Week 4, and by the time he came back, the Ravens were 2-5. They won their first four games after his return, but he dealt with other health issues and still hasn't had a full week of practice since early November.

Losses at home to Cincinnati, Pittsburgh and New England meant Baltimore was facing elimination when it went to Green Bay, and Jackson missed the second half of the game against the Packers. He wasn't able to play against the Packers, but Harbaugh said there was progress last week with his back injury.

# Allen scores 27 points, lifting Cavs

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Jarrett Allen had 27 points and 10 rebounds and the Cleveland Cavaliers held on to beat Victor Wembanyama and the San Antonio Spurs 113-101 on Monday night.

Cleveland had seven players score in double figures. Evan Mobley scored 16 points and Darius Garland added 15 points and 11 assists.

Wembanyama had 26 points and 14 rebounds for his 10th double-double of the season for the Spurs, who have lost two straight after winning eight consecutive games.

Stephon Castle scored 15 points for the Spurs and De'Aaron Fox 14 added points after a one-game absence due to tightness in his left adductor.

Both teams were coming off disappointing losses on Saturday, but the Cavaliers responded by snapping a two-game skid.

San Antonio had an eight-game winning streak ended in a 127-114 loss to Utah. Cleveland fell behind by 37 points on the way to a 117-100 loss to Houston.

The Cavaliers trailed by eight points in the third quarter before rallying in the fourth quarter against the Spurs.

Jaylen Tyson hit consecutive 3-pointers to give Cleveland an 87-82 lead two minutes into the final quarter. The lead swelled to 94-84 and the Spurs failed to rally as they did in the first half.

Cleveland took its first double-digit lead at 22-12 on a four-point play by De'Andre Hunter following a Luke Kornet foul on his 3-pointer in the right corner.

Hunter finished with 11 points and Kornet had 10.

Allen shot 6 for 12 while scoring 12 points in the first half, including a pair of buckets he blindly tossed behind him and off the backboard.

**Suns 115, Wizards 101:** Dillon Brooks scored 26 points and Collin Gillespie added 25 to help visiting Phoenix win its fourth game in a row beating Wash-

ton.

Devin Booker added 22 points for the Suns, who have won five of their last six and the first three on a four-game road trip.

This victory came without center Mark Williams, who served a one-game suspension for his role in an on-court altercation in Saturday's 129-114 win at New Orleans.

**Bucks 123, Hornets 113:** Bobby Portis shot 8 of 12 from the field and scored 25 points off the bench, Giannis Antetokounmpo added 24 points and seven assists and visiting Milwaukee defeated Charlotte to earn back-to-back wins for the first time since late October.

The Bucks trailed 66-63 at halftime before taking control in the third quarter by outscoring the Hornets 32-23. Charlotte closed within five points with three minutes to go before the Bucks took advantage of their size advantage and dumped the ball down low to Myles Turner and Antetokounmpo for easy baskets.

**Heat 147, Nuggets 123:** Norman Powell scored 25 points and host Miami pulled away in the second half to beat Denver in a game where the Nuggets saw superstar Nikola Jokic limp off the court with a knee injury.

The teams were tied at 63 at halftime, with Jokic getting hurt with about three seconds left before the intermission. Miami then scored 47 third-quarter points to take full control.

Jokic still led the Nuggets in scoring with 21 points, along with eight assists and five rebounds. Jamal Murray scored 20 for Denver and Spencer Jones — who stepped on Jokic's left foot on the play where the three-time MVP was injured — scored 16 for the Nuggets, as did Tim Hardaway Jr.

**Raptors 107, Magic 106:** Jamal Shead scored 19 points, Brandon Ingram added 17 and host Toronto overcame a 21-point, second-quarter deficit to beat Orlando.

Gradey Dick scored 15 points and Scottie Barnes had 13 points and 11 rebounds as the Raptors rallied for the second straight day. Toronto beat Golden State in overtime on Sunday.

Orlando's Anthony Black scored 16 of his 27 points in the third quarter. Paolo Banchero had 23 points, 15 rebounds and 10 assists for his fourth career triple-double but the Magic couldn't win back-to-back games for the first time in almost a month.

**Warriors 120, Nets 107:** Stephen Curry scored 27 points and Jimmy Butler finished with 21 as visiting Golden State beat Brooklyn.

Curry shot 8 for 15 from the field while Butler went 11 for 12 from the free throw line for the Warriors, who bounced back from an overtime loss in Toronto in Sunday to win for the fourth time in five games.

Golden State was sluggish in the first quarter and trailed by as many as 13 points. The Warriors recovered to lead by two at halftime before Curry, who struggled to find his shot in the first half, scored 10 points to lead Golden State to an 89-85 lead at the end of the third quarter.

**Rockets 126, Pacers 119:** Kevin Durant scored 30 points to lead Houston to a home win over Indiana.

It's the second straight 30-point game for Durant and his 10th this season, his first in Houston since a blockbuster summer trade from Phoenix.

It's the ninth consecutive loss for the Pacers, who have the NBA's worst record at 6-27 with Tyrese Haliburton out all season with an Achilles injury.

Pascal Siakam had 23 points to lead the Pacers and Aaron Nesmith added 14 with four 3-pointers.

**Timberwolves 136, Bulls 101:** Naz Reid scored a season-high 33 points off the bench, Anthony Edwards added 23, and visiting Minnesota routed Chica-

go, which lost top scorers Coby White and Josh Giddey to injuries.

Nikola Vucevic led Chicago with 23 points, but the depleted Bulls couldn't keep pace and lost a second straight following a five-game winning streak that had lifted them back to .500. Chicago shot just 40.9%, and committed 16 turnovers compared to three by Minnesota.

White, Chicago's leading scorer, exited with a right calf strain in the first quarter.

**Knicks 130, Pelicans 125:** Jalen Brunson capped a 28-point, 10-assist performance with a driving floater and a layup in the final 1:06, and visiting New York surged in front late to beat New Orleans.

OG Anunoby had 23 points and 11 rebounds, Mohamed Diawara scored a career-high 18 points, and Karl-Anthony Towns had 12 points and 12 rebounds for the Knicks, who've won three straight.

**Thunder 140, Hawks 129:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 39 points and host Oklahoma City used a big third quarter to beat skidding Atlanta.

Chet Holmgren had 24 points, nine rebounds and three blocks, and Jalen Williams added 20 points, nine rebounds and seven assists for the NBA-leading Thunder (28-5).

**Trail Blazers 125, Mavericks 122:** Deni Avdija had 27 points, 11 assists and nine rebounds, and Shaedon Sharpe added 24 points as host Portland defeated Dallas.

Portland led 95-84 with 1:30 left in the third quarter before the Mavericks went on a 9-2 run, capped by a running 3 with 0.7 seconds left by Klay Thompson to make it 97-93.

Thompson then tied the game at 99 on a 3 with 9:35 remaining. With 6:56 to play, Max Christie gave the Mavericks their first lead of the second half at 106-105 on a 3-pointer.

The teams exchanged the lead eight times in the fourth quarter.

# Sabres beat Blues for 9th consecutive win

Associated Press

ST. LOUIS — Zach Benson and Alex Tuch scored and the Buffalo Sabres beat the St. Louis Blues 4-2 on Monday night for their ninth straight victory.

Noah Ostlund also scored, Peyton Krebs had an empty-netter and Alex Lyon made 16 saves for Buffalo. The Sabres have their longest streak since winning 10 straight in November 2018.

Lyon has started seven games during Buffalo's nine-game surge, stopping 170 of 185 shots for a .919 save percentage.

Jimmy Snuggerud and Brayden Schenn scored for St. Louis, and Joel Hofer made 30 saves. The Blues are 3-2-1 in their last six games.

Benson scored his fourth goal of the season when he batted a shot from Jack Quinn that was heading wide into the net 1:46 into the third period to give the Sabres a 3-2 lead.

Tuch tied it 2 with his 12th goal of the season. His wrist shot evaded Hofer's blocker with 4:43 remaining in the second period.

**Panthers 5, Capitals 3:** Sam Reinhart scored two goals, helping host Florida beat Washington and giving the back-to-back Stanley Cup champions nine wins in their past 12 games.

The Capitals (20-14-5) have lost four of five.

The Panthers came back from a third-period deficit to pull out the win, getting goals from Brad Marchand, Aaron Ekblad and Reinhart.

Washington led 3-2 early in the third on a goal by Dylan Strome, who also had two assists. But Marchand tied the score by batting in his own rebound past goalie Logan Thompson at 6:16 of the third, and Ekblad put Florida ahead for good about seven minutes later.

**Hurricanes 3, Rangers 2 (OT):** Jackson Blake's power-play goal on a deflection 4:47 into overtime lifted host Carolina

to a win over New York.

Sebastian Aho had a goal and an assist and Jordan Martinook provided the tying goal in regulation for the Hurricanes, who've won two straight following a three-game skid. Nikolaj Ehlers had two assists. Rookie goalie Brandon Bussi stopped 17 shots to improve to 13-1-1.

Vladislav Gavrikov and Jonny Brodzinski scored for the Rangers, who've dropped back-to-back games. Igor Shesterkin made 31 saves.

New York was trying to kill off the final 1:59 of overtime following a tripping penalty on Matthew Robertson. The Rangers had won their previous three games that extended beyond regulation, but Blake deposited his fourth goal in a six-game stretch.

**Oilers 3, Jets 1:** Calvin Pickard made 41 saves to help visiting Edmonton beat Winnipeg.

Max Jones, Jack Roslovic and Zach Hyman — into a empty net — scored for the Oilers. The are 20-14-6 overall and 4-2-0 in their last.

Connor McDavid assisted on Hyman's goal to extended his points streak to 13 games. McDavid has 13 goals and 20 assists during the run.

Adam Lowry scored for the Jets in his 800th NHL game. Connor Hellebuyck made 18 saves as Winnipeg fell to 0-4-3 in its last seven games.

**Blue Jackets 4, Senators 1:**

Damon Severson had a goal and an assist, Jet Greaves made 27 saves and visiting Columbus beat Ottawa for its third straight victory.

The NHL pushed back the starting time a half-hour to 7:30 p.m. after the Blue Jackets' late arrival because of plane issues and inclement weather.

Boone Jenner, Denton Mateychuk and Kirill Marchenko also scored for Columbus. Cole Sillinger and Charlie Coyle each had two assists.

Jake Sanderson scored for the Senators, and Leevi Merilainen

made 18 saves. Ottawa has lost three straight.

**Avalanche 5, Kings 2:** Nathan MacKinnon scored the 399th goal of his career, Brock Nelson had a goal and an assist, and surging Colorado won its eighth in a row, beating visiting Los Angeles.

MacKinnon added an assist to go with his NHL-leading 32nd goal this season. Jack Drury, Cale Makar and Martin Necas also scored for the Avalanche, who have won 14 in a row at home.

Colorado has points in 28 of its last 29 games and is 10-0-1 in its last 11 to continue its historic start to the season. The Avs reached 65 points in 38 games, second all-time to the 1929-30 Boston Bruins.

Corey Perry scored and Joel Armia added a short-handed goal for the Kings, who have lost seven of nine.

**Predators 4, Mammoth 3:** Steve Stamkos scored two goals less than two minutes apart in the third period to rally visiting Nashville to a victory over Utah.

Stamkos scored a power-play goal with 8:21 to play to tie the game at 3, then scored the winner with 6:43 left.

Ryan O'Reilly assisted on both goals. Roman Josi and Luke Evangelista also scored to help the Predators secure their fourth win in five games. Juuse Saros made 28 stops for Nashville.

JJ Peterka, Mikhail Sergachev, and Dylan Guenther scored for the Mammoth, who dropped their second straight game. Vitek Vanecek made 22 saves.

**Flames 2, Bruins 1 (OT):** Connor Zary scored off a scramble in front of the goal on a power play at 1:53 of overtime to give host Calgary a victory over Boston, sending the Bruins to their sixth straight loss.

Zary scored with Boston's Jonathan Aspirot off for high-sticking Blake Coleman at the end of regulation.

Coleman tied it at 1 for the Flames with 6:28 left in the second period with his 12th goal of the season. Dustin Wolf made 24 saves to help Calgary to its second victory and fourth in five games.

Andrew Peeke scored for Boston with 1:54 left in the first. Jeremy Swayman stopped 18 shots for the Bruins.

**Wild 5, Golden Knights 2:** Marcus Johansson had a goal and three assists and surging Minnesota beat host Vegas.

The Wild are 9-1-1 since Dec. 8. They are third in the Central Division with 54 points.

Matt Boldy, Jared Spurgeon, Brock Faber and Joel Eriksson Ek also scored for Minnesota. The Wild have scored first in 25 games this season.

**Sharks 5, Ducks 4:** Macklin Celebriani became the third player with 60 points this season with a goal and two assists in visiting San Jose's victory over Anaheim.

Mario Ferraro, Igor Chernyshov, William Eklund and Zach Ostapchuk also scored for the Sharks, who earned their second win since the holiday break despite getting outshot 43-13. Yaroslav Askarov made 38 saves.

Troy Terry scored two goals, Cutter Gauthier got his 19th goal and Pavel Mintyukov also scored for the Ducks, who have lost three straight and seven of nine while falling out of first place in the Pacific Division. Lukas Dostal allowed four goals on nine shots before Petr Mrazek replaced him during the second period.

**Canucks 3, Kraken 2 (SO):** Kevin Lankinen made 37 saves and Liam Ohgren had the lone shootout goal in visiting Vancouver's victory over Seattle.

Linus Karlsson and Elias Pettersson scored in regulation to help the Canucks end the Kraken's four-game winning streak.

Jared McCann and Ryan Winterton scored for Seattle. Joey Daccord stopped 22 shots for the Kraken.