

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, February 2, 2017

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Mattis vows US to stand with S. Korea

By KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis promised Thursday to stand “shoulder-to-shoulder” with South Korea as he began his first trip abroad in his new role with the threat from North Korea and a need to reassure jittery allies at the top of his agenda.

The two-day visit comes amid speculation that the North is planning to test-fire another missile after a New Year’s declaration by leader Kim Jong Un that the country is in the “final stages” of developing an intercontinental ballistic missile. President Donald Trump tweeted “It won’t happen!” in response.

Officials in Seoul welcomed the presence of the retired Marine general as a sign that the Trump administration will maintain its commitment to defending their half of the divided peninsula.

The new president has said very little about the Koreas since taking office — focusing instead on the threat from Islamic extremism — although he called the leaders of Japan and South Korea over the weekend.

There are some 28,500 U.S. service-members stationed in South Korea and 50,000 in Japan.

South Korean acting President Hwang Kyo-ahn’s office quoted Mattis as saying that Trump had asked him to “make a very clear statement” that the administration is

making the alliance a strong priority.

The retired Marine general, who plans to travel next to Japan, said the new U.S. administration is committed to South Korea’s defense and is determined to strengthen the relationship between the two countries, especially considering North Korea’s provocations.

“We intend to be shoulder to shoulder with you as we face this together,” he added, according to a news release.

The two sides also reaffirmed plans to deploy a U.S. Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system in South Korea despite strong opposition from China, which fears the anti-missile battery’s powerful radar could be used against its own military.

In earlier remarks, the Pentagon chief stressed that only the North has anything to fear from THAAD.

“THAAD is for defense of our allies’ people, of our troops who are committed to their defense, and were it not for the provocative behavior of North Korea, we would have no need for THAAD out here,” Mattis told reporters aboard his plane before landing at Osan Air Base.

“There is no other nation that needs to be concerned about THAAD other than North Korea,” he added.

Trump has said he would press China to do more to rein in its communist protege. Beijing signed onto punishing sanctions but has been accused of failing to enforce them.

Washington and Seoul agreed to station

THAAD in a rural, southeastern region last year after North Korea conducted its fourth nuclear test and launched a long-range rocket.

Tensions spiked as the North carried out a fifth atomic explosion in September and test-fired some two dozen more ballistic missiles, including one launched from a submarine. That showed alarming progress despite tightened economic sanctions by the U.N. Security Council and international condemnation.

Mattis said he also planned to speak to his South Korean and Japanese counterparts about what new defensive steps could be needed to deal with Pyongyang’s nuclear weapons program.

Hwang, meanwhile, stressed the importance of diplomatic pressure and sanctions to change the North’s “strategic calculus,” a nod to South Korea’s hopes that Trump will continue with that policy instead of pursuing unconditional talks with the North.

The defense secretary met earlier Thursday with U.S. Forces Korea commander Gen. Vincent Brooks and South Korean national security chief Kim Kwan-jin before going into the meeting with Hwang. Hwang is prime minister but took the helm of the country after lawmakers voted to impeach President Park Geun-hye over a corruption scandal.

Mattis planned to meet with Defense Minister Han Min-koo on Friday; he will fly to Japan afterward.

Retired AF general demoted over ‘inappropriate’ acts

The Washington Post

The Air Force has taken the extraordinary step of reducing the rank of a retired four-star general after finding he engaged in “inappropriate sexual acts” with a lower-ranking female officer before he retired in 2010, the service announced Wednesday.

Retired Gen. Arthur Lichte was reduced to major general following a probe by the Air Force Office of Special Inves-

tigations after a female officer alleged last summer that Lichte assaulted her twice in 2007 and once in 2009. The service did not substantiate the sexual assault allegations but found that the general engaged in an inappropriate sexual relationship with her.

“The Air Force takes all allegations of inappropriate conduct very seriously,” said acting Air Force Secretary Lisa Disbrow. “We expect our leaders to uphold the highest standards

of behavior. These standards and rules underpin good order and discipline.”

An attorney for Lichte, Larry Younger, said in a statement that Lichte “did not commit a sexual assault and vehemently denies the unsworn allegations made against him.” The general is not proud of what transpired but cooperated fully and provided statements under oath to defend against the allegations against him, Younger said.

Then-Air Force Secretary

Deborah James, who left her job last month after President Donald Trump’s election, issued Lichte a letter of reprimand after reviewing the results of the investigation, said Ann Stefanek, an Air Force spokeswoman. The decision to reduce Lichte in rank was made Tuesday by Disbrow after Defense Secretary Jim Mattis withdrew a Defense Department certification that Lichte had served satisfactorily as a four-star general.

Dems ask DOD to probe Russian event Flynn attended

By TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A group of House Democrats on Wednesday asked the Defense Department to review whether retired Army Lt. Gen. Michael Flynn broke ethics rules with a paid appearance at a Moscow gala attended by Russian President Vladimir Putin.

Flynn brushed aside criticism of the 2015 event during the presidential campaign but the lawmakers, including the top Democrat on the Armed Services Committee, claim the White House national security adviser could have committed a “serious violation” of the Constitution’s Emoluments Clause by accepting a payment from the state-run RT news channel.

The clause bars any retired military personnel from receiving consulting fees, gifts, travel expenses, honors or salary from a foreign government unless it is authorized by Congress, according to the Defense Department. The government can recoup the money or the department can suspend retirement pay if a violation is found.

“It is extremely concerning that Gen. Flynn chose to accept payment for appearing at a gala hosted by the propaganda arm of the Russian government, which attacked the United States in an effort to undermine our election,” Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., along with the top Democrats on the House Judiciary, Homeland Security, Intelligence, Foreign Affairs, and Oversight and Government Reform committees, wrote Wednesday in a letter to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis.

The lawmakers also requested that by Feb. 16 the Defense Department turn over any records on Flynn’s communications with the Russian government and RT as well as any records of payments since his retirement from the Army.

Navy upgrades carrier wing in Japan with E-2D Hawkeyes

By TYLER HLAVAC
Stars and Stripes

The Navy bolstered its airborne radar and detection capabilities in the Pacific with the Thursday arrival of Carrier Airborne Early Warning Squadron 125 at Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni, Japan.

VAW-125’s presence signifies a shift for the Navy as it continues relocating the bulk of Carrier Air Wing 5 — the USS Ronald Reagan’s aviation wing — from Naval Air Station Atsugi, southwest of Tokyo.

The squadron flies the new E-2D Advanced Hawkeye early warning and control aircraft, the latest variant of the E-2 Hawkeye series.

The E-2D “employs long-range radar and electronic communications capabilities

to oversee the battle space and detect threats beyond the sensor range of other friendly units,” said a Navy statement that described the aircraft as the “digital quarterback” of the fleet.

New features include an AN-APY9 radar capable of both mechanical and electronic sweeping. The new radar has been touted in defense journals for its potential to detect stealth aircraft.

The aircraft also includes an “all glass” tactical cockpit and an upgraded mission computer and data-link capabilities, the statement said.

Hawkeyes are the Navy’s longest-serving carrier-based aircraft.

Congress appropriated \$12.5 billion last year for the first 40 E-2D models. The Pentagon is

requesting another \$9.5 billion for 35 more new Hawkeyes in future years, according to the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, a nonpartisan policy institute.

The Japan Air Self-Defense Force also plans to use the new Hawkeye to help monitor foreign aircraft approaching their airspace, including those from China and Russia.

The Defense Ministry should acquire four E-2D Advanced Hawkeyes by March 2019, a spokesman told Stars and Stripes.

Those aircraft will be used to conduct early warning and surveillance missions, including near the Japan-administered Senkaku Islands, which China claims as its own, the spokesman said.

Marines: Increase in ground accidents plagues the Corps’ aviation readiness

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The number of ground accidents for Marine Corps aircraft has more than doubled over the last five years, costing the Marines thousands of flying hours due to broken aircraft, the head of Marine Corps aviation told reporters Wednesday.

Class C ground incidents — when an airframe sustains \$50,000 to \$500,000 in damage — include damage caused while towing planes on base, or by maintenance errors, said Lt. Gen. Jon Davis, deputy commandant of Marine Corps aviation.

According to data provided by the Naval Safety Center in

Norfolk, Va., Class C mishaps rose from 12 in fiscal year 2012 to 29 in fiscal year 2016. The Class C mishaps are the third-most damaging type. Class B incidents occur when an aircraft sustains \$500,000 to \$2 million in damage and leaves crew with significant injuries. Class A mishaps cause more than \$2 million in damage and lead to a permanent disability or death. The Marines have said that budget cuts and a continued demand for its planes for air operations have led to the increases in all types of incidents.

In the last five years, Davis said, the Marine Corps estimates it has lost 1,023 flying days to Class C ground mishaps that have taken planes off flying

status.

“Each and every one of those on average — those ground mishaps — takes an airplane off flight schedule for 43 days,” Davis said.

The Marine Corps reviewed the last five years of ground incidents to identify reasons behind the increase, Davis said. Besides the pace of operations and budget cuts, one of the key takeaways was that a lack of spare parts was contributing to the number of maintenance error incidents. Davis said the service will press for more spare parts Wednesday when it goes to Congress to discuss readiness levels and budget needs.

copp.tara@stripes.com
Twitter: @TaraCopp

Trump honors fallen Navy SEAL at Dover AF base

Associated Press

DOVER AIR FORCE BASE, Del. — Assuming the somber duties of commander in chief, President Donald Trump made an unannounced trip Wednesday to honor the returning remains of a U.S. Navy SEAL killed in a weekend raid in Yemen.

Chief Special Warfare Operator William “Ryan” Owens, 36, from Peoria, Ill., was the first known U.S. combat casualty since Trump took office less than two weeks ago. More than half a dozen militant suspects also were killed in the raid on an al-Qaida compound and three other U.S. servicemembers were wounded.

More than a dozen civilians also were killed in the operation, including the 8-year-old daughter of Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical cleric and U.S. citizen who was targeted and killed by a drone strike in 2011.

Trump’s trip to Delaware was shrouded in secrecy. The president and his daughter, Ivanka, departed the White House in the presidential helicopter with their destination unannounced. A small group of journalists traveled with Trump on the condition that the visit was not reported until his arrival.

After returning to the White House, Trump commented on the trip at the swearing-in of Rex Tillerson as secretary of state.

Pentagon: Civilians likely were killed in Yemen raid

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military said Thursday it is investigating last weekend’s raid by U.S. special operations forces in Yemen and that innocent civilians, including children, apparently were killed.

U.S. Central Command said civilians may have been hit by gunfire from aircraft called in to assist U.S. troops, who engaged in a ferocious firefight with militants from al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula, the group’s Yemen affiliate.

The military said the civilians may not have been visible to the U.S. forces because they were mixed in with combatants who were firing at U.S. troops “from all sides to include houses and other buildings.”

Nasser al-Awlaki told The Associated Press that among the children killed was his 8-year-old granddaughter, Anwaar, an American citizen. Her father was Anwar al-Awlaki, a radical Yemeni-American cleric killed in a U.S. airstrike in Yemen in 2011.

The grandfather said Anwaar was visiting her mother when the raid took place and was shot in the neck and bled to death.

The Pentagon hasn’t confirmed the young al-Awlaki was killed in Sunday’s raid.

“Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula has a horrifying history of hiding women and children within militant operating areas and terrorist camps, and continuously shows a callous disregard for innocent lives,” said Col. John J. Thomas, U.S. Central Command spokesman.

Navy SEAL William “Ryan” Owens was killed in the assault, and three other U.S. servicemembers were wounded.

According to Central Command, the firefight included small-arms fire, hand grenades and close-air-support fire.

U.S. Navy Capt. Jeff Davis said earlier this week that an unspecified number of women were part of the group of combatants battling the U.S. forces, and some were among the 14 killed in the firefight.

Planning for the clandestine counterterrorism raid began before President Barack Obama left office on Jan. 20, but President Donald Trump authorized the raid, U.S. defense officials have said.

The U.S. has been striking al-Qaida in Yemen from the air for more than 15 years, mostly using drones. Sunday’s surprise, predawn raid could signal a new escalation against extremist groups in the Arab world’s poorest, but strategically located, country.

EUCOM calls for cease-fire in Ukraine, Russian pullback

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTT GART, Germany — U.S. European Command called for an immediate cease-fire in eastern Ukraine as heavy fighting threatens a larger humanitarian crisis in a country where U.S. forces continue a mission aimed at beefing up the nation’s military forces.

“We remain concerned with the violence in eastern Ukraine and continue to call for an immediate end to Russia’s occupation of Crimea and for Russia to cease its destabilizing actions in Ukraine and fulfill its commitments in the Minsk agreements,” EUCOM said in a statement late Wednesday.

The Minsk agreement set the terms for a cease-fire and

called on both sides to withdraw troops and military equipment from eastern Ukraine.

In recent days, violence has flared in the city of Avdiivka. According to reports, 10 Ukrainian soldiers have been killed, and there are widespread power outages in frigid temperatures. Thousands of civilians are without water, heat or electricity as a result of the fighting.

“To avert a larger humanitarian crisis, we call for an immediate, sustained cease-fire and full and unfettered access for OSCE monitors,” EUCOM said, referring to the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe.

Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry said Russia-backed fighters have deployed a variety of ar-

tillery and tanks, which would violate a cease-fire deal that restricts the use of heavy weaponry in contested areas. The rebels have accused Ukrainian forces of launching attacks in order to gain territory.

“We request our international partners to step up political and diplomatic pressure on the Kremlin to stop dangerous escalation in Donbas and avoid a humanitarian catastrophe in the region,” Ukraine’s Foreign Ministry said in a statement.

While the violence in Ukraine has prompted condemnations from many Western governments and institutions, including NATO, the White House so far has been mum on the matter. President Donald Trump has emphasized that improving relations with Russia is a top

foreign policy priority. That has raised questions about whether the U.S. will continue to advocate for Moscow’s withdrawal from Ukraine.

On Wednesday, the U.N. Security Council expressed deep concern over the situation and urged both sides to end the violence. Both Russia and Ukraine voted for the Security Council statement, which condemned the fighting, saying it had a severe impact on the civilian population.

In 2014, Russia annexed Ukraine’s Crimean Peninsula, a move that altered security perceptions across Europe, led to NATO’s expanded military presence in the Baltics and resulted in a series of sanctions against Moscow.

Trump: Iran 'on notice' after missile test

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump said Thursday his administration has put Iran “on notice,” echoing comments from his top national security adviser that the U.S. will act against Iran unless it stops testing ballistic missiles and supporting Houthi rebels in Yemen.

Trump and his national security adviser, Michael Flynn, didn't elaborate on what retaliatory actions the U.S. could pursue.

Trump tweeted, “Iran has been formally PUT ON NOTICE for firing a ballistic missile. Should have been thankful for the terrible deal the U.S. made with them!”

He added in another tweet: “Iran was on its last legs and

ready to collapse until the U.S. came along and gave it a lifeline in the form of the Iran Deal: \$150 billion.”

As part of the nuclear deal struck during the Obama administration, Iran received access to an estimated \$100 billion of its own money that had been frozen in foreign bank accounts. The U.S. did not give Iran \$150 billion.

Flynn on Wednesday forcefully denounced Iran's behavior in his first public remarks since Trump took office. He accused Iran of threatening U.S. allies and spreading instability throughout the Middle East, and he faulted the Obama administration for doing too little to stop the Islamic Republic.

“As of today, we are officially putting Iran on notice,” Flynn said from the White House

podium.

On notice for what, Flynn didn't say. Senior Trump administration officials said they were actively considering a “range of options” including economic measures and increased support for Iran's regional adversaries. The officials, who briefed reporters on condition of anonymity, declined repeatedly to say whether military action is being considered.

The warning was an early manifestation of Trump's promise of a tougher American approach to Iran. Yet administration officials emphasized that their allegations were unrelated to Iran's obligations under the Iran nuclear deal that President Barack Obama and world leaders negotiated. Though Flynn noted Trump

has criticized that deal, officials declined to say whether Trump planned to follow through on his campaign pledge to renegotiate it.

“The Obama administration failed to respond adequately to Tehran's malign actions — including weapons transfers, support for terrorism and other violations of international norms,” Flynn said.

The White House also faulted Iran for backing Houthi rebels in Yemen who on Tuesday claimed a successful missile strike against a warship belonging to a Saudi-led coalition fighting to reinstall Yemen's internationally recognized government. The media arm of the Shiite rebels said the vessel was believed to belong to the Saudi Arabian navy.

Trump vows to repeal churches' political limits

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Warning that religious freedom is “under threat,” President Donald Trump vowed Thursday to repeal the Johnson Amendment, an IRS rule barring pastors from endorsing candidates from the pulpit.

“I will get rid of and totally destroy the Johnson Amendment and allow our representatives of faith to speak freely and without fear of retribution,” Trump said during remarks at the National Prayer Breakfast, a high-profile event bringing together faith leaders, politicians and dignitaries.

Trump made a similar pledge as a candidate but has not detailed how he plans to scrap the rule or how quickly he will proceed in doing so.

Religious conservatives whose overwhelming support propelled Trump to the White House have been watching closely for him to deliver on promised protections for religious objectors to gay marriage and abortion.

The president made no mention at the prayer breakfast of other steps he could take on those issues, saying only that religious freedom is a “sacred right.” He used his remarks to thank the American people for their prayers in his opening days in office.

He also took a dig at Arnold Schwarzenegger, the new host of “The Apprentice,” the reality TV show Trump previously headlined. Trump said that since Schwarzenegger took over, the show's ratings have been down, and asked the audience to “pray for Arnold.”

While the president's comments were likely to be warmly received by religious groups, LGBTQ groups are anxious that the president could use his executive powers to curb rights.

Gay-rights supporters argue that he could sign an executive order that would allow religious organizations that receive federal money — like charities or hospitals — to make hiring and other decisions based on religion.

Tillerson stresses State Dept. teamwork

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Making his debut as America's global envoy, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson sought Thursday to reassure U.S. diplomats who are anxious after a turbulent first two weeks of President Donald Trump's presidency. Still, he warned diplomats that unspecified changes would be coming.

Tillerson, the former Exxon Mobil CEO, used his first appearance at the State Department to praise the members of America's diplomatic corps as “among the finest public servants in the world.” He said he intends to pursue diplomacy based on core principles of honesty, respect and accountability.

Yet he also noted that he was assuming the role following a “hotly contested election.”

“Each of us is entitled to the expression of our political beliefs,” Tillerson said. “But we cannot let our personal convic-

tions overwhelm our ability to work as one team.”

The incoming secretary's remarks alluded to a “dissent cable” signed by hundreds of diplomats challenging Trump's executive order on immigration and refugees. Although the White House had warned diplomats as signatures were being collected that they should “get with the program” or resign, Tillerson adopted a notably more amicable tone.

“No one will tolerate disrespect of anyone,” Tillerson said to hundreds of State Department employees who gathered in a lobby on their boss' first day. “We are human beings first.”

Tillerson said diplomats should be aware that he might make changes to “how things are traditionally done,” although he did not elaborate. Rather than move rashly, Tillerson said, he is gathering information “on what processes should be reformed.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Bobcat found in trap in barn is euthanized

NM ALBUQUERQUE — A bobcat found in a Placitas barn with an illegal trap attached to one of his legs has been euthanized.

The Albuquerque Journal reported the bobcat was discovered on Jan. 12 with his rear right foot stuck in a trap that was attached to a chain. A stake at the end the chain, used to secure the trap to the ground, indicated the cat likely tugged against his steel constraint with enough force to dislodge it from the earth. The cat is believed to have dragged the trap from elsewhere into the barn.

A woman feeding her horses discovered the cat and called authorities.

Police: Woman drew welfare on missing kids

PA PITTSBURGH — A Pennsylvania woman charged with collecting more than \$50,000 in state welfare benefits on behalf of twin children not seen for a decade has returned to prison.

Patricia Fowler was arraigned Sunday and sent to Allegheny County Jail, unable to post \$10,000 bond. Police say Fowler has repeatedly claimed Ivon and Inisha are living out-of-state with friends or relatives. Police say her claims about the twins, who would be about 18 by now, haven't checked out.

An Allegheny County detective has testified he believes the Penn Hills woman's twins are dead, though he can't prove that.

Woman convicted in gun case to aid others

FL JACKSONVILLE — A Florida woman whose conviction sparked a change in

the state's gun laws is now free and says she plans to run an organization to help victims of domestic violence caught up in the criminal justice system.

Marissa Alexander told The Florida Times-Union she wants to help others because "from what I've been through I know a lot more about the system and how it fits together."

Alexander, 36, was initially sentenced to 20 years in prison after firing a shot near her estranged husband during an altercation. She contended she fired in self-defense.

Alexander's conviction was thrown out on appeal and she reached a plea deal in 2014. She was released from home detention last week.

Cyberattack infects surveillance cameras

DC WASHINGTON — Devices that record data from police surveillance cameras in Washington were infected in a cyberattack days before President Donald Trump's inauguration.

Officials told The Washington Post the hackers managed to plant ransomware in 70 percent of the recorders for surveillance cameras used in public spaces throughout the city. The incident forced city officials to take the devices offline, remove the software and restart the systems.

Officials say the cameras couldn't record from Jan. 12 to Jan. 15. Officials say 123 out of 187 video recorders were affected.

Man accused in hatchet attack on 3 relatives

AZ PRESCOTT VALLEY — Prescott Valley police said a man was arrested in connection with an attack on three relatives with a hatchet while they were sleeping.

Police said Brian Garofalo, 33, was arrested on suspicion of attempted murder and that the three family members were hospitalized in stable condition with unspecified injuries.

Police said one of the injured family members was leaving the home when officers arrived early Saturday morning.

Officers then entered and helped the other two injured family members outside.

According to police, Garofalo had barricaded himself inside his bedroom but came out when ordered by police and was arrested.

The injured were identified as Donna Garofalo, 70; Paul Garofalo, 74; and Kevin Garofalo, 31.

Man who faked his death gets 14 years

FL JACKSONVILLE — A Florida businessman who faked his own death to defraud insurance companies has been sentenced to 14 years in prison.

The Florida Times-Union reported that Jose Lantigua, 63, was sentenced Wednesday in Jacksonville after he pleaded guilty to bank fraud, identity theft and other charges.

The former owner of a furniture business, Lantigua and his wife told people that he had mad cow disease and was traveling to Venezuela for treatment. According to his plea agreement, he went there to obtain a fake death certificate.

He was arrested last year in North Carolina while applying for a passport in another man's name. His wife received five years of probation.

Woman faces jail over unlicensed dental work

ID BOISE — A woman is facing prison time on charges related to unlicensed dental work.

The Idaho Statesman reported Cherie R. Dillon pleaded guilty on Jan. 27 to health care fraud and aggravated identity theft. She is scheduled for sentencing May 9.

Authorities said Dillon billed insurance companies and Medicaid between 2010 and 2013 for services she was not licensed to perform. She had said the treatments were conducted by one of her office's contract dentists.

That dentist was no longer practicing at her office, and his physician had determined in 2010 that he was disabled.

Large cash deposits were made to retirement accounts belonging to Dillon and her husband. The government wants her to forfeit \$143,000. Dillon had voluntarily surrendered her dental hygienist's license.

Search for woman turns up a 2nd man's body

MO KANSAS CITY — For the second straight week, people searching for a missing Raymore woman found a man's body.

Relatives of Jessica Runions found the body Saturday morning while searching for Runions, who has been missing since early September. Kansas City police said the death is being investigated as suspicious but released no other details.

The Kansas City Star reported Runions' relatives search for her nearly every week. Last week, they found a man's decomposing body in a creek bed. He was later identified as Brandon Herring, 21, of Raytown, who had been reported missing in November. His death is being investigated as a homicide.

Runions was last seen leaving a gathering of friends in south Kansas City. Her burned vehicle was found two days later in a nearby wooded area.

From wire reports

Your objective source for military news
updated 24/7 from bases
around the world.
Now online at www.stripes.com.

STARS AND STRIPES®

Freeney could cap career with 2nd ring

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Dwight Freeney is coming up on that time of year when he has to answer some hard questions.

How does his body feel?

Can he still be effective at what he does?

Is the motivation to succeed as strong as ever?

Once he completes that little self-evaluation, he can decide whether it's time to call it a career.

If this is where it ends, what a way to go out.

Less than three weeks away from his 37th birthday, Freeney is back in the Super Bowl for the third time, essentially filling the role of player-coach for the Atlanta Falcons.

He's one victory away from being able to fulfill the dream of every great athlete: retiring on top.

"I can appreciate the moment a lot more," Freeney said. "I'm at a different place in my career than I was before, and that's OK. You play long enough, you're gonna have all the ranges of what happened in your career: you didn't know much, you're on top of your game, and now you're like mentor guy."

The defensive end hasn't decided if this will be his final game. He's already on borrowed time.

"One of my goals coming in was, 'Hey, get 10 years in,'" Freeney said, smiling about a milestone he surpassed five seasons ago. "After my 10th year, every year I said, 'OK, that's probably it for me.' And I keep coming back, for whatever reason."

The Falcons are sure glad he did.

While Freeney no longer puts up the double-digit sack totals that were the hallmark of his 11-year tenure with the Indianapolis Colts, he has played an invaluable role tutoring an extremely young Falcons defense that started four rookies and four second-year players in the NFC championship game.

His impact was most apparent on Vic Beasley Jr., who rebounded from a disappointing rookie year to lead the NFL with 15½ sacks. Freeney not only taught the youngster some of the tricks of the pass-rushing trade, but how to be a professional athlete.

"I can't even put that into words," Beasley said. "What Dwight does, he just prepares. You just get to see it for yourself. He prepares so well week in and week out. I just try to take everything I can from him."

Freeney relished the chance to take Beasley under his wing. "Vic is a guy who has a lot

of same characteristics I had when I was coming out," Freeney recalled. "I was fast, quick and agile. The thing is, when you're young you don't know much. You just run around and make plays because you're athletic. My thing with Vic was just trying to raise his IQ a little bit, his awareness of when you use certain moves and when you don't use certain moves. Hopefully, I rubbed off on him in a good way."

After establishing himself as one of the greatest pass rushers in NFL history with the Colts, a stint that included two Super Bowl appearances and one championship, Freeney looked like he was finished after two forgettable seasons in San Diego.

More than a month into the 2015 season, Freeney still didn't have a job and began to ponder what came next. A career in television, perhaps.

"I'm tired of training. I'm tired of being ready. No one's calling. I've got all these coaches saying, 'Oh, stay ready, stay ready,'" Freeney said. "But I'm like, 'Forget that. I'm done.'"

Then came a call from Arizona coach Bruce Arians, who wanted someone to bolster the Cardinals' pass rush.

Freeney fit the bill, getting eight sacks in 11 games as the team advanced to the NFC

championship before losing to Carolina.

After another few months of uncertainty, the Falcons called.

Coach Dan Quinn not only wanted someone who might improve Atlanta's anemic pass rush, he was rebuilding the defense around a bunch of talented but inexperienced players.

Once again, Freeney was the perfect fit.

His contribution goes far beyond the field. He's really like having an extra coach on staff.

"Dwight is a very smart guy," Quinn said. "He has quarterback smarts playing defensive end. He has recall, he can remember this stat, this set, this down and distance, this field position, much like a quarterback can. So he's someone that's fun for me to challenge, too, because he usually has an opinion on certain topics or a certain stunt or certain blitz or certain call."

A second Super Bowl title might be enough to ensure Freeney takes his place in the Hall of Fame someday. The Patriots believe he's already earned his spot.

"He's one of the best pass rushers I have ever played against," New England quarterback Tom Brady said. "He's one of the best defensive players I've ever played against."

Tide teammates ready for Houston showdown

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Football ties run deep in the South. And the bonds of guys that have played for the Alabama Crimson Tide may be about as strong as they come.

They'll be on opposite sidelines in Sunday's Super Bowl, but there will be a ton of shared respect between Patriots linebacker Dont'a Hightower and Falcons linebacker Courtney Upshaw when they take the field in Houston.

It was nine years ago that the two small-town products arrived as freshmen together in Tuscaloosa. It was the start of what each says is now an unbreakable friendship.

"That's my ace," Hightower said of Upshaw.

Upshaw said stepping onto the field with

Hightower was like looking in a mirror.

"He's one of the first guys that once I got there I gravitated to," he said. "We became best friends."

Rooming together as sophomores in 2009, Upshaw was on the sideline when Hightower suffered a season-ending knee injury in Alabama's fourth game of the season against Arkansas. Upshaw was inserted as part of a shuffling of players to replace him, and eventually helped the Crimson Tide win the national championship against Texas.

Upshaw also had an up-close view of how Hightower rehabbed and bounced back from that injury. He was side by side with him two years later when Alabama shut out LSU 21-0 in the 2012 BCS national championship game.

It was at Alabama where Hightower said he first discovered other players that were born with that "dog in them" to succeed. He says Upshaw was and remains the embodiment of that type of player.

It was Hightower's performance his senior year that led the Patriots to select him 25th overall in the 2012 draft. The Baltimore Ravens took Upshaw in the second round, 35th overall.

But it was Upshaw that tasted ultimate success first in the NFL, winning a Super Bowl ring his rookie year with the Ravens. He now has a chance to replicate that feat in his first season with the Falcons.

Upshaw said he and Hightower are doing exactly what they talked about achieving while at Alabama.

No. 3 Kansas tops 2nd-ranked Baylor

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Josh Jackson had 23 points and 10 rebounds, then helped third-ranked Kansas prevent No. 2 Baylor from getting off a potential tying shot in the closing seconds of the Jayhawks' 73-68 victory Wednesday night.

Frank Mason III added 19 points, including two free throws to seal the win, and Devonte Graham scored 13 as the Jayhawks (20-2, 8-1 Big 12) pulled a game ahead of the Bears (20-2, 7-2) in the Big 12 race.

The game was tied 64-all with 2:23 left when Jackson went baseline for a dunk. After Mason made a couple of foul shots moments later, the teams began trading baskets down the stretch in a matchup that lived up to its billing — and the lofty rankings of both teams.

The Jayhawks hung on to win their 51st consecutive game at Allen Fieldhouse — a building where Baylor has never won in 15 tries.

No. 4 Villanova 66, Providence 57: Jalen Brunson scored 15 of his 21 points in the second half and the visiting Wildcats held off the Friars to sweep the season series.

No. 9 Virginia 71, Virginia Tech 48: Devon Hall had 17 points, nine rebounds and four assists as the host Cavaliers beat

the rival Hokies.

No. 11 UCLA 95, Washington State 79: Freshman forward TJ Leaf scored a season-high 32 points and grabbed 14 rebounds as the visiting Bruins beat the Cougars to stop a two-game slide.

No. 14 Cincinnati 57, Tulsa 55: Troy Caupain hit a 16-foot jumper with 4.4 seconds left to lift the visiting Bearcats over the Golden Hurricane.

No. 15 Florida State 75, Miami 57: Jonathan Isaac scored 15 points and the visiting Seminoles held the Hurricanes scoreless for more than 6½ minutes in the second half to snap a two-game skid.

No. 19 South Carolina 88, LSU 63: PJ Dozier and Duane Notice each scored 17 points, and the visiting Gamecocks easily defeated the reeling Tigers.

No. 23 Purdue 80, No. 25 Northwestern 59: Caleb Swanigan had 24 points and 16 rebounds, and Vince Edwards scored 17 to lead the host Boilermakers over the Wildcats.

Service academies

Army 80, Lafayette 73: Jordan Fox and John Emezie scored 18 points each and the host Black Knights beat the Leopards to snap a four-game losing streak.

Army rolled to a 20-point halftime lead with Fox scoring 11 points and the Black Knights (9-14, 3-8 Patriot) shooting 55.6 percent in the first half.

Lafayette (6-16, 2-9) came back to get within six on a three-pointer by Nick Lindner with 19.5 seconds remaining but Fox made 1 of 2 free throws and the Leopards missed a three-pointer in falling to their eighth straight defeat.

Mac Hoffman scored 12 points and Tommy Funk had eight assists with nine points for Army.

Fresno State 73, Air Force 64: Deshon Taylor scored a career-high 25 points and the host Bulldogs used a 14-3 run in the second half to beat the Falcons.

Taylor's three-point play put the Bulldogs up 50-48 with 11:19 to play and he followed with a three-pointer. Jahmel Taylor sandwiched a pair of threes around one by the Falcons to make it 59-51 before Deshon Taylor knocked down two free throws.

The Falcons only made 2 of their last 10 shots and shot 32 percent in the second half while Fresno State shot 50 percent and made 13 of 17 from the foul line.

Frank Toohey scored 16 for Air Force (10-12, 3-6), which had a 12-point lead early but trailed 34-32 at the half as the Bulldogs closed with a 10-2 run.

Crimson Tide pulls in top recruiting haul

Associated Press

Alabama came up just short in its bid for a second straight national title on the field, but the Crimson Tide's dominance on the recruiting trail remains as strong as ever.

According to composite rankings of recruiting services compiled by 247Sports, Alabama finished atop the team standings for a seventh consecutive year. And this might have been Nick Saban's best class yet.

Florida's 2010 class that included NFL first-round draft picks Dominique Easley, Matt Elam and Sharrif Floyd is 247Sports' only higher-rated class since 2002, which is as far back as 247Sports' data goes.

"It just speaks to the process that they've put in place there and the machine that is really unstoppable," said Barton Simmons, the director of scouting for 247Sports.

Alabama's class includes

seven of the top 34 players in the 247Sports Composite: running back Najee Harris, offensive tackles Alex Leatherwood and Jedrick Willis, outside linebacker Dylan Moses, wide receiver Jerry Jeudy, defensive end LaBryan Ray and quarterback Tua Tagovailoa. Rivals and Scout rated Harris as the nation's No. 1 overall prospect.

The Buckeyes and Trojans also had reason to celebrate.

Simmons said the average 247Sports Composite rating of Ohio State's signees is the highest of any class since 2002. Alabama finished higher in the team standings largely because it signed more players than Ohio State.

Southern California surged into the top five in the team standings with a fabulous finish. Linebacker Levi Jones, defensive tackle Jay Tufele, wide receiver Joseph Lewis and offensive tackle Austin Jackson

made Signing Day decisions to join USC's class. All three are top-100 prospects in the 247Sports Composite.

Here are other notable Signing Day stories.

Signing Day decisions: Florida State landed the biggest prize of the day with the addition of defensive tackle Marvin Wilson, who was No. 6 in the 247Sports Composite and the highest-rated uncommitted player entering signing. Other members of the 247Sports Composite's top 50 who were uncommitted before Wednesday include defensive tackle Aubrey Solomon (Michigan), defensive ends K'Lavon Chaisson (LSU) and Ray (Alabama) plus wide receiver Jeff Thomas (Miami).

Quality, not quantity: Ohio State wasn't the only program to make the most of relatively limited numbers. Although the small size of their classes kept them from ranking higher in

team standings, Clemson and Stanford landed plenty of star power. Clemson has the nation's No. 2 pro-style quarterback (Hunter Johnson) and No. 2 wide receiver (Tee Higgins) according to the 247Sports Composite. Stanford has four of the top 36 players in the 247Sports Composite (offensive tackles Foster Sarell and Walker Little, quarterback Davis Mills and tight end Colby Parkinson). Mills was rated as the nation's No. 1 pro-style quarterback.

SEC domination: Although some late decisions could shuffle the team standings, six SEC schools were ranked among the top 12 in the 247Sports Composite as of late Wednesday afternoon. Joining Alabama in that group of six were Georgia, LSU, Auburn, Florida and Texas A&M. While the SEC sizzled, the Big 12 fizzled. Oklahoma likely will be the only Big 12 team in the top 20.

Curry powers Warriors to rout of Hornets

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — With dad Dell watching live, Stephen Curry hit 11 three-pointers and scored 39 points in three quarters, coming back with vengeance from a one-game absence and leading the Golden State Warriors to a 126-111 blowout of his hometown Charlotte Hornets on Wednesday night.

Klay Thompson added 29 points, matched his career high with eight assists and Kevin Durant had 18 points, eight rebounds and eight assists for the NBA-leading Warriors (42-7).

Frank Kaminsky scored 24 points off the bench for the Hornets, who lost their sixth in a row overall and ninth straight on the road.

Cavaliers 125, Timberwolves 97: LeBron James scored 27 points while Kyrie Irving had 14 and a career-high

14 assists as Cleveland, coming off a losing record in January, defeated visiting Minnesota.

James was 11-for-14 from the field, and Irving scored 14 points. Kyle Korver, who has struggled since being acquired from Atlanta last month, scored 20 points, going 8-for-11 from the field and hitting four three-pointers.

Celtics 109, Raptors 104: Isaiah Thomas scored 19 of his 44 points in the final quarter to lift host Boston over Toronto in a showdown for first place in the Atlantic Division.

It was the fifth straight win for Boston, which moved 1½ games ahead of the Raptors in the division and holds the Eastern Conference's No. 2 seed.

Kyle Lowry led Toronto with 32 points, former Celtic Jared Sullinger had 13 and Norman Powell added 12. The Raptors have lost seven of nine.

Heat 116, Hawks 93: Goran Dragic scored 27 points, Dion Waiters added 20 and host Miami Heat pushed the NBA's longest current winning streak to nine games by easing past Atlanta.

Hassan Whiteside scored 18 points and grabbed 18 rebounds for the Heat, who hadn't won nine straight since November 2013.

Pistons 118, Pelicans 98: Kentavious Caldwell-Pope scored a career-high 38 points, leading host Detroit over New Orleans.

Knicks 95, Nets 90: Kristaps Porzingis had 19 points and 12 rebounds, and joined a group of mostly substitutes who led a big fourth-quarter rally that carried New York over visiting Brooklyn.

Pacers 98, Magic 88: C.J. Miles scored 16 points, Glenn Robinson III added 14 and vis-

iting Indiana held on to beat Orlando.

Mavericks 113, 76ers 95: Seth Curry scored 22 points, Salah Mejri had 16 points and a career-high 17 rebounds and host Dallas beat Philadelphia for its fifth win in six games.

Clippers 124, Suns 114: Blake Griffin scored 29 points and visiting Los Angeles bounced back from a humiliating 46-point loss at Golden State to beat Phoenix.

Grizzlies 119, Nuggets 99: Marc Gasol scored 24 points, Mike Conley had 18 and Memphis beat host Denver.

Jazz 104, Bucks 88: Rudy Gobert scored 26 points and grabbed 15 rebounds, leading Utah to an easy victory over visiting Milwaukee.

Bulls 128, Thunder 100: Jimmy Butler scored 28 points to help host Chicago rout Oklahoma City.

Backstrom's 3-point night leads Capitals past Bruins

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Something about facing the Boston Bruins brings out the best in the Washington Capitals.

Nicklas Backstrom had three points, Braden Holtby made 30 saves and Alex Ovechkin continued to climb the NHL's goal-scoring charts as league-leading Washington won its eighth consecutive game against Boston, 5-3 on Wednesday night.

Snapping the Bruins' winning streak at three, Holtby improved to 11-2-0 in his career against them.

"We seem to play good against them," said Holtby, who stopped 15 of 16 shots he faced in the third period to preserve the victory. "They're a fun team to play against. I like teams that play hard, play hard in front of the net. It's an enjoyable game to play."

It was an enjoyable offensive game for the Capitals' top line of Ovechkin, Backstrom and T.J. Oshie. Backstrom had a goal and assisted on a goal by

each of his linemates as Ovechkin passed Ron Francis for 27th on the all-time goals list and passed Wayne Gretzky for power-play goals with the 205th of his career.

Ovechkin's 25th goal of the season has him second in the league, three shy of longtime rival Sidney Crosby of the Pittsburgh Penguins. Ovechkin also tied Hockey Hall of Famer Joe Sakic for 14th in power-play goals.

"It's nice to be in this company," Ovechkin said. "Obviously, passing those players means a lot, so I'm pretty happy."

A big reason Ovechkin is amid that exclusive company is Backstrom, his center for a majority of the past decade. Backstrom now has 34 assists in 30 regular-season games against Boston and drove the top line's success a night after coach Barry Trotz said his top players lost the matchup with John Tavares and the New York Islanders.

"I was real happy with their response," Trotz said. "That's

what leadership does. All those three guys are leaders on our hockey team, and they can lead by example.

Bruins leaders Patrice Bergeron and Brad Marchand did that in a losing effort, though in different ways. Marchand scored two power-play goals to give him six in his past four games, while Bergeron tried to gut it out after taking a slap shot from Matt Niskanen to the right leg early in the third period.

Bergeron came back to play two more shifts before leaving the game for good. Coach Claude Julien said Thursday update on Bergeron will "hopefully better than worse."

Kings 5, Avalanche 0: Jeff Carter scored two goals and Peter Budaj earned his sixth shutout of the season in host Los Angeles' fourth consecutive victory.

Marian Gaborik also scored during Los Angeles' three-goal first period, and Dustin Brown and Dwight King added third-period goals in the Kings' first

win over the Avalanche in four tries.

Budaj made 22 saves in the longtime Avalanche goalie's 17th career shutout for Los Angeles, which has ramped up its playoff push with back-to-back victories after hosting the All-Star Game.

Spencer Martin stopped 35 shots in the 21-year-old prospect's third NHL appearance for league-worst Colorado, which has lost nine straight and 19 of 21.

Flames 5, Wild 1: Sean Monahan scored twice to lead host Calgary over Minnesota.

Deryk Engelland had a goal and an assist, and Alex Chiasson and Micheal Ferland also scored to help the Flames win consecutive games after losing four straight. Brian Elliott stopped 28 shots.

Jason Zucker scored and Devan Dubnyk finished with 31 saves for the Wild, who had won three straight and five of their previous six overall. Minnesota was also 12-0-2 in its last 14 road games.