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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Leaders cite mental illness in Fla. shooting

Associated Press

PARKLAND, Fla. — A 19-year-old with a troubled past and his own AR-15 rifle was charged with 17 counts of premeditated murder Thursday following one of the deadliest school shootings in the U.S.

Law enforcement officials told The Associated Press that Nikolas Cruz legally purchased the weapon used in the attack.

Students thought it was just another drill at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School when a fire alarm sounded, requiring them to file out of their classrooms Wednesday afternoon. That's when police say Cruz, equipped with a gas mask, smoke grenades and magazines of ammunition, opened fire with a semi-automatic weapon, killing 17 people and sending hundreds of students fleeing into the streets.

As reactions poured in Thursday, President Donald Trump focused on the young man's mental health, and Attorney

General Jeff Sessions said he wants the Justice Department to study how mental illness and criminality intersect.

Republican Gov. Rick Scott said he's already told Florida House Speaker Richard Corcoran that "if someone is mentally ill, he should not have access to a gun."

Broward County Schools Superintendent Rob Runcie said "now is the time to have a real conversation about gun control legislation," and if adults can't manage that in their lifetimes, he said students will do it.

Broward County Sheriff Scott Israel called for giving law enforcement more power to detain people who make threats.

"What I'm asking our lawmakers to do is go back to places like Tallahassee and Washington, D.C., to give police the power," the sheriff said, to detain people who make graphic threats or post disturbing material online, and bring them involuntarily to mental health professionals to

be examined.

The sheriff said law enforcement can certainly visit gun owners whose mental health is questioned, "whether they have a gun legally or not."

In a national address from the White House, Trump said he wants America's children to know, "you are never alone, and you never will be."

He said no child should have to go to school fearing for their lives. He said he'll travel to Florida to meet with victims' families, explore how to secure schools and "tackle the difficult issue of mental health."

At no point did Trump mention guns.

Thirteen survivors were hospitalized, including two people in critical condition. The sheriff said some bodies remained inside Douglas High on Thursday as authorities investigate the crime scene. The slain included a school athletic director and another adult who worked as a monitor at the school. Runcie

called them heroes.

Cruz was ordered held without bond and booked into jail, still wearing a hospital gown after he also was treated for labored breathing. The jail said he is 5-foot-7 and weighs 131 pounds.

It was the nation's deadliest school shooting since a gunman attacked an elementary school in Newtown, Conn., more than five years ago. The overall death toll differs by how such shootings are defined, but Everytown For Gun Safety has tallied 291 school shootings in America since 2013, and this attack makes 18 so far this year.

FBI agent Rob Lasky said the agency investigated a 2017 YouTube comment posted with the screen name Nikolas Cruz that said "I'm going to be a professional school shooter." Lasky said the FBI did a database review, but couldn't determine the time or location of the post or the true identity of the person making the comment.

New DOD policy: Be deployable in 12 months, or you're out

BY DIANNA CAHN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Facing enormous demand around the globe and a slump in military retention, the Pentagon on Wednesday introduced a new policy that will require servicemembers to be deployable within 12 months or be forced out of the armed services.

"On any given day, about 13 to 14 percent of force is medically unable to deploy — that comes out to be around 286,000" servicemembers, Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Robert Wilkie told a Senate panel Wednesday.

"The situation we face today is really unlike anything we have faced — certainly in the post-World War II era," Wilkie said. "We have to ensure, given the climate this country faces, that everyone who signs up

can be deployed anywhere in the world."

Testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee's subcommittee on personnel and family readiness, Wilkie described the policy as an effort to bolster military retention.

He likened the problem to Amazon having 14 percent of its staff out sick on Christmas week. If that were to happen, Amazon would not be "the largest company in the world," he said.

In July, alarmed at the numbers of servicemembers who were unable to deploy for medical reasons, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis tasked Wilkie with finding the problems and resolving them. It turned out a large number were unable to deploy for the simple reason of not having gone to the dentist, Wilkie said. That falls on the shoulders of junior officers who are responsible for ensuring their servicemembers are

ready to deploy, Wilkie said.

Another issue was recruiting. During years of slow recruiting, the military offered "too many" medical waivers, Wilkie said. Those medical problems follow the servicemembers through their service careers.

Wilkie said the military also needs to get its fitness and training programs up to standards to ensure its forces are healthy.

The new policy will give servicemembers 12 months to be ready for deployment from the time they are called on, or they will be forced out, Wilkie said. There will be exceptions, he said, including pregnancy and postpartum, and wounded servicemembers.

Exceptions aside, the policy will be "an across-the-board standard that will apply to everyone," he said, emphasizing the enormity of 286,000 nondeployable servicemembers.

GOP lawmaker: US needs war tax

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Rep. Walter Jones Jr., R-N.C., a senior member of the House Armed Services Committee, called Thursday for an unpopular response to the ballooning U.S. deficit — a war tax. He made the sobering comments at a congressional forum for the Amphibious Warship Industrial Base Coalition, where much of the theme was focused on boosting the U.S. military ship supply.

The national debt is nearing \$21 trillion and is slated to nearly eclipse the gross domestic product, a benchmark of economic health, by 2028.

“It cannot keep going that way if we want a strong military. There needs to be a national push for a dedicated war tax,” Jones told military, congressional and industry representatives. “That’s not very popular to say around many people, but if you want a strong military, you have to pay for it. Congress cannot continue to borrow from the next generation.”

While talk of a war tax has come up before as U.S. debt grows amid the longest U.S. war, the unpopular idea hasn’t seen much traction.

On Monday, the Pentagon released a 2019 budget plan seeking a 10 percent increase in funding to \$686.1 billion to grow the size and might of the military, primarily in response to China and Russia’s growing capabilities.

“It’s a lot of money. I’m a taxpayer like anybody else,” said Marine Corps Commandant Gen. Robert Neller, the forum’s keynote speaker. Like the other services, “all I can assure you is your Marine Corps ... (is) going to do everything we can to get the best value for every dollar we get,” he said.

Lawmakers have yet to appropriate money for the 2018 and 2019 fiscal years, which is slated to happen later this year.

President Donald Trump’s overall \$4.4 trillion 2019 budget proposal faces criticism, as the plan could add \$7 trillion to the U.S. deficit. Still, experts say the Pentagon portion of that budget proposal is poised to win Capitol Hill support.

“I want to see a strong military, and I want the Congress to have the courage to have this kind of debate sooner rather than later,” Jones said. “This game of ... borrowing from the next generation is a sin.”

Supporters of expanding the U.S. supply of amphibious ships said Thursday that Trump’s proposed budget still falls short.

“I am disappointed,” Rep. Donald McEachin, D-Va., another member of the House Armed Services Committee, said of the ship funding.

Navy relieves 3 after officer found drunk, naked in woods

BY SCOTT WYLAND
Stars and Stripes

The leadership triad of Naval Mobile Construction Battalion 4 was relieved of duty after the executive officer was found wandering drunk and naked through the woods at Camp Shields on Okinawa, Japan.

Lt. Cmdr. Jason Gabbard was discovered intoxicated and unclothed in a wooded area late last week, Navy officials said Thursday.

Cmdr. James Cho and Command Master Chief Petty Officer Jason Holden were relieved for mishandling the incident, the Navy added.

Cho and Holden tried to cover up the in-

cident, an official told Navy Times.

“Trust is the foundation for everything we do as military professionals, and we expect our servicemembers to conduct themselves with the integrity and character to justify that trust,” said Cmdr. Cate Cook, spokeswoman for the Navy Expeditionary Combat Command, in a statement.

“Our senior leaders are entrusted to uphold the highest standards of personal and professional conduct at all times.”

Gabbard, Cho and Holden have been reassigned temporarily to Naval Construction Group 1 in Port Hueneme, Calif.

Capt. Nick Yamodis will assume temporary command of the Seabee battalion, which is deployed to Japan from Port Hueneme.

USS McCain’s former XO guilty of dereliction of duty

BY TYLER HLAVAC
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The USS John S. McCain’s former executive officer has been found guilty of dereliction of duty in connection with a collision that killed 10 sailors last summer.

The judgment for Cmdr. Jessie Sanchez, who served as second-in-command of the destroyer when it crashed into an oil tanker east of Singapore on Aug. 21, came Monday during a series of nonjudicial punishment hearings held in the wake of fatal collisions last year involving the McCain and the USS Fitzgerald, the Navy announced in a statement Thursday.

Sanchez received a punitive letter of reprimand as a result of the findings, the announcement said.

The hearings were conducted by Adm. Frank Caldwell, who was tapped in October to oversee disciplinary actions for the accidents. He also dismissed charges for an officer and an enlisted crewmember from the Fitzgerald, the Navy statement said. Seven sailors died on that ship after it collided with a cargo vessel on June 17 off the coast of mainland Japan.

Monday’s proceedings were the last planned nonjudicial punishment hear-

ings held for the collisions, the statement added.

Article 32 hearings to consider court-martialing Cmdr. Bryce Benson, who commanded the Fitzgerald, and Cmdr. Alfredo Sanchez, former commander of the McCain, and three Fitzgerald officers are scheduled for March 6-8 at the Navy Yard in Washington.

Benson and Sanchez both face charges that include negligent homicide, hazarding a ship and dereliction of duty.

Earlier this month, the Navy punished four sailors for their roles in the collisions.

The executive officer, command master chief and one officer from the Fitzgerald were found guilty of dereliction in the performance of duties and received punitive letters of reprimand. An enlisted sailor from the McCain also was found guilty of dereliction in the performance of duties and received a punitive letter of reprimand, forfeiture of a half-month’s pay for two months and a reduction in rate to the next inferior pay grade. The forfeiture of pay and reduction in rate were suspended for six months.

Caldwell dismissed the nonjudicial punishment charges of one officer and another enlisted sailor from the McCain.

10K Afghan civilian casualties in '17

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Mohammad Salim was driving his taxi in central Kabul in September when his wife called and begged him to return home. The Taliban had launched an attack on the airport from the family's neighborhood, and she didn't want him out.

He returned and was eating lunch with his family when everything went black. "Our house collapsed," Salim said. "I was wounded and bleeding, and my daughter was screaming from underneath the rubble. Only her hand was visible."

An errant U.S. missile had struck Salim's home, destroying it and injuring eight family members. It contributed to a record tally of civilian casualties caused by American and Afghan airstrikes last year, according to the United Nations.

While overall civilian casualties in Afghanistan were down 9 percent due to fewer injuries on the ground, airstrikes resulted in 631 civilian casualties, including 295 deaths and 336 wounded, the United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan said in a report released Thursday.

Airstrike casualties were up 7 percent from 2016, marking the highest annual tally ever announced by the mission, which began documentation in 2009.

The Afghan air force was re-

sponsible for 309 of those casualties, the UNAMA said, while international military forces caused 246, including 154 deaths. The U.S. is the only foreign force conducting airstrikes in Afghanistan.

There also were 76 casualties attributed to undetermined pro-government forces, the UNAMA added. The UNAMA said it was particularly concerned about 114 children's deaths caused by airstrikes last year.

NATO's Resolute Support Mission disputed the numbers. It said its "detailed operational records" showed just 51 civilian casualties were proved to have been caused by international forces in 2017 — nearly five times fewer than the U.N. tally. Only 19 of those were fatalities. Mission officials said 133 cases were disputed.

The U.N. and international military forces in Afghanistan historically have disagreed about civilian casualty figures and use different methodologies for calculating them.

"In some instances, a civilian casualty report may contain insufficient detail to allow RS to make a determination regarding its veracity," Resolute Support said in a statement. "In those instances, the report is considered 'disputed.'"

The new data, which the UNAMA said raises "concerns about the effectiveness of precautions taken by pro-government forces to avoid civilian casualties during airstrikes,"

follows months of concern from observers that the White House's new strategy for Afghanistan could result in greater bloodshed and undermine international efforts in the country.

Officially revealed in August, that strategy includes more firepower and relaxed restrictions on targeting the Taliban. Air Force data show the U.S. releasing more than triple the number of bombs and similar weapons last year it did in 2016.

Meanwhile, the Afghan air force, according to its own data, nearly doubled to 425 the number of strikes it conducted in a recent 10-month period.

Despite questioning precautions taken by the U.S. and Afghanistan to avoid harming civilians, the UNAMA acknowledged that the sharp spike in airstrikes was not matched by an equally sharp spike in civilian casualties caused by them.

"While emphasizing that no civilian casualties are acceptable, the reduced harm ratio suggests improvements in targeting and civilian protection procedures," the report said.

Overall, the report documented 10,453 civilian casualties, including 3,438 deaths and 7,015 injured. That remains significantly higher than pre-2014 figures, when NATO was engaged in combat operations in Afghanistan.

Russia: US strike may have killed 5

Associated Press

MOSCOW — After a week of swirling controversy, Russia acknowledged on Thursday that five of its citizens may have been killed by a U.S. strike in Syria, the first time Russians have died at U.S. hands in Syria.

Russian Foreign Ministry spokeswoman Maria Zakharova said the victims weren't servicemen. "According to preliminary information, five people, presumably Russian citizens, may have been killed in combat, the circumstances of which are being clarified," Zakharova said in a briefing. "Some others have been injured, and it's still necessary to check whether they are citizens of Russia or other nations."

Until Thursday, Russian and U.S. officials said they had no information on Russian casualties in the Feb. 7 clash, which came when pro-Syrian government forces attacked positions of the U.S.-backed Syrian Kurdish fighters in the eastern province of Deir el-Zour and faced a ferocious U.S. counterattack.

Zakharova wouldn't describe how the Russians died, saying the circumstances of the clash are still being clarified, but her statement amounted to official recognition that the victims were part of the force that advanced on positions of the U.S.-backed fighters.

Leaders: Budget instability hurts readiness push

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Military leaders told a panel of senators Wednesday that they've made significant strides addressing a readiness crisis in the past year but plenty of work remains as the military awaits stable funding. Stopgap budget measures have wreaked havoc, they warned during a Senate Armed Services Committee subcommittee hearing, and progress could falter if lawmakers don't

follow through on their spending plans.

"For a while there, we weren't getting the appropriate funding to properly maintain our units at the proper level," said Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville.

The military leaders testified Wednesday before the subcommittee on readiness and management to address readiness of U.S. forces.

Funding for the 2017 fiscal year "provided a welcome step towards correcting our readi-

ness challenges," said Marine Corps Asst. Commandant Gen. Glenn Walters.

A long list of concerns remains, said Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., the chairman of the subcommittee.

The Air Force has 30 percent fewer airmen since Operation Desert Storm and fewer than half of squadrons are ready to fight in high-intensity combat, he said. The Marine Corps has 32 of its 38 required amphibious warships. And last year's Navy ship collisions that left 17 sail-

ors dead highlighted the need for more thorough training, he said.

Now, with a potential boost in servicemembers with the proposed 2019 budget, the Navy has undertaken new oversight efforts and training, the Army has initiated new acquisition reforms, the average number of flight hours has grown for the Marine Corps and the Air Force has boosted its airmen and equipment with the 2017 funding.

Report tells of harm to diplomats but no cause

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Doctors are releasing the first detailed medical reports about the hearing, vision, balance and brain symptoms suffered in what the State Department has called “health attacks” on U.S. diplomats in Cuba. Still missing: A clear diagnosis of just what happened to trigger their mysterious health problems.

Together, the symptoms are similar to the brain dysfunction seen with concussions, concluded a team of specialists from the University of Pennsylvania who tested 21 of the 24 embassy personnel thought to be affected.

Whatever the cause, the Havana patients “experienced persisting disability of a significant nature,” the Penn team concluded.

Cuba has insisted there were no attacks.

The Journal of the American Medical Association released the report late Wednesday, although key findings first were disclosed by The Associated Press in December.

The mystery began in late 2016 when U.S. Embassy personnel began seeking medical care for hearing loss and ear-ringing that they linked to weird noises or vibrations — initially leading investigators to suspect “sonic attacks.” Now officials are carefully avoiding that term as doctors involved in the probe wonder whether the sounds were a byproduct of something else that might help explain the full symptom list, including memory problems, impaired concentration, irritability, balance problems and dizziness.

Wednesday’s report makes clear that the findings are preliminary, essentially a listing of symptoms and tests. And important complications remain, including that there’s no information to compare the patients’ brain or hearing health before they went to Cuba.

‘Dreamer’ deal’s fate uncertain

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A group of senators reached a bipartisan agreement aimed at balancing Democrats’ fight to offer citizenship to young “Dreamer” immigrants with President Donald Trump’s demands for billions to build his coveted border wall with Mexico. Overnight, the Trump administration denounced the deal.

The compromise was announced Wednesday by 16 senators with centrist views on the issue and was winning support from many Democrats, but it faced an uncertain fate. Leaders were trying to schedule votes on that plan and three other immigration proposals for Thursday, which they hoped would bring the chamber’s showdown over the hot-button issue to a close.

Trump on Wednesday urged lawmakers to oppose any plan that doesn’t meet his more stringent demands, which include curbs on legal immigration and the abolition of a visa lottery. The Senate’s No. 2 Republican, John Cornyn of Texas, warned that lawmakers need to address Trump’s entire proposal, saying, “We need to take the president seriously.”

Trump’s Department of Homeland Security, in a statement issued just before 1 a.m. Thursday, condemned the deal, saying it will “create a mass amnesty for over 10 million illegal aliens, including criminals.”

The statement said the compromises would “be the end of immigration enforcement in America and only serve to draw millions more illegal aliens with no way to remove them.”

There also were qualms among Democrats. The party’s No. 2 Senate leader, Dick Durbin of Illinois, said some Democrats had “serious issues” with parts of the plan. Those concerns

focused on its spending for Trump’s wall and its bar against Dreamers from sponsoring their parents for legal residency.

“We’re not there yet,” Durbin said of the 60 votes the proposal would need for approval.

So far, no other proposals from either side seem able to do that. Republicans control the chamber 51-49, though Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., has missed the past several weeks while battling cancer.

The bipartisan measure’s sponsors included eight GOP senators. That meant just three more Republicans would be needed for it to prevail if it is backed by all 47 Democrats and the two independents who usually support them.

The compromise emerged as senators spent a third day of debate largely as they spent the first two — with the chamber floor mostly empty. Other than an initial roll call allowing formal debate to begin, there have been no other votes while party leaders talk behind the scenes about scheduling votes on specific proposals.

The centrist proposal was produced by a group led by Sens. Susan Collins, R-Maine, and Joe Manchin, D-W.Va., that spent weeks seeking middle ground.

It would grant a 10- to 12-year route to citizenship for 1.8 million Dreamers, participants said.

That’s the same number Trump has suggested helping with his own wider-ranging but more restrictive proposal. Dreamers are young immigrants who were brought to the U.S. illegally as children and still have no permanent protection from deportation.

The plan would provide \$25 billion over a decade, \$2.5 billion annually, for a wall and other border security measures, the same total Trump has requested.

Trump: ‘Totally opposed to domestic violence’

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump broke his silence to explicitly denounce domestic violence in the wake of allegations that a top White House aide had abused two former wives. Chief of staff John Kelly, under fire for mishandling the matter, stayed largely out of sight, his future in doubt and the White House in tumult.

The chaos surrounding the departure of aide Rob Porter put a harsh spotlight on Kelly, the retired general who was brought on last summer to instill military-like discipline in the free-wheeling West Wing. Questions persisted about what and when Kelly knew about

the abuse allegations against Porter, who resigned as staff secretary last week after the accusations became public.

West Wing aides have had their faith in the chief of staff shaken, and morale has plunged to levels not seen since last spring’s firing of FBI Director James Comey and the August uproar over Trump’s refusal to denounce white supremacists after the violence in Charlottesville, Va.

This White House scandal erupted initially without the president’s involvement. But Trump fed the fury last week when he defended Porter and questioned the #MeToo movement that sprang up in recent months to protest the mistreat-

ment of many women.

In Trump’s first comments after Porter resigned, he praised his former aide. Next, he appeared to cast doubt on the ex-wives’ allegations by tweeting, “Peoples lives are being shattered and destroyed by a mere allegation.”

On Wednesday, Trump said the words that Democrats and Republicans alike had been listening for. “I am totally opposed to domestic violence and everybody here knows that,” Trump told reporters in the Oval Office. “I am totally opposed to domestic violence of any kind. Everyone knows that, and it almost wouldn’t even have to be said. So now you hear it, but you all know it.”

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man mistakenly texts officer about death

FL DUNNELTON — A Florida man was charged with murder after telling authorities he meant to text his wife about the death of his live-in girlfriend but nervously messaged a detective instead.

Marion County Sheriff's officials arrested David W. Romig, 52, Tuesday.

Investigators said he staged the crime scene to make it look like an intruder entered the Dunnellon home Jan. 30 and killed Sally Kaufmann-Ruff, 64.

The Ocala Star-Banner reported detectives found evidence that didn't match Romig's story about the home invasion.

Pursuit of stolen bus reaches 100 mph

OH DAYTON — Authorities say speeds reached 100 mph during a police pursuit of a stolen school bus in southwest Ohio.

The Dayton Daily News reported a chase began shortly before 3 a.m. Wednesday. The bus had been stolen from the Twin Valley schools in West Alexandria, about 19 miles west of Dayton.

The chase began in Brookville, northwest of Dayton. The bus struck a parked car during the chase, which ended in the Dayton suburb of Trotwood. A suspect was arrested.

Taco Bell run leads to driver's arrest for DUI

OR PORTLAND — A Medford woman was arrested on suspicion of drunken driving after authorities said she struck garbage cans and drove into a ditch during a Taco Bell run.

The Oregonian/Oregon-

Live reported the 39-year-old woman left her home Tuesday morning to travel to a Taco Bell about 6 miles away. The Jackson County Sheriff's Office said she began hitting garbage cans and nearly struck an elderly couple while she was driving home.

Authorities said she then drove into a ditch near her home and bystanders forced her to stop.

Authorities said she had a blood alcohol level of 0.55 percent and was taken to the hospital for treatment. The legal limit in Oregon is 0.08 percent.

Claim: Mayor offered speed bumps for sex

FL LANTANA — A woman accused the mayor of a Florida town of promising to get speed bumps put on streets in her neighborhood in exchange for sex.

In a complaint filed Jan. 2 with the Florida Commission on Ethics, Catherine Padilla said she had asked the town to install speed bumps as a safety measure.

She said Lantana Mayor David Stewart drove her to a motel after having lunch three years ago and said he wanted to have sex with her. She refused, but said he asked her again before the August 2015 vote, which was approved.

Stewart denied the allegations.

Teen calls 911 to report drunken driver

NE OMAHA — Omaha police said they arrested a 32-year-old man suspected of driving drunk with five children in his vehicle after one of the kids called 911.

Omaha television station KETV reported that a 14-year-old boy — the driver's nephew — inside the car called

911 around noon Sunday. Police said that when officers stopped the vehicle, they found the children — ranging in age from 12 to 15 — crying and the driver showing clear signs of intoxication.

The driver was charged with DUI, five counts of child neglect and not having a driver's license or registration.

Man arrested after car wash altercation

WA BELLEVUE — Authorities said a Washington man with a custom "DIRTBAG" license plate on his car was arrested after purposely rear-ending a driver at a car wash and punching an officer.

Court documents said the man — upset the driver ahead of him wasn't moving faster — bumped the car in front of him Sunday with his Chevy Camaro.

Police said the driver of the car that was struck began taking photos of the damage to his car with his cellphone. Police said that's when the driver of the Camaro got out of his car and pointed a gun at the other man.

Police said the driver of the Camaro refused to get out of the car when police arrived, then punched an officer in the face while being taken into custody.

Woman accused of tying boys to pole

MN HASTINGS — A Minnesota woman faces felony charges for allegedly punishing her grandnephew and his brother by tying them to a pole in her basement.

Flor Estella Gallegos, 53, of South St. Paul is charged with false imprisonment of a child and malicious punishment of a child in Dakota County in 2017.

The criminal complaint accuses Gallegos of withholding food, striking the boys and binding them to a pole or furniture overnight.

Fraudster convicted of scamming again

MD ROCKVILLE — A Maryland woman who claims to be a psychic has been convicted of scamming people — again.

WRC-TV reported Gina Marie Marks, who worked under the name Natalie Miller, pleaded guilty last week to multiple counts of felony theft for stealing \$340,000 from five people who sought help with their troubles.

Police learned of Marks in 2016 when a woman paid Marks for love spells but got suspicious when the charges began approaching \$80,000.

Marks was arrested at the Miami International Airport in Florida and faces up to six years in prison.

Woman tells police she's Mother Mary

KY ELIZABETHTOWN — A woman who led police on a chase told arresting officers that she was Mother Mary en route to pick up Baby Jesus and had permission from God to speed.

WDRB-TV cited an arrest report saying a Kentucky trooper attempted to pull over Connie Allen, 52, of Tennessee on Saturday but she ignored him. A high-speed chase ensued.

Another trooper was eventually able to pull in front of Allen, forcing her to stop. He approached her car with his weapon drawn, but she refused to get out and show her hands. The report said she became compliant when he hit her window with a police baton.

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Shiffrin speeds to 2nd gold of career

Associated Press

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea — The nervous energy accumulated for Mikaela Shiffrin while she waited, waited, waited for these Olympics — the ones that so many are expecting to be her Olympics — to finally get started. First one race was postponed. Then another.

And so it was not until a week into the Pyeongchang Games that Shiffrin and the other female Alpine skiers got to compete in the rescheduled giant slalom, an event the 22-year-old American considers a work in progress for her. In second place and still feeling some jitters after the first of Thursday's two runs, Shiffrin did two things during the 3½ hours before the deciding leg of the GS: She took a nap, and then she sneaked onto the adjacent men's course at Yongpong Alpine Center for a little free skiing.

"Then," said Shiffrin's mother, Eileen, who is also a coach, "I think she was just like, 'I'm ready. I'm doing this.'"

Sure was. And sure did.

On a crisp, clear day with very little sign of the gusts that have played havoc with the skiing program, Shiffrin dealt well with her pent-up emotions and put together a pair of aggressive, if not quite perfect, trips through the gates to win the giant slalom for the second Olympic gold medal of her precocious career.

No American Alpine skier has won more.

"Definitely, it's been a mental strain the last couple days, thinking we're going to race and then not racing. So to finally have the race actually happen today, I was like, 'Well, I really hope that I actually can do it when the time comes that we finally race.' And, yeah, I did," said Shiffrin, who is based in Colorado. "So now we got the ball rolling. I'm really excited for tomorrow."

As well she should be.

That's because Friday brings the slalom, by far Shiffrin's best event, one that she has dominated for five years, including a gold at the 2014 Sochi Games plus a trio of world titles. She is a huge favorite in that one, unlike the giant slalom, in which Shiffrin was merely a strong contender. After that, Shiffrin will skip Saturday's super-G, according to her mom, because there's no time to properly prepare. She still intends to enter the downhill and combined.

"I don't think it gets any easier, but I think she can take a deep breath and say, 'The pressure's off a little bit. Maybe,'" said her father, Jeff. "She'll just approach it the way she's always approached it: It's left-right-left-right-left-right, forget about the result."

In this instance, the result was a two-run time of 2 minutes, 20.02 seconds, good enough to beat surprise silver medalist Ragnhild Mowinckel of Norway by 0.39 seconds and Federica Brignone of Italy by 0.46. First-run leader Manuela Moelgg of Italy quickly gave away her 0.20-second advantage over Shiffrin and was eighth.

At Yongpong, Shiffrin found some problems in the choppy terrain of the second half of the 51-gate GS course, in part because nearby trees created shadows that made it tough to see.

But she wasn't the only one: Her first run was second-fastest; her other was fourth-fastest.

"She attacked both runs, and that's how we do it. It was the good way to do things," said France's Tessa Worley, the reigning world champion, who had a poor opening run and was seventh. "She wanted this medal, and we could see it."

Said Brignone: "She is much stronger than the rest of us right now — not physically, but mentally, and with the way she works and prepares."

That last part is key to appreciating the way Shiffrin regrouped and performed in a race originally slated for Monday. Mostly terrific on the World Cup circuit this season — winning 10 of 23 races she's entered to lead the overall standings — she stumbled in late January and failed to finish three of her last four races.

After finishing, Shiffrin put her right glove on her chest, mouth agape. She paused and put her poles atop her neon helmet. She covered her ski goggles with both hands, taking the moment in.

Only briefly, though. There is more work to be done. And perhaps more medals to be won.

"It was my 15 seconds to let it all out," Shiffrin said, "and now I've got to focus on tomorrow."

Norwegian Svindal oldest to win Alpine gold

Associated Press

JEONGSEON, South Korea — As he approached his 35th birthday, Aksel Lund Svindal didn't always feel like he would make Olympic history as the oldest Alpine gold medalist.

His body felt the strain of too many high-speed crashes and season-ending surgeries, and it wouldn't let him train at the high intensity he likes.

Fast forward two months from December, and no one was quicker on the downhill course at the Pyeongchang Olympics.

"I am old," said the tough Norwegian, confirming this would be his last Olympics. "So I guess this is the beginning of

the end somehow."

He certainly made his last chance count on Thursday, finally getting the only downhill honor missing from an impressive career.

Svindal finished 0.12 seconds faster than teammate and close friend Kjetil Jansrud, making up lost time on a masterful ski on the bottom half of the 1¼-mile course.

Beat Feuz of Switzerland took bronze. The world champion — and the standout racer of the classic World Cup downhills in January — was 0.18 behind Svindal's winning time of 1 minute, 40.25 seconds.

The new year brought new hope for Svindal that his body would hold up for the

Olympics.

"I was struggling in the beginning of the season," he said, acknowledging the impact of landing four jumps Thursday that made him creak a little. "Definitely the jumps were longer today, I felt that, but it's working better than I feared in December."

Even getting to South Korea was a little voyage into the unknown for Svindal, who ended his past two seasons in January for surgery on his knees. Both were a direct result of a fearsome crash in Kitzbuehel, Austria, in January 2016.

"This is basically the first year I've skied in February for four years or something

like that," Svindal said. "I've been in the hospital every other year."

At race-time Thursday, there was near-perfect calm and cold conditions. It was 34 degrees Fahrenheit under sunshine and blue skies with only a few wispy clouds.

"I think I pushed just to the right amount and felt fast," said the new Olympic champion, who never led at a time split until the finish.

At 35, Svindal is three months older than Mario Matt was in 2014 when the Austrian won the Olympic slalom.

Svindal now has four Olympic medals, taking home one of each color from the Vancouver Games.

Women's hockey

Canada wins 1st meeting with US

Associated Press

GANGNEUNG, South Korea — The Americans and Canadians pushed, shoved and grabbed each other, sometimes from behind, sometimes mask to mask, and bodies were crashing to the ice repeatedly in front of the net.

All of this with no medal on the line, either.

Meghan Agosta and Sara Nurse each scored in the second period and defending Olympic champion Canada clinched the top spot in pool play by edging the United States 2-1 on Thursday in a rough-and-tumble early showdown between the dominant powers in women's hockey. It could have been a mere preview of the battle for gold expected to come next week.

Genevieve Lacasse made 44 saves, including stopping Hilary Knight at the post inside the final 90 seconds. Brianne Decker hit two posts, the second in the final seconds, before the two rivals ended up in a scrum. Officials reviewed the final play and ruled no goal. The Canadians also had two goals disallowed earlier in a game that showed just how far these two teams are above the rest of the field — and how much they want

to beat each other.

"It's a rivalry," U.S. coach Robb Stauber said of the physical play. "What else would anybody expect?"

Canada coach Laura Schuler was happy with the win, especially Lacasse's performance.

"She played outstanding for us," Schuler said.

Kendall Coyne scored the lone goal for the Americans.

Canada and the United States are the only countries to ever win women's hockey gold at the Olympics. The Americans won in 1998 when women's hockey joined the Olympics, while Canada is looking for a fifth straight title.

The two played eight times last fall through a pre-Olympic exhibition tour and the Four Nations Cup. The United States won two of the first three, but Canada now has won five straight against their biggest and only rival.

"We're not worried about it, nope," Stauber said. "We're focused on the things that we can control, and certainly those games that we've played in the past have nothing to do with our future. Absolutely nothing to do with our future."

NHL roundup

Leafs roll past Jackets

Associated Press

TORONTO—One little tweak to Toronto's lines is paying off in a big way for the Maple Leafs.

Nazem Kadri had three goals and two assists, Frederik Andersen made a career-high 54 saves and surging Toronto beat the Columbus Blue Jackets 6-3 on Wednesday night.

The line of Kadri, Patrick Marleau and Mitch Marner combined for five goals and five assists. Since the trio was formed on Jan. 24 against Chicago, Kadri has seven goals and eight assists, Marner has seven goals and five assists, and Marleau has three goals and four assists.

"My linemates contributed just as much as I did," Kadri said. "They found me, I just tried to get open, and the puck seemed to find me tonight."

Panthers 4, Canucks 3: Nick Bjugstad had a goal and an assist, leading Florida to the road win.

The Panthers trailed 2-1 midway through the first period, but battled back with three straight goals, the last two just 1:11 apart.

Evgenii Dadonov, Jamie McGinn and Alexander Petrovich also scored for Florida (25-23-6). The Panthers are 6-1-0 in their last seven games and seven points behind Carolina for the second wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Bo Horvat had a goal and two assists for Vancouver (22-29-6). Brock Boeser and Michael Del Zotto also scored for the Canucks, who are 1-6-0 in their last seven games.

Avalanche 2, Canadiens 0: Semyon Varlamov made 43 saves and host Colorado beat Montreal to match the franchise record of 10 straight home wins set in Quebec in 1994-95.

Carl Soderberg and Alexander Kerfoot scored. Antti Niemi stopped 23 shots for Montreal.

Luge team relay

History made by German squad

Associated Press

PYEONGCHANG, South Korea — When the International Olympic Committee added a luge team relay to the program seven years ago, part of the rationalization was that it would provide more medal chances for women.

Natalie Geisenberger and Alex Gough surely approve.

Geisenberger became the first Olympian ever to win four luge gold medals by helping Germany win the team relay on Thursday night in the sport's final event at the Pyeongchang Games. Canada won the silver, giving Gough her second medal in the last three days — which sounds even more remarkable when noting that her country was 0-for-forever in luge before her bronze in the women's race on Monday.

Ask anyone in the race, and it will be unanimous: The team

relay is a hit.

"It's definitely a spectator favorite," said Canada's Sam Edney, who teamed with Gough and the doubles sled of Tristan Walker and Justin Snith for the first Olympic medal of his career in what will almost certainly be his final slide before retirement. "The athletes love it, the coaches love it, the officials love it."

Austria, with Madeleine Egle, men's gold medalist David Gleirscher and doubles sliders Peter Penz and Georg Fischler was third. The U.S. was fourth, the team of Summer Britcher, Chris Mazdzer, Matt Mortensen and Jayson Terdiman missing a medal by about one-tenth of a second.

"I love my teammates, and I think the important thing that I feel incredibly lucky to be a part of this team and to have them in my life," Britcher said.

Geisenberger has two sin-

gles golds and two relay golds, this one coming with Johannes Ludwig, Tobias Wendl and Tobias Arlt. Past luge stars like Germany's Georg Hackl and Italy's Armin Zoeggeler never got the chance to pad their Olympic résumés with a team relay, so there certainly won't be a true consensus in the argument of whether Geisenberger is the best Olympic luger ever.

The format is simple.

There's a men's slider, a women's slider and a doubles duo as part of each team, each of them getting one run down the track. At the finish line, they need to sit up — with the sled still going at basically top speed — and smack a pad that sends up an all-clear signal for the next sled to start making its way down the track (or stop the clock if it's the third sled).

If someone misses the pad, it's like dropping the baton in track and field. Game over.

NBA roundup

Lillard's 44 points propel Trail Blazers

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Damian Lillard said it may have been Portland's best win of the season.

Lillard had 44 points and eight assists, and the Trail Blazers overcame Kevin Durant's 50 points to snap a seven-game losing streak to the Golden State Warriors with a 123-117 victory on Wednesday.

CJ McCollum added 29 points for the Blazers (32-26), who go into the All-Star break six games over .500.

"Going into the break, how tight the standings are in the West, needing to come up with a big win, and we came up with it. So it's probably our best performance, if not the best then definitely top two or top three," said Lillard, who has scored 133 points in the last three games, the highest point total for that span in franchise history.

Lillard is also the first player in the league this season with at least 39 points in three straight games.

Portland spoiled Durant's fifth career 50-point game and first this season. He added seven rebounds and six assists, but despite his efforts Golden State had its three-game winning streak snapped and fell a half-game behind Houston for the league's best record.

Rockets 100, Kings 91: James Harden had 28 points, nine rebounds and nine assists, and host Houston held on its 10th straight victory.

The Rockets are 44-13 entering the All-Star break after winning 17 of their last 19 games.

Clippers 129, Celtics 119: DeAndre Jordan had 30 points and 13 rebounds and Los Angeles beat host Boston for its fourth victory in five games.

Jazz 107, Suns 97: Donovan Mitchell scored 24 points, Royce O'Neale had a career-high 19 and the host Jazz won its 11th straight.

Thunder 121, Grizzlies 114: Paul George scored 28 points, Russell Westbrook added 23 points in his 17th triple-double of the season, and Oklahoma City held off host Memphis.

Pelicans 139, Lakers 117: Anthony Davis had 42 points and 15 rebounds in host New Orleans' victory over Los Angeles.

Raptors 122, Bulls 98: Kyle Lowry had 20 points and 10 assists, Serge Ibaka also scored 20 points and visiting Toronto cruised into the All-Star break with its seventh straight victory.

Wizards 118, Knicks 113: Bradley Beal had 36 points and Washington overcame a 27-point deficit to beat host New

York.

76ers 104, Heat 102: Ben Simmons had a triple-double, J.J. Redick hit a 19-foot, off-balanced jumper from the baseline with 19.4 seconds left and short-handed host Philadelphia overcame a 24-point second-half deficit to beat Miami.

Pistons 104, Hawks 98: Ish Smith had 22 points and nine assists, Blake Griffin narrowly missed a triple-double and host Detroit beat Atlanta to end a three-game losing streak.

Hornets 104, Magic 102: Dwight Howard had 22 points and 13 rebounds, Kemba Walker added 20 points and Charlotte edged host Orlando to stop a four-game slide.

Pacers 108, Nets 103: Victor Oladipo scored 25 points, and Corey Joseph added 15 points and 11 assists to help Indiana beat host Brooklyn for its third straight victory.

College basketball roundup

Cartwright powers Providence past No. 3 Villanova

Associated Press

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Kyron Cartwright scored 17 points and Providence withstood several late surges to stun third-ranked Villanova 76-71 on Wednesday night.

Rodney Bullock and Alpha Diallo each added 14 points for the Friars (17-9, 8-5 Big East), who snapped a five-game losing streak to the Wildcats.

It was Providence's first win over Villanova since Jan. 24, 2016.

Mikal Bridges had 19 points for Villanova, but fouled out with 1:12 to play in the game. Jalen Brunson added 14 points.

Villanova (23-3, 10-3) pulled within 59-54 on a pair of free throws by Omari Spellman with 6:25 left. But the Friars outscored the Wildcats 8-4 over the next two minutes to push

the lead back to 67-58.

No. 4 Xavier 102, Seton Hall 90: Trevon Bluiett followed his worst shooting performance of the season with a 37-point effort, and the host Musketeers (24-3, 12-2) held on to securing first place in the Big East.

No. 10 Auburn 76, Kentucky 66: Bryce Brown returned from a shoulder injury to score 18 points and make four three-pointers in leading the host Tigers (23-3, 11-2 Southeastern Conference).

Florida State 81, No. 11 Clemson 79: Phil Cofer scored 17 points, Trent Forrest added 16 and the host Seminoles (18-8, 7-7 Atlantic Coast Conference) rallied from an 18-point deficit in the second half.

No. 12 Duke 74, Virginia Tech 52: Grayson Allen scored 25 points and matched a career high with seven three-pointers

as the host Blue Devils (21-5, 9-4 Atlantic Coast Conference) won without freshman star Marvin Bagley III.

No. 22 Michigan 74, Iowa 59: Duncan Robinson scored 18 points to lead the host Wolverines (21-7, 10-5 Big Ten).

No. 24 Nevada 77, Boise State 72: Kendall Stephens tied his career-high with 21 points and Caleb Martin also had 21 to lead the visiting Wolf Pack (22-5, 11-2 Mountain West) past the Broncos (20-6, 10-4).

Service Academies

Holy Cross 70, Army 65: Caleb Green scored 18 points and the visiting Crusaders (10-16, 7-8 Patriot League) edged the Black Knights (13-13, 6-9).

Green was 4-for-5 from beyond the arc for the Crusaders who have won three of the

last four. Austin Butler added 13 points and Jacob Grandison and Connor Niego had 10 points apiece. Grandison led the team with seven rebounds.

Navy 71, Lafayette 69: Shawn Anderson scored 28 points and grabbed seven rebounds and the host Midshipmen (18-10, 9-6 Patriot League) held on to beat the Leopards (8-18, 6-9).

Anderson was 11-for-14 from the field for the Midshipmen, who have won three straight.

UNLV 81, Air Force 73: Jovan Mooring scored 24 points, Brandon McCoy added 10 points and 13 rebounds and the host Runnin' Rebels (19-7, 8-5 Mountain West Conference) beat the Falcons (10-14, 4-8).

UNLV has won five of its last six games. Air Force had its two-game winning streak snapped.