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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Trump ties withdrawals to peace process

BY KAREN DEYOUNG
The Washington Post

WASHINGTON - The United States will reduce its 14,000-troop presence in Afghanistan as progress is made in negotiations toward a peaceful settlement of the 17-year war, President Donald Trump told the nation Tuesday night, in an apparent loosening of orders he gave the Pentagon in late December to cut the number in half.

In his State of the Union address, Trump also refrained from giving a definitive date for withdrawal of 2,000 U.S. troops in Syria. In a single-sentence reference to that conflict, he said that as the “remnants” of the Islamic State are being destroyed, “it is time to give our brave warriors in Syria a warm welcome home.”

With most of his speech devoted to his domestic policies and the economy, Trump’s speech broke little new ground on his foreign-policy priorities.

He restated his announced intention to withdraw from the Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty with Russia, indirectly warning that the United States would build new nuclear systems to counter Russian gains.

“Perhaps we can negotiate a different agreement, adding China and others, or perhaps we can’t

— in which case, we will outspend and out-innovate all others by far,” Trump said.

Trump also announced a date and place for a second round of talks with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un — Feb. 27-28, in Vietnam. “If I had not been elected president of the United States, we would right now, in my opinion, be in a major war with North Korea with potentially millions of people,” he claimed.

“Much remains to be done,” he said, “but my relationship with Kim Jong Un is a good one.” Regional experts have questioned whether significant progress has been made.

On other issues, Trump’s one-sentence condemnation of Nicolás Maduro’s government in Venezuela, and recognition of Juan Guaidó as interim president, was met with strong applause, as was his condemnation of Iran as “the world’s leading state sponsor of terror.”

He spoke of his decision to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but he did not mention the long-delayed Israel-Palestinian peace proposal he has said is being prepared under the direction of his son-in-law, senior White House aide Jared Kushner.

Recalling his campaign promise to end conflicts abroad, Trump

said that “great nations do not fight endless wars.”

But his reluctance to put a date on promised troop withdrawals reflected the criticism and concern that met his mid-December orders to immediately start a complete exit from Syria and to begin planning to remove up to half of the force in Afghanistan.

A large, bipartisan majority in the Senate voted Monday to oppose troop withdrawals from both countries. The nonbinding resolution, introduced by Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., called on the White House to consult with Congress on developing long-term strategies in both nations, “including a thorough accounting of the risks of withdrawing too hastily.”

Trump referred to last week’s announcement that his special envoy for Afghanistan, Zalmay Khalilzad, had drawn up a draft framework with Taliban representatives in which the militants agreed they would not allow al-Qaida and other terrorist groups to operate on Afghan territory and the United States would agree to withdraw its forces.

Khalilzad said the draft was only a preliminary step in discussions that eventually would move to talks on a complete cease-fire and a political road map for the future agreed on between the

Taliban and the Afghan government. President Ashraf Ghani has sharply objected to any talks that do not include the government, and his senior aides accused Khalilzad of “disrespect” and of trying to replace him with a more malleable successor.

In a brief mention, Trump said that he had “accelerated our negotiations to reach a political settlement in Afghanistan. The opposing side is also very happy to be negotiating,” he said. “As we make progress in these negotiations, we will be able to reduce our troops’ presence and focus on counterterrorism.”

“We do not know whether we will achieve an agreement — but we do know that after two decades of war, the hour has come to at least try for peace.” The “other side,” he said, “would like to do the same thing. It’s time.”

Trump repeated familiar inaccuracies and exaggerations in congratulating himself on his policies in the Middle East. He has frequently described the situation in Iraq and Syria as “a mess” with the Islamic State ascendant. “When I took office,” he said, using an acronym for the militant group, “ISIS controlled more than 20,000 square miles in Iraq and Syria. Today we have liberated virtually all of that territory from the grip of these bloodthirsty killers.”

Trump’s summit with Kim looks to end denuclearization deadlock

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — President Donald Trump’s plan to hold a second summit with North Korea’s leader at the end of the month in Vietnam raised hopes the two leaders will agree on concrete steps toward denuclearization.

Trump said during his State of the Union Address Tuesday in Washington that he will meet with Kim Jong Un on Feb. 27-28 in Vietnam as his administration seeks to break an impasse in nuclear talks.

The summit will take place more than eight months after Trump and Kim met for the first time in Singapore, where the leaders agreed to a vague promise to work toward the “complete denuclear-

ization of the Korean Peninsula.”

But the two sides have deadlocked over the details of how to do that, and the president will face pressure to deliver specific commitments from Kim this time.

The process has gained momentum in recent weeks. U.S. special envoy to North Korea Stephen Biegun traveled to Pyongyang on Wednesday to discuss summit preparations with his North Korean counterpart.

South Korea, which has been thrust into the role of mediator, welcomed the announcement and expressed hope the leaders will take advantage of a second chance to agree on a roadmap for peace.

“The two leaders already took the first step toward shaking off the past 70 years of hostility in

Singapore,” presidential spokesman Kim Eui-keum said. “We look forward to a more specific and substantial step toward progress in Vietnam.”

The spokesman also noted the symbolism of holding the summit in a communist country that overcame the legacy of a war with the United States to achieve prosperity.

Trump insisted progress has been made, pointing to the North’s suspension of missile and nuclear tests after months of tensions that pushed the divided peninsula to the brink of a new war.

Trump also noted that the North had released American detainees as a goodwill gesture.

“If I had not been elected president of the United States, we would

right now, in my opinion, be in a major war with North Korea,” he said.

The announcement had been widely expected. Trump has said he and Kim had agreed to meet in late February, but this was the first time he has confirmed specific dates and a venue.

Critics pounced on Trump’s claim that he had prevented a war, claiming he had stoked tensions by trading personal insults and threats of war with Kim before embracing the North Korean leader in a diplomatic offensive.

“That was a real eye-roller,” Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer told CNN. He said the president’s foreign policy was “inside-out” and consisted of “patting dictators on the back.”

Navy revises rules in wake of linguist's death

By CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Navy officials said they have made several changes to a flawed commissioning and waiver process that led to the deployment of a linguist killed in Syria last month.

Navy Chief Petty Officer Shannon Kent, a 35-year-old mother of two, was killed Jan. 16 by a suicide bomber at a restaurant in the Syrian city of Manbij. It was her fifth combat tour.

Last fall, Kent was slated to attend a clinical psychology doctoral program in lieu of the deployment. But the Navy reversed the move because she previously had cancer, rejected her waiver applications and she received orders to deploy to Syria instead.

She was killed less than two months later.

"I have reviewed and discussed every aspect of the policies and processes in place during Shannon's application to become a clinical psychologist," Adm. William Moran, vice chief of naval operations, wrote in a Feb. 5 letter to the Kent family. "There were many shortcomings in Shannon's case, mainly in our communications throughout and in fundamental flaws in our waiver and appeal process — I offer no excuses."

In his letter, Moran explains the changes installed by Navy officials will give the highest waiver consideration to sailors who are deployed. He also wrote the changes include establishing a standardized appeal process with an option of seeking a second medical opinion, requiring peer review of waivers to boost quality assurance and consistency and requiring all medical authorities operate on the same software system to ensure continuity.

Moran also noted while the Navy did not have a robust waiver process in place, there have been improvements in response to Kent's situation. Moran said the number of waivers approved for enlisted commissioning applications has risen 15 percent since the fall.

"We believe this new policy will improve the quality, fairness, and consistency of the medical waiver process for all enlisted to officer commissioning programs, and I will report back to you in one year to inform you of our progress," Moran wrote.

The changes come less than two weeks after the Kent family requested the move in a Jan. 24 letter to Moran.

"In your letter, you informed me Shannon was fighting to change the regulations which prevented many qualified enlisted sailors from commissioning as naval of-

ficers," Moran wrote. "Her drive to bring fairness and consistency to this process highlighted areas where we, as a navy, needed to improve in order to maintain the trust of our enlisted teammates."

Moran said four new rule changes are now reflected within provisions of Chapter 15 of the Navy's Manual of Medical Department, which covers physical standards for medical examinations, and lists several health conditions, including cancer, that can disqualify servicemembers from receiving a commission.

"To formally correct our waiver process, and to honor Shannon's legacy, the Department of Navy's surgeon general signed out a policy, dated Feb. 1, 2019, to address the informal process improvements started last fall," Moran wrote.

Kent's husband and father to their two young sons said the family was satisfied with the moves.

"The Navy has done all they can and moved rather quickly," Joe Kent, 38, said Wednesday. They "changed as much of the commissioning process and waiver process as they can in their capacity as an individual service."

Now, the family is fighting to change a larger, overarching Defense Department rule that thwarted Kent's plans to become an officer.

The Department of Defense Instruction 6130.30, the "Medical Standards for Appointment, Enlistment, or Induction into the Military Services," requires servicemembers to meet higher medical standards reserved for joining the service versus the requirements for remaining an active servicemember.

In Kent's case, that Defense Department provision ruled her out from the program because of previous thyroid cancer.

"We would like to build on the momentum the Navy and the lawmakers have built to get the greater DOD regulation changed in Shannon's honor," Joe Kent said.

Last week, several congressional lawmakers wrote to top Pentagon officials demanding they explain how they would update the Defense Department and Navy medical rules and waiver process that led to Kent's deployment.

Kent, along with 18 others, including another U.S. servicemember, a Defense Intelligence Agency civilian and a Defense Department contractor, were killed the Jan. 16 blast in Syria. Kent was the first female U.S. servicemember killed in Syria since the U.S.-led coalition's campaign against Islamic State began there in late 2014.

Soldier who shot himself appeals Army's decision to deny benefits

By WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

Army Spc. Kevin Holyan arrived especially early at the Hopkinsville, Ky., home of his former barracks mate, who had been promoted to sergeant and was celebrating with a party that evening in April 2017.

Holyan, a 22-year-old assigned to an engineer battalion with the 101st Airborne Division at nearby Fort Campbell, kept his personally owned handgun at that friend's house, and was eager to put on new grips he'd gotten for the gun. Army regulations did not allow Holyan to keep the .40-caliber Glock 23 at his base residence.

Hours later, Holyan jokingly raised the gun to his head, and believing it was unloaded, pulled the trigger and fired a bullet through his brain. He was rushed to a hospital where a note in his medical chart that evening offered a stark assessment: "Grave prognosis," it said. "Likely fatal [injury]."

Holyan survived, but today he cannot walk and is mentally impaired. He is in an Army Warrior Transition Unit and on his way to becoming a civilian. He is not expected to be able to work again.

The original investigating officer for the case determined the injury to be "in the line of duty," which would entitle Holyan to Army benefits, such as a \$100,000 traumatic group life insurance payment and a medical retirement. The

Army's determination will influence the decision by the Veterans Administration whether Holyan will receive disability compensation.

The "line of duty" determination is an administrative process used by military branches to determine a servicemember's duty status when an illness, disability or death occurs. Certain acts of misconduct result in a negative determination.

The investigator's original determination in Holyan's case, however, was overturned by the 101st Airborne Division's commander and then ratified by Army Human Resources Command.

Now, a law firm representing Holyan has appealed that finding, arguing that the first investigating officer had it right: while Holyan was negligent in his handling of the gun, his actions did not rise to the level of deliberate misconduct.

"The situation in this case is procedurally concerning because the investigating officer who conducted the report and had actual knowledge from the witnesses — and did a full holistic assessment — actually agreed with our opinion," said Sean Timmons, an attorney with Tully Rinckey who represents Holyan.

"Absent supporting evidence of deliberate misconduct, the default rule is that simple negligence alone is not sufficient to negate the presumption of in the line of duty," said Timmons, a former Army captain and judge advocate at Fort Hood. "That presumption was made by

the initial investigating officer."

The Army maintains that its determination was warranted because it says Holyan was intoxicated when the shooting happened.

In an April memo to the 101st Airborne commander, the chief of Fort Campbell's Administrative and Civil Law Division wrote: "Evidence exists to show SPC Holyan abused intoxicating liquor and voluntarily became intoxicated."

"A reasonable and prudent person would not handle a firearm while intoxicated and would not put a firearm to his head and pull the trigger, even thinking it was unloaded," said the memo, a redacted version of which was provided to Stars and Stripes by Tully Rinckey.

The memo said Holyan's blood-alcohol level was .178 percent according to a test taken at the hospital in which he was treated. The Uniform Code of Military Justice assumes an individual is impaired to operate vehicles and vessels at a .10 blood-alcohol level.

Queried by Stars and Stripes, 101st Airborne spokesman Lt. Col. Martin O'Donnell said it would be "inappropriate" to comment on the case because the Army is still reviewing it.

Holyan's attorneys dispute the accuracy of the blood-alcohol test, pointing out in their appeal that it was done by medical personnel for treatment purposes and that Holyan had been liberally swabbed with medical alcohol wipes and cleansers that contaminated the measurement.

US won't cede leadership of ISIS fight

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — America will not cede leadership of the fight against the Islamic State, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo said Wednesday, as he tried to allay fears that President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw forces from Syria could imperil gains against the militants there and neighboring Iraq.

Trump's announcement in December shocked U.S. allies and led to the resignations of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and the top U.S. envoy to the anti-ISIS coalition, Brett McGurk.

While the withdrawal would fulfill a Trump goal, U.S. military leaders have pushed back for months, arguing ISIS remains a threat and could regroup. U.S. policy had been to keep troops in place until the extremists are completely eradicated. Fears that ISIS fighters are making a strategic maneuver to lay low ahead of

the U.S. pullout has fueled criticism that Trump telegraphed his military plans — the same thing he accused President Barack Obama of doing in Afghanistan.

Pompeo told foreign ministers and senior officials from the 79-member, U.S.-led coalition that the planned withdrawal “is not a change in the mission” but a change in tactics against a group that should still be considered a menace. ISIS has lost more than 99 percent of the territory it once held in the two countries.

“America will continue to lead in giving those who would destroy us no quarter,” Pompeo said.

Even as he spoke, senior military official acknowledged to lawmakers that with the pullout, “it is going to be difficult to keep up the pressure.” Maj. Gen. James Hecker, the vice director of operations for the Joint Chiefs of Staff, told the House Armed Services Committee that “there will be a

decrease in the amount of pressure that we will be able to apply.”

Hecker said others would have to carry the burden once the U.S. left.

Pompeo called on the coalition to increase intelligence-sharing, repatriate and prosecute captured foreign fighters and accelerate stabilization efforts so ISIS remnants cannot reconstitute in Iraq, Syria or elsewhere.

He said the fight is entering a new stage where those allied against ISIS must confront a “decentralized jihad” with more than military force.

Pompeo mentioned the suicide bombing claimed by ISIS that killed four Americans — two servicemembers, a Pentagon civilian and a U.S. contractor — in the northern Syrian town of Manbij last month.

Manbij was liberated from ISIS control in 2016.

The conference started hours

after Trump, in his State of the Union address, lauded what he said was the near-complete victory over ISIS.

He also reaffirmed his determination to pull out the roughly 2,000 U.S. troops from Syria.

He had said in December that the pullout would proceed quickly.

Rami Abdurrahman, the head of Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, says ISIS still has 4,000 to 5,000 fighters, many likely hiding out in desert caves and mountains.

Defense officials believe many fighters have fled to ungoverned spaces and other pockets in the north and west.

A Defense Department watchdog report warned this week that even with the ISIS forces on the run, the group “is still able to coordinate offensives and counter-offensives, as well as operate as a decentralized insurgency.”

Pentagon: Obstacles remain in battle against terrorist threats

By CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Two top Pentagon officials told a panel of House lawmakers Wednesday that Islamic State and other terrorist groups have been dealt a series of defeats, yet plenty of challenges remain to fending off future threats.

The comments, which were made before a House Armed Services Committee hearing focused on counterterrorism, come as the military struggles with abrupt plans to drawdown U.S. troops in Syria and Afghanistan.

Owen West, assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, and Air Force Maj. Gen. James Hecker, vice director for operations from the joint staff, said they are still trying to figure out a precise plan for fighting remnants of ISIS.

“I think there is a serious risk if we do not keep the pressure on in both Syria and Iraq, and I realize the concern is if we move our forces out of Syria that that may take some pressure off of the ISIS forces in Syria,” Hecker said.

“So, our mission is to try to figure out how to keep the pressure on without any boots on the

ground.”

In one of the hearing's more dramatic moments, West was asked if he disagreed with former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' push back against President Donald Trump's decision to abruptly withdraw troops from Syria.

“No, sir,” West responded.

In December, Trump stunned Capitol Hill and the Pentagon with his decision to withdraw the roughly 2,000 U.S. troops fighting Islamic State in Syria within 30 days.

Since the Dec. 19 announcement, Mattis resigned and was replaced by his then-deputy Pat Shanahan in an acting capacity.

Wednesday's hearing comes a day after a top military general told a Senate panel that ISIS will be defeated in Syria and the terrorist group will be unable to resurge after U.S. troops withdraw from the country.

Army Gen. Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, confirmed Tuesday that he learned of the Syria withdrawal decision from Trump's Dec. 19 announcement and he was not consulted.

Votel also said there may be 20,000 to 30,000 ISIS fight-

ers left in the region, though they are mostly underground or dispersed.

He said there is one ISIS stronghold of about 1,000 fighters remaining within a 20-square-mile area near the southern Euphrates River and the Iraqi border.

A government watchdog report released Monday suggested ISIS in Syria could resurge within six to 12 months and regain territory in the Middle Euphrates River Valley without sustained counterterrorism pressure.

Of the territories ISIS controlled two years ago, more than 99 percent has been returned to Syrians, military officials have said.

During Wednesday's hearing, Rep. Adam Smith, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, also raised concerns that one of the dominant aspects to combating terrorist groups has been an significant increase in the use of special operations forces.

Smith said their numbers have doubled since the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

“Certainly their tempo is high, they have been doing very dangerous missions for a very long

time,” Smith said.

“Are we asking too much of them? Has it strained the force to the point where it is causing problems? Are there things we can do to mitigate that? How do we handle the fact that so much is being asked of our special forces in light of the post-9/11 world?”

Texas Rep. Mac Thornberry, the ranking Republican on the panel, said a recent rash of deaths serves as a reminder of the cost of the country's longest war.

Thornberry recently attended the memorial service for Army Sgt. Cameron A. Meddock, 26, who died last month after he was wounded by small arms fire in the Jawad district of Afghanistan's Badkhis province.

“We can never forget ... the human cost that goes into keeping us safe and free,” Thornberry said.

Smith also raised concerns Wednesday that there are disconnects between the National Defense Strategy, which focuses on great power rivalries with Russia and China, and the National Strategy for Counterterrorism, which addresses all global threats.

Parents question no-touch school policy

By JOSHUA KARSTEN

Stars and Stripes

MANAMA, Bahrain — A strict “no touching” rule that went into effect last week at Bahrain Elementary School has kept grade-schoolers from giving each other hugs and high-fives, prompting some parents to question the policy.

Some parents shared their frustrations online last week in an informal questionnaire that’s been sent to administrators. But school officials insist that the temporary rule is a step toward developing a comprehensive policy that allows some forms of physical contact.

Friction over the policy underscores a broader debate over several years in U.S. schools regarding both children’s rights — a concept steeped in United Nations conventions that calls for children’s mental, physical and psychological security — and how children learn and develop through physical contact.

In Bahrain, the new rule banning things like games of tag and hand-holding and its punishment — brief timeouts — was outlined for students at an assembly on Jan. 30. It’s a response to “frequent incidences with children touching, pushing and such to one another” at recess, an email sent to parents the same day said.

“For example, the game of tag often gets rough or children don’t realize how their tap is interpreted as a push,” Penelope Miller-Smith, who is in her first year

as the school’s principal, said in the email. “While many of these incidences are not intentional, children are being hurt or feel like they are being hurt.”

Matt Hansen, father of a fifth-grader, attended the assembly and said he understands why the No Body Contact, or NBC rule, came about. He saw recess behavior get “out of hand” last semester, he said.

“It was becoming difficult for the monitors,” Hansen said in an email. “My hope is that this new NBC rule can be a temporary measure that will help the children better understand the concept of personal space, and eventually the rule can be phased out.”

Other parents were caught off-guard after learning of the policy only via email or from their children after the assembly.

“It came out of nowhere,” said Carmen Sunderland, mother of a fourth-grader and a kindergarten student. “I send my kids to school to learn — and recess is part of it — how to play, socialize the right way and help them make right choices while playing.”

Those lessons are part of a longer-term plan, Miller-Smith told *Stars and Stripes* in an email. The new rule is not designed to be permanent nor will it be a “never touch” policy, she said, but is the first part of a larger initiative to “help reduce touching that is hurtful, unwanted and in some instances misunderstood.”

Such rules are a typical response at Department of Defense Education Activity and stateside schools, Miller-Smith has told parents. Miller-Smith, a career educator, said she’s often seen cyclical increases in rough play in the long stretches of the second semester.

Her plan calls for teachers to discuss the issue with the students in coming weeks, using picture books, group discussions, class lessons and other activities to help develop a policy on appropriate physical contact, such as helping someone up after a fall, giving a hug or a high-five, the principal said. She’s participated in similar efforts in the past and has seen “great success,” she said.

A 50-page student-parent handbook at the school had already prohibited horseplay, fighting and shoving on school grounds and buses, but Miller-Smith told parents that the lack of “a common and simple definition” for what’s allowed makes enforcement difficult. The NBC rule is meant to eliminate misunderstandings and keep play from getting out of control, she said.

Though her email to parents described it as barring “any touching to peers,” Miller-Smith told *Stars and Stripes* the new rule isn’t meant to discourage courtesy and kindness, like shaking hands or offering help to others.

But Theresa Tamash’s daughter, a third-grader, was upset at what she saw as a ban against

hugging her friends, Tamash said. The 8-year-old explained the policy to her mother after the school assembly.

Tamash created an online questionnaire that garnered 47 anonymous responses in two days — 30 of them opposed to the new rule — a share of the parents of the 300 enrolled K-5 students at the school.

“A lot of people said, ‘I don’t like it,’” Tamash said. “I was hoping to give those parents an opportunity to share their opinion.”

The survey also allowed parents to suggest alternatives, such as adding more playground monitors or focusing efforts on children who are misbehaving rather than making a blanket policy, Tamash said. For her part, Tamash has volunteered to help at the school, but she said she’s never been asked to assist during lunch or recess.

Tamash sent the parent responses to her questionnaire to the school on Monday and Miller-Smith said she planned to talk with her. But the principal stood by the rule.

While he favors the policy and sent a note to Miller-Smith saying he understands why it’s needed, Hansen said in his email to the school that the NBC rule has drawbacks.

“I have to be honest with you and let you know that our son misses being able to play tag and ‘cops and robbers’ during recess,” he wrote.

US-led exercise focuses on maritime crime off Africa

By SCOTT WYLAND

Stars and Stripes

A U.S.-led exercise is helping East African and Indian Ocean nations combat maritime crime, while building a stronger coalition amid competition for influence in the region.

Cutlass Express brought together 15 countries to improve cooperation in policing waters plagued by drug smuggling, human trafficking, illegal fishing and other crimes that fund violent extremists and cause suffering in the region, officials said.

As part of the exercise hosted by U.S. Africa Command and Naval Forces Europe and Africa, navies worked together to spot, raid and search participating ships during simulations near Djibouti, Mozambique and Seychelles.

The exercise, set to end Thursday, is one of three regional drills meant to strengthen collaborative policing in seas surrounding Afri-

ca, along with Obangame Express in West Africa and Phoenix Express in the Mediterranean.

“The security of those waters is very important to all of us,” said Adm. James Foggo, head of the Navy’s Europe and Africa command, at a December conference in Naples, Italy. “What we’re trying to do is assist our African partners and friends with maintaining that maritime security.”

Boosting cooperative policing is important in East Africa, where major sea lanes between Europe and Asia pass, said Christopher Jaspardo, national security affairs professor at the Naval War College.

Extremist threats are ongoing in Somalia and across the Gulf of Aden in Yemen, and drug smugglers often transit the region’s waters on their way to Europe with Afghan heroin, he said.

But, in recent months, the Pentagon has signaled its plans to shift

its focus in Africa from counter-terrorism missions to near-peer competition in an effort to counter Beijing and Moscow.

While China’s efforts to gain a foothold in East Africa have garnered attention, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States are also becoming major players in the region, Jaspardo said.

For example, Russia is trying to increase its access to the Red Sea and Turkey’s largest overseas military base is in Somalia. That makes it crucial for the U.S. and its allies to bolster their presence there, including through military exercises, he said.

“The geopolitical, economic environment is becoming more crowded and complicated,” Jaspardo said. “They (exercises) help us build influence with the countries in the region.”

Countries participating in Cutlass Express this year alongside the U.S. are Canada, Comoros,

Djibouti, France, India, Kenya, Madagascar, Mauritius, Mozambique, Portugal, Seychelles, Somalia, Tanzania, and the Netherlands.

Military leaders say the exercise has evolved since its inception almost a decade ago as African nations have improved their technology and participants have learned to better communicate and work together.

Last week, servicemembers from several of the participating services, including the U.S. Navy, U.S. Coast Guard, Indian navy and Royal Netherlands Marines, trained dozens of students in boarding, search and seizure techniques, including close-quarters combat, medical preparedness and search and detainment procedures, the U.S. Navy said in a release.

Soldier who shot himself appeals Army's decision to deny benefits

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

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Now, a law firm representing Holyan has appealed that finding, arguing that the first investigating officer had it right: while Holyan was negligent in his handling of the gun, his actions did not rise to the level of deliberate misconduct.

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"Absent supporting evidence of deliberate misconduct, the default rule is that simple negligence alone is not sufficient to negate the

presumption of in the line of duty," said Timmons, a former Army captain and judge advocate at Fort Hood. "That presumption was made by the initial investigating officer."

The Army maintains that its determination was warranted because it says Holyan was intoxicated when the shooting happened.

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cohol test, pointing out in their appeal that it was done by medical personnel for treatment purposes and that Holyan had been liberally swabbed with medical alcohol wipes and cleansers that contaminated the measurement.

The two sides, however, do not dispute the key moments of what happened the evening of April 17, 2017.

After Holyan showed off the alterations to his gun, it was put away, and the guests continued to eat, drink and converse, according to witness statements.

But the handgun reappeared later in the evening as a group of people was gathered around the kitchen table, and the gun ended up back in Holyan's hands.

"The investigation was unable to determine who may have placed [the round] there, unfortunately,"

Timmons said. "Everybody swore it was empty." Timmons argues that given the chain of events that evening, Holyan might have shot himself while laughing at a joke even if no alcohol had been present at the party at all.

"Was it stupid, reckless? Yes," he said. "We're acknowledging it was a bad decision, but a bad decision is the very definition of negligence, not intentional misconduct."

The office of the Secretary of the Army will review the appeal, with the ultimate decision made by the Army Human Resources Command at Fort Knox, Timmons said.

Airman, 23, found dead in parking lot in Alaska

Stars and Stripes

An airman was found dead in a parking lot in North Pole, Alaska, Eielson Air Force Base officials said Tuesday.

Senior Airman Elijah Evans, 23, was found dead on Monday, according to an Air Force statement, though where he was found is unclear. The Air Force said it

was a restaurant parking lot, while North Pole police quoted by KTVF News of Fairbanks said he was found at the Gorilla Fireworks parking lot.

The circumstances surrounding the incident are under investigation by the North Pole police and other local authorities, but foul play is not suspected, according to

the Air Force statement. The statement did not say if the airman was in a vehicle when he was found.

"We are heartbroken to have lost a valued member of our team yesterday," Col. Benjamin Bishop, 354th Fighter Wing commander, said in the statement. "Eielson considers itself a family and the loss of Elijah is felt

by each of us deeply. Our thoughts and prayers go out to his family and are with all those affected by this tragedy."

Evans was assigned to the 354th Logistics Readiness Squadron at Eielson, and hailed from Waldorf, Md. He joined the Air Force on May 10, 2016, according to the statement.

Sixers get Harris in six-player deal

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Tobias Harris drove the lane, tossed up a runner and buried the winner in what turned out to be his final shot for the Los Angeles Clippers.

His packed bags needed a new destination. Next stop, Philadelphia.

The 26-year-old Harris is headed to the 76ers as part of a late-night deal that suddenly gives the team the best starting five in the Eastern Conference and stamped them as legitimate title contenders.

Harris is ready for the move — he tweeted early Wednesday a GIF from the

opening credits of the 1990s sitcom “The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air” showing Will Smith’s character playing basketball.

The Sixers can only hope this trade turns into a story all about how the East got turned upside down.

They paid a steep price for the free agent: Sensational rookie guard Landry Shamet and four draft picks are headed to the Clippers. Philadelphia also traded forwards Wilson Chandler and Mike Muscala to Los Angeles.

A person familiar with the trade told The Associated Press the Sixers also acquired

center Boban Marjanovic and forward Mike Scott as part of the deal. The person spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because the trade had not yet been announced.

Harris, playing for his fifth NBA team, is having a breakout season with the Clippers. He averages 20.9 points and shoots nearly 50 percent from three-point range and is expected to start with All-Stars Joel Embiid and Ben Simmons, along with Jimmy Butler and JJ Redick, to form the best starting lineup this side of Golden State.

The Sixers suffered in the early years of “The Process”

but are clearly in a win-now mode. Harris and Butler both will be free agents this summer and both could command a maximum-level contract.

The Sixers’ four picks, in a trade first reported by ESPN, sent to the Clippers are their lottery-protected 2020 first-round pick, a 2021 first-rounder, a 2021 second-round pick and a 2023 second-round pick.

The Sixers are 34-20 and in fifth place in the Eastern Conference.

The Clippers are 30-25 and have shed the salary needed to make them attractive for major free agents.

NBA roundup

Leonard, Lowry help Raptors beat Embiid, 76ers

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Kyle Lowry had 20 points amid reports that Toronto has offered him in a trade, and the Raptors held off the Philadelphia 76ers 119-107 on Tuesday night in a matchup between two of the Eastern Conference’s top teams.

Kawhi Leonard scored 24 points and Serge Ibaka had 20 points and 10 rebounds to help Toronto overcome another big game for Joel Embiid.

Embiid had 37 points and 13 rebounds for his league-leading 44th double-double. Ben Simmons scored 20 points for Philadelphia, and Jimmy Butler had 18.

Lowry seemed unfazed by a report from Sports Illustrated that Toronto had offered him to Memphis as part of a trade package for Mike Conley and Marc Gasol.

Thunder 132, Magic 122: Russell Westbrook posted his seventh straight triple-double, leading host Oklahoma City to the win.

Westbrook finished with 16 points, 16 assists and 15 rebounds to match the longest triple-double streak of his career. It was his 20th of the season and No. 124 for his career.

Paul George scored 39 points to help the Thunder win for the eighth time in

nine games. Dennis Schroder had 20 points.

Evan Fournier scored 25 points for the Magic, and Aaron Gordon added 18 points and 10 assists.

Pacers 136, Lakers 94: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 24 points and host Indiana made 19 three-pointers while handing LeBron James the most lopsided loss of his career.

James’ teams lost by 36 points twice previously.

Myles Turner had 22 points to help the Pacers pick up their third consecutive victory. Thaddeus Young finished with 12 points, 11 rebounds and eight assists.

James had 18 points, nine rebounds and seven assists in his second game back since injuring his groin on Christmas Day. He didn’t play in the fourth quarter.

Grizzlies 108, Timberwolves 106: Mike Conley had 25 points and nine assists in possibly his last game with his current team, and host Memphis beat Minnesota on Justin Holiday’s two free throws with .1 seconds remaining.

Jaren Jackson Jr. added 23 points for Memphis, which won its second straight game. Ivan Rabb had a career-high 19 points to go along with 11 rebounds.

Karl-Anthony Towns had

26 points and 18 rebounds for Minnesota, and Dario Saric finished with 22 points.

Celtics 103, Cavaliers 96: Jayson Tatum scored 25 points, and visiting Boston earned its fifth straight victory despite missing All-Star guard Kyrie Irving.

A strained left hip prevented Irving from facing his former team, but the Celtics made up for his absence by getting 18 points from Gordon Hayward and 17 from Marcus Smart.

Rookie Collin Sexton scored 27 — but none in the fourth quarter — for the Cavs, who dropped to 3-20 since Dec. 19. Alec Burks, who has been linked to recent trade talks, added 21 for Cleveland. Larry Nance Jr. had 11 points and 12 rebounds.

Clippers 117, Hornets 115: Tobias Harris scored 34 points, including a running jumper with 4.3 seconds remaining, and visiting Los Angeles rallied from 20 points down to beat Charlotte.

Charlotte had a chance to tie or take the lead on its last possession, but Marvin Williams’ three-point attempt was short at the buzzer.

Lou Williams scored 31 points for the Clippers. Montrezl Harrell added 16 and Patrick Beverley had 15 points in Los Angeles’ third

road game in four days.

Pistons 105, Knicks 92: Blake Griffin scored 29 points, Andre Drummond had 17 points and 15 rebounds, and visiting Detroit handed New York its 14th straight loss.

Reggie Bullock and Reggie Jackson each added 19 points for the Pistons.

Dennis Smith Jr., playing his second game for New York, led the Knicks with 25 points.

New York has dropped a team-record 15 straight at Madison Square Garden. The Knicks haven’t won since Jan. 4 against the Lakers in Los Angeles. Their last win at MSG was a 136-134 overtime victory against Milwaukee on Dec. 1.

Heat 118, Trail Blazers 108: Hassan Whiteside had 28 points and 11 rebounds, and visiting Miami snapped a three-game losing streak.

Dwyane Wade added 22 points and nine rebounds for the Heat in the first of a five-game road trip.

CJ McCollum had 33 points for the Trail Blazers, who had won three straight but were coming off a five-day layoff. The loss snapped an eight-game winning streak for Portland at home.

Top 25 roundup

No. 1 Tennessee wins 17th straight

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — Tennessee has matched the longest winning streak of Rick Barnes' 32-year head coaching career.

Admiral Schofield and Grant Williams scored 13 points each as the top-ranked Volunteers defeated Missouri 72-60 on Tuesday night to earn their 17th straight victory, extending a school record. Barnes' only other 17-game winning streak came in 2009-10 at Texas.

"You've got to give these guys credit," Barnes said. "They've done the work, put it in. Now we're getting toward the end of the regular season, we're halfway through the conference season, I guess. It's only going to get tougher, and I think we know that."

The Vols (21-1, 9-0 SEC) want to make sure the similarities to that Texas team end there. That 2009-10 Texas squad started 17-0 and earned a No. 1 ranking but finished 24-10 with a first-round NCAA Tournament loss.

Tennessee extended the longest active Division I winning streak by spoiling Missouri coach Cuonzo Martin's return to Knoxville.

Martin coached Tennessee to a 63-41 record from 2011-14 but never completely won over the fan base. He left for California after leading the Vols to an NCAA regional semifinal appearance, turning down an offer of a raise and an extension.

Although Martin had split two meetings with Tennessee since taking over Missouri's program in 2017, neither of those games was in Knoxville. Before the opening tip, a "Thank You Cuonzo: Welcome Back to Rocky Top" message appeared on the video board.

"It felt good," Martin said. "A lot of good relationships, and I've maintained those. You try to keep it within a game, but it was good emotions for me. It really was."

Jordan Bowden had 12 points and Jordan Bone added 11 for Tennessee. Bone also had seven assists.

Javon Pickett scored 12

points, Jordan Geist had 11 and Xavier Pinson added 10 for Missouri, which lost for the fourth time in the last five games.

Tennessee earned this latest win even as Barnes conceded his team looked lethargic at times.

"I don't know if it was because it was a 9 o'clock game or what, but it kind of felt like everybody was tired or something like that," Bowden said. "But it's just about us going about our business and doing what we've got to do."

Missouri (11-10, 2-7) made five straight shots to take an early 17-13 lead and then missed 16 of its next 17 shots as Tennessee went on an 18-2 spurt.

Illinois 79, Michigan State 74: Illinois coach Brad Underwood had tears in his eyes after his Illini upset Tom Izzo's Spartans.

"Michigan State is a great team, and Tom is a great coach," Underwood said. "They're everything I want to be."

Ayo Dosunmu scored 24 points, and the Illini used its swarming defense to shock the Spartans. Illinois forced 24 turnovers by Michigan State, including 17 in the first half.

Fans stormed the court after the Illini dribbled out the final 9 seconds of the game.

"I mean, it's just one of 20 (Big Ten games), I know," Underwood said. "But man, it's also more than that, you know? It feels like one of those defining moments, I think, where we found out who we are."

Giorgi Bezhaniashvili scored 16 for Illinois (8-15, 4-8 Big Ten), and Trent Frazier added 15 as the Illini handed the Spartans (18-5, 9-3) their third straight loss.

No. 2 Duke 80, Boston College 55: Freshman Cameron Reddish scored 24 points, and host Duke pulled away to beat Boston College.

Zion Williamson had 16 points and a season-best 17 rebounds, RJ Barrett finished with 19 points and Tre Jones added 11 points for the Blue Devils (20-2, 8-1 Atlantic Coast Conference).

They overcame some

shaky early shooting by shooting 63 percent after halftime to claim their sixth straight win, and they will be no worse than tied for first in the league standings when they visit No. 3 Virginia on Saturday night.

Jordan Chatman scored 16 points while North Carolina native Ky Bowman finished with 11 — he averages 20.8 — on 5-of-17 shooting while facing constant pressure from Jones. BC (11-10, 2-7) gave Duke fits for a half before fading down the stretch of its third straight loss.

No. 5 Kentucky 76, South Carolina 48: PJ Washington scored 20 points, and host Kentucky routed South Carolina for its ninth consecutive victory.

The Wildcats (19-3, 8-1 Southeastern Conference) shot just 41 percent but held the Gamecocks to just 28 percent in the second half and 36 percent overall.

Washington fell short of his fourth consecutive double-double but posted his fourth 20-point game in the past five. Tyler Herro, Reid Travis each added 11 points for the Wildcats.

The Wildcats stayed within a game of the conference lead and improved to 28-2 at home against the Gamecocks (11-11, 6-3).

No. 7 Michigan 77, Rutgers 65: Freshman Ignas Brazdeikis scored 23 points and Michigan hit nine of its first 11 shots in opening a big lead and beating host Rutgers.

Zavier Simpson added 14 points, seven assists and seven rebounds as the Wolverines (21-2, 10-2 Big Ten) bounced back from a dreadful performance in a loss to Iowa to remain unbeaten in 11 all-games against the Scarlet Knights (11-11, 4-8).

No. 8 North Carolina 113, N.C. State 96: Luke Maye scored a season-high 31 points to go with 12 rebounds, and host North Carolina beat North Carolina State.

Freshman Coby White added 21 points for the Tar Heels (18-4, 8-1 Atlantic Coast Conference), who swept the regular-season set with

their nearby rival for the 12th time in 16 seasons under Hall of Fame coach Roy Williams.

UNC was in control all night, shooting 56 percent while dominating the glass and repeatedly getting to the line.

Braxton Beverly scored 17 points for the Wolfpack (16-7, 4-6).

St. John's 70, No. 10 Marquette 69: Shamorie Ponds scored 28 points, including a go-ahead layup with 16 seconds left, to give St. John's the victory over host Marquette.

The loss ended an eight-game winning streak for the Golden Eagles and was their first defeat at their new home this season after 14 victories.

Hauser scored 19 points and Howard 17 for Marquette (19-4, 8-2 Big East), which lost at St. John's 89-69 on Jan. 1.

Kansas State 74, No. 13 Kansas 67: Barry Brown scored 18 points, Xavier Sneed hit a crucial three-pointer with a minute to go, and Kansas State roughed up visiting Kansas to snap a frustrating eight-game losing streak against its biggest rival.

Sneed finished with 14 points and Dean Wade added 12 for the Wildcats (17-5, 7-2), who not only maintained their place atop the Big 12 but dealt another tough road loss to the Jayhawks.

Kansas (17-6, 6-4) is just 1-6 in true road games this season.

No. 22 Florida State 80, Syracuse 62: Terance Mann scored 22 points, Mfiondu Kabengele added 18 and Florida State beat host Syracuse.

Florida State (17-5, 5-4 Atlantic Coast Conference) won its fourth straight after starting conference play with four losses in five games, including consecutive setbacks on the road to Boston College and Pittsburgh.

Syracuse (16-7, 7-3 ACC) entered the game 2-3 against ranked teams, having beaten two on the road. But the Orange fell far behind early against the Seminoles, rallied to within a point in the second half and then fizzled at the end.

NHL roundup

Bergeron gets win in 1,000th game

Associated Press

BOSTON — Patrice Bergeron told his Boston teammates that all he wanted in his 1,000th career game was for the Bruins to come out of it with two points.

The Bruins did, as did Bergeron, who scored twice in Boston's 3-1 victory over the New York Islanders on Tuesday night.

"It's been a fun ride. It was a special game that way," said Bergeron, only the fifth player in Bruins' history to play 1,000 games for the club.

Bergeron scored early in the second period and added an empty-netter in the final minute to cap off the night.

"Did you really expect anything else? That guy just steps up in every situation," said Brad Marchand, who assisted on both of Bergeron's goals. "You know he's going to have a big game on a milestone night like tonight. It was great to see. He's one of the top players in the game for a reason."

Marchand made sure Bergeron got a keepsake from the night when he skated out to the blue line and retrieved the puck after Bergeron's first goal put Boston up 1-0 at 2:32 in the first period.

David Pastrnak also assisted on both goals for Bergeron, passing up an empty-net opportunity and leaving the puck for Bergeron to tap in with 55 seconds left.

"I saw him look back and I was like 'oh no, he's going to drop it,' but we were definitely alone and I very much appreciated it," Bergeron said.

Peter Cehlarik also scored and Tuukka Rask stopped 28 shots for the Bruins, who handed the Metropolitan Division-leading Islanders their first regulation loss in more than three weeks.

Jordan Eberle scored for the Islanders and Robin Lehner finished with 24 saves as New York's run of eight straight games with a point came to an end. The Islanders entered the game with a 6-0-2 stretch since a 2-1 loss to the New York Rangers on Jan. 12.

"We had a couple good looks and Tuukka made some good saves," Eberle said. "They're a good team over there. They don't give you much. We definitely had our opportunities, though."

The Islanders were just 1 for 5 on the power-play, failing to score on a great chance in the third when Boston's Matt Grzelcyk was called for two minors — tripping and slashing — on the same play with 11:41 left.

"At the end of the day we could've used another one, but give them credit. They killed it off," Islanders coach Barry Trotz said.

Capitals 3, Canucks 2: T.J. Oshie scored as part of a dominant performance, Braden Holtby made 30 saves

and stopped a penalty shot, and host Washington beat Vancouver in Jay Beagle's return to his old home arena.

Alex Ovechkin assisted on Oshie's 16th goal of the season to pick up his 1,180th career point and become NHL's career scoring leader among Russian players. Ovechkin went into the game tied atop that list with former teammate Sergei Fedorov.

Holtby made 13 saves and denied Bo Horvat on a penalty shot in a busy second period to help the struggling Capitals pick up two important points. Holtby was run over by Horvat prior to Elias Pettersson's goal with 7.6 seconds remaining and was attended to by a team athletic trainer before finishing the game.

Brett Connolly and Jakub Vrana scored third-period goals for the defending Stanley Cup champions, who had lost eight of their previous nine games.

Sharks 3, Jets 2 (OT): Joe Pavelski scored a short-handed goal 2:49 into overtime to lead visiting San Jose over Winnipeg.

Pavelski's 29th goal of the season came on a 2-on-1 with Brent Burns after a Winnipeg turnover, giving the Sharks a three-game winning streak to start off a four-game trip.

Logan Couture and Marcus Sorensen also scored for San Jose. Kevin Labanc had a pair of assists and Pavelski also had an assist. Martin Jones stopped 25 shots.

Blake Wheeler and Mathieu Perreault scored for the Jets, who had their three-game winning streak snapped and their run of seven consecutive victories at home ended.

Hurricanes 4, Penguins 0: Curtis McElhinney stopped 23 shots, Brett Pesce and Jordan Martinook scored from way out, and Michael Ferland and Andrei Svechnikov poured it on late as visiting Carolina began a pivotal five-game trip with a victory over Pittsburgh.

McElhinney collected his first shutout of the season and ninth of his 11-year career by stuffing Jared McCann and Jake Guentzel with sprawling saves in the first period and never letting up as the Hurricanes picked up two big points as they try to stay in the mix for their first playoff berth in nearly a decade.

Matt Murray made 28 saves for the Penguins but lost for the third time in four starts since the All-Star break.

Golden Knights 3, Lightning 2 (SO): Alex Tuch scored the only goal in a shootout and visiting Vegas halted a four-game losing streak with a victory over Tampa Bay.

Vegas got goals from Cody Eakin and Valentin Zykov in regulation. Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 24 shots.

Brayden Point and Mathieu Joseph

scored for the NHL-leading Lightning, and Andrei Vasilevskiy made 35 saves. Steven Stamkos had two assists to give him 14 points over his last 10 games.

Kings 5, Devils 1: Tyler Toffoli scored twice in 35 seconds early in the third period to spark visiting Los Angeles.

Toffoli, who had the overtime winner Monday against the Rangers, helped send the Kings to their third win in four games. Adrian Kempe, Dion Phaneuf and Ilya Kovalchuk also scored for Los Angeles.

Canadiens 4, Ducks 1: Brendan Gallagher had two goals and an assist, and host Montreal beat slumping Anaheim.

Jesper Kotkanen and Phillip Danault also scored for the Canadiens, who improved to 7-1-1 in their last nine games. Jonathan Drouin had three assists. Carey Price made 24 saves for his sixth straight victory — his longest winning streak since the 2016-17 season.

Predators 5, Coyotes 2: Craig Smith, Filip Forsberg and Ryan Ellis scored in the second period, and host Nashville beat Arizona to snap a three-game skid at home.

Pekka Rinne made 24 saves as Nashville avoided being swept by Arizona this season, though the Coyotes did take the series 2-1.

Sabres 5, Wild 4 (SO): Sam Reinhart scored the lone shootout goal and host Buffalo won for just the third time in nine games.

Reinhart also had a goal and an assist in regulation for the Sabres, who led by two in the second period before giving up Zach Parise's tying goal with 1:37 left in the third. Linus Ullmark stopped 41 shots through overtime in a game Buffalo never trailed.

Blackhawks 6, Oilers 2: Patrick Kane had a goal and an assist, and visiting Chicago scored four goals in less than a three-minute span of the third period.

Erik Gustafsson, John Hayden, Dylan Strome, Drake Caggiula and Dominik Kahun also scored for the Blackhawks, who have won five straight. Cam Ward stopped 25 shots.

Blue Jackets 6, Avalanche 3: Josh Anderson scored the tiebreaking goal with 9:31 remaining, Sergei Bobrovsky stopped 27 shots and visiting Columbus snapped a five-game skid by beating Colorado.

Pierre-Luc Dubois scored twice for Columbus, including an empty-netter. Oliver Bjorkstrand, Cam Atkinson and Alexander Wennberg also had goals.

Blues 3, Panthers 2: Vince Dunn scored with 3:53 left to cap a third-period rally from a two-goal deficit and lift visiting St. Louis over Florida.