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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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‘Small peacekeeping group’ of GIs to stay in Syria

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The White House will leave some 200 U.S. troops in Syria after other servicemembers withdraw in the coming months, a policy reversal that comes two months after President Donald Trump ordered troops out of Syria and claimed victory over Islamic State.

The announcement late Thursday came in the form of a one-sentence White House statement emailed to reporters and attributed to press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders. It gave no indication of where in Syria the troops will remain, how long they are expected to stay or precisely what their mission will be other than describing it as a “peacekeeping” operation.

“A small peacekeeping group of about 200 will remain in Syria for a period of time,” Sanders said in the statement.

Pentagon and White House

officials declined to provide additional information about Trump’s decision. They would not describe what Sanders meant by peacekeeping, a term typically reserved for a specific mission usually overseen by the United Nations and meant to keep violence from breaking out in tense areas. Peacekeeping missions stress not using any force except in self-defense, according to the UN. There are 14 active peacekeeping missions across the globe now.

One Pentagon official said the Syria mission probably would not fall under that category, describing it as likely being overseen by the United States and focused on providing logistics to partner forces and gathering intelligence. The official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity, said the troops who will withdraw from Syria are expected to do so by the end of April.

The White House’s an-

nouncement came after Trump spoke Thursday to Turkey’s President Recep Tayyip Erdogan by phone and had agreed to continue to coordinate “the creation of a potential safe zone” in northeastern Syria, according to a readout of the call provided by the Trump administration.

Trump’s initial announcement Dec. 19 that he would remove all of the roughly 2,000 American troops from Syria came just after the American and Turkish leaders spoke by phone. Trump’s decision stunned top American military officers overseeing the combat effort there and triggered former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis’ resignation in protest one day later.

Pentagon officials and others — including several prominent members of Congress — have since sought to convince Trump to keep at least some servicemembers in Syria. They argued the fight against ISIS was

not complete, and withdrawal risked the terrorist group’s return to prominence and the safety of the Kurdish-majority force that has conducted the bulk of the fighting with help from American advisers, artillery and airpower.

Turkey views that U.S.-backed group of Syrian rebels, the Syrian Democratic Forces, as a terrorist group and has repeatedly threatened military action against its Kurdish leadership.

Two U.S. officials said Friday that Trump’s decision to leave some troops in Syria was designed to quash concerns of allies who had expressed frustration with the president’s unilateral decision to leave the country. The officials said the administration hoped it would convince some of those allies, including the United Kingdom and France, to leave some of its troops in Syria, as well.

Navy to fly Union Jack again, replacing First Navy Jack

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The Navy will swap its First Navy Jack, the small flag flown from the bows of naval vessels, for the traditional Union Jack this summer to mark a “new era of competition,” Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson said in a statement Thursday.

A version of the Union Jack — today 50 white stars on a blue field — was flown on Navy vessels as early as 1777.

The Union Jack will fly on each Navy ship starting June 4, corresponding with the 77th anniversary of the start of the Battle of Midway in 1942. The Navy in its statement said the act will honor “the greatest naval battle in history.”

“Make no mistake: We have entered a new era of competition. We must recommit to the core attributes that made us

successful at Midway: integrity, accountability, initiative, and toughness,” Richardson said in a Navy statement Thursday. “For more than 240 years, the Union Jack, flying proudly from jack staffs aboard U.S. Navy warships, has symbolized these strengths.”

A jack staff is a small staff on the bow from which the jack is flown.

There will be one exception, however. The Navy plans to re-establish its tradition of flying the First Navy Jack flag on the service’s longest-serving, active and commissioned ship — a title that now belongs to the 7th Fleet flagship, USS Blue Ridge.

The First Navy Jack — featuring a rattlesnake and the words “DON’T TREAD ON ME” on a red-and-white striped background — replaced the Union Jack on the first anniversary of the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorism attacks. A 2002 Navy directive ordered the First Navy Jack be flown on all

Navy ships throughout the global war on terrorism.

“Today, terrorists threaten free commerce and individual liberty,” Cmdr. Clayton Saunders, USS Rushmore commanding officer, said at the time. The First Navy Jack, he said, represented a renewed commitment by the Navy to our first principles, to secure freedom, both at home and abroad.”

After June 4, sailors may continue to wear the First Navy Jack patch on their uniforms if they so choose, according to the Navy statement.

“The Union Jack is deeply connected to our heritage and our rise as a global nation with a global Navy,” Richardson said in the Navy statement. “The Navy is a symbol that projects American values to the world. Just as the Navy embodies the values and principles that we hold dear, our very appearance in port and at anchor communicates important messages.”

US halts airstrikes on Taliban drug labs

BY PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. military has ended a controversial bombing campaign that targeted Taliban drug labs across Afghanistan, without appearing to significantly disrupt the group's ability to generate revenue from the illegal narcotics trade.

In its most recent report on Wednesday, the Defense Department Inspector General said the operation was officially terminated during the last quarter of 2018.

The campaign, known as Operation Iron Tempest, was launched in Nov. 2017 to hurt the Taliban financially. It was part of the Trump administration's broader strategy for Afghanistan, which relaxed rules of engagement in a bid to push the insurgents to the negotiating table.

From its inception, critics described the campaign — which included costly strikes by American aircraft and special operations raids — as a waste of resources, not

least because the facilities it targeted could be rebuilt within days at little cost.

A year of airstrikes and raids led to, "insurgent confusion, concern, and changes to their tactics, techniques and procedures," the IG report said, citing the 9th Air and Space Expeditionary Task Force — Afghanistan. But it didn't specify how much revenue the Taliban lost — the main aim of the campaign.

According to a report last month by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction, the strikes on narcotics facilities denied the Taliban more than \$42 million. In 2017, the U.S. military said the facilities helped the group generate \$200 million a year.

SIGAR has repeatedly raised concerns about DOD's methodology for calculating the amount of money denied to the Taliban because of the airstrikes, a concern echoed by independent experts.

Over 200 strikes were carried out throughout Operation Iron Tempest, but just two were conducted in the last quarter

of 2018, both in southern Helmand province, the IG report said.

American B-52 and F-22 aircraft and Afghan A-29s, as well as high-mobility artillery rocket systems, aircraft carrier-based F/A-18s, aircraft for in-flight refueling and joint surveillance radar systems were all used during the campaign.

"Operating these aircraft costs anywhere from \$9,798 per hour for an F/A-18 to \$35,294 per hour for an F-22," SIGAR said in June. "Destroyed labs, on the other hand, are quickly and easily replaced with minimal cost."

"Ultimately, it is unclear whether targeting drug labs through an aerial bombing campaign is cost-effective or strategically wise," SIGAR said.

The concerns followed frank comments by Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, who said the U.S. "should not be using an F-22 to destroy a narcotics factory in Afghanistan."

Afghanistan remains the world's top producer of illicit opium, used to make heroin.

Recruits with hate-group ties face little vetting

BY ALEX HORTON
The Washington Post

Officially, U.S. Coast Guard Lt. Christopher Paul Hasson wielded a secret security clearance and oversaw development of vessels designed for drug enforcement and counterterrorism operations.

But, prosecutors said, time at his work computer also drifted to planning a domestic terrorist attack and building a hit list as the self-avowed white nationalist stockpiled guns at home.

Hasson's arrest last week in Maryland, where he faces drug and gun charges, has raised questions about how the military screens for hate group affiliations or other threats, especially compared with how the Pentagon has approached vetting its foreign recruits — an arduous process that has led to a number of lawsuits.

Few tools to screen for hate group affiliation are available beyond visible tattoo inspec-

tions and a criminal record check during the enlistment and commission process said Air Force Maj. Carla Gleason, a Pentagon spokeswoman. Individual military services have rules for how they rescreen and investigate potential violators after they are in uniform, she said.

By contrast, a Pentagon program for skilled foreign recruits designed to trade expedited citizenship for service requires layers of intensive vetting.

Recruits with valid visas are screened by the State and Homeland Security departments before even entering the program, and since 2016 they have been subjected to additional counterintelligence screening and security checks similar to a top-secret clearance.

Continuous vetting requirements, even after recruits had been naturalized, were reversed by a federal court after a judge ruled they were so stringent

that they violated constitutional equal protection laws. The Pentagon said it feared insider threats could gain entry in the military through the program.

"The military is neglecting checks on native-born Americans," said Margaret Stock, a retired Army officer who helped implement the foreign recruit program at the Pentagon. "And they're focused on vetting the least dangerous group in the military."

The Pentagon could institute simpler, broad checks for native-born and foreign recruits alike to block or catch more bad actors, she said.

The Defense Department said it feared security holes in the Military Accessions Vital to the National Interest program, or MAVNI, which was shuttered in 2017, though it acknowledged in court filings that none of the thousands of naturalized recruits from the program have been charged with espionage-related crimes.

One Chinese national who entered the program was charged with espionage but did not make it to basic training, and the new vetting procedures did not play a role in his capture, court filings said.

The additional Pentagon vetting became such a bureaucratic albatross that it essentially imploded the program. Other lawsuits and decisions related to vetting and naturalization procedures led to victories for immigrant recruits.

Similarly, heightened screening for green-card holders have also been introduced and subsequently challenged.

Hasson, 49, was ordered held for 14 days as prosecutors weigh additional charges in addition to the weapons and drug offenses. He had previously served in the U.S. Marine Corps and Army National Guard. Coast Guard officials said he is no longer in his position as an acquisitions officer at their Washington headquarters.

Navy shows off aircraft at Aero India 2019

BY CHRISTIAN LOPEZ
Stars and Stripes

U.S. military aircraft — including Navy F/A-18E Super Hornets and a P-8A Poseidon — traveled to Yelahanka Air Force Station in Bengaluru, India, to take part in the 12th edition of Aero India 2019 underway through Sunday.

Hosted by the Defense Ministry of India, the Indian air force and many other organizations, Aero India is one of the largest air shows in Asia. Held every two years since 1996, it functions as India's premiere aerospace exhibition, trade and air show.

The Navy sees Aero India as an opportunity to strengthen its military ties with India, a regional partner. This year, the trade show also provides a

‘Aero India offers an excellent opportunity to showcase the P-8A Poseidon to our regional partners throughout the Indo-Pacific.’

Lt. Cmdr. David Shultz
Patrol Squadron 47 detachment officer-in-charge

platform to show off the P-8A, the most up-to-date version of the Navy's anti-submarine workhorse.

Boeing in April 2017 agreed to supply the U.S., United Kingdom and Australian navies with 17 of the modernized aircraft, a contract worth \$2.2 billion. The Indian air force since 2009 has flown an older variant, the P-8I, according to Boeing's website.

“Aero India offers an excellent opportunity to showcase

the P-8A Poseidon to our regional partners throughout the Indo-Pacific,” said Lt. Cmdr. David Shultz, the Patrol Squadron 47 detachment officer-in-charge, in a Navy statement released Tuesday.

Super Hornets of Strike Fighter Squadron 27, the Royal Maces, joined the P-8A and 17 other U.S. military aircraft to perform aerial demonstrations and be put on display, according to a Navy statement.

“Our participation in Aero

India ... will strengthen our partnership with India and help establish standardized procedures for continued anti-submarine warfare cooperation in the future,” said Lt. Michael Doehler, the patrol squadron assistant officer-in-charge of the air show detachment, in the statement.

Both squadrons — strike fighters and anti-submarine patrol — are-deployed to the U.S. 7th Fleet, which is headquartered at Yokosuka Naval Base, Japan.

In May, the Defense Department renamed U.S. Pacific Command to Indo-Pacific Command, reflecting the rising strategic importance of the Indian Ocean, India and Sri Lanka.

Typhoon interrupts 3-nation military drills out of Guam

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

A typhoon has forced the Air Force to pause a large-scale exercise involving nearly 100 aircraft and almost 3,000 U.S., Australian and Japanese servicemembers out of Andersen Air Force Base, Guam.

“Cope North 2019 paused Feb. 22 as a precautionary measure due to hazardous conditions and potentially damaging winds caused by Typhoon Wutip,” the Air Force said in a statement Friday.

The Joint Typhoon Warning Center upgraded Wutip, with winds of 75 mph and gusts up to 90 mph, to a typhoon Friday. It was forecast to pass 167 miles southwest of Andersen at 5 a.m. Sunday, possibly as a Category 3 storm.

“For the safety and security of assets, aircraft will either bed down at Andersen Air Force Base, Guam, or relocate to alternate locations until the weather is more favorable for

safe operations,” the Air Force statement said.

Servicemembers on Guam had been conducting humanitarian-assistance and disaster-relief training this week.

The storm provided them with an opportunity to swiftly implement an inclement weather plan for aircraft and test their ability to rapidly maneuver throughout the theater at a moment's notice, Col. Jason Cockrum, U.S. Cope North 2019 exercise director and 35th Fighter Wing operations group commander, said in the statement.

“Typhoon Wutip is an opportunity to demonstrate the air power the three nations provide, and the multilateral alliance is overcoming this weather challenge through deliberate planning and disciplined execution,” he said.

The exercise, which began Monday and is scheduled to run until March 8, will resume once conditions improve, the Air Force said.

Couple thought murder plot untraceable on Snapchat

Associated Press

ST. JOSEPH, Mich. — A woman and her boyfriend were deployed with the U.S. Army in South Korea when they conspired via Snapchat to kill her husband so she could claim the life insurance money, police in Michigan said.

Berrian County Judge Sterling Schrock ruled Wednesday in a preliminary hearing that the murder trial of Kemia Hassel, 22, and Jeremy Cuellar, 24, will begin April 30.

Both have pleaded not guilty in the Dec. 31 killing of U.S. Army Sgt. Tyrone Hassel III. Cuellar was also charged with a felony firearms count.

Authorities say Hassel, 23, was ambushed while visiting his family in St. Joseph Township. He died of multiple gunshot wounds, including one to the head, according to the autopsy report.

All three were soldiers stationed at Fort Stewart in Georgia.

Kemia Hassel told police in a

signed statement that she spent months planning how to kill her husband so she could continue her romantic relationship with Cuellar, Township Police Officer Mike Lanier testified Wednesday.

Kemia and Tyrone Hassel married in 2016 and had a 1-year-old son. She told police she was unhappy with her marriage but didn't want to go through a divorce because she then wouldn't be able to receive any life insurance money, Lanier said.

Hassel and Cuellar began plotting while they were deployed in South Korea last year, Lanier said. The pair communicated through Snapchat because they believed the social media app's temporary messages would make it difficult for police to trace, he said.

Army Specialist Jaquan Hamilton and Army Corporal Tatanya Butler testified that they were aware of Kemia Hassel and Cuellar's affair and their plan.

Mueller report puts focus on attorney general

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — William Barr has been attorney general for just one week but is on the cusp of staring down what will almost certainly be the most consequential decision of his long career: how much of the special counsel's findings to make public.

The position catapults him from Justice Department outsider free to theorize and speculate on special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation to the man at the center of the legal and political firestorm that will accompany its looming conclusion.

With Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein preparing to exit after supervising the day-to-day investigation for nearly two years, and with President Don-

ald Trump loyalist Matthew Whitaker now replaced in the top job, Barr is in the hot seat: He is responsible for navigating the department through congressional and public demands for details of Mueller's findings while dealing with a White House that may challenge, or even stifle, the conclusions.

Friends say Barr is accustomed to pressure-cooker situations by virtue of his experience as attorney general from 1991 to 1993 under President George H.W. Bush and other senior Justice Department jobs. He oversaw the department's response when Los Angeles erupted in riots after the Rodney King verdict and when Cuban inmates took hostages at a federal prison in Alabama. He blessed Bush administration

pardons in the Iran-Contra scandal and offered legal advice on the White House's ability to invade Panama.

In this case, though, no less than the fate of Trump's presidency may hang in the balance of whatever Barr decides.

"I'm sure it's going to be a tough set of decisions and circumstances, but Bill doesn't shy away from tough situations," said former Justice Department colleague Timothy Flanigan. "He's not likely to sit there fretting over what does this mean for his legacy or his long-term political viability."

Key decisions are expected soon as Mueller shows signs of concluding his investigation into Russian interference in the 2016 U.S. presidential election and possible coordination with the Trump campaign.

New election ordered in disputed NC House race

Associated Press

RALEIGH, N.C. — North Carolina's elections board Thursday ordered a new election in the nation's last undecided congressional race after the Republican candidate conceded his lead was tainted by evidence of ballot-tampering by political operatives working for him.

The State Board of Elections voted 5-0 in favor of a do-over in the mostly rural 9th Congressional District but did not immediately set a date. In moving to order a new election, board Chairman Bob Cordle cited

"the corruption, the absolute mess with the absentee ballots."

The board action came after GOP candidate Mark Harris, in a surprising turn, dropped his bid to be declared the winner and instead called for a new election. He reversed course on the fourth day of a board hearing at which investigators and witnesses detailed evidence of ballot fraud by operatives on his payroll.

"Through the testimony I've listened to over the past three days, I believe a new election should be called," Harris said. "It's become clear to me that the public's

confidence in the 9th District seat general election has been undermined to an extent that a new election is warranted."

At the same time, Harris denied any knowledge of the illegal practices allegedly used by those working on his behalf.

Harris left the hearing room without answering questions. It was not immediately clear whether he intends to run in a new election.

The Democrat in the race, Dan McCready, hailed the board decision as "a great step forward for democracy in North Carolina."

Smollett's character removed from 'Empire' episodes

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Actor Jussie Smollett's character on "Empire" will be removed from the final two episodes of this season in the wake of his arrest on charges that he staged a racist, anti-gay attack on himself last month in downtown Chicago, producers of the Fox TV show announced Friday.

The announcement came a day after Smollett turned himself in to police, appeared in court on a felony charge of disorderly conduct for allegedly filing a false police report, and left jail after posting bond.

"While these allegations are very disturbing, we are placing our trust in the legal system as the process plays," "Empire" executive producers said in a written statement. "We are also aware of the effects of this process on the cast and crew

members who work on our show and to avoid further disruption on set, we have decided to remove the role of 'Jamal' from the final two episodes of the season."

"Empire" has nine episodes left to air in its fifth season; the last two episodes are still being worked on.

Smollett, who is black and gay, plays a gay character on the show that follows a black family as they navigate the ups and downs of the recording industry.

Police said Smollett planned the hoax because he was unhappy with his salary and wanted to promote his career. Before the attack, he also sent a letter that threatened him to the Chicago studio where "Empire" is shot, police said.

In a four-page court document laying out the allegations against Smollett, prosecutors said two brothers told police that

Smollett paid them \$3,500 to help stage an attack on himself.

Prosecutors allege Smollett hired the brothers, Abimbola "Abel" Osundairo and Olabinjo "Ola" Osundairo, to buy masks and a rope — transactions recorded on surveillance video. As for the alleged attack, the actor instructed Abel Osundairo to "not hurt him too badly and give him a chance to appear to fight back," according to the filing.

The Osundairos, who are of Nigerian descent, have said they were born and raised in Chicago.

Chicago Police Superintendent Eddie Johnson said at a news conference Thursday that investigators reviewed extensive phone records between Smollett and the brothers, including calls from when the brothers were in Nigeria after the incident.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Man hits woman, bites off her father's ear

WV MORGANTOWN — A West Virginia man is accused of hitting a woman and then biting off her father's ear when he came to her defense.

The Dominion Post reported William Kingsley Clark is charged with malicious wounding by Morgantown police and battery by the Monongalia County Sheriff's Department. Authorities say officers responding to a report of domestic violence on Monday found Clark "highly intoxicated" and covered in blood.

Officers were told the man had hit the woman and then bit off her father's ear when asked to leave. Police say the father beat Clark with a frying pan to stop the attack.

While in custody at the sheriff's department, deputies say Clark started smoking a hidden cigarette. They say a deputy tried to intervene and was hit in the groin and face.

THC found in food sample from school

GA ATLANTA — Investigators said THC has been found in a food sample taken from an Atlanta-area middle school where students were sent to the hospital on Valentine's Day.

The Georgia Bureau of Investigation said in a news release Thursday that tests showed THC, the main psychoactive component in marijuana, was found in one of the samples that "has the appearance of cereal."

Fulton County school officials have said 28 students at Sandtown Middle School in South Fulton were sickened and taken to hospitals. A school system spokeswoman said at the

time that the students reported feeling shortness of breath and other reactions after eating food or candy.

Police: Woman robbed homes during funerals

AL PRICEVILLE — An Alabama woman is accused of breaking into the homes of people who were attending relatives' funerals.

A statement released Thursday by police in the north Alabama town of Priceville says they've arrested Jennifer Lynn Azizian, 43, on four counts of burglary.

Police said evidence obtained in a search of the woman's cellphone shows she had been researching obituaries for some time. They said she would break into the homes of dead peoples' families during the funeral.

Authorities already had video of a suspect and her vehicle, and Azizian was stopped following a possible burglary.

27 of 28 firefighters quit over safety issues

ME THORNDIKE — Nearly all of a Maine town's firefighters have quit following a heated meeting with local officials.

The Bangor Daily News reported all but one of the 28 members in the volunteer department in Thorndike resigned after the town Select Board meeting Wednesday.

The firefighters said in a letter that they are resigning due to "outdated and unsafe equipment" that town officials refuse to replace.

Before the meeting, the firefighters had wanted the town to reinstate George Russell as a firefighter and release about \$85,000 from the department's truck and equipment replace-

ment fund.

Russell stepped down as chief after he acknowledged stealing more than \$5,000 from the department in 2014.

Second Selectman Bob Carter said the town has mutual aid agreements with other communities in case of emergencies.

Furloughed park ranger wins lottery

NJ TRENTON — A park ranger furloughed during the partial federal government shutdown has claimed a \$29.5 million lottery jackpot.

The New Jersey Lottery on Wednesday announced Judith Smith had purchased the winning Dec. 17 Pick-6 ticket days before the shutdown closed the Fort Wadsworth recreation area on Staten Island, N.Y.

The Bayonne, N.J., resident and her two children put the ticket in a safe place while seeking legal and financial advice before claiming the jackpot.

Fleeing man hides in hotel with bow, arrow

DE SEAFORD — Police in Delaware said a man who skipped out on a restaurant bill barricaded himself in a nearby hotel, armed with a hunting-style bow and arrow.

The Daily Times of Salisbury reported Seaford police responding to Grotto's Pizza on Tuesday quickly arrested a female suspect, Summer Bueso-Shinn, 24. But Schuyler Sutton, 28, had fled to a Days Inn, where police received reports of him walking the hallways with a bow and arrow.

When officers tried to contact him in his room, he refused to come out for several hours before eventually surrendering.

In addition to the theft charge, Sutton is wanted out of Montgomery County, Md.,

for first-degree burglary. He's also accused of slapping a server's rear end as he left the restaurant.

School roof collapse means 2nd snow day

IA WATERLOO — The partial collapse of a roof has forced classes to be canceled at a Waterloo elementary school.

Waterloo Community Schools Superintendent Jane Lindaman told the Waterloo-Cedar Falls Courier that no one was injured when the roof section buckled Wednesday morning under the weight of snow at Lowell Elementary.

The district had canceled all classes Wednesday, but Lowell's students got Thursday off as well.

Lindaman said the district had been monitoring and removing snow as needed, saying the overnight snow "certainly came heavier, and there was plenty of it."

Woman sentenced for food stamp scheme

NJ NEWARK — The former owner of a small grocery store in New Jersey's largest city is headed to prison for her role in a food stamps-for-cash scheme that cheated the government out of more than \$885,000.

Maria Teresa Venegas received a two-year sentence Wednesday and must pay \$888,487 in restitution. The Newark woman had pleaded guilty last September to a fraud count.

Federal prosecutors say Venegas owned Jenny's Deli in Newark from November 2011 to March 2018. During that time, she illegally gave some customers cash in return for their food stamp benefits.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Pacers find ways to win without All-Star Oladipo

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — When Victor Oladipo crashed to the floor in late January, the silence inside Bankers Life Fieldhouse was deafening.

Teammates quietly expressed best wishes to their injured teammate as he was wheeled off the court on a stretcher. Fans wondered aloud if this was just another chapter in Indianapolis' injury curse that has claimed Peyton Manning, Paul George and Andrew Luck during the previous eight years. League insiders debated how far the Pacers would slide in the Eastern Conference standings.

Somehow, after four consecutive losses, Indiana turned the page and won six of its next seven games heading into the All-Star break, still third in the East.

"We're just going out there and playing basketball," point guard Darren Collison said. "We're keeping the game simple and easy. Everybody is confident. It's getting closer to playoff basketball."

After tinkering with his lineup for a few games, coach Nate McMillan settled on a rotation that looks remarkably similar to what he used prior to Oladipo's season-ending right knee injury.

Starting forwards Thaddeus Young, a co-captain, and Bojan Bogdanovic reasserted themselves as leaders — just like when the Pacers went 7-4 without Oladipo in November and December.

Kevin Pritchard, the Pacers president of basketball operations, refused to panic. Instead of making a blockbuster deal at the trade deadline or looking toward next season, he simply added a future second-round pick for trade leverage and signed veteran guard Wesley Matthews, someone McMillan coached for two seasons in Portland. The deal, McMillan said, came with understanding Matthews would start.

And then, just like last season, Oladipo became the voice for Indiana's surprise turnaround.

"I'm not sure how important it was for them but it was important for me because I felt they needed to hear my voice and let them know that I'm good," Oladipo said recently, describing a pregame meeting he had with his teammates Feb. 2 in Miami. "I told them that we're at our best when people don't believe in us. I reminded them how good they are, that everyone was overreacting but they didn't need to. They're capable of doing very special things, even when I'm not there."

A few hours later, Indiana's longest losing streak in 13 months ended with a 95-88 victory over the Heat. Since then, they've been virtually unbeatable.

They closed out that four-game road trip with a 109-107 victory at New Orleans then blew out the two Los Angeles teams after returning home. They rolled past Cleveland and Charlotte before blowing a fourth-quarter lead against Milwaukee. The Pacers return to action Friday when the Pelicans come to town.

Replacing a two-time All-Star at mid-season is never easy, especially one who won last season's steals title and one who is capable of pouring in more than 20 points per game.

But what the Pacers have done is rely on the key same elements that helped them make the playoffs and nearly eliminate LeBron James in the first round last season when everyone else wrote them off as a lottery team.

"They're really good defensively, really committed at that end of the floor and if you do that every night, you're going to have a chance," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said. "It seems like they have a great chemistry. They've got a good mix of players that play hard and play together."

Last February, with the Pacers in playoff contention and presumably in position to upgrade, nearly half the team's players asked Pritchard not to do a thing so they could finish the season themselves. He heeded their advice then just as he did during the offseason and earlier this month.

Rather than trying to replace Oladipo with a star, Pritchard went with his gut instinct and decided to let this roster play it out with only the addition of Matthews.

Indiana plays 10 of its final 24 games against teams in the top five of each conference, including a brutal eight-game stretch in March during which they face Denver and Oklahoma City twice and play at Golden State and Boston.

Then, of course, where Oladipo's presence will be sorely missed.

"What we'll miss most is him getting a bucket down the stretch," Collison said. "Teams that don't have a best player like that struggle with that. But we know what we have to do."

And Oladipo is convinced the Pacers will do just that — with or without him.

"When things get tough, I hope I can do whatever I can to help them get back on track," he said. "But they're more than capable of doing good things without me."

Roundup

NBA-best Bucks hold off Celtics

Associated Press

MILWAUKEE — Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 12 of his 30 points in the fourth quarter, Khris Middleton hit a three-pointer in the closing seconds and the NBA-leading Milwaukee Bucks held off the Boston Celtics 98-97 on Thursday.

On the second-to-last position, Marcus Smart forced a jump ball with Antetokounmpo. Antetokounmpo tipped the jump to Brook Lopez, who deflected it toward the basket, but missed as the shot clock expired.

The referees huddled during the timeout and put 3.5 seconds on the clock for the Celtics.

Smart inbounded the ball over the towering Lopez and dropped a pass into Kyrie Irving's hands at the top of the key. With Eric Bledsoe draped all over him, Irving drove the lane, seemed to stumble and missed an awkward shot as time expired. The Bucks won the season series 2-1, their first over the Celtics since 2014-15.

Antetokounmpo added 13 rebounds, Middleton had 15 points and a season-high 13 rebounds, and Malcolm Brogdon had 15 points for the Bucks. They have won 15 of the last 17 games, including nine of the last 10, to improve to 44-14. Horford added 21 points and 17 rebounds for Boston.

Lakers 111, Rockets 106: LeBron James scored 29 points, Brandon Ingram added 27 and host Los Angeles rallied from a 19-point deficit midway through the third quarter to defeat Houston.

James Harden led Houston with 30 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists before fouling out with 1:24 remaining. It is his 32nd consecutive game where he has scored 30 or more points, overtaking Wilt Chamberlain for the second-longest streak in NBA history. Chamberlain also holds the record at 65 games.

Warriors 125, Kings 123: Stephen Curry scored 36 points, hitting 10 three-pointers, and Golden State survived a hectic finish to beat visiting Sacramento.

76ers 106, Heat 102: Tobias Harris had 12 of his 23 points in the fourth quarter, JJ Redick hit a late three-pointer and host Philadelphia overcame All-Star center Joel Embiid's absence to beat Miami.

Cavaliers 111, Suns 98: Cedi Osman scored 19 points, Kevin Love had 16 points and 11 rebounds and Cleveland sent visiting Phoenix to its franchise-record 16th straight loss.

Trail Blazers 113, Nets 99: Jusuf Nurkic had 27 points and 12 rebounds, new backup Enes Kanter added 18 points and nine boards in his debut with his new team, and Portland beat host Brooklyn.

Pats owner Kraft arrested for solicitation

Associated Press

FORT LAUDERDALE, Fla. — New England Patriots owner Robert Kraft is being charged with misdemeanor solicitation of prostitution after he was twice videotaped paying for a sex act at an illicit massage parlor, police in Florida said Friday.

Jupiter police told reporters Friday that the 77-year-old Kraft hasn't been arrested. A warrant will be issued and his attorneys will be notified. Kraft has denied wrongdoing.

Jupiter police said details about the charges against Kraft will not be released until next week.

The charge comes amid a widespread crackdown on sex trafficking in the area surrounding Palm Beach County. About 200 arrest warrants have been issued in recent days and more are expected. Police said they secretly planted undercover cameras in targeted massage parlors and videotaped the interactions between men and the female employees.

In a statement, a spokesper-

son for Kraft said they "categorically deny that Mr. Kraft engaged in any illegal activity. Because it is a judicial matter, we will not be commenting further."

The Patriots won the Super Bowl earlier this month in Atlanta, their sixth in the last 18 seasons.

Jupiter Police Chief Daniel Kerr said he was shocked to learn Kraft, who is worth \$6 billion, was paying for sex inside a strip-mall massage parlor, the Orchids of Asia Day Spa.

"We are as equally stunned as everyone else," Kerr said.

The Palm Beach County State Attorney's Office, which would prosecute the case, had no comment.

Kraft lives in Massachusetts and has a home in the Palm Beach area. He is a frequent guest of President Donald Trump at his Mar-a-Lago club. Though a Democrat, he is friendly with Trump.

Kraft's wife Myra Hiatt died in 2011. He has been dating 39-year-old actress Ricki Noel Lander since 2012.

The NFL did not immediate-

ly respond to a message Friday seeking comment.

Most people charged for the first time for soliciting a prostitute in Florida are allowed to enter a diversion program, said attorney David Weinstein, a former prosecutor. Kraft would have to perform 100 hours of community service and pay to attend an educational program about the negative effects of prostitution and human trafficking.

Kraft, who made his initial fortune through a packaging company, was a Patriots season ticket owner when he purchased the team's previous stadium in 1988, then used his leverage to buy the team in 1994 for \$172 million to keep it from moving to St. Louis.

He hired Bill Belichick to be his coach in 2000 and the team subsequently drafted quarterback Tom Brady, launching their nearly two decades of success.

Under Kraft, the Patriots have been the most successful team in pro sports, having made it to 10 Super Bowls, winning six, including this year

against the Los Angeles Rams.

But there also have been issues involving team actions under Belichick.

In 2007, the Patriots were caught filming signals from New York Jets coaches; New England was suspected of doing so against other teams, as well, and that was confirmed later on. NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell fined the Patriots \$250,000 and stripped them of their 2008 first-round draft pick. Belichick was fined \$500,000, the most an NFL coach ever was fined.

In the 2014 AFC championship game, the team — specifically, star quarterback Tom Brady — was accused by the Indianapolis Colts of doctoring footballs.

The NFL concluded that Patriots employees were involved in deflating the footballs and Brady was "at least generally aware" it was being done. After lengthy legal battles, Brady served a four-game suspension at the beginning of the 2016 season and the Patriots were fined \$1 million.

College basketball roundup

No. 2 Gonzaga routs Pepperdine, wins 17th straight

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — On a night when Josh Perkins became the career assist leader at No. 2 Gonzaga, the Bulldogs clinched a seventh consecutive West Coast Conference regular-season title and kept the door open to a possible No. 1 ranking next week with its 17th straight victory.

Rui Hachimura scored 23 points, leading four Zags in double figures as the Bulldogs beat Pepperdine 92-64 on Thursday night.

"A conference title is one of the goals on our board at the start of the year," coach Mark Few said. "It's a heck of an accomplishment."

"Everybody has their eyes on bigger prizes," Few added,

including a deep run in the NCAA Tournament.

Perkins scored 10 points and dished out nine assists, giving him 670 assists in his career. That beat the record of 668 assists set by Matt Santangelo, the point guard on Gonzaga's Elite Eight team that captured the attention of the nation in 1999.

Zach Norvell Jr. added 21 points and Brandon Clarke had 16 points, 11 rebounds and five blocks for Gonzaga (26-2, 13-0 WCC), which won its 17th consecutive game, longest streak in the nation.

Darnell Dunn scored 16 and Jade Smith had 13 for Pepperdine (12-16, 5-9), which lost to the Zags for the 36th consecutive time dating to 2002.

Colbey Ross had 12 points

and eight assists.

No 7 Michigan 69, Minnesota 60: Jordan Poole scored 22 points to lead a long-range shooting spree and the visiting Wolverines beat the Golden Gophers to set up a weekend matchup against rival Michigan State for first place in the Big Ten.

Jon Teske had 17 points and seven rebounds and Ignas Brazdeikis added 10 points for Michigan (24-3, 13-3). The Wolverines are tied with the Spartans at the top of the conference, with Purdue a half-game behind.

Jordan Murphy had 18 points and 15 rebounds, and Daniel Oturu finished with 18 points and 12 rebounds for Minnesota (17-10, 7-9).

Service academies

Loyola (Md.) 79, Navy 70: Jaylin Andrews and Andrew Kostecka scored 17 points apiece as the host Greyhounds topped the Midshipmen.

Isaiah Hart added 13 points, Chuck Champion scored 11 and Casmir Ochiaka had 10 for Loyola. Kostecka also had eight rebounds for the Greyhounds, while Hart posted seven assists.

George Kiernan had 18 points and eight rebounds for Navy (9-17, 6-9 Patriot League). John Carter Jr. added 11 points and nine rebounds. Evan Wieck had 11 points and three assists.

The Greyhounds leveled the season series against the Midshipmen with the win.

NHL roundup

Alex Ovechkin notches 650th career goal

Associated Press

TORONTO — Alex Ovechkin scored a milestone goal, yet found the points for a Washington Capitals victory far more important.

Ovechkin scored the 650th goal of his career and Braden Holtby made 40 saves as the Capitals defeated the Toronto Maple Leafs 3-2 on Thursday night.

“(Holtby) was unstoppable,” said Ovechkin, the 14th player in NHL history to reach 650 goals. “He makes tremendous saves and keeps us in the game.”

Tom Wilson had a goal and an assist, and Brett Connolly also scored for Washington, which won consecutive games for the first time in two weeks. Lars Eller added two assists.

“Every point is very important,” Ovechkin said. “Especially on the road, if you get a win or get a point it’s a very good result.”

Andreas Johnsson and John Tavares scored for Toronto. Frederik Andersen made 25 stops.

“We didn’t get the result, but we had a lot of pucks on net,” Tavares said. “We did some good things, but I think at times we didn’t sustain some of the momentum that we would like.”

“You’re playing a pretty good hockey team, but we’ve got to find a way to get a result, find a

way to get to another level.”

The Leafs, who were playing at home for the first time since Feb. 6 following a season-long six-game trip that ended with a 3-2-1 record, entered 7-2-2 over their last 11, but had also dropped two straight.

The Capitals, meanwhile, were 6-3-1 over their previous 10 after a 0-5-2 stretch that culminated with a 6-3 loss at Scotiabank Arena on Jan. 23.

Washington, which donated a Stanley Cup ring in honor of last June’s victory to the Hockey Hall of Fame on Wednesday, grabbed a 1-0 lead at 3:54 of the second period when Ovechkin scored past Andersen with Toronto defenseman Morgan Rielly in the penalty box for holding.

T.J. Oshie won a faceoff back to John Carlson, who quickly fed Ovechkin for a one-timer that flew past Andersen’s glove for his 43rd goal of the season, and fifth in the last four games.

“His numbers, his play speak for itself,” Tavares said. “You look where he scored from tonight — that’s not that close to the net. His ability to get pucks off (with) very little room and being as accurate as he is ... there’s no bigger threat over the last 10, 20 years on the power play.”

“Any time he’s got the puck in the offensive zone, you know it’s got a chance.”

Ovechkin — who has 39 goals in 48 career outings against the Leafs, including 22 in 24 games in Toronto — beat Andersen on Jan. 23 for the 1,179th point of his career to tie Sergei Fedorov for the most points in the NHL by a Russian-born player.

Ovechkin currently has 1,192 career points.

Washington then went up 2-0 at 12:07 on a sequence that started when Wilson rocked the Leafs Jake Gardiner behind the net. Eller grabbed the puck and found Connolly, who slid in his 15th.

“We’ve been trying to improve our forecheck,” Wilson said. “That’s a textbook one there.”

Carlson had a chance to make it 3-0 later in the period, but Andersen made a terrific stop on the defenseman’s blast.

Sharks 4, Penguins 0: Tomas Hertl scored a pair of first-period power-play goals, Martin Jones stopped 26 shots and visiting San Jose took advantage of sloppy play by Pittsburgh.

The Sharks have won eight of 10 overall and pulled within one point of Calgary for the top spot in the Pacific Division.

Predators 2, Kings 1: Roman Josi had a goal and an assist as host Nashville topped Los Angeles and moved atop the Central Division with its third win in four games.

The Predators have 77 points,

one more than Winnipeg (76), though the Jets have three games in hand on Nashville.

Hurricanes 4, Panthers 3: Justin Williams had two goals and an assist and visiting Carolina rallied for two goals down to beat Florida.

Devils 4, Senators 0: Cory Schneider made 30 saves in posting his first shutout since November 2017 and host New Jersey beat undermanned Ottawa in a game in which both teams gave indications they were getting ready to make trades in the next few days.

Coyotes 3, Canucks 2 (OT): Alex Galchenyuk scored 1:54 into overtime on an impressive individual effort to lift visiting Arizona over Vancouver.

Wild 4, Rangers 1: Zach Parise had a goal and an assist, and visiting Minnesota ended a five-game skid with a win over New York.

Canadiens 5, Flyers 1: Brendan Gallagher earned his first career hat trick and host Montreal defeated Philadelphia.

Stars 5, Blues 2: Jamie Benn had his first multi-goal game since early October and host Dallas ended St. Louis’ franchise-record 11-game winning streak.

Oilers 4, Islanders 3 (OT): Connor McDavid scored in overtime and added an assist as host Edmonton snapped a five-game losing streak.

Defending champ Caps acquire Hagelin from Kings

Associated Press

The defending Stanley Cup champion Washington Capitals got faster ahead of the NHL trade deadline by acquiring speedy winger Carl Hagelin from the Los Angeles Kings on Thursday.

Washington sent a 2019 third-round pick and a conditional 2020 sixth-round pick to Los Angeles.

“We are pleased to welcome

Carl to our organization,” general manager Brian MacLellan said. “We felt this trade enables us to add depth up front and provides us with a veteran player with a tremendous amount of speed to help us on the penalty kill.”

Hagelin must satisfy a games-played requirement in the playoffs and the Capitals must win two rounds for the Kings to get the sixth-rounder

in next year’s draft.

The teams announced the trade after Washington winger Devante Smith-Pelly cleared waivers and was assigned to Hershey of the American Hockey League. The Capitals needed to wait until was claimed or cleared waivers to clear a roster spot and salary-cap space. The Kings had to retain salary for the Capitals to fit in Hagelin’s \$4 million salary.

Hagelin has just two goals and six assists in 38 games this season with Pittsburgh and Los Angeles. But the Capitals are plenty familiar with Hagelin after facing him in the playoffs the past six years.

Washington is Hagelin’s fifth team during his eight-year NHL career. He has 230 points in 526 regular-season games and won the Stanley Cup with the Penguins in 2016 and 2017.