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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US likely to be in Afghanistan for decades

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Top U.S. military commanders, who only a few months ago were planning to pull the last American troops out of Afghanistan by year's end, are now quietly talking about an American commitment that could keep thousands of troops in the country for decades.

The shift in mindset, made possible by President Barack Obama's decision last fall to cancel withdrawal plans, reflects the Afghan government's vulnerability to continued militant assault and concern that terror groups like al-Qaida continue to build training camps whose effect could be felt far beyond the region, said senior military officials.

The military outlook mirrors arguments made by many Republican and Democrat foreign policy advisers, looking beyond the Obama presidency, for a significant long-term American presence.

"This is not a region you want to abandon," said Michele Flournoy, a former Pentagon official who would likely be considered a top candidate for secretary of defense in a Hillary Clinton administration. "So the question is what do we need going forward given our interests?"

Senior American commanders have been surprised by al-Qaida's resilience and ability to find a haven in the Afghan countryside as well as the Taliban's repeated seizure of large tracts of contested territory.

In November, the U.S. military sent a company of elite U.S. Rangers to southeastern Afghanistan to help Afghan counterterrorism forces destroy an al-Qaida training camp in a "fierce fight" that lasted for several days.

The training camp was "absolutely massive," said Brig. Gen. Wilson Shoffner, a military

spokesman in Afghanistan.

"No matter what happens in the next couple of years, Afghanistan is going to have wide ungoverned spaces that violent extremist organizations can take advantage of," Shoffner said. "The camp that developed in southeastern Kandahar is an example of what can happen."

In Afghan President Ashraf Ghani, U.S. officials said they have a willing and reliable partner who can provide bases to attack terror groups not just in Afghanistan, but also throughout South Asia for as long as the threat in the chronically unstable region persists.

The new American mindset also marks a striking change for Obama, who campaigned on a promise to bring American troops home and has said repeatedly that he doesn't support the "idea of endless war." And it highlights a major shift for the American military, which has spent much of the last decade racing to hit milestones as part of its broader "exit strategy" from Afghanistan and Iraq. These days, that phrase has largely disappeared from the military's lexicon.

In its place, there's a broad recognition in the Pentagon that building an effective Afghan army and police force will take a generation's commitment, including billions of dollars a year in outside funding and constant support from thousands of foreign advisers on the ground.

"What we've learned is that you can't really leave," said a senior Pentagon official with extensive experience in Afghanistan and Iraq. "The local forces need air support, intelligence and help with logistics. They are not going to be ready in three years or five years. You have to be there for a very long time."

There are 9,800 U.S. troops in Afghanistan, some of them advising local forces and some fo-

cused on hunting down al-Qaida and other hardline militants. Current plans call for Obama to halve that force by the time he leaves office, but he could defer the decision to the next president.

The U.S. military's current thinking reflects its painful experience in Iraq, where Iraqi army forces collapsed less than three years after American forces left in 2011. Senior American commanders who spent nearly a decade and hundreds of billions of dollars of taxpayer money building the Iraqi army have been shocked at how little of that force remains today.

In Helmand province, for example, where American troops suffered the heaviest losses of the war, Afghan units have struggled to hold onto territory taken by American forces from the Taliban in 2011 and 2012. "There's a real will-to-fight issue there," said a senior military official in Kabul.

Senior American commanders said that the Afghan troops in the province have lacked effective leaders as well as the necessary weapons and ammunition to hold off persistent Taliban attacks. Some Afghan soldiers in Helmand have been fighting in tough conditions for years without a break.

Gen. John Campbell, the top American commander, has sent special operations forces to the province to help direct American airstrikes and provide help with planning. An American soldier was killed and two others were wounded earlier this month fighting alongside the Afghans.

In addition, about 300 U.S. troops in Helmand are advising Afghan commanders at the Corps level, well removed from the front lines.

The American support is designed to arrest the immediate losses, but building an effective and sustainable fighting force

that can manage contested areas such as Helmand province, will take many years, said U.S. military officials.

Senior American officials point to improvements in areas such as evacuating wounded troops from the battlefield. As recently as 2013 it took the Afghan Army 24 hours on average to get medical assistance to wounded troops. Now help usually arrives in four hours, still longer than desired. Other critical areas, such as building an effective resupply system for the country or a capable air force, can't be accomplished in a few years. Many of the American pilots flying close air support missions for the Afghan military have 10-15 years of experience.

"How long does it take to grow a 15-year pilot? It takes about 15 years," Shoffner said. "We're starting a little late with the Air Force."

Senior U.S. military officials and some former Obama administration officials increasingly compare U.S. plans for Afghanistan with its approach to South Korea, where the United States has maintained tens of thousands of troops for decades. Other top officials cite the example of Colombia where the United States has long provided training, money and contractors.

The difference between Afghanistan and other long-term American commitments in Korea and Colombia is that Afghanistan remains a far more dangerous and unstable place. Even though Afghan troops have assumed the lead combat role with U.S. troops in an advisory role, Americans still face real dangers.

Some officials hold out hope that a long-term military presence might be unnecessary, if hoped-for peace talks with the Taliban make progress.

EUCOM: Deterring Russia is top priority

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Russia's re-emergence as the top security threat in Europe demands a fresh examination of how American power is deployed on the Continent, where a steady post-Cold War drawdown has left the military undermanned.

That's the conclusion of U.S. European Command's first strategy document in four years.

"Reduced U.S. forward presence and degraded readiness across the services are inhibiting the United States' ability" to favorably influence security conditions, the "Theater Strategy" document says.

The document, issued Tuesday, lists deterring Russian aggression as EUCOM's top priority — a sharp shift from the 2012 strategy, which suggested Russia was a potential partner to be cultivated as one of many "key relationships."

While the strategy stops short of naming requirements to bolster military capabilities in Europe, it does make clear that the current force structure is not commensurate with the immediate security situation.

Navy eyes changes so CARAT can shine

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

The Navy is searching for ways to improve a longstanding series of military drills with its partner nations across Southeast Asia.

Depth — including the addition of drones and other high-tech weapons, more gunnery and training to intercept smugglers — will be added to Cooperation Afloat Readiness and Training, said Lt. Cmdr. Arlo Abrahamson, a spokesman for the 7th Fleet's Singapore-based Task Force 73.

CARAT — a five-month series of separate training exercises with Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and East Timor — has traditionally featured a wide range of naval operations, including surface, undersea, aviation and amphibious warfare.

"We are looking for ways to increase the complexity and sophistication of the exercises with each of our partners," Abrahamson said.

Last year, for example, the Navy flew its Fire Scout drone from the newly launched USS Fort Worth littoral combat ship while the Singaporeans operated a Scan Eagle drone, he said.

The Navy has also added to gunnery drills and increased

training on boarding and searching ships at sea to intercept smugglers with many of the nations, he said. This year, it will practice anti-submarine warfare with Bangladesh, Indonesia and Singapore and search-and-rescue drills with Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Indonesia and the Philippines.

For the past two decades, CARAT has involved only bilateral exercises, but there are plans to include multinational events this year, Abrahamson said. The goal is to bring together several partner nations for exercises while helping each nation achieve its training goals. Planners have yet to determine which countries will be involved in the multinational events, he said.

These efforts are in line with the rebalance of U.S. military forces to the Pacific, a plan in which 60 percent of the Navy is expected to be based in the region by the end of the decade, Secretary of the Navy Ray Mabus told the Senate Armed Services Committee last year.

Naval forces from across the 7th Fleet, including amphibious ships and destroyers from Sasebo and Yokosuka, Japan, will participate in CARAT exercises with Okinawa-based Marines and forces from the U.S. mainland, Abrahamson said.

20 bomb threats at schools on Guam

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

Guam schools have received at least 20 bomb threats during the past two weeks, causing disruptions on an island where thousands of U.S. servicemembers and their families reside.

Bomb threats at multiple off-base schools continued Tuesday even after nine students were detained by police in connection with threats, Guam Police Department spokesman Paul Tapao told Stars and Stripes.

Oceanview Middle School, located near U.S. Naval Base Guam, was evacuated Tuesday afternoon following a threat, according to local news site The Guam Daily Post.

Federal and local police responded to threats at five other schools Tuesday, the site reported.

Guam's military facilities, which include a large Navy base and Andersen Air Force Base, include Defense Department schools, which have not reported any threats; however, some military dependents attend Guam's local schools as well.

Snowy East Coast cities strive for normal operations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — After more than three days with life at a virtual standstill in the nation's capital and elsewhere up and down the East Coast, the cities hit hard by a massive snowstorm were getting closer to their normal routines.

In the Washington area, the Metro subway system was closer to fully operational Tues-

day, although several suburban stations remained closed and trains were running less often. Schools in Washington, northern Virginia and Maryland were still closed, and federal offices were closed for another day. City government employees were back at work.

New York City recovered more quickly, with subway and bus service fully operational Monday, although commuter

trains were limited. New York Mayor Bill de Blasio credited better communication and other lessons learned after fiascoes during the 2010 "Snowmageddon" storm. But New York usually gets much more snow than Washington and budgets accordingly, spending three times as much per lane-mile for snow removal.

In Baltimore, which got more than 2 feet of snow, plenty of

people were still freeing their cars, and many side streets remained unplowed.

"I'm expected to be at work but I don't have the best car for snow," said Tameka Smith, who was doing her best to shovel out her maroon sedan. "I don't know what I'm going to do. It's ridiculous to expect people to get to their offices today."

Spurs no match for Curry, Warriors in battle of bests

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Stephen Curry and the dominant Warriors aren't just beating teams anymore, they're throwing staggering knockout punches against the NBA's best — make that second-best.

In a span of eight days, Golden State has 30-point wins over Cleveland, Chicago and San Antonio.

Curry scored 37 points and hit six three-pointers in three scintillating quarters Monday night, and the reigning champions showed they still rule the West by routing the Spurs 120-90.

"No moment's too big, obviously," Curry said. "We know this is just another regular-season game, but there was some hype around it. Every time we have an opportunity to prove who we are and take another step in the journey, we're ready for it. It wasn't always that way. This core has been together for a while and understands how to mentally prepare for nights like this."

The NBA MVP had 15 points in the opening quarter, 18 in the third and shot 12-for-20 in Golden State's 39th straight home win at raucous Oracle Arena, where a star-studded sellout crowd saw a lopsided showdown in what was billed as a potential Western Conference finals preview.

The Warriors (41-4) snapped a 13-game winning streak by the Spurs (38-7), off to the best start in franchise history but without Tim Duncan this time. The teams had the highest combined winning percent-

age in NBA history for opponents meeting at least 40 games into the season.

Curry galloped down the court and pounded his chest after his second straight three-pointer and 10th consecutive point put Golden State up 76-56 with 7:55 to go in the third. It was his 1,400th career three and he became the 26th player in NBA history to reach that mark.

Chants of "M-V-P!" came from every corner of the arena as Curry did it all for his highest-scoring total in 17 games against San Antonio — knocking down threes from the baseline and hitting from 30 feet well beyond the arc. Coming off his second triple-double of the season when he banked in a half-court shot Friday against Indiana, the dynamic point guard had three steals early in the game to set the defensive tone. And the Warriors didn't relent after building a 62-47 halftime lead.

All-Star forward Kawhi Leonard scored 16 points for the sloppy Spurs, with Harrison Barnes and Andre Iguodala guarding him early. The Spurs lacked the presence of Duncan, out because of soreness in his right knee.

"They outplayed us in every single aspect of the game," Spurs guard Manu Ginobili said. "Aggression was one."

Even coach Steve Kerr was in disbelief watching his current team thoroughly dismantle his old one on both ends — not to mention his mentor and good friend, Gregg Popovich. Kerr coached his second game back following a long leave of absence dating to Oct. 1 because of complications following two back operations.

Popovich understood the hype for one of the most anticipated regular-season matchups in recent memory.

"Why not? It's the two teams with the best record, playing it up would seem to be logical to me," he said. "We feel different going against a team that's the best team in the league. I get butterflies in my gut and excited about the game, and all that sort of thing. I don't feel like that every night."

Yet the Spurs are still right behind in the standings despite Golden State's NBA-record 24-0 start, so the Warriors wanted nothing more than to send a message that they plan to win another championship.

First, the Warriors are pursuing the Chicago Bulls' NBA record of 44 straight regular-season home wins from March 30, 1995 to April 4, 1996. They improved to 21-0 this season.

"It was like men and boys out there tonight," Popovich said.

Friends face off: It's not always fun coaching against a friend. Ask Popovich.

Seeing Kerr is always extra special, and they talked both Saturday and Sunday nights ahead of this matchup.

"I've got a lot of close friends," Popovich said. "The closer you are to one of these guys, you win and you actually to some degree feel a little bit badly for your opponent, which sounds really unmanly in the macho world that we live in. If you lose, it doesn't hurt so much like a normal loss."

Kerr disagrees, saying, "I love Pop, that's my guy, but I don't feel that bad right now."

Federer, Serena through to semifinals

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Serena Williams has never lost in the semifinals of the Australian Open. Neither has Novak Djokovic.

A key difference between the defending champions is that Williams beat the most-experienced and highest-ranked challenger in her half of the draw when she extended her streak to 18 consecutive wins against Maria Sharapova with a 6-4, 6-1 quarterfinal victory on Tuesday.

Williams said she wasn't aware that she had won the Australian Open all six previous times she won her quarterfinal match, "but that's good."

"It's not a stat that's set in stone," Williams said. "I still have to win two matches."

Five-time champion Djokovic, after beating No. 7 Kei Nishikori 6-3, 6-2, 6-4, still has a daunting semifinal match against Roger Federer, who has won four of his 17 Grand Slam titles in Australia.

Federer reached his 12th Australian Open semifinal, and 39th in a Grand Slam event, with a 7-6 (4), 6-2, 6-4 win over No. 6 Tomas Berdych. He hasn't gone past the semifinals at Melbourne Park since winning the title in 2010, but he's a serious obstacle for Djokovic.

They're 22-all in career head-to-heads, with Djokovic catching up since usurping Federer in the rankings.

The tiebreaker will be tricky. Djokovic lost only one of his 28 Grand Slam matches in 2015 — to Stan Wawrinka in the French Open final — and has won 37 of his last 38 matches at Melbourne Park, a run that includes four titles.

He beat Federer in the Wimbledon and U.S. Open finals last year, but Federer was back contending for titles.

"Any round feels like finals because of the fact that we are, you know, big rivals, we played so many times against each other," Djokovic said. "There's a lot of tension. There's a lot at stake. I'm expecting a great fight in two days."

In the women's semifinals, Williams will be facing fourth-seeded Agnieszka Radwanska, who beat No. 10 Carla Suarez Navarro 6-1, 6-3. Radwanska has won one of her previous four semifinals at a major, but never won a Grand Slam title.

Williams is 8-0 against Radwanska, including their meeting in the 2012 Wimbledon final.

Williams said she couldn't explain her 11-year domination of Sharapova — she has won 19 of their 21 meetings overall — except to say she rises to the big challenges.

"When I play her, I know automatically I have to step up my game," said Williams, a 21-time major winner. "I think that makes me play better."

Werdum pulls out of UFC title fight

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Heavyweight champion Fabricio Werdum says he is pulling out of his title fight at UFC 196 on Feb. 6.

Werdum announced his decision Monday, one day after Cain Velasquez pulled out as Werdum's opponent at the MGM Grand Garden Arena in Las Vegas.

The injured Velasquez was swiftly replaced by Stipe Miocic. After a day to think about it, Werdum decided he couldn't continue to fight through his own injuries while formulating a game plan against a new opponent.

The UFC didn't immediately confirm a change or announce a replacement fight for the main event of its traditional Super Bowl weekend show.

"I was already injured," Werdum told MMAfighting.com. "I have a foot injury and haven't been able to throw kicks in training for two weeks. I would still fight Cain because I was injured the last time, but I also hurt my back last Friday. I went to the doctor, tried to continue training,

but couldn't spar as I should spar. I decided not to fight because I'm not 100 percent. If Cain was the opponent, I would go on."

The 38-year-old Werdum (20-5-1) claimed his title in Mexico City last year with a submission victory over the injury-plagued Velasquez (13-2), who has fought just once since October 2013.

Velasquez cited a back injury Sunday when he dropped out of the rematch. Werdum initially agreed to fight Miocic (14-2), a veteran contender who beat Andrei Arlovski by opening-minute knockout last month.

But the Los Angeles-based Werdum changed his mind and left the UFC scrambling for a centerpiece to an important pay-per-view show.

The penultimate fight at UFC 196 matches former welterweight champion Johny Hendricks against Stephen "Wonderboy" Thompson — a solid mixed martial arts matchup, but likely not a heavy pay-per-view seller.

Veteran heavyweight Josh Barnett im-

mediately volunteered to fight Miocic for an interim title belt. Barnett is scheduled to take on Ben Rothwell at a UFC show in Newark, N.J., on Saturday.

"If they want a heavyweight championship main event, I'm your man," said Barnett, who returned from a 21-month cage absence with a win over Roy Nelson in September. "I'll go in. I'll take care of business, and I'll give them what they want, what they need, which is a healthy, motivated championship fighter."

Miocic is the No. 2 heavyweight contender in the UFC's internal rankings, while Barnett is No. 8. But Barnett has a championship pedigree: He held the UFC heavyweight title after beating Randy Couture in March 2002, only to lose it due to a failed drug test.

The loquacious Barnett has lost only to Travis Browne and UFC light heavyweight champion Daniel Cormier since 2006, and he hopes Werdum's misfortune creates an opening for another shot at his former title.



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Cavs coach Lue gets 1st win

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Tyronn Lue has had a hectic few days. He now has his first win as an NBA coach.

LeBron James scored 25 points to lead six players in double figures and the Cleveland Cavaliers defeated the Minnesota Timberwolves 114-107 on Monday night.

Cleveland lost to Chicago on Saturday, a day after Lue replaced David Blatt, who was fired on Friday.

Lue was presented the game ball in the locker room following the win.

"It's only been two games, but to get my first head coaching win, it means a lot," he said. "I came in the locker room, the team presented me with the game ball, LeBron gave a speech and they all gave me a hug and said congratulations."

"It's a special moment for anyone," James said. "It could be a rookie player, a rookie head coach. When you get that first win it's very special. You never forget it."

Lue admitted the last few days have been a whirlwind.

"Things are still moving fast for me," he said. "I'm not used to it yet, but I think I'm ready for it. I think after tonight and the Phoenix game (Wednesday), I think things will start to slow down."

The timing of Lue's promotion came as a shock considering the Cavaliers have the best record in the Eastern Conference. A lackluster loss to Chicago didn't help, but Lue understands the expectations he's inherited.

"It comes with the territory," he said. "When you coach this type of team, a team who has aspirations of winning a championship, it's going to be like this."

The Cavaliers struggled with the Timberwolves before going on a spurt that began late in the third quarter and

carried over into the fourth.

Cleveland still had to hold off a run by the Timberwolves, who cut a 15-point lead to 94-91 midway through the fourth. Tristan Thompson scored seven straight points and Matthew Dellavedova hit a three-pointer, giving Cleveland a 104-91 lead.

Thompson had 19 points with 12 rebounds and Dellavedova scored 18 points.

Karl-Anthony Towns led Minnesota with 26 points and 11 rebounds. Zach LaVine scored 21 points while Andrewiggins added 20.

The Cavaliers selected Wiggins with the No. 1 pick in the 2014 draft, but traded him to Minnesota in the deal that brought Kevin Love to Cleveland. Love scored 11 points and is averaging 16.3 against his former team.

"They made runs, we made runs," said Wiggins, who is averaging 28.8 points in four games against Cleveland. "They made the last run, and that won the game."

Minnesota forward Kevin Garnett missed the game with a sore right knee.

Hornets 129, Kings 128 (2OT): DeMarcus Cousins set a Sacramento record with 56 points, most by an NBA player this season, but visiting Charlotte edged the Kings in double overtime after Troy Daniels hit the go-ahead three-pointer with 9 seconds left.

Daniels made eight threes and scored a career-high 28 points, enough to help the Hornets overcome a dominant performance down low by Cousins. The All-Star center grabbed 12 rebounds before fouling out early in the second overtime.

Rockets 112, Pelicans 111: James Harden scored 35 points and Trevor Ariza added a season-high 31 to help visiting Houston beat short-handed New Orleans. The Pelicans played the second half

without All-Star forward Anthony Davis, who left late in the second quarter with a concussion after getting elbowed in the head by teammate Tyreke Evans.

Heat 89, Bulls 84: Dwyane Wade had 28 points, Chris Bosh added 18 and Miami rallied from an eight-point deficit early in the fourth quarter to beat host Chicago, snapping a four-game losing streak.

Wade scored 10 points in the fourth period. He and Bosh combined for the last five points in the final 1:02 as the Heat snapped an 84-all tie.

Celtics 116, Wizards 91: Pint-sized point guard Isaiah Thomas scored 23 points in three quarters, and five other players finished in double figures as visiting Boston routed Washington.

The 5-foot-9 Thomas was sinking shots from all over the floor as the Celtics won their third straight.

Grizzlies 108, Magic 102 (OT): Jeff Green scored a season-high 30 points and host Memphis defeated slumping Orlando in overtime.

Two free throws by Mike Conley with 15.9 seconds left provided the final margin.

Pistons 95, Jazz 92: Reggie Jackson scored 29 points and Detroit never trailed against host Utah.

The Jazz cut their deficit to 88-87 on Rudy Gobert's floater, but the Pistons responded with Kentavious Caldwell-Pope's layup and a jumper from Jackson with 1:08 left.

Hawks 119, Nuggets 105: Paul Millsap scored 22 points, Al Horford had 18 and Atlanta completed its Western Conference road swing with a win over Denver.

The Nuggets ended their eight-game homestand at .500 and fell to 9-15 at Pepsi Center this season. Denver started the stretch 2-0, including a win over Golden State, but lost four of its last six.

Cyclones knock off Jayhawks

Associated Press

AMES, Iowa — Monte Morris scored 21 points, Georges Niang had 15 of his 19 in the second half and No. 14 Iowa State blew past No. 4 Kansas 85-72 on Monday night for its fourth straight win.

"We needed to get our best player going, and that was Georges," Morris said. "When he gets it going, he's hard to guard."

Abdel Nader wasn't easy to guard, either, adding 17 points for the Cyclones (16-4, 5-3 Big 12). They have beaten three of the top four teams in this week's Top 25.

Iowa State overcame a sluggish start with a 24-7 run midway through the second half, and Niang's three-point play made it 80-67 with 2 minutes left.

"We weren't good enough defensively to win the game in the first half. They changed their mindset in the second half," coach Steve Prohm said after watching his team outscore the Jayhawks 49-29 in the final 20 minutes.

Perry Ellis had 23 points and Frank Mason III scored 16 to lead Kansas (16-4, 5-3), which lost its third straight road game.

The Jayhawks have lost four of their last five against the Cyclones, a first for a Bill Self-coached team against a Big 12 opponent.

"We didn't show much composure when it got hot," Self said. "That was disappointing."

Iowa State was only a week removed from toppling top-ranked Oklahoma, its first win over a No. 1 team since 1957.

But this was the game the Cyclones and their fans have had circled on their calendars since October.

Some Iowa State students camped out for up to a week waiting for tickets to the game, which has long figured to have major implications for the Cyclones if they hope to end Kansas's 11-year streak of Big 12 titles.

No. 15 Miami 80, No. 24 Duke 69: Angel Rodriguez had 13 points and a career-high 11 assists for the host Hurricanes, which handed the Blue Devils their fourth loss in five games.

Rodriguez scored 13 points for the Hurricanes, who led for the final 24 minutes. Sheldon McClellan scored 21 points and benefited from Rodriguez's most spectacular assist late in the game.

Miami (16-3, 5-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) beat a ranked team for the third time this season, and won by double digits for the 15th time.

Brandon Ingram led Duke with 19 points and 10 rebounds while Grayson Allen added 17 points but shot just 6-for-17.

Rodriguez came into the game 4-for-30 from three-point range in league games but went 3-for-5 from beyond the arc in the first half to help Miami take the lead for good.

His best play earned a late assist. Duke (15-6, 4-4) was mounting a rally when Rodriguez dribbled quickly through the defense in transition and tossed an alley-oop pass on the run to McClellan for a dunk and a 64-55 lead.

Rodriguez spread his arms as he ran up court, the Hurricanes flying high. They finished with 24 assists to eight for Duke and shot 51 percent.

Tonye Jekiri, Miami's 7-foot center, contributed assists from the perimeter on consecutive possessions to keep a cushion down the stretch. McClellan scored six points in the final 2 minutes.

Rangers squander lead, still beat Sabres

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Derick Brassard ended a month of scoring woes with the best night by a New York Rangers player in five years.

Brassard scored two goals, set up crucial third-period tallies by J.T. Miller and Mats Zuccarello and finished with a career-best five points while the Rangers blew a two-goal lead and came back to beat Buffalo 6-3 Monday night for their eighth straight win over the Sabres.

"We knew it was only a matter of time," Rangers captain Ryan McDonagh said of Brassard, who has battled a flu bug. "You get a tough illness like that, it's tough to get your body back to feeling the way you want to feel as a hockey player. It's great to see him break through before the break."

Brassard is the first Ranger to tally five points in a game since Ryan Callahan on Mar. 6, 2011, vs. Philadelphia (four goals, one assist). He also is the first to have four points in one period since Sean Avery on Mar. 17, 2007, vs. Boston.

"For me, I have been struggling the last two weeks to find some offense and I hope this will give me some confidence," said Brassard, who had two goals and an assist in his last 11 games.

Miller said playing with Brassard has been great.

"If you asked him he probably wished over the last couple of games he could have brought more production but at the same time, he plays the same way every

game," Miller said. "He still brings it and this was a great example of what kind of threat he is with and without the puck."

Miller snapped a tie, Zuccarello added a power-play goal and Brassard scored into an empty net after the Sabres made it 3-3 to allow the Rangers to head into the NHL All-Star break with three wins in four games.

Rookie defenseman Dylan McIlrath and Viktor Stalberg also scored for the Rangers.

Zemgus Girgensons scored twice in a 1:13 span early in the third period to rally Buffalo from a 3-1 deficit. It was his first game after missing four with an upper-body injury.

Brian Gionta also scored for Buffalo, which lost its third straight game overall. Rookie Jack Eichel assisted on both of Girgensons' goals.

This is the Sabres' first eight-game losing streak against the Rangers.

Stars 2, Flames 1: Jamie Benn and Jason Spezza scored 80 seconds apart early in the second period and host Dallas beat Calgary.

It was only the third win in 11 games this month for the Stars, who closed out a 3-6-2 stretch heading into the All-Star break after leading the Western Conference for much of the season.

The Stars have 67 points, three behind conference and Central Division-leading Chicago.

Blue Jackets 5, Canadiens 2: Cam Atkinson had his third-career hat trick

and Brandon Saad scored twice to help host Columbus beat struggling Montreal to end a three-game losing streak.

Atkinson's linemates Brandon Dubinsky and Boone Jenner each had three assists and rookie Joonas Korhonen turned aside 32 shots.

Bruins 3, Flyers 2: Brett Connolly redirected Zdeno Chara's shot from the point with 1:54 left, lifting visiting Boston over Philadelphia.

Connolly tipped the wobbly shot and one-hopped the puck past Michel Neuvirth for his seventh goal of the season.

Brad Marchand scored a goal for the fifth straight game and Patrice Bergeron also scored for the Bruins.

Red Wings 4, Islanders 2: Justin Abdelkader and Danny DeKeyser scored 1:11 apart in the second period to lead visiting Detroit over New York.

Brad Richards scored in the first period and Petr Mrazek stopped 27 shots to give the Red Wings their second win in five games (2-2-1). Luke Glendening added an empty-netter in the final minute to seal Detroit's third win in the last 11 meetings (3-6-2) against the Islanders.

Coyotes 2, Wild 1 (SO): Anthony Duclair had the only goal in the shootout, rookie Louis Domingue made 34 saves and visiting Arizona came back to beat Minnesota.

Domingue stopped all three shooters he faced in the shootout to help Arizona win its second straight. Antoine Vermette tied it with 1:13 left in regulation on a short-handed goal.