

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Watchdog: Long waits still vex Phoenix VA

BY LISA REIN

*The Washington Post*

Almost three years after long waits for medical appointments for veterans exploded into a nationwide scandal, the Phoenix VA hospital at the center of the crisis still is not providing timely care, a watchdog group documented last week.

Special Counsel Carolyn Lerner, whose office represents whistleblowers and investigates their claims, wrote in a letter to President Barack Obama that two independent reviews have confirmed many allegations brought by a doctor at the Phoenix facility.

One review, by the inspector general for the Department of Veterans Affairs, said a veteran with heart trouble died last year while waiting for cardiology tests that could have saved him. Investigators also found that on a given day, 1,100 veterans in Phoenix have longer-than-30-day waits to see doctors. During the period reviewed by investigators, 215 veterans died while waiting to see specialists.

"In case after case since 2014, Phoenix VA whistleblowers have exposed and helped to correct serious problems with veterans' care," Lerner said in a statement. She thanked the whistleblower, Kuauhtemoc Rodriguez, chief of specialty care clinics in Phoenix, for his "courage" in coming forward.

The findings are likely to present challenges for President-elect Donald Trump's incoming administration, which has made

improving care for veterans a priority. Continuing delays in care could bolster the case of agency critics, who say the government alone cannot meet the medical needs of all veterans, who should be able to turn to private doctors when they want.

On Wednesday Trump chose Dr. David Shulkin, current VA under secretary for health, to replace Robert McDonald, a former Procter & Gamble chief executive brought in by President Obama in 2014 after the wait-times scandal forced out retired Army general Eric Shinseki.

"Although [the Veterans Health Administration] has made efforts to improve the care provided at [the Phoenix hospital], these issues remain," Larry Reinkemeyer, assistant inspector general for audits and evaluations, wrote in its review of Rodriguez's claims. While some of the claims were not substantiated, investigators for the inspector general and the VA's Office of Medical Inspector corroborated others.

A VA spokesperson did not respond to requests for comment last week.

Among the problems investigators found:

■ A veteran who died of cardiovascular disease did not receive a cardiology exam his VA physician ordered. The agency determined that had he received the exam when he should have, further testing and interventions could have prevented his death.

■ During a week in October 2015, nearly 3,900 medical appointments in Phoenix were canceled. Of those, 59 should have been rescheduled and were not. Of those 59 patients, 12 may have experienced harm

that could have been prevented without the delay in care.

■ On an average day, the Phoenix VA has 1,100 patients waiting longer than 30 days for appointments.

■ Patients needing to see psychotherapists wait an average of 75 days.

■ Out of a sample of 215 veterans with 295 consults who died while waiting for care, 62 of their consults (21 percent) were delayed. The delayed consults did not contribute to their deaths, the inspector general's office concluded.

■ In one case, a veteran "waited in excess of 300 days for vascular care" following a consult request from another doctor.

■ Out of a sample of 30 inappropriately canceled chiropractic consults, 28 veterans did not receive the appointments they requested.

McDonald has said that on his watch, the agency has added thousands of appointments throughout the system, and that continuing problems like those in reported in Phoenix are isolated.

The reviews released Jan. 9 did not directly address Rodriguez, who said in an email that the VA is now retaliating against him and threatening to fire him by falsely accusing him of discrimination in hiring. He said he has not been the deciding official in any hiring decisions.

"This is straight out of the VA playbook on how to deal with whistleblowers," Rodriguez wrote. "This is a gross injustice and a gross violation of my civil rights."

## Mosul University liberated by Iraqi government troops

*Associated Press*

BAGHDAD — U.S.-backed Iraqi government troops on Sunday fully liberated the sprawling complex of Mosul University, an Iraqi military spokesman said, a major step in the massive operation to retake the Islamic State group-held city of Mosul.

The spokesman for the Joint Military Command, Brig. Gen. Yahya Rasool, declared that the campus was under the full

control of Iraqi special forces, officially known as the Counter Terrorism Service, who raised the Iraqi flag over its buildings.

The troops searched campus buildings and removed bombs left by Islamic State militants, Brig. Gen. Haider Fadhil of the special forces said. Fadhil added that the troops also entered the nearby Andalus neighborhood, which he expected would be fully retaken later in the day.

Iraqi forces had entered the university grounds on Friday and managed to secure more than half of the campus the next day amid tough resistance from Islamic State militants, who mainly deployed sniper and mortar fire in an attempt to slow the advancing troops.

Sunday's progress is the latest in a string of swift territorial gains in recent weeks by the U.S.-backed Iraqi military. Some 30,000 troops — a force that includes not only Iraq's con-

ventional army but an array of other armed groups, including Shiite and Sunni paramilitary troops and Kurdish fighters — are taking part in the Mosul offensive which began Oct. 17.

The Islamic State group captured Mosul in 2014 along with nearly a third of Iraqi territory and large parts of neighboring Syria. Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul is the Islamic State group's last major urban bastion in the country.

# Civilians killed in Syria shelling

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Pro-Syrian government troops shelled a village in a rebel-controlled area near Damascus on Sunday, killing at least 12 civilians and injuring several others who were taking shelter in a banquet hall.

The violence in the water-rich Barada Valley has tested the country's cease-fire and restricted the flow of water to the capital. Despite an agreement to allow maintenance workers in to fix the water facility in the rebel-controlled valley, the violence continued, trapping about 100,000 residents.

On Sunday, shells fell on al-Reem banquet hall in Deir Qanoun village in the valley that houses hundreds of civilians

who had escaped the intensified fighting. The activist-operated Wadi Barada Media Center said 12 were killed and more than 20 were injured. The group posted pictures of the bloodied floors of the hall, some of them showing bodies with severed limbs.

Fuad Abu Hattab, an exiled resident of the Barada Valley and an activist with the group, said medical teams have not been able to move around the valley because of the fighting.

Abu Hattab said the center has served as a shelter for many displaced civilians who escaped the ongoing violence in the valley and in other parts of rural Damascus. The hall has an area for weddings, as well as a restaurant and a number of rooms.

It had largely been spared the intense fighting, Abu Hattab said.

The Syrian Civil Defense, a team of volunteer first responders in the rebel-held parts of Syria, also put the death toll at 12, saying the shelling hit a displaced people's center.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights put the death toll at seven but said it was likely to rise because some of the injured were in critical condition.

Fighting has raged in the valley that provides the Syrian capital with most of its water supply. In recent days, government and allied troops have been advancing in the valley despite talks to stem the violence.

# Kerry stops in Vietnam on last trip

The Washington Post

CA MAU, Vietnam — It could have been 1969 again as Secretary of State John Kerry stood on the bow of the small boat chugging up the Bay Hap River on Saturday, the wind billowing his sleeves and his eyes darting left and right toward banks shrouded in dark foliage.

As a young Navy lieutenant, Kerry commanded a Swift boat along this stretch of churning, brown waters in the middle of a free-fire zone. Here, he earned a Silver Star for his heroics when he leapt ashore after an ambush to pursue a fleeing Viet Cong with a grenade launcher and shot him dead.

It is doubtful the longtime senator from Massachusetts ever will run for public office again, but he will continue to work on climate change and environmental issues, and he is particularly concerned about the effect of rising sea levels and hydroelectric dams on the rivers in the lower Mekong Delta.

Kerry said he will return to Vietnam, a country where he is treated as a returning prodigal son. Many here know Kerry and Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., who spent six years as a POW in Vietnam, for their work normalizing relations and helping transform enmity into friendship. Vietnamese officials regularly bestow big hugs on Kerry at the end of meetings, and civilians wait in the rain to watch him leave a restaurant. A local delegation that greeted him Saturday was "delighted" that he has returned.

"John Kerry loves Vietnam, and Vietnam loves John Kerry," said Ed Miller, a Vietnam historian at Dartmouth College with whom Kerry consulted about the trip.

But it is sometimes difficult to tell how much of the draw of Vietnam for Kerry is in the war that ended more than 40 years ago and how much lies in its future potential as a regional economic powerhouse.

# Ethnic tensions rising in Bosnia

BY SLOBODAN LEKIC  
Stars and Stripes

Bosnia, where thousands of Americans kept the peace after a three-year war, is again facing an ethnic crisis, threatening the U.S.-brokered agreement that ended Europe's bloodiest conflict since World War II.

During the past year, the leader of the Bosnian Serb entity, Milorad Dodik, repeatedly has questioned the need to keep Bosnia united under the formula established under the 1995 Dayton Agreement.

The agreement established a self-governing entity for Bosnian Serbs, who make up about a third of the 4.3 million people, a Bosnian Federation dominated by Muslims and Croats and a weak central government in Sarajevo.

Some analysts believe Dodik could be preparing for a referendum on independence for the Serb entity — known as Republika Srpska — a move the country's Croat and Muslim groups would strongly oppose.

Dodik denies any plans for a referendum this year, but

has added, "unless things are speeded up by events."

Suspicions about Dodik's intentions rose last September when he rejected a ruling by the country's Constitutional Court, declaring that the Bosnian Serb entity's Jan. 9 "Statehood Day" celebrations were illegal. The Bosnian Serbs declared independence and launched the war on Jan. 9, 1992.

Many of their leaders later were found guilty of war crimes by the international tribunal in The Hague. The Serb wartime president, Radovan Karadzic, recently was sentenced to 40 years in jail.

Despite the high court ruling, Bosnian Serbs went ahead with the ceremony Jan. 9 in their capital Banja Luka, which featured an ethnic Serb unit of the Bosnian national army marching in the official parade in defiance of the central government.

Before the parade, NATO, whose forces secured the country after the 1992-95 war, had warned the Bosnian Serbs not to misuse the armed forces,

one of the few joint institutions in the highly decentralized country.

The decision to include the regiment in the ceremonies drew a sharp reaction from the NATO commander in Bosnia, U.S. Brig. Gen. Gizelle M. Wilz, who called for an investigation into the unit's participation.

"When there is the possibility of a breach of defense legislation, (Bosnian) institutions have a responsibility to all citizens to conduct an investigation, determine the facts, and take appropriate action," Wilz said in a statement Wednesday. "I hope that the political leaders will encourage and assist the appropriate institutions to do their job."

Dodik immediately brushed off the NATO statement, saying the alliance was meddling in Bosnia's domestic affairs.

The U.S. Embassy in Bosnia joined the criticism, saying it took "any threat to the security and stability" in Bosnia "very seriously." The U.S. statement added that those who violated the law "must be held accountable."

# Ringling Bros. folding up tent

Associated Press

SARASOTA, Fla. — Goodbye to death-defying feats — daring young men (and women) on the flying trapeze, whip-wielding lion tamers, human cannonballs. Goodbye to the scent of peanuts and popcorn, the thrill of three rings, the jaunty bum-bum-dadadada of circus music.

Send out the clowns. The Big Top is coming down — for good.

On Saturday, officials of the company that owns the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus announced that it will close in May, ending a 146-year run that dates back to a time before automobiles or airplanes or movies, when Ulysses S. Grant was president and minstrel shows were popular entertainment.

What killed the circus? There are many suspects: increased railroad costs; costly court battles with animal rights activists that led to an end to elephant acts; and the fact that some people didn't want to see a show without elephants.

But mostly, in an era of "Poke-

mon Go," online role-playing games and YouTube celebrities, the "Greatest Show on Earth" doesn't seem so great.

"It's been through world wars and it's been through every kind of economic cycle and it's been through a lot of change," said Kenneth Feld, chairman and CEO of Feld Entertainment, owner of the Ringling Bros. "In the past decade, there's been more change in the world than in the 50 or 75 years prior to that. And I think it isn't relevant to people in the same way."

For a long time, the circus was more than relevant — it was the stuff that dreams were made of.

"The circus is the only ageless delight that you can buy for money," Ernest Hemingway wrote in a three-page essay for the Ringling Bros. program in 1953. "It is the only spectacle I know, that, while you watch it, gives the quality of a truly happy dream."

But as the 20th century went on, kids became less enthralled. Movies, television, video games and the internet captured young

minds. The circus didn't have savvy product merchandising tie-ins or Saturday morning cartoons to shore up its image. After 1956, the circus no longer performed under tents, moving to arenas.

Jeff and Carol Fouse, of St. Louis, toured the Ringling Circus Museum on a recent day. They saw the old-timey diorama of the circus encampments. They shuffled past the colorful, sequined ringmaster costumes and peered into the rail cars that were once filled with clowns and elephants and even a pygmy hippo.

Then they squinted into the bright Florida sunshine. "I don't even know if there is a circus anymore," said Jeff Fouse, 63, an engineer, tilting his head.

The show will go on at smaller and more specialized circuses. But come May, after almost a century and a half of spectacular revels, the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Circus will vanish like a big, colorful, improbably long dream.

# SpaceX rocket launch a success

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket blasted off from California on Saturday and placed a constellation of satellites in orbit, marking the company's first launch since a fireball engulfed a similar rocket on a Florida launch pad more than four months ago.

The two-stage rocket lifted off from Vandenberg Air Force Base at 9:54 a.m. carrying a payload for Iridium Communications Inc., which is replacing its entire global network with 70 next-generation satellites. The satellites were deployed about an hour after launch.

About nine minutes after the rocket blasted off to cheers from the control room, its jettisoned first stage landed upright on a so-called dronship in the Pacific Ocean south of Vandenberg — part of SpaceX's effort to make boosters reusable.

The company has succeeded six times previously with landings on a barge or ashore.

The flight is an important step for SpaceX, billionaire Elon Musk's California-based company that has about 70 launches in line, worth more than \$10 billion. In addition to commercial launches, SpaceX ferries supplies to the International Space Station and is developing a capsule capable of carrying astronauts to the station.

SpaceX officials say they identified all possible causes of the Sept. 1 accident during pre-launch testing at Cape Canaveral Air Force Station, Fla., and took corrective action.

The accident destroyed the rocket and its payload and grounded the Falcon 9 program as an investigation took place.

SpaceX announced this month that investigators concluded the accident involved a failure of one of three helium tanks inside the rocket's second-stage liquid oxygen tank.

# More ice hits portion of central US

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — A third wave of sleet and drizzle glazed swaths of the central U.S. on Sunday, extending icy weather that some meteorologists began acknowledging fell short of dire forecasts.

Much of the region remained under an ice storm warning on the eve of the Martin Luther King Jr. holiday as stretches continued getting pelted by rain, often in areas where temperatures hovered around freezing.

The freeze made roads harrowing. In Kansas, near Kansas City, two troopers escaped injury when their vehicles were struck while working a crash along northbound Interstate 635. In central Nebraska, authorities believe icy conditions contributed to a fiery crash involving two tractor-trailers shortly before 9 a.m. Sunday,

forcing the closure of 15 miles of Interstate 80. It was not immediately clear whether that wreck caused any injuries.

Authorities said ice contributed to a southwestern Kansas wreck Saturday night that killed an Oklahoma man and injured several others. The Kansas Highway Patrol said Thay Torres-Ocacio, 35, of Guymon, died after the sport utility vehicle in which he was riding went out of control on an overpass and eventually overturned several times. Some people lost power amid the storm. Nearly 10,000 electric customers were without power in Oklahoma, with most of those in the northwestern part of the state.

South of Kansas City, Mo., the latest round of storms dumped three-quarters of an inch of precipitation overnight, resulting in about a quarter of

an inch of ice.

Jared Leighton, a National Weather Service meteorologist near Kansas City, said Sunday that while the breadth of the ice accumulations fell short of expectations, "that shouldn't distract from the impact of the storm."

"The amounts were never really the story; the impacts were," Leighton told The Associated Press.

Becky Allmeroth, a state maintenance engineer for the Missouri Department of Transportation, said ice is "the most difficult storm to fight."

"We are keeping up with the changing conditions, but it is a continual battle," she said of the department's around-the-clock scrambling to treat the glazed roads. "The precipitation is coming in waves, and we have to apply more salt."

# Diplomats urge renewed Mideast talks

Associated Press

PARIS — Fearing a new eruption of violence in the Middle East, more than 70 world diplomats gathered in Paris on Sunday to push for renewed peace talks that would lead to a Palestinian state.

The conference is meant to be a forceful message to U.S. President-elect Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that much of the world wants peace and sees a two-state solution as the best way to achieve it in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Netanyahu has snubbed Sunday's conference as "rigged" against Israel, and Trump's incoming administration isn't taking part.

French diplomats fear Trump will unleash new tensions in the region by condoning settlements

on land claimed by the Palestinians and potentially moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to contested Jerusalem.

"Our collective responsibility is to bring Israelis and Palestinians back to the negotiating table," French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault said at the conference. "We know it is difficult, but is there an alternative? No, there isn't."

U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry is in Paris defending American interests at the conference in his last major diplomatic foray before he leaves office.

Netanyahu declined an invitation to a special meeting after the conference, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas was initially expected but his visit to Paris was postponed.

The Israeli prime minister said the gathering would do lit-

tle to promote peace and marks the "last flutters of yesterday's world."

"Tomorrow will look different, and tomorrow is very close," he said in an apparent reference to Trump's incoming administration.

According to a draft statement obtained by The Associated Press on Friday, the conference will urge Israel and the Palestinians "to officially restate their commitment to the two-state solution." It also will affirm that the international community "will not recognize" changes to Israel's pre-1967 lines without agreement by both sides.

The final conference declaration also may warn Trump against moving the embassy, a move that could be seen as recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital after decades of insisting the city's status must be deter-

mined by direct negotiations.

Israeli and Palestinian leaders have not negotiated since a failed U.S.-led effort in 2014.

While the conference was underway, a few hundred pro-Israel demonstrators, waving Israeli flags and placards denouncing the summit, gathered outside Israel's embassy in Paris.

"The Palestinians and a number of Arab states have not expressed a will for peace," said Serge Klarsfeld, a famous French Nazi hunter. "If it existed and if the Arab world recognized the existence of Israel, we would find the means to solve all the problems very quickly."

The demonstrators loudly booed French lawmaker Pierre Lellouche when he declared himself in favor of a "two-state solution" and the halting of Jewish settlements in the Palestinian territories.

## Duterte orders troops to bomb militants, hostages

Associated Press

MANILA, Philippines — Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte said he has ordered his troops to bomb extremists who flee with their captives in a bid to stop a wave of kidnappings at sea, calling the loss of civilian lives "collateral damage."

Duterte previously has stated that he had told his Indonesian and Malaysian counterparts their forces can blast away as they pursue militants who abduct sailors in waters where the three countries converge and bring their kidnap victims to the southern Philippines. He said in a speech late Saturday that he had given the same orders to Filipino forces.

He said such an approach would enable the government to get even with the ransom-seeking militants.

His advice to potential victims? "So, really, don't allow yourselves to be kidnapped."

Duterte's remarks reflect the alarm and desperation of the Philippines, along with Ma-

laysia and Indonesia, in halting ransom kidnappings primarily by Abu Sayyaf militants and their allies along a busy waterway for regional trade.

On Saturday, ransom-seeking Abu Sayyaf gunmen freed a South Korean captain and his Filipino crewman who were abducted three months ago from their cargo ship.

The gunmen handed skipper Park Chul-hong and Glenn Alindajao over to Moro National Liberation Front rebels, who turned them over to Philippine officials.

The Moro rebels, who signed a 1996 peace deal with the government, have helped negotiate the release of several hostages of the smaller but more violent Abu Sayyaf.

Duterte's adviser dealing with insurgents, Jesus Dureza, said he was not aware of any ransom being paid in exchange for the freedom of the sailors. At least 27 hostages, many of them foreign crewmen, remain in the hands of different Abu Sayyaf factions, he said.

## China not willing to negotiate on Taiwan

Associated Press

BEIJING — China's Foreign Ministry on Sunday again rejected President-elect Donald Trump's suggestion that he might use American policy on Taiwan as a bargaining chip between the two sides.

Spokesman Lu Kang said Sunday that the "One China" policy is "non-negotiable." Since recognizing Beijing in 1979, Washington has maintained only unofficial ties with Taiwan, the self-governing island that Beijing considers its territory — a status quo Trump has threatened to upend since winning the November election.

Trump told The Wall Street Journal in an interview published Friday that "everything is under negotiation, including 'One China.'"

China was already angered by Trump's Dec. 2 phone call with Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen, the first time an American president or president-elect has publicly spoken to Taiwan's

leader in nearly 40 years.

Trump then said in a television interview that he didn't feel "bound by a 'One China' policy unless we make a deal with China having to do with other things, including trade."

After attacking China repeatedly during his campaign, Trump has continued to disparage China on his Twitter account over its military build-up in disputed areas of the South China Sea, alleged manipulation of its currency to put American companies at a disadvantage, and not doing enough to curb North Korea's nuclear program.

So far, Beijing has reiterated its refusal to negotiate on Taiwan and to push for positive cooperation between the two sides, though state-run media have run several strongly worded editorials attacking Trump.

Chinese political observers on Sunday said they expected Beijing's response to change once Trump is inaugurated next week.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Real-life Perry Mason pleads guilty to theft

**VT** NEWPORT — This Perry Mason has been convicted.

Perry Mason, of Hardwick — not to be confused with the fictional television criminal defense lawyer played by Raymond Burr — pleaded guilty to breaking into a Greensboro jewelry store in 2014 and stealing \$110,000 worth of items.

The Caledonian Record reported Mason, 48, received a sentence of two to 30 years, most of it suspended. Before reaching a plea agreement, Mason had been facing up to life in prison as a habitual offender with three or more prior felony convictions, including burglaries.

Mason was arrested after some of the jewelry was sold to a Burlington pawn shop.

### Bison herd more than quadruples since 2014

**IL** FRANKLIN GROVE — A herd of bison on an Illinois prairie has grown from 20 to 90 since it was brought over two years ago to boost the grassland restoration.

The 4,000 acres of prairie at the Nachusa Grasslands, about 95 miles west of Chicago, has become an attraction as volunteer work days have drawn record attendance, the Chicago Tribune reported.

The project, which began in 2014, has had some setbacks, including in December when managers ordered two bulls be killed after they escaped Nachusa and refused to return. Two calves and a female cow also died last year.

Nachusa project director Bill Kleiman said 17 calves were born last year. The Nature Conservancy, an international nonprofit that owns Nachusa, may send bison to other reserves or

sell some animals for meat this year if the herd continues to grow.

### Felines quarantined because of bird flu

**NY** NEW YORK — Hundreds of homeless New York City cats have been quarantined after health officials discovered many infected with a strand of bird flu.

About 386 cats that live in city shelters have tested positive for the virus since a cat named Mimi was identified in November as having the virus.

Health officials set up a quarantine zone in a warehouse in Queens complete with cages and workers in hazmat suits and masks. The American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals runs the facility and is housing all 500 cats from the city's homeless system.

Sandra Newbury, of the University of Wisconsin's shelter medicine program, told The New York Times the cats should recover in a few weeks.

The virus, H7N2, doesn't normally infect humans.

### De-icer from plane vent triggers crisis

**CA** SAN JOSE — Alaska Airlines said a non-toxic de-icer caused attendants to fall ill on a flight, triggering a hazardous material response when the plane landed in San Jose.

The airline said two flight attendants reported feeling ill Thursday after a white powder fell from an air vent in the galley in the front of the plane.

One attendant was taken to a hospital to be evaluated. She has been released and reported feeling fine Friday, the airline said in a statement.

The plane was removed from service and its ventilation system "will be thoroughly

cleaned" before the aircraft is put back into service, the statement said.

### Sex assault question part of homework

**PA** PERKASIE — A Pennsylvania high school is apologizing after students were given a math homework assignment that asked which family member had sexually assaulted a girl.

The question provided a math formula and asked: "Angelou was sexually abused by her mother's \_\_\_ at age 8, which shaped her career choices and motivation for writing." Pennridge High School students needed to use the formula before deciding whether the answer was boyfriend, brother or father.

KYW-TV reported the district said the assignment was "downloaded from a website that allows teachers around the world to share educational resources."

### Postal worker steals Social Security checks

**FL** TAMPA — A former Tampa Bay area postal employee faces up to 15 years in federal prison for stealing more than \$2 million in Social Security checks.

A U.S. Attorney's Office news release said jurors found Stacy Darnell Mitchell, 48, guilty last week of theft of government property and theft of mail. His sentencing date hasn't been set.

Mitchell was a mail handler for more than 15 years at the processing and distribution center in St. Petersburg. Authorities say Mitchell stole more than 3,000 Social Security benefit checks from the facility in 2012.

Four of Mitchell's accomplices have been convicted of

federal charges related to the same theft scheme.

### Bus hits truck, then house; two injured

**MA** GRANBY — Police said two people were injured when a large passenger bus clipped a heating oil delivery truck and swerved into a house in western Massachusetts.

Granby police said the driver of the Peter Pan bus and one of five passengers were taken to the hospital with minor injuries after the accident the morning of Jan. 9.

No one was in the house at the time, but the owner said his sister left to get some coffee just moments before impact. He said the bus damaged a downstairs home office she often uses and a second-floor bedroom.

No one was in the oil truck when it was struck, but state environmental officials said the truck's tank was ruptured and about 2,000 gallons of heating oil spilled.

### Tanker dumps 3,500 gallons of gasoline

**PA** GREENSBURG — Emergency responders in western Pennsylvania were able to prevent an estimated 3,500 gallons of gasoline from contaminating a major source of drinking water for Westmoreland County.

The Pittsburgh Tribune-Review reported the gas flowed from a tanker truck that ruptured along Route 66 in Salem Township on Jan. 8.

Bob Rosatti, chief of the Forbes Road Volunteer Fire Department, said emergency crews dug a series of dams to contain the gasoline before it reached the creek.

Pennsylvania State Police are investigating the accident.

From wire reports

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# Ryan leads Falcons to NFC title game

Associated Press

ATLANTA — Matt Ryan hardly resembled a quarterback who can't win the big games.

No, this looked more like an MVP.

Returning to the postseason for the first time in four years, Ryan threw for 338 yards and three touchdowns to lead the Atlanta Falcons past the Seattle Seahawks 36-20 in the divisional round Saturday.

The Falcons are headed to the NFC championship game for only the fourth time in their 51-year history, and they're on quite a roll with Matty Ice at the helm.

He finished up to chants of "MVP! MVP! MVP" from a raucous Georgia Dome crowd that gave the Seahawks a dose of what it's like for opposing teams at CenturyLink Field.

"It was pretty cool considering the circumstances, too, with the game in hand," Ryan said. "That's got to be as loud as it's ever been in here."

Ryan turned in another dynamic performance in the best season of his career, shaking off a 1-4 record in his previous playoff appearances.

In an interesting twist, his

lone postseason victory before Saturday was a 30-28 thriller over the Seahawks in the divisional round of the 2012 season.

Make it 2-0 over Seattle.

After the Seahawks zipped down the field for a touchdown on the opening possession, Atlanta's young defense largely shut down Russell Wilson & Co. the rest of the way.

Ryan and the high-scoring Falcons took it from there — getting a huge boost from a holding penalty that wiped out an 80-yard punt return by Devin Hester.

Ryan hooked up with Julio Jones on a 7-yard touchdown and Tevin Coleman for a 14-yard score before finishing off the Seahawks with a 3-yard toss to Mohamed Sanu in the corner of the end zone with just under 4 minutes remaining.

Atlanta (12-5) moves on to face either the Dallas Cowboys or the Green Bay Packers, who meet Sunday in the NFC's other divisional-round game.

After a 26-24 loss at Seattle during the regular season, the Falcons showed off all their offensive weapons against the Legion of Boom.

Eight players caught passes from Ryan, including running

back Devonta Freeman on a 53-yard play that included a dazzling fake on replacement free safety Steven Terrell right in the middle of the field.

The Seahawks (11-6-1) sure missed Earl Thomas, out for the season with a broken leg.

"It's just really hard to think it's over," said coach Pete Carroll, whose team couldn't follow up a dominating win over Detroit in the opening round.

The game turned dramatically on a holding penalty in the second quarter that negated Hester's return to the Atlanta 7.

Instead of having first-and-goal and a chance to extend a 10-7 lead, Seattle was backed up to its 7.

"Just a ridiculously large play in the game," Carroll said.

Especially with what came next. After Thomas Rawls was thrown for a 3-yard loss, Wilson dropped back to pass. One problem: rookie right guard Rees Odhiambo, taking over after Germain Ifedi was injured, stepped back onto Wilson's foot, sending the quarterback tumbling down in the end zone for a safety.

The Falcons did much better when backed up at their 1, closing out the first half by going

99 yards to make it 19-10. The drive was extended by Sanu's brilliant, one-handed catch for 22 yards with Jeremy Lane grabbing at his arm.

"They've got a lot of momentum," Carroll said of the Falcons. "This is what they looked like the last four weeks, and they carried that into this game against us."

**Classy move:** With 2 minutes to go, the Falcons had first-and-goal at the Seattle 2.

But Falcons coach Dan Quinn called for Ryan to take a knee, not wanting to pile it on against the team he previously worked for as defensive coordinator.

"It was a very classy way to end the game," Carroll said. "I thought it was just another great statement on what a great dude he is and what a great coach he is and what a great job he is doing."

**Dynamic Hester:** Facing his former team, Hester certainly had quite an impact on special teams.

Even though his longest play was wiped out, he had five kickoff returns for 194 yards, including a 78-yarder.

Hester, who played for the Falcons in 2014 and '15, signed with the Seahawks just before the playoffs.

# Lewis scores 3 TDs as Pats oust Texans

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — The New England Patriots are headed back to a familiar spot: the AFC championship game.

Dion Lewis had a 13-yard touchdown reception, a 98-yard kickoff return for a score and a late 1-yard touchdown to help the Patriots hold off the Houston Texans 34-16 on Saturday night and advance to an NFL-record sixth straight conference title game.

New England will host the winner of Sunday night's Pittsburgh-Kansas City matchup next Sunday for the right to play in the Super Bowl in Houston on Feb. 5.

"Whoever we play next week is going to be a great football team," Tom Brady said. "We're going to have to play better than we played tonight on offense."

Lewis became the fifth Patriots player to score three touchdowns in a playoff game. He's also the first player in the Super Bowl

era to score on a rush, a catch and a kick return in a postseason game.

"I just approached it that I would be in there on every play. That's just the way I prepare," Lewis said. "So when it does happen, I won't be surprised. I'll always be ready."

Bill Belichick's Patriots survived a gritty effort by the Texans' top-ranked defense, which intercepted Brady twice. Houston's special teams also forced a third turnover.

But the Texans couldn't find enough traction on offense to take full advantage of the Patriots' mistakes, settling for field goals on both of Brady's picks.

New England led just 17-13 at the half, but pushed its lead to 24-13 early in the third quarter on a 19-yard touchdown pass from Brady to James White.

Houston's Brock Osweiler was intercepted three times after that, and the Texans managed only a field goal the rest of game.

It was the first breakout game of the season for Lewis, who spent the first eight games on injured reserve recovering from offseason surgery on his left knee.

Brady finished 18-for-38 for 287 yards and two touchdowns and was showered with chants of "MVP! MVP!" and "Brady! Brady!" late in the game. Julian Edelman was Brady's most dependable target, catching eight passes for 137 yards.

Osweiler was just 23-for-40 for 198 yards with the two turnovers.

"You need to capitalize on great opportunities against a football team like this," Osweiler said. "That's my fault, I'll clean that up."

When New England did have the ball in the first half, it gave Houston a steady diet of Lewis early with LeGarrette Blount coming off an illness that limited him during practice this week.

# No. 14 Louisville trips up Allen, Duke

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — Anas Mahmoud established the post presence that No. 14 Louisville needed against Duke before teammates began chipping in timely baskets and making stops.

The Cardinals' inside-outside combination on both ends culminated in a strong finish that put away the seventh-ranked Blue Devils.

Mahmoud had career highs of 17 points and 11 rebounds, Donovan Mitchell added 15 points and Louisville shot 59 percent in the second half to top Duke 78-69 on Saturday.

"When you score 17 points, and maybe I had assists on 12 of them, it's due to my teammates," the 7-foot junior from Egypt said after making six of nine from the field and five of seven free throws.

No contribution was too small for Louisville against Duke and fiery guard Grayson Allen — who shook off constant booing from the red-clad crowd to keep the Blue Devils on the cusp of making a game-changing run. But the Cardinals' accuracy came up big.

Duke had outshot Louisville much of the game, but the Cardinals had the hotter hands after halftime in making 17 of 29 from the field to gain the edge as the Blue Devils shot 48 percent. Mitchell had the touch from beyond the arc, making consecutive threes while scoring 10 second-half points during a stretch that resulted in a 69-60 lead with 4:03 left.

"We just moved the ball, we weren't afraid," said Mitchell, who left the game early in the second half with a left ankle injury while guarding Allen but returned to make critical baskets.

Mahmoud soon followed with a put-back dunk and two free throws around Quentin Snider's three as the Cardinals (15-3, 3-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) won their third in a row. Snider had 13 points, six of Louisville's 16 assists and three steals. The Cardinals forced 18 turnovers.

"We played a really terrific game," Louisville coach Rick Pitino said. "We played two halves, had to battle them."

Allen had 23 points and nine rebounds as the Blue Devils (14-4, 2-3) lost their second in a row this week without injured forward Amile Jefferson (foot). Luke Kennard added 17 points.

**No. 1 Baylor 77, No. 25 Kansas State 68:** Manu Lecomte scored 26 points after battling early foul trouble, Ish Wainright and Al Freeman had key baskets down the stretch and Baylor outlasted the host Wildcats.

Wainright and Freeman had 15 points apiece for the Bears (15-1, 3-1 Big 12), who bounced back from a lopsided loss at West Virginia in their first game as No. 1.

**No. 2 Kansas 87, Oklahoma State 80:** Frank Mason III had 22 points, five rebounds and four assists, leading host Kansas to the Big 12 victory.

The Jayhawks (16-1, 5-0) rallied for their 16th straight win.

**No. 3 Villanova 70, St. John's 57:** Redshirt freshman Dante DiVincenzo had a season-high 19 points, helping Villanova pull away for the win at Madison Square Garden.

Mikal Bridges had 12 points and Josh Hart added 11 points for the Wildcats (17-1, 5-1 Big East).

**No. 4 UCLA 83, Utah 82:** Lonzo Ball had 17 points, eight assists and six rebounds, and UCLA edged Utah for the road win.

The Bruins (18-1, 5-1 Pac-12) overcame a nine-point deficit in the second half despite a poor defensive performance.

**No. 5 Gonzaga 79, No 21 Saint Mary's 56:** Nigel Williams-Goss scored 19 points and the hosts beat their archrival to remain the only undefeated team in Division I.

Jordan Mathews added 16 points, and Johnathan Williams had 14 for Gonzaga (17-0, 5-0 West Coast). The Bulldogs' 17-game winning streak is the longest in the nation.

**No. 6 Kentucky 92, Auburn 72:** Malik Monk scored 24 points, powering host Kentucky to its fifth straight win.

**No. 8 Creighton 101, Truman State 69:** Marcus Foster scored 21 points on 9-for-11 shooting, and host Creighton rolled to an easy win against Division II Truman State.

Creighton (17-1) dunked eight times and put the Bulldogs away with a 17-2 run in the second half that pushed the lead to 75-46.

**No. 10 West Virginia 74, Texas 72:** Teyvon Myers scored 16 points and visiting West Virginia avoided one of the bigger upsets of the Big 12 season so far with a close win against short-handed Texas.

Jevon Carter added 15 points for the Mountaineers (15-2, 4-1).

**No. 11 North Carolina 96, No. 9 Florida State 83:** Joel Berry II scored 26 points, and host North Carolina snapped Florida State's school-record winning streak at 12.

**No. 12 Butler 83, No. 15 Xavier 78:** Freshman Kamar Baldwin scored each of his 21 points in the second half, and host Butler took down another Top 25 team.

The Bulldogs (15-3, 4-2 Big East) improved to 5-1 against ranked opponents.

**No. 13 Oregon 85, Oregon State 43:** Payton Pritchard had 17 points and host Oregon scored the game's first 21 points.

Dylan Ennis added 16 points to help the Ducks (16-2, 5-0 Pac-12) win their 14th consecutive game and 36th in a row at home. Dillon Brooks and Casey Benson each had 11 points.

**No. 19 Virginia 77, Clemson 73:** London Perrantes scored a season-high 25 points, leading Virginia to the road win.

The Cavaliers (13-3, 3-2 Atlantic Coast Conference) shot 58 percent from the field in their second straight victory since dropping two in a row to Pittsburgh and Florida State. Marial Shayok tied his career high with 17 points, and Isaiah Wilkins finished with eight points and 13 rebounds.

**No. 20 Notre Dame 76, Virginia Tech 71:** Steve Vasturia scored 20 points and visiting Notre Dame rebounded after blowing a 19-point lead.

Matt Farrell and Bonzie Colson had 14 points apiece for the Fighting Irish (16-2, 5-0 Atlantic Coast Conference).

**No. 23 Florida 80, Georgia 76 (OT):** Canyon Barry scored 27 points, including four in overtime, and Florida handed Georgia its 14th consecutive loss in Gainesville.

John Egbunu sealed the victory with a free throw with 5.8 seconds remaining. Keith Stone had 17 points for the Gators (14-3, 5-0 Southeastern Conference), and Kasey Hill finished with 11.

**Penn State 52, No. 24 Minnesota 50:** Tony Carr made two free throws with 5 seconds left to lift host Penn State to the win.

Mike Watkins had 15 points and 15 rebounds and Payton Banks added 10 points for the Nittany Lions (11-7, 3-2 Big Ten) who recovered from a 32-22 halftime deficit.

**Army 53, American 49:** Matt Wilson scored 13 points off the Army bench and Luke Morrison and Jordan Fox each added 11 for the visiting Black Knights.

**Navy 88, Lafayette 51:** Bryce Dulin made five of six three-pointers and scored a career-best 23 points to lead visiting Navy.

Navy made seven of 11 three-pointers by intermission and had a 17-point lead for its largest first-half margin against a Division I opponent this season.

**San Jose State 89, Air Force 85:** Brandon Clarke scored a career-high 36 points on 16-for-22 shooting, adding five rebounds, assists and blocks, and visiting San Jose State outlasted Air Force in a nail-biter the featured eight ties and 15 lead changes.

# Canadiens rally, hold off Rangers

Associated Press

MONTREAL — It took a 62-second outburst in the third period for the Montreal Canadiens to turn a sour mood in the Bell Centre into a celebration.

Alexei Emelin, Max Pacioretty and Paul Byron scored in rapid succession and the Canadiens rebounded after a disputed goal against and the ejection of wing Andrew Shaw for a 5-4 victory over the New York Rangers on Saturday night.

"It was fun. It felt like a playoff game," Pacioretty said. "It felt like there were a lot of Rangers fans here."

Brandon Pirri, Rick Nash, J.T. Miller and Derek Stepan scored for the Rangers, who were coming off a 4-2 loss at home to Toronto on Friday night. It was the first time in eight occasions New York failed to win the second of back-to-back games this season. It also ended a four-game winning run in road games.

"It was a fast game," Pacioretty said. "And we knew they played [Friday] night and that, if we kept skating their defense, eventually we'd get our breaks."

The Rangers' Antti Raanta played for the first time since Dec. 29 but left in the first period with a lower-body injury after stopping 10 of 10 shots. Henrik Lundqvist replaced him and allowed five goals on 22 shots a night after losing to the Maple Leafs.

Alex Galchenyuk scored in his return after injuring his knee Dec. 4, and Brian Flynn also had a goal for Montreal.

**Wild 5, Stars 4:** Jason Zucker scored the winner with 6:45 to play as Minnesota beat host Dallas after blowing a four-goal lead.

Zucker skated into the paint as Dallas goalie Kari Lehtonen blocked a shot. The puck bounced off Zucker's chest and into the goal just before the net came off its moorings. A replay review confirmed the goal.

**Panthers 4, Blue Jackets 3:** Jaromir Jagr scored early in the third period, helping lead host Florida past Columbus.

Shawn Thornton, Vincent Trocheck and Jonathan Marchessault also scored for Florida while Trocheck, Aaron Ekblad, Jason Demers and Jakub Kindl had assists. James Reimer made 30 saves.

**Hurricanes 7, Islanders 4:** Brock McGinn had a goal and three assists while linemates Jordan Staal and Elias Lindholm each had a goal and two assists as host Carolina pulled away late to beat New York for its fourth straight victory.

**Red Wings 6, Penguins 3:** Andreas Athanasiou went end to end with the puck, split defenders and scored early in the third period, giving host Detroit its first lead in a win over Pittsburgh.

Detroit coach Jeff Blashill won a challenge shortly after on a potential tying goal by the Penguins. It was negated because of goaltender interference caused by Pittsburgh's Evgeni Malkin pushing Detroit's Justin Abdelkader into Jared Coreau.

**Bruins 6, Flyers 3:** Brad Marchand had two goals and three assists to lift host Boston over slumping Philadelphia.

**Ducks 3, Coyotes 0:** Hampus Lindholm, Nick Ritchie and Ryan Kesler scored, and Jonathan Bernier earned his first shutout of the season in visiting Anaheim's victory over Arizona.

**Maple Leafs 4, Senators 2:** Nazem Kadri scored twice and Curtis McElhinney made 35 saves, leading Toronto past host Ottawa.

It was McElhinney's first start with the Leafs after being picked up off waivers earlier in the week from the Columbus Blue Jackets.

**Predators 3, Avalanche 2:** Filip Forsberg scored with 11:54 remaining in the third period while Cody McLeod had a goal and a fight against his former team as Nashville rallied for a win over host Colorado.

**Blues 4, Sharks 0:** Colton Parayko had a goal and an assist and backup Carter Hutton earned his fifth career shutout in St. Louis' victory over host San Jose.

**Kings 3, Jets 2 (OT):** Jeff Carter scored his 23rd goal of the season at 1:36 of overtime as host Los Angeles rallied for its fifth victory in seven games.

Carter converted Jake Muzzin's 100th career NHL assist for the winner after Dustin Brown tied it for the Kings on a rebound goal with 5:08 left in regulation.

**Oilers 2, Flames 1 (SO):** Leon Draisaitl and Mark Letestu scored in the shootout, lifting host Edmonton over Calgary.

Patrick Maroon scored in regulation for the Oilers, who have won two straight and four of their last six.

# Booker leads Suns over Spurs in Mexico

Associated Press

MEXICO CITY — Devin Booker scored a career-high 39 points for the second straight game in Mexico City as the Phoenix Suns beat the San Antonio Spurs 108-105 on Saturday in the fifth regular-season game in the country.

Booker was 12-for-22 from the field and Eric Bledsoe added 17 points and 10 assists. Coming off a loss to Dallas in their Mexican opener Thursday night, the Suns overcame an 11-point deficit to snap a two-game losing streak.

Kawhi Leonard had 38 points for the Spurs (31-9).

**Clippers 113, Lakers 97:**

DeAndre Jordan scored 24 points on 12-for-13 shooting in Los Angeles as the Clippers shot 52 percent to cruise past the Lakers.

Jordan had 21 rebounds and Chris Paul added 20 points and 13 assists to help the Clippers improve to 6-0 in 2017. They are off to their best start since going 7-0 to begin 1974 when the franchise was located in Buffalo. Their streak is the longest active one in the NBA.

**Bulls 107, Pelicans 99:** Jimmy Butler scored 28 points in his return from the flu while Dwyane Wade had 17 of his 22 points in the fourth quarter in Chicago's victory over visiting

New Orleans.

Butler returned after missing two games, and had 19 points in the first half. Taj Gibson added 15 points and 16 rebounds to help the Bulls snap a three-game losing streak.

**Jazz 114, Magic 107:** Gordon Hayward scored 23 points to help host Utah beat Orlando, a victory tempered by the loss of Rodney Hood to a right knee injury with 1:44 remaining.

On a fast break after Rudy Gobert blocked Nikola Vucevic's shot, Hood was hurt when his right knee buckled as he went up for a layup. Hood screamed and clutched the knee immediately upon falling.

The Jazz said it was a hyper-extended knee and Hood was walking without assistance in the locker room.

**Wizards 109, 76ers 93:** John Wall had 25 points, seven rebounds and seven assists while Bradley Beal added 20 points as Washington used a second-half spurt to beat visiting Philadelphia.

The 76ers had won three straight for the first time in more than three years. They played without rookie star Joel Embiid. He sat out to rest after scoring 24 points Thursday night against Charlotte.

Jahlil Okafor had a season-high 26 points for the 76ers.