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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Fit Army recruits hardest to find in 11 states

USA Today

WASHINGTON — The Army's problem of finding physically fit recruits at a time of rising obesity in the U.S. is especially acute in the South — where it traditionally draws a high percentage of soldiers — a study published Wednesday finds.

Army recruits from Southern states are generally in poorer physical condition than those from other parts of the country, concluded researchers at The Citadel, a military college in Charleston, S.C.

"This has a real impact on national security," said Daniel Bornstein, a researcher who led the study.

The regional distinction also suggests that government policy can influence fitness, and the South could be falling behind the rest of the country. "Some of the greatest public health achievements have come as the result of state-level policy change," the study found.

Eleven states — Alabama, Arkansas,

Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas and West Virginia — had among the highest rates of recruits who become injured during basic training.

The results reflect trends in the nation where Southern states generally have higher obesity rates. Adult obesity is 35 percent or higher in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi and West Virginia, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Lack of physical fitness and obesity contribute to a higher injury rate among soldiers in basic training. Each recruit lost to attrition cost the government \$31,000 in 2005, according to the study.

The study examined recruits who entered the Army between 2010 and 2013 and looked at initial physical tests, including timed runs, and injury rates after recruits get to basic training.

The struggle to find physically fit recruits is not new for the Army. Even dur-

ing World War II, only about 50 percent of young people were qualified to join. Today, the percentage has dropped to 23 percent.

That number also includes those not qualified because of other factors, such as criminal records or the lack of high school diplomas. But physical fitness remains a growing problem for the military.

"What we're seeing is a less fit population," said Mark Hertling, a retired three-star general who served on the president's physical fitness council under President Barack Obama.

"Recruiting challenges are going to get tougher for the military," said Hertling, who made changes to accommodate the declining fitness of recruits when he commanded Army basic training.

Bornstein and Hertling said the Army cannot fix the problem without support from society. The study cited bringing physical education back to schools or improving infrastructure, such as sidewalks, to encourage walking.

Senate Dems want Trump to get tougher on Russians

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Senate Democrats on Wednesday called for the Trump administration to adopt a set of tougher measures against Russia, although many of their suggestions about improving NATO cyberoperations already have been adopted by the alliance.

The senators charged in a 200-page report that the White House lacks a coherent plan to counter Moscow's efforts at undermining the West.

"Never before has a U.S. president so clearly ignored such a grave and growing threat to U.S. national security," the report said.

The findings, which detail Russian meddling in elections across Europe and the U.S., called for a tougher line, particularly in cyberspace. That would mean closer coordination with NATO, the report says.

Among the recommendations in the report are "rapid-reaction teams" to defend allies that come under attack.

The U.S. also should convene a special meeting of the NATO heads of state to review Russian government-sponsored cy-

berattacks and to determine when such assaults should trigger the alliance's mutual-protection provision, the report said.

"The United States and our European allies remain woefully vulnerable to cyberattacks, which are a preferred asymmetric weapon of state hybrid threat actors," it said. "Moreover, the United States and its allies have not defined the contours of cyberattacks in the context of NATO's Article 5."

Still, NATO already has begun to move in the direction called for in the Senate report, establishing a cyberoperations "center of excellence" in Estonia and one focused on hybrid threats based in Finland. NATO also has a cyberoperations quick-reaction team, and information-sharing agreements with the European Union have been set up to ensure cyberattacks are countered in real time.

In addition, the alliance formally has agreed that cyberattacks can potentially activate Article 5, triggering a collective alliance military response. It remains unclear, however, what type of cyberattack would rise to such a level that NATO's collective-defense provision should be invoked.

The only time in NATO history that Ar-

ticle 5 was activated was after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks.

The report by Senate Democrats comes as independent prosecutor Robert Mueller continues his investigation into possible cooperation between the Trump campaign and Moscow during the 2016 presidential election. In speeches, Trump has denied any cooperation with Moscow, while also speaking of his desire for closer ties with Russia. Trump's past comments about NATO's irrelevance have raised concern in the region about the U.S. commitment to Europe.

Yet U.S. military efforts in Europe have continued even as Trump has talked up his desire for better relations with Russia. The military has moved forward with troop rotations in Eastern Europe, and the Pentagon budget under Trump calls for increased funding for operations aimed at deterring Russian aggression.

In addition, the Trump administration has authorized the sale of lethal aid to Ukraine, a move opposed by the Obama administration because of concerns about antagonizing Moscow.

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US soldier wounded in Afghan attack

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — The U.S. military says one of its soldiers was wounded when insurgents launched an attack in eastern Afghanistan's remote Achin district of Nangarhar province.

Capt. Tom Gresback, a U.S. military spokesman in Afghanistan, told The Associated Press one U.S. servicemember was wounded and in stable condition in what he would describe only as "active ground engagement."

He refused to give further details, including whether it involved a local militia.

In Afghanistan, local militias often are paid by the U.S. and are partnered with them in operations in remote regions.

The Taliban claimed the attack Thursday was carried out by two insurgents disguised as local militiamen. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told the AP the attackers had infiltrated the local force months earlier.

Gresback said the military is investigating the incident.

Army: 4 US-based units to deploy

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army on Wednesday announced deployments this spring and summer for four U.S.-based units, calling them regular troop rotations.

This spring, soldiers from Fort Drum, N.Y., will travel to Iraq, soldiers from Fort Campbell, Ky., will deploy to Afghanistan and soldiers from Fort Stewart, Ga., will be sent to South Korea, the Army announced. Soldiers from Fort Hood, Texas, will deploy in the summer to Europe.

The announcements did not identify how many soldiers from the Army posts would deploy, following recent Pentagon guidance not to disclose such information because of security concerns, officials said.

Fort Drum's 10th Mountain Division Headquarters will replace the Army's 1st Armored Division Headquarters in Iraq, taking over the role of Combined Joint Forces Land Component Command for Operation Inherent Resolve, according to the Army. In that role, 10th Mountain Headquarters, led by division commander Maj. Gen. Walter E. Piatt, will oversee the ongoing training and advising of Iraq's security forces, a mission that has continued following Islamic State's loss of all the land that the terrorist group once controlled in Iraq.

In Afghanistan, Fort Campbell's 101st Airborne Division Headquarters will replace the 3rd Infantry Division's Headquarters, which has served as the U.S. Forces-Afghanistan National Support Element since July, according to the Army. In that role, the 101st Headquarters, led

by division commander Maj. Gen. Andrew Poppas, will oversee logistics and sustainment operations throughout the country. It will mark the 101st Airborne Division Headquarters' fourth deployment to Afghanistan in the last decade.

The Fort Stewart-based 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 3rd Infantry Division will deploy to South Korea to replace the 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division, according to the Army. It will make the first time a 3rd Infantry Division unit has returned to the Korean Peninsula since 1953, when fighting in the Korean War ended. The division participated in major battles of that war, including the Battle of Chosin Reservoir.

Since 2015, the Army has rotated combat brigades to South Korea on temporary assignments to train side-by-side with that nation's forces in an effort to guard against North Korean aggression. The 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division has served that role since June.

Fort Hood's 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Cavalry Division will deploy to Europe in the summer in support of Operation Atlantic Resolve, the U.S. mission to train with and support NATO allies and to deter Russian aggression in the region following its intervention in Ukraine.

The brigade will replace 2nd Armored Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, which arrived in Europe in September with nearly 4,000 troops and has participated in training operations in nations across the continent.

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Study of drug ecstasy to treat PTSD gets bitcoin boost

BY NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pineapple Fund, an anonymous benefactor's initiative to give away \$86 million in digital currency, plans to donate \$4 million for the study of the drug MDMA, commonly known as ecstasy, as a treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder.

The money will go to the nonprofit Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, or MAPS, which has included veterans in its studies of MDMA since 2010. Last year, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration designated the illegal psychedelic drug as a breakthrough therapy, allowing it to move through the regulatory process more quickly.

The \$4 million is a matching grant, and MAPS must raise another \$4 million before March 10 to receive it, MAPS an-

nounced Wednesday in a news release. The plan is for the nonprofit to raise the total amount necessary to complete the third phase of clinical trials of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy.

The Pineapple Fund was announced in December on the social media site Reddit by an anonymous donor, "Pine." As of Wednesday, Pine had given out \$20 million in bitcoins to 23 charities.

"PTSD is a severe condition that affects everyone from sexual assault survivors to military veterans," the secret donor said in a written statement. "MDMA-assisted psychotherapy has shown great promise. We're offering the matching grant because we think the psychedelic and cryptocurrency communities can work together to finish funding Phase 3 clinical trials."

During the trials, participants take a dose of MDMA and a clinician guides participants through eight hours of intensive

psychotherapy. The process is repeated two more times, each session one month apart. The goal is to get to the root cause of someone's PTSD, and not just to treat the symptoms like other drugs do, said Michael Mithoefer, a clinical investigator who is involved in the study.

The idea has seen positive results so far, according to MAPS.

The 107 people involved in Phase 2 trials had chronic PTSD that was severe enough to resist treatment from traditional methods. Two months after they completed three sessions of MDMA-assisted psychotherapy, 61 percent of them no longer qualified for a PTSD diagnosis, according to MAPS statistics.

Rick Doblin, the MAPS founder and director, said the Pineapple Fund is a "dream come true" that highlights cryptocurrency as a potential new source for philanthropy and social change.

Immigration agents descend on 7-Eleven stores in 17 states

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Seven immigration agents filed into a 7-Eleven store before dawn Wednesday, waited for people to go through the checkout line and told arriving customers and a driver delivering beer to wait outside. A federal inspection was underway, they said.

Within 20 minutes, they verified that the cashier had a valid green card and served notice on the owner to produce hiring records in three days that deal with employees' immigration status.

The well-rehearsed scene, executed with quiet efficiency in Los Angeles' Koreatown, played out at about 100 7-Eleven stores in 17 states and the District of Columbia, an operation that officials called the largest immigration action against an employer under Donald Trump's presidency. The employment audits and interviews with store workers could lead

to criminal charges or fines. And they appeared to open a new front in Trump's expansion of immigration enforcement, which has brought a 40 percent increase in deportation arrests and pledges to spend billions of dollars on a border wall with Mexico.

A top official at U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement said the audits were "the first of many" and "a harbinger of what's to come" for employers.

"This is what we're gearing up for this year and what you're going to see more and more of is these large-scale compliance inspections, just for starters," said Derek Benner, acting head of ICE's Homeland Security Investigations, which oversees cases against employers.

Wednesday's actions were aimed at store owners and managers, though 21 workers were arrested on suspicion of being in the country illegally.

Trump 'unlikely' to agree to interview in Russia investigation

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump says that it "seems unlikely" that he'd give an interview in special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation into potential coordination between Russia and the Trump campaign.

Trump said "we'll see what happens" when asked if he'd provide an interview to Mueller's team.

"When they have no collusion and nobody's found any collusion at any level, it seems unlikely that you'd even have an interview," Trump said Wednesday during a joint news conference with the prime minister of Norway.

The special counsel's team of investigators has expressed interest in speaking with Trump, but no details have been worked out. Trump's lawyers previously have stated their determination to cooperate with requests in the probe, which has already resulted in charges against four of Trump's campaign advisers.

Trump called the investigation a "phony cloud" over his administration. "It has hurt our government," he said. "It was a Democrat hoax."

Trump's words differed from what he said at a news conference in June, shortly after fired FBI Director James Comey had told Congress that Trump asked him for a pledge of loyalty. Trump de-

nied that, and said he'd be "100 percent" willing to tell his version of events under oath. He said he'd be "glad to" speak to Mueller about it.

The comments came after Trump lashed out at the investigations on Twitter on Wednesday morning, urging Republicans to take control of the inquiries and repeating his claim that they are on a "witch hunt."

"There was no collusion, everybody including the Dems knows there was no collusion, & yet on and on it goes," he tweeted. "Russia & the world is laughing at the stupidity they are witnessing. Republicans should finally take control!"

In a separate tweet Wednesday morning, Trump accused Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., of being "underhanded and a disgrace" for disclosing details of a dossier of allegations about his ties to Russia during the presidential campaign.

A day earlier, Feinstein, released the transcript of the Senate Judiciary Committee's closed-door August interview with an official from the political opposition research firm Fusion GPS, which commissioned the dossier. She released the transcript of Glenn Simpson's interview over the objections of the committee's Republican chairman, Iowa Sen. Chuck Grassley. She is the top Democrat on the panel.

Search goes on for missing in Calif. mudslide

Associated Press

MONTECITO, Calif. — Hundreds of rescue workers slogged through knee-deep ooze and used long poles to probe for bodies Thursday as the search dragged on for victims of the mudslides that slammed this wealthy coastal town. Seventeen were confirmed dead; eight others were missing.

Santa Barbara County authorities sent a shudder through the community early Thursday when they reported that the number of people unaccounted for had surged from 16 to 48. Later in the morning, they said they had made a clerical error, and the actual number of missing was down to eight.

As search dogs clambered on heaps of wood that used to be homes, mud-spattered rescue teams from all over California worked their way through the ruins of Montecito, an enclave of 9,000 people northwest of Los Angeles that is home to celebrities such as Oprah Winfrey.

It was left covered with thick muck, boulders, wrecked cars, splintered lumber and tree limbs in a scene Santa Barbara County Sheriff Bill Brown likened to a World War I battlefield.

After a better look at the damage, officials lowered the number of destroyed homes from 100 to 59 and raised the number of damaged ones from 300 to 446.

Overall, 28 people were injured. Twelve remained hospitalized, four in critical condition.

By Wednesday, some 500 searchers had covered about 75 percent of the inundated area, authorities said. They had a long slog ahead, filled with hazards seen and unseen.

Rescue crews worked up to 12 hours per day and risked stepping on nails or shattered glass, being exposed to raw sewage or dealing with leaking gas, said Deputy Dan Page, chief of a Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department rescue team.

"We've gotten multiple reports of rescuers falling through manholes that were covered with mud, swimming pools that were covered up with mud," said Anthony Buzzerio, a Los Angeles County fire battalion chief. "The mud is acting like a candy shell on ice cream. It's crusty on top but soft underneath, so we're having to be very careful."

Crews marked where bodies were found, often far away from homes, and used that information to guess where other victims might have ended up as the surging mud carried or buried them.

People in Montecito had counted themselves lucky last month after the biggest wildfire in California history spared the town. But it was the fire that led to the mudslide, by burning away vegetation.

State Department updates system for travel advisories

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The State Department on Wednesday unveiled four tiered categories to warn travelers of potential dangers overseas, using common-sense language ranging from “Exercise normal precaution” to “Do not travel.”

The new rankings replace the vague and often-confusing system of issuing “travel alerts” for short-term dangers posed by events like health epidemics or mass protests and “travel warnings” for long-standing concerns like armed conflict or political instability. The new rankings are applied to every country in the world, and even Antarctica.

Michelle Bernier-Toth, head of Overseas Citizens Services, said the changes were made because so few people understood the distinctions in the previous, broad rankings.

“I personally was tired of ex-

plaining the difference between a travel warning and a travel alert, even to some of my colleagues,” she said. “We needed to make it more accessible to people, to make sure the information was more easily understood using plain language.”

Under the new rankings, Level One, the lowest advisory, signals a need to “exercise normal precautions” in places where there is no more than the usual risk involved in international travel. Canada and Australia are among the countries ranked Level One.

Level Two means “exercise increased caution” for nations where there is a heightened risk to safety. Many countries in Western Europe, where there have been terrorist attacks in recent years, are listed as Level Two. Antarctica is also a Level Two.

Level Three translates bluntly as “reconsider travel,” with the recommendation to avoid going

to countries with serious risks. Turkey, Russia and Venezuela are considered Level Three.

Level Four is for countries with a “greater likelihood of life-threatening risks” in which the U.S. government could be limited in its ability to help. Travelers already in those countries are advised to leave as soon as it is safe.

Eleven countries come with the do-not-travel recommendation, most in Africa and the Middle East — Mali, Central African Republic, Libya, South Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan and North Korea.

In addition, the new system will explain why the advisory was made, with one-letter logos: C for crime, T for terrorism, U for civil unrest, H for health risks, N for natural disasters, E for special events like an election and O for some other reason.

Christian church destroyed in China

Associated Press

BEIJING — Authorities in northern China’s coal country this week demolished a well-known Christian megachurch, underscoring long-standing tensions between religious groups and the officially atheistic Communist Party.

Witnesses and overseas activists say paramilitary People’s Armed Police forces used excavators and dynamite on Tuesday to destroy the Golden Lampstand Church in the city of Linfen in Shanxi province.

ChinaAid, a U.S.-based Christian advocacy group, said local authorities planted explosives in an underground worship hall to demolish the building.

The church, with a congregation of more than 50,000, has long clashed with the government. Hundreds of police and hired thugs smashed the church and seized Bibles in an earlier crackdown in 2009 that ended with church leaders receiving long prison sentences.

There are an estimated 60 million Christians in China, many of whom worship in independent congregations like the Golden Lampstand.

The surging popularity of non-state-approved churches has raised the ire of local authorities, wary of any threats to the party’s rigid political and social control.

The church had previously been accused of violating land agreements and building codes — charges that are commonly brought against unregistered churches.

Millions of Christians, Buddhists and Muslims also worship in state-sanctioned assemblies.

An official at the local religious affairs bureau denied Thursday that the demolition took place, but pictures distributed by ChinaAid showed the church’s steeple and cross toppled in a large pile of rubble.

Police hunt for jewels, thieves after Ritz Hotel robbery in Paris

Associated Press

PARIS — Paris police have recovered some jewels stolen from the Ritz Hotel in a dramatic heist, but are still searching Thursday for two thieves and the rest of the missing luxury merchandise.

The robbery on Wednesday evening raised questions about security in one of the world’s most prestigious neighborhoods, the Place Vendome, whose well-guarded buildings include the Justice Ministry, high-end boutiques and the 19th-century Ritz.

Workers cleaned up shattered glass Thursday morning and started to repair damage from the robbery. Otherwise, business appeared to be returning to normal at the Ritz, with no significant increase in security.

Three suspects entered the hotel through an unmarked side door, smashed display cases and threw bags of goods out a window to at least two accomplices outside, according to a police official.

The three inside then were blocked when they tried to flee through another door and soon were arrested, the official said.

The accomplices outside fled, one on a motorcycle and another in a car. The motorcyclist dropped a bag with jewels and hatchets when his motorcycle hit a pedestrian during his escape, the official said. The pedestrian was lightly injured, said the official, who was not authorized to speak publicly about an ongoing investigation.

Other jewels were found scattered amid the debris of the

shattered display cases during overnight cleanup efforts, the official told The Associated Press.

The overall value of the jewels on display was about \$5.4 million, and authorities were working Thursday with the jewelers to determine how many items are still missing and their value, the official said.

Another police official said some of the thieves apparently had guns. Two people inside the hotel hid from the thieves and alerted police, the official said.

Patrons at the hotel’s renowned Hemingway Bar described panic as the thieves entered the hushed environment of the Ritz, where rooms start at \$1,200 per night.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police: Plow driver drunk when he hit cars

NJ PEQUANNOCK — Authorities said a state Department of Transportation worker was driving drunk when the snowplow he was operating struck two vehicles.

Pequanock police said Roger Attieh, 36, of Boonton, sideswiped a vehicle about 5:40 p.m. Monday.

After inspecting the damage, they said, Attieh began to drive away but then rear-ended a second vehicle.

Attieh is charged with drunken driving and drunken driving in a commercial motor vehicle.

Burst pipe damages historic tavern

VA ALEXANDRIA — A historic tavern building in Virginia dating to the 18th century has suffered damage connected to recent frigid temperatures.

The city of Alexandria said it is temporarily closing Gadsby's Tavern Museum in the city's Old Town section.

City officials said a sprinkler pipe burst Sunday evening. That led to flooding from the second floor to the basement in the museum building, which was built about 1785.

The museum will be closed for at least two weeks.

Gadsby's was a social hub for the city in the era of the Founding Fathers. George Washington was a frequent patron, and each of the first five presidents visited the tavern.

Ice falls from building and crushes man's car

NY NEW YORK — An 18-year-old man said he was walking toward his car when a large chunk of ice and

snow fell off a 21-story New York City building and crushed his car.

The New York Police Department briefly shut down the SoHo neighborhood street after the ice crumpled the back of the car Tuesday afternoon. Coltrane Nadler, of South Orange, N.J., said he can laugh about the incident because no one was injured.

Nadler said that although the streets were parked bumper to bumper, his vehicle was the only one hit.

850 'cold-stunned' turtles are retrieved

FL FORT WALTON BEACH — Officials said more than 850 "cold-stunned" sea turtles have been brought to a Florida facility since a cold snap began last week.

Gulf World Marine Institute spokeswoman Sam Tuno told the Northwest Florida Daily News that it's the second-largest cold-stunning event in the Florida Panhandle since 2010, when approximately 1,800 sea turtles were rehabilitated.

Sea turtles' bodies can go into shock when the waters get below 50 degrees in shallow bays and estuaries.

Tuno said they're expecting to lose up to 10 percent of the turtles, but the majority of them will be fine.

Theft suspect nabbed applying for police job

AZ PHOENIX — A former Bank of America worker suspected of theft chose the wrong employer when applying for a police dispatch job.

The Cottonwood Police Department in central Arizona's Yavapai County said the case involving Alberto Lopez, 32, of Phoenix popped up in law en-

forcement records when he applied to be a dispatcher.

Police spokeswoman Sgt. Monica Kuhl said Monday that Lopez was suspected of stealing \$5,000 from a Bank of America branch in Yavapai County between July and September 2016.

After Lopez applied for the dispatch position, officers had him come in for an interview last week and arrested him on a felony theft warrant.

He didn't get the job.

Seized white tiger sent to California

LA BATON ROUGE — A California sanctuary for exotic animals is caring for a white tiger cub that was seized in Louisiana.

Director Bobbi Brink told The New Orleans Advocate the 5-month-old animal was malnourished, lethargic and had ringworm when it arrived Dec. 22.

She and Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries permits director Melissa Collins said a current investigation keeps them from saying who owned it.

Brink said the cub's now doing well.

It's at Lions, Tigers & Bears, a big cat and exotic animal rescue in Alpine, Calif.

It's illegal for Louisiana residents to own tigers or other exotic animals.

Suspect steals money, cookies from Subway

NV LAS VEGAS — Las Vegas police are searching for a suspect who robbed a Subway restaurant of \$69 and two macadamia nut cookies.

KSNV-TV reported that surveillance footage shows the suspect pull out a gun before

pointing it at a Subway employee Jan. 4.

The employee, Eric Rouse, said the man ordered the two cookies and then pulled out the gun and made demands.

2 fires blamed on heating frozen pipes

MD TANEYTOWN — Fire officials in Maryland blamed two fires on people trying to thaw frozen pipes.

FOX 45 in Baltimore reported that one fire occurred last weekend in Taneytown. No injuries were reported.

The Maryland Fire Marshal's Office attributed the cause of the blaze to the use of a blowtorch to heat some pipes.

The Fire Marshal's Office said another fire started under similar circumstances the same day in Edgewood.

Officials said a maintenance worker used a heat gun and a hair dryer to thaw pipes in a town house.

Police: Woman shot at husband on the toilet

AZ GOODYEAR — An Arizona woman is facing charges after police said she fired shots at her husband while he sat on the toilet to make him "listen."

KNXV-TV reported Linda Jean Fahn, 69, recently was arrested following a frantic call from her husband.

He told Goodyear police Fahn barged in while he was using the restroom and fired two shots above his head.

According to a police report, Fahn told officers, "I shot two bullets at the wall above his head to make him listen to me."

Fahn has been charged with aggravated assault.

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Experience vs. youth in NFL divisional round

Los Angeles Times

NEW ORLEANS — Drew Brees has a dozen playoff starts.

That's not lost on his New Orleans Saints teammates, even those who are making their first foray into the NFL postseason. They understand the value of experience in these do-or-die games.

"It's huge to have a guy like Drew Brees at the helm, who understands every situation," defensive tackle Sheldon Rankins said after Sunday's first-round victory over Carolina. "He's never going to put our defense in a bad position. He's never going to put this team in a bad position. He's always going to give us a chance to win. That's all you can ask for."

A big theme heading into the four divisional games is the wealth of experience at quarterback versus the lack thereof. In every game, there's a seasoned passer on one side and a relative newcomer on the other.

Brees versus Minnesota's Case Keenum, making his postseason debut.

New England's Tom Brady (34 playoff games) vs. Tennessee's Marcus Mariota (one).

Pittsburgh's Ben Roethlisberger (20) vs. Jacksonville's Blake Bortles (one).

Atlanta's Matt Ryan (nine) vs. Philadelphia's Nick Foles (one).

Experience counts, something that was evident in the Falcons' first-round victory

over the Los Angeles Rams. That game pitted a team that was fresh off a Super Bowl — albeit a historic second-half collapse — against one that had not played in the postseason since 2004. Rams quarterback Jared Goff was not at the top of his game.

"It's super fast. Everyone's into it," Jacksonville linebacker Dante Fowler Jr. noted of the playoff intensity. "It's just a different tempo, very fast."

The Jaguars are looking to shock the football world a second time, after a 30-9 victory at Pittsburgh in October when they ran back two Roethlisberger interceptions for touchdowns. It was after that game that the two-time Super Bowl-winning quarterback famously said, "Maybe I don't have it anymore" in frustration.

Bortles was not a big factor in that game, passing for just 95 yards with an interception. It was rookie running back Leonard Fournette who set the pace with 181 yards and two touchdowns.

The Steelers will have All-Pro receiver Antonio Brown back from a calf injury he sustained in mid-December.

"We'll see how it goes and how the week progressed," Brown, the NFL's only unanimous All-Pro, told reporters Monday. "I feel I was able to go through practice. I can still get a little better, but it was good to be out there. There's still a lot to test. First day of the week."

The Patriots have the AFC's top seed and a five-time Super Bowl winner in

Brady, although they've been dealing with the potential distraction of an ESPN report of a strained relationship among the quarterback, coach Bill Belichick and owner Robert Kraft.

Then again, the Patriots have weathered turbulence before and still won.

The Titans played at New England during the 2015 season and lost, 33-16. In that game, the rookie Mariota left in the second quarter after consecutive drives that ended in sacks.

Belichick said Monday that there's no value in his players studying that game tape, with the teams and situations so different now. He also warned against dismissing the Titans as being light on postseason experience.

"I don't think what happened two years ago really has any bearing at all, whatsoever, on this game," Belichick said.

As for the Eagles, they already made history. A far less dangerous team without quarterback Carson Wentz, they are the first No. 1 seed to be an underdog in a divisional game. Las Vegas opened with the Falcons favored by three.

Asked what he'd like to see out of Foles, Eagles offensive coordinator Frank Reich said he simply wants him to "play his game."

"This is a team game," Reich said. "This is we, we, we. We're going to do this. We do it together. It's not any one man."

Federer could see Djokovic in Aussie semis

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Roger Federer found himself in a slightly awkward position before the Australian Open draw.

Just being there.

A few minutes later when the formalities were completed, Federer found out how difficult defending his title could be after landing in the same half as six-time champion Novak Djokovic.

"This is not normal," Federer told a crowd of hundreds of fans before the draw on Thursday at Margaret Court Arena. "I don't like usually going to draws because they freak me out. I don't want to know who I play other than just seeing the sheet at the end and knowing who my first-round opponent is."

First up, the 36-year-old Swiss will play Ajaz Bedene of Slovenia. He also has No. 7-ranked David Goffin, Juan Martin del Potro, Sam Querrey, and Milos Raonic in his quarter.

There's a potential semifinal against Djokovic, who is aiming for a record seventh Australian Open title but is seeded 14th as he returns from six months on the sidelines with a right elbow injury.

Djokovic is in the same quarter as the Zverev brothers — fourth-seeded Alexander could meet older brother and No. 32-seeded Mischa in the third round — 2014 champion Stan Wawrinka and No. 5 Dominic Thiem.

Federer beat Rafael Nadal in the final here last year on his return from six months on the

sidelines and is seeded No. 2 as he bids for a 20th Grand Slam singles title.

Djokovic had a contrasting 2017, starting at No. 2 but losing in a second-round upset at the Australian Open and not playing again after Wimbledon. It was the first year since 2009 that Djokovic didn't reach at least one Grand Slam final. He delayed his return until two exhibition appearances this week.

Top-ranked Nadal will open against Victor Estrella Burgos, has a potential fourth-round match against John Isner, and No. 3 Grigor Dimitrov in his half of the draw. He followed his run to the final in Melbourne by winning the French Open and U.S. Open, splitting the Grand Slam honors with Federer for the year.

Serena Williams has opted not to defend her title four months after giving birth to her first child, leaving the women's draw open.

Her sister Venus, who lost the all-Williams Australian Open final last year, has a tough opener against Belinda Bencic — who combined with Federer to win the Hopman Cup for Switzerland last week — and is also in the same quarter as U.S. Open winner Sloane Stephens.

Top-ranked Simona Halep opens against Australian wild card Destanee Aiava, has a potential second-round match against 2014 Wimbledon finalist Eugenie Bouchard, and is in the same half as Garbine Muguruza, the Wimbledon champion.

Lightning get 4 on All-Star team Wild get by Hawks

Associated Press

The league-leading Tampa Bay Lightning's top performers will be on full display when the city hosts NHL All-Star Weekend later this month.

Top scorer Nikita Kucherov, goaltender Andrei Vasilevski and defenseman Victor Hedman will join captain Steven Stamkos for the skills competition and 3-on-3 tournament Jan. 27 and 28 in Tampa, Fla. Kucherov has the most points in the league and Vasilevski the most victories in leading the Lightning to an NHL-best 65 points so far this season.

With four players on the Atlantic Division team, Tampa Bay has the most representation for the showcase event. The Los Angeles Kings will send three players to Tampa: center Anze Kopitar, defenseman Drew Doughty and goalie

Jonathan Quick. The league announced the full All-Star rosters on Wednesday as selected by the NHL's hockey operations department.

Sidney Crosby and Kris Letang of the defending Stanley Cup-champion Pittsburgh Penguins were added to the Metropolitan Division team that also includes Washington Capitals winger Alex Ovechkin and goalie Braden Holtby. New York Rangers goalie Henrik Lundqvist was selected to his fourth All-Star Weekend, and Florida Panthers center Aleksander Barkov will head to his first.

The surprise Vegas Golden Knights got two All-Stars: goalie Marc-Andre Fleury and winger James Neal. The expansion franchise is atop the Pacific Division with the most success so far of any NHL team in its inaugural season.

Reigning Hart Trophy winner Connor McDavid of the Edmonton Oilers is also on the Pacific Division roster along with Calgary Flames winger Johnny Gaudreau. Nashville Predators goalie Pekka Rinne earned his third All-Star spot, all since 2015, and joins teammate P.K. Subban on the Central Division team.

Vancouver Canucks winger Brock Boeser, who's tied for fifth in the NHL with 22 goals, is the only rookie and the youngest All-Star at age 20.

The two Eastern and Western Conference teams will play each other in the semifinals of the 3-on-3 tournament with the winners facing off for \$1 million.

All 31 teams must have at least one representative with the divisional teams limited to six forwards, three defensemen and two goalies.

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Ryan Suter gave Minnesota the lead on a 4-on-4 early in the third period, Devan Dubnyk made 34 saves and the Wild held off the Chicago Blackhawks 2-1 on Wednesday night to end a two-game slide.

Jonas Brodin scored in the second period for Minnesota (23-17-4). The Wild pulled two points ahead of Chicago (21-16-6) in the tight Central Division as the two tussle for playoff spots in the Western Conference.

Blackhawks defenseman Brent Seabrook, a healthy scratch in Chicago's 8-2 win in Ottawa on Tuesday night, was back in the lineup and celebrated with his first goal since opening night.

Chicago's Anton Forsberg made 25 saves in his third straight start.

The Blackhawks acquired winger Anthony Duclair and defenseman Adam Clendening from Arizona before the game in a trade for right wing Richard Panik and minor league forward Laurent Dauphin.

Senators 4, Maple Leafs 3: Tom Pyatt broke a tie with 3:05 left and visiting Ottawa beat Toronto in the final game for both teams before their bye weeks.

Pyatt took a feed from Matt Duchene on a 3-on-1 — after Toronto defenseman Morgan Rielly got caught pinching at Ottawa's blue line — and beat Frederik Andersen high to the blocker side.

Thomas Chabot, Mike Hoffman and Gabriel Dumont also scored to help the Senators rebound from an 8-2 home loss to Chicago on Tuesday night. Craig Anderson made 44 saves after being pulled against the Blackhawks. Andreas Borgman, James van Riemsdyk and Rielly scored for Toronto.

Figure skaters might lead North Koreans

Associated Press

They're the friendly face of North Korea, and it looks like they're coming south to the Olympics.

With sparkling costumes and winning smiles, figure skaters Ryom Tae Ok and Kim Ju Sik could lead the North Korean team in Pyeongchang, South Korea, next month after their government said Tuesday it would send athletes to the Winter Games.

Ryom and Kim are the only North Korean athletes who have qualified for the Feb. 9-25 Olympics in Pyeongchang so far. However, the International Olympic Committee could potentially hold extra invitational spots open to symbolize togetherness between the two Koreas.

Ryom and Kim almost certainly won't win a medal in the fiercely competitive world of pairs skating, but they've already won friends against a backdrop of political tension.

On their world championship debut last year in Finland, Ryom and Kim put in two spir-

ited skates to enthusiastic applause from the crowd as they finished 15th, above one of the two U.S. pairs and a string of more experienced European competitors.

They weren't afraid to show their feelings, either. The 18-year-old Ryom punched the air with joy on finishing the short program to a Jeff Beck cover of The Beatles classic "A Day in the Life."

Ryom and her partner, Kim, embraced in their matching silver-and-black costumes before soaking up the crowd's cheers and skating off to celebrate with their coaches.

Rarely seen abroad, they have given little away about their lives, other than that they train in the North Korean capital, Pyongyang. At the world championships, Kim said he was keen to take part in "a big competition" when asked about the Olympics through a translator from his team. They wouldn't talk about visiting South Korea and walked away when asked about their choice of music.

North Korea was far from

certain to compete in Pyeongchang. It boycotted the only other Olympics hosted in South Korea, the Seoul Games of 1988, and often has skipped the Winter Olympics entirely.

It hasn't won a winter medal since 1992 and its last team, in 2010, consisted of just one figure skater and one speed skater, neither of whom came close to the podium.

By contrast, North Korea punches above its weight in the Summer Olympics. It won seven medals across weightlifting, gymnastics, shooting and table tennis in 2016.

Even with a deal for North Korea to compete in Pyeongchang, the two Koreas and the IOC face some thorny issues of protocol.

Flags, anthems and the opening ceremony all will require delicate negotiation.

North and South Korean athletes have marched together at some previous Olympics during periods of warmer relations between the two governments, and South Korea has suggested a repeat in Pyeongchang.

NBA roundup

Williams overshadows Durant milestone

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — Lou Williams sent the same roaring, adoring crowd that cheered Kevin Durant's milestone to the exits several minutes before the final buzzer.

Durant was brilliant, and Williams even better.

Williams scored 27 of his career-high 50 points in the third quarter and the undermanned Los Angeles Clippers beat the Golden State Warriors for the first time in more than three years with a 125-106 win Wednesday that spoiled a milestone night for Durant.

Williams shot 16-for-27 with a career-best eight three-pointers and made all 10 of his free throws.

"He ordered 50-piece nuggets on us tonight," Durant quipped. "Lou got it going."

Durant became the 44th player in NBA history to score 20,000 career points, finishing with 40 as the Warriors had their five-game winning streak snapped along with a 12-game unbeaten stretch in the Clip-

pers rivalry.

Durant reached the milestone on a pull-up jumper from the left wing at the 1:41 mark of the second quarter. The Warriors announced his accomplishment on the main scoreboard and Durant received a standing ovation, shaking his head in acknowledgment while still very much in game mode.

By late in the fourth quarter, that crowd was making its way to the exits with the game out of reach.

The NBA Finals MVP returned from a three-game absence due to a strained right calf and scored 25 points in the first half against the Clippers — KD's biggest half of the season and the exact number he needed for 20,000.

Durant, who had a four-point play during the second quarter on the way to 14 points in the period, is at 29 the second-youngest player behind LeBron James and first to reach the 20,000 mark as a member of the Warriors.

Bulls 122, Knicks 119 (2OT): Rookie Lauri Mark-

kanen scored a season-high 33 points, Kris Dunn shook off a nightmarish shooting night to make the tiebreaking basket in the second overtime, and visiting Chicago beat New York.

Dunn had missed 14 of his first 17 shots before banking in a runner with just under a minute left in the second extra period.

Rockets 121, Trail Blazers 112: Chris Paul scored a season-high 37 points, and Eric Gordon added 30 as host Houston withstood a late run to get a win.

Heat 114, Pacers 106: Goran Dragic scored 20 points and Wayne Ellington made the decisive three-pointer with 23.2 seconds left, helping Miami fend off host Indiana's late push.

Grizzlies 105, Pelicans 102: Tyreke Evans scored 28 points, including a pair of free throws with 5.9 seconds left that helped host Memphis.

Jazz 107, Wizards 104: Ricky Rubio scored 21 points, Donovan Mitchell had 16 and short-handed Utah com-

pleted a season sweep of host Washington.

Timberwolves 104, Thunder 88: Jimmy Butler scored 26 points, grabbed seven rebounds and had eight assists for host Minnesota.

Hawks 110, Nuggets 97: Dennis Schroder had 19 points and 10 assists, Taurean Prince scored 16 and Atlanta ended a 10-game road losing streak.

Mavericks 115, Hornets 111: Harrison Barnes had 25 points and 11 rebounds, Yogi Ferrell made seven three-pointers and scored 22 points and Dallas fended off fatigue to beat fresh host Charlotte.

Bucks 110, Magic 103: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 26 points, Khriston Middleton added 22 and host Milwaukee turned up its defensive intensity after a porous first quarter.

Pistons 114, Nets 80: Andre Drummond scored 22 points and grabbed 20 rebounds, Tobias Harris had 22 points, and Detroit blew past host Brooklyn.

College basketball roundup

Top-ranked Villanova has easy time against Xavier

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Phil Booth hit five threes and scored 21 points and Jalen Brunson had 17 to lead No. 1 Villanova to an 89-65 win over Xavier on Wednesday night.

The Wildcats (15-1, 3-1 Big East) returned to the top spot of the poll on Monday.

The Wildcats raced to a 22-9 lead. Booth hit three threes in the first half and Brunson was solid both from long range and in attacking the basket to make it 40-28 at the break.

Naji Marshall had 13 points for Xavier (15-3, 3-2),

No. 4 Michigan State 76, Rutgers 72 (OT): Miles Bridg-

es ended his scoreless start with 7:43 left in regulation and finished with just 11 points for the host Spartans.

Michigan State (16-2, 4-1 Big Ten) was coming off a lopsided loss at Ohio State and the setback seemed to have lingering effects for the team and its sophomore star.

No. 7 Duke 87, Pittsburgh 52: Marvin Bagley III scored 16 points and grabbed 15 rebounds for the visiting Blue Devils (14-2, 2-2 Atlantic Coast Conference).

Bagley recorded his 13th double-double of the season, one shy of the Duke freshman record shared by Jabari Parker and Gene Banks.

Texas 99, No. 16 TCU 98 (2OT): Jericho Sims made a free throw with 5 seconds left, then the host Longhorns (11-5, 2-2 Big 12) watched as the Horned Frogs' Jaylen Fisher missed a layup off the rim at the final buzzer in the second overtime.

Sims had missed his second free throw and the Horned Frogs (13-3, 1-3) got the play they wanted with Fisher driving the lane for a point-blank layup that somehow bounced out.

Louisville 73, No. 23 Florida State 69: Deng Adel scored 16 points and the Cardinals (12-4, 1-3 Atlantic Coast Conference) rallied from a 13-point halftime

deficit to snap the Seminoles' 28-game home winning streak.

UNLV 81, Air Force 76: Jordan Johnson scored 20 points and Jovan Mooring had 15, including a critical three-pointer with fewer than 20 seconds to play, and the Runnin' Rebels (13-4, 2-2 Mountain West Conference) held off the host Falcons.

Air Force (6-10, 0-4) had scored five quick points to close within 77-75 with 45 seconds left. Mooring, dribbling the shot clock down, drilled a shot from the right wing a good five feet behind the three-point line with 19.6 seconds remaining. He also hit 1 of 2 free throws after an Air Force miss.