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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

US troops killed in Syria suicide blast

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

At least three U.S. servicemembers were killed in an Islamic State-claimed blast in the northern Syrian town of Manbij on Wednesday, defense officials said.

The officials also said an unspecified number of Americans were wounded in the attack. The attack took place near a coalition patrol, according to a defense official speaking on condition of anonymity.

A spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition confirmed that U.S. troops were killed but did not state the number of casualties, branch of service or other details.

“U.S. service members were killed during an explosion while conducting a routine patrol in Syria today,” said Army Col. Sean Ryan, a spokesman for the U.S.-led Operation Inherent Resolve, via email. “We are still gathering information and will share additional details at a later time.”

The troops were among more than a dozen casualties reported by Syrian and Kurdish outlets Wednesday afternoon, but Stars and Stripes could not independently confirm the death toll.

Some 2,000 U.S. troops are deployed

to the country to fight ISIS. The attack comes as the U.S. has begun the process of withdrawing its troops from the country, which President Donald Trump ordered last month, surprising U.S. officials and allies and prompting Defense Secretary Jim Mattis to resign.

Trump has been “fully briefed” on the Manbij attack and officials will continue to monitor the situation, the White House said in a statement, according to The Washington Post.

ISIS said via its Amaq news agency that the attack was carried out by one of its members wearing an explosives-laden vest.

The blast occurred near a restaurant where coalition forces were said to be meeting with members of the Kurdish-led Manbij Military Council, which has controlled the town since U.S.-backed Syrian Democratic Forces, or SDF, took it from ISIS in 2016.

The council’s spokesman, Shervan Derwish, confirmed the blast on Twitter.

“Terror hits the safe city of Manbij,” Derwish wrote. “An explosion in Manbij’s busy market [street], initial reports of casualties.”

The city is located near Syrian government forces backed by Russia and anti-regime fighters backed by Turkey.

Video from a security camera near the blast, shared widely on Twitter, shows a crowd of people gathered when a ball of flame erupts, knocking down bystanders. A child then runs out from the smoke.

A post-blast video also shared on social media shows windows blown out and a section of wall covered in what appeared to be blood.

A source told Hawar, a Kurdish news agency based in Syria, that four U.S. soldiers were taken away by medevac helicopter, including two who had been killed. One local militia member was also killed.

Wednesday’s attack comes days after the U.S. said it had begun the process of withdrawing troops from Syria, a move Trump initially appeared to want to take place rapidly, but has since said will be carried out more gradually.

Hours after the attack, Vice President Mike Pence told diplomats during a speech that the ISIS caliphate “has crumbled and ISIS has been defeated.”

Trump advisers: Shutdown hurting economy

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Shutdown pressure on President Donald Trump mounted Wednesday as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi called on him to delay his State of the Union address and his own economists acknowledged the prolonged standoff was having a greater economic drag than previously thought.

In a letter to Trump, Pelosi cited security concerns, noting that both the Secret Service and the Homeland Security Department are affected by the partial government shutdown, now in its fourth week. She added that unless the government reopens this week, they should find another date — it’s

now Jan. 29 — or Trump should deliver the address in writing.

The White House did not immediately respond to the high-stakes move on the 26th day of the shutdown, as Trump and Democrats are at an impasse over Trump’s demands for \$5.7 billion to build a wall along the Mexican border. Pelosi is refusing money for the wall she views as ineffective and immoral; Democrats say they will discuss border security once the government has reopened.

Seven Democratic lawmakers went to the White House on Wednesday to ask Trump to agree to reopen the government while talks continue over his push for border money,

a request the president has heard before and rejected. The White House has been trying to peel lawmakers away from Pelosi but Trump’s invitations to Democrats earlier this week were declined. But the seven, mostly freshmen, come from areas where Trump remains popular. Several did not back Pelosi as speaker.

Separately, Sens. Lindsey Graham, R-S.C., and Chris Coons, D-Del., were organizing a bipartisan letter asking Trump to reconsider his rejection of the idea of reopening the government for three weeks to allow time for negotiations on border security.

Kevin Hassett, chairman

of the White House Council of Economic Advisers, said Tuesday the shutdown is slowing growth more than predicted.

Hassett told reporters the White House is doubling its estimate of the strain on the economy of the shutdown, and now calculates that it is slowing growth by about 0.1 percentage points a week. With the shutdown in its fourth week, that suggests the economy has lost nearly a half-percentage point of growth so far, though some of that occurred at the end of last year and some in the first quarter of this year. Hassett said the economy should get a boost when the government reopens.

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — China in recent years has poured billions of dollars into developing advanced weapons, some of which outclass U.S. weapons, but with an inexperienced military it remains years away from challenging American security interests globally, the Pentagon's intelligence agency concluded in a report released Tuesday.

China has spent increasingly more money each year for more than a decade — including some \$200 billion in 2018 — to modernize its weaponry and professionalize its People's Liberation Army, which has roughly 2 million troops, Defense Intelligence Agency officials determined in the report, "China Military Power." U.S. defense officials wrote China is building its force to ensure its regional prowess and work toward its No. 1 goal — the reunification of mainland China and Taiwan.

The report is the DIA's first unclassified, comprehensive assessment of the Chinese military.

What alarms DIA officials is the increasing confidence China's military has displayed in its own abilities in recent years and whether that could signal the country is inching toward striking or invading Taiwan, a

RISING POWER

Despite advanced weaponry, China remains 'a long way' from US military, DIA report finds

senior defense intelligence official said Tuesday ahead of the report's release.

"The biggest concern is that they are going to get to a point where the (Chinese military) leadership may actually tell (Chinese President) Xi Jinping that they are confident in their capabilities," the official said on condition of anonymity. "We know in the past that they have ... considered themselves a developing, weaker power. ... As these technologies mature, as their reorganization of their military comes into effect, as they become more proficient with these capabilities, our concern is we'll reach a point where internally, within their decision-making, they will decide that using military force for a regional conflict is something that is more imminent."

Top American defense officials have long viewed China's military as a rising power that eventually seeks parity with the U.S. military force, leading the Pentagon to list it — alongside Russia — as the top poten-

tial security threat in its latest National Defense Strategy, released last year. The growing military might of China is said to be the primary focus for acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, who defense officials said has repeatedly raised China as a topic in closed-door meetings in the Pentagon since he took the Defense Department's reins Jan. 1.

On Tuesday, just as the DIA report was released, a top Chinese military official warned Adm. John Richardson, the U.S. Navy's top officer, that the United States should not support an independent Taiwan, according to the South China Morning Post newspaper.

"If anyone wants to separate Taiwan from China, the Chinese military will safeguard the national unity at all costs so as to protect China's sovereignty and territorial integrity," Gen. Li Zuocheng, the PLA's chief of the Joint Staff Department, told Richardson during a meeting in Beijing, according to the newspaper.

Though China's primary focus remains on defending its homeland and increasing its regional power, it has worked to establish military relationships with countries across the world, including building its first base outside of China in Djibouti on the Horn of Africa in 2017. It might seek such relationships elsewhere in the coming years, the DIA report states.

"As it continues to grow in strength and confidence, (U.S.) leaders will face a China insistent on having a greater voice in global interactions, which at times may be antithetical to U.S. interests," it reads.

While DIA is most concerned about an eventual military action against Taiwan, in the near future its primary concerns rest in the South and East China seas, where the Chinese military has built up and militarized artificial islands in areas claimed by China and other nations.

American officials have routinely scolded China's militarization of the Spratly and Parcel islands, which China claims outright, and tensions have grown in recent years as the United States regularly sails warships through the region on freedom-of-navigation operations. Those operations are seen as provocative by China. Such interactions carry the potential for miscalculation, the senior defense intelligence official said.

Navy Surface Forces focus on fight for power

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

ARLINGTON, Va. — The competition for power from China and Russia is pushing the U.S. Navy's Surface Forces to focus on performance and winning the challenges that face the U.S.

Today's strategic environment and how it is shaping the Navy's tactics and shipbuilding are similar to that of the Cold War between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, said Vice Adm. Richard Brown, commander of Naval Surface Forces/Naval Surface Force U.S. Pacific Fleet.

"The lesson we learned from the Cold War was that we had to be ready to fight now," he said Tuesday during a speech at the Surface Navy Association's 31st National Symposium in Arlington, Va. Yet

today's fight for power "could be an even sterner test than the Cold War," he said.

To meet this challenge, the Navy's surface forces must pivot toward a culture of excellence, not compliance, according to Brown, to be "the best of the best."

"Compliance is important; don't get me wrong. It's what's needed to build a culture of excellence. It's the foundation. But compliance is about inspections," he said. "Excellence is about superior performance and winning."

Excellence also demands urgency, he said, and that can be seen in several strategies, including the 2018 Defense Department's National Defense Strategy.

It names China and Russia as long-term strategic competitors, pointing out China's use of "predatory economics to

intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea," and Russia's violations of nearby borders as well as their use of "veto power over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors."

"The common theme in all these strategies is that they are maritime strategies ... that call for sea control whenever and wherever we need it," Brown said. "Requiring our Surface Navy to deter but, if required, fight and win the battle for sea control now in an age of great-power competition."

Brown listed some of the priorities that will be necessary to be ready, including unmanned surface vessels, integrated combat systems and full integration of the F-35B into the fleet.

2 1st Cavalry Division soldiers die in incidents

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

Two 1st Cavalry Division soldiers died and three were injured this week in separate vehicle-related accidents in Germany and California, officials said Tuesday.

In the first incident, Spc. Andrew S. Ortega, a horizontal construction engineer with the 1st Armored Brigade Combat Team, was killed Sunday while deployed to Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, as part of Operation Atlantic Resolve.

On Monday evening, an unidentified second soldier with the Fort Hood, Texas-based division was killed in a rollover accident in an M2 Bradley Infantry Fighting Vehicle during an exercise at the National Training Center on Fort Irwin, Calif. Three others were injured.

All four were with 1st Cav's 3rd Armored

Brigade Combat Team, Ken Drylie, a Fort Irwin spokesman, said in a news release.

One injured soldier was medevaced to Loma Linda University Medical Center in Loma Linda, Calif., and the other two were taken to Fort Irwin's Weed Army Community Hospital, the news release said.

Both incidents are under investigation.

Ortega, 32, joined the Army in September 2016 and arrived at Fort Hood in March 2017, U.S. Army Europe said in a news release.

The soldier, whose home of record is Hernandez, N.M., was on his first rotation to Europe in support of Atlantic Resolve, the U.S. mission to bolster NATO's eastern flank. His awards and decorations include the Army Service Ribbon and the National Defense Service Medal.

Col. Wilson R. Rutherford IV, commander of the 1st Armored Brigade Com-

bat Team, expressed his condolences in the USAREUR statement, saying Ortega's service and dedication to the brigade's mission "are displays of his true character and professionalism."

"Andrew is a true American hero who served his country honorably and made many sacrifices in support of our mission," Rutherford said. "The Ironhorse soldiers are deeply saddened by our loss."

On Facebook, Ortega's wife had asked for prayers Sunday, saying her husband was in the hospital and she was hoping he would make a recovery. About 16 hours later, she posted that he was gone.

On Tuesday, Kanora Ortega said she was struggling to understand her husband's death, which comes just two weeks before he was scheduled to rotate home and about two months before his 33rd birthday.

"I wish we had more time," she said.

Japanese families get rare glimpse of MCAS Iwakuni

BY JAMES BOLINGER
Stars and Stripes

MARINE CORPS AIR STATION IWAKUNI, Japan — Marines and sailors aboard MCAS Iwakuni have for the first time hosted Japanese schoolchildren and their parents during a community relations tour of the air station in southwestern Japan.

The base has undergone massive reconstruction in the past decade that's included an expanded presence, heavy-lift runway, hangars, barracks, base housing, a commissary and Marine Corps Exchange and headquarters buildings for Marine Aircraft Group 12 and the Navy's Carrier Air Wing 5. In total, more than 70 percent of the base was rebuilt — a process that is ongoing.

Carrier Air Wing 5, which supports the aircraft carrier USS Ronald Reagan, finished moving its fixed-wing operations to Iwakuni from Naval Air Station Atsugi last year. The move has tripled the size of the base to nearly 15,000 servicemembers, dependents and civilian workers.

All that construction has given the base, which pre-dates World War II, a shiny new look

that many locals rarely get to see. Even during the popular, annual Friendship Day air show — one of the largest in the Pacific — most of the installation is off limits.

Yuki Kawaguchi, 10, said his favorite part of the tour was getting to see the fighter jets, which locals can hear taking off and landing but rarely get to see up close.

"I was excited to be able to come on base," Yuki's father, Yasuo, said through an interpreter. "Regular citizens cannot usually come on the base."

He added that the base looked brand new except for the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force buildings which, along with the base headquarters, are among the oldest on the installation.

"This tour was intended to show a bit of everything on base. We showed the kids and their parents some things that we do on the operations side, what our family housing looks like, as well as a tour inside the commissary so they can see what a typical American grocery store looks like," John Zambrano, the director of Government and External Affairs and tour organizer, told Stars and Stripes in an email Wednesday.

ACLU: US mistakenly wanted to deport Marine Corps vet

Associated Press

DETROIT — A Marine veteran with post-traumatic stress disorder was held for three days for possible deportation before federal authorities learned that he was a U.S. citizen born in Michigan, lawyers said Wednesday.

Jilmar Ramos-Gomez, 27, lives in the Grand Rapids area. He was released on Dec. 17 from a detention center in Calhoun County after records were shared with Immigration and Customs Enforcement, according to the American Civil Liberties Union of Michigan.

"Why did they think he was a noncitizen? Did they get him confused with someone else? Who knows," ACLU attorney Miriam Aukerman said. "This is an individual who's incredibly vulnerable with a mental illness."

There was no immediate comment from ICE. Spokesman Khaalid Walls in Detroit said he couldn't respond to media inquiries because of the partial government shutdown.

Ramos-Gomez was in the Kent County jail after being accused of trespassing and damaging a fire alarm at a Grand Rapids hospital on Nov. 21. The

ACLU said he pleaded guilty and was supposed to be released on Dec. 14 while awaiting a sentence.

But ICE contacted the jail and requested that Ramos-Gomez be held for pickup. Kent County Undersheriff Chuck DeWitt said ICE, like other law enforcement agencies, has access to fingerprint records. "Once he was released from our custody, he was under the domain of ICE. Where they take him is their process," DeWitt said. "Our procedures were followed." DeWitt said he didn't know whether Ramos-Gomez protested when immigration officers picked him up.

Ramos-Gomez was driven 70 miles to a detention center in Battle Creek. He was released after three days, after lawyer Richard Kessler contacted ICE on behalf of the man's family.

Ramos-Gomez was a lance corporal in the Marine Corps and received awards for service in Afghanistan. The ACLU said his PTSD had a role in the disturbance at the hospital.

The ACLU is asking the Kent County sheriff and county commissioners to investigate the jail's role in releasing Ramos-Gomez to ICE.

Kenya: All gunmen killed after hotel attack

Associated Press

NAIROBI, Kenya — Kenya's security forces have killed the Islamic extremist gunmen whose assault on a luxury hotel and shopping complex took 14 "innocent lives," the country's president said Wednesday.

"All the terrorists have been eliminated," President Uhuru Kenyatta said in announcing an end to the overnight operation to secure the complex in the capital, Nairobi.

In a televised address, Kenyatta did not say how many attackers were involved. He said more than 700 people were evacuated during the security operation and urged

Kenyans to "go back to work without fear," saying the East African country is safe.

Sporadic gunfire could be heard while scores of people were rescued at daybreak during what police called a "mopping-up" exercise.

A new blast was heard in the afternoon as witnesses said security forces were making a sweep of the complex for any explosives.

Surveillance video showed the attack involved at least four armed men.

Al-Shabab — the extremist group allied to al-Qaida and based in neighboring Somalia — claimed responsibility for the carnage at the DusitD2 hotel complex,

which includes bars, restaurants, offices and banks and is in Nairobi's well-to-do Westlands neighborhood with many foreign expatriates. Al-Shabab carried out the 2013 attack at the nearby Westgate Mall in Nairobi that killed 67 people.

Most of the victims were Kenyans, a mortuary attendant said.

The U.S. State Department confirmed that an American citizen was among the dead, and the company I-DEV International confirmed that its co-founder, Jason Spindler, had been killed.

The British high commissioner in Kenya said at least one British national had been killed, without giving details.

Gillibrand announces 2020 presidential bid

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Democratic Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand took a major step toward announcing a 2020 presidential bid Tuesday, saying she is launching an exploratory committee for a White House run.

"It's an important first step, and it's one I am taking because I am going to run," the New York senator said on "The Late Show with Stephen Colbert."

She listed a series of issues she'd tackle as president, including better health care for families, stronger public schools and more accessible job training.

Gillibrand, 52, has already made plans to campaign in Iowa over the weekend, more than a year before the leadoff caucus state votes.

She joins what is expected to be a crowded primary field for the Democratic nomination that could feature more than a dozen candidates. Already, Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren has announced her own exploratory efforts, and decisions by a number of other senators are expected in the coming weeks.

Gillibrand, who was appointed to the Senate in 2009 to fill the seat vacated by Hillary

Clinton, has been among the Senate's most vocal members on issues such as sexual harassment, military sexual assault, equal pay for women and family leave, issues that could be central to her presidential campaign.

"I'm going to fight for other people's kids as hard as I would fight for my own," said Gillibrand, a mother of two sons, ages 10 and 15.

As she works to distinguish herself from likely rivals, Gillibrand will be able to draw from the more than \$10.5 million left over from her 2018 re-election campaign that she can use toward a presidential run.

Gillibrand pledged during her Senate campaign that she would serve out her six-year term if re-elected.

She will use Troy, N.Y., where she lives, as a home base for her presidential efforts.

Near the end of their interview, Colbert presented Gillibrand with a basket of campaign gifts, including an ear of yellow corn to wave in Iowa, a piece of granite for New Hampshire and a one-of-a-kind button that reads "I announced on the Late Show with Stephen Colbert."

May faces no-confidence vote after big Brexit loss

Associated Press

LONDON — British Prime Minister Theresa May faced a no-confidence vote Wednesday, a day after Parliament rejected her Brexit deal by a historic margin, unleashing a power struggle over control of Britain's planned exit from the European Union.

May was battling to save her job after staking her political reputation on winning support for the divorce agreement she negotiated with the EU over the last two years.

Although the Brexit defeat was widely expected, the scale of the rout — 432 to 202 — was devastating for May's leadership.

Immediately after the vote, opposition leader Jeremy Corbyn, of the Labour Party, issued a no-confidence motion, saying it would give Parliament a chance to give its verdict "on the sheer incompetence of this government."

Still, most analysts predict May will survive because lawmakers from her Conservative Party are unlikely to vote against her, and the Democratic Unionist Party in Northern Ireland, which supports the government, has said it will continue to back the prime

minister.

If her government were to lose, it would have 14 days to overturn the result or face an early national election within weeks.

After the biggest defeat for any British government in well over a century, May promised to consult with senior lawmakers on future moves but gave little indication of what she plans to do next. Parliament has given the government until Monday to come up with a new plan for how Britain should leave the EU.

"The House has spoken and the government will listen," May said after Tuesday's vote, which leaves her Brexit plan on life support just 10 weeks before Britain is due to leave the bloc on March 29.

May faces a stark choice: Steer the country toward an abrupt break from the EU without a deal on their future relations or try to nudge it toward a softer departure.

Meanwhile, British lawmakers from all parties are trying to wrest control of the Brexit process from a paralyzed Conservative government so lawmakers can direct planning for Britain's departure from the EU.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Referee banned for singling out braids

VA CHESAPEAKE — A referee has been banned from officiating children's basketball games in a Virginia city after he singled out a girl who was wearing a typical black hairstyle.

WAVY-TV reported Tuesday that the 10-year-old wore braids with blue weave during a basketball game in Chesapeake over the weekend.

Erica Guerrier, who coaches her daughter's team, said the ref pointed to the girl's hair and said, mistakenly, that hair weaves are against the rules.

Hampton Roads Basketball Association commissioner Rick Ennis said the incident is under investigation and the referee won't be working future games in Chesapeake.

Soda maker pays tribute to shutdown

CT NEW BRITAIN — A Connecticut soft drink maker known for its whimsical soda names is trying to make the bitter federal government shutdown a little sweeter.

New Britain-based Avery's Beverages on Monday introduced its newest concoction, Shutdown Swill, and offered a free bottle to federal employees who stop by the plant.

Owner Rob Metz told WTIC-TV the drink is a mix of blue raspberry and orange, making it green, the color of money. He added citric acid for more bitterness. The label features a caricature of President Donald Trump.

Man hurt as intruder enters via pet door

NY MACEDON — A 21-year-old man is recovering from a head wound after

fighting off an intruder who crawled into his western New York home through a doggy door.

Levi Thompson, of Macedon, said he awoke Wednesday to find a 19-year-old former friend rifling through his home. He told WHAM in Rochester he confronted the man, who threatened him with a pocket knife before bashing him in the head with a 30-inch-tall wooden plant stand.

Police said the suspect then escaped through the doggy door but was later caught during an unrelated traffic stop and charged with burglary and assault.

Woman charged in toddler's intoxication

MD WALKERSVILLE — A Maryland woman who lost her day care license last year was charged in connection with a toddler who was hospitalized for apparent alcohol intoxication.

The Frederick News Post reported Doris Marie Ott was charged with neglect of a minor and reckless endangerment at the end December, months after the toddler in her care was hospitalized.

Charging documents said the boy was acting normally when he was dropped off at Ott's home day care but had trouble waking up from his nap. A doctor confirmed the boy's blood alcohol content was almost three times the legal limit for an adult to drive.

Chief: Police drank confiscated beer

VT BURLINGTON — Two police officers in Vermont are accused of drinking beer that they confiscated from minors.

Burlington Police Chief Bran-

don del Pozo said the officers issued tickets to the minors last month for underage possession of alcohol. The officers then allegedly kept the beer and drank some of it on duty instead of disposing of it.

The chief assigned the officers to administrative duty as the department investigates.

Rodeo cow evades capture, wanders

AK ANCHORAGE — The owner of a rodeo cow named Betsy said the bovine has evaded capture for six months as she wanders the trails of Alaska's biggest city.

Rodeo promoter Frank Koloski told the Anchorage Daily News the 3-year-old cow "busted out" of a pen before participating in an Anchorage rodeo in June.

Koloski said Betsy headed to the Hilltop Ski Area and was spotted grazing on slopes during the summer. Betsy then moved to the trails that crisscross the Anchorage Hillside when snow fell.

Koloski said police, animal control authorities and the Bureau of Land Management have relayed information about the cow's whereabouts but she continues to elude him.

Husband indicted after newlyweds shot

GA ATLANTA — An indictment said a man was charged in his wife's death after they were both shot outside a metro Atlanta Popeyes.

The Atlanta Journal-Constitution reported Michael Dale LaVigne was arrested Saturday after being indicted on charges including felony murder.

LaVigne and Alisha Watkins Stephens, 35, had been married for just two weeks when they were shot at the DeKalb County restaurant in October. Stephens died from her injuries. LaVigne

was critically injured.

Investigators said they went to Popeyes to buy meth. The indictment said LaVigne was robbed at gunpoint. It said he pulled out a gun and struck Stephens during a shootout with a possible gang member.

Tip leads police to military-style weapon

CT HARTFORD — Police in Connecticut recovered what they described as a military-style weapon hidden in a wooded area of Hartford.

Officers responding to a tip found the James Madison Tactical .223-caliber rifle with a scope and stabilizing bipod.

Police also recovered a 30-round magazine and 10 live rounds. Officers are continuing to investigate how the weapon ended up in the woods and who put it there.

Students' postcard art displayed at Capitol

WV CHARLESTON — An exhibition of postcard art created by West Virginia students is on display in the state Capitol.

Gov. Jim Justice's office and the West Virginia Department of Arts, Culture and History issued a call for the designs last year. They asked students from kindergarten through 12th grade to submit an entry featuring their favorite place or activity in the state.

Selected pieces will be used by the West Virginia Tourism Office to invite travelers to the state. Winners were selected in December and will receive gift cards for art materials.

The Almost Heaven Art Exhibition is on display outside the Governor's Reception Room on the walls of the West Rotunda of the Capitol.

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Patriots leaning more on running game

Associated Press

FOXBOROUGH, Mass. — This much is clear about the Patriots' latest run to the AFC championship game: It's come with a lot of introspection and reinvention on offense.

Gone are the days in which New England can just bank on Tom Brady piling up four-touchdown games on a weekly basis or simply toss the ball in Rob Gronkowski's orbit in crunch time and expect great things to happen.

Brady, while not showing accelerated signs of decline at 41, did look more human during his 19th NFL season with only one four-touchdown game and 11 interceptions — his most picks since 2013 (11).

Gronk isn't as old as Brady, but he's certainly more beaten up and playing with a body that after multiple injuries and surgeries had him seriously thinking about retirement after last season's Super Bowl loss.

Following a regular season that saw New England lose five games — its most losses since 2009 (six) — coach Bill Belich-

ick recognized the need for this team to lean even more on its collective offensive strength.

The result has been a team that has rediscovered its ability to run the football and wear teams down. New England did it successfully in Sunday's 41-28 divisional-round win over the Los Angeles Chargers. It will be needed again for New England to upend a youth-led Kansas City Chiefs team in the AFC title game.

"You can't get one-dimensional in these types of games," Brady said. "It's too tough against too many good teams. You get to this point and there's very little margin of error and you're going to have to be good in all phases. Running it, throwing it, kicking it, playing defense, everything. We'll have to do it again."

Sony Michel scored three touchdowns and rushed for 129 yards against the Chargers. The three scores were the most ever by a Patriots rookie in a playoff game.

Michel's backfield mates were equally active. Rex Burk-

head added a 6-yard TD run and James White's 15 catches tied Darren Sproles for the most receptions in a single game in NFL playoff history.

They had a season-best four rushing touchdowns. The 155 rushing yards also marked the Patriots' fifth time with 130 or more yards since their bye week. New England has not lost a game this season when rushing for 100 or more yards as a team.

"It's all about trust and patience," Michel said. "We've got faith that coach is going to call the best play possible for us to succeed and guys are going to take pride in executing the play — the offensive line, the receivers, everybody is going to do their job, and it's our job to do our job."

Like the Patriots, Kansas City has a steadying presence setting the tone in veteran coach Andy Reid, but the Chiefs also have a second-year quarterback in Patrick Mahomes who has been mostly unflappable throughout a season in which he's a favorite to win MVP as a

first-time, full-time starter.

After trailing big during their Week 6 matchup with the Patriots, Mahomes brought the Chiefs back and tied the game late. It took a field goal by Stephen Gostkowski as time expired for New England to pull out a 43-40 win in Foxborough.

While Brady threw for 340 yards and a touchdown in that game, he hasn't fared well on the road against the Chiefs. He has just a 1-2 record with three touchdowns in three games at Arrowhead Stadium.

This will be Brady's first playoff game in Kansas City.

White said their task this week is not to overthink how to translate their success on the road.

"Just execute for four quarters, start fast, just play Patriot football," he said. "It doesn't matter what we did during the regular season. This is going to be a battle of what we do on next Sunday. We've just got to put our best foot forward and play Patriot football. That's all we have to do."

Gurley, Anderson have become potent force for Rams

Associated Press

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. — Todd Gurley never had a true running partner during his first four regular seasons with the Los Angeles Rams.

The superstar running back took most of the carries and grinded out most of the tough yards while his backups played only sparingly.

When he suited up with C.J. Anderson for the first time last weekend during the Rams' divisional playoff win over Dallas, Gurley truly shared the big carries for one of the first times in his NFL career.

As the New Orleans Saints have already noticed, the tandem was pretty much unstoppable.

"I guess it was a good thing I got hurt," Gurley said with a laugh.

Gurley's knee injury last month led the Rams to sign Anderson, a six-year veteran who had been released by three NFL teams in the previous eight months. Anderson hit the ground running with 299 yards in the Rams' final two regular-season victories while Gurley sat out.

When Gurley and Anderson suited up together against the Cowboys, their contrasting styles and similar relentlessness made history. Anderson went for 123 yards and two touchdowns, while Gurley rushed for 115 yards and another score as they propelled the Rams to a franchise playoff-record 273 yards rushing and on to the NFC championship game on Sunday.

The Saints have already watched film of this partnership's debut, and they

know what's coming to the Superdome.

"Being able to split time with (Anderson) and Gurley, it does good things for them," Saints linebacker A.J. Klein said. "It gets Gurley some rest and gets him some carries, and vice versa. It keeps them fresh. And obviously you can tell when they're running the ball, they're not tired. They're fresh and they're running hard."

The Rams' dynamic duo presents a remarkable contrast at the position.

Gurley is a powerful, majestic runner capable of injuring would-be tacklers as easily as breaking past safeties for a length-of-the-field TD sprint.

Anderson is 5-foot-8 and a self-described "fat kid running." While he hits holes and linebackers ferociously, he isn't planning to break away from

any defensive backs anytime soon.

"From the 40 in. That's it," he said Sunday when asked to imagine his longest possible TD run. "Can't go 70. Todd can go 70, 80 if he wants to. Me, from the 40 in, man. When they say the 40 at the combine matters, that's where it matters."

Gurley and Anderson present a stark contrast in running styles, but they already looked like good teammates against the Cowboys. Gurley and Anderson largely substituted themselves, each waving the other on or off the field, depending on whether they were tired, or felt they had the metaphorical hot hand.

Gurley also points out the obvious: Even with this fascinating tailback tandem, the Rams run the ball well because of their powerful offensive line.

NBA roundup

Warriors set NBA mark with 51 in first

Associated Press

DENVER — Kevin Durant and the Golden State Warriors weren't trying to send any sort of message or make any kind of statement against a team they were chasing in the Western Conference.

"They know who we are," Durant said.

Still, message received.

Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson each scored 31 points as the Warriors, propelled by an NBA-record, 51-point first quarter, regained the top spot in the West by routing the Denver Nuggets 142-111 on Tuesday night.

"Beautiful, beautiful basketball," Warriors coach Steve Kerr said. "Just liked the way our guys moved the ball, the shot fakes, playing with purpose, playing with a simple style of execution but aggressive at the same time. Finding that balance is always what we're looking for. That was as good as it gets for us."

"I don't remember a better first quarter. That was a fireworks show."

Golden State cruised to a fifth straight win to move a half-game in front of the Nuggets, who had their 12-game home winning streak snapped.

The showdown between the top two teams in the conference proved a little too big for the Nuggets, with Curry and Co. putting on a shooting exhibition all night long. Durant hit the first shot of the night, a 12-footer, as the Warriors broke the old first-quarter mark of 50 held by several teams. The last time it happened was also against Denver when Phoenix scored 50 on Nov. 10, 1990.

"They came in with an edge and we didn't have that edge to start the game," Nuggets coach Michael Malone said. "I don't think anybody on our team is scared of the Golden State Warriors or too respectful. They took it to another level and left us in the dust."

Golden State shot a blistering 60 percent from the field, had 38 assists and hit 21 three-pointers — 10 in the first quarter — in leading wire-to-wire. Durant finished with 27 points and Draymond Green was a plus-41 as he had 13 assists to go with four points.

"When we make shots, we're a tough team to beat," Curry said.

Malik Beasley finished with 22 points for the Nuggets. Big man Nikola Jokic struggled with early foul trouble, finishing with 17 points and eight assists in 23 minutes.

"We're not a bad team," Jokic said. "The game just happened."

76ers 149, Timberwolves 107: Joel Embiid had 31 points and 13 rebounds, and host Philadelphia scored 83 points in the first half in a thrashing of Minnesota in Jimmy Butler's first game against his former team.

The Golden State Warriors were the only team to score

more first-half points in a game this season when they dropped 92 on the Chicago Bulls on Oct. 29. The Sixers hit a team-record 21 three-pointers and reached their highest point total in the 22-year history of the Wells Fargo Center.

Hawks 142, Thunder 126: Trae Young had 24 points and 11 assists to win the showdown of past and former Atlanta point guards, leading the host Hawks.

Bucks 124, Heat 86: Giannis Antetokounmpo had 12 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists in his fourth triple-double of the season, and host Milwaukee cruised past Miami.

Pacers 131, Suns 97: Bojan Bogdanovic scored 20 points in host Indiana's easy victory.

Lakers 107, Bulls 100: Lonzo Ball scored 19 points, Kentavious Caldwell-Pope added 17 and host Los Angeles won for just the fourth time since LeBron James' groin injury, beating reeling Chicago.

Top 25 roundup

No. 4 Virginia cruises past rival Virginia Tech

Associated Press

CHARLOTTESVILLE, Va. — Ty Jerome got No. 4 Virginia off to just the start it needed by making a few deep three-pointers. That opened things up for De'Andre Hunter and quickly shut things off for No. 9 Virginia Tech.

Hunter scored 21 points, Kyle Guy scored 15 and Jerome had 14 points and a career-high 12 assists as the Cavaliers started fast and routed the Hokies 81-59 on Tuesday night.

"He loosened it up early with some of those long threes," Virginia coach Tony Bennett said of Jerome, who made three threes, the first from about 25 feet, in the first seven minutes.

With the Hokies (14-2, 3-1) stretching their defense, Hunter moved inside, making eight of 12 shots.

The Cavaliers (16-0, 4-0 Atlantic Coast Conference) never trailed in the first meet-

ing of the programs in which both were ranked in the top 10.

No. 3 Tennessee 106, Arkansas 87: Lamonte' Turner and Jordan Bowden combined to score 40 points off the bench, and the host Volunteers whipped the Razorbacks for their 11th consecutive victory.

No. 10 Nevada 72, Boise State 71: Cody Martin hit a three-pointer with 4.5 seconds remaining to lift the visiting Wolf Pack over the Broncos.

No. 12 Kentucky 69, Georgia 49: Ashton Hagans silenced a hostile crowd by scoring a season-high 23 points, leading the Wildcats over the Bulldogs.

No. 13 North Carolina 75, Notre Dame 69: Nassir Little scored all 11 of his points in the final 11 minutes, and the host Tar Heels beat the Irish.

No. 15 Marquette 74, Georgetown 71: Sam Hauser scored a career-high 31 points, Theo John tied a career-high with 14 points and the visiting Golden Eagles

held on to beat the Hoyas despite Markus Howard — the nation's fourth leading scorer — playing just three scoreless minutes due to lower back tightness.

No. 16 Buffalo 88, Western Michigan 79: Jeremy Harris had 22 points and 11 rebounds, and the visiting Bulls held off the upset-minded Broncos.

Wake Forest 71, No. 17 N.C. State 67: Freshman Jaylen Hoard had 16 points and 10 rebounds, and the host Demon Deacons blew a 22-point lead before recovering in time to top the Wolfpack.

LSU 83, No. 18 Mississippi 69: Tremont Waters scored 20 points and Kavell Bigby-Williams had 14 points, 10 rebounds and five blocks to help the visiting Tigers end the Rebels' 10-game winning streak.

No. 24 Mississippi State 71, Florida 68: Quindary Weatherspoon converted a three-point play with 3.4 seconds left to lift the host Bulldogs.