

# STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## US airstrike kills top Iranian general

### Counterthreats prompt US to send more troops to region

BY CHAD GARLAND  
*Stars and Stripes*

IRBIL, Iraq — A U.S. airstrike killed the general in charge of Iran's elite Quds Force early Friday in Baghdad, a move that prompted threats from Iran and plans for the deployment of 3,000 additional U.S. troops to the Mideast.

"At the direction of the President, the U.S. military has taken decisive defensive action to protect U.S. personnel abroad by killing [Qassem] Soleimani," the Pentagon said in a statement. "Soleimani was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region."

Iran's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei declared three days of mourning for Soleimani, stating "severe revenge awaits the criminals who bloodied their foul hands with his blood and other martyrs' in last night's incident," according to news reports.

The Associated Press reported later Friday that the U.S. planned to deploy nearly 3,000 more troops from the 82nd Airborne Division to the Mideast, citing defense officials who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss a decision not yet announced by the Pentagon.

The troops are in addition to about 700 soldiers from the 82nd Airborne who deployed to Kuwait earlier this week after the storming of the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad by Iran-backed militiamen and their supporters.

Also reportedly killed in Friday morning's attack was

Abu Mahdi Muhandis, a senior leader of a paramilitary wing of Iraq's security forces and founder of Kataeb Hezbollah, an Iran-backed Shiite militia group with a long history of fighting American forces in Iraq. The Pentagon blamed the group for a rocket attack in Kirkuk that killed a U.S. civilian contractor last week.

Defense Department officials accused Soleimani of orchestrating the Kirkuk attack, as well as many others in recent months that have killed and wounded both American and coalition service members.

Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps confirmed the deaths in a statement to the country's state-owned Tasnim news agency.

The attack reportedly happened at about 1 a.m. Social media users said they heard explosions, followed by sounds of military aircraft.

The strike was confirmed about 45 minutes later by the Iraqi government's security information cell, which posted photos of burning vehicles near the airport on its Facebook page, attributing the damage to a rocket attack.

A drone actually conducted the strike, a security official with knowledge of the event who spoke on condition of anonymity told Stars and Stripes.

A State Department security alert Friday urged all Americans to leave Iraq immediately due to the "heightened tensions in Iraq and the region," reiterating an advisory issued Wednesday after Iran-backed militias attacked the U.S. Embassy compound in Baghdad.

*Associated Press*

BAGHDAD — Iran vowed "harsh retaliation" for a U.S. airstrike near Baghdad's airport that killed a top Iranian general who had been the architect of its interventions across the Middle East.

The killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran's elite Quds Force, marks a major escalation in the standoff between Washington and Iran, which has careened from one crisis to another since President Donald Trump withdrew from the 2015 nuclear deal and imposed crippling sanctions.

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned that "harsh retaliation is waiting" for the U.S. after the airstrike, calling Soleimani the "international face of resistance." Khamenei declared three days of public mourning and appointed Maj. Gen. Esmail Ghaani, Soleimani's deputy, to replace him as head of the Quds Force.

Iranian President Hassan Rouhani called the killing a "heinous crime" and vowed his country would "take revenge."

Iran twice summoned the Swiss envoy, the first time delivering a letter to pass onto the U.S.

Thousands of worshippers in the Iranian capital Tehran took to the streets after Friday Muslim prayers to condemn the killing, waving posters of Soleimani and chanting "Death to deceitful America."

The targeted strike, and any retaliation by Iran, could ignite a conflict that engulfs the whole region, endangering U.S. troops in Iraq, Syria and beyond. Over

the last two decades, Soleimani had assembled a network of heavily armed allies stretching all the way to southern Lebanon, on Israel's doorstep.

However, the attack may act as a deterrent for Iran and its allies to delay or restrain any potential response. Oil prices surged on news of the airstrike and markets were mixed.

The killing promised to further strain relations with Iraq's government, which is allied with both Washington and Tehran and is worried about becoming a battleground in their rivalry. Iraqi politicians close to Iran called for the country to order U.S. forces out.

The Defense Department said it killed Soleimani, 62, because he "was actively developing plans to attack American diplomats and service members in Iraq and throughout the region." It also accused Soleimani of approving the orchestrated violent protests at the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

The strike, on an access road near Baghdad's airport, was carried out Friday by an American drone, according to a U.S. official. Soleimani had just disembarked from a plane arriving from either Syria or Lebanon, a senior Iraqi security official said. The blast tore his body to pieces along with that of Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, deputy commander of the Iranian-backed militias in Iraq known as the Popular Mobilization Forces.

Iran's Supreme National Security Council said Friday it had held a special session and made "appropriate decisions" on how to respond, though it didn't reveal them.



# Trump takes gamble with death of Soleimani

*Los Angeles Times*

WASHINGTON — In ordering the killing of Gen. Qassem Soleimani, one of Iran's highest-ranking officials, President Donald Trump has taken one of the biggest gambles of his presidency —

**ANALYSIS** a step that appears to lead the U.S. on a path toward escalated warfare and that marks a sharp break from his often-stated desire to pull American forces out of conflicts in the Middle East.

Throughout his presidency, Trump has made fiery statements but has typically resisted dramatic belligerent actions. He has promised his supporters that he would use decisive violence against U.S. enemies, but he also promised to stay out of wars in the Middle East and to bring U.S. troops home.

Outside analysts — and some of Trump's former advisers — have repeatedly warned that those two pledges could not be reconciled.

Until now, when his goals clashed, Trump has typically pulled back. In June, for example, he gave a last-minute order to stop an airstrike against Iran planned in retaliation for

Tehran's shooting down of an unmanned American drone. Nor did he order a military response to attacks on Saudi oil installations in the fall that U.S. and Saudi officials blamed on Iran.

The decision to kill Soleimani, the head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Quds Force, who was sometimes described as the second-most powerful official in Iran, marks a radical shift. It appears to represent a bet that Iran, faced by a decisive U.S. military action, will back down, not escalate.

Iran will now have to "re-examine the limitations of the violence they can bring to the table," said one senior congressional Republican official, speaking on condition of anonymity. The official predicted "some face-saving retaliation in Yemen or Lebanon, maybe Afghanistan," but not more.

Others were deeply skeptical of such assertions. While the U.S. undoubtedly has overwhelming superiority in conventional military power, the Iranians, even without Soleimani, will be able to launch guerrilla-style operations throughout the Middle East and possibly beyond, they said.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, said in a statement that "a harsh retaliation is waiting."

"The U.S. and Iran have been engaged in a dangerous tit-for-tat for months now, but this is a massive walk up the escalation ladder," said Charles Lister, a senior fellow at the Middle East Institute in Washington. "There really is no underestimating the geopolitical ramifications of this."

To heighten the political risk, Trump appears to have acted without advance consultation with Congress, breaking with long-standing practice. Congressional Democrats quickly criticized the president for acting unilaterally.

Administration officials say that Trump authorized the strike because Soleimani, who has long directed the actions of Iranian-backed militia groups that have attacked U.S. forces in Iraq and elsewhere, was planning further attacks on American personnel.

Critics, however, accused Trump of recklessness.

Administration supporters said the strike would be a major setback to Iran.

Soleimani's "death is a huge loss for Iran's regime and its

Iraqi proxies, and a major operational and psychological victory for the United States," said James Carafano of the conservative Heritage Foundation, which often advises Trump on foreign policy.

Ariane Tabatabai, a Middle East expert at Rand Corp., said Soleimani "single-handedly controlled Iran's relationships with various militia groups and terrorists in the region." From Afghanistan to Lebanon and Yemen and Syria, he played a key role in building Iran's network of allied groups across the Middle East, which included Shiite militias in Iraq and groups such as Hezbollah in Syria and Lebanon.

Soleimani was a major figure in the highest levels of Iranian decision making, reporting directly to the supreme leader and overseeing military training and financing as well as weapon sales and transfers. He also took a highly public role as an Iranian symbol, often photographed on regional battlefields to underscore Iran's support for its allies.

As a result, killing him sent a strong symbolic message to Iran and its allies, Tabatabai said.

## Congress divided over US strike on Iranian general

*The Washington Post*

WASHINGTON — The U.S. airstrike that killed a powerful Iranian commander Thursday has sharply divided Washington lawmakers and revitalized a debate over presidential war powers.

Republicans praised President Donald Trump for a decisive blow against a general the United States regards as a war criminal responsible for hundreds of American deaths.

Democrats expressed concern that the escalation of tensions with Iran is a dangerous step toward war and complained that Trump ordered the strike against Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani without congressional input.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., criticized "provocative and disproportion-

ate actions," saying in a statement that the airstrikes were conducted "without the consultation of the Congress" and that the full body "must be immediately briefed on this serious situation and on the next steps under consideration by the Administration, including the significant escalation of the deployment of additional troops to the region."

"America — and the world — cannot afford to have tensions escalate to the point of no return," Pelosi said.

House Minority Leader Kevin McCarthy, R-Calif., praised the killing of Soleimani as a "statement to those seeking to attack America." Trump, McCarthy said, had responded appropriately to violence by Iranian-backed groups in Iraq, including an attempt to storm the U.S. Embassy in Baghdad.

"In a display of resolve and strength, we struck the leader of those attacking our sovereign U.S. territories," he said.

Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman James Risch, R-Idaho, offered his "congratulations to President Trump on his decisive action and successful outcome" and said in a statement that "the U.S. will always vigorously defend our interests and allies in the face of terrorist conduct and provocations."

House Foreign Affairs Committee Chairman Eliot Engel, D-N.Y., had a different outlook. Soleimani "had the blood of Americans on his hands and I won't grieve his death," he said in a statement. "But many will consider him a martyr and I'm deeply concerned about the repercussions of tonight's strike."



## Trump looks to boost his evangelical support after editorial with Miami event

Associated Press

WEST PALM BEACH, Fla. — In his first campaign move of the 2020 election year, President Donald Trump on Friday will visit a mega-church in Miami to highlight his support among evangelicals as he aims to shore up and expand support from an influential piece of his political base.

The president will host the kickoff meeting of “Evangelicals for Trump” just days after he was the subject of a scathing editorial in Christianity Today magazine that called for his removal from office. But Trump’s campaign believes that his record in office, including the installation of two Supreme Court justices, will cement the votes of religious conservatives this year.

“I think his record in the past three years is rock-solid in things that the faith community cares about ...,” said Jentezen Franklin, a pastor to a mega-church in Georgia. “We used to see politicians once every four

years but this one is totally different in constantly reaching out to the faith community and we even get a chance to tell him when we disagree.”

Campaign officials said the Miami event was in the works well before the Christianity Today op-ed that raised fresh questions about the durability of his support among the conservative evangelicals who have proven to be a critical component of his political base. The magazine’s editorial, written by editor-in-chief Mark Galli, envisions a message to those evangelical Christians who have remained stalwart Trump backers “in spite of his blackened moral record.”

“Remember who you are and whom you serve,” Galli’s editorial states. “Consider how your justification of Mr. Trump influences your witness to your Lord and Savior. Consider what an unbelieving world will say if you continue to brush off Mr. Trump’s immoral words and behavior in the cause of political expediency.”

## Viral video edited to suggest Biden made racist remark

Associated Press

A video of Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden that was selectively edited to falsely suggest he made racist remarks during a recent speech made the rounds Thursday on social media, raking in more than a million views on one tweet alone.

Experts have been warning about the dangers of selectively edited videos being used as a misinformation tactic ahead of the 2020 presidential election.

In the edited clip, which was less than 20 seconds long, Biden says, “Our culture is not imported from some African nation or some Asian nation.” Social media users paired the video with comments like “It’s almost like Joe Biden is a Racist.” Posts with the video

surfaced across social media platforms on Wednesday.

The clip was taken from ABC News coverage of Biden speaking for more than an hour in Derry, N.H., on Monday. A review of the full video shows that Biden was commenting on changing the culture around violence against women. In discussing the difficulty victims face reporting sexual assault on college campuses, he said, “Folks, this is about changing the culture, our culture, our culture, it’s not imported from some African nation or some Asian nation. It is our English jurisprudential culture, our European culture that says it is all right.”

Biden’s campaign confirmed to The Associated Press that the presentation in the edited video was inaccurate.

## Report renews Dems’ call for witnesses to appear before Senate

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Democrats on Thursday seized on a new report citing unredacted emails that bolster the case that President Donald Trump was directly involved in withholding military aid to Ukraine as he was seeking investigations that could benefit his reelection bid.

House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., joined Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., in pressing for key witnesses and documents to be included in a Senate impeachment trial of Trump after the report’s release.

Senate leaders remained at an impasse Thursday over the scope of a trial, and aides to Schumer and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell, R-Ky., said the two men had not spoken over the holidays about the standoff. Pelosi has yet to send the articles of impeachment — alleging abuse of power and obstruction of Congress — to the Senate as Democrats seek guarantees about witnesses and documents that would be subpoenaed regarding Trump’s conduct toward Ukraine.

The report by Kate Brannen, published by Just Security, referenced an email from Michael Duffey, associate director of national security programs at the Office of Management and Budget, to Elaine McCusker, the acting Pentagon comptroller, on Aug. 30, a little more than a month after Trump pressed Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelenskyy for investigations during a phone call.

In the email, which followed a meeting with Trump that included senior administration officials, Duffey told McCusker, “Clear direction from POTUS to hold.”

A redacted version of that email — and several others cited in the report by Brannen,

a veteran Pentagon reporter — had previously been made public as the result of Freedom of Information Act litigation.

“The newly-revealed unredacted emails are a devastating blow to Senator McConnell’s push to have a trial without the documents and witnesses we’ve requested,” Schumer said in a statement Thursday. “These emails further expose the serious concerns raised by Trump administration officials about the propriety and legality of the president’s decision to cut off aid to Ukraine to benefit himself.”

Schumer has sought guarantees from McConnell that several administration officials will be subpoenaed to testify in a Senate trial who declined to participate in House impeachment proceedings, including acting White House chief of staff Mick Mulvaney, former national security adviser John Bolton and Duffey. McConnell has said the Senate should decide on what if any witnesses to call after hearing opening statements from House impeachment managers and Trump’s lawyers.

Schumer said the unredacted emails raise “questions that can only be answered by having the key Trump administration officials ... testify under oath in a Senate trial.”

At the heart of the Democrats’ case is the allegation that Trump tried to leverage a White House meeting and \$391 million in congressionally appropriated military aid, sought by Ukraine to combat Russian military aggression, to pressure Zelenskyy to launch an investigation of former vice president Joe Biden, a 2020 presidential candidate, and his son Hunter Biden, as well as a probe of an unfounded theory that Kyiv conspired with Democrats to interfere in the 2016 presidential election.



# US sends asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The U.S. government on Thursday began sending asylum-seekers back to Nogales, Mexico, to await court hearings that will be scheduled roughly 350 miles away in Juarez, Mexico.

Authorities are expanding a program known as Remain in Mexico that requires tens of thousands of asylum seekers to wait out their immigration court hearings in Mexico. Until this week, the government was driving some asylum seekers from Nogales, Ariz., to El Paso, Texas, so they could be returned to Juarez.

Now, asylum-seekers will have to find their own way through dangerous Mexican border roads.

About 30 asylum seekers were sent to Nogales, Mexico, on Thursday, said Gilda Lou-

reiro, director of the San Juan Bosco migrant shelter in the Mexican city.

Loureiro said the migrants hadn't made it to the shelter yet but that it was prepared and has a capacity of about 400.

"We're going to take up to the capacity we have," she said.

Critics say the Remain in Mexico program, one of several Trump administration policies that have all but ended asylum in the U.S., puts migrants who fled their home countries back into dangerous Mexican border towns where they are often kidnapped, robbed or extorted.

A Human Rights First report released in December documented at least 636 public reports of violence against asylum-seekers returned to Mexico including rape, kidnapping and torture. Human Rights First said that was a steep increase

over October when the group had identified 343 attacks, and noted the latest figure is surely an under-count because most crime victims don't report.

The government calls the program Migrant Protection Protocols.

Nogales is now the seventh border crossing through which U.S. authorities returns migrants to Mexico to await court hearings. The policy was introduced in January 2018 in San Diego.

More than 56,000 people were sent back to Mexico by the end of November, according to Syracuse University's Transactional Records Access Clearinghouse. Of the more than 24,000 cases that have been decided, only 117, or less than 1%, have been granted asylum or some other form of relief allowing them to stay in the United States.

But U.S. authorities have lauded the program, saying it's helped to significantly reduce illegal border crossings. The Border Patrol apprehended just over 33,000 people along the Southwest border in November, compared to 144,000 in May, when border crossings peaked.

In a statement, acting Department of Homeland Security Secretary Chad Wolf said the program has been "an extremely effective tool."

"I am confident in the program's continued success in adjudicating meritorious cases quickly and preventing fraudulent claims," Wolf wrote.

A three-judge appeals court panel heard arguments Oct. 1 in San Francisco on a lawsuit filed by the American Civil Liberties Union to block the policy. The court has yet to rule.

## More scrutiny over Tesla tech after 3 more crashes

Associated News

DETROIT — Three crashes involving Teslas that killed three people have increased scrutiny of the company's Autopilot driving system just months before CEO Elon Musk has planned to put fully self-driving cars on the streets.

On Sunday, a Tesla Model S sedan left a freeway in Gardena, Calif., at a high speed, ran a red light and struck a Honda Civic, killing two people inside, police said.

On the same day, a Tesla Model 3 hit a parked firetruck on an Indiana freeway, killing a passenger in the Tesla.

And on Dec. 7, yet another Model 3 struck a police cruiser on a Connecticut highway, though no one was hurt.

The special crash investigation unit of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration is looking into the California crash. The agency hasn't decided whether its special-crash unit will review the

crash that occurred Sunday near Terre Haute, Ind. In both cases, authorities have yet to determine whether Tesla's Autopilot system was being used.

NHTSA also is investigating the Connecticut crash, in which the driver told police that the car was operating on Autopilot.

Tesla has said repeatedly that its Autopilot system is designed only to assist drivers, who must still pay attention and be ready to intervene at all times. The company contends that Teslas with Autopilot are safer than vehicles without it, but cautions that the system does not prevent all crashes.

Even so, experts and safety advocates say a string of Tesla crashes raises serious questions about whether drivers have become too reliant on Tesla's technology and whether the company does enough to ensure that drivers keep paying attention. Some critics have said it's past time for NHTSA to stop investigating and to take action.

## 'Affluenza teen' arrested for violating his parole

Associated Press

FORT WORTH, Texas — A Texas man who used "affluenza" as a defense at his trial for killing four people while driving drunk was arrested Thursday after authorities say he violated the terms of his probation.

Ethan Couch, 22, was booked into a jail in Fort Worth after he tested positive for THC, the psychoactive compound in marijuana, court records show.

Couch's attorneys, Scott Brown and Reagan Wynn, said their client has been intensely monitored for alcohol and illegal substance use for more than 20 months and "has never been positive for the use of any substance before."

"We cannot make any further statement until we have the opportunity to conduct an investigation to determine if, in fact, Ethan ingested THC and, if so, if it was a voluntary act on his part," Brown and Wynn

said in a statement.

Couch became known as the "affluenza teen" during his manslaughter trial for the 2013 crash. Couch, 16 at the time of the crash, was found to have a blood-alcohol level three times the legal limit for adult drivers after the crash. But a psychologist told a juvenile court that he was affected by "affluenza," or irresponsibility caused by family wealth.

A judge originally sentenced Couch to 10 years of probation. But he was later jailed after attending a party where alcohol was served and then fleeing to Mexico with his mother to avoid punishment. He was released in 2018 after serving a nearly two-year sentence. In 2013, Couch lost control of his family's pickup truck after he and his friends had played beer pong and drank beer stolen from a Walmart. He veered into a crowd of people helping the driver of a disabled vehicle on the side of the road.



# AMERICAN ROUNDUP

## Police: Woman uses dog urine for screening

**KY** PINEVILLE — A Kentucky woman gave her probation officer a dog urine sample during a drug screening, police said.

Julie Miller, 40, of Arjay, was arrested Monday on a charge of tampering with physical evidence, the Pineville Police Department said in a release on its Facebook page. She also was charged with a parole violation and trafficking in a controlled substance.

Miller admitted she tried to use the dog urine as her own sample given to officers at the Bell County Probation and Parole Office during a regular probation visit, the statement said.

## Server at restaurant gets \$2,020 tip

**MI** ALPENA — The restaurant bill was \$23. But the tip at a small-town restaurant in Michigan was much larger: \$2,020.

"Things like this don't happen to people like me," server Danielle Franzoni told The Alpena News.

Franzoni, 31, got the tip while working Sunday at Thunder Bay River Restaurant in Alpena. The credit card receipt said "Happy New Year. 2020 Tip Challenge."

Franzoni, a single mother, couldn't believe the number, but her manager assured her the tip was legitimate.

She said she was living in a homeless shelter a year ago. Franzoni plans to use the money to reinstate her driver's license and build savings.

"They don't know nothing about my story. They don't know where I've come from. They don't know how hard it's

been," Franzoni said of the couple who left the tip. "They're really just doing this out of the kindness of their heart."

Franzoni later went to a restaurant and left a \$20.20 tip.

## Corvette speared by a flying highway sign

**FL** HALLANDALE BEACH — A flying highway sign gave a driver an unwelcome New Year's Eve gift when it impaled the rear window of his Corvette during a highway mishap that left multiple vehicles damaged in south Florida.

The large highway merge sign speared the rear window of the car Tuesday afternoon on the northbound lanes of Interstate 95, about 20 miles from Miami, WSVN-TV reported.

Investigators think the sign flew into the air when it was struck by another vehicle and was launched into the Corvette's windshield, authorities told the station.

## Hershey is retiring fleet of Kissmobiles

**PA** HERSHEY — The Hershey Co. will soon retire its vehicles that are shaped like its Hershey's Kisses.

The Hershey Kissmobiles, which are each made up of three massive Kisses candies, have traveled across the country since 1997. The chocolate company has confirmed that the 26-foot-long vehicles won't return in 2020.

The company decided to pull the aging Kissmobiles out of safety concerns for employees and the public, Hershey Co. spokesman Jeff Beckman said. It has also become more difficult to find replacement parts for the custom vehicles.

One of the Kissmobiles will

be available for public viewing at the AACA Museum in Hershey.

## Police: Man robbed Domino's with machete

**NC** ASHEVILLE — Police in North Carolina say a man robbed a Domino's Pizza with a machete and then tried to set the store ablaze.

The Citizen Times reported that the alleged incident occurred late Monday night in Asheville.

Police said in a statement that Curtis Andrew Wallace Jr., 29, told Domino's employees that he would "chop heads off" before locking them in an office and then a freezer.

Police said that Wallace took nearly \$700 from a safe. They said Wallace then tried to start a fire in one of the pizza ovens when the employees were still trapped. He was taken into custody when police arrived after an employee called 911.

## Marriage-proposal fireworks cause panic

**NJ** HOWELL — A man who set off fireworks near a movie theater as his friend made a marriage proposal created panic among moviegoers who mistook the fireworks for gunshots, leading to 911 calls and an evacuation, authorities said.

Howell Township police responded to the Xscape Theater around 6 p.m. Wednesday and soon learned the theater manager had confronted a man who had set off fireworks outside another business near the theater, authorities said.

The remnants of the fireworks were located, and it was determined that no shots had been fired.

A 23-year-old Lakewood man told police he had set off the

fireworks as part of his friend's marriage proposal at the other business.

## Man flees solo car crash and gets stuck in ditch

**FL** CLEARWATER — A Florida man tried to flee a traffic accident only to require rescuing when he got stuck in a ditch, authorities said.

The Tampa Bay Times reported that the 42-year-old fled a single-vehicle crash scene but soon found himself in trouble Sunday night when he became trapped in a concrete retention ditch. He had to be rescued by the fire department and taken to a hospital.

The Pinellas County Sheriff's Office said Dustin Anthony Demoss was later taken to jail and booked on charges of driving under the influence and leaving the scene of an accident.

## Couple heats up frozen pizza – and a snake

**NC** WAKE FOREST — A couple in North Carolina say they popped a frozen pizza into the oven only to discover that a snake was burning inside about 10 minutes later.

Amber Helm told the Raleigh News & Observer on Wednesday that her family had hoped to have an easy dinner on Monday night in Wake Forest.

But Helm said the oven started smoking and smelling terrible as they waited for their pizza to cook.

"I opened up the oven and thought, 'Is that part of the oven?' I looked more closely and it was a snake," she said.

She said she left the pizza behind and took her young sons out to eat. Her husband stayed behind to deal with the snake.

From wire reports

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# Titans' Henry ready to carry the load

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — No one is a harsher critic of Titans running back Derrick Henry than himself.

"I just want to do my job very well," Henry said Wednesday. "If I don't, I'm hard on myself. I just keep working until I get it right."

The NFL rushing leader and first-time Pro Bowl running back will get a chance Saturday night to improve on his last performance against the Patriots in the playoffs. Henry ran 12 times for 28 yards — a 2.3-yard average per carry — with nothing over 4 yards. He did catch three passes for 21 yards, but the Titans lost 34-14 in the divisional round on Jan. 13, 2018.

He ran better the last time Tennessee played New England, averaging 5.3 yards on just 11 carries, as the Titans routed the Patriots 34-10 on Nov. 11, 2018, in Nashville.

Since then, the 2015 Heisman Trophy winner has been punishing defenders, piling up

yards in his best year yet. Henry capped his fourth season with 1,540 yards rushing and tied for the league lead with 16 rushing touchdowns, which he calls a "team accomplishment."

Coach Mike Vrabel told his Titans before they clinched the AFC's second wild card that being able to run is how teams win in the postseason. Tennessee (9-7) ranks third in averaging 138.9 yards a game.

"You control the ball, control the tempo," Vrabel said. "I would say that there's probably less turnovers on running plays than there are on passing plays, and turnovers at this point in the year are critical. The last game the Patriots lost was Jan. 20, 2013 in the playoffs at home, and they had three turnovers and the Ravens had zero. So, that's a telling stat."

How well Tennessee runs Saturday against the Patriots will hinge on Henry, who averaged 20.2 carries in 15 games played this season. He is averaging 5.1 yards per carry, and also has had three touchdowns on runs of

53 yards or longer this season.

Henry knows that.

"You have to run the ball to get to the Super Bowl, so I think running the ball effectively is a big key to winning games in the playoffs," Henry said.

New England (12-4) finished sixth against the run, allowing only 95.5 yards a game. Patriots coach Bill Belichick said it's impossible to mimic the 6-foot-3, 247-pound Henry's size, speed and physical play in practice, though there's not many guys like him in the NFL. The Patriots have seen Henry up close most recently during joint practices in August, which helps.

"He can make you miss in space, he can drop his pads and run with power and run over you. He's a good inside runner, good outside runner, and catches the ball well and he's got speed to go the distance. He doesn't get caught much. He gets a step and then he's able to finish it off," Belichick said.

"He's got a good stiff arm. He breaks a lot of tackles in the secondary from guys that just can't

get close enough to wrap him up — he just pushes them away."

Henry's best season yet is perfect timing. The running back who lasted until the No. 45 pick overall in the second round before Tennessee selected him out of Alabama is in the final year of his rookie contract. Henry made clear during the offseason that his contract status was not an issue.

His motivation is simple: "I love playing."

Henry and the Titans had to balance an injury over the past month. A sore left hamstring prompted Tennessee to hold him out of a Dec. 22 loss to New Orleans, and he is averaging 149.3 yards rushing in his past six games, including a season-high 211 yards in last week's win in Houston.

"We like to call that being a professional — trying to make the hard look easy," Vrabel said.

Henry is very good at that, and he's not on the injury report this week.

## Bills' Allen comes into his own this season

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Whatever bad memories Bills quarterback Josh Allen had of his first and only game NFL game at Houston have been pushed aside some 14 months later.

There's no need to remind the second-year player of leaving the game in the third quarter with a sprained throwing elbow that eventually led to him missing five weeks. And Allen doesn't need to hear of the tell-tale rookie awkwardness he displayed after being thrust into a starting role ahead of schedule as a result of Nathan Peterman's turnover-prone issues.

However raw Buffalo's first-round draft pick looked in the weeks leading up to a 20-13 loss to the Texans on Oct. 14, 2018, Allen believes he's made considerable strides in preparing to make his playoff debut in an AFC wild-card game at Hous-

ton on Saturday.

"Obviously, going through that game there's not great memories. Nobody likes getting hurt," he said following practice Tuesday.

"I feel like a different player from last year ... just as far as seeing things, seeing defenses, trusting the guys around me and not trying to make the big play all the time."

Allen's progress has been apparent during a season in which he's posted five fourth-quarter comebacks and helped Buffalo (10-6) to its best finish in 20 years. He's doubled his touchdown passing total to 20; his completion percentage has jumped by 6 points to 58.6; and his 3,089 yards passing are the most by a Bills player since Ryan Fitzpatrick's 3,400 in 2012.

Having shown a flair for performing in national settings by beating the Cowboys at Dallas on Thanksgiving and the Steel-

ers in Pittsburgh in prime-time, Allen can appreciate how the playoffs represent the next step in his development.

"It's a new game. It's a different situation," he said. "All the marbles are on the table."

No pressure, said Allen, who can become Buffalo's first quarterback to win a playoff game since Hall of Famer Jim Kelly oversaw a 37-22 victory over Miami on Dec. 30, 1995.

"I don't have to be the best quarterback out there," Allen said. "I have to be the best quarterback for this team to help us win a football game regardless of the circumstances."

Allen's comments echo what his coaches have emphasized on maintaining an even keel.

"The juices get flowing, it's a competitive time of year and you've got to do a good job of trying to stay as level-headed as you can," offensive coordinator Brian Daboll said. "You want to

win it so bad, but you've got to stay consistent with your routine and the things you've done all throughout the year."

If there's a concern, it's Allen acknowledging he's experienced early game jitters, most recently following a 24-17 loss at New England two weeks ago. It was a game in which he went 6-for-13 for 62 yards and a touchdown in the first half, before finishing 13-for-26 for 208 yards and two touchdowns.

Slow starts have been an issue this season.

Buffalo's game-opening drives have produced just one touchdown and four field goals. And the Bills have combined to score just 12 points in the first quarter of their past eight games, and 43 overall.

"That's on my shoulders. We've got to go and start faster," Allen said.



## Top 25 roundup

# Tillie sparks No. 1-ranked Gonzaga's rally

Associated Press

PORTLAND, Ore. — Challenged by Portland to open conference play, top-ranked Gonzaga leaned on the experience and leadership of Killian Tillie.

Tillie had 22 points, Corey Kispert added 18, and the Bulldogs rallied from a second-half deficit to beat Portland 85-72 on Thursday night for their 12th straight victory over the Pilots.

"I tried to tell them, 'We're good, we've been like that before. We've just got to answer. We have to get the crowd going and get ourselves going with hustle plays on the floor,'" Tillie said about his team falling behind at halftime. "And we did that."

The senior from France scored 18 points in the second half.

Gonzaga coach Mark Few said Tillie's leadership calms the team, even though Tillie has been slowed by injuries again this season. After the game, his left ankle was wrapped in ice.

"Tillie's leadership has been great," Few said. "He's really been fighting a lot of things, but his leadership has been spectacular, his toughness has been spectacular, and just his ability to calmly make plays."

Ryan Woolridge had 15 points for Gonzaga (15-1), which began West Coast Conference play with its seventh straight win. The Bulldogs' lone loss this season came in the Bahamas on Nov. 29 to Michigan.

It was the fifth consecutive loss for Portland (8-8, 0-1). JoJo Walker led the Pilots with 15 points.

The Bulldogs entered as the highest-scoring team in the nation, averaging 88.5 points per game, but the Pilots surprisingly took a 42-35 lead into halftime, stunning the sizable contingent of Zags fans at the Chiles Center.

A 16-0 run early in the second half gave the lead back to Gonzaga, which led by as many as 18.

"Obviously, they're the No. 1 team in the nation. Having the chance to host them in our

building, (it was) a pretty special opportunity for us and I thought our guys in the first half did a great job of stepping up to the challenge," Portland coach Terry Porter said. "But in the second half they just turned it up, we just started getting loose with the ball, start turning over and some intangibles, some injured players, and that allowed them to get back in and allowed them to build a lead."

Portland led 32-27 following Isaiah White's three-pointer, and the Pilots' bench celebrated wildly when Walker's fast-break layup made it 34-29.

The Pilots shot 6-for-8 on three-pointers in the first half, while Gonzaga was 2-for-10 from the perimeter.

The Bulldogs closed the gap early in the second half. Tillie's layup and dunk gave Gonzaga back the lead at 50-47. Tillie's free throws capped the 16-0 run, which made it 55-47.

Tillie's three-pointer extended Gonzaga's lead to 67-55.

**Colorado 74, No. 4 Oregon 65:** McKinley Wright IV scored 11 of his 21 points in the final 5

minutes, and the host Buffaloes beat another ranked team, taking down the Ducks.

Tyler Bey added 15 points and grabbed 14 rebounds as Colorado (12-2, 1-0 Pac-12) improved to 9-0 all-time against Oregon (11-3, 0-1) in Boulder.

Payton Pritchard had 21 points to lead Oregon.

**No. 14 Michigan State 76, Illinois 56:** Cassius Winston had 21 points, and Xavier Tillman scored 19 to lead the host Spartans past the Illini.

Michigan State (11-3, 3-0 Big Ten) has won six straight and has won its first three conference games to stay alone in first place.

The Spartans pulled away early in the second half with a 15-3 run.

Ayo Dosunmu scored 13 of his 18 points in the first half for the Illini (9-4, 1-2).

**No. 20 Dayton 84, La Salle 58:** Obi Toppin scored 20 points, and the visiting Flyers used a big first-half run to cruise past La Salle in their Atlantic 10 opener.

## Bowl roundup

# Tennessee's late TDs stun Indiana in Gator

Associated Press

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — Tennessee sure knows how to get out of a huge hole.

The Volunteers scored twice in a 30-second span late, using an onside kick to help escape a 13-point deficit, and then held on to stun Indiana 23-22 in the Gator Bowl on Thursday night.

The rally was indicative of Tennessee's season, which started 1-4 and ended with six consecutive wins.

"Everybody in the country had given up on these guys," second-year coach Jeremy Pruitt said.

Pruitt was talking about the season. He could have been

talking about the game.

The Hoosiers (8-5) looked to be in control in the second half after scoring two touchdowns in a 1:03 span, the second one coming on Jamar Johnson's 63-yard interception return, and later adding a pair of field goals.

Indiana was up 22-9 before Tennessee (8-5) shocked most of the nearly 62,000 fans on hand.

Quavaris Crouch scored on a 1-yard plunge and then fellow running back Eric Gray recovered a surprise onside kick that barely went the mandatory 10 yards. Gray scored from 16 yards out a few plays later to put the Vols on top for good.

"Obviously, very very disappointing to have a fourth-quarter lead and let it slip away," said Indiana coach Tom Allen, whose team was seeking its first nine-win season since 1967. "I'm not going to sit here and point fingers and blame. At the end of the day, it's my responsibility for us to find a way to win the game. We didn't do that."

Gray was named the game's Most Valuable Player.

"It's amazing," he said. "When adversity hits, you got to put on more steam."

**No. 23 Cincinnati 38, Boston College 6:** Desmond Ridder ran for 105 yards and three touchdowns and threw a scor-

ing pass to lead the Bearcats past the Eagles in the lightning-delayed Birmingham Bowl.

Cincinnati (11-3) reached 11 wins for the second straight season and fourth in program history, bouncing back from two straight losses to No. 15 Memphis. Boston College (6-7) was outgained 459-164 in total yards to finish a turbulent postseason.

Coach Steve Addazio was fired after seven seasons, and star tailback A.J. Dillon declared for the NFL Draft and skipped the bowl game.

Dillon was clearly missed. Boston College got its only points on special teams.



## NHL roundup

# Avalanche top Blues to snap home skid

Associated Press

DENVER — With a big offensive push, the Colorado Avalanche turned the page on a tough stretch at home and against the St. Louis Blues in particular.

Nazem Kadri scored twice, Nathan MacKinnon had a goal and three assists, and the Avalanche beat the Blues 7-3 Thursday night to snap a four-game skid at home.

Rookie defenseman Cale Makar added a power-play goal and an assist for the Avalanche, who also ended a six-game losing streak to the Blues, including two losses earlier this season in St. Louis. Mikko Rantanen J.T. Compher also had power-play goals, and Joonas Donskoi had the other goal for the Avalanche. Samuel Girard finished with four assists.

"Today was a good start in the right direction," said Avalanche goalie Philipp Grubauer, who had 24 saves. "Everybody was going. We need that. (The Blues) are a really good team,

so huge points for us. We didn't do well the last couple games against them. It was a good statement game for us. We need to keep collecting points and playing the right way"

**Sabres 3, Oilers 2 (OT):** Jack Eichel scored on a penalty shot 1:09 into overtime and host Buffalo rallied from a two-goal deficit to beat Edmonton.

Eichel was awarded the penalty shot after Edmonton's Oscar Klefbom interfered with the Sabres' captain as he attempted to break in alone across the Oilers' blue line.

**Sharks 3, Penguins 2 (OT):** Brent Burns' power-play goal just more than two minutes into overtime gave visiting San Jose a win over Pittsburgh.

Burns picked up his seventh goal of the season when his slap shot from high in the slot beat Tristan Jarry 2:02 into the extra period to give the Sharks only their third win in 14 games.

**Blue Jackets 2, Bruins 1 (OT):** Pierre-Luc Dubois scored

52 seconds into overtime, Elvis Merzlikins stopped 25 shots and visiting Columbus beat Boston.

**Lightning 2, Canadiens 1:** Andrei Vasilevskiy stopped 38 shots and Tampa Bay extended its winning streak to five games and improved to 15-2-0 against Atlantic-division opponents this season with a win at Montreal.

**Devils 2, Islanders 1:** Nico Hischier scored the tiebreaking goal early in the third period, Mackenzie Blackwood stopped 29 shots, and visiting New Jersey beat the Islanders.

**Panthers 6, Senators 3:** Frank Vatrano scored the deciding goal as part of visiting Florida's four-goal outburst in the second period.

Evgenii Dadonov scored his second power-play goal of the game to tie it at 2-all for Florida, and 89 seconds later Noel Acciari gave the Panthers the lead. Vatrano and Colton Sceviour scored 44 seconds apart in the final minute to put the

game out of reach.

**Maple Leafs 6, Jets 3:** William Nylander had two goals and an assist and Toronto extended its points streak to nine games with a win over host Winnipeg.

**Coyotes 4, Ducks 2:** Christian Dvorak triggered a three-goal third period by scoring in the opening minute, Antti Raanta stopped 27 shots and host Arizona rallied past Anaheim.

**Flames 4, Rangers 3:** Johnny Gaudreau opened the scoring and then set up the winning goal midway through the second period as Calgary snapped a five-game losing streak at home.

**Canucks 7, Blackhawks 5:** Adam Gaudette scored a third-period goal and host Vancouver rallied from a two-goal deficit, extending its winning streak to six games.

**Golden Knights 5, Flyers 4:** Max Pacioretty scored two goals and host Vegas beat Philadelphia.

## NBA roundup

# Heat hold Raptors to 76, win defensive battle

Associated Press

MIAMI — Bam Adebayo had 15 points and 14 rebounds and the Miami Heat put together their best defensive performance of the season in an 84-76 victory over the Toronto Raptors on Thursday night.

The Raptors' total was their lowest in more than four years — also coming in a game at Miami on Nov. 8, 2015 — and the second-lowest by any team in the NBA this season.

"We took it to heart," Adebayo said. "We need to defend and that's what we did tonight."

Tyler Herro and Goran Dragice each scored 13 for Miami. The Heat are 2-0 against the Raptors this season and improved to 9-0 after a loss. Miami and

Milwaukee are the only teams to not lose consecutive games this season.

Jimmy Butler finished with eight points, 12 rebounds and seven assists for Miami.

Serge Ibaka had 19 points and 10 rebounds for Toronto.

**Nuggets 124, Pacers 116:** Michael Porter Jr. scored a career-high 25 points and Jamal Murray added 22 in visiting Denver's victory over Indiana.

The Nuggets have won three of four and earned this one despite having Nikola Jokic in serious foul trouble all night. Jokic finished with 22 points, 12 in the fourth quarter, and seven rebounds.

**Clippers 126, Pistons 112:** Montrezl Harrell scored 23 points and Los Angeles sur-

vived without Paul George in the second half to beat visiting Detroit, winning consecutive games for the first time since Dec. 13.

George didn't return after halftime because of left hamstring tightness.

**Thunder 109, Spurs 103:** Shai Gilgeous-Alexander had 25 points and Oklahoma City overcame 30 by DeMar DeRozan to beat the Spurs, snapping a nine-game skid in San Antonio.

Chris Paul had 10 of his 16 points in the fourth quarter to help Oklahoma City win its fourth straight.

**Timberwolves 99, Warriors 84:** Shabazz Napier and Robert Covington each scored 20 points to help host Minnesota beat Golden State in a matchup

of injury-ravaged teams.

**Hornets 109, Cavaliers 106:** Devonte' Graham hit a three-pointer with 26 seconds left to break a tie and cap visiting Charlotte's late rally against Cleveland.

**Kings 128, Grizzlies 123:** De'Aaron Fox scored 10 of his 27 points in the final five minutes and host Sacramento overcame a 20-point deficit in the first half to beat Memphis, ending an eight-game losing streak.

**Mavericks 123, Nets 111:** Luka Doncic scored 15 of his 31 points in the fourth quarter as host Dallas beat Brooklyn.

**Jazz 102, Bulls 98:** Bojan Bogdanovic scored 19 points and visiting Utah held off Chicago.