

STARS AND STRIPES®

Saturday, January 11, 2020

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Iran takes responsibility for accidental strike on jetliner

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran's Revolutionary Guard on Saturday acknowledged that it accidentally shot down the Ukrainian jetliner that crashed earlier this week, killing all 176 people aboard, after the government had repeatedly denied Western accusations and mounting evidence that it was responsible.

The plane was shot down early Wednesday, hours after Iran launched a ballistic missile attack on two military bases housing U.S. troops in Iraq in retaliation for the killing of Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani in an American airstrike in Baghdad. No one was hurt in the attack on the U.S. bases.

The admission raised a host of new questions, such as who authorized the strike on the plane and why Iran did not shut down its international airport or airspace when it was bracing for a U.S. reprisal. It also undermined the credibility of information provided by senior officials, who for three days had adamantly dismissed allegations of a missile strike as Western propaganda.

Iran's acknowledgment also alters the narrative around its confrontation with the U.S. in a way that could anger the Iranian public. Iran had promised harsh revenge after Soleimani's death, but instead of killing American soldiers, its forces downed a civilian plane in which most passengers were Iranian and none survived.

Gen. Amir Ali Hajizadeh, the head of the Guard's aerospace division, said his unit accepts "full responsibility" for the shootdown. In an address broadcast by state TV, he said

that when he learned about the downing of the plane, "I wished I was dead."

He said Guard forces ringing the capital had beefed up their air defenses and were at the "highest level of readiness," fearing that the U.S. would retaliate. He said the airline's pilot and crew had done nothing wrong, but an officer made the "bad decision" to open fire on the plane after mistaking it for a cruise missile.

"We were prepared for an all-out conflict," he said.

Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, expressed his "deep sympathy" to the families of the victims and called on the armed forces to "pursue probable shortcomings and guilt in the painful incident."

Ukraine's President Volodymyr Zelenskiy said the crash investigation should continue and the "perpetrators" should be brought to justice. He said Iran should compensate victims' families, and he requested "official apologies through diplomatic channels."

The Ukrainian airline criticized Iran's decision to leave its airspace open despite the hostilities.

"It's absolutely irresponsible," Ukraine International Airlines vice president Ihor Sosnovskiy told reporters. "There must be protection around ordinary people. If they are shooting somewhere from somewhere, they are obliged to close the airport."

The shootdown of the plane and the lack of transparency around it, along with the restrained response to the killing of Soleimani, could re-ignite anger at the country's

leadership.

President Hassan Rouhani acknowledged Iran's responsibility but blamed the downing of the plane in part on "threats and bullying" by the United States after the killing of Soleimani. He expressed condolences, calling for a "full investigation" and the prosecution of those responsible.

Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif also deflected some of the blame, tweeting that "human error at time of crisis caused by US adventurism led to disaster."

The jetliner, a Boeing 737 operated by Ukrainian International Airlines, went down on the outskirts of Tehran shortly after taking off from Imam Khomeini International Airport.

The U.S. and Canada, citing intelligence, said they believed Iran shot down the aircraft with a surface-to-air missile, a conclusion supported by videos verified by The Associated Press.

The plane, en route to the Ukrainian capital of Kyiv, was carrying 167 passengers and nine crew members from several countries, including 82 Iranians, 57 Canadians — including many Iranians with dual citizenship — and 11 Ukrainians, according to officials. Ukraine's president said its team of investigators, who are already on the ground in Iran, should continue their work with "full access and cooperation."

Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau said his country would remain focused on getting justice, closure, accountability and transparency for the families.

Blast kills 2 US troops in Afghanistan

By J.P. LAWRENCE

Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — Two American service members were killed in Afghanistan on Saturday when their vehicle struck a roadside bomb, the military said.

In addition, two service members were wounded in the attack, which occurred in the southern province of Kandahar, a NATO Resolute Support spokesman said.

The names of the slain service members were being withheld until 24 hours after the notification of next of kin in accordance with Defense Department policy, the statement said.

The Taliban immediately claimed responsibility for the attack in a statement from spokesman Qari Yusuf Ahmadi, The Associated Press reported.

The attack came amid Taliban claims that a peace deal with the U.S. is near.

"The U.S.-Taliban peace agreement is finalized and only remains to be signed by the two sides," Taliban peace delegation Suhail Shaheen told Voice of America.

U.S. peace envoy Zalmay Khalilzad has been pressing the insurgents to declare a cease-fire or at least reduce violent attacks. That would give a window in which the U.S. and the Taliban could forge an agreement to withdraw all of America's troops. That agreement would also set out a road map for direct Afghan-to-Afghan talks, mapping out the country's post-war future.

Review: JAG corps must address culture

By CAITLIN M. KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Navy and Marine Corps lawyers have failed to learn from past mistakes and many display a lack of basic ethics in their approach to cases, according to a review of the services' judge advocate general corps released Friday.

The review, which Navy leaders billed as the largest probe of its JAG corps ever conducted, blasted a lack of a professional culture within that corps. The probe was launched in the wake of a string of problems within the Navy's legal community culminating with the chaotic, and ultimately, unsuccessful, prosecution during the summer of Navy SEAL Eddie Gallagher on war crimes.

However, officials cited cases stretching back to 2015 as reasons why the Navy's legal systems needed inspection. In August, the review was expanded to include the Marine Corps' JAG corps.

The review was conducted by a panel of experts, who were advised to focus on critical areas within the JAG corps, including its culture, organizational structure and unlawful command influence. The Navy and Marine Corps are now establishing oversight teams to make certain that the recommendations in the review are implemented, service leaders said Friday.

The panel found the Navy needs to "embrace a learning culture" in which there is self-assessment and feedback on lessons learned. They also found the Navy and Marine Corps' professional responsibility

programs "lack regular, structured training" and need to build on relationships with other legal communities and foster professional interaction.

The culture of the legal profession in the Navy and Marine Corps is the "top priority to get after," said Adm. Robert Burke, the vice chief of naval operations.

Now-retired Adm. John Richardson, the former chief of naval operations, ordered the review Aug. 1, which was endorsed and later expanded by then-Navy Secretary Richard Spencer.

The former top Navy officials called for the review following the high-profile acquittal of Gallagher, a chief petty officer, on charges that included the murder of a young, detained enemy fighter, and a series of other embarrassing episodes in the Navy's legal community in recent years.

The Gallagher case had the lead prosecutor, Navy Cmdr. Christopher Czaplak, booted from the case just days before trial after he was caught working with Naval Criminal Investigative Service officials to attempt to track illegal emails of Gallagher's defense team and a journalist covering the case. During the trial, the prosecution's star witness, another SEAL, reversed his testimony and claimed to have killed the detained enemy fighter. The SEAL had been granted immunity and he did not face legal repercussions for his testimony.

President Donald Trump, long a vocal supporter of Gallagher, ordered the Navy to revoke awards doled out to prosecutors for their work on the case. Later, Trump

restored the SEAL's rank, which was reduced as punishment for his lone conviction of posing for a photograph with a deceased enemy's body. Trump also ordered the Navy to allow Gallagher to retire with his trident pin — a symbol of his position within the SEALs — instead of conducting a review of his status in the elite force. Spencer would be forced from his position as the Navy's top civilian soon after Trump's order, but he blasted the president's handling of the case in a letter acknowledging his termination.

Another area of concern highlighted is the lack of resources of the military JAG community in the Navy and Marine Corps. They found issues with the case management and court reporting systems to be inefficient and in some cases ineffective. Staff shortages was also a problem with the Navy as they suffer from "inaccurate manpower requirements, as well as skill sets and development paths that do not meet Navy needs," according to the review.

The JAG communities have remained small while the workload demand has quadrupled in the last 10 years, Burke said. They are also doing less litigation and providing more legal support in areas such as cyber and environmental law.

The Navy is just now getting to 950 JAG officers, even though that amount was recommended in 2011, he said.

Burke said he will be meeting with members of the JAG corps to discuss the findings in the review.

Pardoned officer denied Special Forces tab

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — An Army general has denied a request by an officer pardoned in an open murder case by President Donald Trump to have his Special Forces tab reinstated, setting up a potential flashpoint with the commander in chief.

The decoration for retired Army Maj. Mathew Golsteyn was denied Dec. 3 by Lt. Gen. Francis Beaudette, the commander of U.S. Army Special Operations Command, the Army disclosed Thursday. Beaudette's decision is not final, and the service said in a state-

ment that it will next have an administrative panel consider whether it should reinstate the Special Forces Tab and a Distinguished Service Cross — the military's second-highest valor award — and expunge a letter of reprimand Golsteyn received in connection with his case.

Golsteyn was awaiting trial this year in the alleged murder of a suspected Taliban bomb maker in Marja, Afghanistan, in February 2010. The service first opened an investigation into Golsteyn after he disclosed the killing during a 2011 photograph as the CIA was considering him for a job. Army

officials revoked the tab and valor award in 2014 while issuing the reprimand and charged Golsteyn with murder in 2018.

Golsteyn has acknowledged the killing in media interviews but said it occurred in a lawful ambush. He burned the body afterward to prevent disease, he said.

The general's action to deny Golsteyn's reinstatement request follows Trump's decision in November to pardon Golsteyn along with former 1st Lt. Clint Lorange, an Army officer who had been convicted of murder in Afghanistan. Trump also

decided to reinstate the rank of a Navy SEAL, Chief Petty Officer Edward Gallagher, who was acquitted of murder last year but convicted of posing with an Islamic State corpse in Iraq.

Beaudette's decision has some parallels to the Navy's decision in November to convene a board to decide whether it would revoke Gallagher's Naval Special Warfare Trident pin, a move that effectively would oust him from the elite force. Trump responded angrily, blocking the move, a decision that led to the ouster of Navy Secretary Richard Spencer.

Trump: After Soleimani death, Iran targeted 4 US embassies

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Confronted by persistent questions about his military action in the Middle East, President Donald Trump and his top officials offered a string of fresh explanations Friday, with Trump now contending Iranian militants had planned major attacks on four U.S. embassies.

Just hours earlier, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had said the U.S. didn't know when or where attacks might occur. Trump and other officials insisted anew that Iranian Gen. Qassem Soleimani had posed an imminent threat to the U.S., but they rebuffed repeated attempts to explain what they meant by "imminent."

Trump, meanwhile, announced additional sanctions against Iran, which he had promised after a barrage of missiles fired by the Islamic Republic against American bases in Iraq earlier this week.

Those Iranian missiles, which caused no casualties, were prompted by the U.S. drone strike that killed Gen. Qassem Soleimani last week in

Baghdad. That U.S. assault set off a chain of events that included the unintentional downing of a Ukrainian jetliner by the Iran military and calls by the Iraqi government to expel U.S. troops from their country.

At the White House, Trump issued an executive order adding additional U.S. sanctions to the already long list his administration had imposed in an effort to force Iran to accept a new agreement that would curb its nuclear program and to halt support for militant groups throughout the Middle East.

Trump declared the U.S. was holding Iran responsible for attacks against the United States as well as a threat to U.S. service members, diplomats and civilians — an apparent reference to the justification for killing Soleimani.

"The United States will continue to counter the Iranian regime's destructive and destabilizing behavior," he said.

But Trump and others faced continuing questions over their claims of an "imminent" threat.

Define what you mean by

imminent, Pompeo was asked Friday at a White House news conference.

"I don't know exactly which minute," Pompeo said. "We don't know exactly which day it would have been executed, but it was very clear. Qassem Soleimani himself was plotting a broad, large-scale attack against American interests and those attacks were imminent."

Both Pompeo and Trump had said U.S. embassies were threatened. The secretary of state broadened it to include "American facilities," including military bases throughout the region. "This was going to happen, and American lives were at risk," he said.

Trump gave a more worrisome number but still no specifics in a later comment.

"I can reveal that I believe it probably would've been four embassies," he told Fox News in an interview taped Friday.

"President Trump recklessly assassinated Qassem Soleimani," said Rep. Pramila Jayapal, D-Wash. "He had no evidence of an imminent threat or attack."

Russian ship 'aggressively approached' US destroyer

BY STEVE BEYNON

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A Russian warship "aggressively approached" a U.S. Navy destroyer Thursday in the north Arabian Sea, the service said.

"While the Russian ship took action, the initial delay in complying with international rules while it was making an aggressive approach increased the risk of collision," the U.S. Fifth Fleet said in a statement. "The U.S. Navy continues to remain vigilant and is trained to act in a professional manner."

The USS Farragut was approached by the Russian ship. The incident is the latest in a string of close encounters between American and Russian warships in international waters.

"Farragut sounded five short blasts, the international maritime signal for danger of a collision, and requested the Russian ship alter course in accordance with international rules of the road. The Russian ship initially refused but ultimately altered course," according to the Fifth Fleet's statement.

Former Gitmo commander lied about drunken brawl

The Florida Times-Union
(Jacksonville)

The third day of testimony in the criminal trial of a former Jacksonville-based Navy captain was a sea of brass, including another captain and two sitting admirals.

The senior officers were called to testify that John "J.R." Nettleton lied to his superiors and investigators following the disappearance and death of civilian contractor Christopher Tur in 2015.

Nettleton, 54, is not charged in the 42-year-old's death, but he is charged with obstruction of justice and lying to federal

investigators.

Capt. Alonza Ross, who was Nettleton's second in command at Naval Base Guantanamo Bay, testified Thursday that then-Cmdr. Nettleton lied twice when directly asked if Tur came to his house the night he went missing.

Tur's body was later recovered from the waters of Guantanamo Bay.

When asked a third time, Ross said Nettleton admitted Tur came to his house but didn't acknowledge the pair got in a bloody fistfight.

"I asked," Ross testified. "He said no, he didn't come to the house."

Ross also testified Nettleton refused to tell his boss, Navy Adm. Mary Jackson, about his drunken confrontation with Tur at the base's officers club that same night, or Tur's shouted allegations that Nettleton "f--- my wife."

Thursday's testimony included Adm. Christopher Gray, who was Jackson's chief of staff in 2015 when he was removed from command.

Gray testified that Nettleton initially provided very little information about the matter. He reported Tur as a missing person without saying anything about his affair with his wife, the explosive confrontation

they had at the officers club or the fight at his home.

"My jaw dropped to the ground," Gray said.

He testified if he'd known that information, "it would have dramatically turned the situation."

Jackson, who removed Nettleton from his command Jan. 21, 2015, testified he misdirected her and other officials to conceal his confrontation with Tur and the fact that he was the last person to see him.

Nettleton could face up to 100 years in prison if convicted of all counts against him.

White House aims to expand travel ban in US

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The White House is considering dramatically expanding its much-litigated travel ban to additional countries amid a renewed election-year focus on immigration by President Donald Trump, according to six people familiar with the deliberations.

A document outlining the plans — timed to coincide with the third anniversary of Trump's January 2017 executive order — has been circulating the White House. But the countries that would be affected if it moves forward are blacked out, according to two of the people, who spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity because the measure has yet to be finalized.

It's unclear exactly how many countries

would be included in the expansion if it proceeds, but two of the people said that seven countries — a majority of them Muslim — would be added to the list. The most recent iteration of the ban includes restrictions on five majority-Muslim nations: Iran, Libya, Somalia, Syria and Yemen, as well as Venezuela and North Korea.

A different person said the expansion could include several countries that were covered in the first iteration of Trump's ban but later removed amid rounds of contentious litigation. Iraq, Sudan and Chad, for instance, had originally been affected by the order, which the Supreme Court upheld in a 5-4 vote after the administration released a watered-down version intended to withstand legal scrutiny.

Trump, who had floated banning all Muslims from entering the country during

his 2016 campaign, criticized his Justice Department for the changes, tweeting that DOJ "should have stayed with the original Travel Ban, not the watered down, politically correct version they submitted to S.C."

The countries on the proposed expansion list include allies that fall short on certain security measures. The additional restrictions were proposed by Department of Homeland Security officials following a review of security protocols and "identity management" for about 200 countries, according to the person.

The current ban suspends immigrant and non-immigrant visas to applicants from the affected countries, but it allows exceptions, including for students and those who have established "significant contacts" in the U.S.

Severe storms destroy homes in Ark., Mo.

Associated Press

DALLAS — Tornadoes destroyed homes in Arkansas and Missouri and also caused damage in Oklahoma as severe storms threatened much of the South over the weekend, officials said.

The national Storm Prediction Center said more than 18 million people in Louisiana, Arkansas, Texas and Oklahoma were at an enhanced risk of storms Friday, including from strong tornadoes, flooding rains and wind gusts that could exceed 80 mph, the speed of a Category 1 hurricane. The area included several major Texas cities including Dallas, Houston and Austin.

The storms also unleashed downpours that caused widespread flash flooding. Dallas police said one person died when a car flipped into Five Mile Creek west of downtown Dallas about 7 p.m.

In Louisiana, Caddo Parish Sheriff Steve Prator told KTBS-TV that a man was killed when a tree fell on his Oil City home.

Earlier in the afternoon, a tornado destroyed two homes near Fair Play, Mo., about 35 miles northwest of Springfield. The Missouri State Highway Patrol said no injuries were reported.

Shortly before 3 p.m., a tornado stripped the shingles from the roof of a home near Tahlequah, Okla., about 60 miles southeast of Tulsa. No injuries were reported there either.

What the NWS described as "a confirmed large and extremely dangerous tornado" roared through parts of Logan County, Arkansas, about 45 miles east of Fort Smith on Friday night.

At least three homes were destroyed by the Arkansas tornado, said Logan County Emergency Management Coordinator

Tobi Miller, but no injuries were reported. Downed trees and power lines were widespread, she said.

Miller said the tornado skirted her home in Subiaco, Ark. She said she heard but couldn't see the rain-wrapped twister in the dark.

Ahead of the storms, Dallas' Office of Emergency Management asked residents to bring in pets, outdoor furniture, grills, "and anything else that could be caught up in high winds to reduce the risk of flying debris."

Such strong winds are a key concern in an area at greatest risk: A zone that includes parts of Texas, Oklahoma, Louisiana and Arkansas, the Storm Prediction Center warned. Weather service meteorologists in northern Louisiana said that such a dire forecast for the area is only issued two to four times each year, on average.

Magnitude 6 temblor shakes quake-stunned Puerto Rico

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — A magnitude 6.0 quake shook Puerto Rico on Saturday, causing further damage along the island's southern coast, where previous recent quakes have toppled homes and schools.

The U.S. Geological Survey said the 8:54 a.m. quake hit 8 miles south of Indios at a shallow depth of 6 miles.

Puerto Rico's Electric Power Authority said outages were reported across much of

southern Puerto Rico and crews were assessing possible damage at power plants.

Barbara Cruz, a prosecutor who was in the southern coastal city of Ponce when the new quake hit, said concrete debris hit the sidewalk as buildings continued to crumble.

"Everyone is out on the street," she said. There were no immediate reports of injuries.

It was the strongest shake yet since a

magnitude 6.4 quake — the strongest to hit the island in a century — struck before dawn on Tuesday, knocking out power across Puerto Rico and leaving many without water. More than 2,000 people remain in shelters, many fearful of returning to their homes, and others unable to because of extensive damage.

Hundreds of quakes have shaken the island since the new year, though most were too slight to be felt.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Police arrest suspect in stolen boat crash

WA RIDGEFIELD — Washington state authorities arrested a man suspected of crashing a stolen boat along the Columbia River and running from law enforcement.

KOMO-TV reported that The Columbian first reported the watercraft was stolen from the Port of Camas-Washougal marina in Clark County.

Washougal Police Department officials told The Columbian they found the luxury yacht downriver near Vancouver before the person at the helm ran the craft aground near the Ridgefield National Wildlife Refuge.

Clark County sheriff's office officials said a 20-year-old man was taken into custody as a suspect.

Police: Nurse stole card from patient's wife

FL DELRAY BEACH — A nurse stole money and a credit card from the wife of an 87-year-old patient and put down a payment on a Jeep, according to police.

Timothy Fenster, 21, an employee at a local nursing company, was hired in late November to provide in-home nursing care to the couple in Delray Beach. The patient died a few days later, police said.

A short time later the patient's wife noticed \$107 was missing from her drawer, and she was also missing her credit card.

The South Florida SunSentinel reported the woman's credit card statement showed charges at Walmart, McDonald's and a local car dealership. An employee at the dealership told police that Fenster used the

same credit card to put \$1,000 toward a down payment on a Jeep, police said.

2K pounds of trash collected at sled area

NV STATELINE — Volunteers joined state and federal officials to collect nearly 2,000 pounds of trash from a popular sledding area at Lake Tahoe in what has become an annual New Year's cleanup.

The Tahoe Daily Tribune reported Take Care Tahoe gathered the debris from Spooner Summit on Jan. 2 with the help of Nevada Department of Transportation, U.S. Forest Service and Nevada State Parks.

Tahoe Fund CEO Amy Berry said the area is not under management during the winter so no dumpsters can be set up at the site.

Long lines at vehicle office leads to assault

NJ BAYONNE — A woman angry about long lines at a New Jersey Motor Vehicle Commission office smashed computer equipment, assaulted two staffers and kicked police officers as they tried to arrest her, authorities said.

Shawna Joseph, 28, of Jersey City was told to leave the MVC office in Bayonne after she became irate over the length of the line of customers, authorities said. She then returned and caused another disturbance.

Joseph pushed the office manager and began breaking computer equipment, authorities said, eventually causing \$23,000 in damage overall.

Joseph repeatedly punched the manager and a security guard, authorities said. Police soon arrived and she repeatedly kicked the officers while

they attempted to handcuff her, authorities said.

Woman sentenced for robbery in monkey mask

RI PROVIDENCE — A woman who wore a monkey mask and brandished a gun when she robbed a Rhode Island gas station last year was sent to prison for seven years, prosecutors said.

Ashley Weaver, 28, of Boston was sentenced after pleading guilty to first-degree robbery, using a firearm during a crime of violence, carrying a pistol without a license, and simple assault, Rhode Island Attorney General Peter Neronha announced.

Leslie the gorilla was treated for cataract

CA SAN DIEGO — A team of eye experts operated on an unusual patient — a gorilla.

A cataract was removed Dec. 10 from the left eye of a 3-year-old western lowland gorilla who lives at the San Diego Zoo Safari Park, the park announced.

The gorilla, named Leslie, was given a muscle blocker to keep her still while a team that included vets along with anesthesiologists and an ophthalmology team from UC San Diego Health removed the cloudy lens and replaced it with an artificial lens that should last for life.

Cataract surgeon Chris Heichel, who led the team and has performed thousands of operations, said it was his first on a gorilla.

'No war' spray-painted on memorial to soldiers

MO ST. LOUIS — A memorial to soldiers in downtown St. Louis was dam-

aged by vandalism, including a spray-painted message of "No war."

It wasn't immediately clear if the vandalism was in response to the air strike that killed a top Iranian official, Gen. Qassem Soleimani.

Chihuahua lost in holiday crash found

FL BUNNELL — A Chihuahua named Max is back with his owner after going missing following a car crash on New Year's Eve.

The 6-year-old dog ran from the accident scene and his owner couldn't find him.

Detectives and the dog owner returned to the scene of the crash every day after the crash, but they couldn't track down Max, officials said.

When they went to the site on a Saturday, Max was there. S

Baker fights gunman to protect his wife

CA SAN DIEGO — A San Diego area doughnuts baker who fended off a would-be armed robber despite being shot at and pistol-whipped wasn't just defending the shop, he was protecting his wife, according to a report.

Surveillance footage obtained by KNSD-TV shows a man in a dark hoodie pulling a handgun on Jose Sanchez during the overnight shift at the store.

Sanchez fights back, struggling with the gunman over the counters. The gunman fires twice, missing Sanchez both times.

The man then climbs over the counter punches Sanchez and hits him with the pistol.

The gunman then jumps back over the counter, falls to the floor, then gets up and runs out.

From wire reports

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Time short for Rodgers to win 2nd title

Associated Press

GREEN BAY, Wis. — Aaron Rodgers won his first Super Bowl nearly a decade ago. The time to capture a second is running out.

"It's on my mind every day," Rodgers said. "That's why we play the game. That's why you put in the time in the offseason. That's why you do the little things. It's to put yourself in this position where we're two games away from being able to compete for that."

"I'm 36, I know what this is all about. This is an important opportunity for us. I feel like I got a lot of really good years left, but you never know. A lot of things happen year to year. We've had some great teams that have been an injury away or a play away from being special, so I want to make the most of this opportunity."

Rodgers and the Green Bay Packers will host the Seattle Seahawks in Sunday's NFC divisional playoff game. It will be the first postseason appearance for Rodgers in three years.

"I'm at the age now, I believe, that Brett (Favre) was when I was drafted, and obviously closer to the finish than the

beginning," he said. "The most important thing is winning, and I know how difficult a couple of those years were when we weren't winning."

Rodgers led an injury-laden Packers team to the NFC championship game in Green Bay's previous postseason appearance following the 2016 season before getting blown out 44-21 by the Falcons. But this Packers squad — including Rodgers — is as healthy as Green Bay has been in recent years.

"I feel great," Rodgers said. "I started all 16 (games) and wasn't in the training room a whole lot. I had some issues early in the season with my knee. But, man, I felt great from about Week 8 on. ... It feels good to be where I'm at right now."

Lack of experience

The biggest issue for the Packers is playoff experience, or a lack thereof. There are only four players left from the 2010 Super Bowl team and seven from the 2014 team that lost to the Seahawks in the NFC championship game in Seattle. Matt LaFleur is also preparing for his first playoff test as a head coach.

"I think it just goes back to doing what you always do," the 40-year-old LaFleur said. "It's just like every other week. I think for guys that maybe haven't experienced the playoffs, there's definitely a heightened intensity around it. But as far as your process, as far as how you go about your daily business, I think it's got to be the same as it is any other week."

Can you Diggs it?

No one has more experience on Seattle's roster playing against Rodgers than safety Quandre Diggs. Until the middle of this season, Diggs faced Rodgers twice a year as part of the Detroit secondary. Even though it's a changed offense than he played against in the past, Diggs is still being leaned on by teammates for little tips on how to try to slow down Rodgers.

"He is a really smart guy and any knowledge that he has is always good to gain," Seahawks linebacker Bobby Wagner said.

The addition of Diggs has been a huge boost for Seattle's defense. The Seahawks are 5-1 in the six games Diggs has

played since coming over in a midseason trade from the Lions. While the defensive numbers aren't markedly different, Seattle has played better with Diggs on the field.

Keep it clean

LaFleur said Monday that a "little bit of a sickness" had crept into the building. But he said on Wednesday that "most of the guys are pretty healthy right now."

Packers wide receiver Davante Adams had a simple prescription for the problem.

"Wash your hands, wash your butt, man. That's it," said the two-time Pro Bowler.

The encore

DK Metcalf had quite the debut in the NFL playoffs. Metcalf set an NFL rookie playoff record with 160 yards receiving last week against the Eagles. Metcalf had a season-high seven catches and pulled in a 53-yard touchdown in the second half that gave Seattle an 11-point lead. He also had a 36-yard catch on Seattle's final possession to seal the victory.

Chiefs' pass rush could be pivotal to beating Texans

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — In the Kansas City Chiefs' regular-season finale, that must-win game against the Los Angeles Chargers that helped them secure a first-round playoff bye, there was a play late in the third quarter that caused Andy Reid to laugh.

The Chiefs coach watched from the sideline as Terrell Suggs, their recently acquired ageless wonder, dominated the woebegone offensive tackle assigned to block him and put some pressure on Philip Rivers. The Chargers quarterback moved in the pocket right into the arms of Frank Clark, the Chiefs' other defensive end, who cleaned up the sack.

"He was right there to take him," Reid said, "and then 55 got the sack. He could've just gone, 'Well, you know.' But he laughed about it. He goes, 'Man, I worked all of this through and my man here gets the sack? Well, good for him.'"

Good for the Chiefs, too.

The late-season addition of Suggs has only helped a Kansas City pass rush that had been humming along most of the season, and one that could prove pivotal in its divisional-round matchup against Houston. The veteran of 18 postseason games has helped to cover for the loss of Emmanuel Ogbah and Alex Okafor to season-ending injuries, and he proved that with the pressure of Rivers

— and a sack later in the game — that he can still get after the quarterback.

That might not bode so well for the Texans, who gave up an astounding seven sacks to the Buffalo Bills in their overtime victory in last weekend's wild-card round. Not only that, quarterback Deshaun Watson was hit 12 times during the game.

Now, the Bills have one of the best defenses in the AFC, and their 44 sacks this season put them just outside the top 10 of all teams league-wide. But flying under the radar and just ahead of them in the pecking order was Kansas City, which piled up 45 sacks despite losing many of its most important players for long chunks of the

season.

Indeed, the Chiefs have become known for using a variety of coverages, personnel groupings and defensive packages. But perhaps the most impressive thing about their ability to rush the passer is that they often do it out of their base defense, and that means they don't need to rely on risky blitzes to beat the offensive line.

While the Chiefs were among the best in terms of sacks, they blitzed a middle-of-the-road 29.1% of the time.

Now, it bears mentioning that the Chiefs never once managed to sack Watson when the teams met in Week 6, and Houston rallied for a 31-24 victory at Arrowhead Stadium.

NHL roundup

McCann's OT goal lifts Pens over Avs

Associated Press

DENVER — The Pittsburgh Penguins have dealt with plenty of adversity this season, so a couple of unfortunate bounces weren't going to bother them.

Instead, they became more determined and found a way to win again.

Jared McCann scored at 3:19 of overtime and the Penguins beat the Colorado Avalanche 4-3 on Friday night for their fourth straight road win.

Evgeni Malkin, Bryan Rust and Teddy Blueger each had a goal and an assist for the Penguins, who recovered from blowing a late lead to pick up two points. Matt Murray made 28 saves and Dominik Kahun had three assists for Pittsburgh, which overcame a pair of late-period goals to win for the 13th time in 17 games.

The Penguins are 3-1-1 since losing leading scorer Jake

Guentzel to a season-ending shoulder injury. They've played without captain Sidney Crosby for the last two months and have a total of 183 man games lost to injury.

"It was another really gritty, hard win," Murray said. "And that's what we needed tonight. That's a really good team over there, so we just stayed resilient no matter what happened."

With goaltender Pavel Francouz off for an extra skater, the Avalanche tied the game with 30.4 seconds left in regulation when Matt Calvert tipped in a shot by Cale Makar — the second time they beat Murray in the final minutes of a period. In the second, Gabriel Landeskog flipped a shot from the neutral zone and it took an odd bounce past Murray at 18:20.

Murray shook off both goals and was rewarded when McCann beat Francouz from the slot for his 12th goal of the

season.

"I thought he responded really well. I thought he had a solid game," Pittsburgh coach Mike Sullivan said of Murray. "Obviously, that fluke goal was a tough one."

Landeskog added an assist and Nathan MacKinnon also scored for Colorado. The Avalanche are 3-6-2 in their last 11 games.

"Obviously we get the one point, but we came here for two," Makar said.

Malkin, who got his 640th career assist earlier in the game, gave the Penguins a 3-2 lead when he beat Francouz inside the left post at 15:43 of the third period for his 13th goal of the season.

MacKinnon scored a power-play goal in the first period, his 27th. He has six goals and seven assists in the last eight games.

Hurricanes 3, Coyotes 0:

Petr Mrazek stopped 32 shots for his third shutout of the season, and Lucas Wallmark and Martin Necas scored within 63 seconds of each other near the end of the second period to help Carolina defeat visiting Arizona.

It was the second straight night the Coyotes were shut out after they lost 4-0 at Tampa Bay on Thursday.

Red Wings 3, Senators 2 (SO): Dylan Larkin scored the only goal in the shootout to give host Detroit the win over skidding Ottawa.

Tyler Bertuzzi had a goal and an assist, and Larkin also scored in regulation for Detroit. It was the Red Wings' third win in five games, the first time they've done that since Nov. 8-16.

Colin White had a goal and an assist and Brady Tkachuk also scored for Ottawa, which lost its season-high sixth straight.

Betts, Bryant sign 1-year contracts, avoid arbitration

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Outfielder Mookie Betts agreed Friday to a \$27 million contract with the Boston Red Sox, the largest one-year salary for an arbitration-eligible player, while Chicago Cubs third baseman Kris Bryant got an \$18.6 million, one-year deal.

Cincinnati pitcher Trevor Bauer struck a \$17.5 million agreement after winning hearings against Cleveland the previous two winters, and Indians shortstop Francisco Lindor also agreed to \$17.5 million.

NL MVP Cody Bellinger agreed at \$11.5 million, the largest amount for a player eligible for arbitration for the first time. New York Yankees slugger Aaron Judge, also eligible for the first time, received an \$8.5 million deal.

Among 155 players eligible for arbitration at the start of the

day, just 20 remained headed for hearings next month after exchanging proposed arbitration salaries with teams.

Houston outfielder George Springer asked for a raise from \$12.15 million to \$22.5 million and was offered \$17.5 million in the biggest gap. Philadelphia catcher J.T. Realmuto requested a hike from \$6.05 million to \$12.4 million and was offered \$10 million, and Milwaukee closer Josh Hader asked for a boost from \$687,600 to \$6.4 million and was offered \$4.1 million.

Four of the remaining cases involve the Dodgers, whose last arbitration hearing was a victory over Joe Beimel in 2007. Los Angeles is headed to hearings with outfielder Joc Pederson (\$9.5 million vs. \$7.75 million), outfielder Chris Taylor (\$5.8 million vs. \$5.25 million), right-hander Pedro Baez (\$4 million vs. \$3.5 million) and infielder

Max Muncy (\$4,675,000 vs. \$4 million).

Just 10 cases went to hearings last year, and players won six. A three-person panel hears each case and sides with either the player or the team — no ruling in the middle. Teams can still negotiate an agreement until the arbitrators make a decision.

Betts' deal topped the \$26 million agreement last winter for Colorado third baseman Nolan Arenado, which led to negotiations for a \$260 million, eight-year deal. A four-time All-Star and four-time Gold Glove winner, Betts is eligible for free agency after this season.

He was voted the American League MVP in 2018, when he hit a major league-leading .346 with 32 homers and 80 RBIs, then helped the Red Sox to the World Series title. He hit .295 last season with 29 homers and 80 RBIs.

Agent Scott Boras and his staff negotiated 19 contracts for arbitration-eligible players totaling \$117.75 million, raising the company's offseason total to \$1,134,250,000 with a deal still to be reached for free agent outfielder Nicholas Castellanos. Boras' agreements Friday included Bryant, Bellinger, Yankees pitcher James Paxton (\$12.5 million) and Dodgers shortstop Corey Seager (\$7.6 million).

Twins slugger Miguel Sano agreed to a \$30 million, three-year contract, pending a physical, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press. Arizona left fielder David Peralta also reached a rare multi-year agreement on swap day, a \$22 million, three-year contract, a person familiar with that deal told the AP. Both people spoke on condition of anonymity because the deals hadn't been announced.

NBA roundup

Nets top Heat, snap seven-game skid

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Spencer Dinwiddie had the best passing night of his career, and Rodions Kurucs played his best game of the season for Brooklyn.

Dinwiddie scored 26 points and had a career-high 14 assists, Kurucs scored a season-best 19 points and Taurean Prince added 17 as the Nets snapped a seven-game losing streak with a 117-113 win over the Miami Heat on Friday night.

"I hope that's the spark because the talent's there," Nets coach Kenny Atkinson said regarding Kurucs' play. "We saw last year. He decided to come out and defend tonight like he did last year. We gave him the assignment of Jimmy Butler. I think that excited him."

Jimmy Butler scored 33 points and Bam Adebayo added 22 for the Heat.

Miami's Duncan Robinson missed a three-pointer from the corner with 5.7 seconds left that would've tied the game.

"The Brooklyn Nets deserved to win this game," Miami coach Erik Spoelstra said. "We got what we deserved."

Lakers 129, Mavericks 114: LeBron James had 35 points and 16 rebounds, Kyle Kuzma scored a season-high 26 points starting in place of injured star Anthony Davis, and visiting Los Angeles went up big early in a victory over Dallas.

James was dominant from the start to help the Lakers build a 22-point lead in the first half, which ended with Luka Doncic in a ripped jersey on a frustrating night for the 20-year-old Dallas phenom against the player he grew up admiring.

Pelicans 123, Knicks 111: Brandon Ingram scored 28 points, Jaxson Hayes had 18 points and 10 rebounds, and New Orleans beat host New York.

The Knicks lost their fifth straight following a season-best three-game winning streak.

Bucks 127, Kings 106: Khris Middleton had 27 points and 11 rebounds, Eric Bledsoe scored 24 and visiting Milwaukee beat Sacramento despite an off night for Giannis Antetokounmpo.

Clippers 109, Warriors 100: Kawhi Leonard scored 36 points as host Los Angeles rallied from a 10-point deficit at the start of the fourth quarter to beat Golden State.

Wizards 111, Hawks 101: Jordan McRae scored 29 points, Troy Brown Jr. added 18 points and 10 rebounds, and

Washington overcame a poor shooting performance to beat visiting Atlanta.

Pacers 116, Bulls 105: Myles Turner set season highs with 27 points and 14 rebounds, and short-handed Indiana withstood a huge effort by Zach LaVine to beat host Chicago.

Grizzlies 134, Spurs 121: Jaren Jackson Jr. scored 24 points, Ja Morant added 22 points and a season-high 14 assists and host Memphis won its fourth straight game.

Jazz 109, Hornets 92: Rudy Gobert had 15 points, 13 rebounds and six blocked shots, leading Utah to a victory over visiting Charlotte.

Suns 98, Magic 94: Devin Booker scored 24 points, including late back-to-back three-pointers, and Ricky Rubio came up with a steal and a free throw to help host Phoenix rally past Orlando.

College basketball roundup

Wieskamp, Iowa score upset over No. 10 Maryland

Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa — The Iowa Hawkeyes were down to eight scholarship players and still outplayed No. 12 Maryland.

Joe Wieskamp scored 26 points and Big Ten scoring leader Luka Garza had 21 as Iowa beat Maryland 67-49 Friday night. Garza added 13 rebounds for his 10th double-double of the season.

"We realized we had a decision to make," Wieskamp said. "A lot of people are counting us out, realizing we're missing some of our best players. We could either fold, listen to that, not compete as hard as we could, or band together and just focus on the seven, eight guys we have playing."

Wieskamp and Garza had 32 of Iowa's 38 first-half points. The Hawkeyes (11-5, 2-3 Big

Ten) got more balanced scoring in the second half, leading by as many as 22 points.

"We have a lot of good players left," Iowa coach Fran McCaffery said. "The guys that come in have the ability to compete and play mistake-free basketball."

The Terrapins (13-3, 3-2) were held to their second-lowest point total of the season. Jalen Smith scored 13 to lead Maryland.

Maryland coach Mark Turgeon said he tried everything and was left confused by the loss.

"We didn't look like us," Turgeon said. "I mean, I'm looking out there, 'Who are those guys out there tonight?' We tried to fix it. We could never fix it."

Turgeon used 11 players in the first half, trying to find a solution after an early lead got

away from the Terrapins.

"We were bad," Turgeon said. "We were bad. We stunk. I've been doing this a long time, and that ranks up there as one of the worst one of my teams have played."

"We did good-cop-bad-cop. We tried everything. We couldn't get them motivated."

The Hawkeyes made 9 of 23 three-point shots after making only 4 of 33 in a 79-76 loss at Nebraska on Tuesday night. Wieskamp made 5 of 9 three-pointers, including 4 of 5 in the first half, after making only 1 of 10 on Tuesday.

Iowa ended a two-game losing streak while Maryland had its three-game winning streak snapped.

A 14-0 run in the first half put the Hawkeyes in control after they trailed 15-10 in the first eight minutes.

"It just wasn't our night," Turgeon said. "We were up 8-5, or whatever it was, and we were stinking it up."

Maryland was held to 32.7% shooting, its second-worst effort of the season. The Hawkeyes had a 44-32 rebounding edge.

"When we play connected defensively, and when we're rebounding, not giving them second shots, we can be really good," Wieskamp said.

No. 6 Butler 70, Providence 58: Kamar Baldwin scored 17 points and Bryce Golden had 14 and the visiting Bulldogs held the Friars scoreless for the first 6½ minutes.

Jordan Tucker scored 17 points for the Bulldogs (15-1, 3-0 Big East). They have won six in a row.

Alpha Diallo scored 21 points for Providence (10-7, 3-1).