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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US recovers bodies from Afghan plane crash

BY PHILLIP WALTER
WELLMAN
AND CAITLIN KENNEY
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — American troops recovered the remains of two U.S. service members killed in the crash of an Air Force aircraft that went down in a Taliban-controlled area of Afghanistan, a U.S. defense official said Tuesday.

They were the only people aboard the Air Force Bombardier E-11A communications aircraft that crashed Monday in Ghazni province, another

U.S. official said. Both spoke on condition of anonymity ahead of an official announcement.

The officials provided no further details, including the cause of the crash, which occurred about 80 miles southwest of Kabul.

U.S. forces reached the crash site overnight Monday and cordoned off the area, said Arif Noori, a spokesman for Ghazni province's governor.

No insurgents were in the area when the U.S. troops arrived and "two bodies were found," Noori said.

The Taliban have claimed

responsibility for downing the aircraft, but U.S. officials said there was no indication the plane was brought down by enemy fire. Afghans near the crash site — about 10 miles from Ghazni city — said the aircraft appeared to be having technical problems before it crashed.

U.S. forces in Afghanistan said on Tuesday that what is assessed to be the aircraft flight data recorder has been recovered and the remnants of the aircraft were destroyed.

The Air Force's four E-11A aircraft are assigned to the

430th Expeditionary Electronic Combat Squadron and operate out of Kandahar Airfield.

Equipped with the Battlefield Airborne Communications Node, the E-11A helps to ensure communication in a country where mountains and poor infrastructure pose challenges for military operations.

Dubbed "Wi-Fi in the sky," they are in the air every minute of the day, the Air Force has said.

Navy steams near contested Spratly Island reefs

BY CAITLIN DOORNBOS
Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — On Saturday, the Navy sent a warship steaming past two of the seven features China has militarized in the South China Sea to challenge restrictions imposed on innocent passage, according to the 7th Fleet.

The USS Montgomery operated near Johnson and Fiery Cross reefs in the Spratly Islands, according to Navy photos from the advanced littoral combat ship.

The mission marked the first South China Sea freedom-of-navigation operation in 2020.

The operation challenged attempts by China, Vietnam and Taiwan to "require either permission or advance notification before a foreign military vessel engages in 'innocent passage' through territorial seas," which are inconsistent with international law, 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley said in an email on Tuesday.

'The ships of all states — including warships — enjoy the right of innocent passage through territorial seas.'

Lt. Joe Keiley
7th Fleet spokesman

Keiley said that the Montgomery's crew did not notify the countries or ask permission before cruising by the reefs, demonstrating "that innocent passage may not be subject to such restrictions."

"Under international law as reflected in the Law of the Sea Convention, the ships of all states — including warships — enjoy the right of innocent passage through territorial seas," he said.

Territorial seas extend 12 nautical miles from a nation's coastline, according to international law.

Johnson and Fiery Cross reefs are among the seven Spratly Island land features China has militarized, according to the

Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. Vietnam and Taiwan also claim the reefs.

The Spratlys are made up of approximately 100 land features, all of which are claimed by China, Vietnam and Taiwan. The Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei also lay claim to portions of them, Keiley said.

The United States does not recognize any nation's sovereignty over the Spratly Islands.

China's efforts to extend its influence in the region are considered to be the most aggressive. In August, for example, the Pentagon accused Beijing of "bullying tactics" against other nations bordering the South China Sea.

Military forces of countries

that lay claim to the Spratlys occupy about 45 of the islands, according to the CIA World Factbook. China has built up and militarized seven of them, according to the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative. The region is rich in fishing grounds and untapped oil and gas deposits.

Freedom-of-navigation operations are conducted for many reasons, but generally challenge other nations' claims that restrict free passage and defy international law.

"Freedom of navigation operations in the South China Sea are a part of daily operations of U.S. military forces throughout the region," Keiley said.

In February, the Navy sent the guided-missile destroyers USS Spruance and USS Preble through the Spratlys. In May, the Preble sailed within 12 nautical miles of the Gaven and Johnson reefs with the guided-missile destroyer USS Chung Hoon.

Pentagon: Troops in Korea are combat-ready

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — American troops on the Korean Peninsula are properly prepared to fight alongside South Korean forces if North Korea were to attack, even with large-scaled training exercises halted since 2018, senior Pentagon officials said Tuesday.

Last year, the U.S. military and South Korean forces completed 273 of 309 “planned activities,” or training missions, even though three major, large-scale exercises long considered the bedrock of the nations’ military partnership were canceled, said Air Force Lt. Gen. David Allvin, the Joint Staff’s strategy, plans and policy director. The large-scale exercises — Ulchi Freedom Guardian, Key Resolve and Foal Eagle — were canceled in 2018 by President Donald Trump, who called them overly expensive and provocative to North Korea, after he met with Supreme Leader Kim Jong Un.

On Tuesday, Allvin told members of the House Armed Services Committee that “creative reorganizing” of military training in South Korea ensured military preparations were able to continue, even after the Pentagon announced in 2019 that major exercises would be halted indefinitely. The efforts have been spearheaded by Army Gen. Robert Abrams, the commander of U.S. Forces Korea since November 2018.

“Through varying the size, scope, scale and timing of [training events], they were able to execute over 88% of those actual planned activities,” Allvin said. “[Abrams’] assessment is that we still have the readiness required to be able to respond to any aggression. ... If he felt like he was not able to achieve the readiness to accomplish the mission for which he was assigned, he would certainly come up voicing that, and we’d be hearing that.”

John Rood, the Pentagon’s policy chief, said on Tuesday that the military must ensure it retains its strength in South Korea

to serve as a deterrent to North Korean aggression, but training on a smaller scale provides the State Department room to negotiate. The talks between the United States and North Korea have stalled in recent months, as the Americans insist that Kim must give up his entire nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief.

House lawmakers on Tuesday said they are pleased that the roughly 28,500 U.S. troops in South Korea are prepared to fight if needed, but several of them said they were dissatisfied with the stalled negotiations.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., said that North Korea’s growing ballistic missile program should be dismantled alongside its nuclear program in any peace agreement with Kim.

“We have not deterred North Korea at all, as they have continued to test missiles and build the equivalent of ICBMs, and continue to have a chemical stockpile,” she said. “We aren’t getting them to do anything to reduce that.”

Experts: Duterte’s threat to end US agreement could damage alliance

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte’s latest anti-American rant could do real damage to the longtime Pacific allies’ defense relationship, some security experts say.

Duterte, who began his term in 2016 by insulting U.S. leaders and stating his intention to move closer to China and Russia, last week threatened to terminate the Visiting Forces Agreement that governs the deployment of U.S. troops to his country.

The U.S. Embassy in Manila declined to comment on the issue Monday.

But Jeffrey Ordaniel, assistant professor of international security studies at Tokyo International University, said in an email from Manila on Tuesday that all military exercises in the Philippines would have to be reviewed and likely need a new legal framework to back them up if Duterte follows through on his threat.

Duterte’s threat to terminate the agreement came in response to the U.S. revoking its visa for one of his closest political allies, Sen. Ronald “Bato” Dela Rosa. Thousands of extrajudicial killings took place during a bloody drug war while Dela Rosa was chief of the Philippines National Police from 2016-18.

It’s unclear how termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement, which includes guidelines on visas and jurisdiction over crimes committed by American troops, might affect the U.S.-Philippines military relationship.

The Philippines and U.S. are allies under the 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty, which mandates both countries support each other in case of an external aggression.

Ordaniel said he expects the Philippine military establishment is trying to save the agreement.

“Duterte’s term expires in 2022. There is still hope that

reason will prevail and that Manila can find a face-saving way to not follow through with the president’s pronouncements,” he said. “But there are those surrounding the president who, instead of advising him on the course of action most beneficial to Filipino interest, will instead kowtow and downplay the negative impact of [ending] the VFA,” he said.

Without an agreement, conducting operations under the alliance becomes difficult, for example, during contingencies in the South China Sea, Ordaniel said.

“It will be virtually impossible for the U.S. to preposition troops, defense equipment and [humanitarian and disaster assistance] supplies without a VFA,” he said.

It’s unlikely that the Philippine military establishment was consulted ahead of Duterte’s speech, Ordaniel said.

Commissary spending cap back in South Korea

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The U.S. military has reimposed monthly commissary purchase limits in South Korea, less than a month after a retiree was banned from bases over black marketing allegations.

The new policy, effective as of Jan. 23, means that commissary shoppers will again be limited to \$800 for the main sponsor and \$300 for additional family members per month. Anybody who needs to spend more must request an exception from squadron or battalion commanders.

USFK said the purchase limits are necessary “to deter black marketing and the abuse of duty-free privileges” and provide commanders with a “useful tool for identifying potential violations.”

ISIS seizes chance amid US-Iran tensions

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Islamic State's self-styled "caliphate" across parts of Iraq and Syria seemed largely defeated last year, with the loss of its territory, the killing of its founder in a U.S. raid and an unprecedented crack-down on its social media propaganda machine.

But tensions between the United States and Iran and the resulting clash over the U.S. military presence in the region provide a comeback opportunity for the extremist group, whose remnants have been gradually building up a guerilla campaign over the past year, experts say.

American troops in Iraq had to pause their operations against ISIS for nearly two weeks. From the other side, Iranian-backed Iraqi militia-

men who once focused on fighting the militants have turned their attention to evicting U.S. troops from the Middle East.

In the meantime, ISIS sleeper cells intensified ambushes in Iraq and Syria in the past few weeks, killing and wounding dozens of their opponents in both countries. Activists and residents say the attacks have intensified since the U.S. killed a top Iranian general, Qassem Soleimani, in a Jan. 3 drone strike at Baghdad's airport.

It is not clear whether the uptick is related to the repercussions that followed from the strike. U.S. officials deny seeing any particular increase in ISIS activities.

On Jan. 5, Iraq's parliament called for the expulsion of the 5,200 U.S. troops from the country who have been there

since 2014 to train Iraqi forces and assist in the fight against ISIS. The U.S.-led coalition then put the fight against ISIS on hold to focus on protecting its troops and bases. It said last week that it had resumed those operations after a 10-day halt.

"This tension will for sure help [ISIS], as all forces fighting it become busy with other matters," warned Abdullah Suleiman Ali, a Syrian researcher who focuses on jihadi groups.

Among other things, he said Iran-U.S. tensions help give ISIS the opportunity to restructure as its new leader, Abu Ibrahim al-Hashimi al-Qurayshi, strengthens his grip. Al-Qurayshi was announced in the post after longtime leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi was killed by a U.S. raid in Syria in October.

On Jan. 14, ISIS launched a

cross border attack from Syria into Iraq, killing an Iraqi officer. A day later, ISIS fighters attacked an Iraqi force in the central Salaheddine region, killing two soldiers and wounding five. Two days later, an Iraqi intelligence major was killed in a car bomb north of Baghdad.

One of the deadliest attacks occurred in Syria on Jan. 14, when ISIS fighters stole some 2,000 cattle from a village near the eastern town of Mayadeen. One of the four shepherds that own the cattle informed authorities, and a Syrian government military force was sent to the area, where they were met by ISIS fire. As the forces returned to their base, ISIS gunmen laid an ambush, killing 11 troops and pro-government fighters as well as two shepherds.

Trump plan calls for two states, settlement freeze

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump unveiled his long-awaited Middle East peace plan Tuesday, calling for the creation of a State of Palestine with its capital in portions of east Jerusalem, saying it is a "win-win" opportunity for both Israel and the Palestinians.

The plan calls for the creation of a State of Palestine with its capital in portions of east Jerusalem, ending speculation as to whether his administration, in preparing a proposal without input from Palestinian leaders, would abandon a "two-state resolution" to the conflict.

Trump, releasing the plan before a pro-Israel audience at the White House with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu by his side, acknowledged that he has done a lot for Israel, but he said he wanted the deal to be a "great deal for the Palestinians." Trump said the deal is a "historic opportunity" for Palestinians to achieve an independent state of their own.

The plan more than doubles

the territory currently under Palestinian control, although it also recognizes Israeli sovereignty over major settlement blocs in the West Bank, something to which the Palestinians will almost certainly object. The Palestinians have already rejected the proposal, accusing Trump of being biased in favor of Israel as he has adopted policies that bolster Israel at their expense.

The plan does call for a four-year freeze in new Israeli settlement construction, during which time details of a comprehensive agreement would be negotiated. However, it was not immediately clear if the freeze could be extended if a final deal is not concluded in the four years.

The 50-page political outline goes further in concessions to the Palestinians than many analysts had believed was likely. However, it would require them to accept conditions they have been previously unwilling to consider, such as accepting West Bank settlements.

Defense wrapping up as senators consider Bolton

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump's legal team prepared to wrap up arguments in his impeachment trial Tuesday afternoon as Senate Republicans wrestled with whether to allow witnesses — including John Bolton, who appears poised to contradict a key Trump claim.

The arguments from defense lawyers have jostled for public attention with revelations from a forthcoming book by former national security adviser Bolton, who says Trump wanted to withhold military aid from Ukraine until it committed to helping with investigations into Democratic rival Joe Biden. That assertion matters because Trump and his lawyers have repeatedly insisted that he never tied the suspension of security aid to political investigations.

News of the book clouded White House hopes for a big finish Tuesday as well as a swift end to the impeachment trial, as Democrats demanded witnesses and some Republicans expressed openness to the idea.

One Republican, Sen. James

Lankford, of Oklahoma, is floating an idea to subpoena Bolton's book manuscript so senators can see the evidence themselves.

It's an idea that may be gaining traction even as other Republicans have warned against a protracted legal dispute with the White House, which has tried to block administration officials from appearing in the proceedings.

GOP Sen. Lindsey Graham, of South Carolina, wrote on Twitter that he "totally" supports Lankford's proposal. Graham, a key Trump ally, said the Bolton document should be made available to the Senate, in a classified setting, "where each Senator has the opportunity to review the manuscript and make their own determination."

Senate Republicans were to meet behind closed doors to consider next steps.

The Bolton revelations distracted from hours of arguments Monday by Trump's lawyers, who declared anew that no witness has testified to direct knowledge that Trump's delivery of aid was contingent on investigations into Democrats.

Puerto Rico opens 20% of schools amid quakes

Associated Press

SAN JUAN, Puerto Rico — Puerto Rico opened only 20% of its public schools on Tuesday following a strong earthquake that delayed the start of classes by nearly three weeks as fears linger over the safety of students.

Only 177 schools were certified to open after engineers inspected them for damage caused by the magnitude 6.4 earthquake that killed one person and damaged hundreds of homes on Jan. 7. But the inspections were not to

determine whether a school could withstand another strong earthquake or had structural shortcomings such as short columns that make it vulnerable to collapse, further worrying parents.

"Of course I am afraid," said parent Marien Santos, 38, who attended an open house at Ramon Vila Mayo high school on Monday in Rio Piedras, where officials gave her a copy of the inspection report and evacuation plans.

Her concerns were echoed by the school director, Elisa Del-

gado. While she feels that engineers did a thorough inspection of the school, built in the early 1900s, they warned her not to use the main entrance in an evacuation because it leads to an area filled with gas lines. The problem is that the other exits are too narrow to handle the school's 450 students, she told The Associated Press.

Engineers have inspected 561 of the island's 856 public schools, finding at least 50 to be too unsafe to reopen, leaving some 240,000 students out of school for now. Ongoing trem-

ors are also forcing crews to automatically re-inspect schools following any quake of 3.0 magnitude or higher, according to Puerto Rico's Infrastructure Financing Authority.

Since the 6.4 quake, there have been several strong aftershocks, including one with a 5.9 magnitude that hit on Jan. 11 and a 5.0 that struck Saturday. The biggest quake flattened the top two floors of a three-story school in the southern coastal city of Guanica on Jan. 7, two days before classes were scheduled to start.

Officials: Bryant's helo pilot tried to avoid heavy fog

Associated Press

CALABASAS, Calif. — A veteran pilot who plunged into a Los Angeles-area hillside, killing Kobe Bryant and eight others, had tried to avoid fog so heavy that it had grounded police choppers, authorities said.

But even experienced pilots may have only seconds to act when they are blinded by weather, an expert said as investigators began scouring the wreckage for clues to Sunday morning's crash.

The NBA postponed the Los Angeles Lakers' next game against the Los Angeles Clippers on Tuesday after the deaths of the retired superstar and the other victims.

And while the official investigation into the cause of the crash was just beginning,

experts and armchair pilots alike already were flooding social media and the airwaves with speculation.

One popular theme was the weather. Dense fog had settled along part of the flight path.

The chartered Sikorsky S-76B was a luxury twin-engine aircraft often used by Bryant, 41, in traffic-jumping hops around the LA area's notoriously congested sprawl. It was heading from John Wayne Airport in Orange County to Camarillo Airport in Ventura County when it crashed in Calabasas.

Bryant, his 13-year-old daughter, Gianna, and the other passengers were heading to Bryant's Mamba Sports Academy, a youth sports center in Thousand Oaks.

Bryant was to coach a basketball tournament there in which his daughter was supposed to play.

Also killed were John Altobelli, 56, long-time head coach of Southern California's Orange Coast College baseball team, his wife, Keri, and daughter, Alyssa, who played on the same basketball team as Bryant's daughter, Christina Mauser, a girls' basketball coach at a Southern California elementary school, Sarah Chester and her daughter, Payton.

The pilot, Ara Zobayan, was chief pilot for the craft's owner, Island Express Helicopters. He also was a flight instructor, had more than 8,000 hours of flight time and had flown Bryant and other celebrities several times before.

Hong Kong cutting all rail links to mainland China

Associated Press

BEIJING — Hong Kong said Tuesday it will cut all rail links to mainland China as the United States and other governments prepared to evacuate citizens from the Chinese city at the center of a virus outbreak that has now killed more than 100 people.

Wearing a green surgical mask, Hong Kong leader Carrie Lam told a news conference that train service would stop at midnight Thursday and that the two stations connecting to the mainland would be closed.

She stopped short of a total closing of the border, as North Korea and Mongolia have done, but said that flights from the mainland would be reduced.

China's death toll from the new viral disease rose to 106, including the first death in Beijing, the Chinese capital, and 24 others in Hubei province, where the first illnesses were detected in December.

Asian stock markets tumbled for a second day, dragged down by worries about the virus's global economic impact.

The U.S. Consulate in the central Chinese city of Wuhan, where authorities cut off most access Jan. 22 in an effort to contain the disease, was preparing to fly its diplomats and some other Americans out of the city on Wednesday. Japan and South Korea said they would send planes to Wuhan this week to evacuate their citizens. France, Mongolia and other governments also planned evacuations.

U.S. health officials expanded their recommendation for people to avoid nonessential travel to any part of China, rather than just Wuhan and other areas most affected by the outbreak.

China's increasingly drastic containment efforts began with the suspension of plane, train and bus links to Wuhan, a city of 11 million people. That lockdown has expanded to 17 cities with more than 50 million people in the most far-reaching disease-control measures ever imposed.

There were 1,771 new cases confirmed in China on Monday, raising the national total to 4,515, according to the National Health Commission. It said 976 people were in serious condition.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Paint job makes \$500K home look cartoon-like

FL NAPLES — Florida residents in an upscale community are seeing red over a paint job on a half-million-dollar home.

The home was painted in large patches of extremely bright primary colors with random splatters throughout. The home in the Il Regalo Circle Community in Naples resembles a preschool play toy or cartoon home. Even the trees, lawn and mailbox were splattered with paint.

Jeffrey Leibman, 40, is listed as the owner of the home, according to property appraiser records. Neighbors said he painted it, but the management company for the neighborhood said he no longer lives there.

Police: 3 teens stole \$10K in items from store

CT NAUGATUCK — Police in a Connecticut town are seeking three suspects who they said stole thousands of dollars of merchandise from a cellphone store.

Naugatuck police said the three young men entered a T-Mobile store at about 3:30 p.m., smashed open a display case and grabbed about \$10,000 worth of items. No injuries were reported. The suspects are described as in their teens and ranging from 5 feet 10 inches to 6 feet in height.

Trooper: Driver fell asleep, injured 9

NC CHARLOTTE — A North Carolina driver fell asleep at the wheel and careened off an interstate highway, injuring herself, two other adults and six children, authorities said.

No one in the vehicle was

wearing proper restraints, including the children ranging from 4 months to 10 years old, State Highway Patrol Trooper Ray Pierce told news outlets. An 8-month-old baby was being held by an adult in the front seat, he said.

All nine people remained hospitalized with serious injuries, Pierce said. Three children's injuries were life-threatening, he added.

Driver Shontavia Smith Barber told troopers she fell asleep at the wheel. Her SUV veered off the right shoulder, Pierce said. The SUV overturned after hitting the dirt embankment.

Large sewage spill prompts alert

WA BREMERTON — A large sewage spill in Bremerton prompted a warning for people to stay out of Sinclair Inlet and the Port Washington Narrows until Wednesday.

Just over 82,000 gallons spilled from Bremerton Public Works, prompting the no-contact advisory, KOMO-TV reported.

Not that it's swimming weather, but Kitsap Public Health said to avoid swimming, wading or recreation activities on the affected waterways. If exposed to the water, wash immediately with soap and water.

In addition, shellfish harvesting should be considered off-limits, health officials said.

Home filled with replica military explosives

CA STOCKTON — Hundreds of military explosive devices found at a California home were replicas, experts determined.

Twenty homes were evacuated for nearly 24 hours after Stockton police officers found the devices when they went to the home to check on a 70-year-

old man who reportedly died of natural causes, police said.

An ordnance disposal team from Travis Air Force Base was called to help deal with the devices and announced that they were non-explosive replicas, KCRA-TV reported.

Man fined for killing endangered sawfish

FL ST. AUGUSTINE — A Florida commercial fisherman has been sentenced to 80 hours of community service and fined \$2,000 for cutting the bill off an endangered smalltooth sawfish and then releasing it back into the Atlantic Ocean.

A St. Johns County judge sentenced Chad Ponce, 38, last month after he pleaded guilty to charges of killing an endangered species, according to a National Marine Fisheries Service news release. Ponce also faces two years of probation.

Witnesses told officials that Ponce first attempted to use a hacksaw on the animal's bill, known as a rostrum, but was unsuccessful. He then used a power saw to cut the rostrum off the live fish.

Hundreds attend first free language class

HI HONOLULU — More than 300 students, professors and others have attended the first free Hawaiian language class offered on the University of Hawaii Manoa campus on Oahu, student leaders said.

Student government leader Raiyan Rafid helped organize the first of 15 free weekly non-credit classes aimed at preserving the Hawaiian language, Hawaii News Now reported.

"This is really a great feeling for me because we thought that there was going to be like 20 to 30 people," said Rafid,

Associated Students of the University of Hawaii at Manoa vice president.

Bills seek to protect kids' lemonade stands

WA OLYMPIA — Local governments would be prohibited from interfering with kids who want to set up lemonade stands under bills being considered in the Washington House and Senate.

Republican state Rep. Luanne Van Werven, sponsor of the House bill, said one of her constituents brought the issue of lemonade stand regulations to her attention.

The Northwest News Network reported that her measure, which received a public hearing, would block local governments from regulating the occasional sale of nonalcoholic beverages, like lemonade, by anyone under 18 as long as the stand is on private property.

Tribal nation studying marijuana industry

OK TAHLEQUAH — The Cherokee Nation plans to create a working group to study how the tribe might get involved in the burgeoning hemp and cannabis industries.

Cherokee Nation Principal Chief Chuck Hoskin Jr. appointed the seven-member committee and asked the group to develop its recommendations by May 31. The Tahlequah-based Native American tribe is the largest in the U.S.

"I believe there are opportunities for the Cherokee Nation, our businesses and our citizens to benefit from this emerging industry," Hoskin said. "But, we need to move forward carefully and responsibly and in absolute strict adherence to the law in order to ensure success and sustainability."

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49ers don't have to rely on QB's arm

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Maybe it was fitting that Jimmy Garoppolo did his best Bob Griese impersonation in the victory that sent the San Francisco 49ers to Griese's old stomping grounds in Miami for the Super Bowl.

Perhaps no quarterback since the former Dolphins Hall of Famer had ever done less in the game that led his team to the Super Bowl than Garoppolo did in the NFC championship game, when he threw only eight passes in a 37-20 victory over Green Bay.

That's led to some predictable skepticism about whether Garoppolo should get credit for leading the Niners to the Super Bowl or if he's just along for the ride.

"That's wild that he takes criticism for that," left tackle Joe Staley said last week. "We won the game. We were doing what we needed to do to win the game and that's the main point of an NFL football game. I think he would be pretty sad if he threw 450 and we lost, so

it doesn't really matter."

Garoppolo acknowledged he hears the criticism that he didn't do much to get San Francisco this far and uses it as motivation, even if he's much quieter about it than teammate Richard Sherman, who seems to seek out doubters as fuel.

"I do the same thing," Garoppolo said. "I hear all the stuff and everything, but you can't put that all out there all the time. You have to do with it what you will and take it for what it is. Just at the end of the day you've got to go out there and play football."

Garoppolo completed six passes for 77 yards against Green Bay. It was the fewest pass attempts by a team in the playoffs since Griese's Dolphins threw six times in the AFC title game against Oakland following the 1973 season and then only seven times in a Super Bowl win over Minnesota two weeks later.

The only other time a team threw eight or fewer passes in a playoff game came in the 1971 AFC championship when Griese had eight attempts in a

victory over Baltimore.

The run-heavy script that seems out of place in the modern pass-happy era has been especially glaring ever since Garoppolo made one of his few mistakes in the postseason.

He threw an interception late in the first half of the divisional round against Minnesota for his 19th turnover of the season, more than any other player who made the postseason.

Since that point, he has gone 9-for-14 for 103 yards and one sack in six-plus quarters as the Niners have run the ball on 73 of 88 offensive plays.

In fact, Garoppolo has been asked to kneel down to run out the clock in that span more times (five) than he has completed a pass that traveled past the line of scrimmage (four).

"That's just how this world works and you'll get credit if you win a Super Bowl or an NFL MVP or something like that," coach Kyle Shanahan said. "We ran the ball (the last two weeks), so a lot of people are going to say that Jimmy didn't do enough. There's lots of games this year that we haven't

been able to run the ball and we've had to win it by passing. That's what I'm proud of with Jimmy and proud of our team, that you can't really say that we have to win a game a certain way. I think we've shown that we can win a number of ways."

One reason Garoppolo has been asked to do so little is the Niners have spent the past month playing from ahead. They haven't trailed a game since a comeback 34-31 win in Week 16 against the Los Angeles Rams.

They have been tied or led for the past 186:14 of game action, allowing Shanahan to lean more heavily on his defense and running game rather than counting on Garoppolo to deliver the big plays.

The strategy has worked as San Francisco has 89 carries for 471 yards in playoff wins over Minnesota and Green Bay, although Garoppolo might have to do more to keep up with Patrick Mahomes and the high-powered Kansas City Chiefs in the Super Bowl.

Diamondbacks acquire Marte from Bucs for prospects

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — When the Arizona Diamondbacks landed ace Madison Bumgarner in free agency last month, the three-time World Series winner made a surprising offer, one that came with a very urgent catch.

Bumgarner told the Diamondbacks they could defer some of the money on his five-year deal if they promised to spend the up-front savings on making the club better in 2020.

Arizona followed through Monday, acquiring two-time Gold Glove outfielder Starling Marte from the Pittsburgh Pirates.

"He fits a lot of what we're trying to do," Diamondbacks general manager Mike Hazen.

Including free up Ketel Marte — no relation to Starling Marte

— to move to second base on a semi-permanent basis. Ketel Marte split time between center field and second last year while making the All-Star team for the first time and finishing fourth in NL MVP balloting. Hazen said he likes the chemistry Ketel Marte developed with shortstop Nick Ahmed, and Starling Marte's arrival should let that relationship flourish.

"We feel like he's a Gold Glove second baseman," Hazen said.

An honor Starling Marte won twice during his eight years with the Pirates. His arrival in the majors in 2012 served as one of the final building blocks that pushed the team to three straight playoff berths from 2013-15. His go-ahead home run in the ninth inning against the Chicago Cubs on Sept. 23,

2013 pushed Pittsburgh to the postseason for the first time in more than two decades, and his blend of speed, athleticism and one of the strongest outfield arms in the game made him a natural fit at spacious PNC Park.

Though the Pirates have fallen well off the pace in the NL Central over the last four years, Marte has been one of the few bright spots. The 31-year-old hit .295 in 2019, setting career highs with 23 home runs and 82 RBIs. It wasn't nearly enough, however, to help Pittsburgh avoid finishing dead last in the division, a plummet that led to a massive leadership overhaul.

New Pirates general manager Ben Cherington reached out to Hazen — the two previously worked together in Boston — shortly after taking over

last October. Talks broke off over the holidays but picked back up this month, with Arizona receiving Marte as well as \$1.5 million from the Pirates, due on Sept. 15. In return, the Diamondbacks sent shortstop Liover Peguero and pitcher Brendan Malone — both 19-year-old prospects — to Pittsburgh.

The Diamondbacks selected Malone with the 33rd overall pick in the draft last season and signed him for a bonus of \$2,202,200. The hard-throwing right-hander went 1-2 with a 4.50 ERA in seven appearances in Class A.

Peguero signed in August 2017 for \$475,000 and hit .326 (74-for-227) with 11 doubles, five triples, five home runs and 38 RBIs in 60 games in the low minors last season.

NHL roundup

Benn, Stars top Lightning in overtime

Associated Press

DALLAS — Jamie Benn scored his second goal 2:07 into overtime and the Dallas Stars beat the Tampa Bay Lightning 3-2 on Monday.

Steven Stamkos had both goals for Tampa Bay, including the tying score with 1:26 left in regulation.

Benn got the winner after a turnover by Brayden Point, who then appeared to grab the Dallas captain from behind before his backhander past All-Star goaltender Andrei Vasilevskiy, who made 32 saves.

"I was lucky to knock that puck down," Benn said.

"We were making high-risk plays," Point said. "One example is on the last goal for sure. I tried to throw it to the middle and he picked it off."

Ben Bishop, who Vasilevskiy passed last month for the most games in goal for the Lightning, stopped 23 shots.

Denis Gurianov also scored for the Stars.

Capitals 4, Canadiens 2: Jakub Vrana had a goal and an assist as Eastern Conference-

leading Washington won at Montreal for its fourth straight victory.

Tom Wilson, Travis Boyd and Nicklas Backstrom also scored for the Capitals, and T.J. Oshie had two assists. Washington, 7-1-0 in its last eight games at Bell Centre, was without star forward Alex Ovechkin while he missed his first game this season to serve a one-game suspension for skipping the All-Star Game.

Braden Holtby made 31 saves and improved to 14-2-2 in his career against the Canadiens.

Jeff Petry and Dale Weise scored for Montreal, which began the night 10 points out of a playoff spot. Carey Price stopped 36 shots.

Maple Leafs 5, Predators 2: William Nylander, Zach Hyman and Rasmus Sandin each scored and had an assist to lead Toronto to a win at Nashville.

Jason Spezza and Auston Matthews also scored and Frederik Andersen made 34 saves for the Maple Leafs, who snapped a two-game losing streak.

Mikael Granlund and Viktor Arvidsson scored for the Predators, who have lost of three of four.

Devils 4, Senators 3 (SO): Kyle Palmieri tied it late in the third period, and Nikita Gusev and Jack Hughes scored in the shootout to lift New Jersey to a win at Ottawa.

Damon Severson and Kevin Rooney also scored in regulation for the Devils, who snapped a three-game losing streak. Mackenzie Blackwood, making his first start since Jan. 9, stopped 35 shots.

Tyler Ennis, Vladislav Namestnikov and Chris Tierney scored for the Senators. Marcus Hogberg had 50 saves through overtime, but gave up two goals on two shots in the tiebreaker.

Canucks 3, Blues 1: J.T. Miller scored twice in the second period to help host Vancouver rally from an early deficit.

Bo Horvat also scored as the Canucks won their ninth straight at home, and 12th in the last 15 overall. Jake Virtanen and Chris Tanev each had two assists. Thatcher Demko, mak-

ing his second straight start, and fourth in the last 20 games, stopped 36 shots.

Miller has 48 points (19 goals, 29 assists) in 50 games this season, topping the 47 points (13 goals, 34 assists) he had in 75 games with Tampa Bay last year.

Zach Sanford scored for St. Louis, which has lost three straight (0-2-1). Jake Allen made 22 saves.

Sharks 4, Ducks 2: Patrick Marleau and Stefan Noesen each scored twice, and host San Jose beat Anaheim.

Marleau moved past Hall of Famer Guy Lafleur and into a tie with Mike Modano for 25th place on the NHL's career list with 561 goals. The 40-year-old also moved past Rod Brind'Amour for 50th on the all-time points list with 1,185 — including 1,101 with the Sharks.

Erik Karlsson had an assist for his 600th career point to help San Jose end a three-game skid. Aaron Dell stopped 26 shots.

Ondrej Kase and Nick Ritchie scored for the Ducks.

Federer saves 7 match points in Australian Open

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Roger Federer was not going to go gently, of course, no matter how daunting the number of match points — his opponent accumulated seven! — no matter how achy his 38-year-old legs, no matter how slow his serves, no matter how off-target his groundstrokes.

Federer still plays for the love of these stages and circumstances. Still yearns for more trophies, too. Down to his very last gasp, time and again, against someone a decade younger, 100th-ranked Tennys Sandgren of the United States, Federer somehow pulled off a memorable comeback to reach the Australian Open semifinals for the 15th time.

Despite all sorts of signs he was not quite himself for much of the match, Federer beat the biceps-baring, hard-hitting,

court-covering Sandgren 6-3, 2-6, 2-6, 7-6 (8), 6-3 on Tuesday in a rollicking quarter-final that appeared to be over long before it truly was.

"For the most time there, I thought that was it. Of course, there's little sparkles where maybe not. Then you're like, 'No, it IS over,'" said Federer, who only once before had won after facing as many as seven match points, equaling his personal best from all the way back in 2003. "Only maybe when I won that fourth set did I really think that, maybe, this whole thing could turn around."

He said afterward that it had been his groin muscle that was the problem and he couldn't be certain whether he would be fully recovered for his next match. That will come against defending champion Novak Djokovic, who overwhelmed No. 32 Milos

Raonic 6-4, 6-3, 7-6 (1) to improve to 10-0 against the 2016 Wimbledon runner-up.

"He was just too good," Raonic said.

It'll be the 50th meeting between No. 3 Federer, who has won 20 Grand Slam titles, and No. 2 Djokovic, who owns 16.

Djokovic leads their head-to-head series 26-23, including their past five matches at majors.

"Roger is Roger. You know that he's always going to play on such a high level, regardless of the surface," Djokovic said. "He loves to play these kind of matches, big rivalries, semis, finals of Grand Slams."

About the only thing that slowed Djokovic's progression to a 37th career Grand Slam semifinal — Federer earned his 46th — was the medical timeout the Serb asked for at 4-all in the third set so he could put in new contact lenses.

NBA roundup

Gordon scores 50 as Rockets top Jazz

Associated Press

SALT LAKE CITY — Eric Gordon is feeling like himself again on offense. That's bad news for Houston's opponents.

Gordon scored a career-high 50 points to lead the short-handed Rockets to a 126-117 victory over the Utah Jazz on Monday night without James Harden and Russell Westbrook.

In a stat line that resembled one Harden might put up, Gordon shot 14-for-22 from the field — including 6-for-11 on three-pointers — and 16-for-20 at the free-throw line. He became the first Rockets player besides Harden to score 50 points in a game since Hakeem Olajuwon had 51 in January 1996, according to STATS. Harden has done it 23 times since.

"I feel like I'm getting back to being myself," said Gordon, who had knee surgery in November. "I told everybody when you have surgery during the season, it's always going to be a process."

Houston needed his outburst with Harden, Westbrook and

Clint Capela sitting out. The veteran guard had his first game with more than 30 points this season. His previous career best of 41 came against Oklahoma City on Jan. 23, 2009.

"You just marvel in it," teammate Austin Rivers said. "He's like a bowling ball when he drives to the basket. Dudes just bounce off of him. He's so low to the ground and he's so strong."

Gordon missed 22 games after having surgery on his right knee Nov. 13. Since his return, he's averaging 20 points in 13 games.

"He's pain-free for the first time in a year and a half," Rockets coach Mike D'Antoni said. "There will be ups and downs like all the others, but Eric is going to be good. As long as he's not hurting, he's going to be good."

Harden missed his second straight game with a bruised left thigh. Capela (bruised right heel) and Westbrook (rest) sat out after playing Sunday against Denver.

Mavericks 107, Thunder 97: Luka Doncic had 29 points

and 11 rebounds, and Dallas won at Oklahoma City.

Thunder guard Chris Paul sat out for personal reasons a night after Kobe Bryant, one of the NBA's all-time greats, was killed in a helicopter crash in Southern California.

Heat 113, Magic 92: Bam Adebayo got his third triple-double of the season in his last opportunity to impress Eastern Conference All-Star voters, Duncan Robinson scored 21 points and host Miami eased past Orlando.

Adebayo finished with 20 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists. He's a candidate to be a reserve selection for the All-Star Game; coaches pick those teams, and their ballots are due at the NBA office on Tuesday for an announcement on Thursday.

Bulls 110, Spurs 109: Zach LaVine scored 14 of his 23 points in the fourth quarter, including two clutch foul shots with 2.1 seconds left, and host Chicago edged San Antonio.

LaVine won an entertaining duel with DeMar DeRozan

after the Bulls trailed by 10 heading into the final period. DeRozan tied it at 108 on a tough fadeaway jumper with 8.6 seconds left, but LaVine responded with two free throws after he was fouled by Jakob Poetl on a drive to the basket.

Cavaliers 115, Pistons 100: Kevin Love scored all 20 of his points in the first half and Cleveland won at Detroit to snap a seven-game losing streak.

It was the third meeting this month between the Pistons and Cavaliers. They split a home-and-home series Jan. 7 and 9 in a pair of tightly contested games.

Kings 133, Timberwolves 129 (OT): Buddy Hield scored a career-high 42 points to help visiting Sacramento rally from a 27-point deficit for an overtime victory against skidding Minnesota.

De'Aaron Fox scored 22 for the Kings, putting back the rebound of his intentionally missed free throw as part of a 33-11 run over the final 5:42 of regulation.

College basketball roundup

No. 18 Iowa turns to defense to hold off Wisconsin

Associated Press

IOWA CITY, Iowa — Iowa's offense was sputtering, so the 18th-ranked Hawkeyes vowed to beat Wisconsin with defense.

"We knew we weren't going to lose this game," center Luka Garza said. "We had to string together some stops, and we would be fine."

They did just that in a 68-62 win over the Badgers on Monday night.

Garza had 21 points and 18 rebounds as the cold-shooting Hawkeyes rallied from a 12-point deficit.

Iowa (15-5, 6-3 Big Ten) trailed 57-45 with 7:13 to play

before going on a 19-2 run. Joe Toussaint's layup and free throw with 1:20 to go gave the Hawkeyes a 60-59 lead, and they did not trail again.

"We were getting stops," guard CJ Fredrick said. "And we were executing on the offensive end."

Wisconsin made just two of its last nine shots as Iowa ended the game on a 23-5 run.

"I think it was just toughness," Garza said. "We were tough through their run, and we were able to come together and make a run of our own, which was huge."

The Hawkeyes went 20-for-60 from the field, including 3-for-20 on three-pointers. But

they came up with big plays in the closing minutes, including Fredrick's three-pointer with 5:08 to go that cut Wisconsin's lead to 57-54.

No. 3 Kansas 65, Oklahoma State 50: Freshman Christian Braun made the most of his first career start.

Taking the lineup spot of the suspended David McCormack, Braun had 16 points and nine rebounds to lead the Jayhawks to the road win.

Kansas (17-3, 6-1 Big 12) has won five in a row, including a 74-68 triumph over Tennessee on Saturday in the Big 12/SEC Challenge, as well as its last five on the road.

Cameron McGriff had 18

points and eight rebounds to lead the Cowboys (10-10, 0-7), the only winless team in Big 12 action. Isaac Likekele had 10 points and four rebounds for Oklahoma State, which had snapped a six-game losing streak with a 73-62 win at Texas A&M on Saturday.

The Jayhawks' defense was outstanding, limiting Oklahoma State to 28.1% shooting (18-for-64), a season low, including 13.6% (3-for-22) over the first 14 minutes of the second half. After connecting on 34 of 83 shots (41%) combined over its past four games from three-point range, Oklahoma State was 2-for-18 (11.1%) in this one.