

Ford leaves Mediterranean on trip home

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — The Navy's largest and most modern aircraft carrier departed the Mediterranean Sea on Friday, a milestone on its journey back from more than eight months on deployment assisting U.S. efforts to contain the Israel-Hamas war.

USS Gerald R. Ford, along with the cruiser USS Normandy, transited the Strait of Gibraltar into the Atlantic Ocean, one of the last scheduled operations of its deployment, U.S. 6th Fleet said in a statement the same day.

The Navy had announced Jan. 1 that Ford's return is imminent.

The Bataan Amphibious Ready Group — which includes the amphibious assault ship USS Bataan, the amphibious

transport dock ship USS Mesa Verde, the dock landing ship USS Carter Hall and embarked elements of the 26th Marine Expeditionary Unit — is now on duty in the Eastern Mediterranean.

Ford left its homeport in Norfolk, Va., on May 2 for a routine deployment, relieving the aircraft carrier USS George H. W. Bush on duty in the U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and U.S. 6th Fleet areas of operation.

Ford was nearing the end of its six-month deployment when Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin ordered the carrier to the Eastern Mediterranean in the aftermath of Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on Israel.

Austin subsequently extended the carrier's deployment twice more as the United States

used a dual-carrier strategy as part of efforts to keep Hezbollah and other Iran-backed proxies from broadening the conflict.

The ship that was presumed to relieve Ford, USS Dwight D. Eisenhower, was instead sent to the Middle East as part of that strategy, which analysts have said was largely successful.

The carriers' intelligence gathering and patrol capabilities would not only deter Iran and other groups but could also benefit Israel, they said.

From October through early December, the carriers combined to launch more than 4,500 flights, the Navy said.

But analysts also warned that the dual-carrier strategy put a long-term strain on the Navy. Keeping Ford on deployment much past December would ad-

versely affect its maintenance schedule and crew rest, hurting its readiness for future deployments, they said.

During its time in the Mediterranean, Ford participated in training, exercises and operations, the Navy's statement said.

In addition to Normandy, the Ford group includes the destroyers USS McFaul, USS Thomas Hudner and USS Ramage. McFaul and Thomas Hudner already transited the strait, Lt. j.g. Triona Swanson said Friday.

During its time on patrol in the Middle East, USS Thomas Hudner shot down multiple attack drones launched from Houthi rebel-controlled areas of Yemen on Nov. 28.

Ramage returned to its homeport, also in Norfolk, on Dec. 3.

N. Korea fires artillery shells near sea border with South

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea again fired artillery shells near its tense sea boundary with the South on Sunday, as the influential sister of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un mocked the South's ability to detect its weapons launches.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff dismissed Kim Yo Jong's statement as "a comedy-like, vulgar propaganda" meant to undermine the South Korean people's trust in the military and stoke divisions.

The Joint Chiefs of Staff said North Korea fired more than 90 rounds near the rivals' disputed western sea boundary on Sunday afternoon. It said South Korea strongly urged North Korea to stop provocative acts immediately.

North Korea's military later confirmed it used coastal artillery systems to carry out live-firing exercises. It said the drills were part of its military training schedules and that the direction of its shells fired didn't expose any threat to South Korea.

On Friday, North Korea launched about 200 shells. South Korea also claimed the North fired more than 60 rounds Saturday, but its rival has denied that.

Kim Yo Jong said North Korea on Saturday only detonated blasting powder simulating the sound of its coastal artillery on the seashore, to test the South Korean military's detection capabilities.

"The result was clear as we expected. They misjudged the blasting sound as the sound of gunfire and conjectured it as a provocation. And they even made a false and impudent statement that the shells dropped north" of the sea boundary, Kim Yo Jong said in a statement carried by state media.

"I cannot but say that (South Korean) people are very pitiful as they entrust security to such blind persons and offer huge taxes to them," she said. "It is better 10 times to entrust security to a dog with a developed sense of hearing and smell."

Animosities between the two Koreas are running high because North Korea has con-

ducted a barrage of missile tests since 2022, while South Korea has expanded its military training with the United States in a tit-for-tat cycle.

North Korea's artillery firings Friday prompted South Korea to have its troops on border islands fire artillery rounds near the sea boundary in response. The shells launched by the two Koreas fell at a maritime buffer zone they had established under a 2018 military agreement on lowering front-line military tensions.

The agreement requires the Koreas to halt live-fire exercises, aerial surveillance and other hostile acts along their border, but the deal is now in danger of collapsing because the two Koreas have taken measures breaching it.

Experts have said North Korea is likely to ramp up weapons tests and escalate its trademark fiery rhetoric against its rivals ahead of South Korea's parliamentary elections in April and the U.S. presidential elections in November.

Officials unaware that Austin was hospitalized

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Senior Biden administration leaders, top Pentagon officials and members of Congress were unaware for days that Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin had been hospitalized since Monday, U.S. officials said Saturday, as questions swirled about his condition and the secrecy surrounding it.

The Pentagon did not inform the White House National Security Council or top adviser Jake Sullivan of Austin's hospitalization at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Md., until Thursday, according to two administration officials. The officials were not authorized to speak publicly about the matter and spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity.

The Pentagon's failure to disclose Austin's hospitalization for days reflects a stunning lack of transparency about his illness, how serious it was and when he may be released. Such secrecy, at a time when the United States is juggling myriad national security crises, runs counter to normal practice with the president and other senior U.S. officials and Cabinet members.

Still, President Joe Biden spoke with Austin on Saturday, and expressed confidence in him, according to a White House official who was not authorized to speak publicly about internal discussions and spoke on condition of anonymity.

In a statement issued Saturday evening, Austin took responsibility for the delays in notification.

"I recognize I could have done a better job ensuring the public was appropriately informed. I commit to doing better," said Austin, acknowledging the concerns about transparency. "But this is important to say: this was my medical procedure, and I take full responsibility for my decisions

about disclosure."

Austin, 70, remained hospitalized due to complications following a minor elective medical procedure, his press secretary said, as it became increasingly clear how closely the Pentagon held information about his stay at Walter Reed.

In his statement, Austin said he is on the mend and is looking forward to returning to the Pentagon soon, but he provided no other details about his ailment.

Air Force Maj. Gen. Pat Ryder said the White House and the Joint Chiefs of Staff were notified about Austin's hospitalization, but he would not confirm when that notice happened.

A number of U.S. officials said Saturday that many of the most senior Pentagon service leaders were unaware until Friday that Austin was in the hospital. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss private conversations. Politico was the first to report the White House learned of his condition on Thursday.

Ryder said members of Congress were told late Friday afternoon, and other officials said lawmakers were informed after 5 p.m. It was not clear when key senior members of Austin's staff were told, but across the Pentagon, many staff found out when the department released a statement about Austin's hospital stay just minutes after 5 p.m. Many believed Austin was out on vacation for the week.

Deputy Defense Secretary Kathleen Hicks, who took over when Austin was hospitalized, was also away. A U.S. official said she had a communications setup with her in Puerto Rico that allowed her to do the job while Austin was incapacitated.

Ryder said Saturday that Austin is recovering well and resumed his full duties Friday evening from his hospital bed.

Envoy: US military to help with Japan earthquake aid

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — The U.S. military will deliver aid to areas of central Japan devastated by a deadly 7.6 magnitude New Year's Day earthquake, U.S. Ambassador to Japan Rahm Emanuel said Friday.

U.S. forces are readying logistical support, food and other supplies, Emanuel announced in a post on X, formerly Twitter.

"A true friend shows up when times are good but more importantly when times are challenging," he wrote. "The (U.S.) is here to support our friend and ally (Japan) in its earthquake response."

U.S. Forces Japan is still planning its response and could not provide specifics about the equipment and units that will be in-

involved, a spokesman for the command, Air Force Maj. Thomas Barger, said by phone Friday.

The U.S. Embassy in Tokyo released a statement later Friday announcing that the United States is providing an immediate \$100,000 aid package that includes essential resources like blankets, water and medical supplies through Pace Winds Japan.

The Japanese government is only accepting support that does not burden affected areas, Chief Cabinet Secretary Yoshimasa Hayashi told reporters Friday at a Tokyo news conference.

"We are grateful from our heart for the countries and regions, including the U.S., that sent condolences, and offers for support as they encourage those in the affected areas," he said.

Snow hinders deliveries to earthquake areas in Japan

Associated Press

WAJIMA, Japan — Rescue teams worked through snow to deliver supplies to isolated hamlets, six days after a powerful earthquake hit western Japan, killing at least 128 people. Snowfall expected in Ishikawa Prefecture later Sunday and through the night added to the urgency.

After Monday's 7.6 magnitude temblor, 195 people were still unaccounted for, a slight decrease from the more than 200 reported earlier, and 560 people were injured. Hundreds of aftershocks have followed, rattling Noto Peninsula, where the quakes are cen-

tered.

Taiyo Matsushita walked three hours through mud to reach a supermarket in Wajima to buy food and other supplies for his family. The home where he lives with his wife and four children, and about 20 nearby homes, are among the more than a dozen communities cut off by landslides. Power was out, and in a matter of hours, they couldn't even use their cellphones, he told Jiji Press.

Firefighters and other disaster officials were trying to get to nine people believed to be buried under collapsed houses in Anamizu, Japanese media reports said.

Biden warns against Trump reelection

Associated Press

BLUE BELL, Pa. — President Joe Biden warned Friday that Donald Trump’s efforts to retake the White House in 2024 pose a grave threat to the country, the day before the third anniversary of the violent riot at the U.S. Capitol by then-President Trump’s supporters aiming to keep him in power.

Speaking near Valley Forge, Pa., where George Washington and the Continental Army spent a bleak winter nearly 250 years ago, Biden said that Jan. 6, 2021, marked a moment where “we nearly lost America — lost it all.” He said the presidential race — a likely rematch with Trump, who is the far and away GOP front-runner — is “all about” whether American democracy will survive.

The speech, the president’s first political event of the election year, was intended to clarify the expected choice for voters this fall. Biden, who reentered political life because he felt he was best capable of defeat-

ing Trump in 2020, believes focusing on defending democracy to be central to persuading voters to reject Trump once again.

“We all know who Donald Trump is,” Biden said. “The question we have to answer is who are we?”

Biden laid out Trump’s role in the Capitol attack, as a mob of the Republican’s supporters overran the building while lawmakers were counting Electoral College votes that certified Democrat Biden’s win. More than 100 police officers were bloodied, beaten and attacked by the rioters who overwhelmed authorities to break into the building.

“What’s Trump done? He’s called these insurrectionists ‘patriots,’” Biden said, “and he promised to pardon them if he returns to office.” He excoriated Trump for “glorifying” rather than condemning political violence.

At least nine people who were at the Capi-

tol that day died during or after the rioting, including several officers who died of suicide, a woman who was shot and killed by police as she tried to break into the House chamber, and three other Trump supporters who authorities said suffered medical emergencies.

Biden said that by “trying to rewrite the facts of Jan. 6, Trump is trying to steal history the same way he tried to steal the election.”

Trump, who faces 91 criminal charges stemming from his efforts to overturn his loss to Biden and three other felony cases, argues that Biden and top Democrats are themselves seeking to undermine democracy by using the legal system to thwart the campaign of his chief rival.

The Supreme Court on Friday agreed to decide whether Trump could be kept off the ballot because of his efforts to overturn his 2020 election loss.

Winter weather batters US coasts, shuts down roads

Associated Press

BOSTON — A major winter storm bringing heavy snow and freezing rain to some communities spread across New England on Sunday morning, sending residents scurrying to pull out their shovels and snowblowers to clear sidewalks and driveways.

Winter storm warnings and watches were in effect throughout the Northeast, and icy roads made for hazardous travel as far south as North Carolina.

The Northeast snow came as a Sierra Nevada storm packing heavy snow shut down a stretch of interstate Saturday and briefly

knocked out power to tens of thousands in Reno, Nev. More than 13,000 electric customers in California were without power Sunday morning.

Some communities in Massachusetts had already recorded nearly a foot of snow by Sunday morning, according to the National Weather Service. More than 16,000 electric customers in the state were without power. Snow totals were lower for coastal communities, with Boston reporting just a couple of inches. The snow was expected to continue throughout the day, with some areas topping out at more than a foot.

The storm reached into Maine with some locations seeing snow totals of up to 12 inches — with locally higher amounts over southern New Hampshire and southwestern Maine. Wind gusts up to 35 mph could add to blowing and drifting snow. Moderate to heavy snow was expected to continue in Vermont, with total snow accumulations of 6 to 12 inches.

The weather service said the “major winter storm” would continue into Sunday evening, with snow in parts of New England and rain and freezing rain in areas across the central Appalachian Mountains.

Federal officials order grounding of 171 Boeing jetliners

Associated Press

Federal officials on Saturday ordered the immediate grounding of some Boeing 737 Max 9 jetliners until they are inspected after an Alaska Airlines plane suffered a blowout that left a gaping hole in the side of the fuselage.

The required inspections take around four to eight hours per aircraft and affect about 171 airplanes worldwide.

Alaska Airlines said in a statement that of the 65 737 Max 9 aircraft in its fleet, crews had inspected the paneled-over ex-

its as part of recent maintenance work on 18 planes, and those were cleared to return to service Saturday.

Inspections for the remaining aircraft were expected to be completed in the coming days, the company said.

An Alaska Airlines jetliner blew out a portion of its fuselage shortly after takeoff 3 miles above Oregon late Friday, forcing the pilots to make an emergency landing as its 171 passengers and six crew members donned oxygen masks.

No one was seriously hurt as the depres-

surized plane returned safely to Portland International Airport about 20 minutes after departure.

Authorities are still looking for the door from the paneled-over exit and have a good idea of where it landed, near Oregon Route 217 and Barnes Road in the Cedar Hills area west of Portland, National Transportation Safety Board Chair Jennifer Homendy said at a news conference late Saturday.

“If you find that, please, please contact local law enforcement,” she said.

Iran: 11 arrests over suicide bombings

The Washington Post

Iranian authorities have arrested 11 people linked to Wednesday's bomb blasts in the central Iranian city of Kerman that killed dozens of people, the country's Intelligence Ministry said in a statement published in state media.

Two suspects who were "supporting and supplying" the two alleged suicide bombers were arrested Thursday, the

statement said. Nine others who Iranian officials believe are part of a network assisting the bombers were rounded up in six provinces, according to the ministry. Iranian officials said the two bombers had worked for Daesh, the Arabic acronym referring to Islamic State. ISIS claimed responsibility for the blasts in a message posted to social media on Thursday.

The operation to capture individuals linked to the bombing "will definitely continue until the arrest of the last person who was involved in supporting the criminals in any way and to any extent," the ministry said.

The two explosions in Kerman killed at least 91 people, The Associated Press reported, citing Iranian state TV. The blasts also injured more than 200, the Islamic Republic News

Agency reported, citing Iranian officials. They struck as thousands had gathered in the city's streets to commemorate the fourth anniversary of the death of Maj. Gen. Qassem Soleimani, a senior commander in Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps who was killed in a 2020 U.S. drone strike.

The Washington Post could not immediately verify the Intelligence Ministry's account.

Israel wrapped up major combat in northern Gaza

Associated Press

JERUSALEM — The Israeli military signaled that it has wrapped up major combat in northern Gaza, saying it has completed dismantling Hamas' military infrastructure there, as the war against the militant group entered its fourth month Sunday.

The military did not address troop deployments in northern Gaza going forward. Its spokesman, Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, said late Saturday that forces would "continue to deepen the achievement" there, strengthen defenses along the Israel-Gaza border fence and focus on the central and southern parts of the territory.

The announcement came ahead of a visit to Israel by U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, who on Sunday was in Qatar, a key mediator. Biden administration officials have urged Israel to wind down its blistering air and ground offensive in Gaza and shift to more targeted attacks against Hamas leaders to prevent harm to Palestinian civilians.

In recent weeks, Israel had been scaling back its military assault in northern Gaza and pressing its offensive in the south, where most of Gaza's 2.3 million Palestinians are squeezed into smaller areas in a

humanitarian disaster while being pounded by Israeli airstrikes.

The war was triggered by Hamas' Oct. 7 attack on southern Israel in which the militants killed about 1,200 people, mostly civilians, and took some 250 people hostage.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu again insisted the war will not end until the objectives of eliminating Hamas, getting Israel's hostages returned and ensuring that Gaza won't be a threat to Israel are met.

"This is our responsibility and this is the obligation of all of us," he told his Cabinet.

On Sunday, officials at Nasser Hospital in the southern city of Khan Younis received the bodies of 18 people, including 12 children, who were killed in an Israeli strike Saturday. More than 50 people were injured in the strike on a home in the Khan Younis refugee camp, which was set up decades ago to house refugees from the 1948 Mideast war over Israel's creation.

An airstrike near the southern city of Rafah killed two journalists on Sunday, including Hamza Dahdouh, the oldest son of Wael Dahdouh, Al Jazeera's well-known chief correspondent in Gaza, the Arabic channel and local medical officials said.

Russia attacks Kherson while soldiers celebrate Orthodox Christmas

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — The southern Ukrainian city of Kherson was subjected Sunday to numerous shelling attacks from Russian-occupied parts of the Kherson region, across the Dnieper River, local officials said.

The head of the Kherson city administration, Roman Mrochko, said two people died in the attacks and several others were wounded.

Air defense shot down 21 of 28 drones launched by Russia overnight, the Ukrainian Air Force said Sunday. Russia also launched three anti-aircraft missiles against Ukraine.

On an unannounced visit to the country this weekend, Japanese Foreign Minister Yoko Kamikawa pledged Japan's continued support for Ukraine. Speaking at a press conference with Ukrainian Foreign Minister Dmytro Kuleba in Kyiv on Sunday, she said that Japan had decided to "contribute \$37 million to the NATO trust fund to provide drone detection systems," according to Japan's Foreign Ministry.

In Russia, more than 100 residents of the Russian border city of Belgorod have evacuat-

ed to an area further away from Ukraine, local officials said.

"On behalf of the regional governor Vyacheslav Gladkov, we met the first Belgorod residents who decided to move to the safest place. More than 100 people were placed in our temporary accommodation centers," Andrey Chesnokov, head of the Stary Oskol district, some 71 miles from Belgorod, wrote on Telegram.

Meanwhile, Russian military personnel marked Orthodox Christmas on Sunday. Russia's Defense Ministry said that military priests led prayer services on the front line both on Sunday and on Christmas Eve night.

Russian President Vladimir Putin was joined by families of military personnel who died in the war in Ukraine at Christmas Eve services at his Novogaryovo residence, in the western suburbs of Moscow.

"Many of our men, our courageous, heroic guys, are warriors of Russia even now, during the holiday — with arms in hand, they defend the interests of our country," he said to the attending families, according to the Kremlin's press service.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Lawsuit claims exploding toilet caused injuries

FL ORLANDO — A customer has filed a negligence lawsuit against Dunkin', claiming he was injured by an exploding toilet at one of the coffee chain's locations.

Paul Kerouac is seeking more than \$100,000 in a lawsuit filed in state court in Orlando, claiming he suffered "severe and long term injuries" following the explosion of a toilet in the men's room of a Dunkin' location in Winter Park a year ago.

After the explosion left Kerouac covered in human feces, urine and debris, he walked out of the men's room seeking help from workers and the store's manager, according to the lawsuit. An employee told him that they were aware of the "problem with the toilet" since there had been previous incidents, the lawsuit says, without giving details about the explosion.

The lawsuit says Kerouac suffered "bodily injury," and he has required mental health care and counseling since the incident in January 2022.

Golden Gate Bridge gets net to impede suicides

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Kevin Hines regretted jumping off San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge the moment his hands released the rail and he plunged the equivalent of 25 stories into the Pacific Ocean, breaking his back.

Hines miraculously survived his suicide attempt at age 19 in September 2000 as he struggled with bipolar disorder, one of about 40 people who survived after jumping off the bridge. Hines, his father, and a group of

parents who lost their children to suicide at the bridge relentlessly advocated for a solution.

On Wednesday, they finally got their wish when officials announced that crews have installed stainless-steel nets on both sides of the 1.7-mile bridge. The nets — placed 20 feet down from the bridge's deck — are not visible from cars crossing the bridge. But pedestrians standing by the rails can see them. They were built with marine-grade stainless steel.

Nearly 2,000 people have plunged to their deaths since the bridge opened in 1937.

Man found dead after climbing inside jet engine

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A man was found dead inside a jet engine at Salt Lake City International Airport after police say he breached an emergency exit door, walked onto the tarmac and climbed inside the engine.

Officers found 30-year-old Kyler Efinger, of Park City, unconscious inside an engine mounted to the wing of a commercial aircraft loaded with passengers, the Salt Lake City Police Department announced Tuesday. The plane had been sitting on a de-icing pad, and its engines were rotating.

Efinger was a ticketed passenger with a boarding pass to Denver, police said.

The manager of a store inside the airport had reported a disturbance just before 10 p.m., telling dispatchers with the Airport Control Center that he saw a passenger pass through an emergency exit. Officers quickly found Efinger's clothing, shoes and other personal items on one of the runways.

After locating him, the officers told air traffic controllers to notify the pilot to shut down the aircraft's engines.

First responders pulled Efinger out of the engine intake cowling. They attempted life-saving measures but he was pronounced dead at the scene.

Flooding disrupts IVF services for 200 patients

MA BOSTON — Flooding from a burst water main at Boston's Brigham and Women's Hospital has disrupted services for about 200 patients seeking to have children through in vitro fertilization, leaving some of them devastated.

Alexis Goulette, who runs a private IVF support group on Facebook, said Wednesday that a lot of the women had been informed of cancellations by voicemail and hadn't been offered emotional support or been given explanations for alternative timelines or cost reimbursements. Goulette also noted the enormous amount of intense preparation that is required for an embryo transfer. The disruption has left some of the women burdened with extra costs such as canceled flights or new insurance deductibles as they move into the new year, Goulette added.

Body in home freezer was woman missing for years

CA SAN DIEGO — A body found inside a chest freezer at a San Diego home last month has been identified as an 81-year-old woman who had lived at the residence, officials said Thursday.

Mary Margaret Haxby-Jones may have been missing or dead

for up to nine years based on the investigation so far, according to the San Diego Police Department. The case was being investigated as a suspicious death. No arrests were announced.

The body was discovered Dec. 22 by out-of-town family members staying at the home, NBC 7 San Diego reported.

The body did not have any obvious traumatic injuries, police said.

Pilot's alleged threat called 'misunderstanding'

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Attorneys clashed Thursday over opposing characterizations of a fight between two commercial airline pilots in which the co-pilot allegedly threatened to shoot the captain for suggesting they divert the flight for a passenger's medical emergency.

Former Delta Air Lines pilot Jonathan J. Dunn, 42, is charged with interfering with a flight crew. His lawyer, John W. Huber, tried to characterize the altercation as "a misunderstanding," while prosecutors described it as a "grave offense."

The heated argument had erupted in the cockpit of a 2022 flight from Atlanta to Salt Lake City, on which Dunn was the first officer, or co-pilot. The captain, who is not named in court documents, had proposed diverting their commercial flight to Grand Junction, Colo., if the passenger's condition worsened, the U.S. Attorney's Office alleges. Dunn objected and threatened multiple times to shoot the captain, whom he accused of "going crazy," the documents state.

— From wire reports

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Experience abounds in CFP title game

Associated Press

HOUSTON — That extra year of eligibility granted by the NCAA because of the pandemic-shortened 2020 season is paying off for the teams playing in the College Football Playoff championship game Monday night.

Among Washington's 22 offensive and defensive starters, seven are in their sixth seasons and seven are in their fifth. Michigan has one starter in his sixth season and eight in their fifth.

"It's one of the factors in both teams getting here," Michigan defensive coordinator Jesse Minter said Saturday. "Guys have been through a lot. Guys have played a lot of football. They're experienced and you see it show up in key situations where older players tend to understand how to handle the moment better than young players."

Washington has five sixth-year players and four fifth-year players who start on defense,

and co-defensive coordinator William Inge said he's certain that experience played a role in the Huskies' ability to stop Texas when it drove deep into its territory in the final seconds of a 37-31 win at the Sugar Bowl.

"When you have individuals who have sweat equity in your program, playing time and maturity, they understand how to win, how to practice, how to prepare," Inge said. "That's something we're getting to experience right now."

Big Ten Network analyst Gerry DiNardo said neither Michigan nor Washington has an edge in experience, given the numbers, "but it certainly makes for a better game or a more competitive game."

The country's best-known sixth-year player is Washington quarterback and Heisman Trophy runner-up Michael Penix Jr. He had his 2018 and 2020 seasons at Indiana end early because of major knee injuries. He transferred after the 2021 season and became the first

quarterback since Texas Tech's Patrick Mahomes in 2015-16 to throw for 4,500 yards in back-to-back seasons.

"He brought Indiana to places maybe they've never been, but they weren't expected to win the championship," DiNardo said. "Now he's at Washington, expectations have been exceeded again. It's not just Penix. We could go through everybody on the rosters and see how a previous experience helps in this experience they're going to have Monday."

Washington coach Kalen DeBoer was Penix's offensive coordinator at Indiana in 2019, and their familiarity with each other over Penix's long college career has shown up on the field.

"I've seen so many different looks with all the plays that we have," Penix said. "It's like I kind of have a feel for the game to where most of the time I know where I'm throwing before I even snap the ball."

Older players on both teams

said they made pacts with fellow graybeards to use their COVID exemption and pursue a national championship.

"Just knowing the guys we had in this room and the brotherhood, we saw all the things we could do together," Michigan sixth-year linebacker Michael Barrett said. "We talked about what's good for the hive is good for the bee, and what's good for the bee is good for the hive."

Washington sixth-year linebacker Edefuan Ulofoshio said DeBoer, who is in his second season with the Huskies, played a key role in keeping the older players together.

"He recruited the heck out of us and we have a lot of gratitude for that, and we have a lot of belief we could get something like this done, and that made us not want to go to the (NFL) or enter the transfer portal," Ulofoshio said. "We believed in this program, we believed in this team and we wanted this moment to happen for this team and university."

Konecny scores late to lift Flyers over Flames

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Travis Konecny snapped a third-period tie with a short-handed goal, and the Philadelphia Flyers stopped a four-game slide with a spirited 3-2 win over the Calgary Flames on Saturday.

Morgan Frost had a goal and an assist for Philadelphia, which had dropped six of seven overall. Sean Couturier also scored, and Carter Hart made 22 saves.

Konecny, the Flyers' All-Star representative, snapped a wrist shot past Flames goalie Jakob Markstrom on a breakaway 2:27 into the final period. It was his NHL-best fifth short-handed goal and No. 21 on the season overall.

The Flyers lead the NHL with 10 short-handed goals this season.

Jonathan Huberdeau and MacKenzie Weegar scored for Calgary, which had won three in a row. Markstrom made 39 saves.

Oilers 3, Senators 1: Zach Hyman had his third hat trick of the season and fourth in the NHL to help host Edmonton win its seventh straight.

Canadiens 4, Rangers 3 (SO): Samuel Montembeault made 45 saves and stopped all three shootout attempts, Cole Caufield scored the lone goal in the tiebreaker and host Montreal held off New York.

Wild 4, Blue Jackets 3 (OT): Marco Rossi scored 3:05 into overtime and visiting Minnesota rallied from three one-goal deficits to beat Columbus, giving goalie Marc-Andre Fleury his 551st career win.

Blues 2, Hurricanes 1 (SO): Brayden Schenn scored in the fifth round of the shootout to give visiting St. Louis the win.

Predators 4, Stars 3: Filip Forsberg scored two goals early in the third period and visiting Nashville beat Dallas.

Sabres 3, Penguins 1: Zemgus Girgensons jammed a loose puck past Tristan

Jarry late in the third period and Rasmus Dahlin added an empty netter to lift visiting Buffalo.

Golden Knights 5, Islanders 2: Jack Eichel and Nic Roy each scored two goals and host Vegas won for just the second time in eight games.

Canucks 6, Devils 4: J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson each scored twice, Quinn Hughes had three assists and visiting Vancouver beat New Jersey.

Maple Leafs 4, Sharks 1: William Nylander had two goals and an assist, Martin Jones made 23 saves and visiting Toronto handed San Jose its 11th straight loss.

Bruins 7, Lightning 3: Trent Frederic scored two goals, David Pastrnak added his team-leading 24th and host Boston beat Tampa Bay.

Panthers 8, Avalanche 4: Sam Reinhart scored three times for his seventh career hat trick, and visiting Florida won its seventh straight.

Texans top Colts to clinch playoff spot

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Rookie quarterback C.J. Stroud made all the right calls in the biggest game of his NFL career to help the Houston Texans secure a playoff spot.

Stroud threw for 264 yards and two scores, Devin Singletary scored the go-ahead touchdown on a 3-yard TD run with 6:20 to play and the Texans came up with a late stop for a 23-19 victory over Indianapolis on Saturday night.

“Everybody’s fighting till that last play, that’s what it’s about,” coach DeMeco Ryans said as the Texans shouted and danced after earning their first playoff berth since 2019. “We punched our ticket.”

Then the waiting began.

Houston (10-7) was set to either be one of the AFC’s three wild-card teams or host a wild-card weekend game as the AFC South champ — if Jacksonville lost at Tennessee.

Indianapolis (9-8) was eliminated from the playoff chase with its third loss in five weeks.

It hasn’t made the postseason since 2020.

Reaching the postseason hasn’t been easy for Houston with a new head coach, a new quarterback, a short-handed receiving corps and needing a win at a venue where the Texans had only won four times in the previous 20 seasons.

Still, Houston finished the job Saturday with a strong performance — and a little help from Indy.

A blown coverage allowed Stroud to throw a 75-yard TD pass to Nico Collins on the Texans’ first play. Hours later, Colts running back Tyler Goodson was wide open when he dropped a pass on fourth-and-1 from the Houston 15 with 1:06 to go.

“We all have plays that we want back. Just because it’s the last one makes it that much more significant,” Colts quarterback Gardner Minshew said about the fourth-down call. “I told him (Goodson) I’d throw that ball every time. I trust him.”

Stroud finished 20-for-26 with no turnovers and hooked up with Collins nine times for 195 yards and the score. Stroud had a passer rating of 134.1.

For Indy, it was an odd night full of close calls.

In the first half, the Colts struggled to move the ball, struggled to contain Stroud and rarely tried to stretch the field.

In the second half, they leaned heavily on Jonathan Taylor, who had his best game of the season — 30 carries for 188 yards and a 49-yard TD run early in the third quarter that led to a nifty 2-point conversion from Minshew to Mo Alie-Cox that tied it at 14.

But he injured his ankle and foot in the second half, went briefly to the locker room, then returned for Indy’s final series only to be out of the game on the fateful fourth-down play. Coach Shane Steichen said that was by design.

Steichen’s other big gamble didn’t pay off, either. He opted to try a 57-yard field goal mid-

way through the third quarter that would have broken the 14-14 tie, but Matt Gay’s kick hit the right upright and five plays later, Ka’imi Fairbairn made a 51-yarder to give Houston a 17-14 lead.

Indy tied it on Gay’s 35-yard field goal on the ensuing drive, but Stroud responded with a 12-play, 73-yard drive that took more than seven minutes off the clock and ended with Singletary’s TD run.

Minshew was 13-for-24 for 141 yards.

“It wasn’t pretty, but it was gritty,” Ryans said. “We fought and found a way to get it done.”

The Colts thought they would open the fourth quarter facing third-and-1 from the Houston 24, but Steichen challenged the call. When the challenge resulted in a first down, the refs put 45 seconds back on the clock and the players, who had just changed ends, had down field again for one more play to finish the third quarter. Then they changed ends again after the play.

Steelers beat Ravens, keep postseason hopes alive

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Cameron Heyward figures the Pittsburgh Steelers can make some noise in the playoffs.

They still needed a little help to get in, but they’ve certainly done their part down the stretch.

“Let us be dangerous,” said Heyward, the Pittsburgh defensive tackle. “We have a formula that’s working right now. Hopefully we can get some guys back in the fold. We’re not going to discount ourselves. We know we’ve got work to do, and looking forward to it.”

Mason Rudolph threw a 71-yard touchdown pass to Diontae Johnson on the first play of the fourth quarter, and the Steelers took a step toward the postsea-

son with a 17-10 victory over the Baltimore Ravens on Saturday.

Rudolph led Pittsburgh (10-7) to three straight wins to close the season, and so the Steelers waited on Sunday. They were in line to make the playoffs if Buffalo lost to Miami or Jacksonville lost to Tennessee.

There was some bad news for the Steelers amid all that hope. T.J. Watt — who had two sacks to take sole possession of the NFL lead with 19 — left in the third quarter with a knee injury. Coach Mike Tomlin didn’t have an update on Watt’s status after the game.

The Ravens (13-4) already had the top seed in the AFC locked up, and they held MVP favorite Lamar Jackson out of this game, along with a handful

of other key players. Tyler Huntley started at quarterback, and both teams had a hard time moving the ball on a rainy, windy day.

“We had a chance to send them home, now they have a chance to go to the playoffs,” Baltimore linebacker Patrick Queen said. “It stings a little bit ... but we have a lot of pages in our book that set us up pretty good. Nobody’s hanging their head or anything. If we see those guys again, we’ll be ready.”

With the score tied at 7, Rudolph found Johnson over the middle for the one big play Pittsburgh needed. After Baltimore’s Gus Edwards lost a fumble, the Steelers kicked a field goal with 3:13 remaining. The Ravens hadn’t trailed by more

than seven points all season until then.

Justin Tucker kicked a field goal with 16 seconds left, but Baltimore couldn’t come up with the ensuing onside kick. The Ravens had a six-game winning streak snapped.

Rudolph was 18 of 20 for 152 yards.

“It was probably the most challenging weather I’ve had to deal with in my career,” Rudolph said.

Each team lost two fumbles. Pittsburgh opened the scoring on a 6-yard touchdown run by Najee Harris in the first quarter. The Ravens didn’t manage a first down until the second, but they eventually tied it on a 27-yard scoring pass from Huntley to Isaiah Likely.

Celtics end Pacers' 6-game win streak

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Jayson Tatum scored 38 points, making a season-high eight 3-pointers, and Jaylen Brown added 31 points as the Boston Celtics beat the Indiana Pacers 118-101 on Saturday night, snapping the Pacers' six-game winning streak.

Tatum, who also had 13 rebounds and six assists, combined with Brown for 27 of the Celtics' 46 baskets on a night they shot 51% from the field and never trailed.

"(Indiana) is really good," Boston coach Joe Mazzulla said. "When we play connected basketball, with physical half-court defense and intentional, poised offense, we play better, and that's kind of what we did."

Boston, which came into the game third in

the NBA in field-goal percentage defense (.449) and third in rebound rate, limited the Pacers to a season-low point total and outbounded them 70-42.

Benedict Mathurin led Indiana with 20 points while All-Star Tyrese Haliburton finished with 17 points, seven assists, six rebounds and five steals.

Jazz 120, 76ers 109: Lauri Markkanen had 33 points and 13 rebounds, and Collin Sexton added 22 points and 10 assists to lead visiting Utah past Philadelphia.

Reigning MVP and two-time defending scoring champion Joel Embiid missed the game because of swelling in his left knee.

Knicks 121, Wizards 105: Julius Randle scored 39 points, Jalen Brunson had 33 and

visiting New York won its fourth straight game, beating Washington.

Coming off an impressive 128-92 win at Philadelphia on Friday night, the Knicks (21-15) led throughout and had a 60-34 lead late in the first half, causing the thousands of New York fans in Washington to loudly chant: "Let's go Knicks! Let's go Knicks!"

Rockets 112, Bucks 108: Alperen Sengun scored 21 points and host Houston overcame 48 points from Giannis Antetokounmpo to beat Milwaukee.

Antetokounmpo shot 16-for-25 from the field and added 17 rebounds in his seventh straight double-double. But the Bucks lost for the third time in four games in 2024 after going 11-2 in December.

Dickinson lifts Kansas past TCU with late layup

Associated Press

LAWRENCE, Kan. — Hunter Dickinson scored with 3.4 seconds left to lift No. 2 Kansas past TCU 83-81 on Saturday.

Dickinson, who led Kansas with 30 points, hit a pair of free throws after a flagrant foul on TCU's Ernest Udeh Jr. with less than a minute remaining to tie the game. Dickinson then followed Dajuan Harris Jr.'s miss in the final seconds.

Kansas (13-1, 1-0 Big 12) also got 18 points from KJ Adams Jr. Kevin McCullar Jr. had 16 points and Harris scored 10.

TCU (11-3, 0-1) was led by Trevian Tennyson with 24 points. He was joined in double figures by Emanuel Miller with 20 points and Micah Peavy and Jameer Nelson Jr. with 10 points each.

No. 3 Houston 89, West Virginia 55: L.J. Cryer scored 20 points, Damian Dunn added 14 points and the host Cougars improved to 14-0 in its inaugural Big 12 contest with a win over the Mountaineers.

No. 5 Tennessee 90, No. 22 Mississippi 64: Jonas Aidoo scored 24 points and had 10 rebounds to lead the host Volunteers to victory over the Rebels in the Southeastern Conference

opener for both teams.

No. 6 Kentucky 87, Florida 85: Aaron Bradshaw hit a 3-pointer with 1:27 to play — just the third of the season for the 7-foot-1 freshman — and the visiting Wildcats rallied to beat the Gators in the first Southeastern Conference opener between the rivals in 26 years.

Seton Hall 78, No. 7 Marquette 75: Al-Amir Dawes had 23 points and Kadary Richmond scored 21 to lead the host Pirates over the Golden Eagles for Seton Hall's third win this season over ranked teams.

No. 8 North Carolina 65, No. 16 Clemson 55: RJ Davis had 14 points while Armando Bacot had 14 points and 16 rebounds to lead the visiting Tar Heels over the Tigers.

No. 10 Arizona 92, Utah 73: Caleb Love scored 15 of his 23 points during a decisive second-half stretch, Keshad Johnson added 20 points and the host Wildcats ran away from the Utes for a win.

No. 11 Oklahoma 71, Iowa State 63: Javian McCollum had 15 points and five assists, and the host Sooners defeated the Cyclones in the Big 12 opener for both teams.

Cincinnati 71, No. 12 BYU

60: Viktor Lakhin scored 17 points and Aziz Bandaogo had 12 points and 10 rebounds to lead the visiting Bearcats over the Cougars in the Big 12 opener for both teams.

Utah State 77, No. 13 Colorado State 72: Great Osobor scored 20 points and had 14 rebounds and Mason Falslev added 18 points to lift the host Aggies over the Rams for their 13th straight win.

No. 14 Duke 67, Notre Dame 59: Mark Mitchell scored 19 of his career-high 23 points in the second half, and the visiting Blue Devils pulled away from the Fighting Irish.

Charlotte 70, No. 17 Florida Atlantic 68: Lu'Cye Patterson made two free throws with 1.7 seconds left as the 49ers defeated the Owls for their first home win against an AP Top 25 opponent in 14 years.

No. 18 Baylor 75, Oklahoma State 70 (OT): RayJ Dennis scored 18 points and Langston Love added 17 as the visiting Bears ended the Cowboys' five-game winning streak with an overtime win in the Big 12 Conference opener for both teams.

Southern Miss 81, No. 19 James Madison 71: Victor Hart scored 16 points and Andre Cur-

belo had 15 points and nine assists, helping the host Golden Eagles beat the Dukes.

Texas Tech 78, No. 20 Texas 67: Pop Isaacs scored 21 points to lead the visiting Red Raiders to a Big 12-opening win over the Longhorns, a day after he was named in a lawsuit alleging sexual assault of a minor.

No. 21 Wisconsin 88, Nebraska 72: Tyler Wahl scored 17 points to lead four of his teammates in double figures and the host Badgers snapped the Cornhuskers' five-game winning streak.

Creighton 69, No. 23 Providence 60: Ryan Kalkbrenner had 22 points and 12 rebounds to help the host Bluejays beat the Friars after nearly blowing an 18-point lead in the second half.

No. 24 Gonzaga 101, San Diego 74: Ben Gregg had a career-high 22 points, Graham Ike scored 15 of his 19 points during a big first half, and the host Bulldogs beat the Toreros.

No. 25 Auburn 83, Arkansas 51: Chad Baker-Mazara scored 16 points to lead three teammates in double figures and the visiting Tigers rolled over the Razorbacks in the SEC opener for both teams.