

US Navy reshuffling in the Mediterranean

Associated Press

ON BOARD THE USS BATAAN — When attacks with missiles and drones surged in the Red Sea late last year, crewmembers of the USS Bataan worked round the clock to make sure they were shot down before reaching passing merchant vessels.

Weeks later, they are still perfecting that operation in training and simulations, along with a dozen other scenarios, despite moving north to the Mediterranean where commercial marine traffic is at little risk.

The U.S. Navy is reshuffling its warship deployment in the Middle East to maintain dominance in the region — now eyeing the longer haul as concerns

mount that Israel's war on Hamas in Gaza could set off a regional conflict.

An amphibious warship, the Bataan is a multi-deck assault vessel jammed full of armored vehicles and military hardware with a lower bay that can take on water to release landing craft directly into the sea.

The ship is now leading the United States' task force in the Eastern Mediterranean, following the Navy's newest aircraft carrier, the USS Gerald Ford, which was sent home at the New Year.

The Bataan and two support ships, the USS Mesa Verde and USS Carter Hall, have a combined force of nearly 2,500 Marines and sailors.

Marine Lt. Col. Jeremy Hawkins, a senior planner on the task force, says the makeup of the multi-role naval force is ideal for the complex nature of the conflict and for related regional sources of tension.

"We're able to operate really autonomously in international waters and airspace. And so it gives us a lot of freedom of operations," he said. "We're floating on a piece of America, wherever we're at."

As he spoke, a "jump jet" AV-8B Harrier roared off the deck overhead, launching a night flight designed to maintain readiness for pilots and support staff.

Now in its 15th week, the war in Gaza continues to pile tension

onto multiple flashpoints in the wider region, many involving militant groups supported by Iran, including Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthi movement in Yemen.

"The deployment of the USS Bataan to the Eastern Med is meant to do two things," said Gregory Aftandilian, a senior lecturer at the School of International Service, at the American University in Washington D.C. "It's to deter Hezbollah from increasing its missile attacks against Israel, which has the potential to lead to a wider war, and to bolster the U.S. naval presence in the Red Sea to hopefully deter the Houthis from launching more attacks on shipping in that body of water."

US prepares for campaign as Houthis vow to fight on

The Washington Post

The Biden administration is crafting plans for a sustained military campaign targeting the Houthis in Yemen after 10 days of strikes failed to halt the group's attacks on maritime commerce, stoking concern among some officials that an open-ended operation could derail the war-ravaged country's fragile peace and pull Washington into another unpredictable Middle Eastern conflict.

The White House convened senior officials on Wednesday to discuss options for the way ahead in the administration's evolving response to the Iranian-backed movement, which has vowed to continue attacking ships off the Arabian Peninsula despite near-daily operations to destroy Houthi radars, missiles and drones. On Saturday, U.S. Central Command announced

its latest strike, on an anti-ship missile that was prepared for launch.

The deepening cycle of violence is a setback to President Joe Biden's goal of stemming spillover hostilities triggered by Israel's war against Hamas in the Gaza Strip. Underscoring the threat, Iran on Saturday blamed Israel for a strike on the Syrian capital, Damascus, that killed five Iranian military advisers. The Israeli military declined to comment. In Iraq, an attack on al Asad Air Base, which hosts Iraqi and U.S. troops, left one Iraqi soldier seriously injured, according to a Defense Department official. An Iran-linked faction there said it was responsible.

The Houthis, one powerful faction in Yemen's long-running civil war, have framed their campaign, which has in-

cluded more than 30 missile and drone attacks on commercial and naval vessels since November, as a means of pressuring Israel, bolstering their standing amid widespread regional opposition to the Jewish state. The quickly expanding U.S. response likewise risks pulling Biden into another volatile campaign in a region that has repeatedly mired down the American military, potentially undermining his attempt to refocus U.S. foreign policy on Russia and China.

Administration officials, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations, described their strategy in Yemen as an effort to erode the Houthis' high-level military capability enough to curtail their ability to target shipping in the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden or, at a minimum,

to provide a sufficient deterrent so that risk-averse shipping companies will resume sending vessels through the region's waterways.

"We are clear-eyed about who the Houthis are, and their worldview," a senior U.S. official said. "So we're not sure that they're going to stop immediately, but we are certainly trying to degrade and destroy their capabilities."

Officials say they don't expect that the operation will stretch on for years like previous U.S. wars in Iraq, Afghanistan or Syria. At the same time they acknowledge they can identify no end date or provide an estimate for when the Yemenis' military capability will be adequately diminished. As part of the effort, U.S. naval forces also are working to intercept weapons shipments from Iran.

US troops checked for TBIs after attack in Iraq

From staff and wire reports

An unspecified number of U.S. personnel are being evaluated for traumatic brain injuries, U.S. Central Command said, after a coalition of Iranian-backed militants launched a missile attack Saturday on al Asad Air Base in western Iraq.

Multiple ballistic missiles and rockets were intercepted by the base's air-defense system, while others impacted the installation, according to a CENTCOM news release. At least one Iraqi soldier was wounded.

"Damage assessment is ongoing," the release said.

An Iraqi military official, speaking on the condition of ano-

nymity to The Associated Press, said at least eight missiles landed on the base.

The attack on U.S. forces is the latest in a series by the Iraqi coalition, which calls itself the Islamic Resistance.

Increasing attacks by Iranian-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen on commercial shipping vessels have also been disrupting global trade.

On Friday, U.S. fighter jets took out three missiles in Houthi rebel sites that were ready to fire, according to U.S. officials.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss ongoing military operations, said the strikes were car-

ried out by F/A-18 aircraft off the USS Dwight D. Eisenhower aircraft carrier. And they resembled similar U.S. attacks on Houthi launchers last week.

In a statement later Friday, CENTCOM said the strike was at about 6:45 p.m. local time in Sanaa, Yemen's capital, and that the missiles were aimed into the southern Red Sea and were prepared to launch. It said the U.S. determined they presented an imminent threat to merchant vessels and the U.S. Navy ships in the region, and so struck them in self-defense. The statement did not say how the strikes were carried out.

Al-Masirah, a Houthi-run sat-

ellite news channel, said there were air raids in the western city of Hodieda on Friday, targeting the al-Jabaana neighborhood in the west of the city. The location of the U.S. strikes could not be immediately confirmed.

At the White House, National Security Council spokesman John Kirby noted the uptick in preemptive missions.

"This is the fourth preemptive action that the U.S. military has taken in the past week against Houthi missile launchers that were ready to launch attacks, in this case, anti-ship missiles," he said, adding that the self-defense strikes are aimed at improving security in the shipping lanes.

Navy ships to be fixed in Japanese shipyards

BY ALEX WILSON

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — The U.S. Navy plans to send some of its vessels to Japanese shipyards for maintenance to reduce the time it takes them to return to service, the U.S. ambassador to Japan announced Friday.

U.S. warships are already maintained and repaired in Japan at U.S. Navy installations like Yokosuka or Sasebo Naval Base, but ships are also routinely sent back to the United States for overhauls, upgrades and major repairs. The process can take months or even years to complete.

Eliminating that lengthy process and exploring alternatives is more critical than ever, Ambassador Rahm Emanuel told reporters Friday at Yokosuka.

"We know that China watches which ships are coming in and out — it's not a secret; they know what's happening," and China

evaluates America's deterrence level in the region based on that, he said outside of the base's ship-repair facility.

Repairing U.S. warships at Japanese shipyards isn't unprecedented. Several years ago, Mitsubishi Heavy Industries' Yokohama dockyard serviced the guided-missile destroyer USS Milius.

The repair was an attempt to explore the possibility of using private shipyards outside of U.S. bases in Japan, and Mitsubishi indicated it was open to future cooperation with the Navy, the Asahi Shimbun reported in May 2019.

The U.S. is setting up a committee or council to coordinate future ship-repair work between the U.S. and Japan, Emanuel said. The Navy is already holding a practice run with the amphibious transport dock USS New Orleans, homeported in Sasebo, which he said is undergoing repairs at an unspecified Japanese shipyard.

Marines upgrading radios to speak undetected in battle

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

Efforts to ensure that U.S. Marines can speak undetected on the battlefield are taking a step forward with major upgrades to the radios they carry, service officials said.

"The closest analogy to our current transition in radio technology is akin to moving from the era of flip phones to the advanced world of smartphones," Richard Sessions, a program manager for Marine Corps Systems Command, said in a statement Thursday.

Since October, 4,000 of the multi-channel radios have been issued across the fleet. And the service is on track to deliver 50,000 upgraded radios by the end of 2024, the statement said.

Securing radio communications has been a priority for the military to counter adversaries such as Russia and China, which have the technological know-how to cause disruptions across the electromagnetic spectrum.

While the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan didn't present such challenges, a new era of great power competition has brought to the forefront the need to ensure that ground troops aren't left vulnerable to attack from unsecured communication networks.

"A key focus in our communication systems' rollout is minimizing detection and interception risks," Sessions said. "We're dedicated to making our systems challenging for the enemy to locate and disrupt."

For the Corps, the communication improvements are also in line with a broader transformation known as Force Design 2030, which aims to return Marines to their amphibious roots as the United States prepares for a potential conflict with China.

As part of that reorganization, the Corps has gotten rid of tank units in favor of more agile formations that can work better with the Navy, which would have a pivotal role in any Pacific Ocean conflict.

US still consumed by Arctic weather, subfreezing temps

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — Much of the United States remained gripped by deadly Arctic weather Sunday — with subfreezing conditions reaching as far south as Texas and Florida. But the numbing cold is expected to ease up in the coming days.

Crews in Memphis, Tenn., continued to work around the clock Sunday to find and fix broken pipes that were causing low water pressure throughout the system. Some residents have been without running water for days, and all of the utility's 400,000 customers continued to be under a boil water notice.

Memphis Light, Gas and Water President and CEO Doug McGowen said in a video posted to social media Saturday evening that he hopes to have an estimate of when pressure will be restored Sunday afternoon.

"Hang in there," McGowen

said. "Neighbors help neighbors."

As of Saturday afternoon, the utility had repaired 36 broken water mains and more than 2,000 leaks in homes and businesses. As temperatures began to rise above freezing Sunday, more leaks were expected to become apparent. McGowen asked residents to stop dripping faucets once things warmed up, a measure that would add 5 to 10 million gallons a day to the system and help restore water pressure.

Rhodes College in Memphis began sending residential students home on Saturday and moving those who could not return home to hotels. The school was planning virtual classes Monday and Tuesday.

"We ask that you NOT come to campus either day due to the ongoing water situation and the hazards that creates," the

school announcement said.

Memphis was the largest, but not the only, water system in Tennessee to experience problems from the unusually cold weather.

The Tennessee Emergency Management Agency said Saturday night that 28 water systems have issued boil water notices.

The continued cold weather is also responsible for at least 25 deaths in Tennessee, according to the Tennessee Department of Health. Nationally, winter storms this month have claimed at least 67 lives around the U.S., many involving hypothermia or road accidents.

Elsewhere, freezing rain, sleet and high wind gusts later Sunday would make traveling in parts of Kansas and Oklahoma particularly treacherous, the National Weather Service said.

Texas man pleads guilty in teenager's kidnapping

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — A Texas man has pleaded guilty to kidnapping a 13-year-old girl who was rescued in Southern California when a passerby saw her hold up a "Help Me!" sign in a parked car.

A statement Friday from the U.S. Attorney's Office in the Central District of California said Steven Robert Sablan, 62, of Cleburne, Texas, admitted in a plea agreement that he sexually assaulted the victim while driving her from Texas to California.

The girl was rescued July 9 in Long Beach, south of Los Angeles, after a passerby called 911 to report seeing her hold up the piece of paper with the handwritten desperate plea for help.

Sablan, who has been in federal custody since July 2023, pleaded guilty to one count of kidnapping, prosecutors said.

His attorney, Deputy Federal Public Defender Nadine Hettle, declined to comment Saturday.

In July, Sablan was indicted by a federal grand jury on charges of kidnapping and transportation of a minor with intent to engage in criminal sexual activity.

An FBI agent wrote in an affidavit supporting the criminal complaint that the girl was walking down a street in San Antonio on July 6 when Sablan drove up, raised a black handgun and told her, "If you don't get in the car with me, I am going to hurt you."

A sentencing hearing was scheduled for Oct. 25. Sablan will face a mandatory minimum of 20 years in federal prison and a maximum sentence of life.

Judge orders release of 'Newburgh Four' defendant, blasts FBI role in terror sting

Associated Press

A man convicted in a post-9/11 terrorism sting was ordered freed from prison by a judge who criticized the FBI for relying on an "unsavory" confidential informant for an agency-invented conspiracy to blow up New York synagogues and shoot down National Guard planes.

U.S. District Judge Colleen McMahon on Friday granted James Cromitie, 58, compassionate release from prison six months after she ordered the release of his three co-defendants, known as the Newburgh Four, for similar reasons.

The four men from the small river city 60 miles north of New

York City were convicted of terrorism charges in 2010.

Cromitie has served 15 years of his 25-year minimum sentence. The New York-based judge ordered Cromitie's sentence to be reduced to time served plus 90 days.

Prosecutors in the high-profile case said the Newburgh defendants spent months scouting targets and securing what they thought were explosives and a surface-to-air missile, aiming to shoot down planes at the Air National Guard base in Newburgh and blow up synagogues in the Bronx. They were arrested after allegedly planting "bombs" that were packed with inert explosives supplied by the FBI.

Critics have accused federal agents of entrapping a group of men who were down on their luck after doing prison time.

In a scathing ruling, McMahon wrote that the FBI invented the conspiracy and identified the targets. Cromitie and his co-defendants, she wrote, "would not have, and could not have, devised on their own a crime involving missiles that would have warranted the 25-year sentence the court was forced to impose."

"The notion that Cromitie was selected as a 'leader' by the co-defendants is inconceivable, given his well-documented buffoonery and ineptitude," she wrote.

Palestinian death toll in Gaza above 25K

Associated Press

RAFAH, Gaza Strip — The Palestinian death toll from the war between Israel and Hamas has soared past 25,000, the Health Ministry in the Gaza Strip said Sunday, while the Israeli government appeared far from achieving its goals of crushing the militant group and freeing more than 100 hostages.

The death, destruction and displacement from the war is without precedent in the decades-old Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Israeli officials say the fighting is likely to continue for several more months.

The conflict has divided ordinary Israelis and their leaders while the offensive threatens to ignite a wider war involving Iran-backed groups in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen that support the Palestinians. In Lebanon, Hezbollah forces have engaged in near-daily clashes with Israeli troops along the border.

An Israeli airstrike on Sunday hit a car near a Lebanese army checkpoint in the southern town of Kafra, killing at least one person and injuring several others, Lebanese state media

reported. Their identities were not immediately clear. Israel's military said its aircraft and tanks struck a number of Hezbollah targets in southern Lebanon. The United States, which has provided diplomatic and military support for Israel's offensive, has had limited success in persuading Israel to put civilians at less risk and to facilitate the delivery of more humanitarian aid.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has rejected U.S. and international calls for postwar plans that would include a path to Palestinian statehood. U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres called the refusal to accept a two-state solution "totally unacceptable."

"The Middle East is a tinderbox. We must do all we can to prevent conflict igniting across the region," Guterres added Sunday. "And that starts with an immediate humanitarian cease-fire to relieve the suffering in Gaza."

The war began with Hamas' attack in southern Israel on Oct. 7. Palestinian militants killed some 1,200 people, mostly civil-

ians, and took around 250 hostages back to Gaza.

Israel responded with a bombing campaign and ground invasion that laid waste to entire neighborhoods in northern Gaza and spread south. Ground operations are now focused on the southern city of Khan Younis and built-up refugee camps in central Gaza dating back to the 1948 war surrounding Israel's creation.

Israel continues to carry out airstrikes throughout the besieged territory, including areas in the south where it told civilians to seek refuge. Many Palestinians have ignored evacuation orders, saying nowhere feels safe.

On Sunday, Israel's military said the demolition last week of a key building at Israa University in Gaza was under review. It asserted that preliminary findings indicated Hamas had used the compound for military purposes. The university said earlier that the "attack" came weeks after Israeli forces occupied the building.

Since the war started, 25,105 Palestinians have been killed in Gaza, while another 62,681 have been wounded, the Health Ministry said.

N. Korea stresses alignment with Russia, says Putin soon will visit

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea said Sunday that Russian President Vladimir Putin expressed his willingness to visit the North at an unspecified "early date" as the countries continue to align in the face of their separate, intensifying confrontations with the United States.

The North Korean Foreign Ministry highlighted Putin's intent for a visit following North Korean Foreign Minister Choe Son Hui's meetings with Putin and Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov in Moscow last week. The ministry said in a statement published by state media that the two countries agreed to further strategic and tactical cooperation with Russia to establish a "new multipolarized international order," a reference to efforts to build a united front against the U.S.

Putin had already confirmed his willingness to visit the capital, Pyongyang, at a convenient time during his meeting with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Russia's Far East in September. One of the few world leaders openly supporting Putin's war on Ukraine, Kim has been actively boosting the visibility of his ties with Russia in an attempt to break out of diplomatic isolation and strengthen his foot-

ing, as he navigates a deepening nuclear standoff with Washington, Seoul and Tokyo.

In a separate statement Sunday, the North's Foreign Ministry condemned the U.N. Security Council for calling an emergency meeting over the country's latest ballistic test, which state media described as a new intermediate-range solid-fuel missile tipped with a hypersonic warhead. It said the test-firing on Jan. 14 didn't pose a threat to its neighbors.

South Korea on Thursday urged the Security Council "to break the silence" over North Korea's escalating missile tests and threats. Russia and China, both permanent members of the council, have blocked U.S.-led efforts to increase sanctions on North Korea over its recent weapons tests, underscoring a divide deepened over Russia's war on Ukraine.

The alignment between Pyongyang and Moscow has raised international concerns about alleged arms cooperation, in which the North provides Russia with munitions to help prolong its fighting in Ukraine, possibly in exchange for badly needed economic aid and military assistance to help upgrade Kim's forces. Pyongyang and Russia have denied accusations by Washington and Seoul about North Korean arms transfers to Russia.

6-legged dog has surgery to remove superfluous limbs

Associated Press

LONDON — A spaniel born with six legs that was found abandoned in a supermarket parking lot is now like other dogs after having her extra limbs surgically removed.

Ariel, named for "The Little Mermaid" character because the additional appendage looked like a flipper, ran through the grass outside a veterinary hospital Saturday as she adjusted to life on four legs.

"She is doing brilliantly," said Vicki Black, director of the Langford Vets Small Animal Referral Hospital, where she was operated on Thursday.

The dog, who had multiple birth defects, was found in Pembroke, Wales, in September. Greenacres Rescue took her in and raised funds for her surgery.

Black said the hospital, which is part of the University of Bristol, had never seen a six-legged dog or performed such an operation.

The extra legs extended from the right hindquarter and appeared to be of no use.

As she was discharged, she took to the lawn with the determination of a bird dog, nose to the ground and pulling on her leash.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

City beams message into space inviting visitors

KY LEXINGTON — A Kentucky city has come up with an out-of-this-world campaign to promote tourism.

The Lexington Convention and Visitors Bureau used an infrared laser to beam a message into space to invite extraterrestrial travelers.

“The first thing you’ll notice as you descend through Earth’s atmosphere above Central Kentucky is the lush green countryside that surrounds Lexington’s vibrant city center. That’s our famous bluegrass,” the message begins. It goes on to describe gentle rolling hills, horse farms and bourbon before suggesting places to stay and eat and shop.

The idea for the campaign came from recent UFO discussions and advances in deep space imaging that have fueled the belief that we are not alone in the universe, the visitors bureau said in a statement this month announcing the move. The agency said it worked with scientists and scholars to beam the message toward potentially habitable planets in the TRAPPIST-1 solar system 40 light years away.

Rape suspect denies involvement, uses accent

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A man accused of faking his death and fleeing the U.S. to avoid rape charges in Utah denied at a court appearance last week that he is the suspect and, in an apparent British accent, called allegations that he wasn’t giving his true name “complete hearsay.”

Nicholas Rossi, whose legal name is Nicholas Alahverdian, is charged with the rape of a 21-year-old woman in Orem, Utah, in 2008, prosecutors said. He wasn’t identified as a suspect until about a decade later due to a backlog of DNA test kits at the Utah State Crime Lab.

Rossi, 36, was extradited from Scotland earlier this month. He identified himself Tuesday as Arthur Knight Brown and gave a birthdate in British English — listing the day first, followed by the month and year — that is different from Rossi’s, KSTU-TV reported.

He appeared from jail via video wearing an oxygen mask and did not enter a plea at the initial court appearance. He was difficult to understand at times and had to lift up the mask to be heard.

Lawmakers seek to ban rainbow flags in schools

FL TALLAHASSEE — A bill advanced by Florida Republicans last week would ban teachers and other government employees from displaying a rainbow flag — even wearing one as a lapel pin for a day — but they could hang the full-size flag of any “recognized nation” as long as they want, according to the bill’s sponsor.

Flag displays that depict a “racial, sexual orientation and gender, or political ideology viewpoint” would be banned from any state or local government building, including public schools and universities, under the bill authored by GOP Rep. David Borrero.

Opponents say the bill is inspired by hate. Borrero said it

protects children and it would ban even lapel pins representing the flags of the LGBTQ+ and Black Lives Matter movements.

Couple gives \$100M to Spelman College

GA ATLANTA — A billionaire couple is giving \$100 million to Atlanta’s Spelman College, which the women’s school says is the largest-ever single donation to a historically Black college or university.

The donation was announced last week by Ronda Stryker and her husband William Johnston. She is the billionaire granddaughter of the founder of medical device maker Stryker Corp. and he is the chairman of money management firm Greenleaf Trust. They live in Michigan.

Spelman said that it would use \$75 million to endow scholarships. The rest of the money will be used for other purposes, including developing an academic focus on public policy and democracy and improving student housing, a sore point in recent years among Spelman students.

Law requiring ratings for school books blocked

TX AUSTIN — An order blocking the enforcement of a Texas law requiring vendors to evaluate and rate the sexual content of books they sell, or have sold, to schools has been upheld by a federal appeals court.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans said opponents of the law are likely to win their legal challenge of the

law, which was aimed at keeping material deemed “sexually explicit” off school library shelves.

Backers of the law have said it is designed to protect children from inappropriate sexual material. The law’s opponents said it could result in bans on literary classics such as “Romeo and Juliet” and “Of Mice and Men” in schools.

Opponents also said the law places too heavy a burden on book sellers to rate thousands of titles already sold and new ones published every year.

State sues TikTok, says it misrepresents content

IA DES MOINES — Iowa last week became the latest state to sue TikTok over claims that the social media company deceives consumers over the amount of “inappropriate content” that children can access via the platform.

TikTok claims an age rating of 12 and older in app stores, which is misrepresentative because of the “frequent and intense” mature and sexual content, Iowa claims in the lawsuit against TikTok and its Chinese parent company, ByteDance.

Utah, Arkansas and Indiana have filed similar lawsuits, though a judge dismissed Indiana’s lawsuit in November. Judges there determined that downloading the free social media app TikTok doesn’t amount to a consumer transaction under its state law.

The U.S. Supreme Court also will be deciding whether state attempts to regulate social media platforms such as Facebook, X and TikTok violate the Constitution.

— From wire reports



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Late rally propels 49ers past Packers

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — Brock Purdy's throws were off-target all night. The San Francisco defense kept giving up big plays. There were even a couple of special teams blunders.

Just when it seemed like the top-seeded 49ers might be sent home in their first playoff game, they did something they hadn't managed to do all season: mount a late-game comeback.

Christian McCaffrey capped a game-winning, 69-yard drive by running for his second touchdown with 1:07 to play, and the 49ers held on to beat the Green Bay Packers 24-21 Saturday in a divisional playoff.

"We're built for those moments," McCaffrey said. "We didn't play well at all but still had a chance at the end. To go out there and execute is a sign of a high-character team."

After spending all regular season as front-runners, the Niners (13-5) rallied behind Purdy and McCaffrey to reach their third straight NFC cham-

pionship game. And they will host it this time after losing the past two on the road. San Francisco will play the winner of Sunday's game between Tampa Bay and Detroit next weekend for a spot in the Super Bowl.

Purdy went 6-for-7 for 47 yards on the decisive drive, converting a third down with a 10-yard pass to Brandon Aiyuk and throwing a 17-yarder to Chris Conley.

"Obviously it's four quarters for a reason, you know? So the way I started, it's like, 'Man, I've got to be better, got to play efficient football,'" Purdy said. "But when it comes down to it, with the season on the line, you've got to make it happen for your boys around you."

McCaffrey finished it off with his 6-yard run on third-and-short and the 49ers' defense held on from there, with Dre Greenlaw intercepting Jordan Love for the second time to seal San Francisco's fifth straight playoff win over Green Bay (10-9).

"We feel exhausted," linebacker Fred Warner said. "That took everything. It took everything. We knew it'd be a close game. That's a heck of a team. They give us everything. This is the playoffs. We knew we had to find a way to win no matter what."

That last throw across his body was one of the few mistakes by Love, who had given the Packers the lead with two TD passes in the third quarter. But his first full season as the starter in place of Aaron Rodgers had a disappointing ending.

"It's tough," Love said. "Very tough. We had an opportunity to win that game and didn't capitalize on it. It's a tough way to end the season."

Purdy — who struggled with his accuracy early on a rainy night — threw for 252 yards and a touchdown, and McCaffrey rushed for 98 yards on 17 carries.

Love put the Niners in the unusual spot of playing from behind. Green Bay converted a

third-and-15 when Ambry Thomas was called for a 41-yard pass interference penalty against Bo Melton. Love and Melton connected on the next play for a wide-open 19-yard touchdown aided by Tashaun Gipson slipping on the wet grass in coverage.

After McCaffrey put San Francisco back in the lead with a 39-yard TD run, Green Bay struck quickly thanks to a 73-yard kick return by All-Pro Keisean Nixon that he fumbled, only to have teammate Eric Wilson recover.

Four plays later, Love threw a 2-yard touchdown pass to Tyler Kraft and the Packers extended the lead to 21-14 on a 2-point conversion pass to Aaron Jones.

"It was the story of our whole team," 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan said. "There was times when we were all off."

The Niners were the first team to make the playoffs in 13 seasons without overcoming a second-half deficit to win a game.

Second-half surge helps Ravens put away Texans

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Lamar Jackson had already done plenty of running by the time he reached the end zone in the fourth quarter.

Apparently, he still had quite a bit of energy, leaping past the photographers and disappearing into the tunnel in a celebration that seemed cathartic for the All-Pro quarterback.

Jackson threw two touchdown passes and ran for two scores, and the Baltimore Ravens pulled away in the second half for a 34-10 win over the Houston Texans on Saturday to advance to the AFC championship game. It was only the second victory in five playoff games for Jackson, a fact he was well aware of.

"You know I heard that," he said. "I don't even get to hear it. I see it. But it is what it is. I really don't care about what people say. ... Those guys just had our team's number in the past, but it's a different team."

Jackson made some more history Saturday, becoming the first quarterback since at least 1948 — in the regular season or playoffs — with at least two touchdown passes, two TD runs, 100 yards rushing and a 100 passer rating in the same game.

"Credit to Lamar," Texans coach DeMeco Ryans said. "He made a ton of great plays. That's why he's the MVP."

The Ravens (14-4) dominated the second half after the teams finished the second quarter tied

at 10. Jackson said he did most of the talking at halftime.

"A lot of cursing," he said.

Jackson's 15-yard scoring run put Baltimore ahead to stay. Although C.J. Stroud had a solid, composed first half for Houston, the Texans (11-8) ultimately couldn't turn enough promising drives into points against an impressive Ravens defense.

Now Baltimore will host the AFC title game for the first time since January 1971, when the Colts beat the Oakland Raiders on their way to a Super Bowl championship. The Ravens will play in that semifinal round for the fifth time since their arrival in Baltimore. They'll take on the winner of Sunday's matchup between Buffalo and Kansas City.

"Our fans are going to get a

chance to cheer just as loud or louder than they did in this game, and they were amazing," Ravens coach John Harbaugh said. "I thought our fans were incredible. Man, it was deafening out there."

Harbaugh's brother Jim was on hand for the game, returning the favor after John went to watch Jim coach Michigan at college football's national title earlier this month.

Ravens fans have been haunted by what happened in the playoffs four years ago, when Baltimore went 14-2 in the regular season but dropped its postseason opener to Tennessee. Houston did enough to create some anxiety, especially when Steven Sims returned a punt for a touchdown.

Thunder top T-wolves in West showdown

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 11 of his 33 points in the fourth quarter and the Oklahoma City Thunder rallied to beat the Minnesota Timberwolves 102-97 on Saturday night in a matchup of the top teams in the Western Conference standings.

Jaylin Williams added 20 points for Oklahoma City, and Minnesota native Chet Holmgren had 15. The Thunder trailed by 11 early in the fourth before rallying to win for the second time in four games to pull within a game of Minnesota.

“We just had great resilience tonight,” Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said. “It’s one thing to defend like that, but it’s another when you’re shooting the ball so poorly. We just had a really hard time cracking them.

They played great defense in the second half.”

The Thunder shot just 39.5% from the field, but held the Timberwolves to 14 points in the fourth on 3-for-13 shooting.

Anthony Edwards and Karl-Anthony Towns each had 19 points for Minnesota and Naz Reid added 18.

Oklahoma City used a 19-7 run to tie it at 90 with 3:42 remaining. Gilgeous-Alexander hit a 3-pointer with 1:14 left to give the Thunder a 96-94 lead.

“He’s been in this position so many times now,” Oklahoma City’s Luguentz Dort said. “I’m not surprised when he takes those types of shots. He’s so much confident. He knows he can make those shots for the team, so we all have trust in him to take those type of shots for us and he knocked it down.”

Knicks 126, Raptors 100:

Julius Randle had 18 points, 16 rebounds and 10 assists in his 14th career triple-double, and host New York routed Toronto in the first meeting between the teams since a trade last month.

RJ Barrett and Immanuel Quickley returned to loud cheers at Madison Square Garden, but the Knicks improved to 9-2 since OG Anunoby joined their lineup.

Bucks 141, Pistons 135: Damian Lillard had 45 points and 11 assists to lead visiting Milwaukee over Detroit.

Giannis Antetokounmpo added 31 points, 10 rebounds and nine assists.

Rockets 127, Jazz 126 (OT): Alperen Sengun scored a career-high 37 points and had a game-high 14 rebounds to lead host Houston over Utah.

Utah’s Jordan Clarkson missed a mid-range jumper in

the closing seconds as Houston hung on to snap a three-game losing streak.

Cavaliers 116, Hawks 95: Donovan Mitchell had 18 points and eight assists to lead a balanced attack as visiting Cleveland extended the NBA’s longest current winning streak to seven with a victory over Atlanta.

76ers 97, Hornets 89: Joel Embiid had 33 points to extend his franchise-record run of 30 or more to 20 games and visiting Philadelphia beat Charlotte for its fifth straight victory.

Spurs 131, Wizards 127: Victor Wembanyama returned after sitting out a game to score 24 points and grab eight rebounds, leading visiting San Antonio over Washington.

Bulls 125, Grizzlies 96: Ayo Dosunmu scored 20 points, DeMar DeRozan added 18 and host Chicago pounded Memphis.

Texas beats No. 9 Baylor on buzzer-beating layup

Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — Tyrese Hunter’s frantic, driving layup at the buzzer sent Texas to a 75-73 win over No. 9 Baylor on Saturday, handing the Bears their second straight loss in the Big 12 Conference.

Hunter’s basket came after Baylor’s Jalen Bridges tied it on a long 3-pointer with 5 seconds left, the Bears’ first basket in nearly nine minutes. Texas quickly inbounded the ball and got it to Hunter near midcourt, and he weaved his way around three defenders for the basket.

“I knew I had to get down the court,” Hunter said. “I had already looked at the clock. ... Get a foul or make a layup.”

Texas coach Rodney Terry still had a timeout to use, but with the game tied, he decided to let the last scramble play out.

“Don’t over-coach,” Terry said. “Let those guys do what they do in practice. We got downhill and won the game.”

Hunter barely got the ball out of his hands over Baylor’s Gavin Perryman before the game clock hit zero. Game officials reviewed the shot, but quickly ruled that it counted.

No. 1 UConn 66, Villanova 65: Alex Karaban hit the decisive 3-pointer for the visiting Huskies with 2:43 left in the game, Tristen Newton scored 25 points and UConn held off the persistent Wildcats.

Cam Spencer had 14 points for the Huskies (17-2, 7-1 Big East), who are 2-0 since they were voted No. 1 the AP Top 25 in the regular season for the first time in 15 years.

No. 2 Purdue 84, Iowa 70: Zach Edey had 30 points and 18 rebounds to lead the visiting Boilermakers past the Hawkeyes.

Lance Jones scored 17 points and Fletcher Loyer added 12 as Purdue (17-2, 6-2 Big Ten) won its third consecutive game and 10th out of its last 11.

West Virginia 91, No. 3 Kansas 85: RaeQuan Battle scored 23 points and grabbed nine rebounds, Pat Suemnick added a career-high 20 points and the host Mountaineers beat the Jayhawks.

No. 4 North Carolina 76, Boston College 66: RJ Davis scored 16 points and Harrison Ingram scored 11 with 13 rebounds to lead the visiting Tar Heels to their eighth straight win and a victory over the Eagles.

No. 5 Houston 57, UCF 42: L.J. Cryer scored 16 points, Jamal Shead added 10 points, seven rebounds and five assists and the host Cougars used a staunch defensive effort to beat the Knights.

Cryer scored 13 first-half points. Ja’Vier Francis had 10 points and six rebounds for Houston (16-2, 3-2 Big 12), which has won 16 straight home games.

No. 6 Tennessee 91, Alaba-

ma 71: Dalton Knecht scored 25 points to help the host Volunteers hand the Crimson Tide their first SEC loss this season.

Jonas Aidoo added 19 points and four blocks and Jordan Gai-ney had 15 points for Tennessee (14-4, 4-1).

Pittsburgh 80, No. 7 Duke 76: Blake Hinson scored 24 points on a perfect 7-for-7 shooting from 3-point range as the visiting Panthers beat the Blue Devils in Cameron Indoor Stadium for the first time since 1979.

No. 8 Kentucky 105, Georgia 96: Tre Mitchell scored 23 points, Antonio Reeves added 21 points and the host Wildcats shot 62% to beat the Bulldogs.

No. 12 Arizona 77, UCLA 71: Oumar Ballo had 17 points and 13 rebounds, Pelle Larsson scored 22 points and the host Wildcats rallied from a 19-point deficit to beat the Bruins in the rivals’ final Pac-12 game at McKale Center.

Oilers win Canada-best 13th straight

Associated Press

CALGARY, Alberta — Sam Gagner broke a tie with a fluke goal early in the third period and the Edmonton Oilers beat the Calgary Flames 3-1 on Saturday night to break Montreal's record for the longest winning streak by a Canadian team at 13.

From below the goal line near the corner, Gagner attempted to center to Dylan Holloway in the slot, but it deflected off Flames defenseman Rasmus Andersson's skate, ended up on the top of goalie Dan Vladar's trapper and fluttered into the net.

Ryan McLeod and Zach Hyman — into an empty net — also scored, and Stuart Skinner made 26 saves to help Edmonton break the tie with the 1967-68 Canadiens for the Canadian mark. Pittsburgh set the NHL mark of 17 in 1992-93.

"Any time you can be the only team to do anything that's positive, that's always exciting. Good for our group," said captain Connor McDavid, whose points streak ended at 12 games. "It's not something we were paying too close attention to, but obviously we want to keep going."

The Oilers improved to 26-15-1, going 23-6-0 since Kris Knoblauch took over as coach.

"When we did the 10-game streak, we eclipsed the Oilers' '80s teams, now it's the old Montreal team," said Hyman, who has 28 goals. "When you're in the moment you just go out there and play, but I'm sure it'll be something cool to look back on."

The Oilers have won nine straight on the road to break the franchise record set in 1986-87, and Skinner won his 10th straight to tie Grant Fuhr's 1985-86 team mark.

Kings 2, Rangers 1: Quinton Byfield scored late in the second period as host Los Angeles spoiled New York goalie Jonathan Quick's first game against his former team.

Kevin Fiala also scored for the Kings, who won for only the second time in 11 games. David Rittich stopped 22 shots.

Lightning 3, Sabres 1: Nicholas Paul and Tyler Motte scored 52 seconds apart in the first period and visiting Tampa Bay beat Buffalo for its fifth consecutive victory.

Brandon Hagel had two as-

sists, and Paul added an assist when defenseman Calvin de Haan scored into the empty net late in the third period. Jonas Johansson, a former Sabres player now backing up Andrei Vasilevskiy with the Lightning, made 27 saves in the opener of a three-game road trip.

Canucks 6, Maple Leafs 4: Conor Garland and Nils Hoglander each scored twice and NHL-leading Vancouver beat visiting Toronto.

After Toronto tied it at 4 early in the third period, J.T. Miller and Elias Pettersson scored power-play goals to put it away. Thatcher Demko made 44 saves for Vancouver.

Golden Knights 3, Penguins 2: Rookie Brendan Brisson scored his first career goal midway through the third period and host Vegas beat Pittsburgh.

The Golden Knights have won five of seven games, and they ended the Penguins' four-game point streak.

Bruins 9, Canadiens 4: Brad Marchand set a club record by scoring his 20th goal for the 11th consecutive season, Danton Heinen got his first career hat trick and host Boston rolled

over Montreal for its fourth straight victory.

Jets 2, Senators 1 (OT): Nikolaj Ehlers' goal with 45.8 seconds remaining in overtime lifted visiting Winnipeg past Ottawa.

Avalanche 7, Flyers 4: Nathan MacKinnon had two goals and three assists, Logan O'Connor had a hat trick and visiting Colorado held on to defeat Philadelphia.

Stars 6, Devils 2: Roope Hintz scored twice in a three-goal second period and Scott Wedgewood made 29 saves against his former teammates to lead visiting Dallas to a victory over New Jersey.

Coyotes 3, Predators 2: Clayton Keller scored two goals and Connor Ingram made 31 saves in host Arizona's victory over Nashville.

Blues 3, Capitals 0: Jordan Binnington stopped 18 shots for his 14th career shutout, and host St. Louis beat Washington.

Sharks 5, Ducks 3: Captain Logan Couture made a long-awaited return from injury with an assist in his first game this season as host San Jose beat Anaheim.

Du Plessis outpoints Strickland for middleweight belt

Associated Press

TORONTO — The hostility brewing between Sean Strickland and Dricus Du Plessis finally hit its boiling point at UFC 297 on Saturday night.

The two battled through five rounds, taking the bout to the distance, but in the end it was Du Plessis taking Strickland's middleweight belt after bloodying the former champ over his left eye and winning a split decision.

Judges Derek Cleary and Eric Colon scored the bout 48-47 in favor of Du Plessis, while Sal D'Amato had it 48-47 for Strickland.

"This is history!" Du Plessis (21-2) screamed in honor of his homeland. "South Africa ... we can probably hear them from outside. That country is amazing."

It was December when Du Plessis referenced Strickland's abusive relationship with his father. Strickland let it be known that would not be tolerated, and violent recourse would result.

At UFC 296 in December, Strickland jumped over a row of seats and threw punches at Du Plessis — which both said was nowhere near a publicity stunt.

Nothing about the fight was

near a stunt, as the two traded blows, both delivering severe blows, especially in the latter rounds.

Despite the tension leading up to fight night, Du Plessis gave Strickland (28-6) his just due afterward.

"Every time he hits you with that jab it feels like someone hit you with a rock. You are one heck of a man, thank you for bringing out the best of me tonight," Du Plessis said. "The first three rounds were give and take, but the last two, I was desperate rounds four and five."

To which Strickland later re-

plied: "I called it from day one — it was going to be a war."

At FanDuel, the fight closed a pick'em with both priced at -108, which means a bettor would have to lay \$108 to win \$100.

Raquel Pennington (16-9-0) beat Mayra Bueno Silva (10-3-1) by unanimous decision to claim the vacant women's bantamweight championship in the co-main event. Pennington was listed as the underdog in the match.

Neil Magny (29-12-0) stopped Mike Malott (10-2-1) at the 4:45 mark of the third round of their welterweight match.