

ISIS ties in New Orleans attack by US vet

Associated Press

NEW ORLEANS — The U.S. Army veteran who drove a pickup truck into a crowd of New Year's revelers acted alone, the FBI said Thursday, reversing its position from a day earlier that he likely worked with others in carrying out the deadly attack, which officials say was an act of terrorism inspired by the Islamic State.

The FBI also revealed that the driver, Shamsud-Din Jabbar, a U.S. citizen from Texas, posted five videos on his Facebook account in the hours before the attack in which he aligned himself with ISIS and told viewers that he had joined the militant group before last summer.

"This was an act of terrorism. It was premeditated and an evil act," said Christopher Raia, the deputy assistant director of the FBI's counterterrorism division.

The attack killed 14 people, including an 18-year-old woman who had ambitions of be-

coming a nurse. Authorities initially put the death toll at 15, which included Jabbar, who was fatally shot in a firefight with police.

Officials had said that they were seeking additional potential suspects in the attack, which occurred when Jabbar steered around a police blockade and plowed into a crowd.

But Raia said the current assessment is that he acted alone, without any conspirators.

Authorities recovered a black flag of the Islamic State in the truck, and President Joe Biden said he was told by the FBI that Jabbar, a U.S. citizen from Texas, had posted videos to social media hours before the carnage that showed he was motivated by the militant group and expressed a desire to kill.

He was shot to death by police, and the FBI said Wednesday that it believed he did not act alone. Investigators found guns and what appeared to be an improvised explosive device in the vehicle, along with other

explosive devices elsewhere in the French Quarter.

Officials fanned out to serve search warrants and spent hours at a Houston-area home thought to be connected to the investigation.

The rampage turned festive Bourbon Street into a macabre scene of maimed victims, bloodied bodies and pedestrians fleeing for safety inside nightclubs and restaurants. In addition to the dead, dozens of people were hurt.

Zion Parsons, 18, of Gulfport, Miss., said he saw the truck "barreling through, throwing people like in a movie scene, throwing people into the air."

"Bodies, bodies all up and down the street, everybody screaming and hollering," said Parsons, whose friend Nikyra Dedeaux was among the dead.

But by Thursday, a still-reeling city was inching back toward normal operations. Authorities finished processing the scene early in the morning, removing the last of the bodies,

and Bourbon Street was set to reopen at some point later in the day, according to an official familiar with the matter who spoke on condition of anonymity to The Associated Press.

The Sugar Bowl college football game between Notre Dame and Georgia, initially set for Wednesday night and postponed by a day in the interest of national security, was still on for Thursday. And the city planned to host the Super Bowl next month.

Federal officials were investigating Jabbar's potential associations with any terror organizations as they hunted for additional clues in what's believed to be the deadliest ISIS-inspired assault on U.S. soil in years.

Jabbar drove a rented pickup truck onto a sidewalk, going around a police car that was positioned to block vehicular traffic, authorities said.

A barrier system meant to prevent vehicle attacks was being repaired in preparation for the Super Bowl.

Suspect in Cybertruck blast at Trump hotel was Green Beret

Staff and wire reports

LAS VEGAS — Firework mortars and camp fuel canisters were found stuffed into the back of the Tesla Cybertruck that exploded outside President-elect Donald Trump's Las Vegas hotel early Wednesday, killing a suspect inside the vehicle and sparking an intense investigation into possible terrorism.

Las Vegas Metropolitan Police and Clark County Fire Department officials said that a person died inside the futuristic-looking pickup truck and seven people nearby suffered

minor injuries.

The U.S. Army identified the dead man as Matthew Alan Livelsberger.

He was a master sergeant assigned to the Army's 10th Special Forces Group, an official said Thursday on condition of anonymity. The group, which has a battalion based out of Stuttgart, is the Army's primary special operations unit in Germany and carries out missions across Europe.

Livelsberger enlisted in the Army in 2006 and served on active duty until 2011.

He then had stints in the Na-

tional Guard and Army Reserve before returning to active duty in December 2012 as a special operations soldier, the Army said.

During his Army career, Livelsberger deployed twice to Afghanistan and served in Ukraine, Tajikistan, Georgia and Congo, the Army said.

He was awarded two Bronze Stars including one with a valor device for courage under fire, a combat infantry badge and an Army Commendation Medal with valor.

Livelsberger was on leave from his assignment in Germa-

ny when he died, officials said.

U.S. Army Special Operations Command "is in full cooperation with federal and state law enforcement agencies, but as a matter of policy, will not comment on ongoing investigations," the Army statement said.

Video of the aftermath of Wednesday's blast showed a tumble of charred fireworks mortars, canisters and other explosive devices crowded into the back of the pickup.

The truck bed walls were still intact because the blast shot straight up rather than to the sides.

Marine Corps to unify senior NCO schools

By LYDIA GORDON
Stars and Stripes

Marine Corps staff sergeants and gunnery sergeants will begin attending the same leadership school for promotion to the next rank under a pilot program that will merge their respective schools. The creation of a single program to teach leadership skills, tactics classes and other aspects of their roles is intended to lessen the time those Marines spend away from their units.

The program consolidating the Career and Advanced schools will begin in the spring, a Marine Corps administrative message

said.

While the change is being referred to as a pilot program, it appears likely to become permanent. The administrative message issued last month stated that the existing format offering separate resident schools will sunset in February 2025, while distance learning programs will be available until June 2025.

The new senior noncommissioned officer leadership school will be offered in two formats, online and in person. The online version will last 15 weeks, and prerequisites will be updated.

The distance course will be run

through the Fort Worth, Texas, region beginning in March 2025 and be offered to Marines who can't attend in person.

The course sites are at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.; Camp Lejeune, N.C.; Camp Pendleton, Calif.; and Camp Smedley D. Butler on Okinawa. For the resident version, instruction will begin in April and is shortened to seven weeks.

Staff sergeants and gunnery sergeants who have already completed current requirements are exempt from attending the new program, according to the statement.

A third option is a two-week format available for Marines of those two ranks who are individual ready reservists or get mobilized as individual augmentees.

"Through the (school), our SNCOs are equipped with the tools to not only lead more effectively but to mentor and guide their Marines through the complexities of today's operational environment," Sgt. Maj. Stephen Griffin of the Training and Education Command said in the Dec. 23 statement. The change was intended to balance the needs for education and occupational training, Griffin said.

New special counsels take over harassment cases

By GARY WARNER
Stars and Stripes

Military commanders will lose their authority to overturn court-martial findings in the most serious sexual harassment cases as of Jan. 1, the Pentagon said Tuesday.

Under a plan approved by Congress, certain sexual harassment cases under the Uniform Code of Military Justice — the military's set of laws — will be investigated and prosecuted by the new Offices of Special Trial Counsel in each service branch.

The Defense Department issued a statement Tuesday confirming the special trial counsels of the Army, Air Force, Navy and the Marine Corps will take over Article 134 sexual harassment cases.

Article 134 is the military's "general article" covering "all disorders and neglects to the prejudice of good order and discipline in the armed forces, all conduct of a nature to bring discredit upon the armed forces, and crimes and offenses not capital, of which persons subject to this chapter may be

guilty, shall be taken cognizance of by a general, special, or summary court-martial," according to the U.S. Manual of Courts-Martial.

Article 134 has several subsections dealing with specific violations, including disloyal statements, fraternization, underage drinking, abusing animals, adultery and gambling with subordinates.

Sexual harassment violations under Article 134 are defined as knowingly making sexual advances, demands or requests for sexual favors. The advances must also have been unwelcome, and a reasonable person would believe submission or rejection to the advances would have an effect on the targeted person's job, pay, career, benefits or entitlements. It is also defined as severe, repetitive or pervasive, creating a hostile environment and being to the prejudice of good order and discipline, and a discredit on the armed forces.

The maximum penalty for each count of sexual harassment is a dishonorable discharge for enlisted personnel or

dismissal from service for officers, total forfeiture of pay and allowances, and confinement for up to two years.

Congress has acted to remove commanders from exercising discretionary authority on prosecution and punishment for 14 "covered offenses" of the UCMJ, including nearly all sex crimes, kidnapping, manslaughter and murder.

Some lawmakers said they pushed for reforms after receiving several reports of "command influence" in which charges were not brought against senior officers or findings were overturned following courts-martial.

The special trial counsels were established in late December 2023 and began taking cases immediately.

Previously, officers were sometimes allowed to accept retirement, with a reduction in rank, in lieu of dismissal, the military's equivalent of a dishonorable discharge for officers.

Lawmakers who supported removing commanders from the decision-making process

said they hoped it would create a more professional prosecution and punishment of offenders.

The addition of sexual harassment cases to the slate of crimes handled by special trial counsels was delayed until 2025 to allow the new offices more time to develop reporting methods and standards.

Before Jan. 1, decisions to charge service members with sexual harassment under Article 134 were made by unit commanders. The commanders also reviewed the outcome of cases that went to court-martial and had the unilateral power to vacate sentences or overturn verdicts with which they disagreed.

The new rules mean appeals of courts-martial handled by the special trial counsels can only be reviewed and altered by the secretaries of the service branches.

Conviction for sexual harassment under Article 134 is considered a felony, which could limit the guilty person's ability to get a job, vote, and buy firearms, among other civilian penalties, once the person has left military service.

China-backed hacker breaches Treasury

Bloomberg News

The U.S. Treasury Department was hacked by a Chinese state-sponsored actor through a third-party software service provider, according to a letter the agency sent to Congress on Monday.

Treasury described the intrusion as a “major cybersecurity incident,” since it was attributed to a state-sponsored actor, according to the letter, which was reviewed by Bloomberg News.

Treasury was notified on Dec. 8 by a third-party software provider, BeyondTrust, that a hacker

had gained access “to a key used by the vendor to secure a cloud-based service used to remotely provide technical support for Treasury Departmental Offices (DO) end users,” according to the letter.

The department is being assisted by the Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency, the FBI, the intelligence community and third-party forensic investigators.

Based on available information, advanced hackers tied to China were behind the incident, according to the letter.

The Chinese Embassy in Washington opposes U.S. “smear attacks against China without any factual basis,” it said in an emailed statement. “The U.S. needs to stop using cybersecurity to smear and slander China, and stop spreading all kinds of disinformation about the so-called Chinese hacking threat,” it said.

BeyondTrust, which sells managed access software and other cybersecurity products, holds contracts with the federal government worth more than \$4 million, according to govern-

ment data compiled by Bloomberg. In addition to Treasury, the data shows, BeyondTrust does business with the Department of Defense, Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Justice, along with other agencies.

A BeyondTrust spokesperson said Monday night that a limited number of customers were involved, had been notified and were being offered support. The spokesperson added that law enforcement had been contacted and the company was supporting the investigation.

Fatal fireworks explosion leaves ruin in Honolulu

Associated Press

Emergency crews arrived to a chaotic and gruesome scene in a Honolulu neighborhood after a large New Year’s firework tipped over after being lit and ignited a fiery, shrapnel-studded blast that killed three people and injured more than 20 others, several of them critically.

Two women died at the scene and a third woman died at a hospital, authorities said Wednesday as they implored people to abandon their New Year’s tradition of setting off fireworks across the city. Officials promised tougher penalties for illegal

fireworks.

Hawaii Gov. Josh Green graphically described the deaths in a news conference Wednesday to emphasize the potential danger of fireworks. “We’re talking about the worst possible, war-zone injuries that took their lives.”

Some of the more than 20 people taken to hospitals with severe burns and shrapnel wounds included children, said officials who had not yet publicly identified any victims including those killed.

Police were investigating whether charges for the person who lit the firework near mid-

night were warranted, Honolulu Police Chief Arthur Logan said.

The blast happened at a three-story home with a bottom-level carport. Piles of debris including bundles of blackened firework mortars could be seen in front of the house in Wednesday’s daylight.

The explosion broke windows across the street. It happened when a lit bundle of aerial, mortar-style fireworks called a “cake” tipped over or fell off a table and fired sideways into crates containing additional fireworks, which then exploded.

The cake’s rounds could be separated but had been lit as a bundle of 50, part of what officials said was tens of thousands of dollars’ worth of fireworks at the home.

Ambulance crews arrived but had to triage — separate and treat victims with the worst injuries first — several houses away because of parked cars and crowds on the streets, Honolulu Emergency Services Department Director Dr. Jim Ireland said.

Some people nearby continued setting off fireworks even as blast victims were being taken to hospitals, officials said.

Biden to give civilian award to leaders of Jan. 6 panel

Associated Press

President Joe Biden is bestowing the second highest civilian medal on Liz Cheney and Bennie Thompson, leaders of the congressional investigation into the Capitol riot who Donald Trump has said should be jailed for their roles in the inquiry.

Biden will award the Presidential Citizens Medal to 20 people in a ceremony Thursday at the White House, including Americans who fought for mar-

riage equality, a pioneer in treating wounded soldiers, and two of the president’s longtime friends, former Sens. Ted Kaufman, D-Del., and Chris Dodd, D-Conn.

“President Biden believes these Americans are bonded by their common decency and commitment to serving others,” the White House said in a statement. “The country is better because of their dedication and sacrifice.”

Biden last year honored peo-

ple who were involved in defending the Capitol from a mob of angry Trump supporters on Jan. 6, 2021, or who helped safeguard the will of American voters during the 2020 presidential election, when Trump tried and failed to overturn the results.

Cheney, a former Wyoming congresswoman, and Thompson, a Mississippi Democrat, led the House committee that investigated the insurrection. The committee’s final report assert-

ed that Trump criminally engaged in a “multi-part conspiracy” to overturn the lawful results of the election he lost to Biden and failed to act to stop his supporters from attacking the Capitol. Thompson wrote that Trump “lit that fire.”

Cheney, who served in Congress as a Republican, later said she would vote for Democrat Kamala Harris and campaigned with the Democratic nominee, raising Trump’s ire.

US: N. Koreans in Russia betrayed by leaders

By DAVID CHOI
Stars and Stripes

CAMP HUMPHREYS, South Korea — North Korean troops deployed to Russia's western border with Ukraine are conducting "human wave tactics" on the battlefield, leading to more than 1,000 casualties within their ranks last week, a White House spokesman said recently.

North Korean troops supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine are conducting ground assaults in the Kursk region against Ukrainian forces that have led to "heavy casualties," White House National Security Council spokesman John Kirby said last Friday during a news conference in Washington.

"It is clear that Russian and

North Korean military leaders are treating these troops as expendable and ordering them on hopeless assaults against Ukrainian defenses," he said. "These North Korean soldiers appear to be highly indoctrinated, pushing attacks even when it is clear that those attacks are futile."

The White House had received reports that North Korean troops were killing themselves, instead of surrendering, Kirby said, "likely out of fear of reprisal against their families in North Korea in the event that they're captured."

North Korean troops have suffered "many losses" and Moscow and Pyongyang "have no interest in the survival of these Koreans at all," Ukrainian

President Volodymyr Zelenskyy said in a video address last Friday.

"Everything is arranged in a way that makes it impossible for us to capture the Koreans as prisoners," Zelenskyy said. Those who were captured were "seriously wounded and could not be resuscitated," he said.

Militaries and intelligence agencies in Ukraine, the United States and South Korea have estimated around 10,000-12,000 North Korean troops have deployed to Russia since October.

Since 2022, Pyongyang has shipped artillery shells and ballistic missiles to Russia in its fight against Ukraine, according to South Korea's military. North Korean leader Kim Jong

Un and Russian President Vladimir Putin in June pledged mutual military aid if either of their countries were at war.

President Joe Biden on Monday announced the U.S. would send nearly \$2.5 billion in security assistance to Ukraine. This package includes medium-range surface-to-air missiles, artillery shells, small arms, grenades, communications equipment and clothing, according to a Defense Department news release that day.

"At my direction, the United States will continue to work relentlessly to strengthen Ukraine's position in this war over the remainder of my time in office," Biden said in a White House statement Monday.

DOD court: Military's 9/11 plea deals can proceed

The Washington Post

The U.S. government's controversial plea deals with three men accused of orchestrating the 9/11 terrorist attacks may proceed, a Defense Department appeals court has ruled, after the Biden administration sought to thwart an agreement that would spare the lives of those who have admitted guilt in the deadliest crime perpetrated on American soil.

The unanimous decision, released Monday night by the U.S. Court of Military Commission Review, is a rebuke of Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin, who intervened in the cases in August after the agreements were approved by a judge he had appointed to oversee the cases against Khalid Sheikh Mohammed, the attacks' alleged mastermind, and Mohammed's suspected accomplices. At the time, Austin said he believed that the families of those killed on Sept. 11, 2001, and as a result of the ensuing wars deserved to see the men stand trial.

The appeals court ruled that while Austin had authority to re-

strict the judge, Susan K. Escalier, from entering into future pre-trial agreements on behalf of the U.S. government, he could not rescind them after the fact. Mohammed and other defendants have already acknowledged their guilt, undermining any other proceeding against them, the appeals court found.

A senior defense official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue, said DOD, in conjunction with the Justice Department, is reviewing the ruling and considering options. The U.S. government on Tuesday filed a motion with the military commission requesting a continuance of the guilty pleas until Jan. 27 to provide U.S. officials "the opportunity to determine whether to pursue relief" in the case, the senior defense official said. A motions hearing in Mohammed's case was to begin Jan. 6.

The appeals court's ruling upholds a determination by Air Force Col. Matthew McCall, a military commission judge.

Impeached Yoon defiant with detention possible

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Impeached South Korean President Yoon Suk Yeol, in a message to conservative supporters rallying outside his Seoul residence, vowed to "fight to the end" against "anti-state forces," while his legal team warned Thursday that police officers attempting to detain him could face arrest by his presidential security service or even civilians.

Yoon's latest statement of defiance came as the Corruption Investigation Office for High-Ranking Officials prepared to execute a detainment warrant against him that was issued by a Seoul court on Tuesday and is valid for one week. The warrant was issued after Yoon evaded multiple requests to appear for questioning and blocked searches of his office, hindering an investigation into whether his hours-long martial law imposition on Dec. 3 amounted to rebellion.

Oh Dong-woon, the anti-cor-

ruption agency's chief prosecutor, has indicated that police forces might be deployed if Yoon's security service resists the detention attempt, which could occur as early as Thursday. But it remains unclear whether Yoon can be compelled to submit to questioning.

Yoon's legal team issued a statement on Thursday warning that any attempt by the anti-corruption agency to use police units for his detention would exceed their legal authority. The lawyers said police officers could face arrest by either the "presidential security service or any citizens" if they try to detain Yoon. They didn't elaborate further on the claim.

The liberal opposition Democratic Party, which drove the legislative vote that impeached Yoon Suk Yeol on Dec. 14 over his imposition of martial law, accused the president of trying to mobilize his supporters to block his detention and called for law enforcement authorities to execute the warrant immediately.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Fire damages hotel made famous by The Doors

CA LOS ANGELES — The former Morrison Hotel, made famous by The Doors and their 1970 album of the same name, was significantly damaged by a fire that erupted in downtown Los Angeles.

The four-story building, which has been vacant more than a decade, burned for nearly two hours before more than 100 firefighters brought the flames under control, according to the Los Angeles Fire Department.

The Morrison Hotel was featured on the cover of The Doors' fifth album. Celebrated music photographer Henry Diltz made the image in 1969 and said years later that it took a little trickery to pull it off.

A hotel clerk told the band they weren't allowed to take photos inside, but when the clerk stepped away, the group ran into the lobby and Diltz quickly got the photo looking through the window, with legendary frontman Jim Morrison in the middle.

The building in recent years had been used as a training site for firefighters.

Officer's traffic stop assault charge dismissed

OK OKLAHOMA CITY — Oklahoma's Republican attorney general dismissed a felony assault charge against a police officer who slammed a 71-year-old man to the ground, breaking his neck, during an argument over a traffic ticket.

Gentner Drummond announced that he had intervened in the case and dismissed the

aggravated assault and battery charge against Oklahoma City Police Sgt. Joseph Gibson, 28.

Oklahoma County District Attorney Vicki Behenna charged Gibson last month after body-worn camera video released by police showed Gibson throwing Lich Vu to the ground after Vu touched Gibson during the argument following a non-injury traffic accident Oct. 27.

"As attorney general, I will not permit Oklahoma police officers to face criminal prosecution for conduct adhering to their training," Drummond said in a statement. "While the outcome of this incident is unquestionably devastating for Mr. Vu and his family, I do not believe the officer exhibited criminal intent."

Prosecutors said Vu suffered a brain bleed and a broken neck and eye socket.

Tugboat, tanker collide in Mississippi River

LA LULING — The crew of a tugboat was quickly rescued when their vessel sank into the Mississippi River following a collision with a tanker ship in Louisiana.

St. Charles Parish Sheriff Greg Champagne said his office received a report of the collision between the ship and tugboat near the Hale Boggs Memorial Bridge in Luling, La., on Sunday night.

"Preliminary reports are that all crew members from the tug have been rescued," Champagne said in a Facebook post around 10 p.m. Sunday.

The sheriff's office said the tanker was traveling upriver when it struck the tugboat and caused the smaller vessel to sink, WWL-TV reported.

Plane crew, passenger injured during turbulence

WA SEATTLE — Four Alaska Airlines crew members were hospitalized after severe turbulence struck their Boeing 737 MAX on a recent flight from Seattle to Phoenix.

One passenger aboard Alaska Airlines Flight 700 was also injured during the midafternoon incident, but was treated at Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport and not hospitalized, Alaska Airlines said.

The airline isn't providing details about the severity of the crew members' injuries or their hospitalization status "to protect their privacy," according to Alaska Airlines.

The Federal Aviation Administration is investigating the incident, which involved a Boeing 737 MAX 9, according to the agency's website. The plane landed safely following a report by the flight crew of a "medical emergency following severe turbulence," the FAA said.

Another Dem switches to GOP in Florida House

FL TALLAHASSEE — A second Democrat re-elected to the Florida House of Representatives this year has joined the Republican Party, further increasing the GOP's supermajority in the chamber.

State Rep. Hillary Cassel, an attorney from Dania Beach, announced that she had changed her party affiliation from Democrat to Republican, saying that she no longer shares the values of the current Democratic Party and that she believes it will be easier to deliver on her promises by joining the majority party.

"This decision was not made lightly but comes from a deep sense of responsibility to my constituents and my commitment to the values that guide my service," Cassel said in a statement. "I will be joining the Republican Conference of the Florida House of Representatives because I believe in their vision for a better, more prosperous Florida."

Cassel's announcement comes less than a month after State Rep. Susan Valdés, a former school board member who was reelected as a Democrat in November, switched her party affiliation to Republican. Valdés said she was "tired of being the party of protesting."

State reports rare fatal human case of rabies

KY LEXINGTON — A northern Kentucky resident has died of rabies, the state Department for Public Health announced. Officials did not release the person's name or disclose whether the victim was a man or woman.

Health officials had not yet been able to pinpoint how the person contracted the disease but said it may have happened during travel outside the U.S.

The person was treated in both Kentucky and Ohio, so health authorities in both states are working with the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to investigate the case.

Dr. Steven Stack, commissioner of the Kentucky Department for Public Health, said it is critical for people to get medical care immediately after any suspected exposure to rabies, a virus that affects the brain.

— From wire reports

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Ohio St. routs Oregon, reaches semis

Associated Press

PASADENA, Calif. — Second chances don't come around often in life, Ohio State coach Ryan Day told his players in a team meeting before the Rose Bowl.

After a season in which they fell short at too many key moments, the Buckeyes all knew they had one of those second chances when they stepped onto this famous turf for another shot at the top-ranked, unbeaten Oregon Ducks.

Ohio State seized it with a vengeance.

Jeremiah Smith caught two of Will Howard's three long touchdown passes during a sensational 34-point first half, and the No. 6 Buckeyes roared into the College Football Playoff semifinals with a 41-21 victory in the 111th Rose Bowl on Wednesday night.

"You can see the potential of where we're at, when we play in all three phases the way we did," Day said.

Howard passed for 319 yards, Emeka Egbuka also caught a long TD pass and TreVeyon

Henderson made a 66-yard touchdown run in a redemptive Rose Bowl for the Buckeyes (12-2, CFP No. 8 seed), who lost a 32-31 heartbreaker to the Ducks in Eugene in October. Ohio State then lost to archrival Michigan in humiliating fashion to conclude a regular season in which its performances didn't always measure up to its talent.

The inaugural 12-team College Football Playoff created a way for the Buckeyes to erase their mistakes — and from the opening minute in Pasadena, they took out every frustration on the outclassed Ducks.

"I think nobody has gone through more scrutiny than probably the team here," Egbuka said. "Five weeks ago, you know, people on the scene getting death threats, our head coach getting cussed out, people saying he should never come to Ohio again, all that type of stuff. And I'm sure by the end of (tonight), when you scroll Twitter, Instagram, everyone's going to be singing our praises. We just

know what to say true to in our building."

Facing the tournament's No. 1 seed, the Buckeyes scored on six of their first seven drives — with four scoring plays longer than 40 yards — to take a 34-0 lead late in the second quarter on the nation's only remaining unbeaten team.

Henderson's second TD run late in the third essentially put it away for Ohio State, which is headed to the Cotton Bowl on Jan. 10 to face No. 4 Texas for a berth in the national title game.

"I'm proud of the resilience of these guys," Day said. "Still got a lot of football ahead of us."

Smith, the Buckeyes' stand-out freshman playmaker, had a remarkable bowl debut with seven receptions for a season-high 187 yards — including five catches for 161 yards in the first half alone, hauling in scoring passes of 45 and 43 yards. Egbuka compared Smith favorably to Jaxon Smith-Njigba, who had a record 347-yard, three-touchdown Rose Bowl performance

three years ago.

"I would say legendary," Egbuka said. "I was able to witness Jaxon's game in the Rose Bowl and the pure dominant performance that that was, but even though (Smith's) stats might not reflect the exact same thing that Jaxon has, I don't think it was too far off in terms of dominance. He's a very special talent, and I'm so excited to keep watching him grow."

Dillon Gabriel passed for 299 yards and hit Traeshon Holden for two touchdowns for the Ducks (13-1, CFP No. 1 seed), whose dreams of their first national title were flattened on the famed Rose Bowl turf. Oregon's 14-game winning streak also ended.

"We really didn't have the ability to stop them, and we didn't have the ability to get something going for us on offense," Oregon coach Dan Lanning said. "We haven't faced a lot of moments like this all year. (Ohio State) is an unbelievable team."

Texas dodges upset with 2OT win over Arizona State

Associated Press

ATLANTA — With Arizona State one play away from pulling off a comeback after the game in the College Football Playoff, Quinn Ewers delivered a throw to Matthew Golden that saved the season for Texas.

Then it was left to Andrew Mukuba to finish off Cam Skattebo and the gritty Sun Devils.

If the Longhorns go on to win the national championship, they'll long remember how they kept their hopes alive in this Peach Bowl quarterfinal classic.

Ewers passed 28 yards to Golden for a touchdown on fourth-and-13 to force a second overtime, and Mukuba's interception clinched a 39-31 victory after Texas squandered a 16-

point lead in the fourth quarter and missed two field goal attempts that could've won it in regulation.

"The one thing that I know about our group is when our backs are against the wall and when our best is needed, our best shows up time and time again," coach Steve Sarkisian said. "The resiliency that these guys showed today was something that as a coach makes you really proud."

Skattebo put No. 10 Arizona State ahead for the first time all day with a 3-yard touchdown run to start overtime against No. 4 Texas, the capper on a brilliant performance that wasn't quite enough to knock off the Longhorns.

The Sun Devils — two-touch-

down underdogs, according to BetMGM Sportsbook — had the game in their grasp before Ewers spotted Golden breaking free behind two defenders to haul in the tying score.

"That's just a testament to how mature this team is and just taking advantage of every single opportunity that we have," Ewers said.

After moving to the opposite end of Mercedes-Benz Stadium, Ewers threw a 25-yard touchdown pass to Gunnar Helm on the very next play, followed by a 2-point conversion pass to Golden.

The Longhorns (13-2) finally put Arizona State (11-3) away when Mukuba picked off Sam Leavitt's pass at the 3 to end the game.

"We gave everything we had," Skattebo said. "We never stopped."

After a bunch of lopsided results through the first five games of the expanded 12-team playoff, the format finally produced the sort of thriller that supporters envisioned.

It sends Texas back to its home state for a Cotton Bowl semifinal against No. 6 Ohio State.

"We weren't at our best and it felt like an NCAA March Madness basketball game with the swings of emotions and things," Sarkisian said. "I'm just proud of these guys because not every game is going to be pretty and not every game is just going to go exactly how you want it to go."

Penn State bottles up Boise RB

Associated Press

GLENDAL, Ariz. — Penn State defenders clogged every hole, stretched out every outside run, closed with ferocity.

Everywhere that Ashton Jeanty turned, he ran into Nittany Lions. The Heisman Trophy runner-up still went over 100 yards, but he sure had to work for it.

Drew Allar threw three touchdown passes and No. 5 Penn State bottled up Jeanty for a 31-14 win over No. 8 Boise State in the Fiesta Bowl on Tuesday night, earning a spot in the College Football Playoff semifinals.

“We knew who we were going against. We knew we had to have hats to the ball every single play because every play he could break one,” said Penn State safety Zakee Wheatley, who had an interception and recovered a fumble. “We did that the whole game.”

The Nittany Lions (13-2, CFP No. 6 seed) opened their first CFP berth with a blowout win over SMU and appeared headed toward the latest lopsided victory in the new 12-team format by jumping out to a 14-0 lead against Boise State.

But the Broncos (12-2, CFP No. 3 seed) have relished the role of underdog and they had an answer.

Boise State galloped back from the early deficit, trimming the margin to 17-14 early in the third quarter, momentum seemingly on its side.

And then Penn State turned the tide for good.

Allar threw his second touchdown pass of the night to John Mackey Award winner Tyler Warren, and Nick Singleton burst up the middle for a 58-yard TD run, sending the Nittany Lions to the Jan. 9 Orange Bowl against No. 2 Georgia or No. 3 Notre Dame.

Eagles' Barkley to sit, ending bid for season rushing record

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Saquon Barkley had a heart-to-heart talk with his dad that was more coated in heartbreak than hope over the Philadelphia Eagles running back's pursuit of the NFL season rushing record.

Barkley's stirring chase of Eric Dickerson was over — he will sit out the Eagles' final regular-season game Sunday, denying the running back his chance at breaking the mark.

The news came with a tough call with his dad, Alibay.

“He definitely wanted me to play,” Barkley said Wednesday at his locker.

“Selfishly for him, you’ve got to think about it ... our last name would have been attached to that. I see it from that side, too. At the end of the day, the most important thing is winning football games. He’s the one that raised me to kind of be all about the team, too. He can have his little selfish moment, but he’ll get over it.”

Barkley insisted he recovered from the sting, too.

So will an offensive line that pushed for the star back to set the record, and even fans who wanted to say they were there Sunday at the Linc against the New York Giants and witness a little slice of NFL history.

Barkley will finish the season with 2,005 yards rushing, just 101 yards shy of breaking Dickerson's record of 2,105 yards set with the Los Angeles Rams in 1984.

The Eagles (13-3) clinched the NFC East and the No. 2 seed in the conference, leaving little to play for against the Giants.

That included NFL records.

Coach Nick Sirianni made the final call — after two conversations with Barkley, players, coaches, general manager Howie Roseman — to give Barkley the week off and not risk poten-

tial injury to perhaps their most valuable player and only the ninth running back in NFL history to top 2,000 yards rushing in a season.

“May never get another opportunity like that again,” Barkley said. “So, I’m down. But at the end of the day, I don’t care for putting the team at risk. He’s the head coach for a reason. He makes those decisions.”

Barkley should have plenty of company among the starting lineup sitting out Sunday before the Eagles host either Washington or Green Bay in an NFC wild-card playoff game.

Sirianni said he was set to rest the bulk of the starters — notably quarterback Jalen Hurts, who sat out Sunday's rout of Dallas with the lingering effects of a concussion — to get them rested and healthy ahead of what the franchise hopes will be a deep run to the Super Bowl.

“I’m just happy I didn’t have to make that decision,” Barkley said. “Nick made it pretty easy on me and I’m truly at peace with it.”

The Eagles had their bye week in Week 5, and returned from a 2-2 start to win 10 straight games and seize control of the division. But 12 straight games — where Barkley added to his NFL-high 345 carries — also played a role in Sirianni giving the Barkley and the starters one week off before the Eagles open the playoffs.

With no guarantee of a Super Bowl, much less even one playoff win, some Eagles struck a melancholy tone inside the locker room that Barkley's run had been grounded.

“Everybody would like to have the record,” offensive tackle Lane Johnson said. “We’d also like to have the player for a playoff game, and win a playoff game with him.”

After he ran for 167 yards in

Sunday's win against Dallas, Barkley said he wanted the record, but he would do what was best for the Eagles, even if that meant sitting out the last game of the regular season.

Barkley can't catch Dickerson, but he bulldozed past LeSean McCoy, Brian Westbrook and Wilbert Montgomery for the best season by a running back in Eagles history.

He set the Eagles record for yards rushing in a season and set a season franchise record for scrimmage yards (2,283). McCoy set the mark of 2,146 yards in 2013.

Barkley ran for 147 yards against New Orleans in Week 3. He had 176 yards in a win in Philadelphia's first meeting against the Giants. Barkley ran for touchdowns of 70 and 72 yards against the Los Angeles Rams and finished the game with a career-high 255 rushing yards on 26 carries and two rushing TDs in November.

“If I had to go out there and get the record, I felt really good enough to do it, too,” Barkley said. “I made a joke to one of my boys the other night, my body don’t feel like I ran for 2,000 yards. That’s a good thing.”

Barkley is set to wonder, what if?

The decision also ends that hand-wringing that Barkley would have set the record in an extra 17th game that Dickerson did not have in 1984.

In 1984, Dickerson topped 100 yards rushing 12 times to break O.J. Simpson's 1973 record with Buffalo of 2,003 yards rushing in a single season.

Simpson set his record in 14 games before the NFL expanded to 16 in 1978. The NFL moved to 17 games in 2021.

“I didn’t sign here to break Eric Dickerson’s record,” Barkley said. “I came here to win a Super Bowl.”

Jackson would prefer title to 3rd MVP

Associated Press

OWINGS MILLS, Md. — John Harbaugh wasn't going to wade into the debate over whether Lamar Jackson should win a third NFL MVP award this season.

Instead, he stuck to the obvious.

"He's my MVP. He'll always be my MVP — I promise you that," the Baltimore coach said. "Yes, as far as I'm concerned, he's our MVP, he's our guy."

Local media agreed, honoring Jackson with the team MVP in voting announced Tuesday — a suspense-free tally if there ever was one. The bigger question is whether Jackson can win yet another NFL MVP when balloting for that AP award takes place. If so, he would join pretty impressive company.

Only six players have won that honor three times: Peyton Manning (five), Aaron Rodgers

(four), Tom Brady, Brett Favre, Johnny Unitas and Jim Brown. Players with exactly two MVPs include Jackson, Patrick Mahomes, Kurt Warner, Steve Young and Joe Montana.

As of Tuesday, Buffalo quarterback Josh Allen (-300) was the MVP favorite this season, according to BetMGM, with Jackson (+225) as the only particularly close challenger. If Allen wins, he'd be the league's first first-time MVP since Jackson in 2019.

Jackson said last week it's hard to avoid the MVP talk since he's often tagged into it online.

"If it does happen, it happens. That'd be dope — three times," Jackson said. "That's never been my goal, though. Even the first or second one, it's never been my goal. I always want to finish with the championship, but I've been falling short."

This weekend the Ravens

have bigger concerns. They're heavily favored against Cleveland, and a win Saturday would wrap up the AFC North title and a home playoff game for Baltimore.

Jackson's individual accomplishments will be tracked closely as well. He enters the game with a passer rating of 121.6. The league record for a season is 122.5 by Rodgers in 2011, the first time he was MVP.

Jackson might not win it this time around, despite leading Allen in touchdown passes, yards passing and yards rushing, and throwing fewer interceptions. Last season, Allen bested Jackson in yards passing and touchdowns (both passing and rushing), but Jackson won MVP after leading Baltimore to the league's best regular-season record.

This season it's Allen and the Bills (13-3) who will finish

ahead of the Ravens (11-5) in postseason seeding. Buffalo lost big to Baltimore head-to-head in September, but Allen led the Bills to signature victories over Kansas City and Detroit — teams that could both end up as No. 1 seeds in their conferences.

It's no surprise where Jackson's center, Tyler Linderbaum, stands on the matter.

"You see him every day, the things he's able to do, and carrying it over to the game. He's a special player," Linderbaum said. "He's extremely fun to play with, just the things he's able to do. There's no one more deserving of that award than Lamar Jackson."

As much as this debate consumes NFL talk right now, by the time the award is presented a few days before the Super Bowl, either Jackson or Allen — or perhaps both — will have fallen short of that goal again.

Steelers defense looks to regain its lost swagger

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Looking back, DeShon Elliott thinks he maybe shouldn't have made his frustrations about the direction the Pittsburgh Steelers defense is heading so public.

Then again, the veteran safety knows the candor he showed in the aftermath of a 29-10 loss to Kansas City on Christmas Day — when he vented about communication issues in the secondary that shouldn't be popping up in late December for a unit that considers itself among the best in the NFL — also makes him who he is.

"It was out of emotion," Elliott said Wednesday.

"I love ball. Everyone knows that I love these guys. But we just have to get back to the drawing board."

And do it quickly.

The swagger the Steelers (10-6) and the NFL's highest-

paid defense exuded for the first three-plus months of the season has vanished during the three-game losing streak they take into the regular-season finale against Cincinnati (8-8), replaced by the kinds of mistakes that have cost them the inside track to the AFC North title.

Shortly after Patrick Mahomes picked them apart while throwing for 320 yards and three scores, several players — including Elliott and outside linebacker Alex Highsmith — groused about a variety of issues.

It's telling of the current mood in the locker room that after star outside linebacker T.J. Watt was selected as the team's Most Valuable Player for a record fifth time on Wednesday afternoon, he spent most of his brief session with reporters fielding questions about how things have gotten so sideways

so quickly.

Asked about the defense's level of angst, Watt shrugged.

"I think we're all professionals, we're all grown adults here," he said. "We know that it's all about channeling energy in the right way."

If Pittsburgh wants to avoid another quick playoff exit, it doesn't really have a choice. The Steelers are giving up more than 400 yards per game during their current skid against the kinds of teams — Philadelphia, Baltimore and Kansas City — that similar to Pittsburgh, carry the desire to play deep into January and beyond.

The Eagles, Ravens and Chiefs are surging to the finish. The Steelers are not. And while the offense has hit a rough patch — it hasn't helped that wide receiver George Pickens missed three weeks with a hamstring injury and was kept relatively

under wraps by Kansas City in his return.

Pittsburgh's best chance at being a legitimate threat when the playoffs begin relies heavily on a star-studded unit that creates turnovers and chaos.

At the moment there's little of either to go around.

While the Steelers are tied with Minnesota and Buffalo for the most takeaways in the league (31), they're also minus-2 in turnover ratio during a December swoon that has done little to offer proof they're ready to compete with the league's elite.

And while Watt remains one of the best in coming off the edge, his 11½ sacks are also on pace for the fewest in a non-injury-abbreviated season since his rookie year in 2017, endemic of a unit that's going to finish with its fewest sacks in a decade.