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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Rubio: US to run Venezuela oil quarantine

BY MATTHEW ADAMS

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump on Saturday said the United States will control Venezuela for an unspecified period and is “not afraid” to have military forces on the ground after a nighttime operation resulted in the capture of Venezuelan President Nicolás Maduro and his wife.

“It was an assault like people have not seen since World War II,” Trump said during a news conference at his Mar-a-Lago Club in Palm Beach, Fla. “We’re going to run the country until such a time we can do a safe, proper and judicious transition. And we are ready to stage a second and much larger attack, if we need to do so.”

The president was asked several times about having U.S. troops on the ground in Venezuela.

“We’re not afraid of boots on

the ground,” Trump said.

On Sunday, Secretary of State Marco Rubio suggested on TV talk shows that the United States would not take a day-to-day role in governing Venezuela other than enforcing an existing “oil quarantine” on the country, a contrast to Trump’s broad but vague claims that the U.S. would at least temporarily “run” the oil-rich nation, the Associated Press reported.

Rubio offered a more nuanced take, saying the U.S. would continue to enforce an oil quarantine that was already in place on sanctioned tankers before Maduro was removed from power early Saturday and use that leverage as a means to press policy changes in Venezuela.

“And so that’s the sort of control the president is pointing to when he says that,” Rubio said on CBS’ “Face the Nation.”

Maduro and his wife, Cilia

Flores, were placed on the amphibious assault ship USS Iwo Jima on Saturday and taken to New York.

The U.S. had for months built a large force of Navy and special operations forces off Venezuela’s coast. The force includes the USS Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier and strike group, the Iwo Jima and thousands of Marines.

Trump said the U.S. wanted to conduct the operation earlier but waited until they “had the perfect weather.” No U.S. forces were killed but one aircraft was hit as well as a “couple of guys.”

“It was just the right time to do it. We had to do it,” the president said.

CBS News reported the Army’s elite Delta Force was involved in the operation. The helicopter assault was conducted by the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment.

The legal authority for the at-

tack was not immediately clear. The stunning American military action, which plucked a nation’s sitting leader from office, echoed the U.S. invasion of Panama that led to the surrender and seizure of its leader, Manuel Noriega, in 1990 — exactly 36 years ago.

Trump was joined at the news conference by Secretary of State Marco Rubio, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, CIA Director John Ratcliffe, Deputy Chief of Staff Stephen Miller and Air Force Gen. Dan Caine, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. When asked who would be running Venezuela, Trump said it would “largely be run by people standing behind me.”

“What we witnessed last night was sheer guts and grit, gallantry and glory of the American warrior,” Hegseth said. “Nicolás Maduro had his chance … until he didn’t. He fled around and found out.”

## Key moments in US military operation to seize Maduro

*The Washington Post*

The U.S. military operation to capture Venezuelan leader Nicolás Maduro came after months of planning and launched only when a break in bad weather on Friday night granted U.S. aviators a path into the capital, Caracas, according to the Joint Chiefs Chairman Air Force Gen. Dan Caine. Maduro and his wife were taken from a fortified compound after both tried to reach the steel door of a safe room, President Donald Trump said Saturday. The raid was condemned by numerous countries, including some U.S. allies, and a spokesperson for U.N. Secretary General António

Guterres called it “a dangerous precedent.”

Though much remains unknown about how the events unfolded, an account given Saturday by Caine and a review of visuals by The Washington Post identified several key moments and locations in the operation.

According to Caine, planning for the operation to take Maduro began months ago and involved coordination among every branch of the armed forces, as well as U.S. intelligence agencies, including the CIA, National Security Agency and National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency.

The Post previously reported that the U.S. deployed two Army

Delta Force units in recent weeks to establish a “pattern of life” on Maduro in advance of the operation, mapping out his location and daily movements, according to a person familiar with that deployment. Delta Force, known within the clandestine community as Combat Applications Group, is among the Pentagon’s most elite units, tasked with executing high-stakes and secretive missions, including hostage rescue and kill-and-capture missions.

On Friday night, Caine said, bad winter weather finally broke “just enough” to clear a path “that only the most skilled aviators in the world could ma-

neuver through.”

At 10:46 p.m. Eastern time, he said, Trump gave the military the order to proceed.

Over the course of the night, aircraft began launching from 20 different bases on land and sea across the Western Hemisphere. In total, more than 150 aircraft, bombers, fighters, intelligence, reconnaissance, surveillance, rotary wing were in the air Saturday night.

According to Caine, U.S. forces arrived at Maduro’s “compound” at 2:02 a.m. local time, or 1:02 a.m. Eastern. One aircraft was hit as the troops apprehended Maduro and his wife, Caine said.

# Navy adds second fitness test requirement

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

*Stars and Stripes*

Active-duty sailors will have to complete two physical fitness assessments per year starting in 2026, the Navy announced last week in a return to its pre-coronavirus pandemic fitness testing schedule.

All sailors in the active component will now be tested during cycles between Jan. 1 and June 30 and July 1 and Dec. 31, according to a Naval Administrative Message governing fitness standards published last Monday. Reserve component sailors must complete at least one fitness test during the year, according to the message.

The increase in fitness testing

aligns with Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth's push for increased physical standards across the U.S. military. The service has also made its fitness tests and body composition standards — which include a measure of waist-to-height ratio and body fat percentage — gender neutral, per Hegseth's orders.

The Navy will now require commanders to integrate some physical training into every workday for their sailors, according to the message. The Navy did not provide specific guidance for commanders to accomplish that goal.

Most sailors will take the Navy Physical Readiness Test

twice per year. That test includes a two-minute pushup test, a timed forearm plank and a timed 1½-mile walk or run. Commanding officers or officers in charge may authorize a 2,000-meter row, a 14-minute stationary bike ride, or a 500- or 450-meter swim instead of the walk or run, according to the Navy.

Sailors in combat arms jobs will take the Navy-wide PRT once per year and the new Combat Fitness Test once per year, according to the guidance.

The combat arms test includes an 800-meter swim with fins, a two-minute pushup test, an untimed pullup test and a 1-mile run. The pushups, pullups

and run are to be completed with 20 extra pounds via a weight vest or plate carrier, according to Navy documents.

The service's new fitness policy also changes the requirements to remain in the service. Any sailor who fails three fitness tests during a four-year period will be administratively separated, according to the policy. Those failures do not have to be consecutive. Previously, the Navy moved to kick out sailors after two or more consecutive fitness test failures.

On Jan. 1, however, the Navy conducted a one-time reset of all past fitness test failures to zero, according to the new message.

## Navy cargo ship saves 3 stranded fishermen in South China Sea

BY ALEX WILSON

*Stars and Stripes*

A U.S. Navy cargo ship rang in the new year by rescuing three stranded fishermen from a disabled vessel in the South China Sea.

The dry cargo ship USNS Cesar Chavez saved the three, later identified as citizens of the Philippines, after spotting them adrift aboard their fishing boat, the U.S. 7th Fleet said Friday in a news release.

The fishermen left an unspecified port on Dec. 27, but the following day they were left adrift after heavy seas flooded their engine.

The group survived the next four days on rationed food and water before the Cesar Chavez spotted them, according to the release.

A medical checkup on board

the Cesar Chavez found the three in good health, according to 7th Fleet.

The United States ultimately coordinated with Philippine officials to return the fishermen.

"Professional and vigilant watch standing procedures enabled the crew to locate and recover the distressed fishermen quickly and safely. Cesar Chavez conducts routine logistics and resupply missions in support of the U.S. 7th Fleet," the release stated.

A spokesperson for the U.S. 7th Fleet did not immediately respond to phone and email requests for comment.

The 689-foot Cesar Chavez, launched in May 2012, delivers ammunition, food, repair parts, stores and small quantities of fuel to customers at sea, according to the Navy.

## North Korea launches ballistic missiles at sea

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea—North Korea launched multiple ballistic missiles toward its eastern waters Sunday, its neighbors said, just hours before South Korea's president left for China for talks expected to cover North Korea's nuclear program.

South Korea's Joint Chiefs of Staff said in a statement that it detected several ballistic missile launches from North Korea's capital region around 7:50 a.m. It said the missiles flew about 560 miles and that South Korea and U.S. authorities were analyzing details of the launches.

South Korea's Defense Ministry noted the launches violated U.N. Security Council resolutions that ban any ballistic activities by North Korea. It urged North Korea to cease provocative actions immediately and respond to South Korea's push to restart talks and restore peace.

The U.S. military said in a statement on social media that the missile launches did not "pose an immediate threat to U.S. personnel or territory, or to our allies."

"The United States remains committed to the defense of the U.S. homeland and our allies in the region," the military said.

The launches were the latest weapons demonstration by North Korea in recent weeks. Experts have said North Korea is aiming to show off or review its achievements in defense.

Observers are watching the Workers Party congress to see whether North Korea will set a new policy on the U.S. and resume long-stalled talks between the two countries. North Korea has been focusing on testing activities to enlarge its nuclear arsenal since its leader Kim Jong Un's summit with U.S. President Donald Trump fell apart in 2019.

# Capitol Police struggles linger post-riot

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — As Donald Trump was inaugurated for the second time on Jan. 20, 2025, former Capitol Police Sgt. Aquilino Gonell put his phone on “do not disturb” and left it on his nightstand to take a break from the news.

That evening, after Gonell spent time with family and took his dog on a long walk, his phone started to blow up with calls. He had messages from federal prosecutors, FBI agents and the federal Bureau of Prisons — all letting him know that the new president had just pardoned about 1,500 people who had been convicted for their actions at the Capitol on Jan. 6, 2021. The pardons included rioters who had injured Gonell as he and other officers tried to protect the building.

“They told me that people I tes-

tified against were being released from prison,” Gonell said.

Gonell was one of the officers who defended the central West Front entrance to the Capitol that day as Congress was certifying Democrat Joe Biden’s victory and hundreds of Trump’s supporters broke into the building, echoing his false claims of a stolen election. Gonell was dragged into the crowd by his shoulder straps as he tried to fight people off. He almost suffocated. In court, he testified about injuries to his shoulder and foot that still bother him to this day.

“They have tried to erase what I did” with the pardons and other attempts to play down the violent attack, Gonell said.

“I lost my career, my health, and I’ve been trying to get my life back.”

Five years since the siege, Go-

nell and some of the other police officers who fought off the rioters are still coming to terms with what happened, especially after Trump was decisively elected to a second term last year and granted those pardons. Their struggle has been compounded by statements from the Republican president and some GOP lawmakers in Congress minimizing the violence that officers encountered.

More than 140 police officers were injured during the fighting on Jan. 6, which turned increasingly brutal as the hours wore on.

At a Republican-led Senate hearing in October on political violence, Metropolitan Police Department officer Daniel Hodges testified again as a witness called by Democrats. After Hodges spoke about his experience on Jan. 6, Sen. Peter Welch, D-Vt., asked the other witnesses wheth-

er they supported Trump’s pardons of the rioters, including for those who injured Hodges. Three of the witnesses, all called by Republicans, raised their hands.

Gonell left the department due to his injuries. He has not returned to service, though he hopes to work again. He wrote a book about his experience, and he said he has post-traumatic stress disorder related to the attack.

Former District of Columbia police officer Adam Eveland said he decided that it was important to talk publicly about Jan. 6 to try to reach people and “come at it from a logical standpoint.”

Still, he said, “I’ve had to come to terms with the fact that just because something happened to me and was a major part of my world doesn’t mean that everyone else has to understand that or even be sympathetic to that.”

## FBI says it halted plan to attack NC grocery, eatery

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — The FBI said Friday it disrupted a New Year’s Eve attack plot targeting a grocery store and fast-food restaurant in North Carolina, arresting an 18-year-old man who authorities say pledged loyalty to Islamic State.

Christian Sturdivant was charged with attempting to provide material support to a foreign terrorist organization. Investigators said he told an undercover FBI employee posing as a supportive confidant about his plans to attack people. Their online messages indicated attacks would occur with knives and hammers, according to prosecutors and records.

Worried Sturdivant might attempt violence before New Year’s Eve, the FBI placed him under constant surveillance for days, including on Christmas, U.S. Attorney for Western North Carolina Russ Ferguson said.

Agents were prepared to arrest him earlier if he left his home with weapons, Ferguson said at a news conference in Charlotte.

Sturdivant was arrested Wednesday and remained in custody after a federal court appearance Friday. An attorney representing him did not immediately respond to an email or phone message seeking comment.

Searches of Sturdivant’s home and phone uncovered what investigators described as a manifesto detailing plans for the attack, FBI Special Agent in Charge James Barnacle told reporters.

A handwritten note found in a trash can at Sturdivant’s home listed details of the planned attacks and the number of intended victims at a Burger King restaurant and unnamed grocery store, according to an affidavit.

Ferguson said the attack was to take place in Mint Hill, a bedroom community of Charlotte.

## Wis. judge who obstructed arrest submits resignation

Associated Press

Embattled Wisconsin Judge Hannah Dugan, who was convicted of obstruction last month for helping an immigrant evade federal officers, has sent her resignation letter to the governor.

The letter was sent Saturday. Republicans had been making plans to impeach her ever since her Dec. 19 conviction. A spokesperson for Gov. Tony Evers, a Democrat, said his office received Dugan’s letter, and he would work to fill the vacancy without delay.

Dugan wrote that over the past decade she handled thousands of cases with “a commitment to treat all persons with dignity and respect, to act justly, deliberately and consistently, and to maintain a courtroom with the decorum and safety the public deserves.”

But she said the case against her is too big of a distraction.

“As you know, I am the subject of unprecedented federal legal

proceedings, which are far from concluded but which present immense and complex challenges that threaten the independence of our judiciary. I am pursuing this fight for myself and for our independent judiciary,” Dugan said in her letter.

In April, federal prosecutors accused Dugan of distracting federal officers trying to arrest a Mexican immigrant outside her courtroom and leading him out through a private door. A jury convicted Dugan of felony obstruction.

The case against Dugan was highlighted by President Donald Trump as he pressed ahead with his sweeping immigration crackdown. Democrats insisted the administration was trying to make an example of Dugan to blunt judicial opposition to the operation.

Agents arrested the man after a foot chase. The U.S. Department of Homeland Security said in November he had been deported.

# Silent march honors Swiss bar fire victims

Associated Press

CRANS-MONTANA, Switzerland — Hundreds marched in silence Sunday to honor the victims of the New Year's Eve fire at a bar in the Swiss Alpine resort of Crans-Montana, which left 40 dead and many severely injured.

Somber mourners, many with reddened eyes, filed silently out of the chapel to organ music after the hourlong Mass at the Chapelle Saint-Christophe in Crans-Montana. Some exchanged hugs, others applauded, before joining the silent march up the hill to Le Constellation bar.

Many hundreds of people, some cradling flower bouquets, walked in the dense snaking procession in the bright sunlight past shuttered stores. Up

on the mountain overlooking the town, snow machines sent plumes of white flakes into the air.

At the top of the street, in front of Le Constellation that is still largely shielded from view by white screens, the swelling crowd stood in near total silence, some weeping. Then they broke out into sustained applause — hands in gloves and mittens against the cold — as a stream of mourners and well-wishers deposited flower bouquets at a makeshift memorial piled with flowers, cuddly toys and other tributes.

"We are going through a moment of crushing darkness but we are going through it together," one speaker said.

During the Mass, the Rev. Gilles Cavin spoke of the "terri-

ble uncertainty" for families unsure if their loved ones are among the dead or still alive among the injured. "We pray for their friends hard hit by misery on this day that was meant to be one of festivities and friendship," he said.

Forty people died and 119 were injured in the blaze that broke out around 1:30 a.m. on Thursday at Le Constellation bar. Police have said many of the victims were in their teens to mid-20s.

By Sunday morning, Swiss authorities identified 24 out of the 40 fatalities.

One of the victims was 16-year old Arthur Brodard, whose mother had been frantically searching for him.

"Our Arthur has now left to party in paradise," a visibly sha-

ken Laetitia Brodard said in a Facebook story posted on Saturday night, speaking to the camera. "We can start our mourning, knowing that he is in peace and in the light."

Brodard's frenzied search for her son reflected the desperation of families of the young people disappeared during the fire, who did not know whether their loved ones were dead or in the hospital.

Swiss authorities said the process of identifying victims was particularly hard because of the advanced degree of the burns, requiring the use of DNA samples. Brodard also had given her DNA sample to help in the identification process.

Swiss authorities have opened a criminal investigation of the bar managers.

# China announces military drill success near Taiwan

Associated Press

BEIJING — China's People's Liberation Army said Wednesday that it "successfully completed" two days of military exercises in the waters off Taiwan, concluding a set of high-powered maneuvers aimed at asserting its sovereignty over the island — actions that ratcheted up tension in East Asia during 2025's waning days.

In a New Year's Eve announce-

ment, the PLA said that the operation it called "Justice Mission 2025" had "fully tested the integrated joint operations capabilities of its troops."

The brief announcement, presented on video accompanied by rousing martial music, offered no details about what constituted success, nor did it specify exactly when the exercises concluded. An earlier announcement had

said they would take place during the day last Monday and Tuesday, but it was unclear if any lingering drills had continued into Wednesday around Taiwan.

Taiwan has long been China's most sensitive issue when it comes to the international community.

Beijing has long insisted the island is its sovereign territory and has promised to retake it by force

if necessary.

Beijing sends warplanes and navy vessels toward the island on a near-daily basis, and in recent years it has stepped up the scope and scale of the exercises.

Last week's military maneuvers were received in many corners as inflammatory, and China itself acknowledged they were designed to send a message to "external forces."

# Britain, France strike suspected ISIS weapons facility

Associated Press

DAMASCUS, Syria — Britain and France carried out a joint airstrike in central Syria on an underground facility where members of Islamic State are suspected to have stored weapons and explosives.

Britain's Ministry of Defence said in a statement guided bombs were used Saturday evening to target a number of access tunnels down to the structure in the mountains just north

of the historic town of Palmyra in the country's Homs province.

The two countries are part of the U.S.-led coalition that has been fighting ISIS militants for more than a decade.

Britain's defense ministry said Typhoon FGR4 fighter jets were supported by a Voyager refueling tanker, and were joined by French aircraft in the strike. It said Paveway IV guided bombs targeted a number of access tunnels down to the facil-

ity and initial indications suggest the target was "engaged successfully."

Defence Secretary John Healey said the U.K. was determined to "stand shoulder to shoulder with our allies" to "stamp out any resurgence" of ISIS.

"This operation, to eliminate dangerous terrorists who threaten our way of life, shows how our armed forces are ready to step up, all year round, keep-

ing Britain secure at home and strong abroad," he said.

The French military said in a statement Sunday on X that the strikes were aimed at "preventing the resurgence" of ISIS as "the fight against terrorism remains a priority" for France and its partners.

There was no immediate comment from Syria's government on the strikes. Syria joined the anti-ISIS coalition late last year.

## AMERICAN ROUNDUP

### Disney World worker hurt trying to stop prop boulder

**FL** ORLANDO — A Walt Disney World worker in Florida was injured while attempting to stop a large runaway prop boulder from rolling into seated spectators at the Indiana Jones live show.

The worker at the “Indiana Jones Epic Stunt Spectacular” at the Disney’s Hollywood Studios park was knocked to the ground by the 400-pound prop boulder after it moved off its track on Tuesday and started rolling toward audience members. Another worker stopped the boulder before it reached the spectators.

Disney wouldn’t disclose the worker’s injuries, citing privacy reasons.

One of the attraction’s scheduled shows was canceled Tuesday after the accident, and Wednesday’s shows were modified to exclude the prop boulder. Disney said it was reviewing why the prop rolled off the track.

### Administration ends lease for 3 public golf courses

**DC** WASHINGTON — The Trump administration has ended the lease agreement for three public golf courses in Washington, a move that offers President Donald Trump an additional opportunity to put his stamp on another piece of the nation’s capital.

The National Links Trust, the nonprofit that has operated Washington’s three public courses on federal land for the last five years, said last week that the Department of the Interior had terminated its 50-year lease agreement. The Interior

Department said it was terminating the lease because the nonprofit had not implemented required capital improvements and failed to meet the terms of the lease.

The move gives Trump, whose private company has developed numerous golf courses in the U.S. and abroad, the chance to remake links overlooking the Potomac River and in Rock Creek Park and a site that is part of Black golf history.

Officials for the National Links Trust said in a statement that \$8.5 million had gone toward capital improvements at the courses and that rounds played and revenue had more than doubled in their tenure managing the courses. The nonprofit has agreed to keep managing the courses for the time being, but long-term renovations will stop.

### Man serving an illegal sentence gets clemency

**MS** JACKSON — A man handed an illegal prison sentence that was years longer than the maximum penalty for his crime has been granted clemency by Mississippi’s governor, weeks after the man’s brother received clemency for a similar sentence.

Gov. Tate Reeves announced last week that he was granting clemency to Maurice Taylor after ordering the man’s brother, Marcus Taylor, to be freed earlier in December.

In 2015, both brothers accepted plea bargains and pleaded guilty to conspiracy to sell hydrocodone acetaminophen, a Schedule III substance. Combinations of hydrocodone and acetaminophen are used to treat pain severe enough to require

opioid treatment when other pain medicine does not work or cannot be taken, according to the Mayo Clinic.

At the time of the brothers’ sentencing, the maximum penalty for conspiracy to sell a Schedule III substance was five years. Yet Maurice Taylor was sentenced to 20 years in prison with five years suspended, and Marcus Taylor to 15 years.

### Federal ruling blocks new tax on cruise ships

**HI** HONOLULU — A federal appeals court ruling on New Year’s Eve blocked Hawaii from enforcing a climate change tourist tax on cruise ship passengers, a levy that was set to go into effect at the start of 2026.

Cruise Lines International Association challenged the tax in a lawsuit, arguing that the new law violates the U.S. Constitution by taxing cruise ships for entering Hawaii ports. They also argued it would make cruises more expensive. The lawsuit notes the law authorizes counties to collect an additional 3% surcharge, bringing the total to 14% of prorated fares.

The levy increases rates on hotel room and vacation rental stays but also imposes a new 11% tax on the gross fares paid by a cruise ship’s passenger, prorated for the number of days the vessels are in Hawaii ports.

### Court dismisses case against attorney general

**MT** BILLINGS — Montana’s Supreme Court on Wednesday dismissed a misconduct case against the state’s attorney general after he defied court orders in a dispute

over a law that gave the governor more power over the judiciary.

A court-appointed panel last year found that Republican Attorney General Austin Knudsen repeatedly attacked the integrity of the justices in his defense of a 2021 law permitting the state’s Republican governor to directly fill judicial vacancies.

The panel had recommended that Knudsen’s license to practice law be suspended for 90 days.

Justices agreed in Wednesday’s ruling that Knudsen had violated rules of professional conduct for attorneys. But the court said the panel that handled the case violated Knudsen’s due process rights by excluding his expert witness and failing to adequately explain its decision against him.

### Hiker killed in suspected mountain lion attack

**CO** GLEN HAVEN — A woman was killed in a suspected mountain lion attack while she was hiking alone in the mountains of northern Colorado on Thursday, in what would be the first fatal attack by one of the predators in the state in more than 25 years, authorities said.

Wildlife officers later in the day located two mountain lions in the area and fatally shot the animals, said Kara Van Hoose with Colorado Parks and Wildlife.

The attack occurred in the mountains south of the small community of Glen Haven, about 7 miles northeast of Estes Park and considered the gateway to the eastern entrance of Rocky Mountain National Park.

—From wire reports

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## Reporting World, National and Military News

# Seahawks clinch No. 1 seed, NFC West title

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — The Seattle Seahawks are heading into the playoffs with the NFC's No. 1 seed, and even more important, a defense that proved it can stop even the most potent offenses in the league.

Zach Charbonnet scored on a 27-yard run in the first quarter and Seattle shut down the high-powered San Francisco offense in a 13-3 victory over the 49ers on Saturday night.

The Seahawks (14-3) won their first NFC West title since 2020 and are now two home wins away from returning to Levi's Stadium for the Super Bowl next month after besting San Francisco (12-5) in just the fourth season-ending game ever where the winner was guaranteed the top seed in the playoffs.

Seattle reached the Super Bowl in its previous three seasons with the No. 1 seed, including the franchise's only championship season in 2013 behind one of the best defenses in recent memory.

"We all have respect for the Legion of Boom, but I feel like we deserve some recognition at this point, too," defensive tackle Leonard Williams said. "We

call ourselves the Dark Side."

The Seahawks have won their last 10 home playoff games played in front of fans, with their only loss since the 2005 season coming during the 2020 season when fans were restricted because of COVID-19.

"It's huge to be able to play in front of the 12s," quarterback Sam Darnold said. "It's unlike any other stadium in terms of how loud it can be and how tough it can be for the other offense. We're really looking forward to being at home for the playoffs."

The loss sends the Niners on the road for the wild-card round next weekend against an opponent that was determined after Sunday's games.

Coach Mike Macdonald's defensive unit flummoxed a San Francisco offense that had been the NFL's most potent since Brock Purdy returned from an injury in Week 11.

Seattle didn't allow a first down in the opening quarter, generated three sacks and made the biggest defensive play early in the fourth quarter when Drake Thomas got an interception at the Seahawks 3 on a pass that went off the hands of Christian McCaffrey.

"It's a play I have to make, absolutely have to make," McCaffrey said. "I expect nothing less but to make that play and it's completely on me."

Darnold did just enough for Seattle as he won a Week 18 showdown this season after falling flat a year ago for Minnesota against Detroit in a loss that cost the Vikings a chance at the No. 1 seed. He went 20 of 26 for 198 yards and didn't turn the ball over once as the Seahawks relied heavily on the running game.

Kenneth Walker III ran for 97 yards, Charbonnet had the long TD and Seattle finished with 180 yards on the ground, its second-most in a game this season.

Purdy went 19-for-27 for 127 yards and the interception and McCaffrey was held to 23 yards on eight carries as the 49ers had their lowest-scoring game since losing 23-3 to Carolina in coach Kyle Shanahan's debut in 2017.

The 173 yards gained by San Francisco were its fewest in any regular-season game under Shanahan, and now it heads out on the road for the playoffs.

"We're ready for it," Shanahan said. "It would have been nice to have a home game here

— or both home games — and get a bye. But it is what it is. This team's been through a lot this year. Now we got to do it the hard way."

The Seahawks controlled the first half, outgaining the Niners by 127 yards and allowing only three first downs, but led only 10-3 at the break after two long drives ended with no punts.

Seattle got stopped on fourth-and-goal from the 4 on the opening drive, but managed to force a three-and-out that set up a short field and Charbonnet's TD run.

"I love how we started the game," Macdonald said. "Felt like we really set the tone."

Jason Myers also missed a 47-yard field goal attempt. He went 2-for-4 on the night, missing from 26 yards late in the fourth quarter.

Seahawks LT Josh Jones, who was starting in place of Charles Cross, left briefly in the second half but quickly returned. San Francisco LB Dee Winters (ankle) and LB Tatum Bethune (groin) both left the game with injuries that could sideline them for the playoff opener. LT Trent Williams (hamstring) and WR Ricky Pearsall (knee) were inactive.

# Buccaneers top Panthers to stay alive in NFC South

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Baker Mayfield and the Tampa Bay Buccaneers found themselves in the uncomfortable position of rooting for the New Orleans Saints. The Carolina Panthers were pulling for the Atlanta Falcons.

The winner of the NFC South has a losing record and was crowned at home watching on television.

Mayfield threw a touchdown pass to Cade Otton, Chase McLaughlin kicked three field goals and Tampa Bay avoided elimination with a sloppy 16-14 victory over Carolina on a rain-soaked Saturday.

The Buccaneers (8-9) needed New Orleans (6-10) to beat or tie Atlanta (7-9) on Sunday to clinch a fifth straight NFC South title.

If the Falcons won, the Panthers (8-9) secured their first division championship since coach Ron Rivera and quarterback Cam Newton led them to a 15-1 record and a Super Bowl appearance 10 years ago.

Tampa Bay holds a two-team tiebreaker over Carolina, but the Panthers hold the three-team tiebreaker over the Bucs if Atlanta also finishes 8-9.

"I never thought I'd see a day where I'm rooting for the Saints," Tampa Bay veteran linebacker Lavonte David said.

Before the Buccaneers faced New Orleans in October, Mayfield accused the Saints of dirty play and said: "I do not like them."

But Tampa Bay's playoff hopes hinged on the Saints beating the Falcons on the road Sunday.

"A tie still gets us in," Mayfield said with a smirk.

Bucs coach Todd Bowles planned to watch the game at home. Mayfield said some players might have a watch party.

"I think we'll all be on the edge of our seats," Carolina coach Dave Canales said. "Hoping for the Falcons to come through, but at the same time, at least we have that hope to look at. We have to look at ourselves and we have to make sure that in these championship moments that we play our best."

Tampa Bay was 0-8 in games where Mayfield threw an interception before overcoming his ninth pick in the last eight games.

"It was a gutsy performance," Bowles said. "We gave ourselves a chance. It's all we can ask for."

# Streaking Penguins top Red Wings again

Associated Press

**DETROIT** — Bryan Rust and Yegor Chinakhov scored first-period goals on Saturday and the Pittsburgh Penguins topped the Detroit Red Wings 4-1 for the second time in three days.

Rickard Rakell and Connor Dewar added empty-net goals to clinch Pittsburgh's fourth consecutive victory. Kris Letang's overtime goal gave the Penguins a 3-2 win over Detroit in Pittsburgh on Thursday.

Sidney Crosby extended his point streak to six games with two assists. Crosby, who scored two goals Thursday, has four goals and six assists during that stretch and 53 points in 40 career games against the Red Wings.

Parker Wotherspoon had two assists and Stuart Skinner made 11 saves for the Penguins.

Alex DeBrincat scored his team-leading 22nd goal for Detroit. John Gibson stopped 27 shots for the Red Wings, who are 5-2-1 in their past eight games.

**Avalanche 5, Hurricanes 3:**

Brock Nelson scored two power-play goals in the first 7 1/2 minutes of the third period and visiting Colorado rallied past Carolina for its 10th consecutive victory.

The Hurricanes dropped to 15-2-1 when leading after two periods.

**Blue Jackets 5, Sabres 1:** Host Columbus scored three times in the first period, including once short-handed, and beat Buffalo to snap the Sabres' 10-game win streak.

The Blue Jackets have won four of the last five games in the series.

**Devils 4, Mammoth 1:** Jesper Bratt had a goal and an assist to lead host New Jersey over Utah.

Michael Carcone scored in the third period for the Mammoth (19-20-3).

**Flyers 5, Oilers 2:** Owen Tippett and Nick Seeler each had a goal and an assist to lead visiting Philadelphia over Edmonton.

Connor McDavid and Evan Bouchard scored for the Oilers (20-16-6), who have lost three of

their last four.

**Lightning 7, Sharks 3:** Nikita Kucherov scored his 20th goal of the season on a second-period power play and added four assists, Darren Raddysh had a hat trick and visiting Tampa Bay beat San Jose.

Pavol Regenda had a hat trick for the Sharks, and Macklin Ce-lebrini added an assist to extend his points streak to 10 games.

**Senators 4, Jets 2:** Senators defenseman Thomas Chabot scored twice and host Ottawa beat Winnipeg, handing the Jets their ninth straight loss.

The Senators improved to 20-15-5, while Winnipeg is 0-6-3 on its skid.

**Islanders 4, Maple Leafs 3 (OT):** Matthew Schaefer scored twice, including at 4:11 of overtime, and host New York beat Toronto.

Adam Pelech and Emil Heineman also scored for the Islanders, who won for the second time in three games.

**Blackhawks 3, Capitals 2 (SO):** Nick Foligno scored in the sixth round of a shootout to give

visiting Chicago a victory over Washington.

The Capitals fell to 0-5 in shootouts this season.

**Predators 4, Flames 3:** Nicolas Hague broke a tie with 28 seconds left, Erik Haula scored twice in a 1:33 span in his 800th NHL game and visiting Nashville beat Calgary.

The Flames dropped to 18-19-4.

**Kings 5, Wild 4 (SO):** Quinton Byfield had a goal and an assist, Samuel Helenius scored his first goal of the season and host Los Angeles beat Minnesota in a shootout.

The Wild are 3-0-3 in its past six games.

**Bruins 3, Canucks 2 (OT):** Fraser Minten scored his second goal of the game 4:41 into overtime to cap a huge homecoming as visiting Boston beat Vancouver.

**Blues 2, Canadiens 0:** Jordan Binnington made 25 saves for his first shutout of the season, Jonatan Berggren and Robert Thomas scored, and host St. Louis beat Montreal.

# Timberwolves snap Heat's 4-game winning streak

Associated Press

**MIAMI** — Anthony Edwards scored 33 points, Naz Reid had 20 of his 29 in the second half and the Minnesota Timberwolves pulled away in the fourth quarter to beat Miami 125-115 on Saturday night and snap the Heat's four-game winning streak.

Julius Randle finished with 23 points and 10 rebounds for Minnesota, which outscored Miami 19-4 in the opening 4 1/2 minutes of the final quarter to turn a four-point lead into a 109-90 edge. Rudy Gobert added 13 points and 12 rebounds for the Timberwolves.

Norman Powell scored 21 for the Heat, who are 3-5 in their last eight home games. Davion Mitchell and Nikola Jovic added 14 for Miami, while Bam Adebayo and Andrew Wiggins each had 12.

**76ers 130, Knicks 119:** Tyre Maxey scored 36 points, Joel Embiid and VJ Edgecombe each had 26 and visiting Philadelphia beat New York for its third straight victory.

Deuce McBride scored 20 points, OG Anunoby had 19 and Mikal Bridges added 12 for New York.

**Raptors 134, Hawks 117:** RJ Barrett scored a season-high 29 points, Brandon Ingram also had 29 and host Toronto beat Atlanta in the first of back-to-back meetings between the teams.

Toronto is 17-1 this season when taking a lead to the fourth.

**Hornets 112, Bulls 99:** Miles Bridges had 26 points and 14 rebounds, helping visiting Charlotte beat Chicago.

The Hornets improved to 5-2

on the second day of back-to-back games.

**Mavericks 110, Rockets 104:** Anthony Davis had 26 points and 12 rebounds and Max Christie scored 24 points, hitting 4 of 6 3-pointers, as host Dallas beat Houston.

The Mavericks snapped a four-game losing streak, winning six of their last seven home games, two of those against the Rockets.

**Trail Blazers 115, Spurs 110:** Deni Avdija had 29 points, 11 rebounds and 10 assists, Donovan Clingan added a career-high 24 points along with 12 rebounds and visiting Portland beat San Antonio.

Luke Kornet had 20 points and Julian Champagnie added 20 points and 10 rebounds for the Spurs.

**Warriors 123, Jazz 114:** Stephen Curry scored 31 points with six 3-pointers and host Golden State welcomed back their regulars Saturday to beat Utah.

Curry scored 20 points in the third quarter making six of his seven shots, knocking down a go-ahead 3 with 7:01 left in the period and another the next time down.

**Celtics 146, Clippers 115:** Jaylen Brown matched his career high with 50 points and Boston completed a successful West Coast swing with a road victory over Los Angeles.

Brown had 19 points in the third quarter. Derrick White added 29 points and Anfernee Simons had 15 as the Celtics went 4-1 on the trip and 3-1 against Western Conference teams. Boston is 7-1 since Dec. 19.

# SMU upsets No. 12 UNC in ACC opener

Associated Press

DALLAS — Boopie Miller had 27 points and 12 assists and SMU beat No. 12 North Carolina 97-83 on Saturday, giving the Mustangs their first win over a ranked team for second-year coach Andy Enfield.

Corey Washington added 23 points, while B.J. Edwards scored 15 points and had six assists for SMU (12-2), which is in its second Atlantic Coast Conference season. Jaron Pierre had 13 points and Jaden Toombs 12.

After leading by nine points three times before the game was tied at halftime, the Mustangs never trailed after the break in their ACC opener. They shot 60% overall (36 of 60) and 52% (14 of 27) on 3-pointers.

Seth Trimble had 22 points for North Carolina (13-2, 1-1 ACC), which was off to its best start in more than 15 years. Henri Veesaar had 14 points, while freshman standout Caleb Wilson had 13 points and seven rebounds.

**No. 1 Arizona 97, Utah 78:** Tobe Awaka and Jaden Bradley each scored 18 points and the visiting Wildcats cruised past the Utes to remain undefeated.

Brayden Burries had 17 points and 11 rebounds, Koa Peat also scored 17 and Ivan Kharchenkov 13 for Arizona (14-0, 1-0 Big 12 Conference), which extended its best start to a season since beginning the 2013-14 campaign with a 21-0 mark.

Terrence Brown scored 26 and Don McHenry and Keanu Dawes each scored 15 for Utah (8-6, 0-1).

**No. 5 Purdue 89, Wisconsin 73:** Braden Smith became the Big Ten's career assists leader, Fletcher Loyer scored 20 points and the visiting Boilermakers defeated the Badgers.

Smith had 12 assists to increase his career total to 893 and break the record formerly held by Cassius Winston, who compiled 890 career assists with Michigan State from 2017-

20.

Smith is averaging 9.6 assists per game and entered Saturday leading all Division I players in that category. The large contingent of Purdue fans at the Kohl Center chanted "Braden Smith!" and gave him a standing ovation after he broke Winston's record.

**No. 6 Duke 91, Florida St. 87:** Isaiah Evans scored a career-high 28 points to lead the visiting Blue Devils to a victory against the Seminoles.

The sophomore guard shot 6-for-14 from 3-point range, surpassing his career-best 23 points set in the opener against Texas on Nov. 4.

Cameron Boozer had 17 points and season-bests in assists with nine and steals with four for Duke (13-1, 2-0 Atlantic Coast Conference).

**No. 8 Houston 67, Cincinnati 60:** Milos Uzan scored 18 points, including a tiebreaking 3-pointer with 2:48 remaining, and the visiting Cougars rallied in the second half for a victory over the Bearcats in the Big 12 Conference opener for both teams.

Kingston Flemings led Houston with 19 points as it won its seventh straight. The Cougars (13-1) extended Division I's longest active road winning streak to 15 games.

Day Day Thomas led Cincinnati (8-6) with 15 points, 12 in the first half.

**No. 10 BYU 83, Kansas St. 73:** A.J. Dybantsa had 24 points to offset seven turnovers in his Big 12 Conference debut, Robert Wright III added 18 points and the visiting Cougars held off the Wildcats to extend BYU's longest winning streak since 2010.

Richie Saunders had 13 points and Keba Keita pulled down 16 rebounds for the Cougars (13-1, 1-0), whose 10th win since a two-point loss to fourth-ranked UConn in late November is their best stretch since Jimmer Freddette's senior season.

P.J. Haggerty led the Wild-

cats (9-5, 0-1) with 24 points.

**No. 11 Vanderbilt 83, South**

**Carolina 71:** Tyler Tanner had 19 points and a career-high 14 assists, AK Okereke scored 17 and the visiting Commodores improved to 14-0 with a victory over the Gamecocks.

Vanderbilt did it against South Carolina (9-5, 0-1) without leading scorer Duke Miles, who missed his second straight contest with an undisclosed injury.

Miles absence didn't slow down Vanderbilt one bit. It used an early 13-0 run — which started on Okereke's 3-pointer — to lead 15-4 in the first six minutes.

**No. 14 Alabama 89, Ken-**

**tucky 74:** Aden Holloway tied a career-high with 26 points, LaBaron Philon Jr. added 17 points and the host Crimson Tide beat the Wildcats.

Kentucky fought back from a 21-point deficit, cutting the lead to single digits, 77-68, with 5:38 to play. But the Wildcats were outscored 12-6 down the stretch.

Holloway hit six of the 15 3-pointers made by the Tide (11-3, 1-0 Southeastern Conference).

**No. 15 Texas Tech 102, Ok-**

**Iahoma St. 80:** JT Toppin had 23 points and 14 rebounds for his 39th career double-double, Christian Anderson had 19 points and a career-high 13 assists, and the host Red Raiders beat the Cowboys.

Texas Tech (11-3, 1-0 Big 12) never trailed after the game's opening minute.

LeJuan Watts finished just shy of the Red Raiders' third double-double of the game at 19 points and nine rebounds.

**UCF 81, No. 17 Kansas 75:**

Riley Kugel had 19 points and a crucial three-point play with less than 10 seconds remaining to lead the host Knights over the Jayhawks.

Themus Fulks had 16 points and Jordan Burks scored 14 for UCF (12-1, 1-0 Big 12).

Kansas (10-4, 0-1) played most of the second half without star guard Darryn Peterson, who scored 23 of his 26 points in

the first half.

**No. 18 Arkansas 86, No. 19**

**Tennessee 75:** Freshman Darius Acuff Jr. scored a career-high 29 points, including a key 3-pointer with just over two minutes left in the second half, to help the host Razorbacks to a win over the Volunteers in the SEC opener for both teams.

Arkansas (11-3) used a 18-5 run over a 6:37 span midway through the second half to turn a five-point deficit into an eight-point lead with 5:40 left.

**No. 20 Illinois 73, Penn St.**

**65:** David Mirkovic had 13 points and 10 rebounds and Kylian Boswell scored 18 points to lead the Fighting Illini to a win over the Nittany Lions at the Palestra in Philadelphia.

Keaton Wagler scored 16 points and Zvonimir Ivisic added five blocked shots for Illinois (11-3, 2-1 Big Ten) in the first of a 12-day stretch in which it plays three of four conference opponents on the road.

**No. 21 Virginia 76, NC St.**

**61:** Sam Lewis matched his career high with 23 points, and Thijs De Ridder took over after halftime as the visiting Cavaliers beat the Wolfpack.

Lewis had 20 points on 7-for-8 shooting by halftime for Virginia (12-2, 1-1 Atlantic Coast Conference).

**Missouri 76, No. 22 Florida**

**74:** Anthony Robinson II had 19 points and eight rebounds as the host Tigers held off the Gators in the Southeastern Conference opener for both teams.

Mark Mitchell added 14 points for Missouri (11-3, 1-0).

**No. 23 Georgia 104, Auburn**

**100 (OT):** Jeremiah Wilkinson scored 31 points, including two 3-pointers in overtime, and the host Bulldogs kept up their high-scoring pace as Georgia held off the Tigers in the Southeastern Conference opener for each team.

**No. 25 Iowa 74, UCLA 61:**

Bennett Stirtz scored 27 points and the host Hawkeyes held off a second-half comeback attempt by the Bruins.