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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

GAO says Navy testing ship void a risk

BY ALISON BATH

Stars and Stripes

The Navy doesn't have a clear plan for replacing the capabilities of an aging destroyer used to test the effectiveness of ship defense systems needed to protect against threats like those recently faced by the fleet in the Middle East, a government watchdog agency says.

That failure in having a backup strategy for the Spruance-class vessel that is beset with structural and other problems puts the fleet at significant risk, the Government Accountability Office said in a report released Thursday that also addressed other Navy testing issues.

Recent Red Sea conflicts demonstrate "the Navy will need to continue to advance — and demonstrate through live testing — the operational capabilities of vessels' self-defense systems in

response to increasingly complex and evolving threats," the report stated.

"A gap in, or outright loss of, test ship capability threatens the Navy's ability to perform the operationally realistic testing needed to sufficiently evaluate ship self-defense systems," the GAO said.

Navy forces in the Red Sea fighting Iran-backed Houthi militants in Yemen defended against more than 400 attack drones and missiles in the span of little more than a year after the group began launching attacks in November 2023 on military and commercial ships in the strategic waterway, a service official said in January 2025.

Since then, Houthi attacks on ships have decreased significantly but the group continues to be a threat.

The Navy pushed back on the

GAO's findings, saying that while it agreed a follow-on test ship is needed, potential substitutes had been identified. However, an availability gap could occur due to the current Arleigh Burke-class destroyer decommissioning schedule, the service said in response to the GAO report.

In October 2024, the Navy announced it would extend the service lives of 12 of Arleigh Burke destroyers that were set to begin retiring in 2028.

The destroyers now will retire sometime between 2030 and 2036, Stars and Stripes reported at the time.

At issue is the former Paul F. Foster that has been in service for nearly 50 years and is the last of its class.

Importantly, the testing vessel allows the service to demonstrate the performance of ship self-defense systems without putting a

ship and its crew in significant danger.

But the poor condition of the test ship, including significant degradation of its hull, equipment and components, makes it uncertain the vessel will be operational through the end of the decade, the GAO found.

Irregular maintenance and a long-delayed drydock for repairs are exacerbating the issue, the report stated.

Without a clear plan for replacing the current test ship's capability that considers how to mitigate the impact of any gap, the Navy risks accepting uncertainty about the adequacy of its operational testing, the GAO said.

"The lack of a plan also risks eroding the Navy's ability to evaluate and understand the self-defense capabilities and limitations of its ships, thus passing significant risk to the fleet, the GAO said.

Europe warns of 'spiral' amid Trump's tariff threat

Associated Press

BERLIN — The eight European countries targeted by President Donald Trump for a 10% tariff for opposing American control of Greenland blasted the move Sunday, warning that his threats "undermine transatlantic relations and risk a dangerous downward spiral."

The joint statement by some of America's closest allies signaled a possible turning point in the recent tensions over sovereignty and security nearly 24 hours after Trump's threat.

It was also the most forceful rebuke of Trump from the European allies since he returned to the White House almost a year ago. In recent months, Europeans have mostly opted for

diplomacy and flattery around him, even when seeking an end to the war in Ukraine. Sunday's statement, as well as some European countries sending troops to Greenland for a Danish military training exercise, appeared to be a step away from that strategy.

The unusually strong joint statement from Denmark, Norway, Sweden, France, Germany, the United Kingdom, the Netherlands and Finland said troops sent to Greenland for operation "Arctic Endurance" pose "no threat to anyone."

Trump's Saturday announcement sets up a potentially dangerous test of U.S. partnerships in Europe. He appeared to indicate that he was using the

tariffs as leverage to force talks over the status of Greenland, a semi-autonomous territory of NATO ally Denmark that he regards as critical to U.S. national security.

"We stand in full solidarity with the Kingdom of Denmark and the people of Greenland," the group said. "Building on the process begun last week, we stand ready to engage in a dialogue based on the principles of sovereignty and territorial integrity that we stand firmly behind. Tariff threats undermine transatlantic relations and risk a dangerous downward spiral."

There are immediate questions about how the White House could try to implement the tariffs because the Euro-

pean Union is a single economic zone in terms of trading. It was unclear, too, how Trump could act under U.S. law, though he could cite emergency economic powers that are currently subject to a U.S. Supreme Court challenge.

EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas said China and Russia will benefit from divisions between the U.S. and Europe. She added in a post on social media: "If Greenland's security is at risk, we can address this inside NATO. Tariffs risk making Europe and the United States poorer and undermine our shared prosperity."

Europe has been trying to keep Trump on its side to ensure U.S. support for Ukraine.

MOLD Act to enforce housing standards

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

A bipartisan group of lawmakers Thursday introduced a bill to hold private landlords of military family housing financially responsible for the health and safety of the homes they lease on military bases through enforceable standards.

"Hundreds of thousands of military families are going without safe and decent housing," Sen. Richard Blumenthal, D-Conn., said during a news conference with other senators, House members and military families. "These private landlords are violating the basic moral rights and usually legal rights of those families. ... What we need is strong, effective legislation that will give families the tools they need to make sure contractors comply with the obligations they have, and put on our

military the burden of protecting those families."

The new bill, the Military Occupancy Living Defense, or MOLD Act, has five key provisions he said will improve safety and oversight and give families new pathways to report hazards in their homes. Specifically, it mandates Defense Department-wide requirements for acceptable levels of humidity in homes, calls for third-party inspections between tenants and for complaints, opens a 24/7 complaint hotline and website for hazard reporting, penalizes landlords by withholding fees and allowing tenants to keep their rent for noncompliance, and dedicates a Pentagon oversight office to the issue.

"It is absolutely the right thing to do for our service members, their families and the future of our armed forces," Sen. Joni Ernst, R-

Iowa, said during the news conference.

Alongside Blumenthal and Ernst, others leading the effort of the MOLD Act include Sens. Tim Sheehy, R-Mont., and Mazie Hirono, D-Hawaii; and Reps. Jimmy Panetta, D-Calif., and Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla.; and James Moylan, Republican delegate from Guam.

The bill is another in a long line of efforts to improve the quality of military family housing, which is primarily managed in the United States by private companies. Roughly 700,000 service members and their families live in this type of housing.

Families have reported mold, water intrusions, broken appliances, and pest and rodent infestations, as well as insufficient efforts to repair or remedy conditions. Military advocates high-

lighting the lasting impacts of toxic exposure, particularly on children, have invigorated Congress to begin mandating reforms, such as the tenant bill of rights created in 2019 and the establishment of stronger oversight.

The private companies responsible for military housing over the years have announced new construction and new lines of credit to update homes faster.

Some families, however, have still face dangerous conditions.

"Our home was contaminated with toxic mold," Erica Thompson, a military spouse for more than 22 years, said during the news conference. "We lost our family dog, we lost most of our belongings, and our children lost their health. As a result of that exposure, all five of our children are now medically disqualified to serve in the military."

DOD will require staff to offer chaperone for sensitive exams

By ROSE L. THAYER
Stars and Stripes

Staff at military medical facilities must now ask patients if they would like a chaperone in the room before a doctor performs a sensitive exam. Leadership made the change after an Army doctor was charged with illegally recording videos of patients during appointments.

"Having chaperones available is a crucial part of patient-centered care," said Dr. Paul Cordts, deputy assistant director for medical affairs and chief medical officer at the Defense Health Agency. "Chaperones can help protect both patients and health care staff."

The previous policy required medical facilities to accommodate a patient's request for a chaperone, but did not require that they be asked their preference.

DHA shared the update online

Thursday, following months of scrutiny about how Maj. Blaine McGraw, an OB-GYN, could be criminally charged with recording videos of more than 40 patients at Fort Hood, Texas, using his cellphone. He is charged with 54 counts of indecent visual recording involving 44 women, according to the Army.

All but one of those women received medical care from McGraw in 2025 at Fort Hood.

Many women have said they did request a chaperone or their partner be present during appointments but were denied by McGraw, according to a lawsuit filed in Bell County, Texas, on behalf of 95 women who were patients of McGraw. During those appointments, McGraw would keep the camera lens of his phone facing outward from the breast pocket of his clothing, according to court documents.

Analysis: Trump warship could be among costliest

Bloomberg News

WASHINGTON — The first of the Navy's proposed "Trump-class" battleships could cost up to \$22 billion, a price tag that would make it one of the most expensive military vessels in U.S. history, according to an early analysis.

The initial cost estimate for the ship was released Thursday by Congressional Budget Office naval forces analyst Eric Labs at a Navy surface warfare conference in Virginia. He acknowledged that the final price for the first vessel will depend on decisions that still haven't been made around tonnage, crew size and weapons. His lowest-cost scenario was \$15.1 billion.

The guided-missile battleship would be twice as large as any cruiser or destroyer the Navy has built since World War II, but about one-third the size of the USS

Gerald R. Ford aircraft carrier that's now the most expensive U.S. warship. The Ford was delivered in 2017 at a cost of about \$13 billion.

Labs said weaknesses in the U.S. shipbuilding industrial base, including skilled labor shortages and supply chain challenges, could make the eventual cost even higher. The average cost of follow-on ships could range from \$10 billion to \$15 billion, depending on a variety of factors, he said.

President Donald Trump announced plans for the new vessel at Mar-a-Lago in December, saying the ship would be part of his "Golden Fleet" plan to revive U.S. shipbuilding and overhaul the Navy. For now, the battleship remains only a concept. A poster at the event featured an artist's rendering of a sleek-looking warship, dubbed the USS Defiant.

Army misses its hypersonic missile deadline yet again

Bloomberg News

The Army has once again missed its own deadline for fielding the first U.S. hypersonic weapon, in a sign that one of the Pentagon's top priorities is still behind schedule.

The unit responsible for using the advanced weapon is trained and ready, but the missile — part of a \$10.4 billion hypersonic program — isn't ready for use.

And while the Army as recently as last month told Bloomberg News that it planned to field the weapon by the end of 2025, the Army acknowledged last week that it missed that deadline.

"Fielding activities include the required integration, safety and readiness steps to ensure soldiers receive a system that is reliable, sustainable and effective in operational environments and are on track for completion in early 2026," the Army statement said. "As the Army moves toward completion of fielding, it remains focused on rigorous testing, training and system maturity to support successful operational employment."

The Army missed a previous deadline of Sept. 30, 2023, to field the technology, and blew past another this past September.

Missing the deadline again at year's end is a reality check on the technical complexities inherent in ensuring the system works as intended — as opposed to any apparent lingering or unresolved flaws with the basic missile developed by Lockheed Martin.

But it's also a cautionary tale for Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth as he emphasizes field-

ing weapons quickly and pursues a complete upending of the Pentagon's often lumbering, risk-averse acquisition process.

The Army on Dec. 17 announced "a significant advancement of its military capabilities" when it activated a battery that operates the hypersonic missile, which is known as Dark Eagle. It didn't mention at the time that the missiles weren't ready.

The Pentagon has invested more than \$12 billion since 2018 in an attempt to develop, test and deploy a hypersonic system.

The first battery will cost about \$2.7 billion, including missiles, according to the Government Accountability Office.

With China and Russia already deploying new hypersonic projectiles, the absence of a similar U.S. capability remains a concerning shortfall. Hypersonic missiles are able to fly fast — more than 3,800 miles per hour — as well as low, and are harder to intercept with traditional air defense systems.

Russia already deployed the technology for attacks in Ukraine.

Hegseth saw the U.S. missile's launcher firsthand on Dec. 12 on a visit to Huntsville, Ala.

Aside from fielding, there are lingering questions on the missile's combat effectiveness. The Pentagon's test office told Bloomberg in October it still had "not conducted an end-to-end operational assessment" of the system and that it didn't have data to evaluate the weapon's "operational effectiveness, lethality, suitability, and survivability."

Troops on standby for Minnesota deployment

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon has ordered about 1,500 active-duty soldiers to be ready in case of a possible deployment to Minnesota, where federal authorities have been conducting a massive immigration enforcement operation, two defense officials said Sunday.

The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss sensitive military plans, said two infantry battalions of the Army's 11th Airborne Division have been given prepare-to-deploy orders. The unit is based in Alaska and specializes in operating in arctic conditions.

One defense official said the troops are standing by to deploy to Minnesota should President Donald Trump invoke the Insurrection Act, a rarely-used 19th century law that would allow him to employ active duty troops as law enforcement.

The move comes just days af-

ter Trump threatened to do just that to quell protests against his administration's immigration crackdown.

In an emailed statement, Pentagon chief spokesman Sean Parnell did not deny the orders were issued and said the military "is always prepared to execute the orders of the Commander-in-Chief if called upon."

ABC News was the first to report the development.

On Thursday, Trump said in a social media post that he would invoke the 1807 law "if the corrupt politicians of Minnesota don't obey the law and stop the professional agitators and insurrectionists from attacking the Patriots of I.C.E., who are only trying to do their job."

He appeared to walk back the threat a day later, telling reporters at the White House that there wasn't a reason to use it "right now."

National Guard to stay on DC streets through 2026

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — National Guard troops will be on the streets of Washington, D.C., until the end of the year, according to a memo.

The memo, signed by Army Secretary Dan Driscoll and dated Wednesday, said "the conditions of the mission" warranted an extension past the end of next month to continue supporting President Donald Trump's "ongoing efforts to restore law and order."

Meanwhile, Trump has at least temporarily dropped his push to deploy National Guard troops in Chicago, Los Angeles and Portland, Ore., which had provoked legal challenges. He also backed off a bit Friday from

his threat a day earlier to invoke the Insurrection Act in Minnesota.

Since Washington is a congressionally established federal district, as president, Trump has much greater control over the police and D.C. National Guard, which he can control directly. This has enabled him to sidestep the legal challenges that he has faced in some states.

Trump activated 800 members of the D.C. National Guard in August under an emergency order. Those numbers were quickly augmented by troops from states run by Republican governors.

There are currently about 2,600 National Guard troops in Washington.

Iranian leader calls Trump a ‘criminal’

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei on Saturday branded President Donald Trump a “criminal” for supporting protesters in Iran, and blamed demonstrators for causing thousands of deaths.

In a speech broadcast by state television, Khamenei said the protests had left “several thousand” people dead — the first indication from an Iranian leader of the extent of the casualties from the wave of protests that began Dec. 28 and led to a bloody crackdown.

“In this revolt, the U.S. president made remarks in person, encouraged seditious people to

go ahead and said: ‘We do support you, we do support you militarily,’ ” said Khamenei, who has final say on all state matters. He reiterated an accusation that the U.S. seeks domination over Iran’s resources.

“We do consider the U.S. president a criminal, because of casualties and damages, because of accusations against the Iranian nation,” he said. He described the protesters as “foot soldiers” of the United States and said they had destroyed mosques and educational centers. “Through hurting people, they killed several thousand of them,” he said.

In response, Trump called for an end to Khamenei’s nearly 40-

year reign.

“The man is a sick man who should run his country properly and stop killing people,” Trump told Politico on Saturday. “His country is the worst place to live anywhere in the world because of poor leadership.”

“It’s time to look for new leadership in Iran,” he added.

The back-and-forth rhetoric came a day after Trump sounded a conciliatory tone, saying that “Iran canceled the hanging of over 800 people,” and adding that “I greatly respect the fact that they canceled.” He did not clarify whom he spoke to in Iran to confirm the state of any planned executions. His comments were a sign he may be

backing away from a military strike.

Iran has returned to an uneasy calm after harsh repression of protests that began Dec. 28 over Iran’s ailing economy. The crackdown has left at least 3,766 people dead, according to the U.S.-based Human Rights Activists News Agency, exceeding that of any other round of protest or unrest in Iran in decades and recalling the chaos surrounding the 1979 revolution.

There have been no signs of protests for days in Tehran, where shopping and street life have returned to normal, and Iranian state media have not reported any new unrest.

Documents reveal acting Venezuelan leader was on DEA radar for years

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — When President Donald Trump announced the audacious capture of Nicolás Maduro to face drug trafficking charges in the U.S., he portrayed the strongman’s vice president and longtime aide as America’s preferred partner to stabilize Venezuela amid a scourge of drugs, corruption and economic mayhem.

Left unspoken was the cloud of suspicion that long surrounded Delcy Rodríguez before she became acting president of the beleaguered nation earlier this month.

In fact, Rodríguez has been on the radar of the U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration for years and in 2022 was even labeled a “priority target,” a designation DEA reserves for suspects believed to have a “significant impact” on the drug trade, according to records obtained by The Associated Press and more than a half dozen cur-

rent and former U.S. law enforcement officials.

The DEA has amassed a detailed intelligence file on Rodríguez dating to at least 2018, the records show, cataloging her known associates and allegations ranging from drug trafficking to gold smuggling. One confidential informant told the DEA in early 2021 that Rodríguez was using hotels in the Caribbean resort of Isla Margarita “as a front to launder money,” the records show. As recently as last year she was linked to Maduro’s alleged bag man, Alex Saab, whom U.S. authorities arrested in 2020 on money laundering charges.

The U.S. government has never publicly accused Rodríguez of any criminal wrongdoing. Notably for Maduro’s inner circle, she’s not among the more than a dozen current Venezuelan officials charged with drug trafficking alongside the ousted president.

Supreme Court to hear appeal regarding Roundup weedkiller

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Supreme Court agreed on Friday to hear an appeal from global agrochemical manufacturer Bayer to block thousands of state lawsuits alleging it failed to warn people that its popular weedkiller could cause cancer.

The justices will consider whether the Environmental Protection Agency’s approval of the Roundup weedkiller without a cancer warning should rule out the state court claims.

The Trump administration has weighed in on Bayer’s behalf, reversing the Biden administration’s position and putting it at odds with some supporters of the Make America Healthy Again agenda who oppose giving the company the legal immunity it seeks.

Some studies associate Roundup’s key ingredient, glyphosate, with cancer, although the EPA has said it is not likely to be carcinogenic when used as directed.

Bayer disputes the cancer claims but has set aside \$16 bil-

lion to settle cases. At the same time, it has tried to persuade states to pass laws barring the lawsuits. Georgia and North Dakota have done so.

The high court will take up a case from Missouri, in which a jury awarded \$1.25 million to a man who developed non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma after spraying Roundup on a community garden in St. Louis.

The Supreme Court in 2022 declined to hear a similar claim from Bayer in a California case that awarded more than \$86 million to a married couple.

But Germany-based Bayer, which acquired Roundup maker Monsanto in 2018, contends the Supreme Court should intervene now because lower courts have issued conflicting rulings. In 2024, the 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in Bayer’s favor.

Bayer faces about 181,000 Roundup claims, mostly from residential users. It has stopped using glyphosate in Roundup sold in the U.S. residential lawn and garden market.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Highway 1 stretch back open after landslides

CA BIG SUR — A 90-mile section of California's Highway 1 along the famous Big Sur coast fully reopened last week after three years of closures and repairs following a series of landslides and a roadway collapse that hampered tourism on the scenic route.

The reopening around mid-day Wednesday came three months ahead of schedule, and business owners say that should give travelers plenty of time to plan their spring and summer road trips. The highway is famously a must for California visitors traveling between Los Angeles and San Francisco.

The first shutdown came in January 2023 when a series of powerful atmospheric rivers triggered a major landslide. The highway was buried by mud and rocks again the following year during another wet winter, and a lane also collapsed down a cliff near the Rocky Creek Bridge.

Book returned to library after 36 years, world tour

VA CHANTILLY — Dimitris Economou was visiting his parents in Greece and looking for a book to read to his 7-year-old son when he found a copy of the children's book "Harry the Dirty Dog" on his dad's bookshelf. He remembered the story from his own childhood.

He realized two things — that this was a library book from the Fairfax County Public Library and that it was very overdue. It was due Nov. 6, 1989.

Economou figured out that

the book must have been taken out for him when he was 5 years old and his parents worked for the Greek Embassy in Washington, D.C. After the family's time in Virginia, they moved back to Greece, and his father went on to live in Syria, Japan and the Netherlands, the library book relocating with him without anyone realizing it.

Economou was planning to be in Northern Virginia over the holidays and took the book with him to finally return it, including a note explaining that the book had "traveled the world and was well taken care of, as you can see. And now it can find its way home."

Fortunately for Economou, the library stopped charging late fees a few years ago, though he said he would have happily paid a fine to support the library.

"There was a maximum for late fees, so it would never have been like hundreds and hundreds of dollars or anything," said Ingrid Bowers, the branch manager at the Chantilly Regional Library, the branch where Economou returned the book. She noted that the book was in great condition, especially given its age and world travels. "This is something that's going to go right back into our collection."

Much of Western states plagued by snow drought

NV LAS VEGAS — Each winter, high elevation snow blankets mountains for skiers and sledders, forming a natural reservoir that will slowly melt as winter warms into spring and provide a steady flow into creeks and rivers.

At lower elevations, where it

doesn't linger as long, snow replenishes moisture in the soil and provides water for range-land plants.

But on Jan. 1, just 379,000 acres across the West were covered with snow, much less than the usual roughly 1.46 million acres that usually blanket the Western U.S.

That's because the West, including Nevada, is experiencing what meteorologists refer to as a "snow drought."

Unseasonably warm temperatures through late fall and early winter have resulted in much of Nevada's precipitation arriving so far this year as rainfall. Beyond western Nevada, the state's snowpack is lagging.

Former senator sued over bodyguard's breakup

AZ PHOENIX — Former U.S. Sen. Kyrsten Sinema had a romantic relationship with a member of her security detail that led to the breakup of the man's marriage, his ex-wife alleges in a lawsuit seeking at least \$75,000 from Sinema.

Matthew and Heather Ammel had "a good and loving marriage" with "genuine love and affection" before Sinema interfered, pursuing Matthew Ammel despite knowing he was married, Heather Ammel alleges in her lawsuit.

The Arizona lawmaker's head of security hired Matthew Ammel after he retired from the Army in 2022, according to the lawsuit, which says he accompanied her on travels to destinations including Napa Valley, Calif.; Las Vegas and Saudi Arabia.

In early 2024, Ammel's wife discovered "romantic and lasci-

vious" messages he'd exchanged with Sinema over the Signal messaging app. That summer, he stopped wearing his wedding ring and Sinema gave him a job as a national security fellow in her Senate office while he continued to work for her campaign as a bodyguard, the lawsuit alleges.

Sinema also paid for psychedelic treatment for Ammel, who has struggled with post-traumatic stress, substance abuse and traumatic brain injuries tied to his military deployments in Afghanistan and the Middle East, according to the lawsuit.

Sinema left Congress after the 2024 election. She declined to seek reelection to the Senate.

Deputy captures runaway emu, takes it home

FL ST. AUGUSTINE — A Florida deputy has captured a runaway emu and safely returned the large flightless bird to its home.

A St. Johns County deputy responded last Friday to a rural area west of St. Augustine following reports of the bird's escape, the sheriff's office said in a Facebook post.

The deputy tried to secure the emu, but the bird kicked several times using its large talons and fled, authorities said.

After a short chase, the deputy cornered it, secured it with a makeshift lasso and handcuffed its legs together to render the talons useless. The emu was returned to its owners unharmed. No charges were filed.

Emus are native to Australia and can grow over 6 feet. They have soft, brown feathers, a long neck and long legs, which allow them to sprint up to 30 mph.

— From wire reports

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Broncos edge Bills but lose Nix to injury

Associated Press

DENVER — The Denver Broncos wrangled their biggest win in a decade from Josh Allen and the Buffalo Bills, but suffered an enormous loss in the process.

About an hour after second-year quarterback Bo Nix led Denver to a 33-30 win on Wil Lutz's 23-yard field goal in overtime Saturday, Broncos coach Sean Payton returned to the postgame lectern to deliver the stunning news.

He said Nix broke his right ankle a few plays before Lutz's kick sent top-seeded Denver (15-3) to the AFC championship game against either New England or Houston.

Nix will have season-ending surgery Tuesday.

"We celebrate the season for him," Payton said. "And listen, the city's ready and we'll be ready for the next challenge."

Backup QB Jarrett Stidham takes over for Nix. He took just one snap this season, a kneeldown in a blowout win over Dallas in Week 8.

Nix got hurt on a keeper where he lost 2 yards and was tackled by safety Cole Bishop. Nix was limping after the play, but there was no indication that he suffered such a serious injury.

On the next play, Nix threw a deep pass to Marvin Mims Jr. that drew a 30-yard pass interference flag and got the Broncos well into field-goal range. Nix then took a knee to center the ball for Lutz's game-ending field goal.

"He's a tough cookie," Payton said. "And this team all year has lost key players and will rise up for the next challenge."

Before word of Nix's injury broke, Denver was jubilant over its first playoff victory in a decade.

The Broncos' game-winning drive came after nickel back Ja'Quan McMillian intercepted Allen's deep pass in overtime. McMillian's pick was Denver's fifth takeaway of the game after it was minus-3 in turnover differential during the season.

McMillian wrested the ball away from Brandin Cooks at the Broncos 20-yard line when a field goal would have won the game for Buffalo (13-6).

"He actually had the ball coming down and I had my hand on the ball," McMillian said. "I was able to take it from him. I fell on top of him, just held the ball up, showed the fans some love."

Cooks said he thought it was a catch.

"I feel that way," he said. "But at the end of the day, you don't, you know, no matter, ultimately this is where we're sitting now."

Referee Carl Cheffers said in a pool report, "The receiver has to complete the process of a catch. He was going to the ground as part of the process of the catch and he lost possession of the ball when he hit the ground. The defender gained possession of it at that point. The defender is the one that completed the process of the catch, so the defender was awarded the ball."

Cooks said he just has to make sure next time not to leave it in the "officials' hands."

Or McMillian's.

Nix said nothing about being hurt during a postgame interview with CBS, and he sounded as if he was looking forward to the next game.

"It's great to have home-field advantage in a situation like this. It's exciting. This is why you play the game, this is why you compete. You get to playoff football, and good things happen," Nix said.

Former Denver kicker Matt Prater nailed a 50-yard field goal with 5 seconds left in regulation, knotting it up at 30-all. That came after Nix's 26-yard touchdown throw to Mims with 55 seconds left had given the Broncos a 30-27 lead.

Allen, who hadn't turned the ball over in his previous six playoff appearances, threw two interceptions and lost two fumbles.

"I felt like I let my teammates down," a teary-eyed Allen said.

Seahawks dominate 49ers, advance to NFC title game

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Richard Sherman, Kam Chancellor and Doug Baldwin hyped up the famed "12th Man" crowd in Seattle, providing a throwback to the Seahawks' fearsome "Legion of Boom" teams from the 2010s.

Then, in its first playoff game in front of home fans in nearly a decade, Seattle found a new level of dominance.

Rashid Shaheed returned the opening kickoff for a touchdown, Kenneth Walker III rushed for three scores and the Seahawks forced three turnovers in a never-in-doubt 41-6 win over the San Francisco 49ers on Saturday night that sent top-seeded Seattle to the NFC championship game.

"One of our most complete

games, for sure," defensive lineman Leonard Williams said. "(Shaheed) starting the game off like that set the tone."

Sam Darnold threw a touchdown pass and got his first career playoff win in his first season with the Seahawks (15-3), who will host either the Chicago Bears or the Los Angeles Rams next Sunday with a trip to the Super Bowl at stake.

Seattle led 7-0 13 seconds into the game thanks to Shaheed, who fielded the opening kick and took it 95 yards to the end zone. It was the fourth kickoff return for a touchdown to open a playoff game since 2000 and the longest postseason kick return in franchise history.

"I was so hyped," defensive lineman Byron Murphy II said.

"I wasn't expecting that, but when he did it, I knew the game was over then. I already knew."

Darnold, who had been listed as questionable because of an oblique injury, guided the Seahawks on two more scoring drives before San Francisco got on the board with the first of its two field goals. As he has all season, Darnold impressed his teammates with his toughness.

"He told us he was going to do whatever it takes to get back and play for us," offensive lineman Grey Zabel said. "That was a gutsy performance by him, not feeling his best. He continues to just be a leader in the huddle, on the field, on the sidelines."

After he flopped in his playoff debut last season with the Min-

nesota Vikings by taking nine sacks in a 27-9 loss to the Rams, Darnold completed 12 of 17 passes for 124 yards and connected with Jaxon Smith-Njigba for a touchdown in the star receiver's playoff debut.

The 49ers (13-6) were never competitive in the second-most lopsided playoff loss in franchise history. San Francisco lost 49-3 to the New York Giants in the divisional round in the 1986 season.

The Niners were missing three injured All-Pros: tight end George Kittle, linebacker Fred Warner and defensive end Nick Bosa. Star left tackle Trent Williams, who played through a hamstring injury, was proud of his team for getting as far in the playoffs as it did.

Adebayo, Wiggins' late 3 help Heat top Thunder

Associated Press

MIAMI—Andrew Wiggins' 3-pointer with 31 seconds left put Miami up for good, Bam Adebayo scored 30 points with a career-best six 3s and the Heat defeated the NBA champion Oklahoma City Thunder 122-120 on Saturday night.

Norman Powell scored 19 for Miami, while Pelle Larsson finished with 16. Simone Fontecchio and Myron Gardner combined for 24 points off the Heat bench.

Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 39 for Oklahoma City, which fell to 35-8 on the season. Aaron Wiggins scored 18 for the Thunder, which got 15 from Ajay Mitchell and 14 from Chet Holmgren.

OKC lost Jalen Williams midway through the second quarter with what the team said was right thigh soreness, even though the starting guard was grabbing at his right hamstring as he limped off the floor. He was set to be evaluated Sunday, Thunder coach Mark Daigneault said.

Mavericks 138, Jazz 120: Klay Thompson scored all 23 of

his points in the first half, including the 17,000th of his career, and six Dallas players scored in double figures as the host Mavericks completed a two-game sweep of Utah.

Brandon Williams and Max Christie each scored 22 points, Naji Marshall added 16, Jaden Hardy pitched in with 12 and Dwight Powell had 10 for Dallas, which entered Saturday with wins in just two of its last five games.

Celtics 132, Hawks 106: Jaylen Brown scored 41 points, Sam Hauser led a 3-point barrage in the second quarter and visiting Boston blew away Atlanta.

The Celtics put this one away with a 52-point outburst in the second quarter, stretching what had been a fairly competitive opening period to an 82-51 laugher at halftime.

Pistons 121, Pacers 78: Duncan Robinson and Cade Cunningham each scored 16 points in limited minutes as host Detroit routed shorthanded Indiana.

The Pacers played without their four leading scorers, with Pascal Siakam resting and Bene-

dict Mathurin (thumb), Andrew Nembhard (back) and Obi Toppin (foot) dealing with injuries. T.J. McConnell, who is sixth on the team in scoring and second in assists, also sat out with a knee problem.

Suns 106, Knicks 99: Devin Booker scored 27 points after missing a game with a sprained left ankle, and visiting Phoenix beat slumping New York.

Karl-Anthony Towns and Deuce McBride each scored 23 points for the Knicks, who were playing without starters Jalen Brunson and Josh Hart because of ankle injuries. They have lost three straight and eight of their last 10 games.

Warriors 136, Hornets 116: De'Anthony Melton scored 24 points as host Golden State had eight players reach double figures in a win over Charlotte.

The Hornets' Brandon Miller scored a game-high 28 points and Kon Knueppel had 24.

Spurs 126, Timberwolves 123: Victor Wembanyama had 39 points and nine rebounds, corralling a critical offensive rebound in the final seconds, en-

abling host San Antonio to fend off Anthony Edwards' season-high 55 points and beat Minnesota.

Donte DiVincenzo's 24-foot, 3-pointer put the Timberwolves up 119-118 with 1:03 remaining. Wembanyama responded with a 20-footer and then blocked Joan Beringer's reverse layup 13 seconds later to preserve the one-point lead.

Nuggets 121, Wizards 115: Jamal Murray scored 42 points on 15-for-24 shooting and host Denver pulled away in the final minutes for a win over Washington.

Kyshawn George had 29 points to lead the Wizards, who lost their sixth in a row including all four on this road trip. Khris Middleton and Alex Sarr scored 16 each.

Trail Blazers 132, Lakers 116: Shaedon Sharpe had 25 points to lead host Portland over Los Angeles, which was playing without top scorer Luka Doncic.

Jerami Grant and Caleb Love each added 22 points for the Trail Blazers, who have won seven of their last nine games.

Sabalenka, Alcaraz start Australian Open with victories

Associated Press

MELBOURNE, Australia — Aryna Sabalenka and Carlos Alcaraz fulfilled expectations on opening night of the Australian Open, the No. 1 seeds advancing in straight sets in a Sunday session that started with tennis royalty Rod Laver and Roger Federer in the crowd.

Rod Laver Arena was heaving for the first-round matches, capping a day when a record total of 100,763 fans packed into Melbourne Park.

The 45-year-old Venus Williams set a record, too, becoming the oldest player ever in the women's singles draw at the Australian Open.

Out on John Cain Arena, the so-called People's Court because it's open to fans with ground passes, Williams was up two service breaks at 4-0 in the third set before Olga Danilovic rallied to win six straight games in a 6-7 (5), 6-3, 6-4 victory.

The seven-time major winner, playing on a

wild-card entry in the singles in just her second major since returning to the tour last year, plans to continue in doubles.

"I'm really proud of my effort today because I'm playing better with each match, getting to the places that I want to get to," she said. "Right now I'm just going to have to keep going forward and working on myself."

Sabalenka fended off wild-card entry Tiantsoa Rakotomanga Rajaonah, 6-4, 6-1 after dropping the opening service game.

"I didn't start my best. She showed up. Fired on. She was playing great," said Sabalenka, who won the Australian title in 2023 and '24 and was the runner-up last year. "It was a tricky start."

Her next round is against Chinese qualifier Bai Zhuoxuan, who outlasted 2021 French Open runner-up Anastasia Pavlyuchenkova, 6-4, 2-6, 7-6 (10) in a 2-hour, 43-minute match. No. 28 Emma Raducanu, who could potentially meet Sabalenka in the third round, beat

Mananchaya Sawangkaew 6-4, 6-1.

Day 1 of a scheduled 15 closed with Alcaraz winning 6-3, 7-6 (2), 6-2 over Adam Walton, beginning his bid to set a record for being the youngest player to complete a career Grand Slam.

Alexander Zverev, runner-up here last year to Jannik Sinner, shrugged off a sluggish start to beat Gabriel Diallo 6-7 (7), 6-1, 6-4, 6-2 to reach the second round at Melbourne Park for the 10th straight year.

"Definitely, when I saw the draw, wasn't too happy to be honest," Zverev said of the tricky challenge presented by No. 41-ranked Diallo. "He's very young, very talented. Unbelievably aggressive."

No. 10 Alexander Bublik advanced over Jenson Brooksby 6-4, 6-4, 6-4. No. 29 Frances Tiafoe overpowered Jason Kubler 7-6 (4), 6-3, 6-2 and Michael Zheng fended off Sebastian Korda 6-4, 6-4, 3-6, 6-7 (0), 6-3 in an all-American first-rounder.

Tarasov, Panthers hold off Capitals

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Sam Bennett had a goal and two assists, and the Florida Panthers rebounded from a lopsided loss at Carolina with a 5-2 victory over the Washington Capitals on Saturday night.

A.J. Greer, Uvis Balinskis, Anton Lundell and Carter Verhaeghe also scored for two-time defending champion Florida, which lost 9-1 to the Hurricanes before traveling to Washington for the second game of a back-to-back. Jacob Chychrun scored twice to give the Capitals a 2-1 lead in the second, but Florida went back ahead before the period was over.

Washington is 6-10-3 in its last 19 games, and now the Capitals head west for a six-game trip.

Sergei Bobrovsky, who allowed all nine goals against Carolina, had the night off in favor of Daniil Tarasov in net. The Capitals had a goal overturned on an offside review in the first period, and then Florida quickly opened the scoring when Bennett tried to stuff the puck past goalie Logan Thompson and Greer put in the rebound.

Chychrun scored twice in the second, once from the left circle and once from just inside the blue line. Bennett tied it at 2, and after a penalty to Alex Ovechkin for putting the puck over the glass, Balinskis' shot from just beyond the right circle found its way through.

Lundell and Verhaeghe had empty-netters in the third.

The Capitals were still without the injured Tom Wilson and Pierre-Luc Dubois. Florida was without Brad Marchand, and Aleksander Barkov and Matthew Tkachuk have yet to play this season.

Rangers 6, Flyers 3: Mika Zibanejad became the Rangers' all-time leader in power-play goals and his three-goal performance tied the team record for most career hat tricks in New York's road win over Philadelphia.

phia Flyers on Saturday.

Artemi Panarin added two goals and an assist, and Brennan Othmann also scored for the Rangers, who snapped a five-game skid. The Rangers, whose last victory came January 2 against Florida, had lost eight of their last nine games.

Travis Konecny, Travis Sanheim and Trevor Zegras each had a goal and an assist for the Flyers, who lost their sixth straight game. Samuel Ersson made 22 stops.

Wild 5, Sabres 4 (OT): Mats Zuccarello scored 1:47 into overtime to lead Minnesota Wild to a road win over Buffalo.

Zuccarello's winning goal came on the power play after a pass from Kirill Kaprizov, who finished with three assists to help end the Wild's three-game winless streak.

Ryan McLeod, Peyton Krebs, Jack Quinn and Alex Tuch scored for the Sabres, who lost for only the third time in 18 games. Utko-Pekka Luukkonen made 20 saves.

Flames 4, Islanders 2: Adam Klapka had a goal and an assist for his first multi-point game of the season as host Calgary beat New York.

Calgary's Rasmus Andersson had an assist and became the seventh defenseman in Flames history to record five straight 20-assist seasons. He joins Al MacInnis, Gary Suter, Mark Giordano, TJ Brodie, Derek Morris, and Randy Manery.

Jean-Gabriel Pageau and Anders Lee scored for New York, which is 2-2-1 with two games left in its seven-game trip, it's longest of the season. David Rittich made 15 saves in the loss and slipped to 11-6-3.

Mammoth 6, Kraken 3: Nate Schmidt scored two goals and assisted on two others to lead Utah to a home victory over Seattle.

Lawson Crouse added a goal and two assists to help Utah win its third straight and for the sixth

time in seven games. Kevin Stenlund, Nick Schmaltz and Barrett Hayton also scored for the Mammoth and Karel Vejmelka made 18 stops.

Jordan Eberle, Matty Beniers, and Chandler Stephenson scored goals for the Kraken, who lost their third straight and are 1-3-2 over their last six. Philipp Grubauer had 24 saves.

Hurricanes 4, Devils 1: Andrei Svechnikov had a hat trick and Frederik Andersen made 28 saves as visiting Carolina beat New Jersey.

Jackson Blake also scored for the Hurricanes, who improved to 6-1-1 in their last eight games. Sebastian Aho had three assists as Carolina won a night after routing the defending champion Florida Panthers 9-1 at home.

Timo Meier scored for New Jersey, which had its two-game winning streak snapped. The Devils are 4-8-1 since Dec. 19 when they won 2-1 at Utah.

Blue Jackets 4, Penguins 3: Charlie Coyle scored the deciding goal in the shootout and visiting Columbus beat Pittsburgh.

Elvis Merzlikins made 29 saves for the Blue Jackets, who matched their longest winning streak of the season.

Sidney Crosby had a goal and an assist for the Penguins. He recorded his 511th multipoint game, tying Gordie Howe for fifth place in NHL history.

Maple Leafs 4, Jets 3 (OT): Max Domi scored at 3:08 of overtime on a 2-on-1 with Auston Matthews to lift visiting Toronto past Winnipeg.

Dennis Hildeby stopped 27 shots as Toronto closed a four-game trip 2-1-1.

Alex Iafallo, Kyle Connor and Nino Niederreiter scored for Winnipeg, and Connor Hellebuyck made 33 saves. The Jets had won four in a row.

Canadiens 6, Senators 5 (OT): Montreal scored three straight goals, including Cole Caufield's second of the game 33 seconds into overtime, to give

the Canadiens a come-from-behind road win over Ottawa.

Brady Tkachuk, Tim Stutzle, Dylan Cozens and David Perron scored for the Senators. Leevi Merilainen stopped 13 shots.

Bruins 5, Blackhawks 2: Mason Lohrei scored two goals and visiting Boston beat Chicago to extend its winning streak to six games.

Charlie McAvoy, Viktor Arvidsson and Marat Khusnutdinov also scored goals while Joonas Korpisalo made 22 saves for the Bruins, who have won eight of their last 11 games.

Golden Knights 7, Predators 2: Alexander Holtz and Shea Theodore scored in a 1:05 span late in the second period and host Vegas had two more two-goal sprees to rout Nashville for its seventh straight victory.

Luke Evangelista and Filip Forsberg scored for Nashville, and Justus Annunen stopped 29 shots. The Predators had won three straight, the last a 7-3 victory at Colorado on Friday night.

Oilers 6, Canucks 0: Tristan Jarry made 31 saves for his first shutout for visiting Edmonton, Jack Roslovic and Kasperi Kapanen each scored twice and the Oilers routed Vancouver.

The Oilers scored all six goals in the second period, four goals on four shots in a 4:52 span. Zach Hyman and Vasily Podkolzin also scored and Ryan Nugent-Hopkins had two assists in his 999th regular-season game.

Vancouver has lost 10 in a row (0-8-2) to fall to 16-27-5.

Ducks 2, Kings 1 (OT): Mikael Granlund scored at 4:02 of overtime, and host Anaheim beat Los Angeles to sweep a two-game weekend set in the Freeway Faceoff rivalry.

The Ducks have won three straight after a nine-game skid.

Adrian Kempe scored a power-play goal and Anton Forsberg stopped 30 shots in the backup's strong performance for the Kings, who have lost six of seven.