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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Vulnerabilities of recruiting sites exposed

The Washington Post

Mohammad Youssef Abdulazeez might have wanted to die, and he appeared to have planned his last acts carefully — particularly the target for his hatred.

On Thursday morning, Abdulazeez swung a silver Ford Mustang convertible into one of the many strip malls in Chattanooga, Tenn.

This one, however, was different. Between an Italian restaurant and a cellphone shop hung a neon sign emblazoned with the American flag. Beneath it stood window upon window advertising every branch of the U.S. Armed Forces. To the left, an Army soldier patrolled some desert country. To the right, the glass was etched with the insignia of the Marines. And in the middle stood a phrase that seemed to encapsulate them all: "Heroes Don't Brag."

It was Chattanooga's military recruitment center. And it was exactly what Abdulazeez was looking for. As he drove past the patriotic storefront, Abdulazeez pulled out a gun and opened fire, spraying the windows with at least 30 bullets. He then sped to a nearby U.S. Naval Reserve Center and opened fire again. Four Marines died in the attacks. At least three others were wounded, including members of the Marines, Navy and local police, before Abdulazeez himself was killed.

Mayor Andy Berke called the killings "a nightmare for our city," but the brazen assault was actually far from the first of its kind.

Over the past half-century, military recruitment centers have been targeted time and time again across the country: by Black Panthers and neo-Nazis, Vietnam War protesters and Japanese communists. Most recently, they have become targets for Islamic terrorism.

Whomever the attacker, the

Names of victims released

Stars and Stripes

The Marine Corps released the names of the four Marines killed in Thursday's shooting in Chattanooga.

The deceased are:

■ **Gunnery Sgt. Thomas J. Sullivan:** The 40-year-old native of Springfield, Mass., served two tours of duty in Iraq and received two Purple Hearts and a Combat Action Medal. John Sullivan, his brother, changed his Facebook profile picture to a split shot of smiling Thomas in uniform and a black ribbon over the Marines Corps logo. The ribbon has the words "in remembrance," and below it appears, "R.I.P. Tommy."

■ **Staff Sgt. David A. Wyatt:** A native of Russellville, Ark., he is survived by his wife, Lorri, and two children. Wyatt and Sullivan were friends on Facebook.

■ **Lance Cpl. Squire "Skip" Wells:** The Georgia native, 21, attended Georgia Southern University before joining the Marines. His mother was watching news coverage of the Chattanooga shooting Thursday when a Marine Corps notification team arrived at her door. A posting on his Facebook page said,

"Skip Wells, it was one of the pleasures of my life to have had the chance to know you ... I will forever have a void in my life that can never be filled."

■ **Sgt. Carson Holmquist:** The native of Grantsburg, Wisc., lived in Jacksonville, N.C. He is survived by his wife, Jasmine, and his 2-year-old son, according to his Facebook page. Holmquist had been deployed to Afghanistan

Media sources reported the wounded are:

■ **Randall Smith:** The logistics specialist in the U.S. Navy was serving in Chattanooga. He is from Paulding, Ohio. His mother said Smith is being treated for three gunshot wounds to the right arm, back and stomach.

■ **Sgt. Dennis Pedigo Jr.:** One of the responding Chattanooga police officers, he was shot in the ankle and is in stable condition. Pedigo, from Cave City, Ky., could be released from the hospital as early as Saturday.

Sources: WVLT news in Chattanooga, CNN, Fox News, Facebook, The Associated Press, the Burnett County (Wisconsin) Sentinel.

reasoning is always amazingly simple: What better place to find unarmed soldiers than at a recruitment center?

"Recruiting offices have been kind of on the leading edge of targets simply because they are both ubiquitous and they're vulnerable," Brian Michael Jenkins, of the RAND Corporation, told the Military Times.

"These recruiting offices are everywhere," he said. "They're

in shopping centers. They're all around the country. So if you think about attacking a military target, as opposed to driving to some military base where there will be armed guards at the gate ... then recruiting stations fit the bill. So the attack, while shocking, is not surprising," Jenkins said.

Although Abdulazeez's motive is not yet clear, Thursday's attack comes amid a flurry of

threats upon American military bases in the U.S. and abroad from Islamic terror groups. In May, after threats from the Islamic State group, the U.S. boosted security at its stateside bases.

But unlike bases, with their blastwalls and gun turrets, there isn't much that recruitment centers can do. By definition located in civilian areas, their officers are in uniform but prohibited from carrying weapons.

"While we expect our sailors and Marines to go into harm's way, and they do so without hesitation, an attack at home, in our community, is insidious and unfathomable," said Navy Secretary Ray Mabus in a statement.

Aside from the center in Chattanooga, the Army's recruiting stations remained open for "business as usual," Brian Lepley, a spokesman for U.S. Army Recruiting Command, told the Military Times.

Representatives from the Army and Air Force said current safety procedures are adequate, according to the Military Times. But Thursday's shooting has already led to calls for recruiters to be armed.

Lepley said that was unlikely. "We can't have barricaded centers. We can't have places where we recruit young men and women that look like a fortress," he told the Military Times. "We have to have a connection to the American people."

That tension — between projecting strength to the public and, at the same time, protecting its officers — has haunted military recruitment centers for decades. In small towns across the country, U.S. Armed Forces offices are immediately recognizable: splashed in aggressively patriotic imagery and staffed by men and women in full uniform (just without the guns).

Report: DOD must share insider threat info better

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

The Department of Defense has taken steps to detect and prevent so-called "insider attacks" in domestic U.S. military facilities in the wake of deadly shootings in 2009 and 2013 but needs to share such best practices more consistently, according to a Government Accountability Office report.

An insider threat is when someone uses authorized access to breach security to do harm. Insiders are often aware of a facility's vulnerabilities, such as loosely enforced procedures or exploitable security measures, said the report, issued Thursday.

For example, on Nov. 5, 2009, an Army officer shot and killed 13 people at Fort Hood, Texas. In September 2013, a Navy contractor killed 12 civilian employees and contractors at the Washington Navy Yard in Washington, D.C.

The report does not address assaults on military installations by outside attackers, which was apparently the case when a 24-year-old gunman killed four Marines Thursday at the Navy Operational Support Center and Marine Corps Reserve Center in Chattanooga, Tenn.

After the Navy Yard attack, all Marine Corps installations now conduct active-shooter training during annual exercises, the GAO report said.

The DOD has established a

department-wide insider threat program that identifies policy and assigns responsibilities, directing that the department's policies be evaluated and modified to address insider threats, the report said.

GAO investigators visited eight U.S. installations: Fort Hood; Rock Island Arsenal, Ill.; the Washington Navy Yard; Naval Submarine Base New London, Conn.; Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.; Joint Base San Antonio, Texas; Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va.; and the Pentagon.

They found that a broad array of actions had been taken to protect against insider threats. Among them were establishing rules and policies, such as screening non-DOD personnel accessing installations; conducting internal spot checks; conducting risk assessments; training and equipping response personnel; and developing cooperative agreements with local law enforcement agencies and first responders.

"While the U.S. installations we visited have taken actions to protect against insider threats, military services have not consistently shared this information across the department because DOD officials are not consistently using existing information sharing mechanisms," the report said. "Such mechanisms include working groups, conferences, lessons-learned information systems, and antiterrorism web portals."

There was a muted, heartbroken sense of relief Thursday afternoon following Holmes' conviction on 165 counts of murder, attempted murder and other charges. Victims wept and comforted one another in the courtroom during the hourlong recitation of each verdict, holding hands and nodding their heads with satisfaction when their loved one's names were read.

From The Associated Press

Jury convicts Colorado theater shooter Holmes

CENTENNIAL, Colo. — Families of the 12 people James Holmes killed and the scores he injured in a packed movie theater were relieved that jurors needed only 12 hours to reject the idea that he was legally insane when he opened fire.

Now the trial enters a new phase as the jury decides whether Holmes should die for his crimes.

Congress: Let troops be armed on base

By TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Congressional leaders said Friday they will direct the Pentagon to allow troops to carry guns on base for personal protection following a deadly shooting rampage in Tennessee that killed four Marines and seriously wounded a sailor at a recruiting center.

The directive will be included in the National Defense Authorization Act, which is set to be finalized within days, according to a joint statement from Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, who are heading negotiations over the bill.

Gun proponents have been calling for the Defense Department to lift its current policy, which allows only security and law enforcement to carry loaded guns on military facilities outside of war zones, since Army Maj. Nidal Malik Hasan killed 13 people and wounded more

than 30 in a shooting spree at Fort Hood, Texas, in 2009.

"Long before the Chattanooga attack, we had been working to clarify a post commander's authority to allow carrying of personal firearms," the statement from McCain and Thornberry said. "This year's National Defense Authorization Act will reflect that work. Together, we will direct the Pentagon to end the disconnect between the threats our warfighters and their families face and the tools they have to defend themselves."

But Gen. Ray Odierno, the Army chief of staff, warned Friday about "over-arming" personnel. He said that security at recruiting centers will be reviewed but that it was too early to say whether the service will boost protection, according to The Associated Press.

McCain and Thornberry did not immediately release details of the legislation.

US, allies wrapping up Talisman Sabre exercise

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

U.S., Australian, New Zealand and Japanese commanders are hoping to declare victory over a fictitious enemy on Saturday during the biennial Talisman Sabre exercise.

The sixth installment of the exercise — which began July 4 and involves more than 33,000 personnel conducting air, sea and land operations in Australia, Hawaii and San Diego — ends Sunday.

Talisman Sabre is primarily concerned with testing U.S. and Australian troops' ability to work together in battle, Air Commodore Chris Westwood,

of the Royal Australian Air Force, said Friday.

However, he added: "We have Kiwis (New Zealanders) embedded in the Australian team and Japanese embedded in the U.S. team."

U.S. Navy Lt. Lauren Cole, a 7th Fleet public affairs officer, said the exercise was a chance for Japanese and New Zealand troops to see how U.S. and Australian forces work together.

Westwood has been aboard the 7th Fleet flagship USS Blue Ridge for the duration of Talisman Sabre, acting as chief of staff to the commander of the U.S. 7th Fleet for the command post component of the exercise.

Rebuilt Astros in contention

The Associated Press

HOUSTON — Here's something new: The Houston Astros finally have reason to look forward to the second half of the season.

After several miserable years of rebuilding, losing and more losing, these Astros — powered by bearded ace Dallas Keuchel, diminutive second baseman Jose Altuve and rookie Carlos Correa — are just a half-game back in the American League West at the All-Star break and eyeing their first playoff trip since 2005.

Houston's 49 wins are the most by the franchise in the first half since 2003 and it's the first time since 2001 the team has been at least seven games over .500 at midseason.

A year ago, the Astros were 19½ games back with little hope of being in contention.

It certainly wasn't an easy path to become relevant again. This proud franchise known for its famed Killer B's of Jeff Bagwell, Craig Biggio and Lance Berkman lost 100-plus games in three straight seasons from 2011-2013 with low-budget teams filled with no-name players. Virtually any veteran of value was traded to restock a barren farm system.

"It's been a painful process from where we've been in the last 10 years to where we're at now," Biggio said. "But you look at the light at the end of the rainbow right now and I'm excited for our guys."

The long climb began last season when the Astros made a 19-game leap to end

the 100-loss streak. But they still dropped 92 games and finished fourth in the AL West.

A beefed-up bullpen, a couple of new veteran role players and an infusion of young talent this season helped Houston to a surprising start. The Astros opened the year 18-7 to race out to a six-game lead in the division and remained in first-place from April 19 until six straight losses helped the Angels take the lead at the break.

They've done it with powerful hitting, heads-up baserunning and a pitching staff that ranks among the best in the AL. At .240, the team's batting average is second-lowest in the AL, but the Astros have managed to produce anyway and are fourth in the AL in runs scored.

That's largely due to the pop in a lineup that leads the majors with 124 home runs. Luis Valbuena has 19 and there are 15 apiece from Evan Gattis and Chris Carter.

Houston is tops in the AL with 69 steals, thanks in large part to Altuve's 25.

Keuchel is 11-4 and his 2.23 ERA is second in the AL. His masterful first-half performance not only aided the Astros' ascent, but made him the first Houston pitcher to start an All-Star game since Roger Clemens in 2004.

A bullpen that was the weakest link last season (25 blown saves) is completely different: Its 2.67 ERA is second in the AL and the group's 17 wins are tied for most in the league.

Years of high draft picks have finally started to pay off for the Astros, too, and they're reaping the benefits of home-

grown talent. Lance McCullers, a first-rounder in 2012, and Vince Velasquez, a second-rounder in 2010, have joined the rotation.

But the most sparkling rookie in Houston is undoubtedly Correa. The 20-year-old shortstop and top overall pick in 2012 made his debut on June 8 and is expected to be the face of the franchise as it returns to prominence.

He's lived up to those lofty expectations early and hit .276 with seven homers and 19 RBIs on top of more than a few dazzling defensive plays to garner AL rookie of the month honors after less than 30 days in the big leagues.

His arrival in Houston has created a buzz not seen at Minute Maid Park in years and crowds of more than 32,000 fans showed up for his first two home games. Drafted as a 17-year-old out of high school in Puerto Rico, Correa is polished beyond his years both on and off the field.

"I'm just glad the fans show up to support the team," Correa said when someone asked him about the spike in attendance. "I think they come here because we've got a winning team."

A setback came for the Astros when dynamic outfielder George Springer was hit by a pitch that fractured his wrist recently. He will be out for several weeks, but Jed Lowrie should return soon after sitting out since April 27 following thumb surgery. His .300 batting average could help ramp up an offense that has averaged just 1.167 runs a game in the current losing skid which the Astros hoped to snap when they hosted Texas on Friday.

SEC sets new rule regarding transfers

The Associated Press

HOOVER, Ala. — The Southeastern Conference has taken the high road when it comes to domestic violence, aiming to keep alleged abusers off their rosters even if it means they land in a rival league.

It's a rare move that could put the SEC, which won seven consecutive national titles from 2006-2012, at a competitive disadvantage in some cases. So far, no other conference has put a similar rule into effect.

SEC schools passed a rule in May barring the signing of any athlete disciplined for serious misconduct at another college stop. The new rule defines a serious offense as "sexual assault, domestic violence or other forms of sexual violence."

Domestic violence advocate Katherine Redmond Brown said she was surprised and pleased that it was the SEC, known for its "crazy good competition," that first took this step.

"The message was long overdue because the NCAA has stayed relatively silent on the issue for years," said Brown, founder of National Coalition Against Violent Athletes. "Basically it was up to the conferences and individual schools to do something."

"To be honest, I never expected that it would be the SEC that would be the first to draw this line."

It wasn't a coincidence that the SEC adopted the rule this year. Defensive lineman Jonathan Taylor was dismissed from Alabama after his arrest on a domestic violence charge a couple of months after signing. The woman in the case later recanted her story, but Taylor had already been kicked out of Georgia following a similar arrest.

Georgia proposed the rule.

"That one was pretty cut and dry," said Bulldogs coach Mark Richt, adding that he wasn't the one making the call to propose the rule.

Alabama coach Nick Saban said he doesn't regret signing Taylor and that Taylor "didn't really get the kind of due process before he was judged as maybe any person should." He added, however, that Taylor was signed under a zero tolerance policy.

"But I do think that this is an emotional issue that's very, very complicated," Saban said. "It's against the law, and we respect the law, and we will continue to do things that respect the law."

"I think that ... we should be creating as many opportunities to try to solve this problem and use this as an opportunity to try to solve this problem with young people, male and female alike, because this is an issue across the board with any emotional relationship."

The SEC rule came after much-publicized domestic violence cases in the NFL.

Parity means every team has playoff shot

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — Clayton Kershaw looks around the major leagues and sees opponents convinced they can reach the playoffs.

"It's just a matter of everybody beating up on everybody," the Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher said. "We want everybody to feel like they're in it."

It's the year of parity in the major leagues, when almost no one has managed to break away from the pack or fall way behind. Kershaw, a three-time Cy Young Award winner and the reigning NL MVP, has a won-lost record reflecting the parity — he's 6-6.

Every team in the American League reached the All-Star break with a .450 winning percentage or higher. It's the first time an entire league did that since 1944, according to STATS, and many rosters that season were depleted of stars because of World War II.

"It's fantastic to see," Pittsburgh pitcher Gerrit Cole said. "All the teams at .500 all think they're going to finish over .500, and all the teams that are over .500, and even us, we're always fretting, looking behind our back."

Boston headed to the All-Star break in last place yet just 6½ games from first — only the second time since division play began in 1969 the AL East spread was

that close. The first-to-last gap has been that narrow in any division just nine times overall in the expansion era, STATS said.

"We're at the bottom of the barrel right now, but we're not that far out," Red Sox All-Star Brock Holt said. "It's just about going out and taking care of our business, and the standings will kind of take care of themselves towards the end of the year."

Oakland has the worst record in the AL but at 41-50 is just 8½ games behind the West-leading Los Angeles Angels. While last in the AL Central, the Chicago White Sox are 41-45 and only 5½ games out for the AL's second wild card.

"We have an unbelievable level of competitive balance," new baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred said. "When I look at the standings, I think we're in for one heck of a ride in the second half of the season."

There is a little more spread in the NL, where the St. Louis Cardinals have the major leagues' best record at 56-33 and Philadelphia owns the worst at 29-62. Other than the Phillies, Miami and Milwaukee, every team is within single-digit games back of a playoff berth.

"It just shows that there's not really that a monopoly of a franchise right now," Baltimore closer Zach Britton said.

Kansas City was 48-46 at the All-Star break last year, 6½ games behind AL Central-leading Detroit and 2½ back of

Seattle for the league's second wild card. By October, the Royals were one win shy of their first World Series title since 1985.

Toronto, Seattle and the Marlins are the only teams that have not made the playoffs since 2005. Increased revenue sharing, the luxury tax on payrolls and restraints on amateur signing bonuses have helped more teams become competitive.

While the Dodgers opened the season with a payroll of nearly \$273 million for their 40-man roster, according to Major League Baseball's calculations, there was a huge dropoff after that to the Yankees at \$220 million and Boston at \$187 million. Six teams were at \$140 million to \$175 million, seven at \$120 million to \$125 million, and six more above \$100 million.

"A lot of teams that are expected to win are learning that the revenues that they are making ... they're actually going to have to spend some of those revenues to create the gap and not stay where they're at, because teams are getting close to them," agent Scott Boras said.

All that crowding in the standings has its impact on talks as general managers approach July 31, the last day to deal players without passing them through waivers first.

"It makes the trade deadline a lot harder, obviously," Kershaw said. "Not as many teams think they're out of it. It makes it tougher to get pieces."



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Johnson, Spieth get back to business in British Open

The Associated Press

ST. ANDREWS, Scotland — Jordan Spieth wasted no time seizing a rare opportunity to chase a Grand Slam, opening with six birdies in 11 holes at St. Andrews and keeping his name high on the leaderboard Thursday in the British Open.

And so did a familiar foe — Dustin Johnson.

Eight times zones and an ocean away from Chambers Bay, Johnson and Spieth picked up where they left off a month ago when Spieth beat him by one shot in the U.S. Open to capture the second leg of the Grand Slam. On this day, Johnson got the better of him with a 7-under 65 and looked like the player to beat at St. Andrews.

He overpowered the Old Course with such a blend of power and accuracy that Johnson hit wedge into all but three of the 14 par 4s. Three of them were into the wind. The other was No. 9, where he putted from just off the green.

Johnson had a one-shot lead over six players, including former British Open champion Paul Lawrie, two-time U.S. Open champion Retief Goosen and Jason Day, playing for the first time since coping with symptoms of vertigo at the U.S. Open. Zach Johnson and Danny Willett played in the afternoon as the wind strengthened, making their 66s even more impressive.

Spieth and Louis Oosthuizen, who won the last time the Open was at St. Andrews, were among those two shots back at 67.

Thursday morning was suited for scoring, so it was critical Johnson, Spieth and all the other early starters post a low score.

"Everybody knows the weather Friday and Saturday is going to be very difficult, so today I thought was very important to get off to a good start and try to make as many birdies as you can," Johnson said. "Because the next couple days, it's going to be very difficult."

It was every bit of that for Tiger Woods.

A two-time Open champion on these links, Woods hit into the Swilcan Burn on the first hole, didn't make a birdie until the 14th hole and had to scramble to salvage a 76, his worst score in 13 rounds as a pro at St. Andrews. He was tied with 65-year-old Tom Watson, who had a 76 in his final British Open.

The buzz came from the top of the leaderboard, especially with Johnson and Spieth making this feel like the U.S. Open, except for the location and green color of grass.

They are playing together for the opening two rounds, and they laughed and chatted as if this were Thursday at a regular PGA Tour event.

"No chat about the U.S. Open at all, as I wouldn't imagine there would be, other than talking about the differences in the course," Spieth said. "But I enjoy playing with Dustin. I've played a lot of golf with him."

He also knows what to expect. Johnson is among the most athletic players in golf, and the most powerful. He was dialed in at Chambers Bay, and it appeared as though the three weeks he spent away from competition didn't hurt him in the least. Spieth

Second round delayed

Rain delayed the start of the second round for 3 hours, 14 minutes at the Old Course on Friday. The delay will force some players to return Saturday morning to complete their rounds. That will almost surely include first-round leader Dustin Johnson and Jordan Spieth, who originally had a mid-afternoon tee time but ended up going off just before 6 p.m. local time.

More woes for Woods

Woods, who missed the cut after an opening 80 in the U.S. Open last month, played almost as poorly in the first round of the British on Thursday on his way to a 4-over 76. That left him in a tie for 139th and in need of a huge rally to make the cut.

It will be two years next month since Woods last won a tournament, and he hasn't won a major since capturing the U.S. Open in 2008.

Willett grabs clubhouse lead

Thank goodness for a good hotel on the golf course. Clubhouse leader Danny Willett said he was up at 5 a.m. exercising and watching the rain pour down as play briefly started before the rain delay.

Instead of having to sit in the locker room, though, he hopped on a shuttle to the Old Course Hotel just off the 17th hole and laid down on his bed for an hour or so before beginning his pre-round routine again.

The routine worked, as the Englishman shot a 69 to get to 9-under midway through the tournament.

Geoff Ogilvy said he also went back to his room, had some breakfast and sat around for a few hours before walking back across the course to the driving range.

From The Associated Press

was along for the ride when Johnson stayed on the attack, often hitting it some 50 yards past Spieth and Matsuyama. Along with five birdies and an eagle, Johnson saved par from 10 feet and 15 feet on the 16th and 17th holes as the wind gained strength.

"If D.J. keeps driving it the way he is, then I'm going to have to play my best golf to have a chance," Spieth said.

Steelers sign DE Heyward to 6-year deal

BY WILL GRAVES

The Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Cam Heyward spent the offseason swatting away questions about his future as the final year of his rookie deal with the Pittsburgh Steelers loomed this fall.

No matter how he was asked, the defensive end always gave a variation of the same answer: "I'm good."

On the eve of training camp, he's paid.

Heyward agreed to a new six-year contract Thursday worth nearly \$60 million that will keep him in Pittsburgh through 2020. The 26-year-old posted a picture of him signing the deal on Twitter with the caption "I love this organization." He later tweeted "never know how much it means 2 stay a Steeler."

The Steelers defense is trying to reinvent itself, and Heyward is a key part of the process. He set a career-high in 2014 and tied for the team lead with 7½ sacks

as the Steelers won the AFC North title. Pittsburgh did it in spite of a defense that slipped to 18th in yards allowed and 27th against the pass thanks in part to a pass rush that struggled to generate pressure.

Changes came quickly in the offseason. Hall of Fame defensive coordinator Dick LeBeau left and was replaced by linebackers coach Keith Butler. Longtime defensive end Brett Keisel — Heyward's mentor — was released while safety Troy Polamalu and cornerback Ike Taylor retired.

Heyward's future never really was in doubt. The Steelers exercised their fifth-year option on his rookie deal last spring and nailing him down long-term became a priority once quarterback Ben Roethlisberger agreed to an extension in March.

The son of former NFL running back Craig Heyward — who played in college at Pittsburgh — grew up with a special affinity for the Steelers. He understands

better than most how the team embraces continuity. As the leading edge of the next wave, Heyward has taken second-year end Stephon Tuitt under his wing in much the same way Keisel, Casey Hampton and Aaron Smith did for him.

"He definitely is next in line," Tuitt said during minicamp in June. "We all look up to him to become better."

Tuitt will have plenty of time to do it. Heyward joins a core that includes Roethlisberger, center Maurkice Pouncey and wide receiver Antonio Brown, all of whom are signed through at least the 2017 season as Pittsburgh tries to get back to its status as one of the NFL's elite franchises. Last season's late surge to a playoff berth was a start, but not the finish.

"I think a lot of younger guys took a lot of big steps this year," Heyward said after a wild-card loss to Baltimore in January. "We have to continue to make steps if we want to make the ultimate goal."

Belgian Van Avermaet wins Stage 13 of Tour

RODEZ, France — Greg van Avermaet of the BMC team won Stage 13 of the Tour de France with a finishing burst of speed Friday that pushed Peter Sagan into second place for the fourth time at this year's race.

Sagan was kicking himself after he eased up in the final meters.

"My stupid mistake," the Tinkoff-Saxo rider said.

For most of the flat-to-hilly stage from Muret deep in southern France, a group of six low-placed riders rode in a breakaway at the front of the race. But the trailing main pack of riders sped up furiously as the finish in Rodez approached and caught the last of the escapees inside the last kilometer.

In the final uphill sprint, Van Avermaet and Sagan surged to the front. The Belgian rider won that duel by just a few meters. Feeling that a rider — he didn't know it was Sagan — was still on his wheel, the stage winner pushed to the very end. Sagan was up in his saddle, sprinting behind him, but mistimed his finish, sitting back down too early.

"I'm very angry and disappointed," Sagan said. "I sat down and all the pain comes. Bad."

Race leader Chris Froome and his closest podium challengers finished safely. Froome's lead remains unchanged, with Tejay van Garderen of BMC still 2 minutes, 52 seconds back and Nairo Quintana still third, 3:09 back.

"It turned crazy at the end," Froome said of the finish. But he was happy that he has one less stage to complete before Paris.

Armstrong charity ride casts shadow on race

RODEZ, France — The Tour de France is on in southern France. So is the Tour de Lance.

That long-used play on words doesn't mean what it used to, although it still applies, because Lance Armstrong rode the Tour de France route on Thursday and Friday, a day ahead of the race, for charity.

With the Tour trying to emerge from the shadow of his doping-rife era, when he won seven times then was stripped of the titles, Armstrong's presence was welcomed by some but openly criticized by more, particularly for taking attention from the race.

Aside from the crush of reporters that he can still draw — after years of lawsuits and cancelled sponsorships — Armstrong gave a glimpse at a lower-budget, less glamorous image in his ride to help fight leukemia, and was grateful for positive reactions.

"Anything that has been yelled has been 100 percent supportive. Not one 'tricheur' (cheater), not one 'Go home,'" said Armstrong, all but acknowledging his controversial presence. "We're not done, so at some point I'm sure somebody will say something."

They've been saying something ever since the testicular cancer survivor was invited by British former footballer Geoff Thomas, a cancer survivor, to join the "Le Tour-One Day Ahead" benefit.

UCI chief Brian Cookson said it was "undesirable" and "disrespectful," teams didn't like it, and yellow-jersey holder Chris Froome was one Tour cyclist to offer misgivings.

Thomas knew Armstrong would garner more attention than his campaign, but he believed any publicity was good publicity, and a spokesman said more than 600,000 pounds (about \$930,000) has been raised for Cure Leukaemia, of a targeted 2 million pounds (\$3.1 million) by the end of 2016.

From The Associated Press