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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

2nd Fleet-led Baltic drills show united front to Russia

By SCOTT WYLAND

Stars and Stripes

The recently revived 2nd Fleet is leading the 18-nation Baltic Operations with an eye toward Russia, a former participant in the long-running exercise whose military movements in recent years have put the Baltic region's former Soviet states on edge.

Military officials say the 47th BALTOPS, which ends Friday, aims to improve teamwork among allies and partners while presenting a united front to Russia, which closely watches NATO activities in the Baltic Sea.

The exercise is taking place throughout the Baltic region, including in an area not far from the Russian exclave of Kaliningrad. The participating nations brought 50 ships, 40 aircraft and more than 8,500 personnel to the Baltic Sea, but officials said the exercise isn't meant to escalate tensions.

"We are very aware of the difference between deterrence and provocation, and we're not interested in provoking anyone," Vice Adm. Andrew Lewis, 2nd Fleet commander, said at the start of the exercise.

The BALTOPS drills were created in 1972 as a security measure aimed at the Warsaw Pact nations. This year's BALTOPS is the 2nd Fleet's first European operation since the Navy revived the fleet last year, primarily in response to Russia's military resurgence.

Lewis and his staff are overseeing BALTOPS from the 6th Fleet command ship USS Mount Whitney while coordinating with U.S. Naval Forces Europe.

Russia's Baltic Fleet said it is monitoring the joint exercises "in order to identify the threats to navigational safety of civilian vessels, related to the use

of radio-electronic warfare means by NATO ships."

BALTOPS has drawn Moscow's attention but won't concern Russian leaders as much as exercises near their borders with air power and ground forces, said Michael Kofman, a research fellow at the Wilson Center's Kennan Institute.

"Russians will interpret it as practicing individual components of NATO's operational plan and will try to learn from anything novel at the tactical level," Kofman said. "But it's not going to keep them up at night."

Russia participated in BALTOPS 19 times over the years. It sat out in 2009, the year after it waged war against Georgia, and was barred from the exercises by NATO after it seized Crimea from Ukraine in 2014.

This year it conducted its own exercises during BALTOPS, which included sinking a submarine in a mock attack.

The Russian military is using such "counterexercises" more during NATO drills, partly to practice fighting NATO and other adversaries, said Michael Petersen, director of the Naval War College's Russia Maritime Studies Institute. The exercises "allow the Kremlin to tell Russian citizens that they are protecting them from NATO aggression," Petersen said.

BALTOPS comprised 389 different activities this year, almost four times more than last year, Navy officials said.

The exercise included several training staples. Warships fended off simulated attacks from smaller, faster vessels; crews practiced anti-submarine warfare and mine countermeasures; aircraft and ships worked together.

Meanwhile, U.S. Marines teamed up with other militaries to launch multiple amphibious landings across the region.

Tanker attack mine resembles Iranian mines, Navy says

Associated Press

U.S. NAVY 5TH FLEET BASE NEAR FUJAIRAH, United Arab Emirates — The limpet mines used to attack a Japanese-owned oil tanker near the Strait of Hormuz last week bore "a striking resemblance" to similar mines displayed by Iran, a U.S. Navy explosives expert said Wednesday, stopping short of directly blaming Tehran for the assault.

Iran has denied being involved in the attacks on June 13 that hit the Japanese tanker Kokuka Courageous and the Norwegian-owned Front Altair.

The comments by Cmdr. Sean Kido came as the Navy showed reporters pieces of debris and a magnet they say Iran's Revolutionary Guard left behind when they spirited away an unexploded limpet mine after the attack in the Gulf of Oman.

Iran has also not acknowledged taking the mine.

Kido also stressed that the damage done to the Kokuka Courageous was "not consistent with an external flying object hitting the ship," despite the ship's owner blaming "flying objects" for the damage in the attack.

Meanwhile, a rocket hit an oil drilling site in Iraq's southern Basra province early Wednesday, striking inside a compound housing energy giant Exxon Mobil and other foreign oil companies and wounding three local workers, one seriously, Iraqi officials said.

The attacks on the oil tank-

ers came against the backdrop of heightened tensions between the U.S. and Iran that take root in President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers a year ago.

Iran recently has quadrupled its production of low-enriched uranium and threatened to boost its enrichment closer to weapons-grade levels, trying to pressure Europe for new terms to the 2015 deal.

In recent weeks, the U.S. has sped an aircraft carrier to the Mideast and deployed additional troops to the tens of thousands already here. Mysterious attacks also have targeted oil tankers as Iran-allied Houthi rebels launched bomb-laden drones into Saudi Arabia.

All that has raised fears that a miscalculation or further rise in tensions could push the U.S. and Iran into an open conflict, some 40 years after Tehran's Islamic Revolution.

The Navy briefed foreign journalists Wednesday at a 5th Fleet base near Fujairah, an Emirati port city 130 miles northeast of the capital, Abu Dhabi. They showed journalists debris recovered from the Kokuka Courageous, which they described as including aluminum and composite metals.

They also showed a magnet they described as being left behind by the Revolutionary Guard — one of six apparently used to stick the unexploded limpet mine to the ship's hull. Sailors said it took two of them and a crowbar to pry it off the ship.

Shanahan withdrawal raises questions

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Senators from both parties are asking why they did not have advance notice of the domestic violence incidents in Pat Shanahan's family that ended his bid to become President Donald Trump's permanent defense secretary, calling his nomination's collapse the latest example of shoddy White House vetting.

"Look what happens when you don't vet," Senate Minority Leader Chuck Schumer, D-N.Y., told reporters Tuesday. "This Shanahan fiasco shows ... what a mess the administration's national security and foreign policy is."

With his withdrawal and resignation, Shanahan joins several other former candidates for prominent Cabinet and military

leadership positions in the Trump administration who bowed out after compromising details came to light. That list includes Trump's first picks to lead the Army and Navy and previous nominees to head the departments of Labor and Veterans Affairs.

Most Democrats and Republicans said they were caught completely off guard by news of Shanahan's withdrawal, which came amid reports that he was involved years ago in an altercation with his now former wife and then, following their divorce, rushed to defend their teenage son after he attacked his mother with a baseball bat. Shanahan denied his ex-wife's claim that he himself struck her.

Shanahan will resign officially at mid-

night Sunday and Army Secretary Mark Esper will become acting defense secretary at 12:01 a.m. Monday, chief Pentagon spokesman Jonathan Hoffman said in a statement Tuesday.

Trump said later Tuesday that Esper could be nominated to take the top Pentagon job permanently "pretty soon."

There was particular consternation among some senators that Congress was not apprised of the incidents by the administration, the FBI or Shanahan himself. As some lawmakers noted, a background check would have accompanied Shanahan's nomination in 2017 to become the deputy defense secretary, a post he held until the departure of Trump's first Pentagon chief, Jim Mattis, in December.

US will deliver more arms, gear to Ukraine

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. will deliver more sniper rifles, grenade launchers, counter-artillery radars and other gear to the Ukrainian military as part of an ongoing effort to bolster its defenses on land and at sea, the Pentagon announced.

The Defense Department said in a statement Tuesday it will provide \$250 million in military aid that also will include training for Ukrainian forces and equipment for Ukraine's navy, which has struggled to counter Russia in the increasingly tense Black Sea area.

The funding boost coincides with progress Ukraine has made by reforming its command and control functions, as well as by strengthening civilian oversight of its military, the statement said.

"These reforms will bolster Ukraine's ability to defend its territorial integrity in support of a secure, prosperous, democratic, and free Ukraine," it said.

The new funds bring total

U.S. security assistance to Ukraine up to \$1.4 billion since 2014 following Russia's annexation of the Crimean Peninsula and its support for armed separatists in the country's break-away eastern region. However, it has only been in the past year that the U.S. has begun shipping lethal military aid to the country, where sporadic clashes continue between government security forces and the militants.

In 2018, Washington began stepping up its support to Ukraine by providing military equipment, such as anti-tank Javelin missiles.

In September, the U.S. Coast Guard transferred two Island-class cutters, armed with .50-caliber machine guns and 25 mm deck guns, to Ukraine to bolster the country's small navy.

Tensions with Russia sparked around the Black Sea in November when the Russian coast guard fired upon and seized three Ukrainian ships that were attempting to pass through the Kerch Strait to the Sea of Azov.

House passes vote to halt military transgender ban

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Democratic-controlled House voted Tuesday night to block President Donald Trump's move to restrict transgender men and women from military service.

The House passed, by a 243-183 vote, an amendment to block Trump's transgender ban from remaining in effect. The move still faces an uphill battle and a Trump veto threat against the underlying \$1 trillion spending bill, which includes the military budget.

The Trump administration's policy bars people who have undergone gender transition from enlisting. It also requires military personnel to serve as their biological gender unless they began a gender transition under less restrictive Obama administration rules. The policy is being challenged in court.

"With so much anger and so much hate in the world today, it is time to be kind to people," said Rep. Peter Visclosky, D-Ind.

A GOP opponent, Rep. Ken Calvert, of California, said the move "risks undermining the readiness of our military at a

time when we can least afford it."

But Rep. Anthony Brown, D-Md., said such arguments were used to justify segregation of the military.

"My service in an integrated armed forces did not harm readiness," said Brown, who is black.

Under the Obama administration, the Pentagon announced that transgender people already serving in the military would be allowed to serve openly. Trump reversed that policy beginning in 2017 with a tweet that the government would not allow transgender individuals to serve in any capacity in the military.

An estimated 14,700 troops on active duty and in the reserves identify as transgender, but not all seek treatment. Since July 2016, more than 1,500 servicemembers have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria; as of Feb. 1, there were 1,071 currently serving.

The Pentagon says it has spent about \$8 million on transgender care since 2016. The military's annual health care budget tops \$50 billion.

SEAL's contact with victim's widow probed

The Washington Post

A Navy SEAL convicted in the death of a Green Beret soldier is under investigation by authorities for approaching his victim's widow under a pseudonym at a Las Vegas party, allegedly requesting access to her room and telling her that the SEALs involved in her husband's death were "good guys," according to military documents and three people familiar with the case.

Chief Special Warfare Operator Adam C. Matthews faced a murder charge in the death of Staff Sgt. Logan Melgar, and was wearing a Rambo costume at the time, according to the documents, which were obtained by *The Washington Post*. They were verified with three people familiar with the investigation, who requested anonymity due to the sensitivity of the case.

The encounter adds a new layer of strangeness in the death of Melgar, a member of 3rd Special Forces Group

who previously had deployed to Afghanistan. It also raises questions about the amount of freedom the Navy provided to Matthews, a member of SEAL Team 6 who received a one-year prison sentence in May after becoming the first servicemember charged willing to testify against others involved.

Melgar was strangled June 4, 2017, after a group of men that had been out drinking burst into his room in the Malian capital of Bamako with a sledgehammer with plans to choke him unconscious, bind him with duct tape and record a video of a Malian man sexually molesting him as part of a hazing plot, according to testimony by a Marine Raider convicted in the case.

Four U.S. Special Operations troops were charged with murder, including Matthews and Chief Special Warfare Operator Anthony DeDolph, a fellow member of SEAL Team 6. Matthews and the Marine, Staff Sgt. Kevin Maxwell, have pleaded

guilty to lesser charges, while DeDolph and another Marine, Gunnery Sgt. Mario Madera-Rodriguez, still face trial.

The January encounter between Matthews and Melgar's wife, Michelle, occurred at a charity party hosted by Crye Precision, a company that makes military apparel and tactical gear, according to Naval Criminal Investigative Service documents detailing the incident. The event was affiliated with the Shooting Hunting, Outdoor Trade Show, a popular gun exposition.

An attorney for Matthews, Grover Baxley, acknowledged the encounter in an email to *The Post* on Tuesday. He said his client and Michelle Melgar "unintentionally met briefly" at a SHOT Show event, and that it was an "innocent coincidence with zero romantic intent by either individual."

Baxley added that Matthews and Michelle Melgar discussed their meeting with each other after his court-martial, and

neither bears any ill will.

"I have discussed this situation at length with the prosecution, and I do not anticipate any disciplinary action being taken against SOC Matthews for this unintentional meeting," he said. But other people familiar with the encounter describe Matthews' intentions differently.

Matthews, using the pseudonym "Mike," approached Michelle Melgar in costume, chatted her up, danced with her and exchanged phone numbers with her without revealing who he was, witnesses told an NCIS investigator, according to the documents. She had been invited to the SHOT Show as a representative of the Special Forces Foundation, a nonprofit that provides financial assistance to the families of Special Operations troops in need.

Baxley said that Matthews was using a pseudonym because "none of these special warfare operators give their real first names when they meet a stranger."

Prosecutor: SEAL bragged about killing captive

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — The photo shows a decorated Navy SEAL holding up the head of a dead Islamic State fighter by the hair while clenching a knife in his other hand.

It will be up to a seven-man jury of mostly combat veterans to decide if it was a snapshot in poor taste of an enemy who succumbed to battle wounds or a trophy shot of a war prisoner killed under his care.

The court-martial of Special Operations Chief Edward Gallagher began Tuesday with the defense claiming he had done nothing more than provide medical care to the militant wounded in an airstrike and the prosecutor accusing the war veteran of premeditated murder.

Defense attorney Tim Parlatore told jurors in opening statements that there's no body, autopsy or forensic evidence to show a killing happened. He said the case was built on lies by junior SEALs who hated Gallagher because he was tough.

"This case is not about murder," Parlatore said. "It's about mutiny. He didn't murder or attempt to murder anyone."

The prosecutor showed a photo of Gallagher posing with the corpse along with

other images of the bandaged curly haired adolescent.

Gallagher texted one photo to friends with the message: "Good story behind this, got him with my hunting knife."

"He celebrated that stabbing; he celebrated that murder," the prosecutor, Lt. Brian John, told jurors.

Parlatore has said the text was an attempt at dark humor.

Gallagher, whose case has drawn President Donald Trump's attention, faces seven counts that include premeditated murder and attempted murder. He's also accused of shooting two civilians — an elderly man and a school-age girl — from sniper perches in Iraq in 2017. He has pleaded not guilty and could face a life sentence.

The trial, which is expected to last up to three weeks, is exposing fractures in the secrecy that typically shrouds the elite Special Forces as fellow troops testify against Gallagher, who had served eight tours of duty and earned two Bronze Stars for valor. Three SEALs were scheduled to testify Wednesday.

On Tuesday, Lt. Thomas MacNeil, who roomed with Gallagher, testified that their

SEAL team provided support to Iraqi forces clearing an area outside Mosul when he heard a radio transmission on May 3, 2017, that an airstrike had wounded an ISIS fighter.

"I heard Chief Gallagher announce, 'Lay off, he's mine,'" MacNeil said.

Gallagher initially began treating the teen militant's wounds, which was caught on video the jury will see. The question is what happened after the footage stopped.

John said the wounded prisoner was in stable condition after treatment.

After another SEAL left his side, Gallagher pulled a knife from his medical bag and repeatedly stabbed the boy in the neck, John said. Another SEAL saw the assault and said blood was pouring out of the teen.

Parlatore said the militant died of his injuries from the airstrike and noted that Iraqi forces had been with him two hours before Gallagher became the first to treat him. He also said no blood was found on the knife.

After the boy died, Gallagher had his reenlistment ceremony conducted with the body and posed with fellow troops for photos.

Trump kicks off his reelection campaign

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — President Donald Trump jabbed at the press and poked the political establishment he ran against in 2016 as he kicked off his reelection campaign with a grievance-filled rally focused more on settling scores than laying out his agenda for a possible second term.

Addressing a crowd of thousands at Orlando's Amway Center on Tuesday night, Trump complained he was "under assault from the very first day" of his presidency by a "fake news media" and an "illegal witch hunt" that had tried to keep him and his supporters down.

He painted a disturbing picture of what

life would look like if he loses in 2020, accusing his critics of "un-American conduct" and saying Democrats "want to destroy you and they want to destroy our country as we know it."

"A vote for any Democrat in 2020 is a vote for the rise of radical socialism and the destruction of the American dream," he said. Trump made only passing mention of any of the Democrats running to replace him even as he tossed out "radical" and "unhinged" to describe the rival party.

Trump has long railed against the special counsel's investigation into Russian meddling in the 2016 election and the ongoing probes by House Democrats in the aftermath of Robert Mueller's report.

The apocalyptic language and finger-pointing made clear that Trump's 2020 campaign will probably look a whole lot like his run three years ago. Even after 2½ years in the Oval Office, Trump remains focused on energizing his base and offering himself as a political outsider running against Washington.

Republican Party Chairwoman Ronna McDaniel tweeted Wednesday morning that Trump had raised \$24.8 million in less than 24 hours for his reelection.

In his speech, Trump spent considerably more time focused on former Democratic rival Hillary Clinton than on his current 2020 challengers, even though she is not on the ballot.

Trump's deportation threat could prove costly

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump could have a tough time making good on his threat to deport millions of people living in the U.S. illegally. But maybe that wasn't his point.

Trump's late night messages Monday promised that starting next week his administration "will begin the process of removing the millions of illegal aliens who have illicitly found their way into the United States. They will be removed as fast as they come in."

That was a pronouncement

likely to excite his political base just as he was formally announcing his reelection bid Tuesday night. It also scared immigrants in the U.S. illegally — and could deter others from coming. But it came at a cost.

Trump blatantly exposed an upcoming enforcement operation, potentially jeopardizing the kind of sensitive effort that takes months to plan and relies on secrecy. The president's tweets put new, fresh demands on Immigration and Customs Enforcement, the agency in charge of removals, which is already overwhelmed, lacking staff, funding and deten-

tion space for its current work. And any massive roundup that includes deportation of families would be sure to spark outrage.

The tweets suggested the start of Trump's reelection campaign is likely to have much in common with his 2016 announcement, when he accused Mexico of sending rapists to the United States and pledged to build a wall and make Mexico pay for it. The rhetoric was widely denounced, yet the tough anti-immigration message struck a nerve with many Americans and ultimately helped carry Trump to victory.

At his rally Tuesday night in Orlando, Fla., he said millions of low-wage workers who come to the U.S. illegally are competing for opportunities against the most vulnerable Americans.

Trump also claimed that schoolchildren across the country are being threatened by MS-13 gang members and blamed "Democratic policies." He said if Democratic officials "had to send their children to those overcrowded, overburdened schools, they would not tolerate it for one minute."

Trump's tough talk hasn't led to a drop in border crossings since he took office.

House panel holds hearing on slavery reparations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Lawmakers on Wednesday held the first congressional hearing in more than a decade on reparations, spotlighting the debate over whether the United States should consider compensation for the descendants of slaves in the United States.

Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, of Texas, who became the sponsor of a measure to study reparations after the retirement of Rep. John Conyers, said black Americans "are the only group that can singularly claim to have been slaves under the auspices of the United States government." She said Wednesday's hearing "is not a symbolic ac-

tion," but about legitimate legislation that should be signed into law.

"I just simply ask: Why not and why not now?" she said to a packed hearing room.

The witnesses at the House Judiciary subcommittee included actor and activist Danny Glover, writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and Sen. Cory Booker, of New Jersey, a Democratic presidential candidate. Booker, who testified first, said the U.S. has "yet to truly acknowledge and grapple with the racism and white supremacy that tainted this country's founding and continues to cause persistent and deep racial disparities and inequality."

"The stain of slavery was not just inked in bloodshed ... but in policies that have

disadvantaged African Americans for generations," he said.

The hearing comes amid a growing discussion in the Democratic Party about reparations. Several of the party's presidential candidates have endorsed looking at the idea, though they have stopped short of endorsing direct payouts for blacks.

Coates drew new attention to the issue with his essay "The Case for Reparations," published in *The Atlantic* magazine in 2014. He told the panel "it's impossible to imagine America without the inheritance of slavery."

"The matter of reparations is one of making amends and direct redress but is also a question of citizenship," Coates said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Traffic stop leads to multiple charges

DE SMYRNA — Police in Delaware said a traffic stop led to weapons charges against a man.

Delaware State Police said Antonio Williams, 33, of Philadelphia was charged with multiple counts. The charges range from aggressive driving to receiving a stolen firearm.

Police said the car was traveling around 90 mph, changing lanes erratically and tailgating other cars.

A trooper found a gun in the car and determined it was stolen, according to police.

Woman accused of disturbing turtle nest

FL MIAMI BEACH — A Chinese woman visiting from Michigan was arrested on a charge of disturbing a sea turtle nest.

Miami Beach police officers arrested Yaqun Lu, 41. She is facing a felony charge of molesting marine turtles or eggs.

An arrest report said officers witnessed Lu using a wooden stick to jab at a nest and she stomped all over the nesting area with her bare feet.

The nest was in an area closed off from the public by sticks and yellow tape.

Officers said the eggs weren't damaged.

Northeast peak race ends in photo finish

NH PINKHAM NOTCH — The annual race up the highest peak in the Northeast ended in the first photo finish.

Brittni Hutton, 29, of Lubbock, Texas, led the entire race but Heidi Caldwell, 27, of Craftsbury Common, Vt.,

caught her at the finish line.

Both finished with a time of 1 hour, 16 minutes, 17 seconds in the women's division of the 7.6-mile all-uphill race to the 6,288-foot summit of Mount Washington.

Judges initially thought Hutton had won but later declared a tie.

Eric Blake, 40, of West Hartford, Conn., won the men's division with a time of 1:02:52, besting Kenyan Francis Kamiri by about a minute.

Flag carried by black Union troops sold

PA DENVER — A flag that was carried into battle by a black Union regiment during the Civil War and hand-painted by an acclaimed black artist will join one of the country's most comprehensive Civil War collections.

The Atlanta History Center bought the flag at auction for \$196,800.

It depicts a black soldier waving goodbye to Columbia, the white female personification of America, beneath a banner reading, "We Will Prove Ourselves Men."

It's one of 11 painted by David Bustill Bowser, the son of a fugitive slave. It's the only known surviving flag.

Naked man accused of assaulting moviegoers

VT WAITSFIELD — Police said a naked man was accused of assaulting moviegoers and police in Waitsfield.

WCAX-TV reported that police responded to the Big Picture movie theater for reports that a naked man was acting erratically and had assaulted numerous people.

Vermont State Police said when troopers arrived the

man, later identified as Charles Root, 40, of Weybridge, jumped on top of the cruiser and tried to kick out the windshield.

Police said he also spit in a trooper's face.

Art installation part of push on seat belt use

MA BOSTON — A bit of seat belt art is part of a new public information campaign aimed at getting young men to buckle up when they're behind the wheel.

State officials said they commissioned teens through Artists for Humanity to create a free-standing art installation that will help deliver the message that seat belts can save lives. The 6- by 12-foot artwork is wrapped with real seat belts and will be displayed at locations around the state during the summer.

The new campaign is called "Love Clicks" and is based on research that suggests young men are more likely to use seat belts if someone they love asks them to do so.

Raccoon attacks dogs; area's 5th rabies case

NC CHARLOTTE — Health officials said two pet dogs attacked and killed a rabid raccoon, marking the fifth time this year a rabies-infected animal has been caught in the Charlotte area.

Mecklenburg County Animal Control said the deranged raccoon wandered into a residential neighborhood and attacked the dogs, which then killed it. The Charlotte Observer reported the dogs had their vaccines and were unharmed.

The latest attack brings the total to five confirmed rabies cases among raccoons in the same North Carolina county this year.

Employee guilty of falsifying urine tests

MD BALTIMORE — A technician at a Maryland company that provides drug and alcohol testing services pleaded guilty to taking cash payments for falsifying urine samples.

Federal prosecutors said Michael Andre Brown, 47, made the plea Monday to a bribery charge. Brown, of Waldorf, worked for a federal contractor that provided urinalysis results to U.S. probation and pretrial services.

According to his plea agreement, Brown accepted cash for falsely reporting urinalysis results as negative for controlled substances. He was arrested after an undercover FBI task force officer posed as a probationer who'd been ordered to submit urine samples.

State getting more reports of alligators

AL BIRMINGHAM — There have been several reports of alligators in north Alabama in recent weeks, including in the Tennessee River.

An alligator was recently spotted by a man walking on a county road in Lauderdale County, the sheriff's office reported. The gator was safely relocated to another area, authorities said.

A few years ago, a gator was found in a pasture in the east end of the county, Sheriff Rick Singleton said.

In Decatur, parks and recreation officials warned residents to be on alert after a gator was spotted near walking trails at Point Mallard State Park.

From wire reports

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Goalie Naeher ready for first real test

The Washington Post

PARIS — The first two U.S. Women's World Cup matches have featured a harmonic spectacle of possession, goals and ruthless dominance. Rarely did the ball leave the attacking end with meaningful purpose, in effect reducing the field to a 57-yard game over 90 relentless minutes.

Far from the torrent of opportunity and celebration, a lonely figure has dutifully remained at her post, like a watchman outside a mall after closing.

Goalkeeper Alyssa Naeher has had very little to do here, leaving unresolved questions about the capacity to shine at her first major tournament.

The knock on the world's top-ranked team — and you have to dig pretty deep to come up with something — is Naeher's lack of experience at the World Cup or Olympics.

Given the ease of victory against Thailand and Chile — and her need to make three routine saves — some might snicker and say she still hasn't played in the World Cup.

But starting Thursday, when the perfect Americans face the unbeaten Swedes in Le Havre for first place in Group F, the path to a fourth world title will grow more difficult. The Americans have secured passage to

the round of 16, and as good as the U.S. defense is, the days of 90 boring minutes are probably over.

Two weeks before the World Cup, Naeher spoke of her expected inactivity in the first two matches.

"The biggest thing for me is the constant communication with the defense, staying connected and managing the space between us," she said. "Having that constant communication helps me stay engaged because sometimes you are called upon in the first minute, sometimes you are called upon in the 90th. Sometimes you are called upon zero in-between, sometimes a hundred times in-between."

So far, it's been almost zero.

Naeher, 31, was called upon in the first half against Chile, and did not fare well. An off-side call bailed her out after she failed to intervene on a free kick slipped behind the defensive wall. Before anyone noticed the assistant referee raise her flag, Chile appeared to have scored a shock equalizer.

That episode added to some outside unease about Naeher. In fairness, the expectation to perform at the level of her elite predecessors is heavy.

Between Hope Solo, arguably the greatest goalkeeper in women's history, and Briana Scurry, the United States won

two World Cup trophies and four Olympic gold medals over 19 years.

Naeher, a Connecticut native and Penn State graduate, was Solo's backup on the 2015 squad that won the world title and the 2016 Olympic team that faltered in the quarterfinals.

Solo's subsequent dismissal from the program for the last in a series of transgressions opened the door for Naeher, who warded off a challenge from Ashlyn Harris for the top slot. (Neither Harris nor Adriana Franch, the third keeper here, has played in a World Cup or Olympics, either.)

Solo's shadow, though, continues to follow Naeher. Beyond the inevitable comparisons, Solo is here in France serving as a BBC analyst and, among other games, worked the first two U.S. matches.

"Obviously she was the best at what she did for a very long time," Naeher said. "I've been fortunate to train with a lot of great goalkeepers over my years and I've taken pieces from each of them. It's molded me into the goalkeeper I've become."

Asked before the tournament whether she has communicated with Solo recently, Naeher said, "No, I haven't heard from her."

Which should not come as a big surprise. Aside from Carli

Lloyd, Solo was not close with many players.

Since taking over, Naeher has been about as likely to record a shutout (27) as to concede a goal (28). Her 48 appearances rank fourth on the U.S. career list and she is third in shutouts.

Midfielder-defender Julie Ertz, Naeher's teammate with the Chicago Red Stars in the National Women's Soccer League, said Naeher has been "solid and great for us for a long time. People don't see it, but behind the scenes, she has put so much work into it."

And she has gone about it quietly. Asked what the public should know about the introverted Naeher, Lloyd said, "I think Alyssa Naeher doesn't want anybody to know about Alyssa Naeher."

"She is quiet, but when you get her one on one, she really opens up. She is smart. She is funny. She is witty. On the training pitch, she is head down, focused, wanting to do her job."

Asked how she feels when people say she is the weak link in the U.S. machine, Naeher said: "I can only control me. I am trying to be the best version of myself every single day. I don't compare it to anything else. I try to be Alyssa; that is all I can control. That's who I am."

Grizzlies trade Conley to Jazz for 3 players

Associated Press

The Memphis Grizzlies traded away the final piece of the franchise's best years on Wednesday, sending veteran point guard Mike Conley to the Utah Jazz for a trio of players, a person familiar with the deal told The Associated Press.

The Grizzlies swapped Conley for Jae Crowder, Kyle Korver and Grayson Allen, said the person, who spoke to the AP on condition of anonymity because neither Memphis nor Utah announced the trade.

Conley confirmed the trade on Twitter, thanking Memphis for making him the man he is and being his home.

"Time for another chapter! Excited

to give all I have to The Jazz ...!" Conley tweeted.

ESPN.com first reported the deal, which it says also includes Utah's No. 23 pick overall in Thursday night's draft.

Conley was the final piece of the core that led the Grizzlies to seven consecutive playoff berths, including the 2013 Western Conference Finals. Zach Randolph and Tony Allen left in 2017 as free agents, and Memphis traded Marc Gasol to Toronto in February, splitting up a duo that had been the NBA's longest-tenured teammates. Gasol went on to help the Raptors win their first NBA title.

The trade cannot be completed until the new league year starts on July 6.

The move almost certainly means that Ricky Rubio will be elsewhere next season, even after he averaged 12.7 points and 6.1 assists for the Jazz this season. Pairing Conley with rising star Donovan Mitchell figures to give the Jazz one of the best backcourts in the league next season and would seem to bolster Utah's chances in a rapidly changing Western Conference.

The move also could make Memphis a major player in free agency for 2020, although much of that space hinges on what the team does to fill out a roster this summer.

The Grizzlies tried to trade Conley before the deadline but couldn't with the guard's pricey contract complicating deals.

Women's World Cup roundup

Australia rips Jamaica; Brazil advances

Associated Press

GRENOBLE, France — Sam Kerr scored four goals, one shy of the World Cup record and the most by an Australian, in a 4-1 victory over Jamaica on Tuesday night that advanced the Matildas into the knockout round.

Kerr tied American Alex Morgan for the tournament lead with five goals.

"I actually wanted more after that, being my selfish self," Kerr said.

Australia advanced to the round of 16 for the fourth consecutive tournament following three straight quarterfinal eliminations. The Matildas finished second in Group C and will face Norway in Nice on Saturday on the first day of the round of 16.

Kerr scored on a header off

Emily Gielnik's cross in the 11th minute, doubled the lead with another header in the 42nd and completed the hat trick in the 69th. She scored again in the 83rd minute to give her 36 goals in 80 international appearances.

Australia had stumbled at the start of the tournament with a loss to Italy but rebounded with a come-from-behind victory over Brazil.

Lisa De Vanna made her 150th international appearance, one shy of the Australian record set by Cheryl Salisbury.

Jamaica got its first World Cup goal when Havana Solaun scored in the 49th.

The first Caribbean nation to make the World Cup, Jamaica lost all three matches and was outscored 12-1. But the Reggae Girlz won hearts in France with their underdog story: Dis-

banded more than a decade ago, the team was revived in 2014 by Bob Marley's daughter Cedella.

"It doesn't matter what the score is, we just kept playing and believing," Reggae Girlz coach Hue Menzies said.

Brazil 1, Italy 0: at Valenciennes, France, Marta set a record for men and women with her 17th career World Cup goal in Brazil's victory over Italy that advanced the Selecao to the knockout round for the sixth straight time.

The 33-year-old forward, playing in her fifth World Cup, scored on a penalty kick in the 74th minute, sending a line drive to the left of goalkeeper Laura Giuliani after Debinha was fouled by Elena Linari.

It was the second goal of the tournament for Marta, and both have been on penalty

kicks. Her goal against Australia last Thursday tied the record set in the men's World Cup by Miroslav Klose, who scored 16 World Cup goals for Germany from 2002-14. The United States' Abby Wambach and Germany's Birgit Prinz are tied for second among women with 14 each.

Marta is the only player, male or female, to score in five World Cups.

Brazil had needed only a draw to advance.

Italy won Group C on goal difference over Australia and Brazil as all three nations finished with 2-1 records and six points. Le Azzurre will play a third-place team in the round of 16 on Tuesday. Brazil wound up third and will play Germany on Saturday or host France on Sunday.

Boyd scores twice as US blanks Guyana in Gold Cup

Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — After newcomer Tyler Boyd scored early in the second half to give the United States a two-goal lead, the sure sign this was going to be a good night for the Americans was visible on Gyasi Zardes' face.

A shot by Paul Arriola from just outside the box was headed by Guyana defender Terence Vancooten straight at Zardes' left eye. The ball ricocheted into the net as teammates celebrated around a stunned, grimacing Zardes.

Finally, the Americans had some fun on the field again.

Boyd scored two goals to guide the U.S. past overmatched Guyana 4-0 to start the CONCACAF Gold Cup on Tuesday, getting this much-maligned team on track in its first competitive game in 20 months.

"The first game of a tournament is always a little bit nervy," coach Gregg Berhalter

said. "We told the guys, 'Enjoy the experience. It's competition time.'"

Boyd, a 24-year-old attacker, played just his second match for the U.S. after a FIFA-approved switch of affiliation from New Zealand. His parents were able to take the long flight from his native country to attend the game.

Arriola had a goal and an assist, and Weston McKennie was awarded with an assist during an all-around strong performance before leaving with what appeared to be a left hamstring injury. Berhalter said it was a cramp, nothing serious.

The Americans were on the attack for most of the game while generating a steady stream of prime scoring chances against a Guyana team making its Gold Cup debut, but even a decisive victory like this wasn't going to provide much insight into any progress being made under Berhalter, given Guyana's No. 177 ranking.

Goalkeeper Zack Steffen made one save, in the 69th minute. With fan angst at a fever pitch and a young squad trying to find its way with a new, flashier style of play, though, there was plenty to be gained from, simply, winning. Especially after the Americans lost ugly in friendlies earlier this month to Venezuela and Jamaica.

"You guys know how it works. In a few weeks nobody is going to be talking about Jamaica and Venezuela," midfielder Michael Bradley said. "Because one of two things is going to happen. We're going to win the Gold Cup, and at that point we're going to have enough in the bank over the course of the next few weeks to where I think those are the last two games that I think everybody is going to be talking about, and if we don't we will have lost more important games that ultimately will be looked more closely at, right?"

Up next for the Americans

in Group D on Saturday night in Cleveland is Trinidad and Tobago, the plucky islanders who beat them on Oct. 10, 2017, in the World Cup qualifier that kept them home last summer from Russia and triggered a re-examination of the entire program. Panama beat the Soca Warriors 2-0 in the first match on Tuesday.

Minnesota became the 27th state — Washington, D.C., has hosted too — with a U.S. men's national team match played within its borders. This one was at sparkling Allianz Field, the just-opened home of Major League Soccer club Minnesota United. With a vintage summer sunset falling beneath the curved canopy of European-style stadium at kickoff, the colored LED lights encircling the building after nightfall, and a raucous red, white and blue capacity crowd of 19,418 into the action the whole time, the atmosphere matched the performance.

Kepler lifts Twins over Red Sox in 17th

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Max Kepler was supposed to have the night off. Instead, the Twins outfielder wound up playing 12 innings and delivered three huge hits.

Kepler's single with one out in the 17th gave Minnesota a 4-3 victory over the Boston Red Sox early Wednesday in the longest game by innings in Target Field history.

Kepler hit a tying homer in the 13th before his hit down the first-base line past a five-man Red Sox infield scored Luis Arraez to end a game that took 5 hours, 45 minutes — tied for the fourth-longest in Twins history.

"Everybody just wanted to put an end to the game," said

Kepler, who pinch hit for Marwin Gonzalez in the sixth inning. "It was a wild game. I'm glad it went our way in the end."

The winning hit came off Brian Johnson (1-1), who pitched the 17th inning for the Red Sox. Johnson threw three innings as Boston's starting pitcher Sunday.

"That's a way better story and way more fun if we win and the outcome of that game," Johnson said. "It wasn't the result, so it's tough to swallow."

The game ended at 12:55 a.m. local time on the first walk-off win of the season for the Twins, who have yet to lose three straight games all season.

"That was one of the best games I've been a part of, ever, in baseball," said Twins man-

ager Rocco Baldelli. "I think a lot of people in that clubhouse can say the same thing."

Boston had a six-game winning streak snapped.

The Red Sox used eight relievers in relief of lefty David Price, who went just five innings. The Twins also used eight arms out of the bullpen to back up Michael Pineda's strong start. Pineda allowed one run in six innings.

Boston had a runner on third and nobody out in the 17th but couldn't score against Zack Littell (1-0), who earned his first career win. With Andrew Benintendi standing on third base, J.D. Martinez struck out for the fifth time. Rafael Devers then grounded out to first, and Xander Bogaerts grounded to third.

"There was a lot of stuff weird in this game, but we played to the end," said Boston manager Alex Cora. "They scored one more run than us."

The teams traded solo homers in the 13th inning. Mookie Betts put Boston up 3-2 before Kepler launched his 18th homer to keep the game going.

Kepler also had a big hit in the eighth as his two-out single to left tied the game at 2.

The Twins (48-24) maintained a tie for the best record in baseball.

"That would be so hard to go that far and use all the pitchers that you did, grind out at-bats and then lose," said Mitch Garver, who caught all 17 innings for the Twins. "I've been on the losing side of those before."

MLB roundup

Jimenez goes deep in first game at Wrigley Field

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Eloy Jimenez came up in a big spot and delivered. It was exactly how he pictured the moment when he became a professional ballplayer.

With one major twist.

Jimenez hit a tiebreaking two-run homer in the ninth inning in his first game against his first major league organization, helping the Chicago White Sox beat the Chicago Cubs 3-1 on Tuesday night.

The 22-year-old Jimenez was a top prospect for the Cubs before a rare trade with the White Sox for veteran left-hander Jose Quintana in July 2017. The Jimenez deal will live on in sports bars all over Chicago for many years to come, and the rookie added another wrinkle with one big swing in his first game at Wrigley Field.

James McCann hit a leadoff single before Jimenez drove a 1-0 pitch from Pedro Strop (1-3) over the wall in left for his 12th homer. Considered one of

baseball's top young sluggers, Jimenez has gone deep six times in his last nine games.

"We were hoping he could get a pitch he could handle and obviously he did," White Sox manager Rick Renteria said. "It was a big blow."

Adding another layer to the accomplishment, Jimenez cracked his bat on the swing. He smiled as he proudly displayed the broken lumber after the victory.

Mets 10, Braves 2: Jacob deGrom took a shutout into the ninth inning, Pete Alonso homered to highlight the first four-hit game of his young career, and visiting New York routed first-place Atlanta.

Yankees 6, Rays 3: Cameron Maybin homered again with his roster spot in doubt, Edwin Encarnacion went deep for his first hit with his new team and host New York extended its AL East lead to 2½ games.

Athletics 16, Orioles 2: Khris Davis, Robbie Grossman and Stephen Piscotty homered in a 10-run sixth inning, and

host Oakland hit six home runs overall in a rout of Baltimore.

Reds 4, Astros 3: Jesse Winker and Derek Dietrich homered off Justin Verlander in the first inning and host Cincinnati beat Houston to clinch its first series win in nearly a month.

Tigers 5, Pirates 4: Nicholas Castellanos trotted home when a potential double play in the eighth turned into an RBI fielder's choice due to some indecisiveness by Pittsburgh second baseman Adam Frazier.

Angels 3, Blue Jays 1: Tyler Skaggs pitched into the eighth inning, Kole Calhoun and Brian Goodwin hit solo homers and Los Angeles remained unbeaten in five games against host Toronto this season.

Marlins 6, Cardinals 0: Rookie Jordan Yamamoto matched his first career start by pitching seven scoreless innings against host St. Louis, and Miami earned the shutout.

Indians 10, Rangers 3: Rookie Zach Plesac allowed only two hits pitching into the

eighth inning and Cleveland had four home runs, including three in a row for the first time in nearly 15 years, to overwhelm host Texas.

Rockies 8, Diamondbacks 1: Nolan Arenado homered and drove in three, Antonio Senzatela pitched one-run ball into the seventh inning and visiting Colorado beat Arizona.

Padres 4, Brewers 1: Left-hander Logan Allen threw seven scoreless innings in his major league debut, Francisco Mejia hit a two-run home run and Manny Machado added an RBI double for host San Diego.

Dodgers 9, Giants 0: Clayton Kershaw combined with two relievers on a four-hit shutout, Enrique Hernandez had a pinch-hit grand slam to highlight a six-run seventh, and host Los Angeles routed San Francisco.

Royals 9, Mariners 0: Whit Merrifield had two homers and a career-high six RBIs, Homer Bailey pitched into the eighth inning and Kansas City beat host Seattle.