

# STARS AND STRIPES<sup>®</sup>

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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## Iraqi forces retake strategic town

*The Associated Press*

BAGHDAD — Iraqi security forces on Tuesday retook a town next to the militant-held city of Tikrit as they pressed their offensive against Islamic State militants, two military officials said.

The Iraqi forces entered Alam early in the morning and hours later gained full control of the town adjacent to Tikrit, the two Iraqi officials said, speaking on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to talk to reporters.

The battle for Saddam Hussein's hometown is a key test for the Iraqi forces as they struggle to win back some of the Islamic State group's biggest strongholds in Iraq.

Ahmed al-Karim, the Salahuddin provincial council chief, told The Associated Press that progress had been slow due to roadside bombs and sniper attacks.

Tikrit, Salahuddin's provincial capital that lies about 80 miles north of Baghdad, fell to the Islamic State group last sum-

mer, along with Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, and other areas in the country's Sunni heartland.

The offensive to wrest Tikrit from the Islamic State group has received significant assistance from Iranian military advisers who are guiding Iraq's Shiite militias on the battlefield. U.S.-led coalition forces have said they are not providing aerial support for this particular mission because the Iraqis have not requested it.

Before Alam, the offensive succeeded in clawing back a few villages and towns, most notably Dawr, south of Tikrit. Among those directing operations is Iranian Gen. Ghasem Soleimani, commander of the powerful Revolutionary Guard's Quds Force. The overt Iranian role and the prominence of Shiite militias in the campaign have raised fears of possible sectarian cleansing should Tikrit, an overwhelmingly Sunni city, fall to the government troops.

Meanwhile, in neighboring Syria, activists said Tuesday that more than 70 prisoners escaped from an Islamic State jail in a

town held by the militant group. The militants then went house-to-house and set up checkpoints around the northern town of al-Bab, searching for those who fled.

The prisoners took the opportunity to escape when clashes erupted between rival militant groups, said Bari Abdelatif, an activist from al-Bab who is now based in Turkey.

"There are checkpoints everywhere," Abdelatif said of the situation in the town. He said he was contact with residents and added that Islamic State fighters were driving through the town's streets and calling on people over loudspeakers to hand over any prisoners they were hiding.

The Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights and Abdelatif said those who fled included Kurdish fighters who were captured by the Islamic State group in recent months. The Observatory said the Islamic State extremists were able to recapture some of those who fled but did not provide details or numbers.

## McCaskill: Discipline in 'Fat Leonard' case should go 'to the top'

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Sen. Claire McCaskill on Tuesday pressed Navy Secretary Ray Mabus to explain how the service is holding commanders accountable for a far-reaching case of bribery among sailors and contractors.

The Missouri Democrat, known for going after corruption and waste, told Mabus and the Senate Armed Services Committee that the so-called Fat Leonard scandal rips at the fabric of integrity in the Navy but that too often responsibility for military wrongdoing rests on middle and lower ranks instead of leadership.

Mabus was before the Senate to testify about the upcoming defense budget, but the Navy

has been shaken for more than a year by Navy officers and enlisted sailors — as well as high-level civilians — pleading guilty to charges they provided classified information to Leonard Glenn "Fat Leonard" Francis, 50, the owner of Glen Defense Marine Asia, for money, luxury travel and prostitutes.

McCaskill said the service should ensure the "consequences go to the very top ... rather than hanging out in the middle or the bottom."

The Navy secretary recounted his recent censure of three admirals, including the commander of naval forces in Japan, which resulted in the announcement of those officers' retirements in February.

Two other admirals lost their access to classified materials

in November. Mabus said the service is still looking into their cases and has not confirmed allegations of wrongdoing.

"We are going to hold people accountable that violated either the law or Navy ethics," Mabus said.

After a three-year secret investigation, the Navy is somewhat frustrated that it cannot move more quickly to prosecute wrongdoing but some parts of the case depend on the U.S. attorney's office in California, he said.

Meanwhile, the Navy has overhauled its procurement requirements and regulations to guard against similar abuses, Mabus said.

"You can have all the ethics training in the world. If somebody doesn't know its wrong to steal or to take a bribe, they

missed something at home," he said. "We need to set up a system to catch them."

Francis pleaded guilty in January in San Diego to working with Navy contacts to bilk the Navy out of about \$20 million by steering ships to specific ports in the Pacific and falsifying service charges.

Naval Forces Japan commander Rear Adm. Terry Kraft and two other rear admirals — Michael Miller and David Pimpo — were censured by the secretary.

The three officers served with the USS Ronald Reagan strike group while the bribery occurred in 2006 and 2007. Miller was the carrier strike group commander, Kraft commanded the carrier, and Pimpo was the carrier's supply officer.

## 'Candyland' VA facility to get visit

BY PATRICK DICKSON  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — The Department of Veterans Affairs announced Tuesday morning that Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson would later in the day visit a Wisconsin VA Medical Center known as "Candyland" by some veterans for its penchant for handing out painkillers.

During Gibson's visit, he will meet with "employees, facility leadership and stakeholders," the VA said in its news release.

The announcement came a day after members of Congress announced it would conduct a joint oversight hearing in Tomah, Wis., on March 30 to examine extremely high opiate prescription rates at the Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center, as well as patient deaths and an alleged culture of fear among hospital employees.

"Unfortunately, the situation at the Tomah VAMC is a familiar one for VA, involving skyrocketing opiate prescription rates, patient deaths, a secret inspector-general report, executive bonuses and allegations of retaliatory behavior," wrote Rep. Jeff Miller, R-Fla., chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs and a frequent critic of the department.

The Tomah medical center came under scrutiny in January when whistleblowers claimed that a doctor was overprescribing opioid painkillers.

The problem of opiate overprescription at the VA has been written about extensively. According to a September 2013 report by the Center for Investigative Reporting, which obtained records via the Freedom of Information Act, prescriptions for four opiates — hydrocodone, oxycodone, methadone and morphine — have surged 270 percent in the preceding 12 years.

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# NATO reps discuss how forces can respond to future threats

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN  
*Stars and Stripes*

RAMSTEIN AIRBASE, Germany — High-level NATO leaders met Tuesday at Ramstein to consider the future of the alliance's ground forces in the wake of the conflict in Ukraine and events in the Middle East and Afghanistan.

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization-LANDCOM Corps Commanders' Conference drew more than 140 participants from nearly every country in the 28-member alliance, including NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe Air Force Gen. Philip Breedlove.

He and Army Lt. Gen. John

Nicholson Jr., the commander of NATO Allied Land Command, spoke of the broader security environment facing NATO post-Afghanistan and the challenges ground forces, in particular, must address to hone and ready a land component that could respond to an international crisis at a moment's notice.

"We are adapting to some of the most significant changes to the security environment here in Europe since the Cold War, and I am pleased to say that NATO is adapting as rapidly as its 21st-century challenges are also evolving," Breedlove said.

Breedlove said NATO's land forces headquarters — estab-

lished in 2012 at Izmir, Turkey, to ensure the interoperability of NATO ground forces — "is focused on matching our readiness to the environment" and working with nations on contingency planning "in support of NATO's readiness action force," as outlined at the pivotal NATO Wales Summit last fall. Interoperability has been a constant, if elusive, goal for the alliance since the early 1950s.

"This is significant, as this planning will reduce the go-to-show time needed between alerting forces and getting them to the right place at the right time," Breedlove said.

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## Agent Orange debate renewed by bill, ruling

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN  
*Stars and Stripes*

WASHINGTON — Senators on Monday intensified a push on Capitol Hill to cover Vietnam-era "blue water" sailors for Agent Orange exposure, just as another long-awaited decision on Department of Veterans Affairs benefits for crews of repurposed C-123 cargo aircraft was expected this week.

A bill introduced by Sens.

Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., and Steve Daines, R-Mont., would extend VA benefits to sailors who served on aircraft carriers, destroyers, cruisers and other large Navy ships in Vietnamese waters during the war and who come down with illnesses associated with the tactical herbicide. A similar bill was introduced last month in the House. The legislation comes as the VA prepares to

decide as early as Tuesday or Wednesday whether Air Force reservists who served on the C-123 Provider aircraft — planes previously used to spray Agent Orange over Vietnam — will also qualify. It underscores the wide reach and debate over exposure and benefits nearly a quarter century after Congress passed a law extending coverage to nearly all the 2.7 million who served in the theater.

## 54 hurt in train-truck crash in North Carolina

*The Associated Press*

HALIFAX, N.C. — When it was time to visit her father for spring break, Alexis Pearce decided to take the train rather than driving. Three weeks earlier, the 22-year-old Duke University student had been in a serious car accident and she didn't want to take any chances.

Her choice turned out to be an unnerving one. The Amtrak train she was riding in Mon-

day hit a tractor-trailer that got stuck on railroad tracks in North Carolina, injuring the conductor and at least 54 of the 212 passengers aboard the train. Pearce was not hurt.

"I just feel very blessed," Pearce said.

Monday's was the third serious train crash in less than two months. Two crashes in New York and California in February killed a total of seven people and injured 30.

The oversized flatbed trailer involved in Monday's crash was transporting a modular building wrapped in blue plastic and loaded with electrical equipment, said Lt. Jeff Gordon, a spokesman for the North Carolina State Highway Patrol.

As the train approached, it set off warning flashers and the crossing arms came down as the truck was still straddling the tracks, Gordon said.



# Marlins confident in Stanton

The Associated Press

JUPITER, Fla. — When someone recently raised the topic of Giancarlo Stanton's beaming, Billy Conigliaro said he had never seen it, so he went to his computer and found a video replay.

His reaction?  
"Oh my God, that's terrible," Conigliaro said.

He spoke with an unfortunate frame of reference. Conigliaro happened to be a spectator in the stands when his older brother Tony took a fastball in the left eye in 1967 — one of the most notorious beamings in baseball history.

Stanton was back in the lineup this month at the start of spring training. The Marlins are so optimistic he'll make a complete comeback, they gave him a record \$325 million, 13-year contract in the offseason.

But beamings have curtailed careers over the years.

"Fear is the big thing if you get hit like that," Billy Conigliaro said. "And I don't know what kind of character this Stanton guy is."

The 6-foot-6, 240-pound Stanton played football in high school, and he's no shrinking violet. In the months since a fastball to the face from the Brewers' Mike Fiers ended Stanton's 2014 season, he and Marlins officials have repeatedly dismissed the possibility of any carryover effect.

"There are no reservations from anyone in our camp," president of baseball operations Michael Hill said.

Stanton led the major leagues in RBIs when sidelined Sept. 11, and despite missing the final 17 games, he won the NL home run title with 37 and led the league in slugging. He has 154 home runs at age 25 despite playing in spacious Marlins

Park.

For fans of a certain age, his beaming brought to mind another precocious slugger. Tony Conigliaro was 22 and already had 104 career home runs when he was beamed. He made an improbable comeback but hit only six homers after age 25, his eyesight permanently damaged. He died in 1990.

Astros shortstop Dickie Thon was never the same after a 1984 beaming left him with vision problems. Stanton was fortunate that while the ball broke his orbital bone and damaged five teeth, he says his vision has been unaffected.

Even without permanent injury, however, a beaming can change the course of a career, as former Brooklyn Dodgers pitcher Ralph Branca will attest.

Branca, now 89, was there when a fastball felled Pete Reiser in one of the majors' worst beamings in 1947. Branca also was friends with Don Zimmer, who lay unconscious for nearly two weeks after being beamed in the minors in 1953, and was beamed in the majors three years later.

"People often wonder how a guy is going to react to it, and how he'll hang in there," Branca said.

Some are unfazed and don't begin to flinch at fastballs. Jason Heyward was beamed in 2013 but returned for the Braves' postseason that year, and last year he batted .271, above his career average.

Heyward, now with the Cardinals, said returning for the playoffs made it easier for him to put any fear of the ball out of his mind.

"I had a chance to play playoff baseball," he said. "That's what I thought about. I didn't think about anything else."

Like Heyward, Stanton is wearing a specially designed helmet for additional protection.

Heyward said he doesn't know if Stanton will make a full comeback.

"Everybody's different," Heyward said. "I know what I hope for. I hope he does awesome and continues to be the player he is, because he does a lot of exciting things. He's a young guy like me, and I would miss it if he were to change. I hope the best for him."

Stanton has already come back from one beaming. Two years ago he was hit in the back of the helmet during a spring training practice game by a fastball that got away from Jose Fernandez, then the team's top pitching prospect.

Stanton said the beaming briefly made his vision fuzzy, but he missed no playing time and has hit 61 homers in the two seasons since.

"We've been down this road before, and obviously it didn't affect him then," Marlins general manager Dan Jennings said. "With all the impact tests and concussion tests and all those things we've done, we feel very confident that going forward he'll be extremely healthy and ready to produce."

There are plenty of precedents for full comebacks. Jim Ray Hart was beamed twice as a rookie in 1963 and went on to a 12-year career. A pitch broke Ron Santo's cheek in 1966, which led to the introduction of the helmet ear flap, and he played another eight seasons.

Reiser was knocked unconscious when beamed in 1947, one of 11 times he was carried off the field on a stretcher. He was back in the lineup nine days later, and the outfielder's injury-plagued career continued until 1952.

"He didn't shy away," teammate Branca said. "He was a competitor. I don't think he let the beaming bother him."

"But he ran into the outfield wall too many times."

# Warriors, Hawks hit 50 wins

The Associated Press

PHOENIX — Stephen Curry scored 25 of his 36 points in the second half and Golden State beat Phoenix 98-80 for its 50th victory of the season Monday night.

Klay Thompson added 25 for the Warriors, who at 50-12 have the NBA's best record, a half-game better than Atlanta.

Curry made 7 of 13 three-pointers, 6 of 8 in the second half, in his 13th 30-point game of the season.

Eric Bledsoe scored 19 for Phoenix. Brandon Knight had 13 before leaving the game with a sprained left ankle in the second quarter.

The Warriors became the second NBA team to win 50 games this season.

**Hawks 130, Kings 105:** Kyle Korver and DeMarre Carroll each scored 20 points as host Atlanta bounced back from a rare loss by becoming the first NBA team to 50 wins, scoring a season high in routing Sacramento.

The Hawks set a club record by going 20 of 36 beyond the arc, breaking the mark of 19 set against Dallas on Dec. 17, 1996.

**Pelicans 114, Bucks 103:** Anthony Davis scored 43 points, tying a career high and helping New Orleans pull away to beat host Milwaukee.

Eric Gordon added 16 and Tyreke Evans had 13 before leaving the game in the third quarter with an ankle injury.

**Grizzlies 101, Bulls 91:** Marc Gasol scored 23 points to lead visiting Memphis past his brother Pau and Chicago.

Pau Gasol, Marc's older brother, had 13 points and 11 rebounds for his 43rd double-double of the season.

**Wizards 95, Hornets 69:** Marcin Gortat scored 20 points and Washington rolled past host Charlotte.

Mo Williams scored 19 points for the Hornets, who shot just 32.5 percent (25 of 77) and committed 16 turnovers to tie their lowest-scoring game this season and end a five-game winning streak.

**Clippers 89, Timberwolves 76:** J.J. Redick scored 26 points, DeAndre Jordan had 20 points and 17 rebounds, and injury-depleted Los Angeles ended a two-game skid.

Austin Rivers scored 13 points as the host Clippers bounced back one day after a road loss to NBA-leading Golden State.

**Celtics 100, Heat 90:** Isaiah Thomas scored 25 points in another strong game off the bench and Brandon Bass added 14 as Boston beat host Miami.

Dwyane Wade scored 34 points for the Heat.

**Nuggets 106, Knicks 78:** Kenneth Faried had 19 points and 11 rebounds as Denver routed visiting New York.

The Knicks lost their fourth straight and fell to 12-50.

# Tavares' OT goal lifts Isles over Leafs

The Associated Press

TORONTO — John Tavares scored 4:38 into overtime, capping the New York Islanders' two-goal comeback in a 4-3 victory over the Toronto Maple Leafs on Monday night.

Tavares, an Ontario native, went around several defenders to score the winning goal during a delayed Toronto penalty. With his 33rd goal and 39th assist, the Islanders captain stretched his lead in the NHL scoring race to three points.

Tavares has four overtime goals this season.

Tyler Kennedy — in his Islanders debut — Frans Nielson and Casey Cizikas all scored in the third period for the Islanders, who have a three-point lead over the New York Rangers atop the Metropolitan Division.

Michal Neuvirth made 22 saves for the Islanders, who will host the Rangers on Tuesday night. New York trailed 2-0 and 3-1 in the third period.

David Booth, Peter Holland and James van Riemsdyk scored for the Maple Leafs (26-35-6). Jonathan Bernier made 39 saves.

New York trailed 2-0 and 3-1 in the third period.

"It's a much better feeling than it could have been," Tavares said. "We were disappointed with our first two periods."

**Red Wings 5, Oilers 2:** Riley Sheahan scored the go-ahead goal in the second period, Jimmy Howard made 36 saves, and host Detroit ended a two-game skid with a victory over Edmonton.

Niklas Kronwall, Teemu Pulkkinen, Justin Abdelkader and Pavel Datsyuk added goals to help Detroit send the Oilers to their fifth straight loss.

Henrik Zetterberg had three assists for the Red Wings.

**Predators 2, Coyotes 1 (OT):** James Neal put in a rebound of Seth Jones' shot 2:45 into overtime to give visiting Nashville a victory over Arizona that ended a season-worst, six-game skid.

Pekka Rinne made 27 saves to halt Nashville's losing streak. The Coyotes have lost 11 of 12 home games and 12 of 13 overall.

**Sharks 2, Penguins 1 (SO):** Antti Niemi made 39 saves and stopped

seven of eight shootout attempts to lead San Jose to its 10th straight home win against Pittsburgh.

Tommy Wingels beat Marc-Andre Fleury with a backhand in the eighth round of the shootout, and Niemi made it stand up by stopping Steve Downie. Matt Nieto scored the lone goal for the Sharks, who had lost nine of their previous 10 home games overall.

But they have dominated the Penguins at the Shark Tank of late. San Jose has 11 wins and one tie since its last home loss to Pittsburgh on Oct. 22, 1997.

Sidney Crosby tied the game earlier in the third with his first goal in seven career games against the Sharks.

The Sharks killed a penalty in overtime and survived Derrick Pouliot hitting the post in the closing seconds.

**Canucks 2, Ducks 1:** Zack Kassian's third-period goal lifted host Vancouver over Anaheim.

Bo Horvat had the other goal for Vancouver, and Eddie Lack stopped 29 shots as the Canucks beat the Ducks in regulation for the first time in more than two years.



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# Manhattan tops Iona in MAAC

The Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — The third time was a charm for Manhattan.

After losing two tight games during the season to rival Iona, the Jaspers knocked off the top-seeded Gaels 79-69 Monday night to win the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference title for the second straight year.

"It's a very proud moment for me, but this is all about my players," said Manhattan coach Steve Masiello, who nearly left after last season and was placed on leave after being disqualified for the South Florida job because of false claims on his resume. "These guys have taken this program into a whole new atmosphere. I couldn't be prouder of these young men. It's more than basketball to us. And they're the reason I'm here."

Ashton Pankey had 21 points and 10 rebounds and Emmy Andujar added 18 points and 11 rebounds to lead

Manhattan.

It was the third straight time the New York-area rivals met for the MAAC tournament title and the league's automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament, and the defending champion Jaspers (19-13) rallied late to win it again. Manhattan, which lost to Iona two years ago, improved to 4-2 against the Gaels in the MAAC tournament.

Now, it's on to bigger things.

"We've been there," said Pankey, who earned the tournament's MVP honors. "We battled Louisville (as a 13 seed in last year's NCAA Tournament) and we went right down to the wire with them. We're trying to go win games there. We're not just going there just to experience it and lose first round."

Iona (26-8) was 17-3 in the conference in the regular season, posting two close wins over Manhattan — 70-67 on the road in mid-January and 79-75 at home a month later.

This wasn't what the Gaels were expecting.

"Not fun for anyone here," Iona coach Tim Cluess said. "We're obviously upset after a game like that. We worked hard all year. Unfortunately, sometimes it doesn't work out."

Iona junior guard A.J. English was 7-for-10 on three-pointers in a 95-77 semifinal win over Monmouth on Sunday and 6-for-10 against Siena in a 74-71 victory on Saturday and had a key hand in seven close victories. He was a non-factor in the second half of this one, failing to score and attempting only three shots after a riveting close to the first half. He had 10 points on 3-for-11 shooting.

Iona trailed for most of the first half, hitting just 2 of 13 shots during a dry spell before Kelvin Amayo hit a pretty driving scoop and sank the free throw to complete a three-point play and give the Gaels a 20-19 lead midway through the period.

# Wofford holds off Furman for Southern's NCAA bid

The Associated Press

ASHEVILLE, N.C. — Wofford coach Mike Young knew the Terriers had no room for error when they arrived in Asheville for the Southern Conference championship.

With only one NCAA Tournament bid typically given out annually to the conference — that coming with the automatic berth from winning the league tournament — it doesn't matter if your team goes 16-2 in the regular season like the Terriers did.

Wofford avoided both on Monday night as Lee Skinner scored 17 points, Eric Garcia added 15, and the top-seeded Terriers survived against 10th-seeded Furman 67-64 to capture their fourth Southern Conference tournament championship in the last six seasons.

The Terriers (28-6) ended the Paladins' unlikely run to the championship and won despite Furman shooting 52 percent from the field.

Furman (11-22) was the tournament's lowest seed, but pulled off three straight upsets over The Citadel, Chattanooga and Mercer to reach the title game.

However, the Paladins didn't quite have enough to complete what would have been a remarkable run to the NCAAs after falling short in their fourth game in four days.

Geoff Beans had 15 points on five three-pointers, and Stephen Croone had 14 to lead the Paladins, who don't have a senior in their rotation.

After a missed free throw, Furman's John Davis III attempted a last-minute half court heave that fell short. Terrier fans quickly stormed the floor to celebrate the team's return to the NCAA Tournament.

# Northeastern earns 1st NCAA trip since '91

The Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Perhaps sometime in the future, William & Mary will be able to cut down the nets to celebrate after winning the conference title and eagerly look forward to participating in the NCAA Tournament.

On Monday night, as usual, the Tribe watched someone else do the honors.

Northeastern captured the Colonial Athletic Association championship with a 72-61 victory over top-seeded William & Mary, which failed again to earn its first trip to the NCAA Tournament.

Quincy Ford scored 22 points and David Walker added 15 for the Huskies (23-

11), who will be making their first NCAA Tournament appearance since 1991.

That's a relatively short stretch compared to that of William & Mary (20-12), one of only five of the original Division I teams that has never participated in the NCAA Tournament. The others: Army, Northwestern, St. Francis (NY) and The Citadel.

William & Mary was playing in its second straight CAA final and the fourth in eight years. The result of each of those games has been frustratingly identical.

"We're all heartbroken right now," coach Tony Shaver said. "We wanted to put that history stuff to rest, and we didn't. We'll live with that. But I do believe if we keep

knocking on the door, the door's going to open."

Third-seeded Northeastern scored the game's first 10 points and never trailed in winning its first CAA title. The last time the Huskies made it to the NCAA Tournament, they were champions of the North Atlantic Conference (now the America East).

Marcus Thornton scored 20 for the Tribe, who trailed by 22 points with 3:39 left before making a run that came far too late.

Northeastern finished tied for the regular-season title but was seeded third behind William & Mary and UNC-Wilmington following the tiebreaking process.

# NFL is looking into early free agency deals

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NFL is looking into whether some teams entered agreements with 2015 free agents before they were allowed to do so.

The league sent a memo to the 32 clubs reminding them not to reach agreement with or sign any of the 2015 free agents until Tuesday at 4 p.m. EDT. The memo noted a "reported number of

agreements."

Among those are big-money deals for Ndamukong Suh with Miami, Jeremy Maclin with Kansas City, and Frank Gore and Byron Maxwell with Philadelphia.

"At this time, the league office is beginning investigations into a number of reported agreements with clubs," the memo said. "Violations will be dealt with accordingly."

Teams were given a three-day window beginning Saturday to meet with repre-

sentatives of free agents. The league's business year began Tuesday and players could be signed after 4 p.m. ET. But in the wake of many reported contract agreements, the NFL issued the warning.

During this negotiating period, a team is allowed to submit a written summary of the club's negotiating position to a certified agent. That can include a potential signing bonus; length of the contract; the amounts of the signing bonus and yearly salary. The team also can ad-

just its position when the agent makes a counter-offer.

The idea behind the three-day negotiating period is to allow conversations between more teams and player agents, and, of course, to gauge a player's value on the open market.

With the salary cap increasing by more than \$10 million this year, and with several teams having carry-over money to spend, the competition for free agents has been intense.

# Texans release WR Johnson; QB Mallett will return

The Associated Press

Andre Johnson was released by the Houston Texans, and quarterback Ryan Mallett agreed to return to the team on Monday.

A 12-year veteran, Johnson, the longest-tenured Texan, was a first-round draft pick in 2003, joining the expansion team in its second season.

The 33-year-old Johnson had 85 catches for 936 yards last season, but the Texans were beginning to see DeAndre Hopkins as their top receiving threat.

"After exhausting all options of a possible trade, we informed Andre Johnson that he would be released (Monday)," general manager Rick Smith said. "No player in the history of this franchise has represented the team, city and community in a more professional way. Andre is a Hall of Fame caliber player and we appreciate his years of service and contributions to our team."

Johnson is a seven-time Pro Bowler with seven 1,000-yard receiving seasons and has 1,012 receptions with 13,597 yards receiving in his career.

He led the NFL in yards receiving in 2008 and 2009. His career high came in 2012 when he had 1,598 yards receiving and the Texans reached the playoffs for the second time.

Houston also re-signed two of its free agents, cornerback Kareem Jackson and tackle Derek Newton.

Mallett has agreed to terms on a two-year contract with the Texans, another person familiar with the contract told the AP. The deal is worth \$7 million over two years, with \$1.75 million guaranteed. The person spoke on condition of anonymity

because the team has not announced the contract.

Mallett joined Houston last year in a trade with New England. He started twice in three appearances for Houston before tearing a pectoral muscle and missing the rest of the season.

Jackson was drafted by the Texans 20th overall in 2010 and has started 71 of 74 games.

Newton has appeared in 60 games since being selected in the seventh round in 2011, including starting the last 46 games he's played in at right tackle.