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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US forces evacuate Yemen base

The Associated Press

ADEN, Yemen — A group of U.S. military forces, including Special Forces commandos, have evacuated an air base after al-Qaida seized a nearby city, Yemeni military and security officials said Saturday.

The officials said the troops were leaving the al-Annad air base near the southern city of al-Houta. The officials, who spoke on condition of anonymity as they weren't authorized to discuss troop movements, did not say whether the troops left the country. U.S. officials declined to immediately comment Saturday.

There are about 100 American troops and Special Forces commandos believed to be at al-Annad. The base is where

American and European military advisers help Yemen battle the country's local al-Qaida branch through drone strikes and logistical support.

Al-Qaida's local branch is considered by Washington to be the group's most dangerous offshoot. Al-Qaida militants took al-Houta on Friday.

The report of the evacuation comes a day after two mosques in the Yemeni capital, Sanaa, were attacked by suicide bombers, killing at least 137 and wounding about 350 people.

Responsibility for Friday's bombings was claimed by an alleged Islamic State affiliate calling itself "Sanaa Province." In its claim of responsibility, the group warned of an "upcoming flood" of attacks

targeting the Houthi rebels.

The claim could not be independently confirmed and did not give concrete proof of Islamic State involvement. In Washington, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said the U.S. had seen no indications of an operational link between the Islamic State group and Friday's attacks.

Also on Saturday, Houthi rebels issued a call to arms to battle forces loyal to the country's embattled president.

The call by the rebels for a general mobilization only increases the ongoing chaos in Yemen, which grew exponentially in September when the Shiite rebels stormed the capital, Sanaa. The rebels also hold nine of Yemen's 21 provinces.

In their statement, the reb-

els described their coming offensive against security and military institutions loyal to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi as a battle against extremists.

Their appeal came just minutes after Hadi gave a defiant speech challenging the Houthis, his first address broadcast to the public since fleeing Sanaa last month. He described the rebels' rule in Sanaa and elsewhere as "a coup against constitutional legitimacy."

In his address, Hadi declared Aden a "temporary capital" and told the rebels' leader, Abdel-Malik al-Houthi, to stop trying to trick the Yemeni people. He accused Iran of backing the rebels, a claim the rebels deny.

Obama expected to slow Afghan withdrawal

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama is expected to announce plans this week to slow down the pace of troop withdrawals between now and the end of 2016 to maintain security in Afghanistan. But the White House on Friday night tamped down expectations raised earlier by an administration official that it could reconsider its plan to remove nearly all U.S. troops from Afghanistan by the end of 2016.

Obama is meeting in Washington this week with Afghan President Ashraf Ghani and Chief Executive Abdullah Abdullah.

Current plans call for a U.S. drawdown to 5,500 troops by the end of this year, but the

Obama administration has said previously it might keep more troops in Afghanistan next year.

Jeff Eggers, of the White House's National Security Council, said Friday the U.S. still intends to pursue its long-term withdrawal strategy, which calls for a U.S. security cooperation office in Kabul beyond 2016 of about 1,000 U.S. troops, but no major troop presence.

Eggers appeared to leave open the possibility that the U.S. role after 2016 could also be reconsidered.

"The question of the post-2016 plan will, of course, flow from that, and it's fair to say that will need to be considered in the same way given the intent to maintain this ongoing

dialogue with President Ghani and his team," he said.

But officials later said Eggers was alluding to discussions about the breadth of the U.S. relationship with Afghanistan after 2016, and the size of the U.S. footprint and the troop levels in Afghanistan that Obama called for previously would not change.

White House spokesman Josh Earnest earlier emphasized that point, saying Obama and his national security team have been discussing changing the pace of the troop drawdown and the rate of base closures in Afghanistan up through the end of 2016 to deal with the security situation in the country.

Earnest said that after 2016, Obama envisions a smaller military footprint designed to pro-

tect embassy personnel and to engage in military-to-military relationships with the Afghan armed forces — a figure that experts place at about 1,000 troops.

"That's been the policy that President Obama put in place a number of years ago. That hasn't changed," Earnest said.

"But the United States is interested in making sure that we have a troop presence that can protect forces that are on the ground," he said.

"We want to make sure that we can continue to have some counterterrorism capability in Afghanistan, because there are still extremist elements operating in Afghanistan that do pose a threat to our interests."

French carrier helps in battle vs. militants

The Associated Press

ABOARD THE CHARLES DE GAULLE — With an allied American aircraft carrier not far away, Rafale and Super Etendard fighter jets catapult off this nuclear-powered symbol of French naval fortitude to attack Islamic State group positions hundreds of miles northwest in Iraq.

The Charles de Gaulle, France's only aircraft carrier and the flagship of the French navy, arrived in the Persian Gulf last month to help provide additional air power to the

U.S.-led coalition conducting airstrikes against the militants who have seized a third of Iraq and Syria.

France has been one of the most active members of the coalition, and is the only nation aside from the U.S. to bring an aircraft carrier to the fight. Its fighters had been flying missions even before the carrier arrived from elsewhere in the region.

For this mission, the Charles de Gaulle is under American operational control and works alongside a U.S. Navy carrier group led by the USS Carl

Vinson.

"We have between 15 and 20 flights over Iraqi territory per day," Capt. Pierre Vandier of the Charles de Gaulle said.

French President Francois Hollande ordered the Charles de Gaulle to the Gulf just days after Islamic extremists launched a deadly attack on the Paris office of satirical newspaper Charlie Hebdo in January.

France, Australia, Belgium, Britain, Canada, Denmark, Jordan, the Netherlands and the U.S. are carrying out strikes against Islamic State militants in Iraq. The U.S. and regional

allies Bahrain, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are also carrying out strikes against the group in Syria.

While the U.S. is handling the majority of airstrikes in both countries, military commanders in the region insist that the contributions of coalition partners like France are vital to the mission.

American planes were responsible for 1,140 of the 1,619 strikes in Iraq since operations began in August, according to U.S. Central Command.

America wants low taxes, more pot

The Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Americans want lower taxes and more government spending both at once, although their support for spending more tax dollars on health care has dropped dramatically. They're likelier than ever to not feel connected to any particular religion, but no less likely to believe in God. And for the first time, most want to legalize marijuana.

Those are among findings from the 2014 General Social Survey, which has been measuring trends in American opinion

and behavior since 1972.

The survey, which is conducted by the independent research organization NORC at the University of Chicago, puts wide-ranging and long-running questions about a large array of issues to the public. Data from the 2014 survey was released earlier this month, and an analysis of its findings was conducted by the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research and the General Social Survey.

Among the findings: The people want more spent on many government programs, yet

lower taxes for themselves..

Out of 22 spending items asked about in the survey, Americans are more likely to want cuts than increased spending on only four of them — welfare, foreign aid, assistance to big cities and the space program.

The portion of Americans saying they have no religious preference has increased dramatically since 1972, when only 5 percent of Americans said they didn't identify with any particular religion. In 2014, 21 percent of Americans said they had no religion — a record high.

Military kids more likely to be suicidal, study says

Los Angeles Times

California high school students who have parents in the military are far more likely than those from civilian families to have recently attempted suicide, according to a new study.

The findings are based on a survey of ninth- and 11th-graders at 261 schools across the state. The data were collected in 2012 and 2013.

Of 2,409 students with a parent in the military, 11.7 percent answered yes when asked if they had attempted suicide in the previous year. For the 21,274 students with civilian parents, that figure was 7.3 percent.

About a third of the suicide attempts in both groups required medical treatment, the survey said.

The study, published Thursday in the journal *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, did not consider completed suicides.

"They're bearing the burden of our war on terrorism," said Tamika Gilreath, the University of Southern California sociologist who led the research.

Police shoot man swinging machete at airport

The Associated Press

KENNER, La. — A man sprayed wasp killer and swung a machete at TSA agents and passengers at the New Orleans international airport before an officer shot the man several times as people frantically scrambled away, authorities and passengers say.

Richard White, 62, approached the airport security checkpoint Friday evening, pulled out a can of the insecticide and began spraying both

agents and several passengers standing in line before he then drew a large machete from the waistband of his pants, Jefferson Parish Sheriff Newell Normand said.

White began swinging the machete, and a male TSA agent blocked the machete with a piece of luggage as White ran through a metal detector, Normand said.

After running through the detector, White was chasing a female TSA agent when Lt. Heather Slyve, of the Jefferson

Parish Sheriff's Office, drew her weapon. White continued to swing the machete as she approached, and she fired three rounds, striking him in the face, chest and leg, according to Normand.

A TSA agent also was struck in the arm by a bullet while running from White, authorities said, adding the agent's wound wasn't life-threatening.

White, who was wounded, was taken into surgery at a hospital overnight, Normand said.

South regional

No. 1 seed Duke advances

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Duke's youngsters saw plenty in their first NCAA tournament game: the buzz of a fast start to a big lead, the challenge of putting away an overmatched opponent that keeps playing hard, even an irate Hall of Fame coach.

Quinn Cook scored 22 points to help the No. 1-seeded Blue Devils get off to a torrid start and beat Robert Morris 85-56 on Friday.

Jahlil Okafor added 21 as the Blue Devils (30-4) wasted little time getting their offense revving, hitting their first seven shots and 12 of 15. Duke led by double figures from there, with the night mostly about learning how to play in March for a team with four freshmen among its eight scholarship players.

"We've played in some big-time games and earned a spot here in the NCAA tournament," said Cook, a senior. "I just told them to be themselves."

That's not to say everything went perfectly.

Okafor blew a reverse dunk in the second half, prompting coach Mike Krzyzewski to spring up and point to junior reserve Marshall Plumlee to replace his star freshman big man. He burned a timeout at the 14:53 mark, and then animatedly addressed his team from the edge of his chair in the huddle.

"I know them well enough: I feel like I can get emotional, funny, serious, and they'll respond because of the relationships that have been built," Krzyzewski said. "And it's my responsibility to spon-

taneously act when I do have a feel, when I do see something and for them to react to me. And they've done that."

Robert Morris — the No. 16 seed that had to win a First Four game to get here — showed plenty of fight and kept hanging around for the first part of the second half. The Colonials (20-15) twice pulled within 10, but the Blue Devils put the game out of reach with a suddenly dominant 12-0 burst — started by freshman Justise Winslow — that pushed the lead back to 68-46 on Amile Jefferson's layup with 8:29 left.

"Coach is intense," Jefferson said. "His passion is at a high level and guys aren't afraid of that. When Coach let it out, guys responded."

Duke was in command from there, shooting 63 percent in the program's 100th NCAA Tournament victory.

More importantly, Duke got off to a good start in the tournament after a pair of shocking one-and-done exits in the previous three seasons, both in its home state of North Carolina. Last year, the Blue Devils lost to No. 14 seed Mercer in Raleigh, roughly 30 minutes from Duke's campus.

Rodney Pryor scored 23 points on 10-for-19 shooting for Robert Morris, the Northeast Conference champions who were in their eighth NCAA tournament.

No. 8 San Diego State 76, No. 9 St. John's 64: At Charlotte, N.C., J.J. O'Brien scored 18 points for San Diego State, and Dwayne Polee II added 15 points on five three-pointers against his former team.

Skylar Spencer added 10 points and seven rebounds for the Aztecs (27-8), who will face the top-seeded Duke on Sunday.

Polee, who transferred from St. John's early in his college career, made national headlines when he collapsed on the court during a game against UC Riverside in December because of an irregular heartbeat. He was 5 of 7 on three-pointers.

Sir'Dominic Pointer had 21 points and 10 rebounds, and D'Angelo Harrison added 18 points for St. John's, which failed in its quest to win its first tournament game since 2000.

No. 2 Gonzaga 86, No. 15 North Dakota State 76: Kyle Wiltjer scored 23 points to lead Gonzaga to the victory in Seattle.

The second-seeded Zags (33-2) will play Iowa on Sunday to try to make the second weekend of the NCAA tournament for the first time since 2009.

No. 7 Iowa 83, No. 10 Davidson 52: At Seattle, Aaron White scored 13 straight points as part of Iowa's 18-3 run early in the second half, and the seventh-seeded Hawkeyes rolled into the round of 32.

White finished with 26 points as Iowa (22-11) used its significant height advantage to overwhelm the champions of the Atlantic 10 Conference regular season. Davidson had no answers on defense and couldn't match Iowa's shooting as the Hawkeyes won their first NCAA Tournament game since 2001 when they were also a No. 7 seed and won their opener.

Midwest regional

Late swipe lifts Terps

The Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Varun Ram played 13 seconds of Maryland's first NCAA tournament game since 2010 and with one timely swipe earned a place in Terrapins' history.

The former walk-on thwarted Valparaiso's last shot attempt with a steal in the closing seconds to help Maryland hold off the determined Crusaders 65-62 on Friday.

The fourth-seeded Terrapins (28-6) advanced to face West Virginia in Midwest Regional on Sunday.

Terps star senior Dez Wells made the biggest offensive play for Maryland, converting a three-point play off an offensive rebound with 1:44 left to make it 65-61. And Ram, a 5-foot-9 senior who had played 55 minutes this season coming into the tournament, did what he does best on the final possession, checking in for the first time with 13 seconds left.

"It's a situation I've been in. Obviously not in a game of this magnitude, but I've played defense for one possession before. At the end of the halves or the end of games," Ram said, unable to contain his smile as he stood in front of his locker.

The 13th-seeded Crusaders (28-6) were down three with one last chance for coach Bryce Drew to draw up a winning play. He didn't need a length of the court pass as he did when he made the most famous shot in school history back in the 1998 tournament, but Valpo did need to get behind the arc.

"They played great defense. I was supposed to pop back and take a three, but they guarded it well," said Alec Peters, who led Valpo with 18 points and was 4-for-7 from three.

Keith Carter improvised when the play broke down and went up for a three in the corner, but Ram reached in and smacked the ball away — seemingly getting some of Carter's arm in the process.

"I thought so," Carter said.

Not Ram. "I think I got it clean," he said. Wells finished with 14 points for the Terps, who have won 13 games this season by six points or less.

"I guess it's just the nature of our team," Wells said. "And when it gets down to like the grit part of the game, we just find ways to win."

No. 5 West Virginia 68, No. 12 Buffalo 62: At Columbus, Ohio, Tarik Phillip hit a three-pointer with 28 seconds left while the shot clock was winding down, adding the clinching points as West Virginia held off Buffalo in their NCAA tournament opener.

Devin Williams, who led the Mountaineers with 17 points and nine rebounds, hit two free throws with 2:10 left to give his team the lead for good.

Mid-American Conference tournament champion Buffalo (23-10) did not score over the final 2:42 against the physical Mountaineers.

Juwan Staten had 15 points and seven assists for West Virginia, with Daxter Miles Jr. adding 10 points.

West regional

Seventh-seeded Shockers top Hoosiers

The Associated Press

OMAHA, Neb. — Fred VanVleet matched his career high with 27 points, Ron Baker made big free throws late, and Wichita State defeated Indiana 81-76 in the NCAA tournament on Friday.

By winning, the seventh-seeded Shockers (29-4) set up a much-anticipated Sunflower State showdown with Kansas on Sunday.

Baker scored 15, making 7 of 8 free throws in the last 2 minutes to allow Wichita State to hold off the Hoosiers (20-14).

Freshman reserve Zach Brown had eight of his career-high 11 points in the second half, with six coming during the Shockers' decisive run.

Kevin "Yogi" Ferrell scored 24 points for Indiana. James Blackmon Jr. added 14 points and Troy Williams and Collin Hartman had 11 apiece for the Hoosiers.

VanVleet scored 19 points in the first

half to keep Wichita State close. The Shockers trailed by eight points in the first half and played from behind most of the game before going on a 15-3 run in the middle of the second half to take their biggest lead. Brown did much of the work, scoring off an inbound play, dunking and putting back Tekele Cotton's miss to make it 65-57.

No. 1 Wisconsin 86, No. 16 Coastal Carolina 72: At Omaha, Neb. Frank Kaminsky had 27 points and 12 rebounds for his 12th double-double of the season, and No. 1 seed Wisconsin got the win.

Sam Dekker had 20 points and Nigel Hayes added 15 against a Coastal Carolina team that gave a game effort but had no answer for the 7-foot Kaminsky or, for that matter, any of his hulking teammates.

No. 8 Oregon 79, No. 9 Oklahoma State 73: At Omaha, Neb. Joseph Young scored 27 points and

Elgin Cook added 18, leading Oregon to the win.

Dillon Brooks had 17 points for the Ducks (26-9), and Dana Altman got the win in his return to Omaha and the same building where he once coached Creighton.

Le'Bryan Nash had 18 points before fouling out in his final game for Oklahoma State (18-14). Anthony Hickey added 17 points, and Phil Forte and Tavarus Shine finished with 12 each.

No. 2 Kansas 75, No. 15 New Mexico St. 56: At Omaha, Neb., Frank Mason III scored 17 points to lead a balanced attack, and the Jayhawks gave the Big 12 its first win of the tournament after three losses on Thursday.

Perry Ellis added nine points for the Jayhawks (27-8).

DK Eldridge had 11 points and Remi Barry and Tshildzi Nephawa scored 10 each for the Aggies (23-11), who had swept the Western Athletic Conference regular-season and tournament titles.



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East Regional No. 2 UVA survives Belmont

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — It wasn't until 27 seconds remained in the game that Virginia coach Tony Bennett looked up at the scoreboard and breathed a sigh of relief.

The Cavaliers seem rather determined to use the NCAA tournament to put a tinge of gray in their sixth-year head coach's smooth black hair.

Malcolm Brogdon scored 22 points, Justin Anderson re-emerged as a scoring threat and second-seeded Virginia survived another opening-round scare, defeating 15th-seeded Belmont 79-67 on Friday in the round of 64.

Anderson, who is recovering from a broken left pinky, had 15 points on 4 of 6 shooting and Anthony Gill added 16 points for the Cavaliers (30-3), who recorded consecutive 30-win seasons for the first time in school history.

Like last year when Virginia avoided a historic upset and held on to beat 16th-seeded Coastal Carolina, the Cavaliers needed a late second-half push to set up a rematch with No. 7 seed Michigan State on Sunday in the East Region. The Spartans knocked Virginia out of the Sweet 16 in last year's tournament.

Belmont (22-11) clawed within two behind 25 points from first-team Ohio Valley Conference selection Craig Bradshaw, but the Cavaliers outscored the Bruins 17-7 over the final 4:37 of the game.

No. 7 Michigan State 70, No. 10 Georgia 63: At Charlotte, N.C., Denzel Valentine scored 16 points and went 6-for-6 at the free throw line in the final 30 seconds to help Michigan State hold off Georgia.

Travis Trice scored 15 points and Branden Dawson had a strong second half for the seventh-seeded Spartans (24-11).

No. 5 Northern Iowa 71, No. 12 Wyoming 54: At Seattle, Paul Jespersion led five Northern Iowa players in double figures with 16 points and Sean Tuttle added 14 and the fifth-seeded Panthers.

No. 4 Louisville 57, No. 13 California-Irvine 55: At Seattle, freshman Quentin Snider hit the winning free throws and Terry Rozier made the saving steal for fourth-seeded Louisville.

No. 3 Oklahoma 69, No. 14 Albany 60: At Columbus, Ohio, TaShawn Thomas had 18 points and Buddy Hield scored 15, carrying Oklahoma into the round of 32 after early exits the last two years.

The Sooners (23-10), who led wire to wire, advance to play Sunday against Dayton.

Peter Hooley had 15 points, Evan Singletary 13, Sam Rowley 12 and Ray Sanders 11 for No. 14-seeded Albany (24-9).

No. 11 Dayton 66, No. 6 Providence 53: At Columbus, Ohio, Dyshawn Pierre scored 20 points and Dayton rode a loud home-crowd advantage to another NCAA tournament victory.

The 11th-seeded Flyers (27-8) will face Oklahoma on Sunday night, with a chance to reach the round of 16 for the second straight season.

Cavaliers clinch playoff spot

The Associated Press

CLEVELAND — LeBron James scored 29 points — 13 in the fourth quarter — and the Cleveland Cavaliers edged the Indiana Pacers 95-92 Friday night for their 15th straight win at home.

As usual, James, who was playing despite a head cold, was at his best down the stretch. He scored 11 straight points in the fourth to give Cleveland a 93-92 lead.

With the win, the Cavs clinched a playoff spot — their first since 2010 before James left as a free agent for Miami.

After Smith's free throws, Indiana had one last chance, but C.J. Miles' desperation 3-pointer was way off and Cleveland held on to win a game that had a playoff vibe from the start.

"Any time you play Indiana it's like that," said James, who has faced the Pacers many times in the playoffs. "Every possession counts and that was one of those types of games."

Irving added 13 points for Cleveland and Kevin Love had 13 rebounds and scrapped underneath for a key rebound in the final minute. The Cavs are a league-best 26-6 since Jan. 15.

George Hill scored 24 points and Roy Hibbert had 20 for the Pacers, who dropped their fourth straight and damaged their playoff hopes.

Thunder 123, Hawks 115: Hours after Oklahoma City learned it might be without reigning MVP Kevin Durant for the rest of the season, Russell Westbrook had yet another triple-double

and scored 17 of his 36 points in the fourth quarter to help the Thunder defeat visiting Atlanta.

The update on Durant's right foot came during the same week the Thunder found out forward Serge Ibaka might also be out for the season with a knee injury. Big man Enes Kanter also missed Friday's game with a sprained left ankle.

Westbrook's 10 rebounds and 14 assists gave him his seventh triple-double since the All-Star break, his ninth of the season and the 17th of his career.

He also made all 17 of his free throws, the most without a miss by any player in the league this season. He has made 36 free throws the past two games. According to STATS, that's the most by any player in back-to-back games since Durant made 41 combined on Jan. 18 and Jan. 20, 2013.

Bulls 108, Raptors 92: Nikola Mirotic matched a career high with 29 points to propel host Chicago to a victory over Toronto, which was without All-Star guard Kyle Lowry.

Nets 129, Bucks 127 (3OT): Brook Lopez had 32 points and a season-high 18 rebounds, helping Brooklyn to a victory over Milwaukee in the second triple-overtime meeting between the teams this season.

Heat 108, Nuggets 91: Dwyane Wade scored 22 points, Goran Dragic added 18 and Miami clamped down in the fourth quarter to beat visiting Denver.

76ers 97, Knicks 81: Nerlens

Noel scored a career-high 23 points and grabbed 14 rebounds to lead host Philadelphia over New York in a matchup of the two worst teams in the Eastern Conference.

Magic 111, Trail Blazers 104: Elfrid Payton had 22 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists for his second straight triple-double, and Orlando snapped a six-game losing streak with a victory over visiting Portland.

Spurs 101, Celtics 89: Kawhi Leonard had 22 points and host San Antonio never trailed, holding off Boston after a late scare.

Grizzlies 112, Mavericks 101: Zach Randolph scored 21 points, Marc Gasol had 15 points and 10 rebounds, and visiting Memphis pulled away in the third quarter to defeat Dallas.

Kings 101, Hornets 91: Rudy Gay had 33 points and nine rebounds, leading host Sacramento past Charlotte for its second victory over the struggling Hornets in 10 days.

Warriors 112, Pelicans 96: Stephen Curry overcame a subpar shooting performance to score 16 points with 11 assists, Harrison Barnes added 22 points and Golden State topped visiting New Orleans.

Clippers 113, Wizards 99: Chris Paul had 30 points and 15 assists, and host Los Angeles ended Washington's five-game winning streak.

Perry nets winner for Ducks in OT

The Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Corey Perry scored the winner as the Anaheim Ducks defeated the Colorado Avalanche 3-2 in overtime on Friday night to sweep their three-game homestand.

Perry corralled the puck after Sami Vatanen knocked it out of the Ducks' zone and raced down the ice before sending it past Semyon Varlamov 1:25 into the extra period, securing another dramatic late-game victory.

The Ducks are now 29-1-7 in games decided by one goal this season.

Frederik Andersen stopped 38 shots for the Ducks, picking up his second win in four starts since suffering a neck injury in February.

Varlamov made 37 saves, as the Avalanche's streak of four consecutive road wins came to an end.

That success, combined with wins in six of its first seven games in March, had put the Avalanche back on the edge of playoff contention. But this loss leaves them six points back of a spot with only 11 games remaining, including six against teams currently in the playoff positions.

However, the Avalanche boosted those slim hopes with a pair of goals in the third period to claim one point.

Jarome Iginla beat Frederik Andersen over his left glove hand on a one-timer from Matt Duchene at 5:28 in the third period, notching his 24th goal and 50th point of the season to tie the game at 1-1.

Less than two minutes later, Ryan O'Reilly picked Vatanen's pocket on the power play and pulled away for a short-

handed goal, beating Andersen on his stick side for a brief 2-1 lead.

But on that same man advantage, Rickard Rakell responded with a wicked wrist shot that sailed past Varlamov to tie the game at 2-2 with 10:56 remaining in regulation.

Jiri Sekac opened the scoring by curling around the net and putting a low-angle shot over Varlamov's left shoulder 3:37 into the first period. Sekac, Tomas Fleischmann and Rakell, who recorded assists on the play, each made aggressive moves to retain possession during the nearly minute-long barrage in the Avalanche's end.

The Ducks improved to 32-9-5 against the Western Conference.

Lightning 3, Red Wings 1: Alex Killorn scored a tiebreaking goal midway through the third period, Ben Bishop made 30 saves and Tampa Bay beat visiting Detroit.

Tampa Bay also got goals from Anton Stralman and from Steven Stamkos, who got his 40th this season on late empty-netter. The second-place Lightning hold an eight-point advantage over the Red Wings in the Atlantic Division.

Devils 3, Sabres 1: Steve Bernier scored twice, including the 100th of his career, in leading New Jersey over host Buffalo.

Scott Gomez and Adam Henrique set up both goals in helping New Jersey improve to 3-0-1 in its past four. Jordin Tootoo also scored for the Devils (31-29-11), who inched up the Eastern Conference standings by moving into a tie for 11th with Philadelphia.

Kurt Busch wins pole in Fontana

The Associated Press

FONTANA, Calif. — Kurt Busch's comeback from his season-opening suspension is gathering speed.

Busch won the pole for Sunday's NASCAR race at Auto Club Speedway, turning a lap of 185.142 mph in his Stewart-Haas Racing Chevrolet to edge teammate Kevin Harvick.

Busch took another step forward Friday in his return from four months of off-track troubles involving his ex-girlfriend, who accused him of domestic assault. He wasn't charged, but missed the first three races of this season under suspension.

Busch was reflective after claiming the 17th pole of his NASCAR career and his first since May 2013.

Busch returned last week with a fifth-place finish at Phoenix even while he's still adjusting to NASCAR's new rules package. He then claimed the pole at Fontana for the track-record fourth time in his career, capitalizing on Stewart-Haas' impressive engineering start to the season.

Busch said he is having success in the face of potential distraction by "just putting the blinders on and focusing on the car. It's my love. It's my passion. It's what I do. I love to go out there and drive fast."

Harvick's Chevrolet has won the first two titles on the three-race West Coast swing, putting him in position for a clean sweep at Fontana. Only 19 drivers in NASCAR history have won three straight races.