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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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In Iraq, enmity despite common enemy

BY ROBERT H. REID

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A long, bloody history of conflict, double-crosses and American blood lies behind the U.S. military's refusal to cooperate with Iraq's Shiite militias — even if both sides now face a common enemy in the Islamic State group.

Gen. Lloyd Austin, head of the U.S. Central Command, bluntly laid out the reasons why the military was loathe to launch airstrikes to help the stalled Iraqi government offensive against Islamic State fighters in Tikrit until Iranian-backed Shiite militias pulled back from the front lines.

"Once those conditions were met, which included Shiite militias not being involved, then we were able to proceed," Austin told the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday. After "three tours in Iraq commanding (U.S.) troops who were brutalized by some of these Shiite militias, I will not, and I hope we never will, coordinate or cooperate with Shiite militias."

Until the U.S. launched airstrikes late Wednesday, critics had accused the Obama administration of sitting on the sidelines, allowing the Iranians and their Shiite militia clients to exploit the campaign against Tikrit to expand their influence in Iraq, where nearly 4,500 American servicemembers died.

Others, including former Iraq commander Gen. David Petraeus, had warned that as long as militias made up the bulk of the pro-government forces besieging Tikrit, a Sunni city, the U.S. ran the risk of being seen by Sunnis as the "Shiite air force."

Aside from the political risks, cooperation with the Shiite militias would be a bitter pill for Americans who fought many of those same militiamen only a few years ago. Some of those

militia leaders rose in stature in the Shiite-dominated Iraq that the U.S. left behind when the last American troops left in December 2011.

For Americans who never served in Iraq, the image of the war promoted in such Hollywood productions as "American Sniper" has focused on the fight against Sunni insurgents from al-Qaida in Iraq, the forerunner of the Islamic State group.

But much of the fighting was waged against Iranian-backed Shiite groups, some of which are now part of the "popular mobilization units." Since the Iraqi army collapsed last summer, the government has sent those militiamen to the front lines against the Islamic State group, not only in Tikrit but in the old battlefields of Diyala, Salaheddin and Babil provinces where they once fought the Americans.

Those Shiite groups include the "Peace Brigades," the re-branded Mahdi army of Muqtada al-Sadr, whose followers battled U.S. troops in Sadr City, Najaf, Basra and elsewhere, as well as two other groups — Kataib Hezbollah and Asaib Ahl al-Haq, or League of the Righteous, which were largely seen as proxies for Iran.

'Special groups'

During the war, Kataib Hezbollah and the League of the Righteous were often described by the U.S. military as the "special groups" — shadowy militants responsible for rocket attacks on the Green Zone, kidnappings and ambushes in mostly Shiite areas of Baghdad and elsewhere.

The special groups' signature weapon was the notorious EFP, or explosively formed penetrator, a lethal improvised explosive device that could fire an explosive charge through all but the most heavily armored vehi-

cles. In the last years of the war, EFPs were believed to have accounted for as many as 80 percent of U.S. casualties.

The EFPs were so well-made that U.S. intelligence was convinced they were manufactured in Iran.

League of the Righteous claimed more than 6,000 attacks against U.S. troops, including EFP and rocket attacks. After the U.S. routed al-Qaida in Iraq in 2008, the U.S. military identified League of the Righteous as the biggest single threat to American forces in the final three years of the war.

The special groups were also believed to have been responsible for the Jan. 20, 2007, raid on the Joint Security Station in Karbala, which left five American soldiers dead and three wounded. The raid was among the boldest and most sophisticated attack against American troops during the war.

It was carried out by up to a dozen Shiite militants dressed in American uniforms and carrying American weapons. They drove to the station in vehicles similar to those used by U.S. civilian convoys, bluffed their way through Iraqi checkpoints and stormed a building used by the Americans, killing one U.S. soldier and capturing four others before fleeing with their prisoners.

Three of the Americans were found shot to death near the compound. A fourth was found alive but died soon afterward of his wounds.

Hero status

Two months after the raid, American troops captured the group's leader, Qais al-Khazali. He was released in 2010 under an Iraqi-negotiated deal in exchange for a British computer contractor who had been kidnapped by Shiite militants.

Al-Khazali ended up rehabili-

tated and elevated to hero status by the government of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki, who needed political support from his fellow Shiites as the Americans were preparing to leave the country. Al-Khazali's followers are among Shiite militias now fighting the Islamic State group.

He wasn't the only special groups leader to escape punishment thanks to Iraq's murky sectarian politics. Ali Mussa Daquq, a Lebanese citizen who was sent by Hezbollah and the Iranians to train Shiite militias, was also captured by the U.S. in March 2007 and accused of a role in the Karbala raid.

With al-Khazali having escaped punishment, the U.S. was determined to see Daquq held accountable for the five American deaths in Karbala. As with al-Khazali, however, the Iraqi government didn't want to take the political risk of punishing a popular figure.

To add to the problem, Daquq became the center of an internal political battle in Washington. The Obama administration wanted to extradite him to the U.S. to stand trial. Republicans in Congress demanded that he be sent to the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay, but the White House wanted to close the Guantanamo prison and refused.

Instead, the administration decided to hand him over to the Iraqis and formally ask them for his extradition. The Iraqis refused the request and put him on trial, but the courts threw out the charges.

After months of high-level wrangling and U.S. pressure, in July 2012 — five months after the last American troops left Iraq — the Iraqi central criminal court ordered his release, signaling that as far as Baghdad was concerned, the case was closed. Daquq was free.

Yemen president blasts Iran

The Associated Press

SHARM EL-SHEIKH, Egypt — Yemen's embattled president on Saturday called Shiite rebels who forced him to flee the country "stooges of Iran," directly blaming the Islamic Republic for the chaos there and demanding airstrikes against rebel positions continue until they surrender.

With Egypt's president also calling for a regional Arab military force — and another Gulf diplomat separately warning Saudi-led airstrikes in Yemen could go on for months — the specter of a regional conflict pitting Arab nations against Shiite power Iran also has been raised.

The comments by Arab leaders including Yemeni President Abdel Rabbo Mansour Hadi, who fled his country only days earlier, came at an Arab summit largely focusing on the chaos there caused by the advance of the rebels, known as Houthis.

Other leaders, including the leaders of Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, obliquely referenced Iran earlier at the summit held in Egypt's Red Sea resort of Sharm el-Sheikh. They blamed the Persian country for meddling in the affairs of Arab nations, with Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sissi saying, without mentioning Iran by name, that it was "spreading its ailment in the body."

"This (Arab) nation, in its darkest hour, had never been faced a challenge to its existence and a threat to its identity like the one it's facing now," el-Sissi said. "This threatens our national security and [we] cannot ignore its consequences for the Arab identity."

Hadi directly challenged Iran in his remarks and called for his supporters to rise up in peaceful protest against the Houthis.

"I say to the puppets of Iran and its toys: ... You've destroyed Yemen," Hadi said.

Iran and the Houthis deny that Tehran arms the rebel movement, though the Islamic Republic has provided humanitarian and other aid.

Navy Week set for ND, MN

The Associated Press

FARGO, N.D. — Navy planners said Wednesday that landlocked North Dakota and Minnesota make an ideal site for its weeklong summer program because the majority of Navy enlistees are typically from the Midwest.

Navy Week festivities are scheduled for July 20-26 in Fargo and neighboring Moorhead, Minn. Coinciding with the Fargo AirSho, it will feature scheduled appearances by the Blue Angels flight demonstration team, the Leap Frogs parachute team, bomb disposal teams, exhibition trailers, admirals and other senior leaders, and one of the Navy bands.

Lt. Geordie F.O. Kelly, director of Navy Band Great Lakes, said it makes sense to bring the event to prime recruiting territory.

"I don't know if it's because they long for the sea, or dream of it, or have never seen it, or whatever," Kelly said of the Midwest connection.

The lead planner for the Fargo event, Lt. j.g. James Adams, said it's important to give people in the area a chance to meet and talk with Navy leaders and others. One of them scheduled to appear, Rear Adm. Stuart Munsch, is from Oakes, in southeastern North Dakota.

"We're putting our heads together to start coming up with ideas on the type of events we want to use," Adams said.

Mass Communication Specialist Andrew Jandik said planners also want to show there's more to the Navy than combat.

"A lot of people think that if they join, they're going into war. And breaking that stereotype is a big bonus of Navy Week," Jandik said.

DOD: 400 Syrians chosen to be trained

WASHINGTON — U.S. military and intelligence agencies are doing background checks on the first 400 Syrians to be trained to combat Islamic State forces in their country, with a target date set as early as September for them to join the war, the Pentagon said Friday.

About 1,800 other Syrians have been identified as candidates for the program, with background probes slated to start soon.

It was the first official word that the U.S.-led effort to equip and train thousands of Syrians to fight the Islamic State group has begun, four months after Congress approved spending \$500 million on the program. More than 350 U.S. troops have arrived in Turkey and other nearby countries in preparation for the training, the Pentagon said.

"If all goes well, we expect they'll be finished with training in late summer or early fall," Army Col. Steve Warren, a Pentagon spokesman, said of the first group.

From The Associated Press

Crashing drones spill secrets

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Crashing drones are spilling secrets about U.S. military operations.

A surveillance mission was exposed recently when a Predator drone crashed in northwest Syria while spying on the home turf of President Bashar Assad. U.S. officials believe the drone was shot down, but they haven't ruled out mechanical failure. Regardless, the wreckage offered the first hard evidence of a U.S. confrontation with Assad's forces.

The mishap in Syria follows a string of crashes in Yemen, another country where the U.S. military keeps virtually all details of its drone operations classified.

Yemeni tribesmen have reported three cases in the past 15 months in which U.S. drones have fallen from the sky, pulling back the curtain on likely surveillance targets. Air Force spokesmen said they could not confirm any crashes in Yemen, but Air Force records obtained by The Washington Post show the dates match up with official acknowledgments of acci-

dents that occurred in classified locations

Since January 2014, the Air Force has reported 14 crashes of Predator and Reaper drones that either destroyed the aircraft or inflicted more than \$2 million in damage. Three of the accidents took place in Afghanistan, but six happened elsewhere in classified or undisclosed sites, a sharp increase from prior years.

The far-flung nature of the accidents reinforces how U.S. drone operations have spread well beyond the established war zone in Afghanistan.

In November, a Reaper drone crashed in the Sahara while returning to a new U.S. base in Niger. At the start of last year, a Predator plunged into the Mediterranean Sea after conducting a secret mission over Libya, a rare tangible sign of U.S. surveillance operations there.

U.S. military drones are also based in Turkey, Italy, Ethiopia, Kuwait, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and Djibouti, a small country on the Horn of Africa. In addition, the CIA has its own drone bases in Saudi Arabia and Afghanistan.

Spartans back in Elite Eight

The Associated Press

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — All but counted out a little over a month ago, coach Tom Izzo and the Michigan State Spartans are still playing.

Next up, another Elite Eight.

Denzel Valentine scored 13 of his 18 points in the second half and Travis Trice scored six of his 21 points in the final two minutes of a 62-58 win over the Oklahoma Sooners in an NCAA tournament East Regional semifinal Friday night.

"I get to work another day. I can't tell you how excited that makes me," Izzo said. "I'm just tickled to death to still be playing."

The Spartans (26-11) have won 11 of 14 and are headed to their second consecutive regional final and fourth since 2009.

And they're going as a seventh-seeded team that knocked off the third-seeded Sooners (24-11), a week after knocking off No. 2 Virginia.

The Spartans are the lowest-seeded team still in the tournament, and advance to face fourth-seeded Louisville on Sunday.

Buddy Hield scored 21 points for Oklahoma, which failed in their bid to reach the regional final for the first time since the Blake Griffin-led Sooners in 2009.

"Their defense definitely bothered us in the long run," said Oklahoma forward TaShawn Thomas, who scored 16 points

and added seven rebounds. "They're tough. They got stops when they needed to and we didn't."

The game turned once Michigan State took its first lead, going up 44-42 on Branden Dawson's 8-foot turnaround jumper with 9:26 left. The teams traded the lead four times before the Spartans went ahead for good with 6:42 left, when Matt Costello put back his own miss with an emphatic dunk.

After Hield missed a three-point attempt at the other end, Valentine responded by hitting a pull-up three-pointer in transition to make it 51-47.

Trice called Valentine's shot a clutch basket that turned the momentum in the Spartans' favor.

"The stakes were high and if he misses that shot we might not be here right now," Trice said.

Valentine's second-half surge followed a cold first half, during which he missed six of eight attempts.

"The first half, I felt like that was my first time playing basketball," Valentine said. "But I just kind of snapped out of it. I was like, 'I'm in Sweet 16, and we've got a chance to go to the Final 4. I'm a junior, what the heck.' I just smacked the ground and I woke up I guess."

The Spartans rallied as well, particularly on defense.

After allowing the Sooners to hit eight of their first 11 shots and build an 18-8 lead, Michigan State's defense held Oklahoma to finish 20 of 55.

"I don't know if anything changed. They got more aggressive," Sooners coach Lon Kruger said.

Michigan State, which lost to eventual champion Connecticut in the regional final last year, has overcome the loss of three of its top four scorers. And the Spartans also showed they were capable of hitting clutch free throws — something they had struggled with all season.

After missing seven of their first 10, the Spartans were perfect on their final six free throws.

Trice hit two to put Michigan State up 62-58 with 13.2 seconds left. Hield missed a three-point attempt on what became the Sooners' final possession in a game that stretched into Saturday morning.

Tip-ins

Michigan State: The Spartans improved their NCAA tournament record to 62-27, and moved into seventh place on the victory list — one ahead of Syracuse. ... The Spartans were a No. 7 seed when they reached the Elite 8 in 2003.

Oklahoma: Kruger stayed true to form by starting the same five he's had all season. The Sooners are just one of six teams in the nation to start the same five this year. Kruger did the same last year. ... The Sooners bench, which had combined for 30 points in its last two games, managed just 3 points against the Spartans.

Blue Devils advance past Utes

The Associated Press

HOUSTON — Justise Winslow says coach Mike Krzyzewski never treated him and the other Duke freshmen like, well, freshmen.

These young Blue Devils certainly aren't playing like it either — and have Coach K one win away from another NCAA Final Four.

"He gave us his trust and just believed in us," said Winslow, one of the three freshman starters. "When you have that, you play like yourself."

Winslow, playing home in Houston the day after his 19th birthday, had 21 points and 10 rebounds for South Regional top seed Duke in a 63-57 Sweet 16 victory over revived Utah on Friday night.

"He played phenomenal. He was outstanding. He was the best player on the floor," said Duke big man Jahliil Okafor. "Maybe because he's in Houston or maybe because he's 19 now. It was fun to watch."

Freshman guard Tyus Jones had 15 points while Okafor had six points and eight rebounds.

Duke (32-4) will play in its 20th regional final, the 14th under Coach K for the most by any active coach. The last Final Four appearance was in 2010, when the Blue Devils also went through Houston on way to their fourth national title.

"This has been one of my favorite groups. They've been easy to coach and they really get along. There's only a good attitude, only a good attitude and a willingness to learn," Krzyzewski said. "Sometimes freshmen don't learn that until they're older. But these guys knew it from the beginning. That's why they've had a special year."

Brandon Taylor had 15 points for the Utes (26-9), the No. 5 seed with an at-large berth out of the Pac-12.

Utah and its Coach K, Larry Krystkowiak, got to the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2005, and only three years after winning six games in Krystkowiak's first season.

Leading scorer Delon Wright was the Utes' only senior starter, and Dallin Bachynski the only other graduating player who played regularly.

Asked where he goes from now, Krystkowiak said it was time to decompress a bit.

"Just enjoyed the experience with these kids, and am going to soak this up and reflect," he said.

Wright, who got his third foul on a questionable call with about 5 minutes left in the first half, finished with 10 points on 4 of 13 shooting. Dallin Bachynski added 11 points for the Utes, and 7-foot freshman Jakob Poeltl had 10 points and eight rebounds.

Tip-ins

Utah: The Utes missed their first nine shots before Poeltl scored inside with 15:19 left in the first half. And they trailed only 3-2, before Bachynski scored six points in a row for an 8-5 lead.

Duke: Krzyzewski has a record 85 NCAA Tournament wins, 20 more than Dean Smith and Roy Williams.

Late surge lifts Louisville over NC State

The Associated Press

SYRACUSE, N.Y. — Montrezl Harrell is not ready for the end of his college career at Louisville just yet. Anton Gill helped make sure it continues at least one more game.

Harrell scored 24 points, Gill keyed a late-game surge with seven points off the bench, and Louisville beat North Carolina State 75-65 on Friday night in the East Regional semifinals of the NCAA tournament.

"We don't want to go home," said Harrell, a junior who plans to enter the NBA Draft. "We took our bumps and bruises throughout the season, but we came together at the right time. Everything just gelled at the right time."

Louisville (27-8), the fourth seed in the East and seeking to make its third Final Four in four years, will play seventh-seeded Michigan State in the East final on Sunday. The Spartans beat third-seeded Oklahoma 62-58.

After toppling top-seeded Villanova, North Carolina State (22-14), the eighth seed, saw its postseason run end against a team that refused to quit.

"Late in the game they made some plays there that were the difference," N.C. state coach Mark Gottfried said. "He (Gill) made a couple of tough shots there. I thought it was that little stretch that gave them the cushion, and it was

the difference in the game."

Louisville wasn't given much chance of playing in late March after it lost two of three entering the NCAA Tournament, but gritty wins over UC Irvine and Northern Iowa had the Cardinals brimming with confidence.

Guard Terry Rozier had 17 points and a career-high 14 rebounds and freshman guard Quentin Snider added 14 points for the Cardinals.

Louisville coach Rick Pitino has a 12-1 record in Sweet 16 games, 6-1 with the Cardinals.

Before the game, Pitino promised a surprise and Gill delivered. Gill, who averaged 9.5 minutes and 2.4 points during the season, hit a runner and a 3 from the right corner in a span of a minute as Louisville regained the lead late in a seesaw game. He followed with a tough baseline drive through traffic for a 62-57 lead with 3:33 left.

"Anton and I had an interesting conversation the other day," Pitino said. "I said, 'You're going to get your opportunity, son.' He went in and basically won the game for us."

And he did it against his hometown team.

"It's kind of weird. I didn't really realize we were playing N.C. State," Gill said. "We've been so focused on what we need to do as a team. It's funny how things work."

After Gill's drive, Lacey missed and

Rozier stormed back on a fast break, his off-balance shot caroming in off the back of the iron as Turner committed a foul. Rozier calmly made the free throw to complete a three-point play for a 65-57 lead with 3:05 left.

Harrell's driving layup with 1:41 to go boosted the lead to 67-57 and that effectively put an end to the Wolfpack's postseason run.

"That stretch right there, they had some separation right at that point of the game," Gottfried said. "That's what the game's about."

Tip-ins

N.C. State: The Wolfpack were wildly inconsistent all season. They handed Duke its first loss of the season, but also lost by double digits to Clemson. They went from not winning consecutive games for more than two months — State went 6-10 from mid-December to mid-February — to closing the season with five wins in six games, something they hadn't done in 27 years.

Louisville: The Cardinals have won seven of their last eight regional semifinal games. ... Pitino moved to 53-17 in the tournament, tying Syracuse's Jim Boeheim among active coaches in tournament wins. ... It was the 21st Sweet 16 appearance and a school-record fourth straight for Louisville, which has made two of the past three Final Fours, winning the title in 2013.



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Karnowski shines as Zags get past UCLA

The Associated Press

HOUSTON — Growing up in Poland, Przemek Karnowski had to stay up until 2 or 3 a.m. to watch the NCAA tournament.

Gonzaga's big man got to star in the show in prime time on Friday night, scoring 18 points with nine rebounds to lead the second-seeded Bulldogs to a 74-62 win over No. 11 seed UCLA in the Houston Regional semifinals.

The victory puts Gonzaga (35-2) in the Elite Eight for the second time, its first regional final since 1999. The Bulldogs will play top-seeded Duke on Sunday.

UCLA (22-14) opened the second half with a 6-0 run to get within 35-34. Gonzaga got going after that, scoring the next 12 points, thanks to the powerful inside game of the 7-foot-1, 288-pound Karnowski to make it 47-34.

"For me it was always a dream to be here and to play deep into the NCAA tournament," Karnowski said. "And right now I'm here and I'm trying to enjoy every second of it."

Karnowski helped the Bulldogs grab six more offensive rebounds than UCLA, which Bruins coach Steve Alford believes was the key to the game.

"We didn't rebound the basketball," Alford said. "They got too many second shots."

Gonzaga's Kyle Wiltjer raved about Karnowski's work.

"He was a beast down there, just gobbling up offensive boards," Wiltjer said. "It's so easy for us, especially when we're on the perimeter, to just throw it down to him and he gets a bucket."

The Bruins, who lost in the Sweet 16 for the second straight year, were done in by a tough shooting night that included long stretches without scoring. They were led by Norman Powell's 16 points.

They quieted doubters who questioned whether they should be in the tournament by winning their first two games, but couldn't stay with the Bulldogs on a night when their shots weren't falling. Powell made just 8 of 19 shots and Bryce Alford was 3 of 11.

It's Gonzaga's second win over UCLA this season after also beating the Bruins in December. Gonzaga's only loss to UCLA in the four-game history of the series came in a 73-71 defeat in the regional semifinal in 2006.

It will be the first trip to the round of eight for Gonzaga coach Mark Few, who took over the season after they last made it.

"The one accomplishment that we haven't done is reach the Final Four and we finally have an opportunity to do that," Few said.

With both teams struggling to shoot, many questions were asked about whether the venue caused problems. The games are being played in NRG Stadium, which is home to the Houston Texans, and the setup, with no walls behind either basket, challenges players' depth perception.

Entering Friday's game, teams have shot a combined 39.8 percent in nine NCAA tournament games at NRG. UCLA shot 38.8 percent on Friday and Gonzaga shot 40.3 percent.

But no one on either team would use that as an excuse.

"We just missed shots," Wiltjer said. "You either make them or you don't. We don't really blame it on the arena or anything like that."

Gonzaga's Domantas Sabonis scored 12 points before fouling out late.

Hawks clinch top seed in East

The Associated Press

ATLANTA — After clinching the top seed in the Eastern Conference playoffs for only the second time in their Atlanta franchise history, the Hawks were left to contemplate the remainder of the regular season.

It's a new dilemma for a Hawks team that barely made the playoffs as the No. 8 seed last year.

DeMarre Carroll scored 24 points and the Hawks never trailed in beating the Miami Heat 99-86 on Friday night.

Minutes later, the race for the No. 1 spot in the Eastern Conference ended when Brooklyn beat Cleveland 106-98, leaving home-court advantage in the conference playoffs with Atlanta.

"The hard work paid off for this team," said point guard Dennis Schroeder, whose double-double in a fill-in start for injured Jeff Teague was the latest example of the depth which lifted the Hawks to the top of the conference.

Schroeder had 12 points and 11 assists, Paul Millsap had 21 points and Al Horford had 15 for Atlanta, which has 11 games remaining in the regular season.

Coach Mike Budenholzer said the goal will be "make sure we're in the best place we can be going into the playoffs."

The big question will be how to find the right combination of rest and keeping the rotations sharp.

"It's a great debate," Budenholzer said. "I think it's a credit to our players and all the good work they've done all year. We're obviously proud of what they've done. ... I'm very happy for them, happy for us, happy for our organization and our fans."

Miami, seventh in the East, had won four of six but fell behind early with cold shooting against the Hawks. Dwyane Wade had 13 points after missing one game with a swollen left knee.

Luol Deng led Miami with 17 points and 10 rebounds.

After Schroeder opened the game with a driving basket, Carroll's three-pointer and layup gave the Hawks a 7-0 lead. The Hawks increased the lead to double fig-

ures for the first time at 19-9 on two free throws by Carroll, who had 19 points in the first half.

Carroll finished two points shy of his career high.

Atlanta stretched the lead to 26 points at 81-55 in the third quarter.

Teague missed the game with a left ankle sprain he suffered in Wednesday night's win over the Magic. "I don't think it's too severe," Budenholzer said.

Warriors 107, Grizzlies 84: Stephen Curry had 38 points and 10 assists and visiting Golden State won its 60th game, matching a franchise record.

Klay Thompson finished with 28 points and Draymond Green added 10 as the Warriors (60-13) won their eighth straight, solidifying their hold on the top spot in the Western Conference.

Mike Conley and Jeff Green led Memphis with 16 points each, while Marc Gasol scored 13 points. Zach Randolph finished with 10 points.

Nets 106, Cavaliers 98: Joe Johnson and Brook Lopez each scored 20 points, and host Brooklyn snapped Cleveland's four-game winning streak.

Bojan Bogdanovic added 18 points for the Nets, who held LeBron James to two baskets in the second half and won for the sixth time in eight games as they chase a playoff berth. They came in tied for ninth in the East, a half-game behind Boston for the final spot.

James finished with 24 points and nine assists for Cleveland, while Kyrie Irving led the Cavaliers with 26 points, and Kevin Love had 18 points and seven rebounds.

Raptors 94, Lakers 83: Host Toronto clinched its second straight Atlantic Division title, beating Los Angeles behind 18 points from Lou Williams and 19 from Jonas Valanciunas.

James Johnson had 17 points, Amir Johnson 11 and Terrence Ross 10 as the Raptors snapped a two-game skid and beat the Lakers for the first time since Dec. 8, 2013. DeMar DeRozan scored six points, making just one of his 10 field-goal attempts and missing a dunk in the fourth quarter, but he had 10 rebounds and seven assists, both team highs.

Jeremy Lin scored 18 points and Jordan Clarkson had 14 for the Lakers, who lost for the 11th time in 14 games.

Pistons 111, Magic 97: Reggie Jackson scored 26 points, and had 11 rebounds and 10 assists to lift Detroit over host Orlando.

It was the second triple-double for Jackson since he joined the Pistons in a mid-season trade. Tayshaun Prince scored 23 points and Andre Drummond had 16 points and nine rebounds as Detroit won its fourth in a row.

Pelicans 102, Kings 88: Tyreke Evans had 25 points and 10 assists, and New Orleans snapped a four-game losing streak with a victory over visiting Sacramento.

Anthony Davis had 24 points, nine rebounds and six blocks for New Orleans, which has 10 games left to make up three on Oklahoma City for the final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Wizards 110, Hornets 107 (2OT): John Wall scored seven of his game-high 32 points in the second overtime, and host Washington held off Charlotte.

Rockets 120, Timberwolves 110: James Harden had 33 points and eight assists as host Houston clinched a playoff spot with a victory over short-handed Minnesota.

Celtics 96, Knicks 92: Isaiah Thomas scored 18 points and Jae Crowder had 17 points and nine rebounds as visiting Boston held off a late rally by New York.

Spurs 94, Mavericks 76: Boris Diaw scored 19 points, helping host San Antonio pull away from Dallas.

Nuggets 107, Jazz 91: Ty Lawson and Jameer Nelson each scored 18 points as Denver beat visiting Utah, handing the Jazz their fourth straight loss.

Trail Blazers 87, Suns 81: LaMarcus Aldridge scored 27 points and Portland overcame one of its worst shooting performances of the season, rallying from an eight-point deficit in the fourth quarter to beat host Phoenix.

Clippers 119, 76ers 98: Chris Paul scored 25 points, DeAndre Jordan had 17 points and 20 rebounds, and visiting Los Angeles cruised past Philadelphia.

Three-goal third lifts Wild past Flames

The Associated Press

ST. PAUL, Minn. — The Minnesota Wild poured it on in the third period against the Calgary Flames.

Thomas Vanek and Mikko Koivu scored early in a three-goal third period and the Wild pulled away to beat the Flames 4-2 on Friday night.

Matt Dumba and Zach Parise also scored for Minnesota, which has won four in a row and six of seven. The Wild moved within one point of Chicago for third place in the Central Division and are three points ahead of Winnipeg for the top wild-card spot. The Blackhawks, who lost 5-2 to Columbus, have a game in hand.

"We've got a really hard schedule ahead of us and I know we play them one more time, but for us we're worried about ourselves," Parise said. "We can't control the other stuff but we can control how we're playing and getting better."

Devan Dubnyk stopped 23 shots. He made his 33rd consecutive start since joining Minnesota and 34th overall, tying Antti Niemi for the most consecutive starts in the NHL since 2010-11.

Early in the third period, Calgary center

Joe Colborne laid out Minnesota's Justin Fontaine. The Minnesota bench erupted, looking for a penalty that never came.

That only lit a fire under the league's hottest team.

Since Jan. 15, Minnesota is 25-6-2 and leads the league with a plus-44 goal differential in that span. The New York Rangers are second at plus-29.

With the game tied at 1 in the third period, Fontaine circled behind the Calgary net and lost the puck briefly. He quickly gathered it in the left circle and backhanded a pass across to Vanek alone at the edge of the crease. His second whack knocked the puck in at 3:36 for his seventh goal in 10 games.

Less than 4 minutes later, Koivu tipped a Stewart centering pass into the Calgary net.

Parise scored unassisted on a breakaway nearly 5 minutes later for his 30th goal of the season to make it 4-1. Granlund scored on a tip with 4:43 to play for the Flames.

Blue Jackets 5, Blackhawks 2: Cam Atkinson scored twice in Columbus' four-goal first period and added an empty-net goal in the final minute for his second career hat trick to help the Blue Jackets win

their fifth straight game, a win over the Chicago Blackhawks.

Ryan Johansen and Kevin Connauton also connected for Columbus. Twelfth in the Eastern Conference, the Blue Jackets set a team record with their seventh consecutive road victory and have won eight of nine overall.

Columbus' Sergei Bobrovsky made 31 saves.

Chicago goalie Corey Crawford was pulled with 3:14 left in the first period after allowing four goals on 13 shots. Scott Darling finished, and stopped all 13 shots he faced.

Oilers 4, Stars 0: Richard Bachman made 29 saves for his second NHL shutout and Edmonton beat visiting Dallas.

Jordan Eberle, Derek Roy, Benoit Pouliot and Andrew Miller scored to help the Oilers win their second straight game.

Kari Lehtonen made 24 saves for the Stars. They had won four in a row.

Dallas remained eight points behind Winnipeg for the final wild-card spot in the Western Conference, with just seven games left.