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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Iraqi forces reach downtown Tikrit

The Associated Press

TIKRIT, Iraq — Iraqi forces battled Islamic State militants holed up in downtown Tikrit on Tuesday as the country's prime minister announced security forces had reached the city's center.

In a statement, Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi said security forces already have retaken neighborhoods on the southern and western edges of Saddam Hussein's hometown and are moving to control the entire city. But Abdul-Wahab al-Saadi, the commander of the operation in Salahuddin province, said his forces fighting in from the west were still 325 yards from the center of Tikrit.

Street-to-street fighting raged into Tuesday afternoon, and estimates on how much of this strategic city Iraqi forces held

widely differed. Iraqi army Lt. Gen. Talib Shaghatai said at least 75 percent of the city had been recaptured. Ammar Hikmat, deputy governor of Salahuddin province, said more than 40 percent of Tikrit was under Iraqi control.

"Our security forces are now pushing forward toward the presidential complex and have already entered parts of it," Hikmat said. "I think the whole city will be retaken within the coming 24 hours."

An Associated Press reporter embedded with Iraqi security forces saw soldiers surround the iconic presidential palace in Tikrit as well as the provincial government headquarters there.

The Islamic State group seized the Sunni city last summer during its lightning advance across

northern and western Iraq. The battle for Tikrit is seen as a key step toward eventually driving the extremists from Iraq's second-largest city, Mosul, which is further north.

Interior Ministry spokesman Brig. Gen. Saad Maan Ibrahim said at least 40 militants were killed during the Tikrit offensive Tuesday as Iraqi forces dismantled 300 roadside bombs. He said that the federal police, backed by allied militias, were able to clear the government compound, the Tikrit provincial council headquarters, its security headquarters and the presidential palace.

The leader of Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units, a collaborative force made up mostly of Shiite militias, also said Tuesday his fighters had rejoined the Tikrit operation, less than

a week after announcing a boycott over U.S. involvement.

Abu Mahdi al-Mohandis told the AP that his fighters participated in the southern offensive Tuesday and would be joining the offensive on the northern and western fronts shortly.

Retaking Tikrit would be the biggest win so far for Baghdad's Shiite-led government. The city lies on the road connecting the capital to Mosul. Retaking it will give Iraqi forces a major supply link for any future operation to retake Mosul.

U.S. military officials have said a coordinated military mission to retake Mosul likely will begin in April or May and involve up to 25,000 Iraqi troops. But the Americans have cautioned that if the Iraqis are not ready, the offensive could be delayed.

Lawsuit again cites AF songbook with obscene lyrics

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Sexual assault victim advocates on Tuesday again pointed to an unofficial Air Force songbook with derogatory lyrics about women and gay airmen as a reason for filing a new lawsuit against the Defense Department.

The 130-page book was originally made public by an assault victim in 2012 and is stamped with the playing-cards logo of the 77th Fighter Squadron, which is known as the Gamblers and is based at Shaw Air Force Base in South Carolina. Despite an Air Force crackdown, advocates claimed too little was done and such songbooks are still being used by officers and commanders.

The lawsuit by sexual assault

victims was filed in a Virginia federal court and calls for the DOD to stop using convening authorities to judge whether such cases go to court-martial. As the military struggles with an epidemic of sex assaults, the use of such authorities has brought widespread scrutiny from the public and some on Capitol Hill who say the practice is biased toward perpetrators.

The songbook is part of a continuing culture in the Air Force and military that glorifies sexual violence, said retired Air Force Col. Don Christensen, president of Protect Our Defenders, an advocacy group for military sex assault victims.

"This is something that is used by Air Force officers today," Christensen said. "These are the commanders

who sing songs about raping women as fun."

The book is professionally printed and bound to mimic an official Air Force publication. The bottom of its pages are labeled "For Unofficial Use Only."

It includes about 70 pornographic songs — many with obscene titles — as well as some drinking toasts. Titles include "Pubic Hair," "The Kotex Song," "Will You Suck Me Tomorrow," "The Hair on Her Diki-Di-Doo," and "Bestiality."

Air Force spokeswoman Capt. Brooke Brzozowska said Tuesday that the service is looking into the issue but could not immediately comment on the lawsuit.

Military cadences and songs are a long-established part of its culture and tradition, though

such sexist and obscene imagery is not publicly endorsed by the services.

The book caused public outrage when it was released amid a growing debate over sex assault and culture within the service. In 2012, the Air Force began what it calls health and welfare inspections to identify toxic work environments and make reforms to ensure all airmen feel comfortable and respected in their units, Brzozowska said.

The unit songbook was originally brought to the Air Force's attention by former Tech. Sgt. Jennifer Smith, who again appeared with other victims and advocates during a lawsuit press conference in Washington on Tuesday morning.

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Comfort's hospital commander relieved 2 days before deployment

The (Norfolk, Va.) Virginian-Pilot

NORFOLK, Va. — Two days before the hospital ship Comfort deploys on a humanitarian operation to South and Central America, the commanding officer of the ship's medical facility was relieved of her duties.

Capt. Rachel Haltner was set to deploy with the Comfort on Wednesday to 11 countries over five months on the biannual mission known as Continuing Promise.

But Rear Adm. Thomas Shannon, the commander of Military Sealift Command, relieved her on Monday, citing a loss of confidence in her ability to command.

The Navy said Capt. Christine Sears, fleet surgeon for the U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command/U.S. 4th Fleet, will assume permanent command of the medical training facility.

Until Sears is in place, Haltner's second-in-command, medical training facility executive officer Capt. Miguel Cubano, is serving as acting commander, a Navy news release said.

The Navy did not detail why Haltner was relieved. The news release said a command climate investigation is being conducted.

Haltner, who assumed command of the ship hospital on Aug. 27, 2013, has been tem-

porarily reassigned to Portsmouth Naval Medical Center.

This is the second time in two years Shannon has relieved the Comfort's hospital commander. Haltner took command after Shannon stripped her predecessor, longtime Navy physician Capt. Kevin Knoop, of his duties in 2013.

That decision was later placed in doubt when a board of inquiry unanimously endorsed Knoop's leadership and work.

At the time, Knoop was preparing the ship for Continuing Promise 2013. That mission was canceled when across-the-board, automatic budget cuts known as sequestration went into effect.

Obama backs overhaul of retirement benefits

By TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama will back sweeping overhauls to the military retirement and health care systems as a way to ensure the costly benefits survive into the future.

Obama said Monday he will provide Congress a list of proposals by the end of April that will be based on the recommendations of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, a panel created by lawmakers to find solutions to ballooning personnel expenses.

The panel has advised the military to eliminate its 20-year pensions in favor of a 401(k)-style retirement system and replace Tricare health coverage with a wide variety of private insurance plans. Those and a list of 15 changes to military compensation — including a consolidation of commissaries and exchanges — could save almost \$5 billion next year and up to \$10.4 billion per year by 2020, the panel claims.

Obama wrote that he will complete the legislative proposals and submit them to Congress by April 30, when he will request they be passed without delay.

During a troop talk about building "the force of the future," Secretary of Defense Ash Carter said the Pentagon is exploring different retirement system options.

"I'm looking very hard right now at blended retirement plans that would be similar to the 401(k) mechanism that is widespread in civil society," he told soldiers at Fort Drum, N.Y., on Monday.

Carter noted that about 80 percent of those who serve don't receive any retirement pay because they leave the military before completing 20 years of service. The Pentagon chief sees that as problematic for recruitment and retention.

China's sea moves cause some concern

The Associated Press

CANBERRA, Australia — China is "creating a great wall of sand" through land reclamation in the South China Sea, causing serious concerns about its territorial intentions, the commander of the U.S. Pacific Fleet said Tuesday.

Adm. Harry Harris Jr. told a naval conference in Australia that competing territorial claims by several nations in the South China Sea are "increasing regional tensions and the potential for miscalculation."

"But what's really drawing a lot of concern in the here and now is the unprecedented land reclamation currently being conducted by China," he said.

"China is building artificial land by pumping sand on to live coral reefs — some of them submerged — and paving over them with concrete. China has now created over 4 square kilometers (1.5 square miles) of artificial landmass," he said.

Harris said the region is known for its beautiful natural islands, but "in sharp contrast, China is creating a great wall of

sand with dredges and bulldozers over the course of months."

China claims virtually all of the South China Sea. The Philippines and other countries which have territorial disputes with China in the busy sea have been particularly concerned by the land reclamation projects, which have turned a number of previously submerged reefs in the Spratlys archipelago into artificial islands with buildings, runways and wharves. The islands could be used for military and other facilities to bolster China's territorial claims.

Questions linger over shooting at NSA gates

The Associated Press

FORT MEADE, Md. — The warnings are strong and security is always tight, but most drivers are versed in the daily routine as thousands of employees and contractors stream through the closely guarded entrance to the National Security Agency.

The ordinary start to the workweek came to a violent halt

Monday, though, when two men dressed as women and driving in a stolen, dark-colored SUV ignored officers' orders at the gate to the spy agency headquarters at Fort Meade, Md. Police fired on the SUV, which then rammed into a police vehicle. One suspect was killed. The second suspect was injured, as was a police officer.

Whether the pair wanted to breach the perimeter or the driver was desperate and confused in a security-sensitive area added to the mystery.

Authorities said the cross-dressing men stole the SUV Monday morning from a hotel in Jessup, Md., and ended up about 7 miles away at the NSA gate at Fort Meade.

Teams on the clock as MLB head toward Opening Day

The Associated Press

Even before Max Scherzer, Bryce Harper and the rest of the ramped-up Washington Nationals hit the field for their first full-squad workout at spring training, they got the message.

There it was, printed across the top of a practice schedule posted in the clubhouse at Space Coast Stadium. Simple and direct, from manager Matt Williams.

"The road to the World Series begins today."

A challenge? A prediction? A statement?

Or, perhaps, a rally cry from Wrigley Field to Fenway Park. Because as Major League Baseball launches speed-up rules this year to cut the length of games, a lot of teams are on the clock.

Throw in the return of Alex Rodriguez from a drug suspension, the possible reinstatement of Pete Rose — imagine the roar he'd get at the All-Star Game in Cincinnati — and fresh ideas pitched by new Commissioner Rob Manfred, and it's a full plate going into Opening Day.

"There are so many plotlines unfolding, especially at the start of the year. It's like a very meaty novel — people want to see how it's going to turn out," Toronto Blue Jays sage R.A. Dickey said.

Chicago Cubs newcomer Jon Lester will throw the first pitch of the season, a Sunday night special on April 5 against St. Louis.

Hope springs eternal all over, and now there's a special kind of Chicago Hope. Credit that to a key free agent — wily, ol' manager Joe Maddon.

The Cubs haven't won the crown since

1908, before Wrigley was built. As the fabled ballpark gets a renovation that includes a giant, bright video board, fans are thrilled their franchise is being refurbished, too.

"I always feel good vibes in baseball," Maddon said.

The feeling is mutual across the big leagues. From Cuba to Canada, from the Bay Area to the snow-besieged Northeast, great expectations abound.

Pablo Sandoval, Hanley Ramirez and the remade Boston Red Sox; Nelson Cruz with the run-starved Seattle Mariners; Jimmy Rollins and the just-keep-missing Los Angeles Dodgers.

Hey, if Kansas City can come so close in the World Series — should Alex Gordon have tried to score in Game 7? — and Pittsburgh can blossom into a perennial playoff contender, then any club truly can reverse its fortunes.

"You look at what the Royals and Pirates have done," Yankees veteran Carlos Beltran said. "The success they've had, other teams want to emulate that. They inspired a lot of people to think, 'This could be us.' The Cubs, the Mets, the White Sox, more. Everybody has a chance."

No wonder Harper, after hearing his Nats had added Scherzer to their robust rotation, said he started laughing and thought: "Where's my ring?"

Toss the Angels, the Cardinals, the Padres, the Indians, the Tigers and champion Giants and a few more into the mix, along with Rusney Castillo and plenty of Cuban prospects.

"You have more young talent now, elite talent. More than I've ever seen from the mound," Dickey said. "That's why so

many teams are hopeful, because youth is hopeful."

So start with this: With Derek Jeter gone, who will reign as the face of the majors? Could be Andrew McCutchen, despite trimming his trademark dreadlocks. Or \$325 million man Giancarlo Stanton or unanimous MVP Mike Trout or King Felix or ace Clayton Kershaw, provided he can overcome his October struggles.

Maybe the main man on Madison Avenue will be the MadBum himself, Madison Bumgarner. That is, if his long left arm holds up after he threw 270 innings while becoming the World Series MVP and leading San Francisco to its third title in five years.

The Giants get a boost with the return of injured pitcher Matt Cain. That's a common theme, guys named Matt coming back from health woes — Harvey, Wieters, Shoemaker. Plus, Prince Fielder, Jose Fernandez and Manny Machado are on the mend.

Several stars weren't so lucky in spring training. Pitchers Yu Darvish, Zack Wheeler, Marcus Stroman and Tim Collins already are lost for the season, Cliff Lee and Chris Sale are ailing, and Kershaw is OK after being hit in the face by a line drive.

Giants sparkplug Hunter Pence is out for a while, his forearm broken by an errant pitch. Blue Jays outfielder Kevin Pillar missed 10 days and was hurt in a much different fashion — he strained his side when he sneezed.

"I was very upset that it got out and it became as big of a story as it was," Pillar said.

Kaminsky, Okafor lead All-America

The Associated Press

Frank Kaminsky and Jahlil Okafor are as different as stories can be in college basketball. The two, however, have a lot in common — both are in the Final Four and both were the top selections on The Associated Press' 2014-15 All-America team.

Kaminsky, the 7-foot senior from Wisconsin, was a unanimous choice Monday. Okafor, the 6-11 freshman from Duke, received all but one first-team vote.

Notre Dame senior Jerian Grant, Kentucky junior Willie Cauley-Stein and Ohio State freshman D'Angelo Russell rounded out the first team.

Kaminsky, projected as a top pick in the NBA Draft, led the Badgers to their second straight Final Four berth, averaging 18.2 points and 8.0 rebounds while shooting 55.3 percent from the field, including 39.5 percent from three-point range.

Kaminsky is Wisconsin's second All-America, joining Tucker in 2007. He is the second unanimous pick in as many years following Doug McDermott of Creighton.

Okafor is Duke's 16th first-team All-America and is the Blue Devils' second freshman in as many years, with Jabari Parker being chosen last season.

Okafor, who received 64 first-team votes, averaged 17.7 points and 9.0 rebounds while shooting 66.9 percent, second in the nation.

At Notre Dame, Grant's career was in jeopardy last season when he was suspended for the second semester for what he called an academic mistake. The son of former NBA player Harvey Grant returned for his senior season and averaged 16.8 points and 6.6 assists while playing 36.6 minutes per game.

Grant, who received 53 first-team votes and is Notre Dame's first All-America since Troy Murphy repeated in 2001, said receiving an honor like this makes his decision to return that much sweeter.

Cauley-Stein and his teammates are chasing history with an undefeated season just two wins away. The 7-footer is the first first-team All-America to average less than 10 points per game. He averaged 9.3 points while grabbing 6.4 rebounds and shooting 58.8 percent.

Russell is another freshman who isn't expected to be back for a second season. He averaged 19.3 points, 5.6 rebounds and 5.1 assists and received 51 first-team votes. Russell is the 15th All-American from Ohio State and the first since Jared Sullinger repeated in 2012.

Utah senior Delon Wright led the second team and was joined by Kentucky freshman Karl-Anthony Towns, Northern Iowa senior Seth Tuttle, Arkansas sophomore Bobby Portis and Virginia junior Malcolm Brogdon.

The third team was Gonzaga teammates Kyle Wiltjer and Kevin Pangos, Oklahoma junior Buddy Hield, Syracuse senior Rakeem Christmas and Iowa State junior Georges Niang.

Union irked as Cubs demote Bryant

The Associated Press

MESA, Ariz. — Third baseman Kris Bryant was reassigned by the Chicago Cubs to their minor league camp on Monday despite an outstanding spring training at the plate, triggering a threat of litigation from the players' association.

Bryant hit .425 in the exhibition season with nine homers and 15 RBIs in 40 at-bats. If the 23-year-old spends 12 or more days in the minor leagues, Chicago would delay him from becoming eligible for free agency by one year, until after the 2021 season, according to baseball's collective bargaining agreement.

"Today is a bad day for baseball," the Major League Baseball Players Association said in a statement. "I think we all know that even if Kris Bryant were a combination of the greatest players to

play our game, and perhaps he will be before it's all said and done, the Cubs still would have made the decision they made today. This decision, and other similar decisions made by clubs will be addressed in litigation, bargaining or both."

Major League Baseball defended the Cubs' decision.

"In accordance with long established practice under the Basic Agreement, a club has an unfettered right to determine which players are part of its Opening-Day roster," MLB said in a statement. "This issue was discussed extensively in bargaining in 2011, and the principle was not changed. We do not believe that it is appropriate for the players' association to make the determination that Kris Bryant should be on the Cubs' 25-man roster while another player, who, unlike Bryant, is a member of its bargaining unit, should be cut or sent to the minor leagues."

Bryant, who is not on the 40-man roster, was slowed defensively in the middle of camp by right shoulder soreness.

"It's always difficult to send young players down because it is news they don't want to hear," Cubs President of Baseball Operations Theo Epstein said. Bryant was not available to discuss the move. His agent, Scott Boras, called it "Ersatz Baseball."

"MLB is not the MLB without the best players," Boras said in a text message to The Associated Press. "Kris excelled at every level and earned the right of entry. The CBA is at the apogee of wrongs incentivizing clubs to create a product less than best. Bryant's situation is the badge for change to the CBA player service structure."

The demotion of Bryant was expected. "In this case it was the right thing to do," general manager Theo Epstein said.



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Celtics move into playoff spot

The Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Avery Bradley says despite a season of ups and downs, he never stopped believing the Boston Celtics were a playoff team.

If the Celtics continue to play the way they have in recent weeks, Bradley might be right.

Bradley had 30 points and eight rebounds, and the Celtics beat the Charlotte Hornets 116-104 on Monday night for an important Eastern Conference victory.

Boston (33-41) moved back into eighth place in the East, a few percentage points ahead of Brooklyn in the battle for the final playoff spot.

Evan Turner added 15 points, while Jae Crowder and Marcus Smart each had 14 as the Celtics won for the 10th time in the last 16 games.

But it was Bradley who carried his team on his shoulders, making 12 of 23 shots.

"Avery was terrific on both ends of the floor," said Celtics coach Brad Stevens.

Charlotte's Kemba Walker led a furious fourth-quarter comeback that fell short, finishing with 28 points and 12 assists. Gerald Henderson added 17 points for the Hornets, who've dropped four of their last five games.

The Celtics built a 19-point, fourth-quarter lead that the Hornets cut to six behind Walker. But the Celtics closed out the game with some clutch free throws to even the series with the Hornets at 2-2.

"We knew we needed this game," Turner said. "Every game is important, so we came and toughed it out."

Charlotte's loss clinched a second straight playoff berth for the Washington Wizards.

The frustration of a disappointing season seemed to set in for the Hornets

late in the third when Walker drove on a fast break and his layup was rejected. Upset there wasn't a foul called, Walker stopped in his tracks and didn't hustle back on defense. The Celtics made him pay on the other end as Bradley knocked down a three-pointer to give Boston an 18-point lead.

Raptors 99, Rockets 96: DeMar DeRozan scored a career-high 42 points and tied his career best with 11 rebounds as host Toronto earned its eighth straight home victory over Houston.

DeRozan made a go-ahead turnaround bank shot with 1:27 left, and then closed out the win with a jumper over James Harden with 18 seconds to go. He made 14 of 27 attempts from the floor and 12 of 17 at the free-throw line.

Harden scored 31 for the Rockets, who had won four in a row. Trevor Ariza had 15 points, and Corey Brewer finished with 13.

Trail Blazers 109, Suns 86: Damian Lillard scored 19 points before sitting the final quarter, and host Portland secured a playoff berth with a victory over Phoenix.

The Blazers have won four straight to edge closer to their first Northwest Division title since 2008-09.

LaMarcus Aldridge added 17 points and seven rebounds, and Portland led by as many as 31 points. The Blazers rested their starters in the fourth quarter after building a 92-65 lead.

Hawks 101, Bucks 88: DeMarre Carroll scored 23 points and Kyle Korver put on quite a shooting display in the third quarter, carrying host Atlanta past Milwaukee.

Having clinched the top seed in the Eastern Conference, the Hawks are trying

to maintain their playing edge while staying healthy for the final two weeks of the regular season. This wasn't pretty — they put up five airballs — but it was enough to improve to 56-18, one win away from tying the team record.

Grizzlies 97, Kings 83: Mike Conley scored 18 points, Jeff Green had 16 and host Memphis ended a three-game losing streak by beating Sacramento.

The Grizzlies moved back into the second spot in the Western Conference playoff race by a half-game over the Houston Rockets, who lost 99-96 at Toronto.

Zach Randolph scored 15 points for Memphis, and Marc Gasol had eight points and 11 rebounds.

Lakers 113, 76ers 111 (OT): Jordan Clarkson made the tie-breaking basket with 0.7 seconds left in overtime, lifting visiting Los Angeles past Philadelphia in a matchup of two of the NBA's worst teams.

Clarkson scored 26 points and Jabari Brown finished with 22 for Los Angeles (20-53). Wayne Ellington added seven of his 20 points in OT, including a three-pointer that put the Lakers up 111-105 with 1:25 left.

Rookie Nerlens Noel led the 76ers (18-57) with 19 points and 14 rebounds for his ninth double-double of the month.

Jazz 104, Timberwolves 84: Gordon Hayward scored 22 points, reserve Trey Burke had 19 and Utah got the road win against Minnesota.

Trevor Booker had 17 points and 13 rebounds for Utah, which earned its second straight victory after a four-game losing streak. Rudy Gobert finished with 15 points and 12 boards.

Zach LaVine led Minnesota with 21 points, and Andrew Wiggins scored 17.

UConn returns to Final Four

The Associated Press

ALBANY, N.Y. — Getting to the Final Four never gets old for Geno Auriemma and his UConn Huskies.

Kaleena Mosqueda-Lewis scored 27 points to help UConn beat Dayton 91-70 on Monday night to advance to the national semifinals for an eighth straight season.

"I love going to the Final Four. I don't care how many times it is, what the total number is. I love it for the fact that some of my players have never been there," Auriemma said.

Now the Huskies stand two wins away from a third straight national championship. They accomplished that same feat from 2002-04.

Unlike the first three games of the tournament when UConn won by an average of nearly 48 points, the Huskies got all they could handle from the seventh-seeded Flyers, who weren't intimidated by the top seed for the game's first 20 minutes.

"When we're challenged, sometimes that's when we're at our best, and that's what we talked about in the locker room and I couldn't be prouder of them and happier for them ... especially tonight against a great, great team," Auriemma said. "Boy, I'm glad we don't have to play them again."

Trailing at the half for the first time in two seasons, UConn scored the first nine points of the second half during a 15-3 run to take a 58-47 lead with 13:56 left.

A little more than a minute later, Mosqueda-Lewis hit her fifth three-pointer of the game giving her 393 in her career to break the NCAA record for threes. That made it 62-49.

Dayton (28-7) couldn't get within seven the rest of the way thanks in a big part to Mosqueda-Lewis, who finished the game with seven three-pointers.

Maryland 58, Tennessee 48:

At Spokane, Wash., Lexie Brown scored 13 of her 15 points in the second half, Brianna Jones added 14 points and nine rebounds and the top-seeded Terrapins advanced to their second straight Final Four by beating the Lady Vols in the Spokane Regional final.

Brown hit three three-pointers in the second half as the Terrapins (34-2) overcame their lowest-scoring first half of the season to knock out Tennessee from the NCAAs for the second straight year.

It's the fifth Final Four appearance for the Terrapins and third under coach Brenda Frese.

Shatori Walker-Kimbrough added 12 points for the Terrapins, who held Tennessee to one field goal over the final 5 minutes. Maryland has won 28 straight games.

Ariel Massengale led Tennessee (30-6) with 16 points, but the Lady Vols missed their chance at reaching the Final Four for the first time since 2008.

Tennessee's focus all season had been on getting back to the Final Four, which just so happened to be in Tampa, Fla., this season, the site of the Lady Vols' most recent Final Four appearance and most recent national title.

That task became far more difficult when leading scorer Isabelle Harrison was lost for the season to a knee injury in February.

Tennessee showed resiliency in the aftermath of Harrison's injury and again in the Sweet 16, rallying from 17 down with less than 7 minutes remaining to beat hometown Gonzaga in overtime.

But the Lady Vols' run ended against the Terrapins.

Tampa Bay locks up postseason berth

The Associated Press

MONTREAL — The Tampa Bay Lightning owned the Montreal Canadiens all season.

Despite being depleted by injuries, the Lightning completed a five-game, season-series sweep of Montreal with a 5-3 victory on Monday night.

Lightning goalie Ben Bishop had two assists, Vladislav Namestnikov scored two goals, and Tampa Bay clinched an Eastern Conference playoff berth.

Bishop started plays that set up breakaway goals by Namestnikov and Jonathan Drouin in the second period. Nikita Kucherov and Anton Stralman also scored for Tampa Bay, which trails Atlantic Division-leading Montreal by one point.

The Lightning outscored the Canadiens 21-8 in the series sweep after being swept by Montreal in the first round of the 2014 playoffs.

"Everyone keeps talking about last year's playoffs, but we're not thinking about that at all," Lightning star Steven Stamkos said. "We're focused on this year."

"It's a great feat to beat a team, that's first in the division, five times. It was a pretty gritty effort."

Bishop, who made 25 saves, is the first goalie with two assists in a game since Buffalo's Ryan Miller did it on Feb. 25, 2014.

"I'm not really looking for (assists), but if it helps the team, it helps the team," Bishop said.

The NHL record of three was set by Calgary's Jeff Reese against San Jose on Feb. 10, 1993.

Max Pacioretty, Jeff Petry and P.K. Subban scored for Montreal, which was outshot 31-13 through two one-sided periods and 44-28 overall. Carey Price stopped 39 shots.

The Canadiens managed to keep it close until Stralman's empty-net goal in the final minute.

Pacioretty scoffed at the suggestion that Montreal doesn't match up with Tampa Bay.

"I hope we play them in the playoffs, if people really think that passionately about it, because we have a lot to prove against that team," the Canadiens' scoring leader said. "They play very similar to us, and it's not a matter of feeling uncomfortable."

"We play the same system as them. When they buy in, they have success. When we buy in, we have success. You saw the third period."

The Lightning were coming off a 4-0 loss at Detroit in which defensemen Jason Garrison (out 3-to-4 weeks) and Andrej Sustr (1-to-2 weeks), and scoring star Tyler Johnson (day-to-day) sustained upper-body injuries.

Blackhawks 4, Kings 1: Defensemen Duncan Keith and Niklas Hjalmarsson scored 1:04 apart in the second period, and host Chicago beat Los Angeles.

Marian Hossa added a goal and an assist as the Blackhawks won their second game in two nights and pulled within

a point of second-place St. Louis in the Central Division. Chicago will face the Blues twice in its final six games.

Canucks 4, Blues 1: Radim Vrbata had a goal and assist, and Eddie Lack made 23 saves as Vancouver opened a four-game trip with a victory over struggling St. Louis.

Flames 5, Stars 3: Jiri Hudler, Raphael Diaz and Johnny Gaudreau scored within a span of 6:49 of the second period, and Calgary held on to beat host Dallas.

The third-place Flames moved three points ahead of Los Angeles in the Pacific Division.

Oilers 4, Avalanche 1: Defenseman Justin Schultz broke a second-period tie, and Richard Bachman stopped 29 shots, helping Edmonton end a five-game road losing streak by topping Colorado.

Sabres 4, Coyotes 1: Andrej Meszaros scored two goals for the second straight game, and Buffalo ended a five-game losing streak by beating host Arizona in a matchup between the NHL's worst two teams.

The Sabres, the NHL's lowest-scoring team, had a rare strong night on the offensive end, generating 31 shots in the first two periods against goalie Mike Smith.

Anders Lindback stopped 28 shots, and Brian Gionta and Rasmus Ristolainen each added empty-net goals in Buffalo's second win in 14 games.