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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Services blame budget cuts for crashes

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Marine Corps and Army on Wednesday pointed to tight budgets and a lack of training to explain increases in catastrophic and fatal aircraft incidents during the past few years.

Gen. Robert Neller, the Marine commandant, and Gen. Mark Milley, the Army chief of staff, were questioned during a House budget hearing about the growing number of aviation mishaps, which included the crash of two Marine helicopters in Hawaii in January that killed 12 people. Both explained the upticks by saying funding shortfalls have led to less training than needed, a factor that defense experts have suspected.

“We track this very closely and the simple fact is that we don’t have enough airplanes to meet the training requirements for the entire force,” Neller said.

The generals testified to the House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday as the Defense Department is hoping to increase aviation training and maintenance. The House panel is holding hearings and

wrestling with politically imposed spending caps as it crafts the department’s annual budget bill.

Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, chairman of the House panel and an advocate for higher defense spending, said the Marine Corps rate of Class A aviation mishaps, which result in the complete loss of an aircraft and the death or permanent maiming of personnel, had hovered at 2.15 per 100,000 flying hours for a decade.

But the rate has shot up from 2.67 in 2014 to 3.96 mishaps so far this year, Thornberry said.

This year’s accidents include the collision of the two U.S. Marine CH-53 Super Stallions on Jan. 14. In 2015, 12 helicopter crashes killed 30 troops.

“So the point is, over the last three years especially, the number of Class A mishaps per 100,000 flying hours has been increasing significantly,” Thornberry said.

Milley said the Army is conducting a “multifunctional, very detailed” study of its aviation mishaps and expects to have findings to share with Congress within about a

month.

“Aircraft accidents have increased and we are very concerned about it,” Milley said.

The Army is requesting a budget that will increase helicopter training from 10 to 12 hours per month, he said.

The increase is less than ideal, the general said, but no more money is available.

“Ideally we want them [training hours] to 14-15 hours per month but we can’t get there with the budget,” Milley said.

The Army and other military branches are generally set for a slight increase in funding for the coming year due to a budget deal cut last fall by Democrats and Republicans in Congress. But the deal also sets caps on spending that the services must still work within.

Fiscal hawks in the House are now ready to ditch the spending deal and are pushing for deeper cuts in federal spending against the wishes of defense hawks on the Armed Services panel.

tritten.travis@stripes.com

Twitter: @Travis_Tritten

Math, momentum point to Trump, Clinton nominations

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Math and momentum on his side, an emboldened Donald Trump offered himself Wednesday as the inevitable Republican presidential nominee and called on balky GOP leaders to embrace the voters’ “tremendous fervor” for his candidacy. If GOP leaders try to deny him the nomination at a contested convention when he is leading the delegate count, Trump warned, “You’d have riots.”

Trump, who padded his delegate lead and won at least three more states in the latest round of voting, predicted he’d amass enough support to snag the nomination outright before the Republican convention — without much difficulty, in fact — and added that “there’s going to be a tremendous problem” if the Republican establishment

tries to outmaneuver him at the convention.

Democrat Hillary Clinton, eager for a matchup against Trump, took direct aim at him after strengthening her position against rival Bernie Sanders with another batch of primary victories of her own. “Our commander in chief has to be able to defend our country, not embarrass it,” Clinton said in a speech that largely ignored Sanders. “We can’t lose what made America great in the first place.”

With anti-Trump Republicans frantically seeking scenarios to deny the billionaire businessman the GOP nomination, Trump suggested in a round of calls to morning TV shows that the party establishment already is starting to fall in line behind him. Without naming names, Trump said some of the same Republican

senators who are publicly running him down have called him privately to say they want to “become involved” in his campaign, eventually.

Trump, devoting little attention to his two remaining GOP rivals, was ready for a head-on fight with Clinton. He said she’d be “a major embarrassment for the country” and added that she “doesn’t have the strength or the stamina to be president.”

The GOP front-runner also said he’d skip a GOP debate scheduled for Utah on Monday, saying, “I think we’ve had enough debates.”

Clinton triumphed in the Florida, Illinois, Ohio and North Carolina presidential primaries, putting her in a commanding position to become the first woman in U.S. history to win a major-party nomination. Trump strengthened his hand in the Re-

publican race with wins in Florida, North Carolina and Illinois, but fell in Ohio to that state’s governor, John Kasich. Votes were also being counted in Missouri, and races in both parties there were too close to call.

With Florida Sen. Marco Rubio out of the race, Texas Sen. Ted Cruz welcomed the Rubio’s supporters “with open arms.”

The fiery conservative tried to cast the GOP nomination battle as a two-person race between himself and Trump.

On the Democratic side, Clinton’s victories were blows to Sanders and bolstered her argument that she’s the best Democrat to take on the eventual Republican nominee in the general election. Her win in Ohio was a particular relief for her campaign, which grew anxious after Sanders pulled off a surprising win last week in Michigan.

Overhaul complete, USS Kentucky deploys

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

The Pacific-based nuclear ballistic-missile submarine USS Kentucky has deployed for the first time since 2011 after an overhaul as part of efforts to extend the life of aging Ohio-class boats while the U.S. develops a replacement.

The Kentucky left Naval Base Kitsap-Bangor, Wash., earlier this week, according to a Navy statement issued Tuesday.

The ship's overhaul, which began in 2012, included nuclear refueling and other fixes designed to keep the boat operating for another 20 years, the Navy statement said.

The Kentucky and the other 13 nuclear missile-capable submarines in the Ohio class were designed to last 30 years. Delays in developing and funding their replacements led to the creation of a 40-month over-

haul program for each ship.

At current overhaul rates, those subs will begin retiring at a rate of one per year beginning in 2027.

Under plans to acquire new subs beginning in 2021, the Navy's stock of nuclear missile-equipped subs would drop to 10 or 11 between 2029 and 2040, according to a March Congressional Research Service report.

The Navy says it needs 12 Ohio-class submarines, or their replacements, to keep enough boats on nuclear deterrence patrol at once.

Replacing the Ohio class is expected to cost \$95.8 billion, including research and development costs.

Following the outsized initial expense of developing the first sub, the Navy is trying to reduce the cost of boats two through 12 to \$4.9 billion each.

It remains unclear how the

Pentagon is going to pay for Ohio-class replacements, despite multiple senior Navy officials labeling the boats a top priority.

Congress could opt to work outside of normal appropriations to fund the submarines. In 2015, the National Defense Authorization Act created the National Sea-based Deterrence Fund, which would provide supplemental money for programs like new submarines.

Others have suggested cutting costs by reducing boats, with the Stimson Center think tank calling for 10 boats in a 2013 report — a recommendation partially based on the assumption that the U.S. and Russia continue signing agreements to decommission nuclear weapons.

The U.S. has 4,717 nuclear warheads either deployed or stockpiled, compared with Russia's 4,500, according to

2015 State Department figures. Each country also has thousands more "retired" warheads that await dismantling.

A 2013 paper from the libertarian Cato Institute suggested keeping 12 nuclear missile-capable submarines and paying for them by eliminating the other two legs of the nuclear triad — intercontinental missiles and bombers.

"The sea leg of the nuclear triad by itself is a more powerful deterrent than that possessed by nearly any other nation in the world," authors Christopher Preble and Matt Fay wrote. "Russia retains a relatively large arsenal, but no other country is capable of deploying more than a few hundred nuclear warheads. A single Ohio-class submarine can carry up to 192."

slavin.erik@stripes.com
Twitter: @eslavin_stripes

Obama names pick to Supreme Court

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama announced Wednesday he is nominating Merrick Garland to serve on the Supreme Court, setting up a protracted political fight with Republicans who have vowed to block any candidate picked by the White House.

Garland, 63, is a longtime Washington lawyer and jurist who is chief judge of the U.S. Court of Appeals for the District of Columbia Circuit. Considered a moderate, Garland is widely respected in the D.C. legal community and was also a finalist for the first two Supreme Court vacancies Obama filled.

Seven sitting Republican senators voted to confirm Garland in 1997.

GOP lawmakers have said since Justice Antonin Scalia's death last month that Obama should leave the choice of a new justice to his successor.

From wire reports

Commander apologizes to Okinawa governor over reported rape case

BY CHIYOMI SUMIDA
Stars and Stripes

NAHA, Okinawa — The head of U.S. Marines in Japan apologized Wednesday to Okinawa's governor for the alleged rape of a Japanese woman by a Navy sailor and ensured him the military will cooperate thoroughly with the investigation.

Lt. Gen. Lawrence D. Nicholson, III Marine Expeditionary Forces commander, visited Gov. Takeshi Onaga at his Naha office Wednesday in response to the arrest of Seaman Apprentice Justin Castellanos, 24, who is assigned to Camp Schwab.

Police say Castellanos found the tourist intoxicated and asleep in a hotel hallway, took her into his room and raped her between 1 and 4 a.m. Sunday. A friend of the victim called police after she heard the woman screaming for help and found her in Castellanos' room with the suspect, who was a stranger to them, police said.

Castellanos reportedly told investigators he was not in his room when the alleged assault occurred and was drinking in a bar instead, police said.

"I express my deepest regret and remorse at the incident," Nicholson told Onaga at the beginning of their half-hour meeting. "Today, I came here

to represent 27,000 uniformed members, 17,000 families, 4,000 civilians, 50,000 Americans. The allegation against the specific individual is a great shame and dishonor of us all."

Onaga urged Nicholson to enforce stricter discipline over servicemembers on the island and to take preventive measures as quickly as possible.

Nicholson told Onaga the military has already started training this week for servicemembers stationed on Okinawa.

On Monday, Vice Gov. Mitsuo Ageda filed a protest over the incident with the Okinawa Liaison Office of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Okinawa Defense Bureau. Okinawa City Mayor Sachio Kuwae, who represents municipalities that host military bases on Okinawa, lodged a protest Tuesday with the Okinawa Area Coordinator's Office and American Consulate Naha. The Naha City Council is expected to adopt a protest resolution Thursday. An Okinawa women's group, organized after the 1995 rape of a schoolgirl by three U.S. servicemembers, demanded on Tuesday the enforcement of the existing curfew for all servicemembers on the island that was imposed after the rape of a woman by two Navy sailors in 2012.

sumida.chiyomi@stripes.com

Guards lead Wichita State in First Four

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Wichita State's guards let their Final Four experience make the difference in a defense-dominated First Four game.

Fred VanVleet and Ron Baker led a surge at the start of the second half that put the Shockers on pace for a 70-50 victory over Vanderbilt on Tuesday night, making the big shots in a game with very few uncontested ones.

The seniors who were part of the Shockers' 2013 Final Four team led the way. VanVleet — the two-time Missouri Valley player of the year — scored 14 points despite a cut on his head that sent him to the bench in the first half. Ron Baker also had 14. Together, they scored all of the points in a decisive 11-0 run that opened the second half.

"Fred and I hit a couple of threes to get us going early on," Baker said. "The momentum shifted slowly and we kind of grasped it and kept on rolling."

The Shockers (25-8) play Arizona on Thursday in Providence, R.I.

Vanderbilt (19-14) couldn't take advantage of its pronounced size advantage on offense and never led in the second half. Joe Toye and Riley LaChance had 10 apiece. The Commodores shot 30 percent from the field, went 3-for-19 from beyond the arc, and were 15 of 26 on free

throws.

"They're a very good defense and they play really physical," LaChance said. "We did get some open looks and nothing happened to fall."

The Shockers returned three starters from the team that knocked off Indiana and Kansas to reach the Sweet 16 last year, drawing a No. 10 ranking in the preseason poll. A lot of early injuries — including VanVleet's pulled hamstring — forced the Shockers to reinvent themselves.

They got yet another setback on Tuesday when VanVleet left to get treated for a cut on the right side of his forehead only a few minutes into the game. He gave the Shockers a pep talk during the next timeout but stayed on the bench.

"It didn't hurt at all," said VanVleet, who had a bandage on the wound. "I didn't even know it was bleeding. I was just hoping it wouldn't need stitches. I hate to get stitched. He patched me up real quick."

VanVleet got back into the game with 13:13 left in the half and hit a baseline jumper for his first points.

He and Baker let their tournament experience show at the start of the second half, scoring all the points in an 11-0 run for a 41-30 lead — the biggest by either team up to that point. Baker hit a three, and VanVleet made a pair from beyond the arc during the spurt.

Vanderbilt cut the lead to one point, but Wichita State

dug in and hit back-to-back threes that pushed it to 57-48 and left the Shockers in control.

Back in health, they're moving on in the tournament, getting the better of a defensive game.

There were few open shots in a choppy first half that ended tied 30-30 — about what was expected. Wichita State and Vanderbilt ranked sixth and seventh in field-goal defense. The Shockers get pressure with their guards, while the Commodores used their front-line size to redirect shots.

Seven-foot center Damian Jones missed both of his shots and all of his four free throws in the first half as Vanderbilt failed to take advantage of its size on offense. He finished with five points.

Tournament tidbits: Vanderbilt: Is 10-15 all-time in 14 appearances. Wichita State is 16-13 all-time in 13 appearances. The Shockers are in it for the fifth straight year, a school record, and have won at least one game in each of the last four years.

Tip-ins: The Commodores blocked five shots, with 7-foot-1 forward Luke Kornet swatting away two. Kornet was fourth in the nation with three blocks per game. ... The Shockers worked on their shooting after going 2-for-24 from beyond the arc during a Missouri Valley Tournament loss. Against the Commodores, they missed all five from beyond the arc in the first half. They finished 7-for-19 overall.

Tourney experience helps boost FGCU

Associated Press

DAYTON, Ohio — Florida Gulf Coast showed once again that it can rise to the occasion in the NCAA Tournament.

It wasn't the same "Dunk City" gang that captured the nation's attention during an improbable Sweet 16 run in 2013, but the Eagles controlled the boards and blew past overmatched Fairleigh Dickinson 96-65 in a First Four game Tuesday night.

Marc-Eddy Norelia opened the game with a dunk, two of his 20 points on the night to lead the Eagles (21-13). FGCU never relinquished the lead, going on a 23-6 run in the first 10 minutes and opening a 40-19 lead at the half.

Fairleigh Dickinson got some looks but couldn't get much to fall, shooting just 33 percent from the field while playing thoroughly lackluster defense. It was one of the team's worst shooting performances of the season.

Florida Gulf Coast relied on outmuscling its opponent's big men inside and controlling the boards, while making 60 percent of its shots from the field.

"That's what got us here," Norelia said of the inside game. "Coach made the game plan and said we're going to do what we've been doing, and it worked for us."

Julian Debose and Christian Terrell both added 14 for Florida Gulf Coast, and Demetris Morant chipped in 10. After Norelia's opening slam, Brian Greene Jr. closed the scoring with a dunk for FGCU.

Norelia was 10-for-11 from the field while grabbing 10 rebounds. FGCU out-rebounded the smaller, less-aggressive Fairleigh Dickinson squad 52-33.

"We knew they were very good, very long, very well-coached," Fairleigh Dickinson coach Greg Herenda said. "And tonight they played that way. I'm disappointed we didn't play our basketball, Fairleigh Dickinson basketball, in the first half."

Earl Potts Jr. led Fairleigh Dickinson (18-15) with 16 points despite sitting a good chunk of the second half with four fouls. Marques Townes added 13.

The 19 points at halftime was the lowest offensive output of any half for Fairleigh Dickinson.

Florida Gulf Coast will need some more magic as it takes on top-seeded North Carolina on Thursday in Raleigh, N.C.

"We're just going to stay confident and believe in ourselves and give it our best effort," Norelia said. "Anything can happen."

The Eagles already proved that three years ago.

The game was delayed twice in the opening seconds because officials couldn't get the game clock running properly.

Tip-ins: The Eagles could have had a bigger lead at halftime, but shot 6-for-17 on free throws in the first 20 minutes.

Darian Anderson, who led Fairleigh Dickinson in scoring this season, scored 11 points and fouled out with 7:21 left in the game.

Tournament tidbits: Florida Gulf Coast: The Eagles improved to 3-1 in the NCAA Tournament.

Fairleigh Dickinson: The Knights fall to 0-5 in the tournament, dating back to 1985.

FIFA admits Cup bribes, asks US to return money

Associated Press

GENEVA — FIFA acknowledged Wednesday that past World Cups were awarded based on bribes, and the organization wants U.S. prosecutors to give it "tens of millions of dollars" seized from the former FIFA officials who took the cash.

FIFA submitted a 22-page claim to the U.S. Attorney's Office in New York on Tuesday that seeks a big share in restitution from more than \$190 million already forfeited by soccer and marketing officials who pleaded guilty in the sprawling corruption case.

Tens of millions of dollars more is likely to be collected by U.S. authorities when sentences are handed down, and from dozens of officials currently indicted but who have denied bribery charges or are fighting extradition.

FIFA claims it is the victim of corrupt individuals, despite widespread criticism that bribe-taking was embedded in its culture in the presidencies of Joao Havelange and Sepp Blatter, who was forced from office after 17 years by the current scandal.

"The convicted defendants abused the positions of trust they held at FIFA and other international football organizations and caused serious and lasting damage to FIFA," FIFA President Gianni Infantino said Wednesday in a statement. "The monies they pocketed belonged to global football and were meant for the development and promotion of the game. FIFA as the world governing body of football wants that money back and we are determined to get it no matter how long it takes."

In documents seen by The Associated Press, FIFA asks for:

- \$28.2 million for years of payments, including bonuses, flights and daily expenses, to officials it now says are corrupt

- \$10 million for the "theft" of money that FIFA officials transferred as bribes to then-executive committee members to vote for South Africa as 2010 World Cup host

- "substantial" cost of legal bills since separate U.S. and Swiss federal probes of corruption in international soccer were revealed last May

- damages for harm to its reputation, plus other bribes and kickbacks for media rights to non-FIFA competitions but "which were made possible because of the value of the FIFA brand"

"FIFA has become notable for the defendants' bribery and corruption, not its many good works," lawyers for soccer's world body state in the claim. "FIFA is entitled to restitution for this harm to its business relationships, reputation and intangible property."

FIFA's grab for a share of the money sets up a battle with two of its regional confederations — CONMEBOL, the South American confederation, and CONCACAF, the body running soccer in North America. It was officials and competitions from those regions that were most involved in the corruption crisis.

It also signals a change in strategy for FIFA, after months of senior officials distancing Zurich from the scandal, instead blaming confederations which are beyond its control.



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Spurs stretch home streak

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — The emergence of Kawhi Leonard and LaMarcus Aldridge has made the San Antonio Spurs less reliant on their bench than in previous years.

But the Los Angeles Clippers learned San Antonio's reserves can still be potent.

Leonard had 20 points and the Spurs wore down the short-handed Clippers 108-87 on Tuesday night to match the second-longest home winning streak to open a season in NBA history.

Aldridge added 17 points for San Antonio, which has won four straight.

"With us, when Kawhi is on the court or Kawhi and LaMarcus [it changes the game]," Spurs guard Manu Ginobili said. "Today [the bench] could change the game at that point, and it makes us feel good."

San Antonio won its 33rd straight home game this season, tying Orlando's start to the 1995-96 season.

The Chicago Bulls set the league mark with a 37-game home winning streak to begin that same season during their record 72-victory campaign.

The Clippers' reserves, who were without injured Paul Pierce, were outscored 51-20 by the Spurs' bench.

"The first unit did everything in their power," Los Angeles guard Austin Rivers said. "Our second unit, we didn't play well tonight. I don't know what to tell you. It's disappointing because obviously everybody in the second unit feels like it's our fault. Whether that's true or not, that's the way we feel."

Los Angeles (42-24), still missing Blake

Griffin, lost its second straight despite getting 67 points from its starters. Chris Paul scored 22 and DeAndre Jordan had 16 points and 14 rebounds.

The Clippers had won three of four regular-season games against the Spurs. Los Angeles also took two of three in San Antonio to beat the Spurs in a seven-game series to open the playoffs last year.

San Antonio's bench ensured a continuation of the team's home winning streak, which is now at 42 games dating to March 2015.

Patty Mills had 15 points and Ginobili added 13 off the bench for the Spurs (57-10).

Spurs backup David West tipped in missed shots on successive possessions and then delivered a hard screen on Rivers that freed Mills for a jumper from the top of the key for an 82-72 lead with 9 minutes remaining. West finished with eight points.

"Dave was a big-time spark off the bench," Aldridge said. "I thought Patty brought some juice and some energy to us tonight, too. They definitely carried us down the stretch."

San Antonio needed that production to counter Paul, who continued to confound and frustrate the Spurs on both ends.

Paul had 22 points on 9-for-16 shooting and made eight assists.

Pacers 103, Celtics 98: Paul George had 25 points as host Indiana finished with a strong fourth quarter to beat Boston.

Monta Ellis added 16 points with six assists, and Jordan Hill scored 15 for Indiana.

Isaiah Thomas had 21 points, eight as-

sists and six rebounds for Boston.

Raptors 107, Bucks 89: Kyle Lowry scored 25 points as Toronto, despite resting leading scorer DeMar DeRozan, had no trouble with host Milwaukee.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 18 points, 12 rebounds and nine assists in 35 minutes for the Bucks, just missing a triple-double.

Magic 116, Nuggets 110: Evan Fournier scored 30 points and Jason Smith had 25 points and 13 rebounds off the bench to help host Orlando beat Denver.

Victor Oladipo scored 23 for the Magic, who led by 18 in the third quarter before fending off Denver's second-half rally. Brandon Jennings added 12 points and 11 assists in his first start for Orlando.

Nets 131, 76ers 114: Bojan Bogdanovic scored a career-best 44 points to help host Brooklyn set a season high for points against Philadelphia.

Sean Kilpatrick had 19 points, Brook Lopez added 18 points and 10 rebounds, and Thaddeus Young finished with 14 points and 16 rebounds for the Nets.

Isaiah Canaan led the 76ers with 20 points.

Kings 106, Lakers 98: Darren Collison had 22 points in his ninth start of the season, DeMarcus Cousins also scored 22 and Sacramento completed a four-game season sweep of Los Angeles.

The Lakers, who trailed by as many as 23, got as close as 97-91 on a pair of free throws by Julius Randle that capped a 15-5 run with 3:14 to play.

Cardinals get Jones from Pats

Associated Press

PHOENIX — The Arizona Cardinals have filled what they considered their biggest offseason need by acquiring Pro Bowl defensive end/outside linebacker Chandler Jones from the New England Patriots.

The Cardinals sent guard Jonathan Cooper and a second-round pick in this year's draft to the Patriots in a deal that was pending the two players passing physicals.

The 26-year-old Jones ranked fifth in the NFL last season with a career-best 12½ sacks. Cooper was Arizona's first-round pick, the seventh selection overall, in the 2013 draft.

He missed his rookie season with a broken leg and never reached the level of play the Cardinals had envisioned for him.

A first-round draft pick out of Syracuse — the 21st selection overall — Jones is one of three players who since 2012 have at least 200 tackles, 36 sacks and 10 forced fumbles. The other two are J.J. Watt and Ryan Kerrigan.

The move saves about \$5.4 million in cap space for New England and could bolster an offensive line that was battered throughout last season. Two members of its rotation were on injured reserve before Week 6 in 2015, and only once during the regular season did the Patriots start the same offensive line in consecutive games.

It hit a crescendo in the AFC championship game when quarterback Tom Brady was sacked four times.

The trade gives New England consecutive picks late in the second round of the draft. The Patriots don't have a first-round pick.

Jones played in 55 games in four seasons for New England, 52 as a starter, with 36 sacks, 217 tackles, 10 forced fumbles and one interception. He played in nine postseason games with two sacks and 18 tackles.

"Want to thank the (at)Patriots, the Kraft family, and all of Pats Nation for making my time in New England so special," Jones said on his Twitter account.

In other NFL news:

■ Denver Broncos general manager John Elway matched Miami's four-year, \$18 million offer to lead running back C.J. Anderson on Tuesday.

The move was a surprise coming as it did just two weeks after Elway placed the lower right-of-first refusal tender on the restricted free agent rather than the more expensive tender that includes a second-round draft pick as compensation.

Elway matched the offer that will pay Anderson \$5.25 million in bonuses by month's end and a \$625,000 base salary in 2016 and includes substantial non-guaranteed dollars on the back end of the deal.

■ The Baltimore Ravens added more speed and a familiar foe to their passing game Tuesday, signing wide receiver Mike Wallace to a two-year contract.

Released by the Minnesota Vikings on March 8, the 29-year-old Wallace joins his third team in as many years after beginning his career with Baltimore's AFC North rival, the Pittsburgh Steelers.

"It feels weird being on the other side, but I'm all for it," Wallace said. "I've just got to switch my whole mentality. I used to hate purple; now, I love purple."

Wallace caught 39 passes for a career-low 473 yards and two touchdowns in 2015, but he should provide strong-armed quarterback Joe Flacco and the Ravens the outside speed they've been lacking.

Caps first to clinch playoff spot

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Unafraid to look at their substantial lead atop the NHL standings, Washington Capitals players knew they were on the verge of clinching a playoff spot before they took the ice against the Carolina Hurricanes.

With almost a month left in the regular season, the Capitals on Tuesday became the first team to clinch with a 2-1 overtime victory against the Hurricanes.

Alex Ovechkin fittingly scored the game-winner as the Capitals reached the playoffs for the eighth time in the past nine years.

"It's certainly unexpected with this many games left," said winger Justin Williams, who scored his 21st goal in his first season with the Capitals. "It's a tribute to how we've played and we're proud of where we sit, but not proud enough to rest on our laurels."

There was no celebration of the playoff berth or acknowledgement beyond some answers to interview questions.

The Capitals have led the league for several months, so this seemed inevitable, yet it was an accomplishment to get it over with so soon and move on to the next challenge of winning the Metropolitan Division and capturing the top seed in the Eastern Conference and home-ice advantage throughout the playoffs.

"Obviously it's good for us," said Ovechkin, who scored his league-leading 42nd goal of the season 1:38 into overtime. "Right now we have to be focusing how we have to play and just get healthy and then get ready for the playoffs."

The Capitals clinched the instant the

game got into overtime, needing just a point against Carolina. Hurricanes coach Bill Peters wonders if that's all his opponent should have gotten after it looked as if Evgeny Kuznetsov was offside before Ovechkin's goal.

The NHL situation room challenged the goal, but on-ice officials upheld it.

"We probably still should be out there in some form or fashion maybe overtime or maybe a shootout, I don't know," Peters said as he awaited an explanation. "The league will have a really good conversation piece with that."

Video evidence appeared inconclusive, though the NHL wrote that the Capitals "entered the attacking zone legally prior to the goal."

Penguins 2, Islanders 1 (SO): Kris Letang scored the only goal of the shootout with a pretty backhand past New York rookie goalie Jean-Francois Berube to lift host Pittsburgh.

Marc-Andre Fleury stopped Frans Nielsen, Kyle Okposo and John Tavares in the shootout as Pittsburgh strengthened its hold on the first wild-card spot in the Eastern Conference.

Sharks 3, Bruins 2: Joonas Donskoi scored a tiebreaking power-play goal with 13:23 remaining after an offensive zone penalty by Jimmy Hayes and host San Jose beat Boston.

San Jose won consecutive home games for the first time in two months to move within one point of Anaheim for second place in the Pacific Division.

Maple Leafs 4, Lightning 1: Ben Smith and Connor Carrick scored their first goals of the season to help Toronto beat

visiting Tampa Bay.

With the win, the Leafs have won back-to-back games and picked up points in four of their past five games.

Flyers 4, Red Wings 3: Michael Raffl scored two goals to lift host Philadelphia to a key win over Detroit in its playoff push.

The Flyers have 78 points and pulled within one point of the Red Wings for the final Eastern Conference wild-card playoff berth.

Panthers 4, Canadiens 1: Vincent Trochek scored a goal and set up one by Jiri Hudler as visiting Florida beat injury-riddled Montreal.

Nick Bjugstad and Aleksander Barkov also scored for Florida, which has won three of its past four games to stay in the tight battle for first place in the Atlantic Division with Tampa Bay and Boston.

Senators 3, Wild 2 (OT): Erik Karlsson scored at 4:29 of overtime to lift host Ottawa past Minnesota.

Nino Niederreiter and Ryan Carter scored for the Wild, who have a one-point lead on the Colorado Avalanche for the final wild-card spot in the Western Conference.

Kings 5, Stars 2: Tyler Toffoli scored again a night after ending a long goal drought as visiting Los Angeles capped an impressive back-to-back with another win.

The Kings won for the fourth time in five games and are up to 89 points, two behind Dallas and St. Louis atop the Pacific Division.