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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Belgian police hunt bombing suspect

Associated Press

BRUSSELS — Belgian authorities searched Wednesday for a man pictured at the Brussels airport with two apparent suicide bombers amid growing suggestions that the bombings of the Brussels airport and subway were the work of the same Islamic State cell that attacked Paris last year.

Several people who may be linked to the Brussels attacks were still on the loose and the country's threat alert remained at its highest level, meaning there was danger of an imminent attack, said Paul Van Tigchelt, head of Belgium's terrorism threat body. The attacks killed 34 people, including three suicide bombers, and injured 270 others, authorities said.

Belgium began three days of mourning, and government offices, schools and residents held a moment of silence to honor the dead, marking the moment in a mood of defiance mixed with anxiety that others involved in the attacks are still at large.

Belgian prosecutor Frederic Van Leeuw identified two of the Brussels attackers as brothers — Ibrahim El Bakraoui, a suicide bomber at the airport, and Khalid El Bakraoui, who targeted the subway. Investigators raided the Brussels neighborhood of Schaerbeek after the attacks and found a computer in a trash can on the street including a note from Ibrahim El Bakraoui saying he felt increasingly unsafe and feared landing in prison.

A taxi driver who took Ibrahim El Bakraoui and two others to the airport led investigators to an apartment where they found 33 pounds of TATP explosives, along with nails and other materials used to make bombs, Van Leeuw said.

He said authorities do not know the identities of two other people pictured with El Bakraoui in a surveillance photo from the airport that police are circulating.

Two were suicide bombers, the prosecutor said; the other was a man in a white jacket and

black cap who fled before the bombs went off, leaving behind a bag full of explosives. That bag later blew up, but no one was injured.

The Islamic State group, which was behind the Paris attacks, has also claimed responsibility for the Brussels bombings.

Belgian state broadcaster RTBF, citing sources it did not identify, said Khalid El Bakraoui had rented an apartment that was raided last week in an operation that led authorities to top Paris attacks suspect Salah Abdeslam.

Abdeslam was arrested Friday in the Brussels neighborhood where he grew up, a rough place with links to several of the attackers who targeted a Paris stadium, rock concert and cafes on Nov. 13. Those attacks killed 130 people.

A Belgian official working on the investigation told the AP that it is a "plausible hypothesis" that Abdeslam was part of the cell linked to the Brussels attack. The official spoke on

condition of anonymity.

Authorities are also still looking for a suspected accomplice of Abdeslam, Najim Laachraoui. It's not clear if he has any connection to the Brussels attack.

French and Belgian authorities have said in recent days that the network behind the Paris attacks was much larger than initially thought — and developments this week suggest the same group could have staged the Paris and Brussels attacks.

The airport and several Brussels metro stations remained closed Wednesday, and authorities said the airport would remain closed through Thursday, forcing the cancellation of 600 flights each day. Security forces stood guard around the neighborhood housing the headquarters of European Union institutions, as nervous Brussels residents began returning to school and work.

In the afternoon, thousands of people gathered at Place de la Bourse in the center of downtown Brussels in solidarity with those killed.

Carter won't bar China from exercise

BY ERIK SLAVIN

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Tuesday the Pentagon is "constantly evaluating" China's militarization of the South China Sea but stopped short of agreeing with a Hawaii congressman's proposal to revoke China's invitation to a prestigious global naval exercise.

Carter described China's construction of military facilities and artificial islands atop reefs claimed by other nations in the Asia-Pacific region as behavior that isolated Beijing, during questioning by Rep. Mark Takai, D-Hawaii, at a House Armed Services Committee hearing on the 2017 defense budget.

Takai wants to exclude China from this summer's Rim of the Pacific 2016, the world's largest biannual naval exercise.

The exercise, which is primarily based in Hawaii, included 22 participant nations and six observer nations in 2014.

"We're constantly evaluating our relationship with China and China's behavior, including the South China Sea, where I emphasize we have very serious concerns about their aggressive militarization there," Carter said.

Navy officials have repeatedly expressed wariness regarding China's attempts to regulate freedom of navigation in the South China Sea, where about \$1.2 trillion in U.S. trade transits annually.

China maintains a disputed claim to about

90 percent of the sea — including areas that most nations consider international waters — based on what it deems as historical claims.

Most recently, Navy officials pointed to Chinese military action at Scarborough Shoal, which lies within the exclusive economic zone of the Philippines, a U.S. security treaty ally.

Takai's position is similar to one expressed by Sens. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Jack Reed, D-R.I., in a 2015 letter to Carter calling for China's exclusion from RIMPAC. The letter called for "policy options that impose costs on China's disruptive behavior, not reward it."

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Jeb Bush backs Cruz; Trump, Clinton win in Ariz. votes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A clash of worldviews is intensifying as the presidential contenders in both parties fight to convince voters they can best protect the nation from a renewed threat of Islamic extremism.

As the world grappled with a new wave of attacks in Europe, Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton traded wins with their chief rivals on Tuesday in primary contests across three Western states.

"This is about not only selecting a president, but also selecting a commander in chief," Clinton said in Seattle as she condemned Trump by name and denounced his embrace of torture and hardline rhetoric aimed at Muslims. "The last thing we need is leaders who incite more fear."

Trump, in turn, branded Clinton as "Incompetent Hillary" as he discussed her tenure as secretary of state. "Incompetent Hillary doesn't know what she's talking about," the billionaire businessman said in an interview with Fox News. "She doesn't have a clue."

The back and forth between the front-runners came on a day when voters were eager to make their voices heard in the 2016 election.

In another development, former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, who dropped out of the GOP race in February, endorsed Ted Cruz.

Bush tweeted Wednesday that "Ted is a consistent, principled conservative who has shown he can unite the party."

Bush added on his Facebook page that Republicans "must overcome the divisiveness and vulgarity Donald Trump has brought into the political arena" or risk losing to Hillary Clinton.

Trump and Clinton scored victories in the night's biggest prize of Arizona, while Democratic challenger Bernie Sanders won caucuses in Utah and Idaho. Cruz claimed the GOP caucuses in Utah.

New missile task force marks expanding mission in Europe

By STEVEN BEARDSLEY
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — At first glance, not much will change when Navy Capt. Jeffrey Wolstenholme assumes command of the U.S. 6th Fleet's new air and missile defense task force Thursday. He's been doing a lot of the work since June as a staff officer for the fleet.

"The only change in my office is we're going to change the sign on the door," he said in a recent interview.

That doesn't mean Wolstenholme's job will remain the same. As a newly minted commodore, he'll have command over missile and air defense operations across the theater, a mission that has expanded in recent years with the arrival of four U.S. ballistic missile defense ships in Rota, Spain, the construction of two land-based Aegis Ashore interceptor

sites in eastern Europe and the growing threat of Russian anti-ship cruise missiles across the region.

Instead of working from within the 6th Fleet staff, Wolstenholme will have the same authority as officers overseeing surface ships or submarines in the theater.

"Now that we've put the ships in Rota and now that we have Aegis Ashore, we need a command to direct ballistic missile defense operations when we're doing the mission," Wolstenholme said.

The task force also will give the U.S. a platform from which it can, if needed, transfer authority over its ballistic missile defense ships to NATO command.

The Navy is the centerpiece of the U.S.-built European missile shield, known as the European Phased Adaptive Approach. The four Arleigh-Burke

class destroyers based in Rota, and planned interceptor sites in Romania and Poland, are the "shooters" — capable of firing SM-3 missiles guided by the Navy's Aegis air defense system to intercept short- and medium-range ballistic missiles.

Other parts of the shield include a radar facility in Turkey and a command-and-control node at Ramstein Air Base in Germany. Other NATO-member ships can track missiles, but none can currently fire interceptors.

The shield has caused a major rift with Russia, which says NATO missile defense plans are aimed against its own nuclear missile arsenal, a claim denied by the U.S.

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Railgun may be added to ship later

Associated Press

BATH, Maine — The Navy is still considering putting an electric-powered gun aboard a Maine-built destroyer, but the futuristic weapon would be installed after the ship is built, a top Navy officer said.

The construction schedule is too far along to install an electromagnetic railgun aboard the Lyndon B. Johnson at Bath Iron Works, "but it's certainly an option after the ship leaves the yard," said Rear Adm. Pete Fanta, director of surface warfare.

Fanta proposed skipping the step of putting a prototype weapon aboard another ship this year and instead putting an operational gun aboard the Lyndon B. Johnson.

No decisions have been made.

Railguns use pulses of electricity to fire projectiles at six to seven times the speed of sound, producing enough kinetic energy to destroy targets.

It's one of several technologies the Navy is considering to increase firepower at a lower cost than missiles. Fanta said it's an engineering race to discover the best system.

"The way we put it to the research and development team is, 'You've got to earn your way aboard,'" Fanta said. "I want to make sure I'm not putting a science project aboard. I want to make sure I'm putting a war-fighting effort on board."

The Lyndon B. Johnson is the third and final destroyer in the Zumwalt class under construc-

tion at Bath Iron Works, a General Dynamics subsidiary.

The destroyer makes an attractive platform for a railgun, laser system or other energy-based weapons because it uses powerful marine turbines to help produce up to 78 megawatts of electricity for use in propulsion, weapons and sensors.

Bath Iron Works had no comment Tuesday, deferring questions to the Navy.

John Portela, a shipyard worker, said he was not surprised by the admiral's comments. Installing a railgun at the shipyard would mean a major redesign, he said. Such upgrades are often completed during post-shakedown work elsewhere, he said.

Obama, Castro take in game

Associated Press

HAVANA — When Kevin Kiermaier slid into home for the Tampa Bay Rays' first run of the day, President Barack Obama flung his arms wide in the sign for "safe." Then he turned to his left and shook the hand of his seatmate and Cuban counterpart, Raul Castro.

The scene was a remarkable milestone for sports diplomacy as the two presidents try to set aside more than 50 years of Cold War hostility during which about the only thing the countries agreed on was a shared love of baseball.

Obama and Castro even joined in when fans were doing "the wave."

In the landmark game, the first visit by a major league team to the communist country island nation since 1999, the Tampa Bay Rays beat the Cuban national team 4-1 on Tuesday.

James Loney homered and drove in three runs, and Matt Moore and the Tampa Bay pitchers shut out the Cubans until Rudy Reyes homered in the ninth inning.

But the day will be remembered less for the final score than for the two men sitting in the front row at Havana's Estadio Latinoamericano, the last stop on Obama's trip to Cuba this week in a bid to further pave the road toward normalized relations.

The near-capacity crowd roared as Obama and Castro entered and walked toward their seats right behind home plate, waving to fans and greeting other dignitaries.

Chants of "Raul! Raul!" broke out. Rarely has so much pomp and circumstance accompanied an exhibition game. Former All-Stars Derek Jeter and Dave Winfield and Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred were among the president's greeters. Secretary of State John Kerry was also in the VIP box, as well as several of Cuba's highest officials.

Before the first pitch, Rays players walked over from the dugout to say hello

and passed flowers and small Cuban flags through the netting to first lady Michelle Obama and first daughter Sasha.

"Appreciate you guys," said the president, clad in a white shirt and sunglasses. Castro was slightly more formal in a blazer.

Obama shared an extended handshake with ace pitcher Chris Archer, who once was a minor leaguer for the Chicago Cubs. He gave Obama, a White Sox fan, a glove owned by Moore.

The last time a big league club played in Cuba was 17 years ago when the Baltimore Orioles came to this same stadium during spring training.

"We won't experience anything like this again," Rays manager Kevin Cash said afterward. "So it's a very special day for Major League Baseball, the Tampa Bay Rays and obviously all of our players, myself included."

Both Obama and Castro were gone by the third inning — with Obama heading to the airport to fly south for a state visit to Argentina — but the stands remained packed until the final out.

Reyes, a hometown favorite who plays for Havana's powerhouse club Industriales, finally gave the fans a reason to cheer with his solo shot.

"It kind of went quiet for a little bit, but then they get something going, you can imagine how loud this place can get when it's championship baseball," Cash said.

What the game lacked in offensive productivity from the home team, it made up for in pageantry.

Loud music and dancers on the field warmed the crowd up beforehand, and tots in tiny baseball uniforms escorted the players out for introductions.

A white-clad choir sang both countries' national anthems and a flock of doves was unleashed from the center-field stands. The Cuban and U.S. flags fluttered atop the scoreboard under overcast skies.

The stadium known as "El Latino" got a facelift just before the Rays' visit, providing a freshly scrubbed backdrop.

"It's beautiful. The field looks marvel-

ous," said Guillermo Gonzalez, an 18-year-old university student. "We are celebrating a union between two peoples, between the United States and Cuba. It's marvelous."

The stands were notably more mellow than your average Cuban game, where the music, dancing and horn-blowing can be practically nonstop.

Admission was free, and tickets were distributed to Cubans through organizations such as student groups and workplaces. That essentially assured a well-behaved crowd and no government opponents around to protest.

Maria Ester Mendoza Alvarez, a 52-year-old university professor, agreed that cultural exchanges like this one can help heal geopolitical schisms, but also said the United States ought to end its economic embargo of Cuba and give back the naval base at Guantanamo — two longstanding grievances of the Cuban government.

"Forget all the politics — we are going to enjoy this as a game, nothing more," Mendoza said.

The trip was also a homecoming for Tampa right fielder Dayron Varona, who was born in Havana and spent seven years playing in Cuba before hopping a boat to Haiti in 2013. On Monday he had a tearful reunion with relatives he hadn't seen in three years.

In a symbolic moment, Varona was first to bat Tuesday. He flied out to first, to polite applause. He said after the game that "playing baseball here is a really beautiful thing, very impressive," and meeting the president was, too.

"That gave me a lot of satisfaction," Varona said. "I hope someone took a photo and has it somewhere so I can go pick it up."

Luis Tiant, a three-time MLB all-star, and Pedro Luis Lazo, who had a long career with Cuban club Pinar del Rio and the national team, threw out the first pitches.

The stadium observed a minute of silence before the game in memory of the Brussels attacks.

Tar Heels happy to 'go small'

Associated Press

CHAPEL HILL, N.C. — Going smaller is becoming a big deal for North Carolina.

The Tar Heels haven't hesitated to go to a lineup with four perimeter players around All-America candidate Brice Johnson or Isaiah Hicks more and more in recent weeks. It's an asset in the NCAA Tournament that allows the East Region's No. 1 seed to juggle lineups and speed up the pace against opponents heading into Friday's Sweet 16 game against No. 5-seed Indiana in Philadelphia.

"I like when we go small," sophomore wing Justin Jackson said Tuesday. "It seems like our intensity level goes up a whole other notch, because we have to fly around, we have to box out and work hard because if we don't, they'll take advantage of it."

So far at least, the Tar Heels (30-6) have been the ones gaining an edge with the lineup. Coach Roy Williams has long preferred balance, having the ability to attack teams both in the paint and on the perimeter to wear down opponents, get them in foul trouble or both.

His typical starting lineup uses 6-foot-10 forwards Johnson and Kennedy Meeks inside, with Marcus Paige and Joel Berry II in the backcourt and the 6-8 Jackson on the wing. But the Tar Heels frequently go in and out of the smaller look thanks to their size on the perimeter with Jackson and versatile 6-6 sophomore Theo Pinson, who is possibly UNC's top overall defender.

It's not a new scheme; the Tar Heels have been using it for stretches this season like an off-speed pitch to give a team a different look, buy time due to foul trouble or get more pressure on the perimeter with some scrambling traps. Of late, it's also helped offset Meeks' struggles (21 points in five postseason games) since posting a double-double in the win at Duke to close the regular season.

"Being able to use different lineups in the tournament is huge," Paige said. "It's not [Atlantic Coast Conference] play where you get three days to scout somebody or you've played against them before and know what they're going to do."

"You're playing teams from different conferences, just completely different styles of play from one game to the next. So having the ability to go small can save us in a lot of opportunities."

Saturday's second-round win against Providence was an example of how UNC uses its small lineup.

The Tar Heels spent the last 6 minutes of the first half with Jackson, Berry, Pinson and 6-1 junior Nate Britt on the court around Johnson inside, and shifted into four-wing looks around Hicks for second-half stretches, too.

Pinson spent time defending Big East player of the year Kris Dunn (6-4) in the backcourt and top scorer Ben Bentil (6-9) as a stretch forward. And with Johnson's 10.5 rebounds per game, the Tar Heels aren't losing much of the glass.

Terps fill underdog role against Kansas

Associated Press

COLLEGE PARK, Md. — After spending much of the college basketball season ranked in the top 10, Maryland defeated a pair of lower seeded teams last week to advance to the Sweet 16 of the NCAA Tournament.

On Thursday night against Kansas, the overall top seed in the tournament, Mark Turgeon's squad will be cast in a decidedly different role: Underdogs.

The Terrapins (27-8) beat No. 12 seed South Dakota State and 13th-seeded Hawaii to earn a berth in the round of 16 for the first time in 13 years. That provided Maryland a date with the Big 12 champion Jayhawks (32-4), who will bring a 16-game winning streak into the matchup in Louisville, Ky.

It's not as if the Terps have nothing

to lose, but there's certainly less pressure facing one of the favorites in the tournament.

"There's been times this year we've been tight. Now there's no reason for us to be tight, really, the rest of the way," Turgeon said Tuesday. "There's a good chance we'll be an underdog in most games."

Especially on Thursday, as a No. 5 seed.

"There are only 16 of us left," Turgeon said. "We'll be on the national stage playing the No. 1 team in the country. So, I want them to enjoy the moment and make the most of it."

Turgeon's players were reluctant to acknowledge Kansas as the favorite.

"I don't really feel like we're an underdog," forward Robert Carter Jr. said.

Senior Jake Layman added, "We're not worried about seeding and where we

were at the beginning of the year, in terms of rankings and stuff. We know they're a great team and have great players. We're just going to try to go out there and play Maryland basketball."

Maryland has run hot and cold this season. The Terrapins were 22-3 and ranked second in the nation before losing five of eight, a skid that ultimately produced an earlier-than-hoped date with Kansas.

For much of the season, the Terrapins dealt with the pressure of fulfilling high expectations. Now, here they are, still playing ball with 15 of the best teams in the country.

"It was really important to me that we beat Hawaii. I wanted our guys to experience this," Turgeon said. "The first and second rounds, it's fun, it's nice, it's great. But the Sweet 16 takes it to another level."



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Westbrook's triple-double lifts Thunder over Rockets

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Russell Westbrook's recent play has been on par with some of the game's all-time greats.

The dynamic point guard had 21 points, 15 assists and 13 rebounds to help the Thunder beat the Houston Rockets 111-107 on Tuesday night.

Westbrook has 15 triple-doubles this season and 34 in his career. It's the most triple-doubles by a player in a season since 1988-89, when Magic Johnson had 17 and Michael Jordan had 15. It was also Westbrook's sixth triple-double in March. According to STATS, it's the most by a player in a calendar month since Jordan had seven in April 1989.

"That's just a blessing," Westbrook said. "Especially getting mentioned with those guys. Those guys are Hall of Famers. My job is try to help us win games and try to win a championship."

It was his third triple-double in a row and fourth in his past five games. The Thunder improved to 15-0 this season when he gets a triple-double and 30-4 all-time.

"When he helps us rebound like that and passes the ball, it's good for our team," Thunder forward Kevin Durant said. "I think the thing is rebounds. When he rebounds like that, we're a better team. He can pass and he can score with the best of them. When he rebounds that way, it gives us a little something extra."

Durant scored 23 points and Dion Waiters added 17 to help the Thunder win

their fifth straight.

James Harden had 24 points, a career-high 16 assists and seven rebounds for the Rockets. Dwight Howard had 16 points and 13 rebounds and Patrick Beverley added 16 points.

Houston led 99-97 when Westbrook took over. He found Steven Adams for a dunk on an inbounds pass, got a steal and a dunk, then made a long two-point jumper to give the Thunder a 103-99 lead.

Harden's three-pointer with 13.8 seconds to play cut Oklahoma City's lead to 108-107. Serge Ibaka made 1 of 2 free throws with 11.9 seconds left to give the Thunder a two-point lead. Harden then tried to get the ball down low to Howard, but Waiters stole it.

"It was the right read by both of our guys offensively, but it was a heck of a defensive play by Waiters to deflect the ball," Rockets coach J.B. Bickerstaff said.

Westbrook made two free throws at the other end with 3.5 seconds remaining to put the game out of reach.

"We felt like we were in it the whole game," Howard said. "We had great opportunities to win. K.D. made some tough shots, Russ made some tough shots and they got some stops down the stretch. That won them the game."

Lakers 107, Grizzlies 100: Jordan Clarkson scored 22 points and Kobe Bryant added 20 as host Los Angeles snapped a four-game losing streak.

Bryant scored 12 points in the third quarter, but the superstar sat out the final 4:20. Brandon Bass got eight of his

18 points in the fourth while Los Angeles' younger players closed out an unlikely victory over the playoff-bound Grizzlies, who had won the clubs' first three meetings of the season.

Heat 113, Pelicans 99: Hassan Whiteside had 24 points, 14 rebounds and three blocked shots to lead visiting Miami past injury-ravaged New Orleans.

Dwyane Wade and Goran Dragic each scored 23 points for the Heat, who've won nine of 12 games to put Miami in position to grab a playoff seeding as high as third in the Eastern Conference.

Jrue Holiday scored 24 for New Orleans, but missed 16 of his 23 shots. His shooting struggles against Miami's stout defense was part of a theme for New Orleans, which shot only 39.1 percent (34-for-87) for the game.

Hornets 105, Nets 100: Nicolas Batum scored 23 points to lead Charlotte past host Brooklyn.

Jeremy Lin added 21 points, a night after scoring 29 in Charlotte's rally from 23 down to beat the San Antonio Spurs.

Brook Lopez had 29 points, nine rebounds and a season-high six assists, and Sean Kilpatrick added a career-high 25 points for the Nets.

Batum hit two big shots down the stretch to key the win. Batum had a four-point play to put Charlotte up 91-84 with 4:11 left and a three-pointer to extend the lead to 96-88 with 2:44 remaining.

Cougars, Crusaders get berths in NIT semifinals

Associated Press

PROVO, Utah — Freshman Zac Seljaas made 5 of 6 three-pointers and scored 19 points and BYU used a big second half to beat Creighton 88-82 on Tuesday night in the NIT quarterfinals.

The Cougars (26-10) will face Valparaiso (29-6), which beat BYU's fellow West Coast Conference member Saint Mary's, at Madison Square Garden on March 29.

Seljaas nailed an open three-pointer to give BYU its first double-digit lead at 61-51 with 11:19 left. Then Seljaas and Nick Emery hit threes on the Cougars' next two possessions to cap a 12-1 run for a 67-52 lead.

Kyle Collinworth missed two free throws with 41.2 seconds left and Cole Huff made a contested layup to cut Creighton's deficit to 82-77. But Emery made 4 of 4 free throws from there to secure it.

Kyle Davis added 18 points for BYU. Emery had 17 and Collinworth battled through the flu bug to finish with 10.

Geoffrey Groselle led Creighton (20-15) with 22 points. Huff had 18 points and 11 rebounds.

Creighton led by as many as 12 points in the first half but made just two of its last 11 field-goal attempts and trailed BYU 38-37 at halftime.

Valparaiso 60, Saint Mary's 44: Alec Peters scored 20 points for his seventh straight 20-plus game and the host Crusaders advanced to their first NIT semifinals with a victory over the Gaels.

Tevonn Walker opened the second-half scoring with a three-pointer to give Valparaiso a 32-31 lead — its first since 17-16. Shane Hammink's putback extended it to 40-31 and capped a 16-0 run. Saint Mary's was held scoreless for nine-plus minutes, spanning the halves, and missed its first 10 shots of the second half.

The shooting troubles continued for Saint Mary's as the Gaels shot 20.7 percent in the second half and scored just 13 points.

Keith Carter added 11 points for Valparaiso (29-6) and Vashil Fernandez caused problems inside with nine points, seven rebounds and six blocks. Peters has totaled 74 points and 24 rebounds in three NIT games.

Peters sank a three-pointer from the wing to cut Valparaiso's deficit to 31-29 at halftime. He scored 11 in the first half but the Crusaders were hurt by seven turnovers.

Dane Pineau led Saint Mary's (29-6) with 11 points. The Gaels made four of their first seven 3-pointers but hit 1 of 12 after that.

Valpo set an Athletics-Recreation Center (ARC) record with 5,444 attendees.

Capitals clinch top spot in East

Associated Press

OTTAWA, Ontario — Alex Ovechkin and the Washington Capitals know they still have room to improve going into the playoffs.

Ovechkin scored his 43rd goal and the Capitals clinched the Metropolitan Division and the top seed in the Eastern Conference with a 4-2 victory over the Ottawa Senators on Tuesday night.

"It's huge," Ovechkin said. "I think we deserve how we play all year to clinch it. Right now, 10 games left, I think we just have to play more simple and be ready for the playoffs."

Mike Richards, Nicklas Backstrom and T.J. Oshie, with an empty net, also scored for the Capitals. Braden Holtby stopped 28 shots.

"It's one of those things where we're not in a playoff push, but with 10 games left and we're not playing the way we want to play it's almost a blessing in disguise that we can wrap it up," Holtby said.

"Now we have something to play for. We want to make sure we're getting to our top level coming into Game 1 of the playoffs and it's a luxury that we have 10 games to do it and now it's our job to use them effectively and that's our goal as a collective group."

The Capitals were pleased with how they started the game, but know they need to be better for 60 minutes.

"Obviously we had a very good start," Ovechkin said. "Scored three goals right away and didn't give them anything, but

we just have to continue to play all three periods like that. I think in the second we felt a little bit loose and tried to play fancy hockey and you can see it's not going to work like that."

Chris Wideman and Mika Zibanejad scored for the Senators. Craig Anderson made 18 saves.

Stars 6, Blackhawks 2: Vernon Fiddler scored two of Dallas' four goals in the first period to help the Stars clinch a playoff spot with a victory over host Chicago.

The Stars lead the Western Conference with 97 points with eight games left on their schedule. They are on track for their first division title since they took the Pacific in 2006.

Lightning 6, Red Wings 2: Erik Condra ended a 20-game drought with a pair of goals to lead Tampa Bay past visiting Detroit.

Tampa Bay tied the Florida Panthers atop the Atlantic Division with 89 points. Both teams have nine games remaining.

Blue Jackets 3, Flyers 2 (SO): Boone Jenner scored late in the third period and again in the shootout after Cam Atkinson's tying goal with 8 seconds left, rallying host Columbus to an improbable victory over Philadelphia.

Steve Mason finished with 51 saves for the Flyers, who blew a two-goal lead in the final 65 seconds but still earned a point. That was enough to pull them into a tie with Detroit for the final playoff position in the East.

Wild 2, Kings 1: Devan Dubnyk made a season-high 38 saves and Minnesota's

penalty kill kept up its strong work as the Wild beat visiting Los Angeles to move back into possession of the final playoff spot in the Western Conference.

Blues 1, Sharks 0: Brian Elliott made 37 saves in his second consecutive shut-out since returning from an injury and Robby Fabbri scored midway through the third period to lift St. Louis over host San Jose.

Canadiens 4, Ducks 3: Lucas Lessio scored his first goal in 11 games with Montreal to help the Canadiens defeat visiting Anaheim.

Torrey Mitchell, Alex Galchenyuk and Mike Brown also scored for the Canadiens.

Sabres 3, Hurricanes 2: Johan Larsson scored with 2:49 left as Buffalo rallied to beat host Carolina.

Larsson's winner came a minute after Evander Kane tied it, and Carlo Colaiacovo also scored to help the Sabres earn their third win in five games.

Jets 2, Canucks 0: Ondrej Pavelec made 28 saves for his first shutout of the season to help host Winnipeg beat reeling Vancouver.

Coyotes 4, Oilers 2: Tobias Rieder scored the winning goal in the second period and Oliver Ekman-Larsson returned from injury to spark Arizona against visiting Edmonton.