

STARS AND STRIPES®

Friday, March 16, 2018

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Helo crash in Iraq kills 7 US troops

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

All seven servicemembers aboard a U.S. military helicopter died when the aircraft crashed near the Iraq-Syria border on Thursday evening, military officials said.

"This tragedy reminds us of the risks our men and women face every day in service of our nations," said Brig. Gen. Jonathan P. Braga, director of operations for Combined Joint Task Force — Operation Inherent Resolve, in a statement. "We are thinking of the loved ones of these service members today."

The HH-60 Pave Hawk helicopter crash did not appear to be the result of enemy activity, said the statement from the U.S.-led operation battling militants in Iraq and Syria.

Used by the Air Force for combat search and rescue, the Pave Hawk was on a routine transit flight when it went down near the town of Qaim in Anbar province, officials said.

A second helicopter accompanying it immediately reported the crash, and a quick-reaction force of Iraqi and coalition forces

secured the scene, officials said.

"We are grateful to the Iraqi security forces for their immediate assistance in response to this tragic incident," Braga said.

Using an alternative Arabic term for ISIS, he said Iraqi forces "continue to demonstrate their professionalism, capabilities and flexibility as we continue the fight towards a lasting defeat of Daesh."

The incident is under investigation and the names of the dead servicemembers will be released after next of kin have been notified, the military said.

On Facebook, members and veterans of the Air Force's combat search-and-rescue community began replacing their profile photos with images of two green footprints with a black ribbon, on which was written the Air Force pararescue motto, "That others may live."

Danielle Youngberg, whose profile said she works for the Air Force, wrote about a colleague he said was lost in the crash.

"This has been a season of goodbyes, but this last one has hurt the most," she wrote, along with recollections about one of the unnamed victims of the crash. "To those that pray, lift up the rescue commu-

nity tonight. To those that don't, we could use some peace and compassion for the (seven) lives lost and the families forever changed."

The U.S.-led coalition battling ISIS insurgents in Iraq and Syria have an outpost in Qaim, which is located near the Syrian border. The anti-ISIS campaign accelerated through much of last year as coalition and Iraqi forces battled to take back a string of cities and towns.

Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi declared victory over ISIS in Mosul in July. In the following months, Iraqi forces retook a handful of other ISIS-held towns, including Tal Afar in August, Hawija in September and Qaim in October. In November, Iraqi forces retook the last Iraqi town held by ISIS — Rawah, near the border with Syria.

The U.S.-led coalition has continued to work with Iraq and Syrian Democratic Forces to shore up the border region and to make sure that foreign fighters and insurgents can't move freely across the region.

garland.chad@stripes.com
Twitter: @chadgarland

In wake of deadly crash, DOD cites funding crunch

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon acknowledged Thursday that budget shortfalls have eroded military capabilities, including training and flight hours, but stopped short of blaming those cutbacks for the crash of a U.S. Navy fighter jet that killed both crewmembers.

Dana White, Pentagon spokeswoman, said the cause of the F/A-18 Super Hornet crash Wednesday off the coast of Key West, Fla., is still under investigation. But she was asked if there was a link between the crash and persistent military complaints about reductions in flying hours and other training cutbacks because Congress hasn't approved the 2018 budget.

"It's important that we not necessarily draw a direct correlation, but it is important that we have stable funding. That has been our message to the Congress and to

Incident killed former Navy football player

Page 2

Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, director of the Joint Staff, said military readiness is a key priority, but it's not clear how it affected the aircraft or the deaths of the crew. He added, however, that "pilots are going to be flying more and training is going to pick up."

The Super Hornet was on approach to land at the naval air station in Key West about 4:30 p.m. when it crashed into shallow water about a mile east of the runway.

Both the pilot and the weapons-system officer ejected and were pulled out of the

the American people for the last several months," said White. "Capabilities erode. And things are delayed."

Marine Lt.

water. U.S. Naval Air Forces said late Wednesday that both had died.

The aviators have been identified as Lt. Cmdr. James Brice Johnson and Lt. Caleb Nathaniel King, both Florida residents, Naval Air Forces said.

Johnson, a Naval aviator and 2007 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, was piloting the jet when the incident occurred while King, a 2012 U.S. Naval Academy graduate, was serving as the weapons systems operator.

April Phillips, a spokeswoman for the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, Va., said there have been 25 serious mishaps involving F/A-18 Super Hornets since fiscal year 2008. They resulted in four deaths — including the two Wednesday — and the loss of 11 aircraft. The other two fatalities were in 2011.

Mattis taps Stearney to lead 5th Fleet

BY TYLER HLAVAC

Stars and Stripes

The Pentagon has tapped a career aviator and former TOPGUN instructor to lead the Navy's Bahrain-based 5th Fleet.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis announced Thursday that Rear Adm. Scott Stearney had been nominated to take charge of the epicenter of naval operations in the Middle East. He also is slated to lead Naval Forces Central Command and to receive a promotion to vice admiral.

Stearney — who now serves as director of operations for U.S. Central Command — will replace Vice Adm. John Aquilino, who was nominated by the Pentagon last month to take over the Navy's Pacific Fleet. Aquilino took over as head of Navy forces in the Middle East only six months ago.

If confirmed, Stearney will command a fleet whose operational area covers roughly 2.5 million square miles of sea and includes the Arabian Gulf, the Red Sea, the Gulf of Oman, parts of the Indian Ocean and choke points at the Strait of Hormuz, the Suez Canal and the Bab el Mandeb strait at the southern tip of Yemen.

The Navy routinely sends aircraft carrier strike groups on rotational deployments to Bahrain. They have conducted airstrikes in the region to

eliminate Islamic State as part of Operation Inherent Resolve. Naval forces in the region began an air campaign against the terror group in August 2014 in which the USS George H.W. Bush launched airstrikes against ISIS targets in Iraq. In December, the USS Theodore Roosevelt — the latest carrier to be deployed to 5th Fleet — began launching strikes against ISIS targets in Iraq and Syria. It struck Taliban targets in Afghanistan the same month.

Naval forces in the region also have faced provocative acts at sea from Iranian forces. These peaked in January 2016 when 10 U.S. sailors were detained by members of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard

after their riverine patrol boats accidentally crossed into Iranian territorial waters.

Last year saw 13 unsafe or unprofessional interactions between the U.S. and Iran, Navy officials said.

Iranian forces have been unusually quiet since August when a drone flew within 100 feet of a Navy fighter, forcing the F/A-18 Super Hornet to change direction to avoid a collision.

Stearney previously served as tactics instructor and readiness officer at Navy Fighter Weapons School, or TOPGUN. His past assignments include serving as the commander of Carrier Air Wing 7, Carrier Strike Group 4 and Navy Warfare Development Command.

Former Navy linebacker among jet crash victims

The (Annapolis, Md.) Capital

Former Navy football player Caleb King was one of two aviators killed in a fighter jet crash off Key West, Fla.

King, a 2012 Naval Academy graduate, was aboard an F/A-18F Super Hornet that crashed on approach to Naval Air Station Key West on Wednesday, friends and Navy sources told The Capital. Family members have confirmed his death on social media.

Navy officials said the aircraft was on a routine training mission when the mishap occurred, but would not go into further details because a preliminary investigation was still in its early stages.

President Donald Trump offered his condolences via Twitter

Both the aircraft and aircrew were from the "Fighting Black Lions" of Strike Fighter Squadron 213, based out of Naval Air Station Oceana in Virginia Beach, Va.

Word clearly has spread among former Navy football

players that King was one of the aviators killed in this particular accident. Several individuals associated with Navy football posted tributes to King on social media.

King was a standout inside linebacker for the Navy football program from 2009 through 2011, appearing in 38 games over three seasons. The 6-foot, 223-pounder started four games during the 2010 season and finished with 28 tackles. He was the primary backup at both inside linebacker spots as a senior and recorded 31 tackles.

King did not see varsity action as a plebe in Annapolis before becoming a key contributor on special teams as a sophomore.

King was a varsity letterman for the 2009 Navy football team that captured the Commander-in-Chief's Trophy and finished 10-4 after beating Missouri in the Texas Bowl and the 2010 squad that went 9-4 and played in the Poinsettia Bowl.

Milley: Army is still years away from readiness goals

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Army's top general told lawmakers Thursday that his service's combat readiness has improved significantly during his tenure, but the force needs at least three more years to reach its goal of producing 30 combat brigades prepared to fight.

Nearly two decades of war and mandatory budget cuts left only two of the Army's 58 brigade combat teams fully trained and ready to fight when Gen. Mark Milley, the Army's chief of staff, took the reins of the service in August 2015, he told the defense subpanel of the House Appropriations Committee. Today, more than five brigade combat teams are trained to the highest possible readiness level, he said, adding the exact number of fully trained combat brigades was classified for security reasons.

Several additional brigades are at least partially trained, the general said, promising the House panel that the Army was

capable of winning any fight it entered in the near future.

"I can assure you the United States Army has sufficient readiness to take on whatever adversary that the United States meets today or tomorrow," Milley said. "I'm very confident of that. I wasn't confident of that two and a half years ago. I am very confident of that today."

Milley and Army Secretary Mark Esper told lawmakers that the Army's goal is to ensure two-thirds of its 31 active-duty brigade combat teams are fully trained and prepared to "fight tonight." The service additionally wants one-third of its 27 National Guard combat brigade teams trained to the highest possible level.

But achieving those goals will take time and a lot of training, Milley said.

"If the international environment stays the way it is right this minute, we think on the glide path we're on, we'll achieve our readiness objectives somewhere in the 2021, 2022 time frame," he said.

Vt. Guard: Avalanche hit during slope safety check

Associated Press

JERICO, Vt. — Vermont National Guard officials say the avalanche that injured six soldiers hit while the slope was being checked for safety.

Lt. Col. Matthew Brown, the head of the Army's Mountain Warfare School in Jericho, Vt., said Friday that two of the soldiers remain hospitalized while recovering from injuries sustained in the avalanche Wednesday on a slope in Smugglers Notch.

He wouldn't describe the injuries, but said no one was buried under the snow.

The six were among a group of soldiers taking part in an advanced mountaineering training event in Easy Gully in Smugglers Notch, a narrow pass in the Vermont mountains flanked by steep, rocky cliffs. The area is frequently used by soldiers participating in the Mountain Warfare School, which is run by the Vermont National Guard.

Guard spokesman Lt. Mike Arcovitch said the avalanche struck as some instructors and students in the advanced course were setting up ropes to be used by soldiers in the basic course.

The avalanche came as the latest in a series of March storms dumped snow onto the mountains of Vermont.

Veteran Congresswoman Slaughter dies at 88

WASHINGTON — Veteran Congresswoman Rep. Louise Slaughter died Friday days after falling in her residence, her top aide said. The lawmaker had been the first woman to chair the House Rules Committee and was her party's top member on the panel when she died.

The New York Democrat died at George Washington University Hospital in Washington, a week after a fall in which she'd sustained a concussion, said Liam Fitzsimmons, her chief of staff. Doctors had been monitoring her for a condition, Fitzsimmons said.

Slaughter, 88, was serving her 16th term in the House, and her service of 31 years in the chamber was the third longest, according to the official House website. She chaired the Rules committee from 2007 through 2010.

From The Associated Press

Officials seek probe of sex assaults of children on bases

Associated Press

Congress reacted Thursday to an Associated Press investigation into sexual assault among children on U.S. military bases by demanding the Defense and Justice departments explain how they will solve the problem.

The House of Representatives Armed Services Committee, meanwhile, said it had begun its own examination of the issue. And a top Democrat on the committee said she would call a hearing within six months.

Four senators, including the head of the Senate Armed Services Committee and two others who've made sexual assault a keynote issue, sent letters to the Pentagon and the Justice Department with questions about sex assault among the military's children.

The AP's investigation revealed that reports of sexual violence among kids on U.S. military bases at home and abroad often die on the desks of prosecutors, even when an attacker confesses. Other cases are shelved by criminal investigators despite requirements they be pursued. Many cases get lost in a dead zone of justice, the AP found, with neither victim nor offender receiving help.

"The report reveals an inscrutable system that fails these children at every level," wrote Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.

In a letter to Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., and Sen. Jack Reed, D-R.I., leaders of the Senate Armed Services Committee, asked that the Pentagon's inspector general begin a "comprehensive assessment" of department policies related to sexual assault among military children in schools and elsewhere on base.

"It disturbs us to learn that the department's policies and procedures may prevent efforts to help child victims of misconduct ... and to rehabilitate and hold child offenders accountable," they wrote.

Separately, Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, D-N.Y., wrote the Justice Department's inspector general requesting a "comprehensive investigation" into how many child sex assault cases have been prosecuted and why the majority have been declined.

Inspector general offices are independent entities within federal departments charged with investigating potential problems within agencies. They do not have to accept requests for action from Capitol Hill.

A Pentagon spokesman would not comment on the day's developments. "Alleged conversations between Secretary Mattis and other officials are private and will remain as such," Maj. Dave Eastburn said in an email.

Inspectors general for the Pentagon and the Justice Department also did not com-

ment, nor did a spokesman for the Justice Department.

Rep. Jackie Speier, D-Calif., called the AP's finding of nearly 600 reports of sexual assault among children on bases since 2007 "a national disgrace and a military scandal."

Speier, the top Democrat on a House Armed Services subcommittee that deals with military personnel, said she was demanding information from the Pentagon in anticipation of holding a public hearing within six months.

"You cannot have an environment in which children aren't protected, regardless of whether they're on a base or in a public school classroom. So we've got to change the law," Speier said in an interview.

A spokesman for Republicans on the House Armed Services Committee said staff already had begun "an independent examination of cooperation between" the Defense and Justice departments and how they handle military child-on-child sexual assault. Issues they would examine include support for victims and the Pentagon's data.

Records the military initially released omitted a third of the cases the AP later identified through interviews with prosecutors, military investigators, family members and whistleblowers as well as data that officials later provided.

"This is clearly a serious matter," committee spokesman Claude Chafin said of the AP's findings.

The tens of thousands of kids who live on U.S. bases are not covered by military law. The Justice Department, which handles civilian crimes on many bases, isn't equipped or inclined to take on juvenile cases, the AP found.

This legal and bureaucratic netherworld also extends to the Pentagon's worldwide network of schools, which afford students fewer protections than public schools if they are sexually attacked by classmates on campus. The federal law that offers help to victims of student-on-student sexual assault, known as Title IX, does not apply to federal education programs, such as those run by the military.

In a separate letter to Mattis on Thursday, Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate education committee, demanded answers by early April to a long list of questions about how the Department of Defense Education Activity handles assaults on its campuses.

The military school system that educates some 71,000 children has no specific policy to respond to student-on-student sexual violence and doesn't accurately track the incidents, the AP found. More than 150 cases weren't disclosed by schools in reports that are meant to alert headquarters to serious incidents.

Florida bridge collapsed after stress test

Associated Press

MIAMI — An innovative pedestrian bridge being built at Florida International University had been put to a “stress test,” and its cables were being tightened when it collapsed over traffic, killing six people and sending 10 to a hospital, authorities said.

As state and federal investigators worked to determine how and why the 5-day-old span failed Thursday, one factor may have been the stress test Miami-Dade Mayor Carlos Gimenez said crews were conducting on the span.

Two workers were on the 950-ton bridge when it pancaked on top of vehicles waiting at a stoplight.

Sen. Marco Rubio R-Fla., tweeted late Thursday that the cables that suspend the bridge had loosened and the engineering firm ordered that they be tightened. “They were being tightened when it collapsed,” he said on Twitter.

First responders had been racing to find survivors in the rubble of the 175-foot span using high-tech listening devices, trained sniffing dogs and search cameras before turning the scene over to police.

“This has turned from a rescue to a recovery operation,” Miami-Dade Police Det. Alvaro Zabaleta said.

The \$14.2 million pedestrian bridge was supposed to open in 2019 as a safe way to cross the busy six-lane road between the university campus and the community of Sweetwater, where many students live.

At the accident scene, Florida Gov. Rick Scott said investigators will get to the bottom of “why this happened and what happened,” and if anyone did anything wrong, “we will hold them accountable.”

National Transportation Safety Board Chairman Robert Sumwalt III said a team of specialists would begin its investigation Friday morning.

Rubio, who is an adjunct professor at the school, noted the pedestrian bridge was intended to be an innovative and “one-of-a-kind engineering design.”

Renderings showed a tall, off-center tower with supporting cables attached to the walkway. When the bridge collapsed, the main tower had not yet been installed, and it was unclear what builders were using as temporary supports.

An accelerated construction method was supposed to reduce risks to workers and pedestrians and to minimize traffic disruption, the university said.

Kurds say Turkish shelling, strikes kill 20 in Afrin

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Turkish shelling and airstrikes on the northern Syrian Kurdish town of Afrin killed at least 20 civilians on Friday, Kurdish officials said, as the Turkish military urged residents of the town to leave and the Syrian Kurdish militiamen to surrender to besieging Turkish forces.

The media office for the Syrian Democratic Forces, a Kurdish-led and U.S.-backed force that operates in the Kurdish autonomous region in northern Syria, said that along with 20 killed, at least 30 were wounded in the attacks.

Victims lay dead the streets in pools of blood, according to a video from the Britain-based Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, which monitors Syria’s 7-year-old civil war and which put the death toll at 18.

Since their January offensive began, Turkish forces have nearly encircled Afrin in an effort to drive the Syrian Kurdish fighters from the town and the surrounding region. Residents say they are facing bread, water, and electricity shortages.

Hundreds of civilians were seen leaving the town to neighboring villages on Thursday looking for relief. Tens of thousands of civilians are believed to still be inside.

Earlier Friday, Turkish aircraft dropped

flyers in Arabic and Kurdish on Afrin, asking residents to stay away from “terrorist positions” — a reference to the Syrian Kurdish fighters — and to not let themselves be used as “human shields.”

The leaflets claimed that civilians desiring to flee Afrin would be guaranteed safety by the Turkish military and urged Syrian Kurdish fighters to “trust the hand we extend to you.”

“Come surrender! A calm and peaceful future awaits you in Afrin,” the leaflets read.

Along with civilians fleeing Afrin, a massive exodus also is underway from the besieged eastern suburbs of Damascus, where civilians are leaving the enclave known as eastern Ghouta in the face of the onslaught by the Syrian government forces, backed by their Russian allies.

Russia’s Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said Friday that the Russian military and the Syrian government would extend a cease-fire in Damascus’ rebel-held suburbs as long as it takes to allow all the civilians to leave the area.

Lavrov spoke in Kazakhstan, saying the cease-fire will be extended “until all (civilians) leave” eastern Ghouta. The Russian Defense Ministry said that 2,000 people had exited the rebel-held suburbs by early morning.

Russia to expel British diplomats

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia will expel British diplomats in a worsening global standoff over a nerve agent attack on an ex-spy — but still isn’t saying when or how many.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov on Friday also accused Britain of violating international law and said Britain’s defense minister “lacks education.”

Geopolitical tensions are mounting since the poisoning of ex-spy Sergei Skripal and his daughter in the English city of Salisbury earlier this month, in what Western powers see as the latest sign of increasingly aggressive Russian meddling abroad. The tensions threaten to overshadow Vladimir Putin’s expected re-election Sunday for another six-year term.

Accusing the Russian state of the nerve agent attack, Britain is expelling 23 Russian diplomats and is trying to build a coalition of countries to punish Moscow as a

result.

British Prime Minister Theresa May’s office said Friday that Australian leader Malcolm Turnbull joined her in condemnation of the attack. In an unusual joint move Wednesday, the U.S., France and Germany also pointed the finger at Russia.

The source of the nerve agent used — which Britain says is Soviet-made Novichok — is unclear. A report Friday in the Telegraph says it was put into the suitcase of Skripal’s daughter before she left Russia for Britain to see her father.

Russia denies being the source of the nerve agent, suggesting it could have been another country, and has demanded Britain share samples collected by investigators.

Russia’s ambassador to Britain said Friday the 23 expulsions will reduce staff at the embassy by about 40 percent. Alexander Yakovenko said on Russia-24 television it will have a “serious impact” on the embassy’s work.

Sources: Trump plans to fire security adviser

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump has decided to remove Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster as his national security adviser and is actively discussing potential replacements, according to five people with knowledge of the plans, preparing to deliver yet another jolt to the senior ranks of his administration.

Trump is now comfortable with ousting McMaster, with whom he never personally gelled, but is willing to take time executing the move because he wants to ensure both that the three-star Army general is not humiliated and that there is a strong successor lined up, these people said.

The turbulence is part of a broader potential shake-up under consideration by Trump that is likely to include senior officials at the White House, where staffers are gripped by fear and uncertainty as they await the next move from an impulsive president who enjoys stoking conflict.

For all of the evident disorder, Trump feels emboldened, advisers said — buoyed by what he views as triumphant decisions last week to impose tariffs on steel and aluminum and to agree to meet with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. The president is enjoying the process of assessing his team and making changes, tightening his inner circle to those he considers survivors and who respect his unconventional style, one senior White House official said.

White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders pushed back late Thursday on Twitter: “Just spoke @POTUS and Gen H.R. McMaster. Contrary to reports they have a good working relationship and there are no changes at the NSC.”

Before *The Washington Post* report was published, a White House spokesperson checked with several senior White House officials and did not dispute that the president had made a decision. White House Chief of Staff John Kelly — who has personally been eager to see McMaster go — has also told White House staff in recent days that Trump had made up his mind about ousting McMaster.

Just days ago, Trump used Twitter to fire Rex Tillerson, the secretary of state whom he disliked, and moved to install his close ally, CIA Director Mike Pompeo, in the job. On Wednesday, he named conservative TV analyst Larry Kudlow to replace his top economic adviser, Gary Cohn, who quit over trade disagreements.

And Trump signaled Thursday that more personnel moves were likely. “There will always be change,” he told reporters. “And I think you want to see change. I want to also see different ideas.”

This portrait of the Trump administration in turmoil is based on interviews with 19 presidential advisers and administration officials, many of whom spoke on the condition of anonymity to offer candid perspectives.

The mood inside the White House in recent days has verged on mania, as Trump increasingly keeps his own counsel and senior aides struggle to determine the gradations between rumor and truth. At times, they say, they are anxious and nervous, wondering what each new headline may mean for them personally.

But in other moments, they appear almost as characters in an absurdist farce — openly joking about whose career might end with the next presidential tweet. White House officials have begun betting about which staffer will be ousted next, though few, if any, have much reliable information about what is actually going on.

Many aides were particularly unsettled by the firing of the president’s longtime personal aide, John McEntee, who was marched out of the White House on Tuesday after his security clearance was revoked abruptly.

“Everybody fears the perp walk,” one senior White House official said. “If it could happen to Johnny, the president’s body guy, it could happen to anybody.”

Trump recently told Kelly that he wants McMaster out and asked for help weighing replacement options, according to two people familiar with their conversations. The president has complained that McMaster is too rigid and that his briefings go on too long and seem irrelevant.

Several candidates have emerged as possible McMaster replacements, including John Bolton, a former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, and Keith Kellogg, the chief of staff of the National Security Council.

Kellogg travels with Trump on many domestic trips, in part because the president likes his company and thinks he is fun. Bolton has met with Trump several times and often agrees with the president’s instincts. Trump also thinks Bolton, who regularly praises the president on Fox News Channel, is good on television.

Some in the White House have been reluctant to oust McMaster from his national security perch until he has a promotion to four-star rank or another comfortable landing spot. They are eager to show that someone can serve in the Trump administration without suffering severe damage to their reputation.

There has been a death watch for McMaster for several weeks. After NBC reported on March 1 that Trump was preparing to replace him, the White House dismissed that report as “fake news” — but this week, officials told *The Post* that Trump has now made a clear decision and the replacement search is more active.

McMaster is not the only senior official on thin ice with the president. Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin has attracted Trump’s ire for his spending decisions as well as for general disorder in the senior leadership of his agency.

Others considered at risk for being fired or reprimanded include Housing and Urban Development Secretary Ben Carson, who has generated bad headlines for ordering a \$31,000 dining room set for his office; Environmental Protection Agency Administrator Scott Pruitt, who has been under fire for his first-class travel at taxpayer expense; and Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke, whose agency spent \$139,000 to renovate his office doors.

Meanwhile, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos drew attention this week when she stumbled through a pair of high-profile television interviews. Kelly watched DeVos’ sit-down with Lesley Stahl of CBS’ “60 Minutes” with frustration and complained about the secretary’s apparent lack of preparation, officials said. Other Trump advisers mocked DeVos’ shaky appearance with Savannah Guthrie on NBC’s “Today” show.

Kelly’s own ouster has been widely speculated about for weeks. But two top officials said Trump on Thursday morning expressed disbelief to Vice President Mike Pence, senior advisers and Kelly himself that Kelly’s name was surfacing on media watch lists because his job is secure. Trump and Kelly then laughed about it, the officials said.

But others in the West Wing say Kelly’s departure could be imminent, and Mick Mulvaney, director of the Office of Management and Budget, has been mentioned as a possible new chief of staff.

On a mission to provide objective reporting
to America’s military, wherever they serve.
Read us online at www.stripes.com.

STARS AND STRIPES®

Bulls bust bracket, stun No. 4 Arizona

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Inside Buffalo's locker room hung a handwritten sign with two words: Ball Pressure.

Coach Nate Oats knew the Bulls had a shot at beating big, bad Arizona, but only if they could put lots of pressure on Arizona's guards and make them shoot from the perimeter.

It worked to perfection.

Call them the bracket-busting Bulls.

Pushing the pace and hounding Arizona into submission, 13th-seeded Buffalo pulled off the NCAA Tournament's biggest upset of the opening round, rolling to an 89-68 victory over the fourth-seeded Wildcats in the South Region on Thursday night.

"I felt like we had a shot," Oats said. "I didn't think we were going to win it like that."

The MAC's Bulls have a decided size disadvantage against the Pac-12's Wildcats and their pair of 7-footers.

Buffalo (27-8) shredded Arizona's defense with its quickness, getting to the lane for shots at the rim and kickouts to shooters.

Defensively, the Bulls pressured Arizona's guards and

collapsed around its big men in the lane, forcing the Wildcats (27-8) to the perimeter. Arizona couldn't convert, going 2-for-18 from beyond the arc while the Bulls knocked down 15 of 30.

And, boy, did they run—right into the round of 32 against Kentucky on Saturday.

Wes Clark scored 25 points, Jeremy Harris added 23 and CJ Massinburg had 19 points for Buffalo, which shot 55 percent.

"With us being a MAC, it's easy to look at us as a team that can't compete with a high-major, a team that has four NBA prospects," Clark said. "We know deep down from looking at the film and getting our confidence right that we could play with those guys. We came and played hard."

Arizona was bewildered by Buffalo's quickness and had a hard time getting the ball into Pac-12 player of the year Deandre Ayton. He still finished with 14 points and 13 rebounds, but the Bulls prevented him from dominating, as he had most of the season.

Now the Wildcats' tumultuous season is done and so is the Pac-12 — Arizona was the last of the conference's three teams still in the bracket. It's the first

time since 1996-97 a school from the six major conferences failed to send a team to the round of 32.

"They overwhelmed us in the second half, on offense and defense," Arizona coach Sean Miller said.

Arizona has played through one of the most difficult seasons in program history. The Wildcats were twice entangled in a federal investigation into nefarious recruiting practices and lost one of their best players twice to injury. Allonzo Trier missed two games after testing positive for the same banned substance that cost him 19 games a year ago.

Outside of an 0-for-3 trip to the Bahamas, their focus on the court rarely wavered. Arizona won the Pac-12 regular-season title and routed Southern California in the tournament title game, becoming the second team in conference history to sweep both in consecutive seasons.

"We endured a lot from the beginning," Arizona point guard Parker Jackson-Cartwright said. "People kind of wrote us off. And I thought we responded every time that happened."

The Wildcats were the No. 4 seed in the South, but Buffalo was not an easy matchup.

Harris and Clark used their quickness to combine for 27 first-half points, and the Wildcats went 1-for-8 from three-point range to trail Buffalo 40-38.

Buffalo used a similar blueprint to build a 65-55 lead midway through the second half. Massinburg banked in a three-pointer to stretch the lead to 13 and the Bulls kept building it, racing off to the program's biggest victory.

Big picture: Arizona will be in rebuilding mode this off-season with Ayton, Trier and Rawle Alkins headed to the NBA and a thin recruiting class so far.

Busting Obama's bracket: Former President Barack Obama picked Arizona to beat Buffalo in his bracket. He was left disappointed along with millions of others, but the Bulls aren't going to apologize.

"I noticed President Barack Obama picked Arizona to beat us," Massinburg said. "So I just wanted to say, 'President Obama, I'm sorry but I had to.'"

South roundup

Buzzer-beater lifts Loyola-Chicago over Miami

Associated Press

DALLAS — Donte Ingram picked the perfect spot for this game-winning shot.

Ingram hit a three-pointer from the March Madness logo just before the buzzer, lifting 11th-seeded Loyola-Chicago over Miami 64-62 in a Thursday thriller at the NCAA Tournament.

"Well, it's pretty simple to know why we call it March Madness," said Hurricanes coach Jim Larranaga, left holding his head in stunned disbelief after Ingram's shot.

In 2006, Larranaga took 11th-seeded George Mason to the Final Four. This time, it was Loyola's turn to celebrate after making its first tournament appearance in 33 years.

The long shot from well beyond the key came with just a split-second left, and was

set up by a pass from Marques Townes. It happened after Lonnie Walker IV missed a free throw with a chance to give Miami a three-point lead with 9 seconds remaining.

"I thank Marques for making that pass," said Ingram, who was 3-for-8 from three and scored 13 points. "Any one of us could have hit that shot, but I was just fortunate enough to be in the position."

The Ramblers (29-5) matched the school record for wins from their 1963 national championship team in their first NCAA trip since losing to Patrick Ewing and Georgetown in the Sweet 16 in 1985.

The sixth-seeded Hurricanes (22-10) couldn't pull away in the final minutes and lost in the first round for the second straight year.

Tennessee 73, Wright State 47: At Dallas, Admiral Schofield had 15 points and 12 rebounds as the third-seeded Volunteers advanced to the second round by overwhelming the Raiders.

Lamonte Turner had 19 points and a career-high nine assists for Tennessee (26-8), SEC co-champion in the regular season after being picked in the preseason to finish 13th in the 14-team league. The Volunteers face Loyola-Chicago on Saturday.

Kentucky 78, Davidson 73: At Boise, Idaho, Kentucky didn't make a three-point for the first time in a game since 1988, but still did enough to top Davidson.

Fifth-seeded Kentucky (25-10) went 0-for-6 from behind the arc after hitting a three in a nation-best streak of 1,047 games.

West roundup

Fourth-seeded 'Zags survive scare from UNC Greensboro

Associated Press

BOISE, Idaho — Zach Norvell Jr. watched Gonzaga's greatest moments play out from the sideline last year.

This year, the redshirt freshman will be part of the highlight reel.

The shooting guard from Chicago hit the go-ahead three-pointer with 20.8 seconds left Thursday to help the fourth-seeded Bulldogs escape a major scare in the West Region with a 68-64 victory over UNC Greensboro.

"He has a knack for that," coach Mark Few said. "When I saw him size the guy up, I knew that, A, he was probably going to shoot it, and, B, it was probably going to go in."

Last season's national runner-up trailed 64-62 with 1:48 left after squandering a 12-point lead it took early in the second half.

Josh Perkins tied the game at 64 with a long jumper, and after Greensboro's Francis Alonso forced up a miss, Gonzaga (31-4) got the rebound and worked the ball to Norvell, who spotted up from the right elbow and made the three for the lead.

Houston 67, San Diego State 65: At Wichita, Kan., Rob Gray drove for a wind-milling layup that just trickled over the rim with 1.1 seconds left, and Trey Kell's off-balance three-pointer at the buzzer was no good, giving the No. 6 seed Cougars a victory over the 11th-seeded Aztecs.

Devin Watson had just tied the game for San

Diego State with a turnaround three-pointer, his second in a matter of seconds, when Gray dribbled up floor with 29 seconds left. He allowed the clock to tick down to six seconds before crossing over, scooting under two defenders and scooping up his shot.

The layup gave him 39 points and Houston (27-7) its first tournament win since 1984.

Michigan 61, Montana 47: At Wichita, Kan., Charles Matthews had 20 points and 11 rebounds, his team locked down on defense and the third-seeded Wolverines beat the Grizzlies in a plodding first-round game.

Ohio St. 81, South Dakota St. 73: At Boise, Idaho, Kam Williams made a tiebreaking four-point play with 1:36 left, then added a trio of free throws after being fouled on another three-point attempt, lifting the Buckeyes over the Jackrabbits.

Fifth-seeded Ohio State (25-8) built a 13-point lead by reeling off 16 straight points midway through the second half of a game that featured 71 combined three-point attempts.

South Dakota State made a late run at the Buckeyes, scoring 10 straight points to tie it at 70-all.

Williams answered — by being fouled on a pair of three-pointers. He finished off the four-point play for a 74-70 lead and made all three free throws on the second, making it 77-70 with 64 seconds left.

East roundup

Crimson Tide edges Hokies

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Avery Johnson has spent plenty of time trying to convince Alabama freshman star Collin Sexton to take ownership of his play and the Crimson Tide, a message the coach has repeated frequently during his team's uneven season.

It finally seems to be getting through. The fact it took until March hardly matters.

"(Sexton's) giving more speeches to our team, which is showing leadership," Johnson said.

Make no mistake, however. It's the point guard's play — and not his talk — that sent the Crimson Tide into the second round of the NCAA Tournament. Sexton shook off a shaky and foul-marred first half to score 21 of his team-high 24 points after the break as Alabama took control late in an 86-83 victory over Virginia Tech on Thursday night.

Justin Robinson scored 19 points to lead the eighth-seeded Hokies (21-12).

Florida 77, St. Bonaventure 62: At Dallas, Egor Koulechov scored 20 points and the Gators eased past the Bonnies, ending their postseason run two days after their first NCAA Tournament victory in 48 years.

Jalen Hudson scored 16 points and Chris Chiozza had 11 assists for sixth-seeded Florida (21-12), which has reached the Elite Eight the past five times they've been in the tournament.

Villanova 87, Radford 61: At Pittsburgh, Jalen Brunson scored 16 points and the top-seeded Wildcats hit 14 three-pointers to rout the Highlanders.

Texas Tech 70, Stephen F. Austin 60: At Dallas, Keenan Evans scored 19 of his 23 points after halftime and the third-seeded Red Raiders finished on a 13-2 run.

SFA (28-7), the Southland Conference tournament champion, led by eight early in the second half.

Midwest roundup

Rhode Island keeps Young, OU in check

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — Here's the skinny on a Philly guard called Fatts: The player with the best nickname in the tournament given because he was a chunky baby turned in the stout performance Rhode Island required to win.

Fatts Russell hit three three-pointers and showed that — for this game, at least — he was the best freshman guard around as he pressured Oklahoma's dynamic scorer Trae Young right out of the NCAA Tournament.

E.C. Matthews hit the go-ahead three-pointer in overtime and one more that sealed it to help Rhode Island hold off Young and beat Oklahoma 83-78 Thursday in the Midwest Region.

The seventh-seeded Rams (26-7) won a game in the tournament for the second straight season and will play second-seeded Duke on Saturday.

Duke 89, Iona 67: At Pittsburgh, Marvin Bagley III dominated in his NCAA Tournament debut, pouring in 22 points to go with seven rebounds as the Blue Devils rolled past the Gaels.

Kansas 76, Pennsylvania 60: At Wichita, Kan., Devonte Graham ignited his sluggish team midway through the first half, pouring in 29 points and lifting the top-seeded Jayhawks to a tough, grind-it-out victory over the 16th-seeded Quakers.

Lagerald Vick added 14 points for Kansas (28-7), which trailed the Ivy League champs by 10 in the early stages before going on a 19-2 run late in the first half to take control.

Seton Hall 94, North Carolina State 83: At Wichita, Kan., Khadeen Carrington scored 26 points, Desi Rodriguez added 20 and the eighth-seeded Pirates beat the Wolfpack in a foul-filled first-round matchup.

NFL free agency

McKinnon glad to be featured back for 49ers

Associated Press

SANTA CLARA, Calif. — After spending most of his first four seasons in Minnesota as a part-time back, Jerick McKinnon wanted to find a spot in free agency where he could show off his ability as a featured runner.

San Francisco 49ers coach Kyle Shanahan saw enough from his film over those years to decide he was the player they wanted to be their starting running back, giving him a four-year deal that will guarantee him nearly \$12 million in 2018.

"It was big for me," McKinnon said Thursday. "It was what I was hoping to have and looking for instead of staying in Minnesota and being in that third-down back role. I was looking for that opportunity. I'm glad this organization, this team, coach Shanahan felt strong enough about me and brought me in. I believe it's the perfect fit."

The 49ers said they heavily targeted McKinnon and center Weston Richburg as players they wanted to acquire early in free agency. Richburg agreed to a five-year deal on Wednesday and both players were introduced at a news conference Thursday.

Raiders sign WR Nelson

ALAMEDA, Calif. — As soon as Jordy Nelson was released by the Green Bay Packers, the Oakland Raiders put on a full-court press to acquire the former Pro Bowler.

His former position coach and coordinator in Green Bay, Edgar Bennett, and new Raiders coach Jon Gruden immediately called to bring him out for a free-agent visit. Quarterback Derek Carr picked him up at the airport and gave him a tour of the Bay Area.

Then the Raiders offered a two-year deal worth a reported \$15 million that persuaded him to cancel his other scheduled visits and sign with Oakland.

The Raiders wasted little time Thursday attempting to rebuild under their first-year coach, releasing receiver Michael Crabtree to make room for Nelson; signing safety Marcus Gilchrist, linebacker Tahir Whitehead, running back Doug Martin and full-back Keith Smith; and finalizing deals with blocking tight ends Derek Carrier and Lee Smith that had been agreed to earlier in the week.

NBA roundup

Rockets wrap up division

Associated Press

HOUSTON — James Harden scored 24 points, Eric Gordon added 23 and the Houston Rockets outlasted the Los Angeles Clippers for a 101-96 victory on Thursday night.

It's Houston's third straight win and snaps a three-game winning streak for the Clippers. The victory, coupled with a loss by the Pelicans to the Spurs, wrapped up the Southwest Division title for the Rockets.

Trail Blazers 113, Cavaliers 105: CJ McCollum scored 29 points and Portland won its NBA-best 11th straight game with a victory over visiting Cleveland.

Damian Lillard added 24 points for the Blazers, on their longest run since also winning 11 in a row in 2013. It was the Blazers' eighth straight win at home.

Raptors 106, Pacers 99: DeMar DeRozan scored 24 points, Jonas Valanciunas added 16 points and 17 rebounds, and Toronto rallied late to get past host Indiana for its 10th straight victory.

Spurs 98, Pelicans 93: LaMarcus Aldridge scored 25 points, Dejounte Murray had 18 points and 12 rebounds, and San Antonio overcame another late rally to beat

visiting New Orleans.

76ers 118, Knicks 110: Joel Embiid had 29 points and 10 rebounds, Ben Simmons finished with a triple-double, and Philadelphia used a big final period to rally past host New York.

Nuggets 120, Pistons 113: Nikola Jokic had 23 points, 12 rebounds and 10 assists for his eighth triple-double of the season, Jamal Murray added 26 points and Denver's playoff hopes received a much-needed boost with a victory over visiting Detroit.

Jazz 116, Suns 88: Donovan Mitchell scored 23 points and Rudy Gobert had 21 points and 13 rebounds to lead host Utah over Phoenix, its eighth consecutive victory.

Hornets 129, Hawks 117: Dwight Howard scored 20 of his season-high 33 points in the second half, Nicolas Batum had a triple-double and set a career high with 16 assists, and visiting Charlotte beat Atlanta.

Bulls 111, Grizzlies 110: Antonio Blakeney made two of three free throws with 1.8 seconds left as Chicago handed host Memphis its 19th straight loss.

NHL roundup

Oshie's 2 goals propel Caps

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Washington Capitals — particularly T.J. Oshie — were grateful to get a high-scoring win.

Oshie scored twice, Dmitry Orlov and Nicklas Backstrom each had a goal and two assists, and the first-place Capitals beat the reeling New York Islanders 7-3 Thursday night.

It was the first time this season the Capitals had scored seven times and their three-game winning streak is their first since early January. They remained tied with Pittsburgh atop the Metropolitan Division, but currently hold the tiebreaker with two games in hand.

Penguins 5, Canadiens 3: Patric Hornqvist's second goal of the game gave his team the lead in the third period, and visiting Pittsburgh went on to beat Montreal.

Maple Leafs 5, Sabres 2: James van Riemsdyk had two goals and an assist to lead visiting Toronto past Buffalo.

Blue Jackets 5, Flyers 3: Cam Atkinson

scored a hat trick to lead visiting Columbus to its sixth straight victory.

Panthers 3, Bruins 0: James Reimer tied a season high with 46 saves to lead host Florida past Boston.

Avalanche 4, Blues 1: Nathan MacKinnon had two goals and an assist, Semyon Varlamov stopped 44 shots and visiting Colorado won its third straight to move into the first wild card spot in the Western Conference.

Jets 6, Blackhawks 2: Kyle Connor scored twice to reach 25 goals this season and host Winnipeg rebounded from a quick deficit.

Predators 3, Coyotes 2: Kevin Fiala and Kyle Turris each had a goal and assist in the third period, leading visiting Nashville over Arizona.

Kings 4, Red Wings 1: Anze Kopitar broke a third-period tie with a fluke goal and host Los Angeles handed Detroit its eighth consecutive defeat.