

STARS AND STRIPES®

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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

1 US servicemember killed in Syria blast

BY CHAD GARLAND AND COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

An improvised explosive device blast in Syria killed at least one American servicemember and one U.K. servicemember with the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State coalition and wounded five others late Thursday, according to military officials.

The wounded were immediately treated and were being evacuated for further medical care, according to an Operation Inherent Resolve statement Friday. The condition of the wounded troops was not immediately clear.

A U.S. defense official confirmed Friday that a U.S. servicemember was killed in the blast; however, the official would not confirm the nationality of the other individual killed in the explosion. The official spoke on the condition of anonymity to disclose information not authorized for public release.

In an emailed statement, the U.K. De-

fense Ministry said one of its servicemembers, embedded with U.S. forces in a counter-ISIS mission, also was killed in the blast. It's the U.K.'s first combat death in the anti-ISIS fight.

"The family has been notified and our thoughts are with them at this difficult time," the statement said. "We cannot confirm any further details at this stage."

Additional details of the incident were being withheld pending an investigation, according to the coalition. The Pentagon typically withholds the names of servicemembers killed in action for 24 hours after family notification.

Neither the two statements nor the official identified where the incident occurred. But it came hours after The Associated Press reported a local Syrian official had said a roadside bomb went off in Manbij, an Arab-Kurdish town not far from the border with Turkey, where U.S. troops patrol alongside their allies and are based nearby.

Mohammed Abu Adel, leader of the

Manbij Military Council, a U.S.-backed Arab-Kurdish group in Manbij, told the AP that the bomb went off just before midnight Thursday, hundreds of yards from a security headquarters that houses the council.

It's not yet clear who is responsible for the fatal bombing this week, which caused the first deaths from hostile action for the coalition, including the U.S., in Iraq or Syria this year. The American killed was at least the fourth in Syria since the anti-ISIS campaign began in late 2014.

It came as President Donald Trump, speaking Thursday at an event in Ohio, said the U.S. would be "coming out of Syria, like, very soon."

State Department and Pentagon officials on Friday declined to confirm the president's assertion, directing questions to the White House.

Pentagon spokeswoman Dana White said Thursday that the U.S. and coalition's mission in Syria "has not changed."

Syria town expects US to ward off threat from Turkey

Associated Press

MANBIJ, Syria — A rowdy mob of over two dozen men on motorcycles streamed into the small square in the center of Manbij. They cheered and waved jerseys of their local soccer team, which had just beaten the town's top club. The upset victory was sweet, and their wild chants reverberated, "My people! My people!"

It was a moment of normalcy distracting from the tensions engulfing the northwestern Syrian town, which is at the heart of a tussle among Syria's Kurds, the U.S. and Turkey.

Turkey has threatened to march on Manbij to wrest it from Kurdish hands after its forces won a resounding victory over Kurdish fighters earlier this month and took control of Afrin, a town 60 miles to the west.

If Turkey goes through with its threats, it will come in direct confrontation with American troops who patrol Manbij alongside their Kurdish allies.

Ankara and Washington are in talks to defuse tensions, with a new round expected on Friday. But it is unclear what would appease Turkey, which says it is prepared to push all the way west to the Iraqi border to push the Kurdish YPG militia — Washington's only ally in Syria — away from its borders. It views the YPG as a threat to its national security and an extension of its own insurgents.

Manbij residents said the repeated threats by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan have unnerved them — especially after the demoralizing defeat of the Kurds in Afrin. But many who spoke to the As-

sociated Press during a recent visit also said they have faith the U.S. won't abandon them to face Turkish advances on their town.

Manbij, a mixed Arab-and-Kurdish town of nearly 400,000, was liberated from Islamic State militants in 2016 by the YPG fighters with backing from U.S.-led coalition airstrikes. Now the town is bustling with trade and life.

With Turkey's threats, the town has become a linchpin for U.S. policy in Syria. Its loss would damage the Americans' prestige and military deployment in eastern Syria.

Said al-Sayegh, 33, a teacher, proudly told of how he didn't leave Manbij after the ISIS takeover — even when the militants put a gun to his neck, threatening to kill him for refusing to grow a beard. And he

said there's no reason to worry now, confident that Erdogan won't risk a fight with the U.S. and the Americans won't back down.

"They will stay. They have invested in it and they have an ally here," he said. "For the Americans, it is strategically important for the control of whole of eastern Syria."

The U.S. Central Command chief, Army Gen. Joseph Votel, said Wednesday the U.S. recognizes Turkey's security concerns, but it also has a "key partner on the ground" in the Kurds, who made sacrifices in the fight against ISIS. "We have to continue to work between these two objectives to ensure that we can find an appropriate way forward," he told journalists.

DOD mum on transgender plan specifics

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Nearly a week after the Pentagon publicly posted its new recommended policy on transgender troops, the department's chief spokeswoman refused to clarify portions of the memo or to settle confusion about whether servicemembers who already have transitioned from one gender to another would be discharged under the proposed plan.

Dana White said Thursday that pending litigation challenging President Donald Trump's order to ban transgender forces prevents her from answering even the most basic questions, including who was on the panel that drafted the recommendations.

The report, approved and

signed by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and endorsed by the White House last Friday, provides unprecedented details on the number of transgender forces currently serving in the military and how many of them have sought mental health help or are planning to seek surgery. For the past two years, Pentagon officials have insisted they don't collect data on transgender troops.

White said that the department is complying with four court orders and currently is allowing transgender individuals to enlist and continue to serve openly. She added, "to safeguard the integrity of the court process, I am unable to provide any further details at this time."

According to the report, which initially was released in court

filings last Friday, transgender individuals who have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria or have a history of the condition are banned from serving in the military except under "limited circumstances."

The exceptions include those who can show they have been stable for 36 months, have not undergone gender transition and can adhere to the standards for their "biological sex" — which would appear to mean their birth gender. Another exception would be made for currently serving transgender troops who also can adhere to the standards for their biological sex and are otherwise able to deploy if needed.

The policy states that anyone who has "undergone gender transition" is disqualified from

service, but it's not clear if that means a complete surgical transition or also refers to ongoing hormone treatment.

In 2016, the Pentagon under then-Defense Secretary Ash Carter lifted the ban on transgender service. Trump, however, took defense leaders by surprise last July, tweeting that the U.S. government would not allow transgender members to serve. The tweet triggered a number of lawsuits, and Trump asked Mattis to develop recommendations.

Because of the lawsuits, the Pentagon has continued to allow transgender troops to serve and on Jan. 1, went ahead with plans to allow them to begin enlisting. Several have done so, but it's not clear exactly how many.

Woes beset Colo. plant that destroys chemical weapons

Associated Press

DENVER — A highly automated, multibillion-dollar plant in Colorado that destroys U.S. chemical weapons is over budget, behind schedule and bedeviled by troubles that could worsen the danger to workers.

But when the Army said this month it wants to spend millions of extra dollars installing more traditional technology to help the beleaguered plant and to

reduce worker risk, public reaction was more resignation than anger.

"Yes, the process has been too slow and too expensive, but this is the price paid to protect the workers and neighbors of this site," said Marco Kaltofen, a nuclear and civil engineering researcher at Worcester Polytechnic Institute in Massachusetts who has worked on chemical weapons destruction and testing methods.

Defense contractor Bechtel Inc. spent 12 years designing, building and testing the plant at the Pueblo Chemical Depot to disassemble and neutralize 780,000 decades-old shells filled with liquid mustard agent stored at the site.

Mustard agent — first used in World War I — can maim or kill, blistering skin, scarring eyes and inflaming airways.

The heavily guarded depot spreads across 36 square miles

of rolling, brushy terrain about 15 miles from the city of Pueblo. The plant destroying the weapons is a collection of nondescript industrial buildings and tanks connected by a web of pipelines.

The plant is expected to cost \$4.1 billion, including design, construction, operation and disassembly when the work is done, according to the Defense Department inspector general's office, an internal watchdog.

Shulkin won't say president's doctor qualified to lead VA

CQ-Roll Call

WASHINGTON — Ousted Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin on Friday would not say Ronny Jackson, President Donald Trump's military doctor and pick to replace him, is qualified for the position.

Shulkin said Jackson, a Navy rear admiral who has no command or management experience, has the "right values" to lead the Department of Veterans Affairs. But during an in-

terview on MSNBC he stopped short of calling Jackson qualified to bring about the reforms needed to repair the agency and to improve military veterans' care.

The outgoing VA secretary reiterated his claims that Trump aides who favor privatizing the department manufactured a controversy surrounding alleged travel abuses by Shulkin, who said the trip in question was handled by the books and

he did nothing wrong. He told the network that he was pushed out by a group that wants to privatize the VA, and warned that would hinder veterans' care.

But after Shulkin first floated that notion in an op-ed published Thursday morning, the White House tried to knock it down.

"No, there is no intent at this point to privatize the VA," White House deputy press sec-

retary Lindsay Walters told reporters on Air Force One.

Shulkin said White House chief of staff John Kelly called to notify him he was being fired shortly before Trump announced it via a late-afternoon tweet on Wednesday.

The fired secretary, an Obama administration hold-over, took a shot at Trump, saying Washington during his presidency has become "too chaotic."

Deported Army veteran wins fight for citizenship

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — A deported U.S. Army veteran has been granted U.S. citizenship, a move made possible by California Gov. Jerry Brown's pardon of a criminal offense last year.

Lawyers for Hector Barajas said the government informed them Thursday their client should attend a naturalization ceremony on April 13 in San Diego. U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services confirmed the decision.

Barajas, 40, is founder and director of Deported Veterans Support House, which provides housing and other services in Tijuana, Mexico. He said Thursday that he believes his advocacy contributed to his victory and that he planned to commute to Tijuana from the Los Angeles area for at least a year to continue his work. He also plans to find a job and go to school in Los Angeles, while supporting his 11-year-old daughter and her mother.

"I still can't believe it," Barajas said by phone from Tijuana. "I'm just excited I'll be able to be home with my family."

Barajas was convicted in 2002 of shooting at an occupied vehicle and served two years in prison. Brown removed a major obstacle to citizenship by pardoning him last year, noting

his distinguished military service and advocacy work.

"I always say we make choices that have consequences," Barajas said of his conviction. "I'm not proud of it. Somebody could have been seriously hurt."

Barajas came to the United States from Mexico when he was 7 years old and, after graduating high school, served in the U.S. Army from 1995 to 2001, when he was honorably discharged, according to a federal lawsuit filed in December seeking citizenship.

He was a member of the 82nd Airborne Division and received several military accolades.

After completing his prison sentence, he was deported in 2004 to Mexico, lacking fluency in Spanish and struggling to find work, according to the lawsuit.

He returned to the United States and was deported again in 2010 after police stopped him for a traffic infraction.

Some military members are entitled to seek citizenship.

The American Civil Liberties Union said Barajas is the second deported veteran pardoned by Brown to be allowed to return to the United States.

Marine veteran Marco Chavez was pardoned for cruelty to animals and allowed to return in December.

Sessions: No new special counsel yet for GOP concerns

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Attorney General Jeff Sessions said Thursday he won't immediately appoint a new special counsel to investigate a number of Republican grievances involving the FBI and Justice Department, despite mounting pressure from members of his own party.

Sessions, in a letter to three Republican committee leaders, reiterated that he had directed a senior federal prosecutor, Utah's U.S. attorney John W. Huber, to evaluate "certain issues," including whether such an appointment is necessary. Huber's review is ongoing, and Sessions said he gets regular updates.

The letter is likely to unnerve Republican lawmakers, who have called for multiple special counsels to study allegations of misconduct in some of the FBI's highest profile, most politically charged investigations. Most recently, they've demanded a special counsel to take a broad look at whether

Justice Department or FBI employees were biased during their now-closed probe of Hillary Clinton's use of a private email server, and as they began investigating Trump campaign ties to Russian meddling in the 2016 election.

In a statement released Thursday night, House Judiciary Chairman Robert Goodlatte and House Oversight and Government Reform Chairman Trey Gowdy said they were "encouraged" that Huber was tapped to investigate the issues.

Democrats say the allegations are an effort to distract from and undermine the separate work of special counsel Robert Mueller as his team's Russia investigation intensifies.

Sessions' letter comes a day after the Justice Department's inspector general announced that, at Sessions' urging, it would review whether law enforcement officials abused their surveillance powers in seeking permission to monitor the communications of former Trump campaign adviser Carter Page.

Lawmaker sorry for not protecting female employees

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — Connecticut Rep. Elizabeth Esty issued an apology Thursday for failing to protect female employees who say they were harassed by her former chief of staff, including one woman who said she was punched in the back and received death threats.

The three-term Democratic congresswoman on Thursday also personally repaid the federal government \$5,000 in severance issued to now-fired Tony Baker, according to her current chief of staff, Timothy

Daly.

Esty issued a public statement responding to a Hearst Connecticut Media article saying she was "horrificed and angry" to learn in 2016 that a former employee had been harassed and physically harmed, allegedly by Baker. She said she demanded Baker receive counseling. She then conducted an internal review of her office practices, later learning "the threat of violence was not an isolated incident" but a pattern of behavior by Baker affecting many of her female staffers.

Baker was Esty's chief of staff from 2014 to 2016. His

spokesman denied many of the allegations.

"To this survivor, and to anyone else on my team who was hurt by my failure to see what was going on in my office, I am so sorry," Esty wrote. "I've asked myself over and over again, 'How did I not see this? How could I have let down so many people?'"

Esty, known for advocating women's rights issues, said she has hired new senior staff and instituted mandatory anti-harassment training. Daly said Esty was advised by the Office of House Employment Counsel to enter into a nondisclosure

agreement with Baker as part of a settlement agreement.

Hearst Connecticut Media reported Esty also recommended Baker for a job at Sandy Hook Promise, a non-profit gun violence prevention organization that was started after the deadly 2012 mass shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Conn., which is part of Esty's congressional district.

Daly said the nondisclosure agreement was "a recommendation that was provided to the congresswoman as part of a means to get Tony out of the office as soon as possible."

Nightclub shooter's widow is acquitted

Associated Press

ST. PETERSBURG, Fla. — The widow of the gunman who killed 49 people at a gay Orlando, Fla., nightclub was acquitted Friday on charges of lying to the FBI and helping her husband in the 2016 attack.

Noor Salman, 31, began sobbing with joy when she was found not guilty of charges of obstruction and providing material support to a terrorist organization, WKMG reported. Salman was married to Omar Mateen when he attacked the Pulse nightclub. Police killed him after the massacre.

Prosecutors said Salman and her husband scouted out potential targets together — including Disney World's shopping and entertainment complex — and she knew he was buying ammunition for his AR-15 in preparation for a jihadi attack. She knew that he had a sick fascination with violent jihadi videos and an affinity for Islamic State websites and gave him a "green light to commit terrorism," prosecutors said.

Defense attorneys described Salman as an easily manipulated woman with a low IQ. They said Salman, who was born in California to Palestinian parents, was abused by her husband, who cheated on her with other women and concealed much of his life from her.

Attorney Charles Swift argued there was no way Salman knew that Mateen would attack the Pulse nightclub because even he didn't know he would attack it until moments before the shooting. His intended target was the Disney Springs complex, prosecutors said.

Salman's statement to the FBI in the hours after the attack appeared to play a key role in the case. In the statement, Salman said over "the last two years, Omar talked to me about jihad."

Calif. judge rules carcinogen in coffee requires warning

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Coffee sellers in California should have to post warnings because the brew may contain an ingredient that's been linked to cancer, a judge has ruled.

The culprit is a chemical produced in the bean roasting process that is a known carcinogen and has been at the heart of an eight-year legal struggle between a tiny nonprofit group and Big Coffee.

The Council for Education and Research on Toxics wanted the coffee industry to remove acrylamide from its processing — like potato chip makers did when it sued them years ago — or disclose the danger in ominous warning signs or labels. The industry, led by Starbucks Corp., said the level of the chemical in coffee isn't harmful and any risks are outweighed by benefits.

Los Angeles Superior Court

Judge Elihu Berle said Wednesday that the coffee makers hadn't presented the proper grounds at trial to prevail.

"While plaintiff offered evidence that consumption of coffee increases the risk of harm to the fetus, to infants, to children and to adults, defendants' medical and epidemiology experts testified that they had no opinion on causation," Berle wrote in his proposed ruling. "Defendants failed to satisfy their burden of proving ... that consumption of coffee confers a benefit to human health."

The suit was brought against Starbucks and 90 companies under a law passed by California voters in 1986 that has been credited with culling cancer-causing chemicals from myriad products and also criticized for leading to quick settlement shakedowns.

The Safe Drinking Water and Toxic Enforcement Act, better known as Proposition 65, re-

quires warning labels for about 900 chemicals known to cause cancer or birth defects. It allows private citizens, advocacy groups and attorneys to sue on behalf of the state and collect a portion of civil penalties for failure to provide warnings.

"This lawsuit has made a mockery of Prop. 65, has confused consumers, and does nothing to improve public health," said William Murray, president and CEO of the National Coffee Association, who added that coffee had been shown to be a healthy beverage.

Scientific evidence on coffee has gone back and forth for a long time, but concerns have eased recently about possible dangers of coffee, with some studies finding health benefits. In 2016, the cancer agency of the World Health Organization moved coffee off its "possible carcinogen" list.

In quid pro quo, Russia expels diplomats

Associated Press

MOSCOW — Russia announced the expulsion of more than 150 diplomats, including 60 Americans, on Thursday and said it was closing a U.S. consulate in retaliation for the wave of Western expulsions of Russian diplomats over the poisoning of an ex-spy and his daughter in Britain, a tit-for-tat response that intensified the Kremlin's rupture with the U.S. and Europe.

The Russian move came as a hospital treating Sergei Skripal and his daughter, Yulia, said the woman was improving rapidly and now is in stable condition, though her father remained in critical condition.

The Skripals were found unconscious and critically ill in the English city of Salisbury on March 4. British authorities blamed Russia for poison-

ing them with a military-grade nerve agent, accusations Russia has denied vehemently.

Two dozen countries, including the U.S., many EU nations and NATO, have ordered more than 150 Russian diplomats out this week in a show of solidarity with Britain — a massive action unseen even at the height of the Cold War.

Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said at news conference Thursday that Moscow will expel the same number of diplomats from each of those countries in retaliation.

U.S. Ambassador Jon Huntsman was summoned to the Foreign Ministry while Lavrov was speaking, where he was handed notice that Russia is responding quid pro quo to the U.S. decision to order 60 Russian diplomats out.

In a statement, Huntsman

said there was "no justification" for the move and that it shows Moscow isn't interested in dialogue with the U.S. about important matters.

"Russia should not be acting like a victim," U.S. State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said.

Later, White House spokeswoman Sarah Huckabee Sanders said Russia's action was "not unanticipated," but she said the retaliation by Moscow "marks a further deterioration in the United States-Russia relationship."

The Foreign Ministry said the U.S. diplomats, including 58 from the embassy in Moscow and two from the consulate in Yekaterinburg, must leave Russia by April 5. It added that the U.S. must leave its consulate in St. Petersburg no later than Saturday.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Girls can apply to take governor's job for day

NH CONCORD — New Hampshire middle and high school girls have been invited to apply to take Republican Gov. Chris Sununu's job for a day.

Sununu on Wednesday announced the Governor for a Day competition as part of Women's History Month. Applicants must answer the prompt "If I were governor for a day, I would ..." via a written response of fewer than 250 words or a one-minute video.

Written responses can be emailed to GovernorForADay@nh.gov or sent to the governor's office. Video submissions must be sent as private messages to Sununu's Facebook account.

Sununu said the goal is to ensure the state's next generation of leaders feels empowered to lead. The contest is a partnership with Girls Inc., Girl Scouts and Granite Girls State.

Dogs released during burglary at facility

OR SALEM — Dogs escaped during a burglary at a canine-boarding facility in Salem.

Salem police Lt. Treven Upkes said officers who responded to The Dog Bark early Wednesday found a shattered window and an open door. Kennels were open, and dogs roamed the neighborhood.

Passers-by helped corral most of the missing dogs, but three were still on the loose.

Planned Parenthood: Tweet inappropriate

PA PHILADELPHIA — A Pennsylvania branch of Planned Parenthood said that a tweet declaring the need for a Disney princess

who's had an abortion was not appropriate, and the organization has taken it down.

An executive for Planned Parenthood Keystone said the group believes pop culture plays a "critical role" in educating the public and sparking "meaningful conversations about sexual and reproductive health issues and policies, including abortion."

Melissa Reed, president and CEO of Planned Parenthood Keystone, said the seriousness of the point they were trying to make was not appropriate for the subject matter.

The since-removed tweet read: "We need a Disney princess who's had an abortion. We need a Disney princess who's pro-choice. We need a Disney princess who's an undocumented immigrant. We need a Disney princess who's actually a union worker. We need a Disney princess who's trans."

Carnival Cruise barters for Snapchat handle

VA PROSPECT — Carnival Cruise rolled into a small Virginia town this week on the hunt for a local teen and his coveted Snapchat handle @CarnivalCruise.

The company surprised Darian Lipscomb, 15, at his Prospect, Va., home Tuesday night after peppering the town with signs asking "Hey Prospect, does anyone know Darian?"

The Richmond (Va.) Times-Dispatch reported the company offered to trade Lipscomb a free trip for his family abroad its newest ship, Carnival Horizon, in exchange for his Snapchat handle. The net worth of the trip is about \$5,000.

Organizers said Lipscomb will receive customized surprises throughout the trip, which will be documented on the cruise's social channels.

The Dispatch reported the company said the trade was

a fun way to claim the handle and to reward a "superfan."

Proud former clown running for Congress

SC COLUMBIA — A clown is running for Congress. That's not a joke.

Steve Lough is wearing his red nose with pride, appearing in clown makeup on his campaign website as he runs against four others in South Carolina's Democratic primary for the seat held by GOP Rep. Ralph Norman. Lough was a professional clown with Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Circus. Now, The State newspaper reported that he's for reforming gun laws and providing universal access to health care.

The Camden, S.C., native is a graduate of both Dartmouth and the Ringling Bros. Barnum & Bailey Clown College. He volunteered for the presidential campaigns of Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders. His website is ClownForCongress.com. And his campaign slogan is "Aim high! Vote Lough!"

Portrait of mystery high court justice ID'd

MA BOSTON — The mystery of the unknown justice has been solved.

The man whose portrait has hung for years outside the chamber of the highest court in Massachusetts without anyone actually knowing who he was now has a name: Lemuel Shaw, who served as chief justice of the Supreme Judicial Court from 1830 until 1860.

In February, current Chief Justice Ralph Gants sought the public's help in identifying the man and received more than 40 educated guesses.

Gants credits two court employees, Assistant Chief Court Officer Keith Downer and Director of Education and Public

Programs Cliff Allen, with nailing down the identity through some nifty detective work.

Gants said Downer used his experience in forensic science and knowledge of fine art.

Police: Man prayed before break-in

NY NEW YORK — New York City police are searching for a man who they say was caught on surveillance video praying before stealing from a Brooklyn clothing store.

WCBS-TV reported the theft happened March 22 at Ziani Fine Italian Clothing in Brooklyn. Police said the suspect is seen making the sign of the cross before he breaks into the store with a brick. According to investigators, the man stole 18 pieces of clothing.

Artist shutting down big eye projection

NH CONCORD — An artist who projected an image of a gigantic eye gazing over Main Street in New Hampshire's capital city is shutting it down after two years.

Artist Tom Devaney created the projection of his right eye from his studio in Concord. A few other eyes made guest appearances. Devaney told the Concord Monitor he's making space for new works.

The project caught the eye of passers-by and became quite the conversation piece. Devaney said it was born from 3-D video-mapping techniques he was working on. Video of the blue-green eye moving and blinking were projected onto a foam board structure.

Devaney said he could operate the eye remotely from home. He also had a camera in the studio to see who was looking at it.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Teams arrive at Final Four venue in style

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — Loyola-Chicago's team plane pulled into a private hangar, and the players were serenaded by a brass band playing "Deep in the Heart of Texas" while they walked a festive carpet to a team bus emblazoned with their logo and colors.

The 11th-seeded Ramblers sure looked like they belonged when they rolled into San Antonio in style for the Final Four.

Several hours later, the excitement still hadn't worn off when the biggest underdogs in recent NCAA Tournament history joined powerhouses Kansas, Villanova and Michigan at the Alamodome on Thursday morning for the four teams' first workouts before Saturday's semifinals.

"We dreamed of getting to this moment, and now we're here," said Loyola-Chicago senior Aundre Jackson, a native Texan. "It's a challenge to deal with all of this, but I think we deserve the attention. We've worked really hard for it."

The teams and their legions of fans arrived in a downtown decked out in vibrant colors,

with the Final Four logo plastered on most available surfaces from the River Walk to the Alamo. The players even had brightly colored socks on their chairs in their locker rooms — and several Loyola players had already pulled on their new gear moments after they arrived.

"We love it. It's all hype," Ramblers guard Adarius Avery said. "I feel like we have a lot of confidence, even though it's our first time doing anything like this."

The unlikely Ramblers are downright dazzled by the Final Four festivities, but it's also a new experience for the players at Kansas, which hadn't made it since 2012, and Michigan, which was last here in 2013.

Jayhawks star Devonte Graham did a double take when he saw larger-than-life photos of himself and several teammates lining the Alamodome hallway outside the Kansas locker room.

"Yeah, OK, I took some pictures of it," Graham said with a laugh.

Several Villanova players already won it all in Texas two

years ago when they watched Kris Jenkins' buzzer-beating 3-pointer to down North Carolina. The media obligations, fan frenzy and difficult game preparations are nothing new to Jalen Brunson, the junior guard named the AP's Player of the Year on Thursday.

"I think it's definitely an advantage for us that we've been through it before," Brunson said. "But we still have to go through it. There's going to be a lot of things going on in the next couple of days, but I'm enjoying it because I'm out here with my brothers and getting to be in this moment."

Villanova's flight encountered turbulence on its descent into Texas, but Mikal Bridges calmed nervous flyer Eric Paschall. The Wildcats can cement their status as a modern college basketball power with their second title in three years, but a showdown with the powerful Jayhawks looms.

The Wolverines realize most of the country will be rooting against them when they take on Loyola, but that doesn't detract from the excitement — and it certainly won't matter to the large crush of maize-and-blue

fans expected to invade the Alamodome after an outstanding turnout in Los Angeles last week.

"We got in late and we got up early," said Moe Wagner, Michigan's high-scoring German big man. "It's been pretty busy since we got in. A lot of talking and running around. But like I always say, it beats the alternative. It's surreal, but it's a great opportunity, and these people in this locker room are the best guys to share it with."

The next few days will be surreal for every player — but particularly for Loyola-Chicago, it seems.

When the Ramblers reached their team hotel, they got another thrill from a brief visit with Russell Westbrook. The NBA MVP is in town with the Oklahoma City Thunder to face the San Antonio Spurs on Thursday night.

"I was standing next to him, trying to see how tall I was," said Jackson, who got a photo with the UCLA product. "He just (said), 'Good luck and go ahead and win it.'"

Villanova's Brunson selected AP player of year

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — A long list of goals has taken up permanent space on Jalen Brunson's wall, including becoming a conference player of the year, an all-American and helping Villanova win a second national championship in three seasons.

The junior point guard just reached another one by becoming The Associated Press men's college basketball player of the year.

Brunson was presented with the award Thursday at the Final Four, where the Wildcats will face Kansas Saturday in the national semifinals. He earned 36 of 65 votes from the same panel that selects the AP

Top 25, with ballots submitted before the start of the NCAA Tournament.

Brunson was joined at the trophy presentation by coach Jay Wright as he became the first Villanova player to win the AP award. It came two days after Brunson was the leading vote-getter on the AP All-America first team.

"It's written on my wall," Brunson said of being an All-American and player of the year in a recent interview with the AP. "It's something that I strived for but never really focused on. I just knew that the more team success that we had, the individual honors would come. I just really focused on what the team needed and how I could be a key contributor."

Oklahoma freshman Trae Young was second with 15 votes after leading the country in scoring (27.4) and assists (8.7).

Arizona 7-foot-1 freshman Deandre Ayton earned seven votes after averaging 20.1 points, 11.6 rebounds and shooting 61 percent from the floor. Duke freshman Marvin Bagley III earned four votes after leading the Atlantic Coast Conference in scoring (21.0) and rebounding (11.1).

Wilson named top women's player

COLUMBUS, Ohio — A'ja Wilson of South Carolina is The Associated Press women's college basketball player of the

year.

Wilson is the first player from the school to win the award.

The 6-foot-5 star received 22 votes Thursday from 32-member national media panel that selects the weekly AP Top 25. Balloting was done before the NCAA Tournament.

Katie Lou Samuelson of UConn received five votes while Kalani Brown of Baylor, Asia Durr of Louisville, Megan Gustafson of Iowa, Sabrina Ionescu of Oregon and Victoria Vivians of Mississippi State each received one vote.

Wilson helped the Gamecocks to their first title last year and averaged 22.6 points and 11.8 rebounds for the team this season before reaching the Elite Eight.

Big hitters tee off on opening day

Associated Press

Giancarlo Stanton and Matt Davidson gave opening day quite a jolt.

A new baseball season began with a bang Thursday when Ian Happ of the Chicago Cubs homered on the very first pitch. World Series MVP George Springer connected, Adam Jones and Nick Markakis hit walkoff winners and Anthony Rizzo delivered the most emotional drive of the day.

Shohei Ohtani also got off to a nice start with a hit in his first at-bat.

But a year after big leaguers launched a record 6,105 long-balls, Stanton and Davidson staged their own long-distance home run derby.

Stanton hit two hard homers and doubled in his debut with the New York Yankees during a 6-1 victory at Toronto. The reigning NL MVP led the majors with 59 home runs last

year, then was traded from Miami to the Bronx.

"You want to get the first one out of the way and then you can relax," Stanton said.

Davidson did even better, hitting three home runs for the Chicago White Sox in a 14-7 romp at Kansas City. He became the fourth player with a three-homer performance on opening day, joining Detroit's Dmitri Young (2005), the Cubs' Tuffy Rhodes (1994) and Toronto's George Bell (1988).

"Special day in anybody's book," White Sox manager Rick Renteria said.

Not every pitcher got tagged, though.

Justin Verlander pitched six shutout innings for the champion Houston Astros in a 4-1 win over Texas. Luis Severino threw one-hit ball over 5²/₃ scoreless innings for the Yankees. Boston ace Chris Sale gave up just one hit in six innings, but Tampa Bay rallied

for six runs in the eighth to win 6-4.

And in Seattle, Felix Hernandez used a biting curveball to outduel Cleveland ace and AL Cy Young award winner Corey Kluber. Hernandez pitched 5¹/₃ scoreless innings, while Kluber allowed two runs over eight in the Mariners' 2-1 win.

The new season has a couple of new numbers on the scoreboard, too.

As part of MLB's pace of play initiatives, mound visits are now counted. Teams are allowed six without pitching changes — by the managers, coaches or infielders — before a trip triggers a mandatory change on the mound.

There didn't appear to be any flaps with umpires over the new policy, though it seemed to have an early effect in Miami, where Jose Urena gave up a home run to Happ on his first pitch. Dwight Evans is the only other player to connect on the

first pitch of a season, doing it for the Red Sox in 1986 off Jack Morris at Tiger Stadium, the Elias Sports Bureau said.

"I was thinking fastball first pitch there," Happ said.

Urena hit three batters in the first inning and walked two. Even so, it took a while before pitching coach Juan Nieves went to see him — when he did, the scoreboard at Marlins Park counted down the MVs from six to five.

The next inning, Rizzo earned a standing ovation after his home run at Miami.

Both teams wore patches to honor the 17 people killed at his former high school in Parkland, Fla. Crossing home plate, the Cubs star patted the patch on his chest and pointed to the sky.

"That was probably the most out-of-body experience I've had hitting a home run in my life," Rizzo said. "It just felt really good."

MLB roundup

Hernandez, Cruz help Mariners hold off Indians

Associated Press

SEATTLE — Felix Hernandez pitched shutout ball into the sixth inning, Nelson Cruz hit a two-run home run in the first inning and the Seattle Mariners opened the season with a 2-1 win over the Cleveland Indians on Thursday night.

Hernandez became just the seventh pitcher to start at least 10 straight opening days, and he got off to a strong start against one of the best teams in the American League. Hernandez allowed two hits in 5¹/₃ innings, only being pulled due to a limited pitch count after being hit by a line drive during spring training.

Yankees 6, Blue Jays 1: Giancarlo Stanton homered twice, doubled and had four RBIs in his debut with New York, a rout of host Toronto that

gave Aaron Boone a win in his first game as a manager.

White Sox 14, Royals 7: Matt Davidson became the fourth player in major league history to homer three times on opening day, Tim Anderson homered twice and Jose Abreu went deep as visiting Chicago ripped Kansas City.

Cubs 8, Marlins 4: Ian Happ became the second player to homer on the first pitch of the major league season, leading visiting Chicago past Miami.

Athletics 6, Angels 5 (11): Marcus Semien singled into an empty center field with one out in the 11th inning for host Oakland, beating Los Angeles' five-man infield.

Giants 1, Dodgers 0: Joe Panik homered off Clayton Kershaw in the fifth inning, and visiting San Francisco dealt the three-time NL Cy Young

Award winner his first loss in his eighth consecutive opening day start for Los Angeles.

Diamondbacks 8, Rockies 2: Jake Lamb doubled and singled to drive in four runs and Patrick Corbin struck out eight while pitching into the sixth inning to lead host Arizona past Colorado.

Astros 4, Rangers 1: World Series MVP George Springer hit a leadoff homer in the opener for the second year in a row and Justin Verlander (1-0) pitched six scoreless innings as visiting Houston started its championship defense with a win over Texas.

Mets 9, Cardinals 4: Yoenis Cespedes drove in three runs and newcomer Adrian Gonzalez hit a go-ahead double to lead host New York past St. Louis.

Rays 6, Red Sox 4: Denard Span made a huge splash in his

debut for hometown Tampa Bay on opening day, lining a bases-loaded triple to highlight a six-run rally in the eighth against visiting Boston.

Orioles 3, Twins 2 (11): Adam Jones homered on the first pitch from Fernando Rodney starting the bottom of the 11th inning, and host Baltimore won its eighth straight opener.

Brewers 2, Padres 1 (12): Milwaukee's Orlando Arcia singled in Ji-Man Choi with two outs in the 12th off Adam Cimber, who was making his big league debut with host San Diego.

Braves 8, Phillies 5: Atlanta's Nick Markakis hit a three-run homer off Hector Neris with two outs in the ninth inning, capping a comeback from a 5-0 deficit as visiting Philadelphia lost in Gabe Kapler's first game as a big league manager.

NBA roundup

Spurs move into fourth place in West

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — LaMarcus Aldridge had 25 points and 11 rebounds, and the San Antonio Spurs held off the Oklahoma City Thunder 103-99 on Thursday night to climb back into fourth place in the Western Conference.

San Antonio matched Oklahoma City at 44-32 in jumping two spots in the standings. The Thunder are fifth, a half-game ahead of the New Orleans Pelicans.

Aldridge scored 19 points in the first half, then drove past Steven Adams for a dunk and a three-point lead with 52 seconds left as the Spurs snapped a two-game slide.

Paul George led Oklahoma City with 26 points and had six assists. Russell Westbrook added 19 points and 11 assists,

but had a pair of three-pointer miss the rim and land out of bounds in the final minutes.

Bucks 116, Warriors 107: Giannis Antetokounmpo scored 32 points, Kevin Durant's return from a rib injury ended early with a second-quarter ejection, and visiting Milwaukee beat Golden State.

The Bucks beat the Warriors for just the second time in their past 10 meetings and stayed five games ahead of Detroit for the final playoff spot in the Eastern Conference.

Sidelined by a fractured rib the previous six games, Durant argued after no foul was called on a drive through three defenders. Official Tre Maddox whistled him for a technical foul, then gave him another and tossed him with 2.4 seconds left. Khriston Middleton converted two free throws to cap an 11-0 run

that gave Milwaukee a 58-49 halftime lead.

Still without Stephen Curry (ankle sprain) and Klay Thompson (broken thumb), the Warriors lost their third straight game and seventh in their past 10 outings. Houston clinched the No. 1 seed in the Western Conference, and Golden State fell a game behind East-leading Toronto for the NBA's second-best record.

Pistons 103, Wizards 92: Andre Drummond scored 24 points and grabbed 23 rebounds as host Detroit beat Washington for its fifth win in six games.

The Pistons remained five games behind the Milwaukee Bucks for the last Eastern Conference playoff spot. The Wizards have lost four of five.

Heat 103, Bulls 92: Josh Richardson scored 22 points, Goran Dragic added 17 and

Miami trimmed its magic number for clinching a playoff berth to one by topping visiting Chicago.

Justise Winslow scored 13 points and Kelly Olynyk finished with 11 for the Heat (41-35), who've won a season-best eight consecutive home games and moved within a half-game of Washington for the No. 6 spot in the Eastern Conference playoff race.

Pacers 106, Kings 103: Victor Oladipo scored 13 of his 24 points in the fourth quarter, including a pair of free throws with 2.5 seconds remaining, and Indiana held on to beat host Sacramento.

Darren Collison finished with eight points and nine assists against his former team to help the Pacers extend their winning streak to four.

NHL roundup

Crosby scores in overtime, lifts Penguins over Devils

Associated Press

NEWARK, N.J. — On the opening day of the baseball season, Sidney Crosby swung and connected for the Pittsburgh Penguins, preventing the New Jersey Devils from sweeping their four-game season series with the two-time defending Stanley Cup champion.

Crosby batted his own rebound out of the air and into the net 19 seconds into overtime, and the Penguins beat the Devils 4-3 on Thursday night, marking the second time in just over a week the back-to-back Conn Smythe Trophy winner has scored on a baseball swing.

"I've seen him do it so many times, it doesn't surprise us anymore," Penguins coach Mike Sullivan said. "He's an elite player. There aren't too many guys (making) those types of plays. He does it time

and time again. He thinks the game on such a high level and he's such a competitor."

Kris Letang stole Taylor Hall's pass in the opening seconds in the Pittsburgh zone and sent Crosby on a semi-break the other way. His initial shot hit the goalpost, but then the star center pulled his hands in and swatted the puck, extending his goal-scoring streak to five games.

The tally was similar to one against Montreal last Wednesday in which Crosby juggled the puck once on his stick before smacking it from just below shoulder height.

Crosby, who has won almost every major award in the NHL, modestly downplayed his latest trick.

"I just tried to stay with it," he said. "It's fortunate it came back to me. I saw it go off post."

Bruins 4, Lightning 2: Patrice Bergeron had a goal and two assists and host Boston took over first place in the Eastern Conference with a win over Tampa Bay.

Blackhawks 6, Jets 2: Emergency goaltender Scott Foster played the final 14 minutes after his team lost Anton Forsberg and Collin Delia to injuries, closing out host Chicago's victory over Winnipeg.

Predators 5, Sharks 3: Ryan Ellis scored the go-ahead goal with 9:54 left and host Nashville beat San Jose to set a franchise record with 111 points this season.

Kings 4, Coyotes 2: Jeff Carter completed a hat trick by scoring with 4:25 left and host Los Angeles beat Arizona.

Senators 3, Panthers 2 (OT): Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored on a penalty shot in overtime to lift host Ottawa over Florida.

Blue Jackets 5, Flames 1: Pierre-Luc Dubois had his first career hat trick and visiting Columbus stayed hot with a win over Calgary.

Red Wings 6, Sabres 3: Anthony Mantha scored his team-leading 24th goal and Detroit snapped an 11-game road losing streak by beating last-place Buffalo.

Wild 5, Stars 2: Matt Dumba scored on a power play and had two assists in his team's three-goal second period, and host Minnesota moved a step closer to a spot in the playoffs with a victory over fading Dallas.

Canucks 2, Oilers 1: Defenseman Derrick Pouliot snapped a 1-1 tie with his third goal of the season early in the third period and host Vancouver defeated Edmonton for its third consecutive win.