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Military leaders vow to fix housing woes

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A panel of military leaders said Thursday that they are addressing mounting concerns over dilapidated housing across the country and subsequent health concerns with a series of new efforts.

Service secretaries and chiefs told a Senate panel that they have a slew of military housing visits underway, meetings with the seven private companies that manage the residences and a new tenant bill of rights.

The problems began when military leadership left its oversight role when private contractors took over management of the residences in the 1990s, the military leaders said.

“I think the chain of command, over the past 20 years,

has slowly walked away from being involved in the housing of our soldiers and their families,” Army Secretary Mark Esper told the Senate Armed Services Committee.

The concerns have coalesced into what appears to be the largest crisis to hit military housing since a 1996 privatization initiative let outside contractors take control of the homes. Previously, the military managed those properties.

In recent months, the military services have hosted dozens of town halls on bases. In recent weeks, top leaders have personally visited a slew of military installations. And some families, previously afraid to speak for fear of retaliation, are increasingly coming forward.

On Thursday, the Senate Armed Services Committee held its second hearing on the

housing concerns to examine the chain of command’s role in the crisis with service secretaries and chiefs.

“I have asked the chain of command from each of the services here today because the health, safety and welfare of our servicemembers are the responsibility of everyone, from the secretary to the squad leader,” Sen. Jim Inhofe, R-Okla., the committee chairman, said in his opening remarks.

“Plain and simple. The chain of command failed to take care of its own and lost their trust. Now the chain of command must regain that trust.”

The service secretaries and chiefs seemed to agree that they all had a role to play in the recent failures, and the fixes that are expected to come.

“Recent reports of substandard conditions in some of our

military housing units are deeply troubling,” Esper said. “It is unacceptable for our families who sacrifice so much for our country to endure these hardships. ...We are fully committed to solving this problem.”

Navy Secretary Richard Spencer said military leaders are also revisiting agreements with private contractors.

“I want to start by apologizing personally on behalf of the Department of the Navy,” he said. “It is clear in many cases, we have fallen woefully short of this obligation and upon reviewing the issues surrounding housing, it is apparent there is culpability around the table.”

The service secretaries and chiefs went on to say that they have directed a series of internal reviews and inspector general probes.

No set timeline for US exit from Syria, Votel tells lawmakers

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The top U.S. commander in the Middle East told House lawmakers Thursday that he has not been ordered to withdraw most American forces from Syria by a specific date, telling them troops would leave as military conditions in the fight against Islamic State allowed.

Describing ISIS fighters as “unrepentant, unbroken and radicalized,” Army Gen. Joseph Votel warned they remained committed to the terrorist organization and committed to the group’s return to the prominence it achieved in 2014 as it swept across Syria and Iraq capturing some 35,000 square miles.

However, ISIS’ so-called caliphate has now been reduced

to less than one square mile of territory in an eastern Syrian village, the U.S. Central Command chief told the House Armed Services Committee. Votel indicated major combat operations were expected to be completed soon against ISIS, but the U.S. withdrawal of most of its roughly 2,000 troops in Syria ordered by President Donald Trump in December would not necessarily coincide with the caliphate’s collapse.

“Reduction of the physical caliphate is a monumental military accomplishment, but the fight against ISIS and violent extremism is far from over and our mission remains the same,” he said.

“While ISIS has been battered ... we should be clear in our understanding that what we are seeing now is not the surrender of ISIS as an organi-

zation but, in fact, a calculated decision to preserve the safety of their families and preservation of their capabilities ... waiting for the right time for a resurgence.”

Votel called for the U.S. military to remain committed to the Syrian Democratic Forces, which will be responsible for securing the region against an ISIS resurgence in Syria.

The Pentagon announced last month that it would leave a small residual force of about 400 mostly U.S. special operators in Syria to aid stabilization efforts following the caliphate’s fall. Votel said Thursday that planning for that force had not been completed.

Votel, who is set to retire after relinquishing command later this month, also pledged continued U.S. support for Iraqi security forces.

As the general testified Thursday — alongside Marine Gen. Thomas Waldhauser, the chief of U.S. Africa Command, and Kathryn Wheelbarger, the acting assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs — a watchdog organization warned ISIS was already actively re-emerging in areas of Iraq where it had been defeated.

“ISIS is re-establishing capable insurgent networks in multiple historic strongholds and linking them together, setting the conditions for future offensive operations against the government of Iraq,” announced the Institute for the Study of War, a Washington-based think tank that has monitored ISIS since it first emerged.

Sen. McSally says she was raped in Air Force

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Sen. Martha McSally, R-Ariz., said Wednesday during a congressional hearing that she was raped while in the service.

The admission by McSally, a retired Air Force colonel and the first American woman pilot to fly in combat, came during a Senate Armed Services Committee subpanel hearing focused on sexual assault in the military. She made the remarks during the opening moments of the hearing.

“Like you, I am also a military sexual assault survivor,” she said. “But unlike so many

brave survivors, I didn’t report the sexual assault. Like so many women and men, I didn’t trust the system at the time. I blame myself, I was ashamed and confused and I thought I was strong but felt powerless.”

McSally said she was assaulted by a commanding officer.

“The perpetrators abuse their positions of power in profound ways, and in one case, I was preyed upon and then raped by a superior officer,” she said. “I stayed silent for many years, but later in my career as the military grappled with scandal, I felt the need to let the people know I, too, was a survivor.”

Last April, McSally said she was also sexually abused by a high school coach.

McSally is a military veteran and former House member who served on the House Armed Services Committee last year. During the midterm elections, she lost a bid to fill the seat then held by Republican Sen. Jeff Flake.

Afterward, Arizona Gov. Doug Ducey appointed her to temporarily fill the seat vacated by the late Republican Sen. John McCain and his successor, former Sen. Jon Kyl, who departed the upper chamber last year.

“During my 26 years in

uniform I witnessed so many weaknesses in the processes involving sexual assault prevention, investigation and adjudication,” McSally said.

“It motivated me to make recommendations to Air Force leaders, it shaped my approach to command as a commander and it informed my advocacy for change.”

McSally said while the service has come a long way, there’s a long way to go.

“I almost separated from the Air Force at 18 years over my despair,” she said. “Like many victims, I felt the system was raping me all over again. But I didn’t quit.”

Sexual assault in military still pervasive despite laws

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Despite incremental changes to the law and renewed focus, the military remains plagued with sexual misconduct allegations and improvements remain elusive, lawmakers, survivors and advocate groups said Wednesday.

During a dramatic Congressional hearing on Capitol Hill, senators and witnesses agreed that challenges with a long-standing culture, the Uniform of Military Justice and other concerns have bedeviled improvements.

The annual reported rate of sexual assault against service-women, for example, is unchanged from 4.4 percent in 2010 to 4.3 percent in 2016, said retired Air Force Col. Don M. Christensen, president of the Washington nonprofit Protect our Defenders.

“The scourge of sexual assault in the military has rightfully brought great scrutiny on the military justice system and the role of the chain of the command,” he told the Senate Armed Services Committee

subpanel hosting Wednesday’s hearing focused on sexual assault in the military.

“There has been no real improvement despite decades of promises from leadership and claims commanders are the solution. The commander-controlled system has failed to deliver accountability.”

The hearing — which lasted more than two hours — hosted sexual assault survivors, advocacy groups and military leaders, and hit frustrated and emotional beats as speakers struggled to tell personal stories and recount that despite heightened focus and effort, a long road remains.

New York Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand, the ranking Democrat on the Armed Services subpanel on personnel matters, said it’s clear the services have not done enough. Instead, a new fundamental approach is needed to prosecute these crimes, she said.

“I am incredibly disappointed that after years of fighting this problem, after so many incremental changes in the law, that we are still in the exact same place,” said Gillibrand.

North Korea’s nuclear activity under scrutiny

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The U.S. and South Korean militaries are closely monitoring the North, officials said Thursday, as new nuclear weapons activity was reported after the summit between President Donald Trump and Kim Jong Un ended without a deal.

Uranium enrichment facilities appear to be operating normally at the North’s Yongbyon nuclear complex, South Korea’s spy agency told lawmakers, according to the Yonhap News Agency. It also said vehicles used to transport supplies were spotted at a missile research center that has been used to produce intercontinental ballistic missiles.

That followed reports and satellite images showing that the communist state has begun restoring facilities at a long-range rocket launch site that was dismantled last year as part of talks with the United States on relinquishing its nuclear weapons program.

The apparent renewed activity came after Trump and Kim failed to reach an agreement during their Feb. 27-28 summit in Hanoi, Vietnam, due to sharp disagreements over the extent of sanctions relief in exchange for disarmament.

Seoul and Washington are coordinating military intelligence about the reported developments, a spokeswoman for the South Korean Defense Ministry said Thursday.

“We are closely monitoring North Korea’s nuclear and missile facilities,” Choi Hyun-soo told reporters during a regular press briefing.

The Washington-based Center for Strategic and International Studies said satellite imagery taken Saturday, just two days after the summit ended, showed North Korea was “pursuing a rapid rebuilding” of the rocket site.

When asked about the reports, Trump said he’s still hoping to reach agreement but he would be “very, very disappointed in Chairman Kim” if they are confirmed.

Servicemembers with a superhero name

BY CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

When Zack Marvel was promoted in November, his wife posted a photo of him and his two young sons each holding comic books bearing their father's rank and name.

"Good job and thank you for your service Captain Marvel!" MaryKate Marvel wrote in the post. "I know 2 little boys who already thought you were a superhero."

The mild-mannered Indiana Army National Guard finance officer is one of only two servicemembers with the superhero rank and surname appearing in the military's global email address list. Though neither admitted to having super powers, both described how the lead-up to the release of two big-budget action films has been an exciting time to be wearing captain's bars.

Disney's "Captain Marvel," produced with Defense Department cooperation and featuring a female Air Force pilot as its protagonist, opened Friday.

Air Force Capt. Madison Marvel, a pediatric intern at Brooke Army Medical Center in San Antonio, has early

memories of dressing up as DC Comics' Wonder Woman as a child and being fascinated with her costume's golden lasso, but she's looking forward to the movie based on the Marvel Comics character who shares her name.

When Madison Marvel started serving on active duty as a captain after medical school last summer, many of the patients she saw were already aware of the upcoming film. There have been few days someone hasn't said something about it to her, she said. Not too long ago, a passerby asked to take a picture with her.

Jake Marvel remembers teasing his friends about having superpowers, threatening to say the magic word "Shazam," which in the original Captain Marvel comics turned kid radio reporter Billy Batson into "Earth's mightiest mortal."

Now a chaplain in the New York Air National Guard, Jake Marvel is one of two lieutenant colonels with the powerful surname listed in the military's global email address book, which also includes a cadet, a Navy lieutenant junior grade, and a smattering of enlisted troops who share the name, be-

lieved to be of French origin.

"I was Captain Marvel for six years," said Lt. Col. Nathan "MOG" Marvel, a Marine pilot and liaison at the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, via email. "The Marvel name always draws a comment."

The chance to be Capt. Marvel played only a small part in Madison Marvel's decision to join the military during her first year of medical school.

For Christmas, her parents made a poster using the cover of September's "Entertainment Weekly," which featured actress Brie Larson in costume but photoshopped with Madison Marvel's face and name. Knowing she wanted to be a pediatrician, they had long advised her to keep the Marvel name for professional reasons.

Growing up in Indiana, Zack Marvel could move heavy equipment by the time he was 8, driving the machines owned by his father's construction firm. He didn't dig into comics until middle school, after some peer pressure over his name.

In basic training, captains would occasionally walk up to him and remove his nametape

from his uniform without asking and take pictures with it, he said. After training to be a military truck driver, he became a cadet in the Reserve Officer Training Corps while studying economics and business at Indiana's Ball State.

As a junior, he developed a special ability to repair and refurbish electronics as a way to make extra money, building a business around that skill, which he still operates.

A father of three — Levi, 4; James Logan, 2; and newborn Aurora — he's been known to dress up as Captain America, he said.

"Unfortunately, I don't know how comfortable the (female Captain Marvel) outfit would be for me ... and most people don't know that Shazam is Captain Marvel," he said.

Still, he has trouble persuading his youngest son, named after Marvel's Wolverine, to refer to him by any other name.

"I've corrected him so many times," Zack Marvel said. "He will not stop. He calls me Daddy Captain Marvel; Captain Marvel is all he calls me."

Fast-transport ships depart Guam for Pacific Partnership

BY CHRISTIAN LOPEZ

Stars and Stripes

Two Navy expeditionary fast-transport ships steamed out of Guam this week to kick off Pacific Partnership, an annual mission focused on disaster preparedness and humanitarian assistance throughout the Pacific.

During the mission, the USNS Brunswick and the USNS Fall River will travel to seven nations, according to an email to Stars and Stripes from Task Force 73 spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Sean Riordan.

The ships will conduct engineering projects, host medical events and have humanitarian assistance and disaster response training in the Federated

States of Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Malaysia, the Philippines, Thailand, Timor-Leste and Vietnam, Riordan said.

"Pacific Partnership is about building trust and sharing knowledge," Rear Adm. Joey Tynch, Task Force 73 commander and the mission's executive agent, said in a Navy statement. "This mission shows that the U.S., our partners and hosts are working together to making this region better prepared for disaster response."

Past Pacific Partnership missions, which have lasted up to 150 days, brought together military medical professionals from several nations to work together and provide health care in Pacific countries. Last year, for example, the USNS

Mercy, a hospital ship, visited Indonesia, Sri Lanka, Malaysia and Vietnam, where its crew provided medical, dental and public health services.

That mission has changed over the years to focus less on providing direct care and more on strengthening relations with other nations by exchanging subject matter experts and other personnel, which is reflected by the absence this year of a hospital ship, according to the statement.

The Brunswick and the Fall River, both part of Military Sealift Command, allow relief planners to conduct operations from small or damaged ports. The Navy operates 10 of the ships, first delivered in 2012 by Austal, according to the Aus-

tralian shipbuilder's website.

The vessels are designed to quickly transport equipment and personnel, according to the Navy. Fast transports have shallow drafts, 20,000-square-foot bays and a flight deck that accommodates the CH-53 Sea Stallion helicopter.

More than 500 personnel from the United States, Japan, Australia, Canada, Malaysia, Peru, the Philippines, South Korea, Thailand and the United Kingdom are participating in Pacific Partnership 2019, according to the Navy statement.

The mission was sparked by the December 2004 tsunami that devastated parts of South and Southeast Asia after a 9.1 magnitude earthquake struck off the coast of Indonesia.

Agents on Mexico border told to target Spanish speakers

Associated Press

SANDIEGO—Border agents have been told to explicitly target Spanish speakers and migrants from Latin America in carrying out a Trump administration program requiring asylum-seekers to wait in Mexico, according to memos obtained by The Associated Press that reveal some inner workings of a top government priority to address the burgeoning number of Central Americans arriving in the country.

The Trump administration launched the program in late January in what marks a potentially seismic shift on how the U.S. handles the cases of immigrants seeking asylum and fleeing persecution in their homeland.

The program initially applied only to those who turned themselves in at official border crossings. But a memo from a division chief of the Border

Patrol's San Diego sector says it expanded Friday to include people who cross the border illegally.

The guidance includes instruction about various groups of immigrants who are not to be sent back to Mexico and instead must go through the traditional asylum process in the U.S. immigration court system. They include pregnant women, LGBT migrants and people suffering medical issues. Authorities said previously that Mexican asylum-seekers are excluded, as are children traveling alone.

U.S. officials must check if the asylum-seeker has any felony convictions and notify Mexico at least 12 hours before they are returned. Those who cross illegally must have come as single adults, though the administration is in talks with the Mexican government to include families.

The instructions say Mexican officials insist that no more

than 20 asylum-seekers are returned each day from San Diego to Tijuana, Mexico, on Monday through Saturday, underscoring challenges that the U.S. faces in trying to quickly ramp up one of its top border enforcement priorities and most significant changes to the U.S. immigration system of Donald Trump's presidency. Authorities said Tuesday that more than 76,000 were stopped or apprehended at the Mexican border in February, more than double the same period last year.

A memo on Tuesday to top Border Patrol officials in San Diego said the agency is under "pressures to utilize this program as much as we can."

Explicitly targeting Spanish speakers and Latin Americans had not been previously disclosed, though some critics said it was no surprise considering that recent arrest numbers are largely Central Americans.

R. Kelly says ex-wife destroyed his name

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Embattled R&B star R. Kelly angrily blamed his ex-wife for "destroying" his name and claimed other people stole from his bank accounts during new portions of an interview that aired Thursday, a day after he was sent to jail for not paying child support.

Kelly, who is also facing felony charges that allege he sexually abused three girls and a woman in Chicago years ago, shouted and cried as he spoke with Gayle King of "CBS This Morning." He said his ex-wife was lying when she accused him of domestic abuse and his voice broke as he asked, "How can I pay child support if my ex-wife is destroying my name and I can't work?"

The 52-year old singer was jailed Wednesday after he said he couldn't afford to pay \$161,000 in back child support. He said he had "zero" relationship with his three children but knows they love him.

The interview, which was recorded earlier this week, marked the first time Kelly has spoken publicly since his arrest last month in the sexual abuse case. In segments that aired Wednesday, Kelly whispered, cried and ranted while pleading with viewers to believe that he never had sex with anyone under age 17 and never held anyone against their will — likely hoping the raw interview would help sway public opinion.

The interview also marked the first time he addressed allegations in the Lifetime documentary series "Surviving R. Kelly," which aired in January and alleged he held women captive and ran a "sex cult."

Experts said Kelly's appearance was also risky and could backfire if it gives prosecutors more information to use against him at trial.

On Wednesday's broadcast, Kelly's emotions swung wildly as he explained he was simply someone with a "big heart" who was betrayed by liars who hoped to cash in.

Pentagon to request fewer F-35s

Bloomberg

The Pentagon will request 78 F-35 jets built by Lockheed Martin, six fewer than previously planned, in the budget expected to be sent to Congress next week, according to defense officials.

The cutback from the 84 fighters projected a year ago for fiscal 2020 is a setback for Lockheed, the No. 1 defense contractor, even as interest in the plane from foreign buyers increases.

The officials asked not to be identified in advance of the budget release.

It's likely to raise questions from skeptical lawmakers about why the Defense Department, which has spent years saying it needs the more advanced F-35, cut back the planned purchases even as the Air Force is seeking money to buy eight new, upgraded F-15 jets from rival Boeing. They would be the first F-15s the Pentagon bought since 2001.

Among the likely questions is whether acting Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan, a former Boeing official, played any part in the decision to buy fewer planes from Lockheed and more from Boeing. However, Shanahan has recused himself from participation in all Boeing matters.

If recent history is a guide, Congress will increase the F-35 request in the final version of the fiscal 2020 budget.

Despite a history of performance setbacks, the F-35 has drawn praise for its flying qualities as the Air Force, the Marine Corps and now the Navy have declared that the aircraft has an initial combat capability. It also retains strong support in Congress as a job creator.

For the current year, Congress appropriated \$9.34 billion for 93 F-35s, 16 more than requested. For fiscal 2018, lawmakers added 20 F-35s to the 70 requested.

Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Armed Services Committee, has said he wants to triple F-35s purchased by 2024, making it the most ambitious procurement request on his agenda for next year.

While Shanahan has pledged to stay out of Boeing decisions, he isn't hesitant to praise the F-35 built by its rival. In an interview with Bloomberg News, he sought to make clear he's a fan.

"What's really important for people to always take away is I've found the aircraft — the F-35 as a product, its capability and performance — to be eye-watering. It is high, high-performing — no ambiguity — no ifs, ands or buts."

Shanahan said he's focusing on "program execution," which includes driving down the long-term costs of maintaining and operating the F-35 fleet.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Wedding photo fight lands groom in jail

FL OCEAN RIDGE — Police said a Florida man spent what was supposed to be his wedding night in jail after breaking the nose of a man who refused to move out of the way of the beachfront wedding pictures.

Ocean Ridge police arrested Jeffery E. Alvord, 27, on Sunday following the fight with a 24-year-old man who refused offers of \$50 to move out of the way of the wedding pictures.

Alvord told police the man became “very belligerent,” making him feel threatened. So he punched the man. The victim told police a groomsman held him so Alvord could hit him.

Alvord’s attorney, Steven Cohen, told The Palm Beach Post the incident “did not play out” as the victim stated.

Alvord was released on bond Monday and married his fiancée.

Child in stroller rides NYC subway alone

NY NEW YORK — The New York Police Department said a 1-year-old boy in a stroller rode alone on a Manhattan subway train after his caregiver suffered a medical condition.

Authorities said the caregiver, a family friend, somehow exited the southbound “1” train at 96th Street around 5:30 p.m. Tuesday.

The train pulled away and the child rode eight stops to Penn Station before he was recovered, unharmed.

Police declined to provide details on the man’s medical condition due to privacy laws. He was not charged.

Arrested man asks police to share booze

NC MORGANTON — Police said a North Carolina man wasn’t just caught driving drunk — he also complained that an officer wouldn’t share a bottle of liquor.

A police report said officers saw Kyle Ryan Elliott driving away from a Morganton sports bar early Saturday with his girlfriend as she vomited out of his truck.

Elliott told an officer he was taking her to get diabetes medicine. A medic later cleared her at the scene.

Police said Elliott failed breath tests and was put in a patrol car, where he saw a bottle of Fireball Whiskey confiscated from someone else. The report says he told the officer: “You could have shared; I’m already drunk.”

Elliott was charged with DWI.

Art donated to private school deemed fake

CA OAKLAND — Officials at an Oakland private school thought they were sitting on a small fortune after a donation of four Chinese paintings valued at \$2.8 million.

The San Francisco Chronicle reported Tuesday that officials at the Pacific Boychoir Academy borrowed \$400,000 against the windfall from the 2017 and 2018 donations to boost staff. They added an admissions director, a web designer and a Latin teacher. Then last month came the shocking news: Asian art experts in San Francisco deemed the paintings fake.

The head of the school, Summer Dittmer, said the donor had no idea the pieces were reproductions and is “devas-

tated.” She said the loans have put the school in deep financial trouble.

The school has turned to GoFundMe and other fundraising efforts to pay this year’s operating costs.

Man charged after parking lot shooting

MO ST. CHARLES — A Missouri man is in jail after being charged in the shooting of an Amazon delivery driver in a dispute over a handicapped parking spot.

KTVI-TV reported that Larry Thomlison, 65, of St. Charles, is charged with assault and armed criminal action.

The shooting happened Tuesday in the parking lot of a Target store in St. Charles. Authorities believe Thomlison was upset that the 21-year-old Amazon driver pulled into a handicapped-accessible parking space.

Police said Thomlison, who had a placard allowing him to park in handicapped-accessible spots, pulled out a cellphone to document the truck, leading to a struggle in which Thomlison was knocked to the ground. Police said he then pulled out a gun and shot the Amazon driver in the back.

The Amazon driver remains hospitalized.

Rescued snowboarder charged in arson case

CO ASPEN — A snowboarder who had to be rescued from a central Colorado mountain has been charged in an arson case.

The Aspen Highlands Ski Patrol and Mountain Rescue Aspen located Richard Miller, 23, after he was separated from his group on Sunday. Searchers reached him in an area 300 feet below the ski area’s boundary.

Miller pleaded not guilty to felony charges of arson and setting fire to woods stemming from a July blaze that destroyed three homes and burned more than 19 square miles. His trial is scheduled for May.

Authorities said Miller and girlfriend Allison Marcus fired prohibited, incendiary tracer rounds at a gun range near dry tinder during drought conditions.

Man accused of taking \$75K of tenderloin

KY LOUISVILLE — A Kentucky man is accused of stealing more than \$75,000 of beef tenderloin over several months.

News outlets reported Billy Wethington, 42, was arrested in Louisville on March 1 and charged with theft by unlawful taking.

Police said Wethington worked at an undisclosed business. During each shift, they say, he’s accused of shoving eight to 10 beef tenderloins into a garbage bag and putting it in his vehicle.

An arrest citation said Wethington was captured on surveillance video stealing the beef. Court records show the business lost more than \$75,000 and up to \$100,000 over the course of eight months.

Man sought in theft of Girl Scout cookies

WA SEATTLE — Police are looking for a man who stole \$600 from a group of Girl Scouts who were selling cookies outside a Seattle grocery store.

Seattle police said the man ran up to the girls just before 8 p.m. Sunday near the Northgate area, grabbed their money bin and fled.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Aggressive moves transform NL East

Associated Press

PORT ST. LUCIE, Fla. — For years, the NL East has been soft as a bunt single.

Not anymore.

Even before Bryce Harper decided to stay inside the division, four of the five teams spent this offseason swinging for the fences. In addition to defending champion Atlanta, the New York Mets, Philadelphia Phillies and Washington Nationals all have enough firepower to potentially contend for the playoffs.

“This is probably going to be the stiffest competition in a division race in my career,” Nationals ace Max Scherzer said at spring training.

It’s certainly a noticeable transformation.

In the past eight seasons, the NL East has won a grand total of two playoff series and produced one pennant winner — with the 2015 Mets responsible for the entirety of that October success.

Two years ago, Washington

finished a whopping 20 games in front, and no other team in the division was better than 77-85.

Last season, Atlanta rolled to a surprise title at 90-72, the fewest wins of any postseason participant. No other NL East squad did better than two games above .500.

Miami has endured nine straight losing seasons. Philadelphia hasn’t been a winner since 2011. New York’s last 10 years, two winning records.

But now, an influx of talent and a cavalcade of new faces have the division on the rise, seemingly shaping up as a rugged gauntlet for years to come.

By the looks of it, the NL East is suddenly a beast.

“I don’t think there’s another division harder right now. Every team is pretty much loaded,” Phillies outfielder Nick Williams said.

This winter alone:

Atlanta signed third baseman Josh Donaldson, the 2015 AL MVP.

New York acquired five re-

cent All-Stars in Robinson Cano, Edwin Diaz, Jeurys Familia, Jed Lowrie and Wilson Ramos.

Washington spent \$140 million to plug Patrick Corbin into an imposing rotation that already featured Scherzer and Stephen Strasburg.

And the Phillies plucked away two big stars from division rivals, trading with Miami for catcher J.T. Realmuto and luring Harper from the Nationals with a record \$330 million contract.

“It’s almost like the AL East — great pitching, great lineups 1 through 9. But that’s what you live for. You want to face the best,” Braves All-Star pitcher Mike Foltynewicz said.

“People took us a little lightly last year and now we’re the ones kind of getting chased. But no panic button or anything. We made great moves before everyone started going haywire,” he added. “It’s kind of cool to see that we might have stirred it up for these guys.”

Even the less-heralded

moves showed all four organizations were serious about winning right away.

Atlanta brought back veteran catcher Brian McCann and re-signed All-Star outfielder Nick Markakis.

The busy Mets added reliever Justin Wilson and outfielder Keon Broxton, among others, significantly improving their bullpen, bench and overall depth under new general manager Brodie Van Wagenen.

Washington boosted its relief corps with Kyle Barraclough and Trevor Rosenthal, secured a pair of first-string catchers in Yan Gomes and Kurt Suzuki, and addressed issues on the right side of the infield with Brian Dozier and Matt Adams. Anibal Sanchez was signed away from Atlanta for the back of the rotation.

Philadelphia paid \$50 million for 2013 NL MVP Andrew McCutchen, another \$23 million for late-inning reliever David Robertson, and traded for two-time All-Star shortstop Jean Segura.

College picks wind up on fast track to major leagues

Associated Press

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz. — Joey Bart already looks like a big league hitter in his first major league camp, especially when the San Francisco Giants catcher sends a misguided pitch soaring over the center-field fence.

The same with White Sox shortstop Nick Madrigal every time he makes a spinning stab deep in the hole, or Tigers pitcher Casey Mize when he leaves an unsuspecting batter befuddled, or the four young arms the Royals selected among the first 40 picks of last year’s amateur draft.

All have a couple of things in common: They played college baseball rather than turning pro out of high school, and they are all expected to help their clubs sooner than later.

Whether it’s the beginning of

a trend toward selecting less-risky, more advanced college prospects over raw, high-ceiling high school stars remains to be seen. But there are undeniable benefits to stocking a farm system with college players as opposed to an 18-year-old fresh off the prom, including the chance to provide more immediate help — not unlike what is expected of NBA and NFL picks.

“Yeah, that’s all high school players versus college players. The risk is lower,” explained J.J. Piccolo, the Royals’ assistant general manager in charge of scouting and player development.

“Some would make the case the reward is greater with a toolsy high school player,” Piccolo said, “but that’s a case-by-case basis. You have a track record, three years playing against college competition.

They’re playing against more advanced players, and the predictiveness of what they may do falls in line a little better. You know what to expect.”

None of which is necessarily new. Baseball scouts have been mining the college and prep ranks with equal fervor for years, and the maturity gap — physically and mentally — has always existed.

Some things have changed, though.

Some baseball officials believe kids chosen right out of high school are more inclined to pass up a modest signing bonus in favor of a few years in college these days, gaining not only an education and experience but also the opportunity to be drafted higher down the road.

Others believe patience has grown short in this modern, fast-paced world. Investing five

years developing a first-round pick out of high school is no longer as palatable for ownership and fans alike. They’d rather see their first-round picks slipping on a big league jersey and playing in front of thousands of fans than toiling away in some baseball backwater.

“Everybody develops at their own pace. It’s hard to put a date on when that’s going to be,” Royals manager Ned Yost said. “We didn’t know when (Alcides) Escobar or Salvador Perez were going to develop and become All-Stars. We just knew they would.”

Perhaps as a result, the first five picks of last year’s first-year player draft came from the college ranks. There were only 10 college kids picked in the first round in 2016, but there were 15 the following year and 13 first-round selections last summer.

College basketball roundup

No. 10 LSU escapes Florida in overtime

Associated Press

GAINESVILLE, Fla. — Getting to overtime was the tough part for LSU.

Winning in the extra frame? That's pretty much what the Tigers have done all season.

Tremont Waters dribbled the length of the court for the tying basket with 3 seconds remaining in regulation and hit a three-pointer early in overtime, helping No. 10 LSU escape Florida with a 79-78 victory Wednesday night.

The Tigers (25-5, 15-2 Southeastern Conference) improved to 5-1 in OT games in league play.

"It's kind of what we've done all year," LSU coach Will Wade said. "It's not very pretty."

The Tigers can clinch a share of the SEC regular-season title with a victory Saturday against lowly Vanderbilt. They already have locked up a double-bye in next week's conference tournament and continue to im-

prove their NCAA Tournament seeding.

The Gators had a chance to win it with 7.8 seconds left in the extra period, but Jalen Hudson slipped and then KeVaughn Allen failed to get off a shot before the final buzzer.

"Golden opportunity," Florida coach Mike White said. "To not get a shot off on your last possession is very disheartening. We had done so many positive things to be in that position."

LSU nearly gave the game away in the final minute of regulation. Waters coughed up a turnover that led to a dunk at the other end and Skylar Mays missed the front end of a one-and-one.

Hudson, who scored 16 straight points in the second half in his final home game on "Senior Night," looked as if he delivered the winner after Mays' miss. His 3-pointer from the elbow rattled around the rim and fell through with 6.2

seconds left, putting the Gators (17-13, 9-8) up 72-70.

But that was enough time for Waters to go coast to coast while splitting Florida's half-hearted defense.

Waters finished with 19 points, six assists, six turnovers, three rebounds and three steals.

Seton Hall 73, No. 16 Marquette 64: Myles Powell scored 34 points and host Seton Hall closed with an 18-0 run to revive its NCAA Tournament hopes.

Georgia Tech 63, N.C. State 61: With 5.5 seconds remaining, Yellow Jackets coach Josh Pastner told his players during a timeout that they were going to find a way to win the game.

Clemson 64, Notre Dame 62: After standing 0-5 this season in games decided by two points or fewer, the Tigers finally broke through, holding on for a victory at upset-minded Notre Dame.

West Virginia 90, Iowa State

75: Jermaine Haley scored a career-high 28 points and the host Mountaineers upset the Cyclones.

Oklahoma St. 67, Baylor 64: Isaac Likekele had 23 points, nine rebounds and six assists, and the Big 12 last-place Cowboys held host Baylor without a field goal over the final 4:33. Fellow freshman Yor Anei added 14 points, nine rebounds and six blocked shots.

Oregon 72, Washington State 61: Paul White scored 21 points and grabbed six rebounds and the Ducks won on the road.

Fresno St. 76, San Diego St. 74: New Williams stole the ball and scored the go-ahead basket on a slam dunk with 30 seconds left and Fresno State overcame an eight-point deficit in the final 2:50 to win at San Diego State and clinch the No. 3 seed in the Mountain West Conference Tournament.

McIlroy doing everything right – except winning

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Rory McIlroy has few complaints about the state of his game, only the results.

That doesn't bother him, either.

At least not yet.

Behind him are 12 months since his last victory in the Arnold Palmer Invitational, a title he defends this week against a typically strong field at Bay Hill that no longer includes Tiger Woods as he copes with a neck strain. Ahead of McIlroy is the Masters, his fifth opportunity to join the most elite group in golf by completing the career Grand Slam.

"Playing well," McIlroy said Wednesday after a frigid pro-am at Bay Hill. "Just seems like one or two people play a little better than me every week I tee it up. I'm in a good place with my game, doing every-

thing pretty well, and just got to try and keep continuing on that path. And if I keep working on these things and keep doing the right things, hopefully sooner or later I'll turn all these good finishes into a win."

McIlroy has opened the year with four straight top-five finishes, his longest streak on the PGA Tour. He was runner-up two weeks ago in Mexico City, where Dustin Johnson overwhelmed everyone for a five-shot victory. He finished three back at Riviera, and he was in the final group at Kapalua.

His best stretch of golf might have been the end of 2011 and the start of 2012, when McIlroy finished in the top five in 11 out of 12 tournaments, two of them victories. That ended at Augusta National when he tied for 40th.

The Florida swing is when the Masters starts to come into

view for everyone, especially McIlroy. A green jacket is all he needs to complete the career Grand Slam, and it's been on his mind since he won the British Open at Royal Liverpool in 2014. He has finished in the top 10 at the last four Masters, each time finishing six shots behind. Last year might have been the toughest because he played in the final group with Patrick Reed, three shots behind, and faded to a 74.

There is no sense of panic. In fact, the 29-year-old from Northern Ireland even managed to cite Abraham Lincoln, who lost several elections over three decades.

"He wound up being president of the United States," McIlroy said. "So I still got a bit of time."

For now, McIlroy is at a course he has come to enjoy since he first played the Arnold

Palmer Invitational in 2015 and dined with the King. Even with such a short history, the connection between Palmer and McIlroy was strong.

PGA Tour Commissioner Jay Monahan recalls being at lunch with Palmer at Bay Hill in 2015 when McIlroy stopped by to say hello. Palmer offered McIlroy whatever he needed, from tickets to ice cream. McIlroy replied: "Mr. Palmer, thanks to you, I have everything I could ever need in my life. I'm all set."

Palmer teared up at the words.

On the day Palmer died — Sept. 25, 2016 — McIlroy won the Tour Championship and the FedEx Cup. His next victory was 18 months later at Bay Hill, the course Palmer bought, nurtured and turned into the signature sporting event in Orlando.

NBA roundup

LeBron passes Jordan on scoring list

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Will Barton scored 23 points, Gary Harris added 19 and the Denver Nuggets snapped their three-game losing streak with a 115-99 victory over the Los Angeles Lakers on Wednesday night despite LeBron James' move into fourth place on the NBA's career scoring list.

James scored 31 points and surpassed Michael Jordan's 32,292 career points on a driving layup during the second quarter. His Lakers erased most of an early 23-point deficit before fading in the fourth quarter of their fourth consecutive loss.

Denver (43-21) blew all but two points of its huge early lead, but Harris and Nikola Jokic contributed key baskets down the stretch of the Nuggets' first win.

James now trails only Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (38,387 points), Karl Malone (36,928) and Kobe Bryant (33,643).

Bulls 108, 76ers 107: Zach LaVine scored 39 points and hit the go-ahead layup

in the closing seconds to lead host Chicago to a wild win over Philadelphia.

LaVine scored 13 in the fourth quarter as the Bulls wiped out a 10-point deficit in a game that featured two endings.

Heat 91, Hornets 84: Kelly Olynyk had 22 points and 11 rebounds, Hassan Whiteside added 18 points and 15 rebounds off the bench and Miami won at Charlotte to break a tie for the eighth spot in the Eastern Conference.

Olynyk was 8-for-14 from the field, including 5-for-7 from beyond the three-point arc as Miami won its third straight game.

Suns 107, Knicks 96: Devin Booker scored a season-high 41 points and host Phoenix rolled to its fourth victory in five games.

Booker made 14 of 23 shots, including six of 10 three-pointers, and the Suns (15-51) took over after a slow start in a matchup of the teams with the NBA's worst records.

Wizards 132, Mavericks 123: Bradley Beal dunked over 7-foot-2 Salah Mejri and

then stared him down in the most dramatic part of a 30-point performance as Washington beat Dallas.

Beal added eight assists and seven rebounds as Washington beat Dallas at home after losing nine in a row when hosting the Mavericks.

Pistons 131, Timberwolves 114: Andre Drummond had 31 points and 15 rebounds and surging host Detroit beat Minnesota.

Drummond posted his 16th straight double-double — the second-longest streak in franchise history. He set the record with 18 last season.

Spurs 111, Hawks 104: LaMarcus Aldridge scored 32 points and San Antonio pulled away at Atlanta in the closing minutes for its fourth straight victory.

Derrick White scored seven straight points, putting the Spurs ahead to stay with a three-pointer before hitting two straight shots in the lane. He finished with 18 points and nine assists.

Nets 113, Cavaliers 107: Spencer Dinwiddie scored 12

of his 28 points in the fourth quarter and host Brooklyn beat Cleveland for its second straight win.

D'Angelo Russell added 25 points for the Nets.

Kevin Love had 24 points and 16 rebounds for the Cavaliers, who had won four of six since that loss to the Nets in the final game before the All-Star break.

Jazz 114, Pelicans 104: Derrick Favors scored 25 points, Rudy Gobert added 22 points and 13 rebounds, and visiting Utah beat New Orleans for the second time this season. Donovan Mitchell had 22 points, and Joe Ingles had 10 points and 10 assists for the Jazz.

Celtics 111, Kings 109: Gordon Hayward made up for a costly foul by hitting a tie-breaking shot with 2 seconds to play that helped Boston overcome the absence of injured star Kyrie Irving in a win at Sacramento.

Jayson Tatum led the Celtics with 24 points and Al Horford had 21 points, 11 rebounds and seven assists.

NHL roundup

Caps race out to big lead, hold off Flyers' late surge

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — Alex Ovechkin and Nicklas Backstrom each had a goal and an assist, and the Washington Capitals beat the Philadelphia Flyers 5-3 Wednesday night to reclaim sole possession of first place in the Metropolitan Division.

Brett Connolly, Tom Wilson and Andre Burakovsky also scored for the Capitals, who won their fifth straight and seventh in the last eight. Washington began the night tied with the Islanders atop the division.

Ovechkin moved one point

from reaching 1,200 for his career. He will become the third active player and 49th all-time to reach the mark.

Braden Holtby made 27 saves for his 250th career victory.

Claude Giroux had a goal and an assist, and Scott Laughton and Philippe Myers also scored for the Flyers, whose rally from a 5-0 deficit fell short. Philadelphia had won 16 of 21 to close within reach of a postseason spot after sinking to the NHL's worst record in January. The Flyers remained seven points out of the second wild card in the Eastern Conference.

Canucks 3, Maple Leafs 2 (OT): Alex Edler scored 3:11 into overtime as host Vancouver rallied past Toronto.

Loui Eriksson and Josh Leivo also scored for the Canucks, who trailed 2-0 after two periods and snapped a three-game skid. Adam Gaudette had two assists and Jacob Markstrom stopped 28 shots.

Blues 5, Ducks 4: Robert Thomas and Alex Pietrangelo scored 12 seconds apart late in the third period, and visiting St. Louis rallied to beat Anaheim.

Thomas got his second goal of the game with 1:04 left on the rebound of a loose shot and Pi-

etrangelo rifled a shot through traffic for the game-winner with 52 seconds remaining for his 12th goal of the season.

Golden Knights 2, Flames 1: Deryk Engelland scored his second goal of the season in the third period to lift host Vegas over Calgary.

Shea Theodore also scored for the Golden Knights and Marc-Andre Fleury stopped 33 shots for his league-leading 33rd win of the season. Vegas pulled seven points behind second-place San Jose in the Pacific Division and 10 behind first-place Calgary.