

SUNDAY, MARCH 30, 2025

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Hegseth: USFJ becoming operational command

BY SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

TOKYO — U.S. Forces Japan has begun reorganizing into a “warfighting headquarters,” U.S. Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth said Sunday during his first trip to the Indo-Pacific since taking office.

Hegseth discussed restructuring USFJ amid regional security challenges with Japanese Minister of Defense Gen Nakatani at Camp Ichigaya, the Ministry of Defense headquarters in central Tokyo.

The Defense Department has begun the first phase of upgrading USFJ into a joint force command better equipped to coordinate with its Japanese counterpart, Hegseth told reporters after the meeting.

“This also means reorganizing U.S. Forces Japan into a warfighting headquarters, increasing its staff and giving its commander the authorities needed to accomplish new missions,” he said.

USFJ will soon add personnel in central Tokyo and at its headquarters at Yokota Air Base in the western suburbs, Hegseth said.

The upgrade will improve coordination with Japan’s own, recently created, joint operations command, he said.

The Pentagon announced plans in July to modernize USFJ into a command with “expanded missions and operational responsibilities” to complement the Japan Self-Defense Forces Joint Operations Command.

The Japanese command was established in March to take operational control of all three of its armed forces and work closely with USFJ.

Hegseth gave no timeline for the USFJ reorganization, but welcomed the creation of the new Japanese command.

“It’s more urgency, it’s more cooperation in real time,” he said. “It also increases our readiness to respond to contingency or crisis, support U.S. operations

and help Japan and U.S. forces defend its territory.”

CNN earlier this month reported the Pentagon had proposed consolidating four global commands and canceling the USFJ restructuring to save \$330 million over five years.

The Republican chairs of the House and Senate Armed Service committees immediately questioned the path forward for that move.

The security environment in the Western Pacific has deteriorated in recent years.

China is rapidly expanding its military capabilities and has vowed to take control of Taiwan — by force, if necessary. Beijing also claims Tokyo-administered islands in the East China Sea.

Meanwhile, North Korea has deployed troops to assist Russia in Ukraine and continues to advance its nuclear and missile technology.

America and Japan stand together in the face of “aggressive

and coercive” actions by the communist Chinese, Hegseth said.

“America is committed to sustaining robust, ready and credible deterrence in the Indo-Pacific including across the Taiwan Strait,” he said, noting Japan would be on the front lines of any conflict the allies might face in the Western Pacific.

The U.S.-Japan alliance is the cornerstone of peace and security in the region, Hegseth said.

Their goal is increased deterrence, peace through strength and keeping the enemy guessing, he said.

“This means ensuring that we have the right posture in Japan and the right capabilities forward deployed here, whether permanent or temporary,” he said. “It also means expanding access to key terrain in the first island chain such as Japan’s southwest islands and, certainly, it means exercising together at those critical locations.”

Think tank’s fingerprints seen on DOD China memo

The Washington Post

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth has reoriented the U.S. military to prioritize deterring China’s seizure of Taiwan and shoring up homeland defense by “assuming risk” in Europe and other parts of the world, according to a secret internal guidance memo that bears the fingerprints of the conservative Heritage Foundation, including some passages that are nearly word-for-word duplications of text published by the think tank last year.

The document, known as the Interim National Defense Strategic Guidance and marked “secret/no foreign national” in most passages, was distributed throughout the Defense Department in mid-March and signed by Hegseth. It outlines, in broad and sometimes partisan detail, the execution of

President Donald Trump’s vision to prepare for and win a potential war against Beijing and defend the United States from threats in the “near abroad,” including Greenland and the Panama Canal.

The document — setting out a prioritization framework for senior defense officials and a vision to execute that work — also instructs the military to take a more direct role in countering illegal migration and drug trafficking.

The first Trump administration and the Biden administration characterized China as the greatest threat to the U.S. and postured the force to prepare for and deter conflict in the Pacific region. But Hegseth’s guidance is extraordinary in its description of the potential invasion of Taiwan as the exclusive animating scenario that must be pri-

oritized over other potential dangers — reorienting the vast U.S. military architecture toward the Indo-Pacific region beyond its homeland defense mission.

The Pentagon will “assume risk in other theaters” given personnel and resource constraints, and pressure allies in Europe, the Middle East and East Asia to spend more on defense to take on the bulk of the deterrence role against threats from Russia, North Korea and Iran, according to the guidance.

The agency will shift focus to counterterrorism missions against groups with the capability and intent to strike the U.S., the guidance says, signaling that it will deprioritize militants in the Middle East and Africa who are regionally destabilizing but don’t have ambition to launch international attacks.

Russian spy plane intercepted near US ship

BY ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — Navy fighter jets recently intercepted a Russian spy plane flying near an aircraft carrier ordered to the Middle East to support U.S. military strikes against Iranian-backed Houthi militants, officials said.

"Aircraft from Carrier Air Wing 2 intercepted and escorted a Russian aircraft in the vicinity of the Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson while underway in the Pacific (Ocean)," Lt. Cmdr. Katie Koenig, a spokeswoman for U.S. Pacific Command, said.

She added that the interaction was safe and professional, but did not say exactly when the incident occurred.

On Friday, the Carl Vinson

Carrier Strike Group departed Guam after a five-day port visit, the Navy said in a statement released the same day.

The strike group, which also includes the cruiser USS Princeton and the destroyer USS Sterett, is presumably heading to the Middle East to join the Harry S. Truman Carrier Strike Group already on duty in the Red Sea.

Earlier this month, Vinson carried out naval drills with South Korea and Japan in the East China Sea in an exercise that ended March 20.

That same day, South Korean officials made a strong protest to Russia over repeated airspace violations made by Russian military aircraft in the East Sea, also known as the Sea of Japan, according to the

South Korean news agency Yonhap.

In a video posted to the social media site Instagram on Monday, a Russian Ilyushin II-38N "Dolphin" patrol and anti-submarine aircraft is shown conducting a low-altitude pass by the Vinson while escorted by a Navy F/A-18F Super Hornet and a F-35C Lightning II.

It's not uncommon for the Russian military to monitor U.S. ships, particularly during exercises and other activities. Much the same, the United States also monitors Russian ships and aircraft. But the proximity was surprising.

The person who posted the video indicated the incident happened "a few miles off the coast of Russia." Russia has a

small amount of coastline along the Sea of Japan.

Secretary of Defense Pete Hegseth ordered Vinson to the Middle East earlier this month as the U.S. continues to pummel Houthi militants in Yemen with airstrikes to attempt to cripple the group's ability to disrupt shipping in the region.

It will be the second time in six months the U.S. will operate two aircraft carriers in the Middle East. Hegseth also extended Truman's deployment a month.

Also on Monday, USS Nimitz, the oldest aircraft carrier in the fleet, departed its homeport in Bremerton, Wash., for a regularly scheduled deployment to the Indo-Pacific, the Navy said in a statement the same day.

Army's Ranger School adopts new fitness test

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

ATLANTA — The first day of the Army's famously grueling Ranger School will get a little tougher next month, according to the service's infantry commandant.

The Airborne and Ranger Training Brigade at Fort Benning, Ga., will drop its long-held Day 1 Ranger Physical Fitness Assessment of pushups, situps, chinups and a five-mile run for a new, nine-event test meant to better mimic the demands of combat, said Brig. Gen. Phil Kiniery, the Infantry School leader.

The test determines who will continue in the three-phase, 61-day leadership course that is known for challenging its students to complete combat-focused missions on little sleep

and with little food.

Fort Benning officials said the new Ranger Physical Fitness Assessment will be administered with the class scheduled to begin April 21.

Officials said the new test consists of two parts. In the first part, Ranger students have 14 minutes to complete an 800-meter run, 30 dead-stop pushups, a 100-meter sprint, 16 lifts of a 40-pound sandbag onto a 68-inch high platform, a 50-meter farmer's carry of 40 pounds in each hand, a 50-meter "movement drill," which will include a high crawl and brief sprints, and a second 800-meter run.

Ranger students will then change into physical fitness uniforms to conduct a 4-mile run in less than 32 minutes and finish the test with six chinups, according to Fort Benning.

DOD reopens deferred resignation program

BY JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

The Department of Defense is launching a deferred resignation program and early retirement initiative aimed at trimming the size of the civilian workforce, the agency said over the weekend.

Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth, in a memorandum signed Friday, said the military is re-aligning the workforce and looking for ways to automate more positions in an across-the-board restructuring to "supercharge our American warfighters."

The Defense Department didn't release the full memorandum, but said in a summary released Saturday that the moves would reduce duplicative efforts within the Pentagon.

The memo also did not spec-

ify how much of the workforce it intends to cut.

The reductions, however, are required "to put the department on ready footing to deter our enemies and fight for peace," the DOD said.

The Pentagon offered deferred resignations in January through a program managed by the government's Office of Personnel Management, offering participants full pay and benefits through September. OPM made the resignation offer available to most full-time federal employees.

As of March 18, only about 21,000 of DOD's 900,000 civilian workers had signed up. That's far short of the roughly 50,000-60,000 employees the Pentagon wanted to register for the program, according to a March 18 release.

Trump: Force not ruled out for Greenland

Associated Press

NUUK, Greenland—The Danish foreign minister on Saturday scolded the Trump administration for its “tone” in criticizing Denmark and Greenland, saying his country is already investing more into Arctic security and remains open to more cooperation with the U.S.

Foreign Minister Lars Lokke Rasmussen made the remarks in a video posted to social media after Vice President JD Vance's visit to the strategic island. Later Saturday, though, President Donald Trump maintained an aggressive tone, telling NBC News that “I never take military force off the table” in regards to acquiring Greenland.

“Many accusations and many allegations have been made. And of course we are open to criticism,” Rasmussen said speaking

in English. “But let me be completely honest: we do not appreciate the tone in which it is being delivered. This is not how you speak to your close allies. And I still consider Denmark and the United States to be close allies.”

Greenland is a territory of Denmark, which is a NATO ally of the United States. Trump wants to annex the territory, claiming it's needed for national security purposes.

In Saturday's interview, Trump allowed that “I think there's a good possibility that we could do it without military force.”

“This is world peace, this is international security,” he said, but added: “I don't take anything off the table.”

Trump also said “I don't care” when asked in the NBC interview what message it would send to

Russian President Vladimir Putin, who is trying to solidify his hold on Ukrainian territory three years after his invasion.

Vance on Friday said Denmark has “underinvested” in Greenland's security and demanded that Denmark change its approach as Trump pushes to take over the Danish territory.

Vance visited U.S. troops on Pituffik Space Base on mineral-rich Greenland alongside his wife and other senior U.S. officials for a trip that was ultimately scaled back after an uproar among Greenlanders and Danes who were not consulted about the original itinerary.

Vance said the U.S. has “no option” but to take a significant position to ensure the security of the island as he encouraged a push in Greenland for independence from Denmark.

The reaction by members of Greenland's parliament and residents has rendered that unlikely, with anger erupting over the Trump administration's attempts to annex the vast Arctic island.

And Greenlandic lawmakers on Thursday agreed to form a new government, banding together to resist Trump's overtures.

Hundreds of protesters demonstrated Saturday outside the U.S. Embassy in the Danish capital Copenhagen with some lifting signs saying, “back off, USA” Danish broadcaster TV2 reported.

Even Greenland's national dogsled race that kicked off Saturday was affected. Usha Vance, the vice president's wife, who was originally scheduled to attend the race, opted out when her husband decided to join the trip and visit the military base instead.

Iran rejects direct negotiations in response to Trump's letter

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran's president said Sunday that the Islamic Republic rejected direct negotiations with the United States over its rapidly advancing nuclear program, offering Tehran's first response to a letter President Donald Trump sent to the country's supreme leader.

President Masoud Pezeshkian said Iran's response, delivered via the sultanate of Oman, left open the possibility of indirect negotiations with Washington. However, such talks have made no progress since Trump in his first term unilaterally withdrew America from Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers in 2018.

In the years since, regional tensions have boiled over into attacks at sea and on land. Then came the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, which saw Israel target militant group leaders across Iran's self-described “Axis of Resistance.” Now, as the U.S. conducts

intense airstrikes targeting the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels of Yemen, the risk of military action targeting Iran's nuclear program remains on the table.

“We don't avoid talks; it's the breach of promises that has caused issues for us so far,” Pezeshkian said in televised remarks. “They must prove that they can build trust.”

The White House, the State Department and other officials offered no immediate reaction to the announcement. However, Trump said before Pezeshkian's comments he was considering military action and tariffs if Iran does not agree to a nuclear deal.

“If they don't make a deal, there will be bombing and it will be bombing the likes of which they have never seen before,” Trump told NBC News.

Trump's letter arrived in Tehran on March 12. Though announcing he wrote it in a television interview, Trump offered little detail on what he said.

Former defense officials: Signal chat flouted rules

The Washington Post

The Yemen attack timeline that Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth posted to a Signal chat group would have been so highly classified, under Pentagon guidelines, that the details should have been restricted to a special, compartmented channel with its own code word and with access tightly limited, according to former Defense Department officials.

Hegseth and other senior Trump administration officials have denied that the data they shared in a Signal group, which included the timing of weapons strikes against Yemen's Houthis and intelligence information shared by Israel on the whereabouts of a top Houthi operative, was classified.

“These are indeed highly detailed operational plans for war,” said one of the former officials, who like others spoke on the condition of anonymity because of

the issue's sensitivity. “Twenty-five years, I have never known them not to be classified. And usually this operational level of detail is further restricted to those with a need-to-know.”

“I don't care what DOD says—that's classified info,” a second former official said.

Current and former U.S. defense and intelligence officials described the lack of operational security, which leaked when the editor in chief of the Atlantic magazine was inadvertently added to the chat group among President Donald Trump's top aides, as a potentially grievous espionage vulnerability. Russia, China and other hostile intelligence services constantly probe government officials' communications devices for weakness, and as former National Security Agency contractor Edward Snowden revealed in 2013, the United States does the same — even with the leaders of friendly nations.

Myanmar cities reeling after earthquake

Associated Press

MANDALAY, Myanmar — The smell of decaying bodies permeated the streets of Myanmar's second-largest city on Sunday as people worked frantically by hand to clear rubble in the hope of finding someone still alive, two days after a massive earthquake struck that killed more than 1,600 people and left countless others buried.

The 7.7 magnitude quake hit midday Friday with an epicenter near Mandalay, bringing down scores of buildings and damaging other infrastructure like the city's airport.

Relief efforts have been hampered by buckled roads, downed bridges, spotty communications and the challenges of operating in

a country in the midst of a civil war.

The search for survivors has been primarily conducted by the local residents without the aid of heavy equipment, moving rubble by hand and with shovels in 106-degree heat, with only the occasional tracked excavator to be seen.

A 5.1 magnitude aftershock Sunday afternoon prompted screams from those in the streets, and then the work continued.

Many of Mandalay's 1.5 million people spent the night sleeping on the streets, either left homeless by the quake, which also shook neighboring Thailand and killed at least 18 people there, or worried that the continuing aftershocks might cause structures left unsta-

ble to collapse.

So far 1,644 people have been reported killed in Myanmar and 3,408 injured, but many areas have not yet been reached, and many rescue efforts so far have been undertaken by people working by hand to try and clear rubble, said Cara Bragg, the Yangon-based manager of Catholic Relief Services in Myanmar.

"It's mainly been local volunteers, local people who are just trying to find their loved ones," Bragg said after being briefed by her colleague in Mandalay.

"I've also seen reports that now some countries are sending search and rescue teams up to Mandalay to support the efforts, but hospitals are really struggling to cope with the influx of injured

people, there's a shortage of medical supplies, and people are struggling to find food and clean water," Bragg added.

The organization was sending a team by road on Sunday to assess peoples' most pressing needs so that it could target its own response.

With the Mandalay airport damaged and the control tower toppled in the capital Naypyitaw's airport, all commercial flights into the cities have been shut down.

Official relief efforts in Naypyitaw were prioritizing government offices and staff housing, leaving locals and aid groups to dig through the rubble by hand in residential areas, the sun beating down and the smell of death in the air.

Two killed, dozens hurt in Russian attack on Kharkiv

Associated Press

KYIV, Ukraine — Russian drones hit a military hospital, shopping center, apartment blocks and other buildings in Kharkiv late Saturday, killing two people and wounding 35 others, Ukrainian officials said.

Regional Gov. Oleh Syniehubov said that a 67-year-old man

and a 70-year-old woman were killed in the attack on Ukraine's second-largest city.

Ukraine's General Staff denounced the "deliberate, targeted shelling" of the military hospital. Among the casualties were "servicemen who were undergoing treatment," it said.

The Ukrainian Air Force re-

ported that Russia fired 111 exploding drones and decoys in the latest wave of attacks overnight into Sunday. It said 65 of them were intercepted and another 35 were lost, likely having been electronically jammed.

Russia's Ministry of Defense, meanwhile, said its air defense systems shot down six Ukrai-

nian drones.

According to Ukrainian government and military analysts, Russian forces are preparing to launch a fresh military offensive in the coming weeks to maximize pressure on Ukraine and strengthen the Kremlin's negotiating position in ceasefire talks.

Navy divers searching for 4 US soldiers in Lithuania

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. Navy divers are pushing through thick layers of mud in a flooded Lithuanian bog, where efforts are ongoing to excavate a submerged armored vehicle and locate four missing American soldiers, Army officials said Sunday.

U.S. and ally military resources have poured into Lithuania, where the harsh, muddy terrain has complicated efforts to recover an M88A2 Hercules armored recovery vehicle stuck under some 15 feet of water and

sludge, U.S. Army Europe and Africa said in a statement.

The vehicle "has continued to sink into the bog," USAREUR-AF said in the statement.

Navy personnel began dive operations Saturday night and are continuing to swim and dig toward the vehicle, the Army said.

Meanwhile, the Army's 21st Theater Sustainment Command out of Kaiserslautern, Germany, is bringing in a specialized ramping system to help stabilize the ground in the area and enable the use of more heavy equipment in the bog.

"So not only are we dealing with the terrain, a lot of mud that is over top of the vehicle, but also the fact that it's 70 tons that we're trying to recover out of a swamp or bog," Brig. Gen. John Lloyd, commander of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers North Atlantic Division, said in a statement.

Army soldiers are being joined by hundreds of other Lithuanian and Polish personnel, who have also brought in gear and manpower to assist in the recovery effort ever since the M88A2 went off course in the early morning hours Tuesday on

a Lithuanian training base.

All four of the missing soldiers are from the 3rd Infantry Division's 1st Armored Brigade.

The accident happened on a base near the city of Pabrade, which has served as a training hub for U.S. forces in Europe for many years.

The Army has not declared the soldiers dead, with officials saying they are still considered to be missing.

The rescue and recovery operation has involved a wide array of specialized gear, including high-powered dredging systems and water pumps.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Babysitter finds 'monster' hiding under child's bed

KS GREAT BEND — A babysitter looked under a bed to reassure a worried child that there wasn't a monster hiding there — and came face-to-face with a man who wasn't supposed to be there, a sheriff's office in Kansas said in a news release.

The Barton County Sheriff's Office said deputies were called late last Monday to the home near Great Bend. The suspect was gone when they arrived, but the babysitter told them that the child had been complaining about a "monster" before she found the suspect.

The 27-year-old man once lived in the home, but there was a protection from abuse order issued against him to stay away from the property, the sheriff's office said.

Deputies searched but were unable to find the man until the next day, when he was captured after a foot chase, the news release said.

Cops: Doctor tried to use syringes during struggle

HI HONOLULU — A Maui doctor tried to use two syringes on his wife after pushing her off a hiking trail and hitting her head with a rock about 10 times, police said in court documents released Thursday.

Gerhardt Konig's bail was set at \$5 million and a preliminary hearing in the attempted murder charge is scheduled for this week.

The alleged assault stemmed from Konig's desire to take a selfie while the couple was on Pali Puka Trail in Honolulu on

March 24, according to a probable cause document filed in court.

While on the trail, Gerhardt stood close to the edge and asked his wife to take a selfie with him, said a Honolulu police declaration. She told him she didn't feel comfortable taking a picture with him that close to the edge and began to walk back. He yelled at her to come back and when she refused, he pushed her into bushes where they began to struggle, according to the document. The wife managed to get away.

Konig then picked up a rock and hit her on the head about 10 times "while also grabbing the back of her hair and smashing her face into the ground," the document said. She crawled over to two hikers who heard her yelling for help, and the hikers called 911.

The wife also told police she saw "Gerhardt take out two syringes from his bag and attempt to use them on her, but she was able to get them away from him," the police declaration said.

She sustained multiple large lacerations to her face and head and was taken to a hospital in serious but stable condition.

Transgender bathroom restrictions take effect

MT HELENA — Transgender people in Montana can no longer use bathrooms in public buildings that do not align with their sex at birth after Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte signed new restrictions into law Thursday.

The law requires public buildings including the state Capitol, schools, jails, prisons, libraries and state-funded do-

mestic violence shelters to provide separate spaces for men and women. It defines the sexes in state law based on a person's chromosomes and reproductive biology, even as a district court ruling earlier this year declared the definitions unconstitutional.

The new law declares that there are only two sexes, male and female, going against a judge's 2024 ruling that struck down that same definition.

Pilot wasn't authorized to have passengers

AK ANCHORAGE — A pilot rescued with two young family members after they survived a night on the wing of an airplane partially submerged in an Alaska lake is a student pilot who was not authorized to fly with passengers, according to a U.S. official and federal aviation records.

The Federal Aviation Administration started disciplinary action against the pilot, John Morris Jr., National Transportation Safety Board investigator Mark Ward said.

Morris had not cooperated with federal investigators about what happened on the flight, Ward said.

Heart-shaped note found in socks sent to suspect

NY NEW YORK — Someone tucked a heart-shaped note of encouragement into socks packed for Luigi Mangione to wear to court last month in the UnitedHealthcare CEO murder case, according to court documents made public Wednesday.

A court officer intercepted the handwritten note, which urged the jailed defendant to "keep your head held high" and

"know there are thousands of people wishing you luck," according to a photo in court papers filed by Mangione's lawyers. Written on pink paper, the message was signed "K / Free Luigi." The attorneys said they didn't realize the note was stuck in the socks until the court officer found it Feb. 21.

The note episode was disclosed amid written arguments over various requests from the defense team. They include a bid for Mangione to get a laptop to review legal material in jail while he awaits trial in the December shooting death of Brian Thompson, 50.

Thompson was killed outside a midtown hotel. Mangione, 26, has pleaded not guilty to New York charges including murder as an act of terrorism.

Suspected Las Vegas Tesla arsonist arrested

NV LAS VEGAS — A man who set fire to Tesla vehicles in Las Vegas and painted the word "resist" at the scene has been arrested.

Paul Hyon Kim, 36, faces charges in connection with the March 18 attack in both state and federal court in Nevada, authorities announced Thursday, a day after his arrest. Kim was being held in the custody of the federal government.

In state court, Kim is facing charges of arson, possession of an explosive device and firing a weapon into a vehicle, Clark County Sheriff Kevin McMahill said at a news conference.

Kim is also charged with federal unlawful possession of an unregistered firearm and arson, according to a criminal complaint filed Thursday.

— From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

Single source convenience, reliably independent. Visit www.stripes.com.

Reporting World, National and Military News

Clayton carries Gators to Final Four

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Coach Todd Golden cut the final strand of the net, waved it to the crowd and performed the famed Gator Chomp.

A celebration that seemed completely improbable a few minutes earlier was in high gear. Florida is heading back to the Final Four.

Walter Clayton Jr. rescued the top-seeded Gators with two late 3-pointers, and Florida rallied from nine points down late to beat Texas Tech 84-79 in the NCAA Tournament's West Region final on Saturday.

"It goes to show how together we all are," Clayton said. "Many times could easily just break, start pointing the finger, blaming each other for this and that. But we just stayed together through the end and stayed the course. And thankfully we got it done today."

The Gators (34-4) trailed 75-66 with less than three minutes

to play before staging a furious rally against the third-seeded Red Raiders (28-9), who had done the same in the Sweet 16 against Arkansas.

Clayton dribbled out of the paint and hit a fadeaway 3 with 59 seconds left to give Florida a 78-77 lead, and the Gators held on from there to advance to their first Final Four since 2014 in Golden's third season. Florida will face the South Region champion — either Auburn or Michigan State — next Saturday in San Antonio.

"There's not another player in America you would rather have right now than Walter Clayton with the ball in his hands in a big-time moment," Golden said. "The biggest thing in those moments is you need to have somebody that wants to take those shots. They're obviously difficult plays, but someone that has the confidence to step up and make incredible individual plays. Wal-

ter did that for us tonight."

The comeback provided a happy ending to Golden's return to the Bay Area, where he played in college at Saint Mary's and got his start as a head coach at San Francisco. As the final horn sounded, Golden turned to Florida fans and demonstrably pumped his fist as his players rushed out to the court to celebrate.

Clayton, who began his college career at Iona, scored 30 to lead the Gators. Thomas Haugh added 20 points and 11 rebounds off the bench, including the two 3-pointers that started the comeback.

Clayton then tied it with his shot from long range after Texas Tech missed a second straight front end of a one-and-one as Golden called for Florida to foul early to prolong the game.

Williams scored 23 points to lead Texas Tech and JT Toppin added 20.

Duke 85, Alabama 65: Duke's stream of long, tall NBA-ready standouts smothered Alabama and covered up Cooper Flagg's rough shooting night to lift the Blue Devils to the program's 18th Final Four with a victory in the East Region final.

Flagg made only 6 of 16 shots, including a brick that got stuck in the flange of the rim, but still finished with 16 points. Kon Knueppel, another potential lottery pick, led the Blue Devils with 21 points.

But the most important stat: Alabama's nation-leading offense, one coming off a record-setting night from 3 in the Sweet 16, shot 8 for 32 from behind the arc, 35.4% overall and failed to crack 70 for only the second time this season.

Mark Sears, who came one short of a tournament record with 10 3s two nights earlier, finished with one and only six points against Duke (35-3), which won its 15th straight.

Bueckers scores 40, leads UConn women to Elite Eight

Associated Press

SPOKANE, Wash. — Paige Bueckers scored a career-high 40 points, rescuing UConn from its first-half doldrums and single-handedly turning a tight game against Oklahoma into an 82-59 rout on Saturday that sent the Huskies to the Elite Eight of the women's NCAA Tournament.

Bueckers had 29 points after halftime for the Huskies, who trailed 36-32 at the break. The likely No. 1 overall pick in the WNBA draft eclipsed her previous career best of 34 points, set Monday in UConn's second-round victory over South Dakota State, her final home final game at Gampel Pavilion.

The electrifying senior guard matched her career high with six 3-pointers, the last two during a personal 10-0

run in the fourth quarter. Bueckers checked out of the game with 3:06 left and UConn ahead 80-51.

The second-seeded Huskies (34-3), winners of 13 straight, will face Southern California in a regional final on Monday.

Ashlynn Shade added 12 points and Sarah Strong had 11 points and 11 rebounds for UConn, which is seeking to extend its record by winning a 12th national title. The Huskies reached their 18th Elite Eight in the past 19 seasons, but Auriemma's team hasn't won it all since 2016.

Payton Verhulst scored 16 points for third-seeded Oklahoma (27-8), which reached the Sweet 16 for the first time since 2013.

The Sooners have never beaten the Huskies in a series

that includes the 2002 national title game.

TCU 71, Notre Dame 62: The Horned Frogs are in uncharted territory thanks to Hailey Van Lith, reaching the Elite Eight for the first time.

It sure seems like business as usual for the dynamic guard.

Van Lith scored 12 of her 26 points in the fourth quarter to help second-seeded TCU beat No. 3 seed Notre Dame in the Sweet 16.

Sedona Prince added 21 points for the Horned Frogs (34-3), who advanced to the Elite Eight for the first time in school history. Next up is Texas on Monday night.

Notre Dame (28-6) was trying to reach the Elite Eight for the first time since 2019.

Texas 67, Tennessee 59:

Madison Booker scored 17 points and the No. 1-seeded Longhorns outlasted the fifth-seeded Volunteers in a tight battle in the Sweet 16.

Taylor Jones added 12 points and eight rebounds for Texas, which advanced to face TCU in the Elite Eight.

Southern California 67, Kansas State 61: Kennedy Smith stepped into the void left by injured star JuJu Watkins, scoring 19 points to help the Trojans hold off the Wildcats in the Sweet 16.

Top-seeded USC (31-3) was considered a title contender before Watkins tore her right ACL during a second-round victory over Mississippi State. Now they'll be underdogs in an Elite Eight rematch on Monday with Paige Bueckers and second-seeded UConn.

Yankees rout Brewers behind 9 home runs

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Boom! Boom! Boom!

Three home runs on the first three pitches.

Aaron Judge followed Paul Goldschmidt and Cody Bellinger to combine for unprecedented fireworks Saturday, starting one of the most memorable days of Judge's already indelible career.

"It was electric, from the stadium crowd to just the guys in the dugout locked in and fired up," Judge said after homering three times, including a grand slam, and setting a career high with eight RBIs in the New York Yankees' 20-9 rout of the Milwaukee Brewers.

Major League Baseball said this was the first time a team homered on its first three pitches since tracking of pitch counts began in 1988.

New York hit a team-record nine homers, matching Cincinnati against Philadelphia in 1999 and one shy of the major league mark set by Toronto vs. Baltimore in 1987. The first of the Reds' homers that day was hit by Yankees manager Aaron Boone.

Austin Wells, Anthony Volpe, Jazz Chisholm Jr. and Oswald Peraza also homered on the day.

Five of the homers were off old friend Nestor Cortes, dealt from New York to Milwaukee in December, including four in the first inning. Cortes left the ballpark without speaking to reporters in what the Brewers said was a miscommunication.

"My heart goes out to him because he's a great, great, young man, great teammate," Milwaukee manager Pat Murphy said. "Your heart just hurts for him."

Orioles 9, Blue Jays 5: Jordan Westburg hit two solo homers for his first career multihomer game, and visiting Baltimore beat Toronto.

Colton Cowser also connected for the Orioles, and Ramón Urias hit a three-run double. Baltimore finished with 12 hits after it had three in Friday's 8-2 loss.

Three-time Cy Young Award winner Max Scherzer left his debut start with the Blue Jays after three innings because of soreness in his right lat muscle.

Cardinals 5, Twins 1: Lars Nootbaar had two hits and two RBIs, helping Erick Fedde and host St. Louis beat Minnesota.

Nolan Arenado, Iván Herrera and Victor Scott II also had two hits apiece for the Cardinals. Fedde (1-0) permitted one run and two hits in six innings.

Angels 1, White Sox 0: Yoán Moncada hit an RBI single against his former team in the eighth inning, and visiting Los Angeles blanked Chicago.

Moncada drove in Jorge Soler with a grounder back up the middle that went off Mike Clevinger (0-1) for an infield single. Moncada played for the White Sox for the previous eight seasons before signing with the Angels in free agency.

Reds 3, Giants 2: Christian Encarnacion-Strand hit a go-ahead solo homer, Matt McLain had two extra-base hits and an RBI and host Cincinnati won to spoil the San Francisco debut of three-time Cy Young Award winner Justin Verlander.

McLain, who missed the entire 2024 season with a shoulder injury, got the Reds on the board with a solo homer in the third inning and scored from second base on an RBI single by Elly De La Cruz in the fifth, tying the game at 2.

Royals 4, Guardians 3: Bobby Witt Jr. hit a go-ahead RBI double in the seventh inning after Maikel Garcia tied it with a homer four batters earlier to help lead host Kansas City over Cleveland.

Garcia led off the seventh with a 405-foot homer off Paul Sewald (0-1). Cavan Biggio followed with a single and was replaced by pinch-runner Dairon Blanco, who stole second. With two outs, Witt lined a double to left to score Blanco with the go-ahead run.

Rockies 2, Rays 1: Brenton Doyle and Kyle Farmer each hit

an RBI single to help visiting Colorado beat Tampa Bay.

Doyle drove in Nick Martini with a grounder back up the middle in the third inning. Farmer's liner to right in the seventh brought home Hunter Goodman for a 2-0 lead.

Phillies 11, Nationals 6: Kyle Schwarber's three-run shot — his second homer in two games — was the big blow in a five-run sixth inning, and Brandon Marsh's three-run drive in the seventh lifted visiting Philadelphia to a win over Washington.

Jesús Luzardo (1-0) struck out 11 in five innings in his Phillies debut. The only scoring he allowed came on Keibert Ruiz's two-run homer in the second.

Marlins 5, Pirates 4 (12): Dane Myers' RBI single in the 12th inning drove in Otto Lopez to give host Miami a win over Pittsburgh, its second walk-off victory in three days.

Myers threw out Tommy Pham at home from right field in the top of the inning, then delivered his opposite-field drive to right-center off Tim Mayza for the winning run. George Soriano (1-0), the seventh Marlins pitcher, got the win despite giving up two hits in the 12th.

Padres 1, Braves 0: Pinch-hitter Yuli Gurriel singled with two outs in the seventh inning to score Jake Cronenworth, who was aboard on an unusual ground-rule double, and host San Diego beat Atlanta to take its third straight win in the four-game series.

Cronenworth's liner hit reliever Aaron Bummer (0-1) on the bottom of his right foot and careered into the Braves' dugout for a ground-rule double. Bummer intentionally walked Xander Bogaerts and made way for Daysbel Hernández, who allowed Gurriel's hit to left field that brought in Cronenworth.

Rangers 4, Red Sox 3: Adolis García put host Texas ahead to stay with his first homer of the season after an earlier two-run double in a win over Boston.

García went deep leading off the fourth for a 3-2 lead. His 414-foot drive to left field came on a 79-mph sweeper pitch from Walker Buehler (0-1).

Astros 2, Mets 1: Jeremy Peña homered and Yordan Alvarez got his first hit this season, a tie-breaking double in the sixth inning that lifted host Houston to a win over New York.

Spencer Arrighetti (1-0) allowed just one hit, a first-inning double to Juan Soto, and one run with five strikeouts in six innings. Astros closer Josh Hader walked Soto to start the ninth before retiring the next three batters.

Cubs 4, Diamondbacks 3: Kyle Tucker hit his first home run with visiting Chicago, leading his new team to a victory over Arizona.

Shota Imanaga (1-0) pitched seven effective innings, allowing just one run as the Cubs bounced back from Friday's 8-1 loss. Ryan Pressly worked a rocky ninth inning for his first save with Chicago.

Dodgers 7, Tigers 3: Freddie Freeman had a homer and an RBI double, Teoscar Hernández delivered a tiebreaking two-run double in the fifth inning, and host Los Angeles extended its perfect start to the season with a victory over Detroit.

Will Smith and Tommy Edman also homered for the defending World Series champions, who are 5-0 after beating the Cubs twice in the Tokyo Series before sweeping Detroit in Chavez Ravine. It is their best start since 1981, when they opened 6-0 and won the World Series.

Athletics 4, Mariners 2: Shea Langeliers hit a two-run homer, Osvaldo Bido pitched five solid innings and the visiting Athletics defeated Seattle.

Miguel Andujar and Brent Rooker each had an RBI single for the Athletics. Mason Miller struck out three in a scoreless ninth for his first save of the season.

SGA leads Thunder to 9th win in a row

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — Shai Gilgeous-Alexander scored 33 points and the Oklahoma City Thunder routed the Indiana Pacers 132-111 on Saturday night for their ninth straight victory.

Gilgeous-Alexander, the league's leading scorer, made 10 of 23 field goals and 10 of 12 free throws.

Lu Dort scored 22 points and made 6 of 7 3-pointers while Jalen Williams added 18 points for the Thunder.

Tyrese Haliburton had 18 points and Andrew Nembhard added 16 for the Pacers, who had won six of their previous seven games.

Oklahoma City dominated, even though forward/center Chet Holmgren sat out to manage the left hip injury he suffered early in the season. The Thunder have a three-game

lead on the Cleveland Cavaliers in the race for the league's best record and homecourt advantage throughout the playoffs with eight games left to play.

Lakers 134, Grizzlies 127: Austin Reaves had 31 points and eight assists, Luka Doncic added 29 points and nine assists and visiting Los Angeles held for a victory in Memphis' first game under interim coach Tuomas Iisalo.

LeBron James scored 25 points as the Lakers led by 20 points in the first half, but squandered the advantage to make it a close game in the fourth quarter.

Desmond Bane led the Grizzlies with 29 points.

Magic 121, Kings 91: Paolo Banchero scored 24 points in three quarters and Orlando beat visiting Sacramento.

The Magic pulled even with the Hawks for seventh place in

the Eastern Conference, although Orlando has played two more games than Atlanta.

DeMar DeRozan led the Kings with 21 points.

Nets 115, Wizards 112: Drew Timme scored the go-ahead basket on a cutting layup with 7.7 seconds left and visiting Brooklyn beat NBA-worst Washington to end a six-game skid.

After Timme put the Nets up 113-112, the Wizards' Colby Jones threw the ball out of bounds, and Jalen Wilson hit two throws to finish the scoring.

Heat 118, 76ers 95: Tyler Herro scored 30 points to lead visiting Miami to a victory over short-handed Philadelphia.

Alec Burks added 20 points for the Heat, who hold the final spot in the Eastern Conference for the play-in tournament. Miami has won four in a row following a 10-game losing streak.

Herro made five of the Heat's 20 3-pointers.

Jared Butler had 19 points to lead the Sixers.

Celtics 121, Spurs 111: Jayson Tatum had 29 points, 10 rebounds and eight assists and Boston won its eighth straight, beating host San Antonio.

Keldon Johnson had 23 points and Stephon Castle added 22 points as the Spurs lost their third straight.

Mavericks 120, Bulls 119: Klay Thompson scored 20 points, P.J. Washington had 19 and Dallas won at Chicago.

The Mavericks moved 1½ games ahead of the idle Suns for the final spot in the Western Conference play-in tournament.

Anthony Davis added 18 points and Spencer Dinwiddie had 14 points and 11 assists to help Dallas win for the second straight game and fourth time in its last five.

Maple Leafs end Kings' home point streak at 15 games

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — John Tavares scored twice and the Toronto Maple Leafs defeated the Los Angeles Kings 3-1 on Saturday.

Auston Matthews had a goal and an assist, Anthony Stolarz made 35 saves, and the Maple Leafs are 5-1-1 in their past seven games.

Alex Laferriere scored, Darcy Kuemper made 23 saves, and the Kings had their franchise-record 15-game home point streak snapped. It was their first regulation loss at home since falling 5-1 to Pittsburgh on Jan. 20.

Laferriere put Los Angeles ahead early in the second period, but Matthews tied it up 1-1 early in the third with his second career short-handed goal.

Tavares then put Toronto in front by putting in Matthews' rebound during a 4-on-3 power play with less than eight minutes remaining.

Blues 2, Avalanche 1: Zack Bolduc and Pavel Buchnevich each scored a goal as visiting St. Louis beat Colorado to extend its win streak to nine games.

Bolduc opened the scoring with 9:03 left in the first period and Nathan MacKinnon scored on one-timer for the Avalanche to make it 1-1 about a minute later. The 29-year-old MacKinnon has 52 points (18 goals, 34 assists) in 49 regular-season games against St. Louis.

Oilers 3, Flames 2 (OT): Leon Draisaitl got his second goal of the night 2:25 into overtime, and host Edmonton beat Calgary to snap a two-game skid.

Viktor Arvidsson also scored and Darnell Nurse had two assists for the Oilers.

In the extra period, Jeff Skinner dropped the puck back to Draisaitl in the slot and he blasted a shot past Wolf for his league-leading 51st goal of the season.

Stars 5, Kraken 1: Jason Robertson netted his 33rd goal of the season, Jake Oettinger finished with 34 saves, and visiting Dallas clinched a playoff spot with a victory over Seattle.

Robertson's goal about eight minutes into the first period tied the game at 1-1 then Roope Hintz scored on the power play with 1:36 left until the second to put Dallas ahead for good.

Flyers 7, Sabres 4: Matvei Michkov had his second straight two-goal game and Samuel Ersson made 17 saves as host Philadelphia beat Buffalo.

Noah Cates, Owen Tippett, Tyson Foerster, Ryan Poehling and Jakob Pelletier also scored for the Flyers.

Red Wings 2, Bruins 1: Lucas Raymond and Marco Kasper scored, Cam Talbot stopped 21 shots and host Detroit beat Boston.

The Red Wings, clinging to flickering playoff hopes, won

for just the fourth time in 15 games.

Lightning 5, Islanders 3: Brayden Point scored twice and Nikita Kucherov had a goal and an assist as host Tampa Bay beat New York.

Devils 5, Wild 2: Nico Hischier scored three goals for his second hat trick of the season and visiting New Jersey beat Minnesota.

Golden Knights 3, Predators 1: Jack Eichel had a goal and an assist, and visiting Vegas beat Nashville for its sixth straight win.

Senators 3, Blue Jackets 2: Drake Batherson and Jake Sanderson scored for host Ottawa and it beat Columbus in a matchup of teams vying for playoff spots.

Rangers 6, Sharks 1: Artemi Panarin and Adam Fox each scored two goals, Jonathan Quick had 21 saves and visiting New York beat San Jose.