

STARS AND STRIPES®

Friday, May 13, 2016

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US troops stationed at outposts in Libya

The Washington Post

American special operations troops have been stationed at two outposts in eastern and western Libya since late 2015, tasked with lining up local partners in advance of a possible offensive against the Islamic State group, U.S. officials said.

Two teams totaling fewer than 25 troops are operating from around the cities of Misurata and Benghazi to identify potential allies among local armed factions and to gather intelligence on threats, according to the officials, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss a sensitive mission.

The insertion of a tiny group of U.S. personnel into a country rife with militant threats reflects the Obama administration's worries about the Islamic State group's powerful Libyan branch and the widespread expectations of an expanded campaign against it. For months, the Pentagon has been developing plans for potential action against the group, which has at least several thousand fighters in the coastal city of Sirte and other areas. And the U.S. personnel, whose ongoing presence had not been previously reported, is a sign of the acceleration toward another military campaign in Libya.

The mission is also an illustration of President Barack Obama's reliance on elite units to advance counterterrorism goals in low-visibility operations.

The activities of the American "contact teams," as they are known, take place in tandem with those of elite allied forces from France and other European nations in the same areas, U.S. and Libyan officials said.

Leader fired over Iran incident

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Navy has fired the commander of the 10 American sailors who wandered into Iranian territorial waters in the Persian Gulf and were captured and held by Iran for about 15 hours.

In a statement Thursday, the Navy said it had lost confidence in Cmdr. Eric Rasch. He has been relieved of command of Coastal Riverine Squadron 3 and reassigned, the Navy said.

At the time of the January incident, Rasch was the executive officer of the squadron. He was responsible for the training and readiness of the more than 400 sailors in the unit. He had been promoted to commander of the

unit in April — after the Iran incident occurred but before the preliminary investigation was done.

A Navy official said Rasch failed to provide effective leadership, leading to a lack of oversight, complacency and failure to maintain standards in the unit. The official was not authorized to discuss the details publicly so spoke on condition of anonymity.

Although this is the first firing by the Navy regarding the incident, several other sailors received administrative reprimands. The investigation is expected to be finished by the end of the month, and others are likely to be disciplined.

The sailors, nine men and one

woman, were detained after their boat drifted into Iranian waters off Farsi Island, an outpost in the middle of the Persian Gulf that has been used as a base for Revolutionary Guard speedboats since the 1980s.

The sailors were on two small, armed vessels known as riverine command boats on a 300-mile journey from Kuwait to Bahrain, where the Navy's 5th Fleet is located. The incident, while brief, raised tensions between the U.S. and Iran because of images Iran published of the soldiers kneeling with their hands on their heads.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter said the sailors made a navigational error and went off course.

Congress to vote on women in the draft

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Proposals to open the military draft to women are now teed up for key votes in both chambers of Congress, moving the country closer to a historic shift in how it treats combat service by women.

A Senate panel on Thursday passed a measure requiring women between the ages of 18 and 26 to register with the Selective Service as part of the 2017 defense budget, which is now headed to the chamber floor for a vote. The House is expected to vote next week on a defense budget bill that also integrates the all-male draft system.

The military was ordered by the defense secretary in December to open all combat positions to women, and the decision has sparked debate — and some opposition from Republican conservatives — over the dormant draft, which re-

quires all eligible men to register and be available for duty on the front lines of future wars.

The Senate Armed Services Committee said it "believes there is no further justification in limiting the duty to register under the Military Selective Service Act to men" after passing the defense budget bill, called the National Defense Authorization Act.

Uniformed service leadership supports draft integration, the committee said. The chairman, Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., also had voiced his support earlier this year.

The committee voted 23-3 to pass the massive defense bill to the full Senate. No date for a vote had been scheduled Friday.

Votes against the bill came from conservative members, including Sen. Mike Lee, R-Utah, who has been a critic of the draft changes.

"This is a highly consequential — and, for many American families, a deeply controversial

— decision that deserves to be resolved by Congress after a robust and transparent debate in front of the American people, instead of buried in an embargoed document that is passed every year to fund military pay and benefits," Lee said in a released statement.

Former presidential candidate Sen. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, also spoke out against the measure and voted down the defense bill.

The House could take its vote next week, and the biggest challenge to integration could come from Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, the chairman of the House Armed Services Committee.

The chairman has mostly stayed neutral on the issue and opted for a slower approach. He is sponsoring an amendment to the defense budget bill that keeps women out of the Selective Service and instead calls for a study of the country's military draft needs.

Feds issue transgender restroom order

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration on Friday directed schools across the nation to provide transgender students with access to suitable facilities—including bathrooms and locker rooms—that match their chosen gender identity.

The move, which will affect all public schools and most colleges and universities that receive federal funds, plunges the administration even further into the country's ongoing contentious debate over transgender rights.

The directive comes from two top administration officials: Catherine E. Lhamon, the assistant secretary of education for

civil rights, and Vanita Gupta, head of the Justice Department's Civil Rights Division. It will put state and local officials and higher-education institutions on notice that they risk losing federal education aid if they limit students to areas or teams based on their gender assigned at birth.

The action comes just days after the Justice Department and the state of North Carolina filed dueling lawsuits over a new law requiring individuals in that state to use bathrooms based on their birth gender.

Citing Title IX, which prohibits sexual discrimination at educational institutions that receive federal funding, the two

officials warn that the obligation "to ensure nondiscrimination on the basis of sex requires schools to provide transgender students equal access to educational programs and activities even in circumstances in which other students, parents, or community members raise objections or concerns."

"As is consistently recognized in civil rights cases, the desire to accommodate others' discomfort cannot justify a policy that singles out and disadvantages a particular class of students," reads the letter, which was obtained by *The Washington Post*.

The *New York Times* first reported the planned guidance Thursday evening.

For the most part, state and local officials have reversed course when threatened with the loss of federal funds over their treatment of transgender students. In 2013, for example, the Department of Education reached a settlement with the school district of Arcadia, in California, on a dispute over whether the district violated Title IX by requiring a student who transitioned to being male to change clothes and use the bathroom in the nurse's office.

In December, the school district in Palatine, Ill., agreed to allow a transgender girl to use the girls' locker room after the DOE threatened to withhold \$6 million in federal funds.

DOD: Half of US-trained Iraqi forces in Baghdad

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Roughly half of Iraq's American-trained security forces are stationed in and around Baghdad to protect the country's capital, where recent political turmoil was followed this week by a wave of terrorist attacks, a U.S. military spokesman said Friday.

The Islamic State group claimed responsibility for the truck bomb attacks Wednesday and Thursday that killed nearly 100 people and wounded almost 180 more, said U.S. Army Col. Steve Warren, spokesman for the U.S.-led anti-Islamic State group coalition. The bombings largely targeted Shia Muslim civilians who were "not in any way shape or form ... combatants or a threat to" the Islamic State group, he said.

Securing Baghdad, a city of 6 million people, will be difficult, Warren said. But the United States has advised the Iraqis that they have enough soldiers and police in the area to protect the city without pulling Iraqi troops from the front lines as they push

toward the Islamic State group's de facto Iraqi capital, Mosul, the country's second-largest city.

Those forces have inched closer to Mosul than at any point since the city fell to the Islamic State group in 2014, Army Maj. Gen. Gary Volesky, the U.S. ground forces commander for Operation Inherent Resolve, said Wednesday. Both Volesky and Warren declined to provide a timeline for when Mosul could be retaken, but they said the Iraqi government remains committed to that fight even as issues arise in Baghdad.

Warren, speaking to reporters at the Pentagon during a video conference, said the Islamic State group attacks were "opportunity targets" that aimed to grab attention. "They have lost ground almost continuously for half a year," he said. "They've really taken a beating, particularly in Iraq, where we've seen them lose city after city, region after region. They've lost their money, they've lost their leaders. ... I think they want to try to make a statement and they know these very high-visibility attacks get attention."

First female takes charge as combatant commander

BY TARA COPP

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Air Force Gen. Lori Robinson became the military's first female combatant commander as she assumed responsibility for U.S. Northern Command and North American Aerospace Defense in a ceremony Friday in Colorado.

Robinson replaced outgoing Adm. William Gortney to lead the two commands. North American Aerospace Defense, or NORAD, is a joint U.S.-Canada operation tasked with detecting and tracking potential missile threats. U.S. Northern Command is responsible for the defense of the continental United States, but its area of operation also includes Mexico, Canada, the Gulf of Mexico and parts of the Caribbean.

In an emotional speech, Robinson thanked her family and the airmen with whom she has served. Robinson noted she started her career as an air-battle manager for the E-3 Sentry — or AWACS, as it is commonly known — an aircraft

that provides early warning to the United States of potential attacks. Her new command fittingly carries the same responsibility, she said.

"The world is more dangerous, and North America is increasingly more vulnerable," Robinson said after taking command. "I accept the watch."

Defense Secretary Ash Carter praised Robinson, particularly her role as the first woman to lead the nation's combat air power at U.S. Pacific Air Forces, a role that she has served in since 2014. The command has a high pace of operations given security challenges posed by North Korea and China, Carter has said previously.

"She has a remarkable, complete set of proven experience," Carter said at the ceremony. "These abilities will serve our nation well."

Robinson's rise follows recent gains by women in the military to serve in combat roles and opens the door to a future chairwoman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff.

Durant, OKC eliminate Spurs

Associated Press

OKLAHOMA CITY — The Thunder flipped the script, and now they're heading to the Western Conference finals.

Tim Duncan doesn't know yet where he's headed as the San Antonio Spurs face an uncertain future.

Kevin Durant scored 37 points, Russell Westbrook added 28, and Oklahoma City beat San Antonio 113-99 on Thursday night to win the Western Conference semifinal series 4-2.

The Thunder lost Game 1 124-92, but recovered to win four of the next five. Oklahoma City controlled Game 6, leading by as many as 28 points.

Westbrook said the Thunder never lost confidence.

"We had that game, and we left it behind us," he said. "We came out after that and had a different mindset. We knew what we had to do to win the series. They're a great team. They've been winning for 10-plus years, same pace. I'm just proud of our guys."

Steven Adams had 15 points and 11 rebounds, and Andre Roberson added 14 points for the Thunder. Oklahoma City now will face defending NBA champion Golden State, starting Monday in Oakland, Calif.

"Golden State's a great team," first-year Thunder coach Billy Donovan said. "It will be a great challenge. We've got a little bit of time to prepare before we play, but right now, for us, it's just to enjoy the opportunity to move on, get a chance to continue to play and get as prepared as

we can going into Game 1."

The Spurs were trying to extend the winningest season in franchise history after going 67-15. The 40-year-old Duncan struggled for much of the series before scoring 19 points as San Antonio tried to fight back in the fourth quarter.

Duncan didn't clear anything up about his future after the game. He has a player option for next season.

"I'll get to that after I get out of here and figure life out," he said.

Kawhi Leonard scored 22 points and LaMarcus Aldridge added 18 for the Spurs. San Antonio lost just once at home during the regular season, but the Thunder beat the Spurs twice in San Antonio during the series.

In Game 6, Oklahoma City opened up a 47-29 lead late in the second quarter after a three-pointer by Westbrook that brought a roar from the crowd. Durant's three-pointer with 2.3 seconds left in the half pushed the lead to 55-31 at the break. Durant scored 18 points in the first half and Westbrook added 13.

The Thunder looked like the Spurs often do in the first half, running an efficient offense while committing just three turnovers.

It was a season-low point total for the Spurs in a first half. San Antonio shot 31.1 percent from the field before the break and missed all nine of its three-pointers.

"I thought they did a great job of coming out and punching us in the stomach," Leonard said. "But we got some open looks that didn't go down, turned over the ball a couple of times, and that's all

on me."

Oklahoma City kept the pressure on and led 91-65 at the end of the third quarter.

The veteran Spurs had one last surge left and got as close as 11, but a three-pointer by Westbrook, then a driving layup by Westbrook, killed San Antonio's momentum for good.

"We always give credit to our opponents, and obviously, OKC turned it up there and turned our execution into forced bad shots, and then we kind of trickled down from there and it snowballed," Duncan said. "We put ourselves in the hole. We actually played somewhat solid for the second half but it was too little, too late."

The Thunder dominated the boards in the series, winning the rebounding battle in five of the six games. Oklahoma City outrebounded San Antonio 50-40 on Thursday.

"We knew that they were going to be dominant on the boards and be good down low," Aldridge said. "We just wanted to try to match their intensity."

TIP-INS

Spurs: Aldridge had eight points and seven rebounds in the first quarter. ... Duncan, who had been quiet in the series, had six points in the first five minutes of the game.

Thunder: The Spurs led 16-10, but the Thunder closed the quarter on a 15-3 run to lead 25-19 at the end of the period. ... Westbrook was called for a flagrant foul on a drive by Danny Green with 3:45 remaining in the fourth quarter.

Holcomb's bronze might get upgrade

Associated Press

MONTREAL — The knock on the door came shortly after Steven Holcomb learned his Olympic bronze medals could be upgraded to silver because of a doping scandal in Russia.

It was drug testers. Holcomb had to give a urine sample.

That no-notice testing policy is a hallmark of the American anti-doping program — an intrusive part of life for thousands of U.S. athletes that, Holcomb says, makes him "Frenemies" with U.S. Anti-Doping Agency CEO Travis Tygart.

"I don't agree with everything he does, but it's a necessary evil," Holcomb said. "But at this moment, with all these people under scrutiny, I welcome anyone to come and say, 'What about Holcomb?' I've taken 113 tests or something. You can check any one. I test clean."

Holcomb is one of around 40 athletes from the Sochi Games who stand to be elevated on the medals table if the latest details about Russia's doping scandal can be proven.

A New York Times story Thursday detailed an extensive doping scheme that allowed at least 15 Russian medal winners to get away with cheating after officials replaced their drug-tainted urine with clean samples taken months earlier.

The story illustrated, in the perpetrator's words, a system "broken beyond repair."

That perpetrator is Grigory Rodchenkov, the former Moscow lab director who was fired last November and now lives in Los Angeles, where he has teamed with a documentary maker to tell the story.

Rodchenkov and the filmmaker sent a letter to the International Olympic Committee and World Anti-Doping Agency calling for them to test the Sochi urine samples, with Rodchenkov overseeing the testing because, as mastermind of the plot, he's the only one who can identify which samples were compromised.

It would, at a minimum, make it more difficult to prove who the real cheaters were in Sochi since, presumably, all the urine Rodchenkov wants tested is clean.

"In some ways, it's crazy," said Olivier Niggli, the incoming director general of WADA, which has declared Russia's lab and anti-doping agency noncompliant as part of an ongoing case involving the country's track team. "It's a continuation of what had started. We have the same actors, the same players we had previously. Now, we're going to have to find what's supported by credible evidence."

If the evidence shows the Russian bobsled teams were involved, they could lose their gold medals, which would move Switzerland and Latvia into the winner's column and give Holcomb two silver medals to go with the gold he won in the four-man event in 2010.

Mid-major prospects chase NBA dreams

Associated Press

CHICAGO — As he watched Golden State take out Portland, A.J. English felt some mid-major pride, not to mention hope for his own future.

The guard from Iona saw two-time reigning MVP Stephen Curry and Klay Thompson leading the Warriors back to the Western Conference finals, and Damian Lillard and CJ McCollum leading the rebuilt Trail Blazers to a place few would have anticipated at the start of the season.

For English, watching was inspiring. He hopes to join their club, and the NBA Draft Combine this week is a crucial step.

"I know how it is," English said Thursday. "You've got to kind of do the right things, always be on attack mode. The four guards that I watched last night were all from mid-majors — Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson, CJ McCollum and Damian Lillard. They have the mindset like they also struggled with that mid-major thing. The stories they tell and they show them on TV, I know exactly what they're talking about right away. That's the thing. It's a group, club. I'd love to be a part of that club right now."

The 6-foot-4 English is trying to convince NBA executives he is more than just a mid-major star as he tries to move up from the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference, and in that sense, he has

company. Oakland guard Kay Felder and Weber State forward Joel Bolomboy are trying to do the same.

"I kind of almost like when the mid-major players pop out of nowhere and just make a name for themselves just because that's the situation I'm in — just trying to make a name for myself and get my name even bigger than it already is," Bolomboy said.

They are among the many players gathered in Chicago this week trying to boost their stock for next month's draft, whether that means getting chosen at all or being taken with one of the top picks.

California forward Jaylen Brown has no worries about getting drafted. The question for him is how high he will go.

He could be a fit for the Lakers, particularly if they wind up with the third pick and Brandon Ingram and Ben Simmons are off the board.

An athletic wing player with the ability to outmuscle opponents and attack the basket, Brown even said Thursday he is trying to emulate Kobe Bryant's work ethic.

"They say 'Kobe Bryant, he wakes up at 5:30 every morning,' so I'm trying to do the same thing and kind of just catch up to him," he said. "I know if that's what it takes to be where he is then I'm going to try to do that, too."

While there is little question he has the physical skills NBA teams seek, one area of concern is his outside shot. Brown hit

just 29.4 percent of his 3-pointers in his lone season at California, but he does not have to worry about getting picked.

He is one of the biggest names in the draft, someone who figures to go early.

Felder said other players didn't recognize him until he introduced himself. Then, they knew who he was — one of the nation's top scorers and the leader in assists per game as well as the Horizon League Player of the Year.

"That's pretty cool to have other guys notice you that you didn't think would know you," he said.

The 5-9 Felder opened a few more eyes by recording a 44-inch vertical leap at the combine. He said seeing his name on an NBA jersey this week is "like a dream come true."

Bolomboy has been staying in Chicago, where his agent is based, the past 6½ weeks, training in the gym where the Combine is being held. He described himself as an underrated player who has flown under the radar and is intent on showing he can make it in the NBA after being selected Big Sky Conference Most Valuable Player.

"I feel like I can play with anybody," he said. "With me knowing that, I feel like I fit in perfectly. ... Everybody has the same opportunity and an equal chance to make a name for themselves so I don't think I'm behind anybody. I don't think I'm at a disadvantage."



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Cardinals complete sweep of Angels

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — The St. Louis Cardinals couldn't touch Jered Weaver and his low-80s fastball the first time through the order Thursday night.

The second time was an entirely different story, and he didn't make it a third time through.

Matt Holliday homered twice in two innings off Weaver, Matt Carpenter homered as well and the Cardinals held off a late rally to beat the Los Angeles Angels 12-10 to complete a three-game sweep.

Weaver (3-2) retired the first 11 batters of the game before Holliday ended the streak with his first homer. Eight of the next nine Cardinals reached base, capped by a two-run homer from Holliday to end Weaver's night in the fifth.

"It took us a minute to get used to his decreased velocity compared to what we're used to," Holliday said. "It's really just more with your eyes and a timing thing. Once you see it, the next time your mind and body is much more in sync."

Holliday matched his career high with four hits to pace an 18-hit outburst by the Cardinals. Matt Adams and Yadier Molina added three hits apiece, and every Cardinals starter had a hit.

Adam Wainwright (3-3) got the win despite allowing 11 hits and seven runs, six earned, in five innings.

Weaver gave up nine hits and eight runs allowed in four-plus innings for the Angels, who have lost six straight and 10 of their last 12.

"That's the type of offense I believe we are," Cardinals manager Mike Matheny said. "Great production up and down, everybody. The guys just kept coming and obviously we needed every one of them."

The Angels offense gave Weaver a 2-0 lead in the third and 5-3 lead in the fourth, but the Cardinals battled back each time.

Carpenter launched a three-run homer down the right-field line in the fifth to make it 6-5 and put St. Louis up for good. Holliday followed two batters later with a two-run drive to center to chase Weaver from the game.

Adams gave the Cardinals some breathing room with a two-run single in the sixth after the Angels had crawled back within a run and delivered another RBI single in the ninth.

The Angels, down 12-7 entering the ninth, didn't go quietly. Kole Calhoun's RBI single and a two-run homer by Albert Pujols cut their deficit to 12-10, and Cardinals closer Trevor Rosenthal promptly walked the bases loaded upon entering. But Kevin Siegrist came in and struck out Carlos Perez and got Shane Robinson to pop out to end the threat and record his first save.

"The fact we came back from the brink I think says a lot about the heart in the club right there," Angels manager Mike Scioscia said. "You can tell a lot about people by how they react when things aren't going the right way, and a lot of things aren't going the right way for us, but the guys are getting in there and busting it and getting after it."

Giants 4, Diamondbacks 2: Johnny Cueto pitched seven strong innings, Zack Greinke had another rough outing at home for Arizona and San Francisco opened a four-game series with a victory.

Joe Panik hit a two-run homer off Greinke, who fell to 1-3 in five home starts.

Cueto (5-1) allowed two runs and eight hits, striking out nine and walking two in a matchup of two of the highest-priced free agent pitchers last offseason. Cueto signed a six-year, \$130 million contract, which was dwarfed by Greinke's six-year, \$206.5 million deal.

Greinke (3-3) gave up four runs and eight hits in six innings, raising his ERA to 5.26 in eight starts. Greinke led the majors with a 1.66 ERA last season.

Red Sox 11, Astros 1: David Price struck out 12, Mookie Betts had a three-run homer and Xander Bogaerts had a two-run shot to help Boston beat visiting Houston for a season-high fifth straight win.

Jackie Bradley Jr. singled twice and extended his hitting streak to 18 games, tying the longest streak in the major leagues this season. Bogaerts had three RBIs. Thursday was supposed to be all

about the first matchup between reigning Cy Young Award winner Dallas Keuchel and Price, last year's runner-up.

Boston's bats ensured Price (5-1) easily took this one. He rallied after a slow start and allowed a season-low one run over 6 2/3 innings, lowering his ERA to 6.00.

Keuchel (2-5) gave up 10 hits and eight runs. He has allowed five or more earned runs in four of his last five starts, something he did only three times last year.

Orioles 7, Tigers 5: Jonathan Schoop hit a tiebreaking two-run triple in the seventh inning, and Baltimore rallied from a five-run deficit to beat visiting Detroit for a fifth straight victory.

Schoop's triple was the only extra-base hit in the seventh-inning rally that included five singles.

Baltimore trailed 5-0 in the sixth. Detroit starter Mike Pelfrey allowed two runs in 5 1/3 innings, but the collapse of the Detroit bullpen left the right-hander winless in 15 starts since Aug. 12.

Alex Wilson gave up three runs in the seventh and Justin Wilson (0-1) yielded the last two.

Vance Worley (2-0) worked two innings, and Zach Britton got three outs for his ninth save in nine chances.

Padres 3, Brewers 0: James Shields had a season-high nine strikeouts in seven innings to lead visiting San Diego.

Shields (2-5) allowed seven hits and one walk. Brandon Maurer pitched the eighth inning and Ryan Buchter pitched the ninth for his first major league save. Melvin Upton Jr. homered for the fourth time and had three hits, two RBIs and two runs for the Padres one day after San Diego swept a doubleheader at the Chicago Cubs.

Milwaukee's Jimmy Nelson (4-3) pitched a season-high eight innings and gave up two earned runs on five hits but lost for the second time in his last seven starts.

Phillies 7, Braves 4 (10): Cameron Rupp hit a three-run double with two outs in the 10th inning and Philadelphia beat host Atlanta.

Odubel Herrera matched his career high with four hits, including a triple off Jason

Grilli (1-2) leading off the 10th.

Andrew Bailey (2-0) got the final out of the ninth, and Jeanmar Gomez pitched the 10th for his major league-leading 13th save in 14 tries.

Atlanta dropped to a big league-worst 8-25, including 2-17 at home. Rookie Aaron Blair allowed four runs — three earned — and six hits in 3 2/3 innings, he shortest of his four starts with Atlanta.

Yankees 7, Royals 3: Chase Headley, Starlin Castro and Didi Gregorius hit early home runs and host New York beat Kansas City, sending the World Series champion to its 12th loss in 16 games.

Kansas City dropped three of four at Yankee Stadium.

Nathan Eovaldi (3-2) worked around eight hits in five innings, and overcame getting struck on the leg by Lorenzo Cain's hard one-hopper at the outset.

Relievers Kirby Yates and Dellin Betances each followed with a perfect inning to hold a 5-3 lead. After the Yankees scored twice more, Andrew Miller worked a 1-2-3 eighth and Chasen Shreve threw a scoreless ninth.

Ian Kennedy (4-3) lost in his first game back in the Bronx since the Yankees traded him after the 2009 season.

Dodgers 5, Mets 0: Clayton Kershaw tossed his second complete-game shutout this month, Yasmani Grandal hit a three-run homer and Chase Utley added a solo shot to help host Los Angeles beat New York for a split of the four-game series.

Making his 250th career start, Kershaw (5-1) struck out 13 and walked one to win his third straight. He only gave up three hits. It was the left-hander's fifth straight start with double-digit strikeouts, a club record.

The Dodgers jumped on Bartolo Colon (3-2) with four runs in the first inning. Their first run came on Justin Turner's RBI single before Grandal homered off a 2-0 pitch into the right-field pavilion, making it 4-0 on his third homer of the season.

Chase Utley added a two-out homer in the second for a 5-0 lead.

Sharks oust Predators, advance to conference finals

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — Captain Joe Pavelski and the rest of San Jose's big guns took little time to answer the questions about how this version of the Sharks would respond after a lackluster loss in a potential series clincher.

Pavelski got San Jose off to a fast start in Game 7 with his franchise record-tying ninth goal of the playoffs to send the Sharks to their first Western Conference finals in five years with a 5-0 victory over the Nashville Predators on Thursday night.

Joel Ward, Logan Couture, Joe Thornton and Patrick Marleau also scored as San Jose shook off an overtime loss in Game 6 to reach the conference finals for the fourth time in franchise history.

"As soon as the puck dropped tonight, the guys were going," Thornton said. "It was nice to see. It was a huge game for us. I'm just glad we came on the good side tonight."

Martin Jones made 20 saves for San Jose's first playoff shutout in six years. The home team won all seven games in this series.

After blowing a 3-0 series lead to Los Angeles in 2014 in their most noteworthy in a long list of playoff collapses and

missing the postseason entirely last year, the Sharks are now one round away from advancing to the Stanley Cup Final for the first time in franchise history.

San Jose will open the conference finals on the road Sunday against the St. Louis Blues.

"It never gets easier," Pavelski said. "These teams are all good right now, good goalies. It feels good, but we understand this was a second step. It feels good, but we have to keep going."

The Predators' most successful season ended in bitter disappointment as they were unable to repeat their Game 7 road win in the first round against Anaheim to make the conference finals for the first time.

Defensive miscues by Nashville's two top defensemen, captain Shea Weber and Roman Josi, led to early San Jose goals as Pekka Rinne got little help from his teammates.

The Predators had just eight shots on goal in the first two periods and Rinne left after allowing goals to Thornton and Marleau early in the third period. The frustration boiled over as he slammed his stick against the post and tossed it aside after Marleau's goal made it 5-0. Carter Hutton replaced Rinne in goal and made one save.

"That was childish and not the way you want to end the season," Rinne said. "I wish I hadn't have done that. Yeah, it was frustration. That's the end of that stick."

Nashville remains one of three franchises, along with Columbus and the current Winnipeg franchise, to never make it to the conference finals.

The Sharks got there in 2004, 2010 and 2011 — only to lose each time as a long run of regular-season success behind stars such as Thornton and Marleau has not yet led to the ultimate postseason goal.

The 2014 collapse set the franchise back and led to Thornton losing his captaincy amid several other changes the past two years. But with only 10 players remaining from that disappointment and a new coach in Peter DeBoer, the Sharks believed this team was different and are showing that through two rounds of the playoffs.

"The core guys are still the same, but the core guys here are great," DeBoer said. "They have great habits, they've been well coached for a decade by the previous staff that was here. They're not the problem. It was filling in behind them. We've got those type of people here now, and I think the guys at the top feel that and are feeding off it."

The Sharks came out fast from the drop

and completely dominated the opening period, outshooting Nashville 17-3 to take a 2-0 lead.

San Jose's potent top power-play unit made Nashville pay for a delay of game penalty on Game 6 overtime hero Viktor Arvidsson when Marleau set up Pavelski with a pass from behind the net for a one-timer to open the scoring. It was Pavelski's ninth goal this postseason, tying the franchise record he and Marleau already held.

The Predators came close to scoring on one flurry in front of Jones' net, but the Sharks ended up adding to the lead when Josi misplayed a puck at the blue line, sending Ward in on a breakaway that made it 2-0.

The break between periods did little to slow the Sharks as they scored in the opening minute of the second period when Weber turned a puck over right to Couture in the defensive zone. Couture skated in and beat Rinne to make it 3-0 and the rout was on.

"They were the better team tonight," Weber said. "We couldn't get anything going. It was tough. They deserved it."

Notes: Couture's 11 points in the series breaks the franchise record of 10 set by Igor Larionov in San Jose's first series ever in 1994 against Detroit.