

STARS AND STRIPES®

Wednesday, May 10, 2017

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

S. Korea's new leader ready to talk to US

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — South Korea's new president got right to work Wednesday, saying he's ready to negotiate with the United States and China over a controversial U.S. missile defense system and would even travel to Pyongyang "if the circumstances are right."

Moon Jae-in's comments signal that he will quickly follow through with promises to take a softer approach toward dealing with North Korea, although he sought to reassure Washington of his commitment to the long-standing alliance between the countries amid concern about possible friction ahead.

"I will solve the security crisis in haste," he said shortly after being sworn into office following a landslide victory in Tuesday's snap election. "If necessary, I will fly to Washington right away. I will go to Beijing and to Tokyo. If the conditions are right, I will go to Pyongyang."

The U.S., China and Japan sent congratulations, with the White House saying it joined South Korea's people "in celebrating their peaceful, democratic transition of power."

The 64-year-old former human rights lawyer assumes the helm of a country that is deeply divided following a bitter eight-month political crisis that led to the ouster and arrest of ex-President Park Geun-hye.

While an acting president maintained order, South Korea has suffered from a diplomatic vacuum at a critical time of rising tensions over the North's nuclear weapons program.

Sources: Comey sought Russia probe resources before firing

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — In the days before his firing by President Donald Trump, FBI Director James Comey told U.S. lawmakers he had asked the Justice Department for more resources to pursue the bureau's investigation into Russia's interference in last year's presidential election, three U.S. officials said Wednesday.

The officials said Comey met last week with Rod Rosenstein, the deputy attorney general, to make the request. Comey then alerted lawmakers with ties to the concurrent congressional investigations into Russia's meddling, according to the officials, who insisted on anonymity in order to disclose the private conversations.

Justice Department spokeswoman Sarah Isgur Flores said it was false that Comey had asked Rosenstein for money for the Russia investigation.

The revelations raise new questions about what prompted Trump's decision to fire Comey. The White House has cited a memo from Rosenstein, in which he criticizes Comey's handling of last year's investigation into Democrat Hillary Clinton's email practices.

Rosenstein's memo makes no mention of the FBI's Russia investigation, which is probing both Russia's hacking of Democratic groups last year and whether Trump campaign associates had ties to Moscow's election interference.

Trump defended his decision Wednesday, asserting in a flurry of tweets that both Democrats and Republicans "will be thanking me" for his action. He did not mention any effect the dismissal might have on the FBI and congressional investi-

gations into contacts between his 2016 election campaign and Russia.

"He wasn't doing a good job. Very simply. He was not doing a good job," Trump said in brief remarks to reporters in the Oval Office, where he was joined by former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.

The abrupt firing of Comey threw into question the future of the FBI's investigation and immediately raised suspicions of an underhanded effort to stymie a probe that has shadowed the administration from the outset. Trump has ridiculed the investigations as "a hoax" and denied any campaign involvement with the Russians.

Democrats compared Comey's ouster to President Richard Nixon's "Saturday Night Massacre" during the Watergate investigation and renewed calls for the appointment of a special prosecutor. Kissinger, who was meeting with Trump, was Nixon's secretary of state in 1973, just moved over from being national security adviser.

Earlier Wednesday, Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer, of New York, urged Attorney General Jeff Sessions and his deputy, Rosenstein, to appear before the Senate to answer questions about the circumstances surrounding Trump's action. However, Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell brushed aside calls for a special prosecutor, saying a new investigation into Russian meddling would only "impede the current work being done." He noted that Democrats had repeatedly criticized Comey in the past and some had called for his removal.

Trump made a similar case on Twitter, saying Comey had

"lost the confidence of almost everyone in Washington," adding, "When things calm down, they will be thanking me!"

The Justice Department said Sessions was interviewing candidates to serve as an interim replacement. Comey's deputy, FBI veteran Andrew McCabe, became acting director after Comey was fired.

In his letter Tuesday to Comey, Trump said the firing was necessary to restore "public trust and confidence" in the FBI. The administration paired the letter with a scathing review by Rosenstein of how Comey handled the investigation into Clinton's email practices, including his decision to hold a news conference announcing its findings and releasing "derogatory information" about Clinton.

Rep. Adam Schiff, of California, top Democrat on the House Intelligence Committee, said Wednesday on MSNBC of Trump's contention that the firing had to do with Comey's decision-making on such matters as the Clinton emails, "Nobody believes that."

Trump, in his letter, pointedly thanked Comey for telling him three times "that I am not under investigation." The FBI has not confirmed that Comey ever made those assurances to the president. In public hearings, Comey has declined to answer when asked if Trump is under investigation, urging lawmakers not to read anything into that statement.

Comey, 56, was nominated by President Barack Obama for the FBI post in 2013 to a 10-year term, though that appointment does not ensure a director will serve the full term.

Marine helicopter likely to cost \$144M

Bloomberg

Lockheed Martin's new King Stallion helicopter for the Marine Corps is likely to cost \$144 million each, 4 percent more than projected by the service, and be ready to deploy a year later than planned, according to the Pentagon's cost assessment office.

The estimate by the independent cost office is an increase from the Navy program office's most recent projected "program acquisition unit cost" of \$138.5 million per copter in a \$31 billion program. It's also a 25 percent increase from the initial goal of about \$115 million established in late 2005 for the aircraft designed to haul heavy cargo.

The Pentagon's Cost Assessment and Program Evaluation office also estimates a delay of about a year to May 2020 in the start of rigorous combat testing that must be completed before the aircraft can be ap-

proved for full-rate production — the most profitable phase for Lockheed in what's planned as a 200-aircraft program. The updated estimate was provided in a new report to Congress that was obtained by Bloomberg News.

The cost office also estimates that the helicopter won't achieve its initial combat capability until December 2020, or a year later than the program's estimate.

The new cost projection for the King Stallion may become a focus of congressional oversight when the Marine Corps' fiscal 2018 budget is submitted to Congress. Rep. Niki Tsongas, of Massachusetts, the top Democrat on a House Armed Services subcommittee that oversees the copter program, already has questioned the King Stallion's basic cost.

The aircraft, designated the CH-35K, will be capable of lifting 27,000 pounds. It will be the same size as its predecessor, the Super Stallion, but able to haul triple the

cargo, according to Lockheed. On April 4, the Defense Department approved the CH-53K program entering low-rate production, authorizing production of the initial batch of 26 helicopters.

Lockheed spokesman Paul Jackson said the company is proud that the Pentagon "recently showed its confidence" by "approving the move to low rate initial production. We remain on track to achieve Initial Operational Capability (IOC) in 2019."

Navy program spokeswoman Kelly Burdick declined to discuss the new projection directly but said in an email that the Navy and Lockheed are "committed to reducing program costs over the life of the program." She said a Navy "Program Cost and Affordability Team" has saved an estimated \$750 million and projects it can save an additional \$1.5 billion during the helicopter's production and support phases.

Okinawa seeks to limit US access to Aha Falls after airman's death

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
AND CHIYOMI SUMIDA

Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — Okinawan officials are working to keep the U.S. military community away from Aha Falls — a spot popular with service-members and tourists for hiking and cliff jumping — in the wake of an airman's death over the weekend.

Shannon Purcell, 19, died Saturday after slipping and falling 15 feet into the Tanaga Gumui basin about 12:40 p.m., according to Japanese fire and rescue officials. Purcell was observed struggling in the water, but by the time her friends reached her, she had disappeared beneath the surface. She was recovered at approximately 5:30 p.m. by Japanese fire and rescue divers.

In response, tourism officials from Kunigami village filed a request Monday with the U.S. military through the Okinawa Defense Bureau to make the site off-limits to Americans in the military community, according

to a spokesman for the village's tourism office. Bureau officials delivered a letter to the U.S. military on Wednesday.

The village also asked the Okinawa Regional Forest Office and the Okinawa prefectural government, which manage the nationally owned forests that lead to the falls and the river connected to the falls, respectively, to restrict access to the area.

"It is not a site that we advertise as a tourist spot, nor park or recreational spot," said Kunigami village tourism official Kosuke Miyazato. "Basically, it is an area where no one should be."

The falls are adjacent to the former Northern Training Area so they are administered by the Okinawa Defense Bureau, Miyazato said. In December, about half of the Northern Training Area was closed and returned to Japan.

Local officials said that the falls are known in the community for frequent water-related accidents. Signs warning of deep water and a high risk are posted

in both English and Japanese.

Due to the dangers and its reputation, locals said that they stay away for the most part.

Purcell was part of a group that arrived at the falls about 11 a.m. Saturday, a spokesman for the Okinawa prefectural police in Nago said, citing the Americans at the scene. They were diving from the rocks into the basin, swimming and hiking in the area when the incident occurred.

The cause of the accident is still under investigation but the spokesman, citing witnesses, said Purcell fell after losing her footing. Her friends called for help and searched for her while they awaited police and fire and rescue officials.

Purcell was found at the bottom of the approximately 26-foot-deep basin, Japanese fire and rescue officials said. She wore a T-shirt and shorts but no life jacket.

Rescue divers were hampered by increased water volume at the falls after heavy morning rains and low visibility.

2 former execs plead guilty in bribery scandal

Associated Press

SAN DIEGO — Two former executives of a defense contractor linked to an international Navy bribery scandal have pleaded guilty to federal charges in San Diego.

Neil Peterson and Linda Raja entered pleas Tuesday to conspiracy to defraud the U.S.

The Singapore residents worked for Glenn Defense Marine Asia, which provided fuel, food and other services to the Navy in Pacific ports.

Prosecutors say for years the firm and its owner, "Fat Leonard" Francis, bribed Navy officers with fancy gifts, trips and prostitutes to provide classified information in order to beat competitors and overcharge for services.

The scheme cost the Navy some \$35 million. More than a dozen Navy and company officials, including Leonard and an admiral, have pleaded guilty and more await trial.

US may send missile battery to Baltics as part of exercise

Associated Press

VILNIUS, Lithuania — U.S. defense officials said a Patriot missile battery might be deployed to the Baltic region later this year as part of a military exercise. The move, if finalized, would be temporary but signal staunch U.S. backing for Baltic nations concerned about the threat from Russia.

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis on Wednesday declined to confirm the specific deployment but said: “We are here in a purely defensive stance. Everyone knows this is not an offensive capability. For anyone who says otherwise, I would just say I have too much respect for the Russian army to think that they actually believe there’s any offensive capability.” At a news conference with Lithuania President Dalia Grybauskaite, Mattis said the U.S. “will deploy only defensive systems to make certain that sovereignty is respected. The specific systems that we bring are those that we determine necessary.”

U.S. officials said the Patriot surface-to-air missile system could move into the region during the July air defense exercise, but it would be gone by the time a large Russian military exercise begins in August and September. They said there will be a U.S. component to the air defense exercise, adding that the U.S. is not considering any long-term change to its air defense status in the region.

The officials said the U.S. will keep a close eye on the Russian exercise, called Zapad, which will take place in Russia’s Kaliningrad territory and western section of the country. They said the U.S. will have an enhanced presence in the region at that time to monitor whether Russia uses the exercise as an opportunity to mass troops and equipment there and leave some behind when it’s over.

The officials, who were not authorized to discuss the matter publicly and spoke on condition of anonymity, said Russia could have 100,000 troops in the region for the exercise.

Syrian Kurds welcome US arms

Associated Press

BEIRUT — Syrian Kurdish fighters Wednesday welcomed the Trump administration’s announcement that it will provide them with heavier arms to battle Islamic State, but NATO member Turkey, which views the main Syrian Kurdish militia as terrorists, says every weapon the Americans give them is a “threat.”

The dispute could ignite more fighting between the two key American allies in the battle against the extremist group as Syrian Kurdish forces gear up for a major operation to drive the militants from their de facto capital, Raqqa.

A top Syrian Kurdish official hailed the U.S. decision to step up military aid, saying it would “legitimize” the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, which includes Arab fighters.

But Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoglu slammed the move, saying “every weap-

on that reaches their hands is a threat toward Turkey,” and that Turkey’s president would raise the issue during a visit to Washington planned for next week.

The Syrian Democratic Forces, which have driven ISIS from much of northern Syria over the past two years with the help of U.S.-led airstrikes, are among the most effective ground forces battling the extremists.

Ankara said the Kurdish militia known as the YPG, which forms the backbone of the force, is an extension of the Kurdistan Worker’s Party, or PKK, which has been waging a decades-long insurgency in Turkey and is considered a terrorist group by Turkey, the U.S. and other Western countries.

Ilham Ahmed, a top official in the Syrian Democratic Forces’ political office, said the decision to provide heavier arms carries “political meaning” and “legitimizes the YPG and the Syrian Democratic Forces.”

She said the decision is likely

to be met with “aggression” from Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who is to visit Washington next week.

U.S. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis told reporters Wednesday that the U.S. has had very open discussions with Turkey.

“We will work together, we’ll work out any of the concerns. I’m not concerned at all about the NATO alliance and the relations between our nations,” he told reporters, as he toured a NATO training site outside Vilnius, Lithuania.

The SDF’s rapid advance against ISIS last year prompted Turkey to send ground forces across the border for the first time in the more than 6-year-old civil war to help allied Syrian forces battle ISIS and halt the Kurds’ progress.

Since then, Turkey is believed to have positioned more than 5,000 troops in northern Syria, and has escalated its airstrikes and cross-border artillery attacks against Kurdish forces.

US-backed Syrian forces nearing Raqqa

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Anti-Islamic State fighters, backed by U.S. forces, have seized a strategic town in northern Syria and will soon move “within striking distance” of Raqqa, the terrorist group’s self-proclaimed capital, a U.S. military spokesman said Wednesday.

Syrian Democratic Forces have taken control of the strategically vital town of Tabqa, about 25 miles west of Raqqa along the Euphrates River, but had two neighborhoods remaining to clear of ISIS fighters, said Air Force Col. John Dorrian, a spokesman for the Operation Inherent Resolve coalition.

Syrian Democratic Forces announced Wednesday that they had seized the town and captured the nearby Tabqa Dam, Syria’s largest and most important hydroelectric dam.

The dam’s seizure clears the path to Raqqa, with an assault

on the city expected to begin in the coming weeks.

“The city [Raqqa] is almost completely isolated,” Dorrian told reporters at the Pentagon. “What we can expect is that our partnered forces will continue moving closer to the city to advance to within striking distance.”

He would not say exactly when he expected Syrian Democratic Forces would announce the operation to liberate the city, a battle expected to take months. Fighting in Tabqa began seven weeks ago when the United States airlifted SDF fighters into the city’s outskirts behind enemy lines.

The United States estimates ISIS has about 4,000 fighters inside Raqqa, which the terrorist group has controlled for nearly three years and was once touted as the centerpiece of its caliphate.

ISIS has begun preparing the city for the coming invasion, Dorrian said. The coalition has

watched as ISIS has built berms alongside the city’s outskirts, placed booby-traps such as improvised explosive devices and attempted to dam portions of the Euphrates River to flood areas from which they expect the attack to come.

In response, the U.S.-led coalition has focused its air and artillery strikes on eliminating those defenses and the construction equipment that ISIS uses to build them, Dorrian said.

U.S. airstrikes have also recently targeted ISIS boats and barges carrying fighters and gear on the Euphrates. Dorrian said 13 ISIS vessels had been destroyed in recent days.

The Pentagon announced Tuesday that President Donald Trump had authorized it to provide military gear, including rifles, machine guns and ammunition to the YPG, the Kurdish militia that makes up about half of the SDF, to be used for the Raqqa fight.

Federal court ruling prompts review of firing of VA executive

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Federal firing procedures established following the 2014 Department of Veterans Affairs wait-time scandal are unconstitutional, said a ruling Tuesday by the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit.

The ruling upholds a petition from Sharon Helman, former director of the Phoenix VA Health Care System. She was director of the hospital in 2014 when whistleblowers disclosed veterans seeking care in Phoenix were languishing on secret wait lists.

The VA inspector general later confirmed some veterans died because of the delays.

Helman was terminated that year, and she was convicted last May of criminal misconduct in office and sentenced to two years of probation.

Helman's firing still stands; however, the court ordered a review into an administrative judge's original decision to affirm her removal, creating the possibility she could be reinstated at the VA.

VA Secretary David Shulkin responded to the decision Tuesday by asking Congress for new constitutional authority to fire poor-performing VA

employees.

"Today's ruling underscores yet again the need for swift congressional action to afford the secretary effective and defensible authority to take timely and meaningful action against VA employees whose conduct or performance undermines veterans' trust in VA care or services," Shulkin said in a statement.

The firing process the federal court deemed unconstitutional Tuesday was created through the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, a \$15 billion measure that aimed to reform the department.

A measure in that bill expedited how senior executives could be terminated.

The court determined the process violated the Appointments Clause because it gave administrative judges — who are federal employees — too much discretion in deciding the appeals of VA employees facing disciplinary action.

In the years since the process was created, some lawmakers have attempted to pass legislation that would create a firing process, with solid legal standing, that would still allow the VA secretary to fire bad workers. Bills passed the House in 2015 and 2016 but

never gained traction in the Senate.

In March, legislation again passed through the House. It would shorten the time that VA employees would have to appeal any disciplinary action against them and require quicker determinations from the Merit Systems Protection Board, which hears the appeals.

It would also allow the VA secretary to reduce the pension of a VA employee and recoup bonuses and relocation expenses in certain instances.

Like in previous years, the legislation has been slow to move in the Senate.

However, following the court's decision Tuesday, leaders of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee sent out a call for action.

It's unclear when a final decision will be made in Helman's case.

The Merit Systems Protection Board will perform the review of her termination.

The board has been short of a quorum since March, though, and President Donald Trump would have to appoint a new board member before the MSPB could perform the review.

Tunnel collapse latest issue at nuke site

Associated Press

RICHLAND, Wash. — The collapse of an underground tunnel containing radioactive waste that forced workers at the Hanford Nuclear Reservation to shelter in place is the latest incident to raise safety concerns at the sprawling site that made plutonium for nuclear bombs for decades after World War II.

Officials detected no release of radiation Tuesday and no workers were injured, said Randy Bradbury, a spokesman for the Washington state Department of Ecology.

No workers were inside the tunnel when it collapsed, causing soil on the surface above to sink 2 to 4 feet over a 400-square-foot area, officials said.

The tunnels are hundreds of feet long, with about 8 feet of soil covering them, the U.S. Department of Energy said.

The anti-nuclear group Beyond Nuclear said the incident helped show "radioactive waste management is out of control."

The cause of the collapse was not immediately known. It was discovered Tuesday as part of a routine inspection and occurred during a massive cleanup that has been underway since the 1980s and costs more than \$2 billion a year. The work is expected to take until 2060 and cost more than \$100 billion.

Photo scandal prompts new Marines rule for mandatory separation

BY MICHAEL DARNELL
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — In the wake of the nude photo-sharing scandal that rocked the military earlier this year, Marines with substantiated cases of improper photo sharing will face mandatory separation proceedings.

An administrative message issued May 9 amended the Marine Corps separation manual — the set of regulations that address everything from retirement policies to involuntary separation proceedings.

Language that addresses nonconsensual sharing of sexually explicit images

was added to regulations that govern other forms of sexual harassment.

"The distribution or broadcasting of an intimate image, without consent, if done for personal gain; or with the intent to humiliate, harm, harass, intimidate, threaten or coerce the depicted person" is now a violation.

The Marine Corps has had social media guidance for years, but policies were updated after the nude photo scandal was first reported by The War Horse. During a March 14 Senate hearing into the scandal, Gen. Robert Neller, the commandant of the

Marine Corps, said the policy would be adjusted to account specifically for improper photo sharing.

"I believe the policy that we revised is focused more on certain behaviors such as the one we are here to discuss today on social media ... to tell all Marines that these types of things are unacceptable," Neller told the Armed Services Committee. "The previous policy said that, but it did not say it quite directly."

The addition to the separations manual addresses the online behavior of Marines in much clearer terms.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Pair rescued after car crashes into bay

NJ ATLANTIC CITY — Authorities said a good Samaritan helped rescue a woman trapped inside a car that had crashed into a bay.

Atlantic City police said two Absecon residents — a 29-year-old man who was driving and a 28-year-old female passenger — were in the car when it crashed around 4:30 a.m. Sunday. They said the vehicle went through a bulkhead before it entered the water.

Police said city resident TJ Andrews witnessed the crash and immediately jumped into the bay. He then helped the driver free the woman and get her to land.

All three were taken to a hospital for treatment of undisclosed injuries. Authorities said the woman's injuries are considered serious, while the injuries suffered by the two men are considered minor.

The cause of the crash remains under investigation.

Sam the missing python slithers back home

AK ANCHORAGE — A 17-foot python that had caused concern in a community north of Anchorage since it went missing two weeks ago has returned home.

Matsunika-Sustina Borough Animal Care reported that Sam slithered back into view Monday in the living room of its owners' home in Meadow Lakes.

Sam had attracted international media attention after it went missing 14 days ago.

One of its owners told the borough's Animal Care department that Sam was fed a 25-pound rabbit before it disappeared.

Daring deer licks barrel of hunter's shotgun

IN DANVILLE — Some daring deer approached a group of hunters in central Indiana and one was so unafraid that it licked the barrel of a shotgun and allowed one of the men to stroke its neck.

Perhaps they knew the men were hoping to bag a turkey?

Leon Champine said the young animals didn't have their mother with them "to teach them what is dangerous."

Champine, of Indianapolis, told WXIN-TV that he and his friends encountered the inquisitive animals in Hendricks County. One of the men, Corey Cook, recorded video showing the deer wandering toward the camouflaged men who are hidden in the undergrowth.

Deputy: Woman with 2 DUIs had boy steer car

WI MILWAUKEE — Authorities said a 37-year-old Milwaukee woman arrested on suspicion of her third DUI had an 8-year-old boy on her lap steering the car.

A Milwaukee County sheriff's deputy saw the car entering an on-ramp on May 4 with a child seated on the driver's lap and steering the car. The deputy stopped the car and saw that the boy was crying. He told the deputy that he did not want to go jail.

The sheriff's office said the driver refused to cooperate with the deputy until the deputy's supervisor arrived. Authorities said the woman was visibly impaired and failed field sobriety tests.

The woman was arrested and jailed, with charges pending. The child was turned over to Child Protective Services.

Second-grader giving cemetery new crosses

KS SALINA — An 8-year-old boy in central Kansas is giving 57 graves new wooden-cross grave markers.

The Salina Journal reported that Jet Plumer, a Salina second-grader at Heusner Elementary School, and his family started replacing the wooden-cross markers at the county-owned "Poor Farm" Cemetery on Saturday. Jet and his grandfather, Jim Norton, gained Saline County Commission approval in November to replace the crosses and have been working ever since.

Jet said he got the idea after Norton moved to a house near the cemetery. He said every time he and Norton would drive past it, the two would pick up or straighten the knocked down crosses, many of which had rotted away.

Police: Cheese wrapper registration won't work

NH ALEXANDRIA — New Hampshire police are warning drivers to stay up to date on their vehicle registration after fining and towing the car of a woman who tried to cheese her vehicle registration with a supermarket cheese wrapper. Alexandria police commented on Facebook, saying they can't even file the incident under the "A for effort" category.

WMUR-TV reported the driver's car was towed and will remain impounded until she registers the vehicle properly. The making of fake registration stickers is also a misdemeanor, punishable with a fine up to \$1,200. Police say the driver could be fined up to \$2,400, since she forged both her registration and inspection stickers.

Teen earns her college degree before diploma

PA HARRISBURG — A Pennsylvania girl has earned an associate's degree online at a community college even before she has received her high school diploma.

WPMT-TV reported that Sadira Stallings will receive her degree in business administration from Harrisburg Area Community College on Thursday.

Stallings completed 63 credit hours through a dual-enrollment program and is the first high school student from the community college's Gettysburg campus to earn her degree before finishing high school.

She plans to pursue an associate's degree in nursing at the community college this fall so she can become a registered nurse.

First-graders push bill to name a state spider

NC ASHEVILLE — There's an official dog, an official flower and even an official beverage. Students in a first-grade class in North Carolina think a spider should be in the group of special state symbols.

Students in Patti Evans' class at Dickson Elementary School have gone so far as to craft a bill that Rep. Susan Fisher has sponsored to make the golden silk spider the top arachnid.

In groups of two, the students studied a dozen of the state's most common spiders. They made posters and compiled facts about each spider before voting on their favorites, the Asheville Citizen-Times reported.

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Johansen deal paying off for Predators

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The Predators stunned the NHL not once, but twice in 2016 by trading away a top defenseman. Ryan Johansen is the big center landed with Nashville's first big trade, a move almost forgotten in all the wake of the deal that brought P.K. Subban to Music City.

With Nashville waiting for either Anaheim and Edmonton in the Western Conference finals, the deal for Johansen is looking like one of general manager David Poile's more masterful swaps.

"Well, it was a big addition at the time," coach Peter Laviolette said Tuesday of adding Johansen. "Pieces like that are hard to come by. He was young. He's 6-foot-3. He's big. He's skilled. He's talented. From an organizational standpoint the depth of what we needed, it made a lot of sense."

The Predators hoped Johansen could be the top line center the franchise has been searching for since its inaugural season back in 1998-99. Poile sent

young defenseman Seth Jones, who had been paired with captain Shea Weber, to the Columbus Blue Jackets for Johansen on Jan. 6.

Looking back now, it's a move overshadowed by Poile's other trade last June when he shocked the league by trading Weber to Montreal for fellow defenseman Subban.

But Johansen immediately moved onto the top line, where he helped the Predators reach the playoffs last spring. They beat Anaheim in seven games only to lose to San Jose in seven in the second round.

Now 24, Johansen tied with linemate Viktor Arvidsson with 61 points in his first full regular season in Nashville, and he also handed out a team-high 47 assists. Only 10 players in the NHL had more this season.

"I think Ryan's had an excellent year and just the growth for me in him as a person and as a leader as somebody who wants to be that guy, to make a difference and make sure a team moves in the right direction, it's been noticeable this year that he's really trying to take own-

ership," Laviolette said.

Predators forward Colin Wilson called the trade another great move considering Nashville needed a big No. 1 center and got it in Johansen.

"He's been great for us," Wilson said. "In a game that's gotten big and fast, it's nice to have him there, and he's been producing well for us and that line in general wasn't here three, four years ago. So to have him and constantly be producing has certainly helped."

Johansen outplayed Chicago captain Jonathan Toews as Nashville swept the Blackhawks in the first round. In one moment as they fought for the puck, the 218-pound Johansen stiff-armed Toews to the ice to grab possession.

"He's obviously really a really big guy," linemate Filip Forsberg said of Johansen. "And he can move well, too, and I think just one of those guys that can do it all."

Johansen also outplayed St. Louis center Paul Stastny in the second round and now is winning 55.7 percent of his faceoffs.

Johansen ranks ninth this postseason with seven assists behind Evgeni Malkin, Leon Draisaitl, Erik Karlsson, Sidney Crosby, Phil Kessel, T.J. Oshie and Ryan Getzlaf. He only has two goals through 10 games, but he scored the biggest yet Sunday with a backhand to finish off a 2-on-1 early in the third period for the game winner as Nashville eliminated St. Louis in six games.

That was exactly what Nashville hoped for in trading for Johansen, who called scoring that goal a "good feeling."

"But coming in here, I just believed in myself, and I'm going to continue believing in myself that I can get it done," Johansen said. "I've got a lot of work to do to keep playing at my best."

There is one area where Johansen might need a little help. He celebrated that goal with a big fist pump. Asked if Johansen was imitating the coach's celebration of a big goal earlier in the St. Louis series, Laviolette said he wasn't sure.

"It wasn't very good if it was," Laviolette said.

Senators secure berth in Eastern Conference finals

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Erik Karlsson and the Senators have goals this season beyond the Eastern Conference finals.

Still, Ottawa planned to enjoy the achievement for a night before getting back to work. After all, it's been a while.

Karlsson had a goal and an assist to help the Senators reach the third round of the playoffs for the first time in a decade by eliminating the New York Rangers 4-2 in Game 6 on Tuesday night.

"We have a long way to go here," Karlsson said. "We're going to enjoy this for a little bit and again, get back to work as soon as tomorrow."

Ottawa will face either Pittsburgh or Washington in its first trip to the third round since

going to the Stanley Cup Final in 2007.

After outlasting Boston in six games during a first-round series featuring four OT finishes, the resilient Senators outworked the Rangers at Madison Square Garden. Ottawa won all three games at home — each by one goal — including two that went to overtime after the Senators tied it in the closing minutes. That included Game 2, in which Jean-Gabriel Pageau scored twice in the final 3½ minutes of regulation, and then won it with his fourth of the game in the second extra period.

The Rangers tied the series with two dominant 4-1 wins at Madison Square Garden, but the Senators returned home and won Game 5 in overtime to take the lead and then finished

off the Rangers in New York.

After their successful rallies against New York in Ottawa, the Senators had to hold off the desperate Rangers near the end of Game 6. Chris Kreider scored early in the third period to make it 3-2, but the Senators held firm from there. Craig Anderson finished with 37 saves, and Pageau clinched the series with an empty-netter with 6.2 seconds left for his seventh goal of the postseason.

"The four games we lost in this series, it's as simple as them making one more play defensively or one more play offensively," Rangers coach Alain Vigneault said. "We were in all of those games, we didn't make the defensive play when we needed to and we didn't make the offensive play to bury them. You have to give them a

lot of credit. They played well and they deserved to win."

Ottawa led 2-0 after 20 minutes despite being outshot 13-10. New York had three power plays and more scoring chances, but the Senators were aggressive on defense while blocking nine shots in the opening period — and 20 for the game. Whatever got past the defense was stopped by Anderson.

"I thought the players have shown again, character," Ottawa coach Guy Boucher said. "We didn't have two good games here and so I think the players reloaded emotionally, mentally and physically real well for home and then we wanted to do the same for this game. ... The players were extremely poised. They looked really rested and had a lot of energy."

Spurs overcome Leonard injury in OT win

Associated Press

SAN ANTONIO — The San Antonio Spurs were in a tough spot after Kawhi Leonard hurt his ankle in the second half.

That's when Danny Green and the Spurs' supporting cast stepped up.

Green scored seven of his 16 points in overtime, helping San Antonio top James Harden and the Houston Rockets 110-107 on Tuesday night to take a 3-2 lead in their second-round playoff series.

Harden had 33 points, 10 rebounds and 10 assists. He had a chance at a potential tying three-pointer in the final seconds of OT, but was blocked from behind by Manu Ginobili.

"I remember saying to a couple of the guys this is what we live for, these moments, to play in these situations," Spurs point guard Patty Mills said. "Game 5, at home, you just try to soak it up and play hard. I guess that's where all the passion comes out, at those moments. The diving on loose balls, coming up with whatever it may be, you're throwing your body on the line in those situations."

Leonard had 22 points and 15 rebounds in 38 minutes before exiting with an injured right ankle. He stepped on Harden's foot

while running back in transition with 5:37 left in the third quarter and then played limited minutes before sitting out overtime.

The Spurs already were without Tony Parker, who will miss the rest of the playoffs after surgery to repair a ruptured left quadriceps tendon.

"It was frustrating because I wanted to play," Leonard said. "But I was happy seeing my teammates out there putting in a good effort and getting the win."

Leonard said he will play in Game 6 on Thursday in Houston.

Green made a go-ahead three-pointer and converted a three-point play to make it 109-107 Spurs with 30.1 seconds left. He also made a foul shot down the stretch to help San Antonio hold on.

"I think we all made a decision to be aggressive," Green said of Leonard's absence, "regardless of what was going to happen. We weren't going to lose the game being on our heels."

Two questionable plays closed regulation with the game tied at 101.

Harden was whistled for a charge after dribbling all but a few seconds off the shot clock before driving to the basket on Jonathan Simmons. The Spurs failed to take a shot on their final possession, with Mills

banking in a three-pointer after the buzzer sounded.

Harden also played solid defense, helping hold Leonard and LaMarcus Aldridge to 15-for-42 shooting as he rotated assignments in Houston's smaller lineup.

"I was trying to keep them in front of me," Harden said. "Two All-Stars and even Pau [Gasol], who is 7-foot-something. I just tried to be aggressive and do the best that I can and help my team."

But the defensive effort and facilitating Houston's offense appeared to take a toll on Harden. He had four points on 1-for-6 shooting and four turnovers in the final five minutes of regulation and overtime. Harden, who finished with nine turnovers, said he was not fatigued despite playing 43 minutes.

"I just missed shots," Harden said.

The Spurs tried to exploit a size advantage over the Rockets' small lineup early, especially when Harden was guarding either Aldridge and Gasol. The Spurs' big men only managed 2-for-5 shooting in the opening three minutes, leading San Antonio to abandon the strategy midway through the first quarter and sub Simmons for Gasol.

Simmons responded by scoring 10 points on 5-for-13 shooting in 26 minutes.

Harvey rejoins Mets, apologizes for behavior

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Matt Harvey was contrite. Visibly embarrassed. Entirely apologetic.

Nothing like the brash and cocksure kid who burst onto the New York scene a few years back and quickly became one of baseball's most dominant pitchers.

A subdued Harvey rejoined the Mets on Tuesday and apologized to teammates, coaches, owners and fans after serving his three-day suspension for skipping a game last weekend following a late night on the town. And in a pair of unusually emotive news conferences, he and manager Terry Collins even hinted the one-time ace might have a problem with alcohol.

At the very least, they virtually acknowledged a late-night lifestyle has pulled Harvey's priorities away from the game

and impaired his pitching.

"There are things that I've realized in the last couple days that I need to be doing or should not be doing," Harvey said before New York hosted San Francisco. "One of those that I should be doing is putting myself in a better place to perform physically and be accountable for my work, and that's something that I'm committing to."

Collins said this latest flap can be a wakeup call, and Harvey admitted that.

Before the 2015 playoffs, Harvey was fined for missing a mandatory team workout. This time, he was suspended three days without pay.

"I'm extremely embarrassed by my actions," said Harvey, wearing a Mets cap and practice shirt as he sat at a table with a microphone in the interview room.

"It's completely my fault," he added. "I'm doing everything

I can so that never happens again."

The star pitcher has help inside and outside the clubhouse, Collins said, and he thinks Harvey will now use his strong support group.

"I don't think he thinks he has to do it by himself anymore," Collins explained.

Asked directly if he thinks Harvey has an alcohol problem, Collins said: "I'm not qualified to answer that."

And his habits off the field?

"I didn't get into that stuff with him. I know that there's people who have, that he's discussed it with. They're professionals on that side of it," Collins said. "I think he needs to just refocus his energies towards being the best in the game again."

The 28-year-old Harvey acknowledged he was out after Friday night's game "past curfew" and then played golf

Saturday morning. He did not show up at Citi Field for Saturday night's game against Miami and took "full blame" for that.

The right-hander was scheduled to start Sunday afternoon, but when he arrived at the ballpark he was sent home by the team. New York called up journeyman Adam Wilk from Triple-A Las Vegas to fill in on short notice and little-to-no sleep. Wilk was hit hard in a 7-0 loss to the Marlins.

"I think everybody deserves a second chance. What Matt said to me, he's going to get after it like he did in the past," Collins said. "I told him he needs to make baseball number one. When he did that, he was on top of the world, you know? This guy was the best pitcher in the game. He made that the priority. And when he makes that the priority again, he'll be back."

Trumbo rallies O's past Nats in 12th

Associated Press

BALTIMORE — Down by three runs against Nationals ace Max Scherzer with six outs to go, the Baltimore Orioles appeared destined to finish a successful homestand on a sour note.

"A great pitcher on the mound for them," Orioles slugger Mark Trumbo said, "so we knew we were really going to have to fight."

Adam Jones began the improbable comeback with a home run and Trumbo completed the turnaround with a 12th-inning RBI single that provided Baltimore with a 5-4 victory on Tuesday night.

After finishing a two-game sweep of their neighbor to the south, the Orioles have won six in a row and have the best record in the major leagues at 22-10.

"The guys just never give in," manager Buck Showalter said. "They think they've got an op-

portunity as long as they have an at-bat and some outs left."

Jones' homer got Baltimore to 4-2 in the eighth, and the Orioles added two runs in the ninth against Enny Romero, one of several struggling members of the Washington bullpen.

Trumbo then won it with a bases-loaded single off Jacob Turner (1-1).

"This is definitely a good win," Trumbo said.

Adam Lind had a three-run, pinch-hit homer in the eighth inning to break open a duel between Scherzer and Ubaldo Jimenez and put the Nationals up 4-1.

But the lead didn't hold up.

"It's frustrating," said Nationals second baseman Daniel Murphy, who homered before being ejected in the 10th. "Max threw the ball great today. Adam comes up with a huge at-bat right there. It's a ball game we would have liked to have won although we didn't. We'll

head back home and see if we can get back on track."

The interleague series shifts to Washington for two games on Wednesday and Thursday.

Baltimore can only hope the momentum generated by a 5-0 homestand continues in a stadium less than 40 miles down the road.

Singles by Jones and Manny Machado, along with an intentional walk to Chris Davis, loaded the bases for Trumbo in the 12th. Trumbo hit the first pitch to left field, ending the game just seven minutes short of four hours.

Logan Verrett (2-0) pitched three shutout innings for the Orioles, who improved to 13-3 at home.

Washington has lost three in a row for the first time this season. This defeat was more distasteful because with two innings to go, a victory appeared in hand.

"It takes a big emotional toll," manager Dusty Baker said.

"One of the biggest downers in baseball is when you blow a game late. We'll see how we come out of this."

The score was tied at 1 when Anthony Rendon and Matt Wieters opened the eighth with successive singles. Lind stepped in for No. 9 hitter Michael Taylor and drove a 1-1 pitch over the center-field wall.

It was his third pinch-homer this season and eighth of his career. He's 6 for 11 with nine RBIs as a pinch hitter this year.

Scherzer struck out 11 and gave up two runs and four hits over eight innings. The 2016 NL Cy Young Award winner has gone at least six innings in all seven starts this season and has reached double digits in strikeouts three times.

Scherzer issued two walks over the first five innings and held the Orioles hitless until Seth Smith homered with one out in the sixth.

Fowler's ninth-inning single lifts Cards over Marlins

Associated Press

MIAMI — Still out of the starting lineup, Dexter Fowler helped the St. Louis Cardinals to a big finish.

Fowler singled home the tie-breaking run as a pinch hitter with one out in the ninth inning, and the Cardinals rallied from a late four-run deficit for their fifth consecutive victory by beating the Miami Marlins 6-5 Tuesday.

The game was tied when rookie sensation Magneuris Sierra reached on an infield single with one out in the ninth, and he continued to second on an errant throw to first by A.J. Ramos (1-2). Fowler followed with a sharp single to right field, and the speedy Sierra slid home ahead of Giancarlo Stanton's throw.

Fowler was held out of the starting lineup for the fifth game in a row because of a lat injury.

Mets 6, Giants 1: Zack Wheeler pitched two-hit ball against the team that traded him, Michael Conforto homered and host New York scored four times in the first inning against staggering San Francisco.

Reds 5, Yankees 3: Joey Votto singled with the bases loaded during the latest big inning off CC Sabathia, and the host Reds stopped the Yankees' six-game winning streak.

Indians 6, Blue Jays 0: Carlos Carrasco and two relievers combined on a four-hitter, and Yan Gomes hit a three-run homer for visiting Cleveland.

Rockies 10-1; Cubs 4-8: John Lackey struck out 10 over seven scoreless innings and added an RBI single, helping visiting Chicago stop a four-game skid in the finale of a day-night doubleheader.

In the opener, Colorado scored six runs in the third inning and Mark Reynolds homered for the fourth straight

game. Antonio Senzatela (5-1) pitched six innings of two-run ball.

Brewers 11, Red Sox 7: Eric Thames hit his 13th homer in host Milwaukee's five-run first inning, helping the Brewers overcome a big night for Boston's Mookie Betts.

Royals 7, Rays 6 (12): Mike Moustakas homered in the 12th inning, helping Kansas City to the win at Tampa Bay.

Mariners 10, Phillies 9: Taylor Motter had the go-ahead RBI double in the ninth inning, Ben Gamel had four hits and Seattle overcame a four-run deficit to beat host Philadelphia in Carlos Ruiz's return to his home town.

Astros 8, Braves 3: Carlos Correa and Carlos Beltran hit consecutive homers off Bartolo Colon during host Houston's five-run first inning.

Twins 7, White Sox 2: Hector Santiago beat his former team once again and Byron Buxton

tied his career high with three hits, leading visiting Minnesota to the victory.

Rangers 11, Padres 0: Texas right-hander A.J. Griffin dominated his hometown team, San Diego, with a four-hitter for his second career shutout.

Angels 7, Athletics 3: Yunel Escobar hit a three-run homer and had four RBIs, and Albert Pujols and Ben Revere added solo shots for visiting Los Angeles as AL MVP Mike Trout missed his fourth straight game because of a tight left hamstring.

Tigers 7, Diamondbacks 3: Justin Upton and James McCann homered, and Mikie Mahtook singled in two runs for visiting Detroit.

Dodgers 4, Pirates 3: Pinch-hitter Austin Barnes doubled home the winning run with one out in the 10th against Daniel Hudson (0-2) as host Los Angeles won its fourth straight.