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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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USS Fitzgerald officer pleads guilty

BY DIANNA CAHN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The officer of the deck for the USS Fitzgerald when it collided with a commercial vessel pleaded guilty Tuesday to dereliction of duty in the collision that killed seven sailors last year.

Lt. j.g. Sarah Coppock entered the plea during her court-martial at the Washington Navy Yard. Sentencing details were unavailable.

As officer of the deck, Coppock was responsible for ensuring the safe navigation of the USS Fitzgerald when it struck a civilian commercial vessel on June 17, 2017 in heavily trafficked waters off the Japanese coast.

The Fitzgerald's commanding officer, Cmdr. Bryce Benson, was not on deck at the time

of the collision. Coppock was charged for failing to "communicate and coordinate with the Combat Information Center, report ship specified contacts to the commanding officer, operate safely in a high density traffic condition and alert crew of imminent collision," according to the charge sheet.

Coppock was charged along with two unnamed junior officers onboard the Fitzgerald. Those sailors — a tactical action officer and a surface warfare coordinator whose jobs focused on overseeing the gathering and communicating of vital information to the bridge — each face three charges: dereliction in the performance of duties through neglect resulting in death, negligent hazarding of a vessel and negligent homicide. They face a joint

Article 32 hearing Wednesday to see whether they will face court-martial.

The tactical information officer is accused of failing in her job to "communicate with the bridge vital contact information and safe speed and maneuvering recommendations, enforce watch-standing principles in the combat information center and support the officer of the deck."

The surface warfare officer is charged with "effectively failing in his duties to supervise those on watch in the USS Fitzgerald Combat Information Center," which monitors the operations of the ships and maintains contact with the bridge and the tactical action officer.

The two lieutenants are charged with negligent homicide for causing the deaths of the seven seaman in their

flooded berthing section by "negligently failing to comply with the USS Fitzgerald commanding officer's standing orders" and to effectively ensure the sailors under their oversight carried out their jobs — watch-standing for the tactical information officer.

The Fitzgerald was navigating out to sea near Yokosuka Port in Japan when it failed to recognize the dangers of three ships heading across its path. They were close enough to present risk of collision, according to a U.S. Navy report.

Two of the ships maneuvered to avoid a collision — one coming particularly close. The report said Coppock was responsible to alert the commanding officer after that close call. The third, called the ACX Crystal, did not.

SEAL to get Medal of Honor for rescue try

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

A retired Navy SEAL who led a daring rescue attempt for a stranded teammate up an Afghanistan mountain in 2002 will be awarded the Medal of Honor on May 24, the White House announced Monday.

Retired Master Chief Special Warfare Operator Britt Slabinski, who was then a senior chief, "repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire as he engaged in a pitched, close-quarters firefight against the tenacious and more heavily armed enemy forces," the announcement said.

Slabinski was a team leader assigned to a joint task force, and in the predawn hours of March 4, 2002, he led a reconnaissance team to an observation area atop a 10,000-foot mountain.

From that snow-covered vantage point, the team was to help support a major coalition offensive against al-Qaida forces in the valley below, the announcement said. But enemy fighters, hidden in the tree lines and rocks, opened fire with rocket-propelled grenades and rifles as the team arrived by helicopter.

Petty Officer 1st Class Neil Roberts fell out of the helicopter as it hovered about 10 feet above the ground, according to a 2016 New York Times account of the firefight. The aircraft was so badly shot up that it had to return to the valley.

From there, Slabinski "boldly rallied his remaining team and organized supporting assets for a daring assault back to the mountain peak in an attempt to rescue their stranded team-

mate," the announcement said.

Unknown to the team, Roberts had already been killed by the enemy, The New York Times said.

Slabinski led his six-man joint team up a snow-covered hill in a frontal assault against two enemy bunkers under intense fire coming from three directions. Radioman John Chapman, an Air Force technical sergeant, was wounded during that assault and later died.

The team was too close to the enemy for air support to be used, and "after several teammates became casualties, the situation became untenable," the announcement said.

Slabinski maneuvered the team to a defensible position, directed airstrikes in very close proximity to the team and re-

quested reinforcements.

Three Army Rangers, an Army helicopter crewman and an Air Force airman were also killed after arriving as reinforcements, The New York Times said.

Slabinski enlisted in the Navy in 1988 and became a SEAL in 1990, according to the White House. He completed nine overseas deployments and 15 combat deployments in support of the global war on terrorism, including operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom.

Slabinski will be the 15th servicemember to receive the Medal of Honor for actions in Afghanistan since the U.S. invaded the country in the wake of the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center towers and the Pentagon.

US withdrawing from Iran nuke accord

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump announced Tuesday the U.S. will pull out of the landmark nuclear accord with Iran, dealing a profound blow to U.S. allies and potentially deepening the president's isolation on the world stage.

"The United States does not make empty threats," he said in a televised address.

Trump's decision means Iran's government must now decide whether to follow the U.S. and withdraw or try to salvage what's left of the deal. Iran has offered conflicting statements about what it may

do — and the answer may depend on exactly how Trump exits the agreement.

Trump said he would move to reimpose all sanctions on Iran that had been lifted under the 2015 deal, not just the ones facing an immediate deadline. This had become known as the "nuclear option" because of the near-certainty that such a move would scuttle the deal.

Supporters of fixing the agreement had hoped Trump would choose a piecemeal approach that could leave more room for him to reverse himself and stay in the deal if he could secure the additional restrictions that European nations

tried unsuccessfully to negotiate with him. Still, the administration planned to allow a grace period of at least three months and possibly up to six months so that businesses and governments can wind down operations that will violate the reimposed U.S. sanctions.

A slower withdrawal process could allow more room for Trump to reverse course later. Indeed, as administration officials briefed congressional leaders about Trump's plans Tuesday, they emphasized that just as with a major Asia trade deal and the Paris climate pact that Trump has abandoned, he remains open to renegotiating a

better deal, one person briefed on the talks said.

The agreement, struck in 2015 by the United States, other world powers and Iran, lifted most U.S. and international sanctions against the country. In return, Iran agreed to restrictions on its nuclear program making it impossible to produce a bomb, along with rigorous inspections.

In a burst of last-minute diplomacy, the deal's European members gave in to many of Trump's demands, according to officials, diplomats and others briefed on the negotiations. Yet they still left convinced he was likely to reimpose sanctions.

Military aviation safety panel urged

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., introduced legislation Monday to create an independent National Commission on Military Aviation Safety in response to a series of deadly aircraft crashes in the last year.

The commission would review military aviation mishaps from 2013 and 2018, compare trends with historical data, assess causes fueling the crashes and make recommendations on safety, training, maintenance, personnel and other policies related to military aviation safety, Smith's office said.

Smith, the ranking Democrat on the House Armed Services Committee, is proposing the legislation be added as an amendment to the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, or NDAA, which directs policy and spending plans for the Defense Department. Discussions of the House Armed Services Committee's NDAA are underway, with a hearing

slated Wednesday for the panel to push out its proposal for the defense policy plan.

On Friday, Rep. Mac Thornberry, R-Texas, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, proposed \$639.1 billion in a military base budget, in addition to another \$69 billion for a war chest called the Overseas Contingency Fund. It followed plans unveiled a week earlier by several House panels that laid out the first wave of spending proposals and policies for the next NDAA.

In recent weeks, the House Armed Services Committee, its subpanels and its Senate counterparts have held dozens of hearings to discuss the 2019 priorities for each of the branches as well as a wide-ranging list of challenges facing the military.

Smith's effort comes on the heels of a crash last week of an Air Force C-130 Hercules used by the Puerto Rico Air National Guard. The cargo plane crashed in Savannah, Ga., killing all nine Guard members on board.

It was the latest in a long string of aircraft mishaps.

Local reports: US delayed Japanese plan to verify US aircraft safety on Okinawa

BY MATTHEW M. BURKE
Stars and Stripes

CAMP FOSTER, Okinawa — A plan to send Japanese inspectors to a Marine base on Okinawa in response to a spate of aircraft incidents has been put on ice, according to local media reports.

The idea was first floated on Jan. 30 by Japanese Defense Minister Itsunori Onodera after emergency landings on the island that month by Marine Corps helicopters. The plan for what U.S. military officials called an "information exchange" was confirmed the next day by U.S. Forces Japan and scheduled to take place on Feb. 1.

Japan Ground Self-Defense Force aircraft maintenance specialists were to visit Marine Corps Air Station Futenma and be briefed about the AH-1Z Viper and UH-1Y Venom helicopters that made the landings. After verifying that any issues had been rectified, they would report back to Onodera's of-

fice, which would then decide if the Marines' explanations made sense from a technical standpoint.

The U.S. side asked to postpone the exchange on the day it was to take place "because they needed more time for preparation," Kyodo News reported, citing an unnamed senior Japanese Defense Ministry official.

"The source said the U.S. military sees the deployment as a form of inspection, as was reported in Japanese media, and is opposed to a probe of this nature because the helicopters made only precautionary landings to prevent accidents," the Kyodo report said.

Officials with Japan's Ministry of Defense confirmed the visit had not yet taken place when they were reached this week by Stars and Stripes. They declined to comment on what was holding it up as talks continue.

Officials from U.S. Forces Japan did not immediately reply to requests for comment.

Russian hackers attacked GIs' wives as 'ISIS'

Associated Press

PARIS — Army wife Angela Ricketts was soaking in a bubble bath in her Colorado home, leafing through a memoir, when a message appeared on her iPhone from hackers threatening to slaughter her family.

"Dear Angela!" the Facebook message read. "Bloody Valentine's Day!"

"We know everything about you, your husband and your children," the message continued, claiming that the hackers operating under the flag of Islamic State militants had penetrated her computer and her phone. "We're much closer than you can even imagine."

Ricketts was one of five military wives who received death threats from the self-styled CyberCaliphate on the morning of Feb. 10, 2015. The warnings led to days of anguished media coverage of ISIS militants' online reach. Except it wasn't ISIS.

The Associated Press has found evidence that the women were targeted not by jihadists but by the same Russian hacking group that intervened in the American election and exposed the emails of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign chairman, John Podesta.

The brazen false flag is a case study in the difficulty of assigning blame in a world where hackers routinely borrow one another's identities to throw investigators off track. The operation's attempt to hype the threat of radical Islam also presaged the inflammatory messages pushed by internet trolls during the U.S. presidential race.

Links between CyberCaliphate and the Russian hackers — typically nicknamed Fancy Bear or APT28 — have been documented previously. On both sides of the Atlantic, the consensus is that the two groups are closely related.

But that consensus never filtered through to the women involved, many of whom were convinced they had been targeted by ISIS sympathizers right up until the AP contacted them.

"Never in a million years did I think that it was the Russians," said Ricketts, an author and ad-

vocate for veterans and military families. She called the revelation "mind-blowing."

"It feels so hilarious and insidious at the same time," she said.

As Ricketts scrambled out of the tub to show the threat to her husband, nearly identical messages reached Lori Volkman, a deputy prosecutor based in Oregon who had won fame as a blogger after her husband deployed to the Middle East; Ashley Broadway-Mack, based in the Washington area and head of an association for gay and lesbian military family members; and Amy Bushatz, an Alaska-based journalist who covers spouse and family issues for Military.com.

Public threats

Liz Snell, the wife of a U.S. Marine, was at her husband's retirement ceremony in California when her phone rang. The Twitter account of her charity, Military Spouses of Strength, had been hacked. It was broadcasting public threats not only to herself and the other spouses but also to their families and then-first lady Michelle Obama.

Snell flew home to Michigan from the ceremony, took her children and checked into a Comfort Inn for two nights.

"Anytime somebody threatens your family, Mama Bear comes out," she said.

The women determined they had all received the same threats. They were also all quoted in a CNN piece about the hacking of a military Twitter feed by CyberCaliphate only a few weeks earlier. In it, they had struck a defiant tone and suspected that CyberCaliphate decided to single them out for retaliation.

"Fear is exactly what — at the time — we perceived ISIS wanted from military families," said Volkman.

Volkman was quoted in half a dozen media outlets; Bushatz wrote an article describing what happened; Ricketts, interviewed as part of a Fox News segment devoted to the menace of radical Islam, told TV host Greta Van Susteren that the nature of the

threat was changing.

"Military families are prepared to deal with violence that's directed toward our soldiers," she said. "But having it directed toward us is just complete new ground."

A few weeks after the spouses were threatened, on April 9, 2015, the signal of French broadcaster TV5 Monde went dead. The station's network of routers and switches had been knocked out and its internal messaging system disabled. Pasted across the station's website and Facebook page was the keffiyeh-clad logo of CyberCaliphate.

The cyberattack shocked France, coming on the heels of jihadi massacres at the satirical magazine Charlie Hebdo and a kosher supermarket that left 17 dead. French leaders decried what they saw as another blow to the country's media. Interior Minister Bernard Cazeneuve said evidence suggested the broadcaster was the victim of an act of terrorism.

But Guillaume Poupard, the chief of France's cybersecurity agency, pointedly declined to endorse the minister's comments when quizzed about them the day after the hack.

"We should be very prudent about the origin of the attack," he told French radio. "We might be surprised."

Government experts poring over the station's stricken servers eventually vindicated Poupard's caution, finding evidence they said pointed not to the Middle East but to Moscow.

Speaking to the AP last year, Poupard said the attack "resembles a lot what we call collectively APT28."

Russian officials in Washington and in Moscow did not respond to questions seeking comment. The Kremlin has repeatedly denied masterminding hacks against Western targets.

Russian involvement

Proof that the military wives were targeted by Russian hackers is laid out in a digital hit list that was provided to the AP by the cybersecurity company Secureworks last year. The AP has previously used the list of

4,700 gmail addresses to outline the group's espionage campaign against journalists, defense contractors and U.S. officials. More recent AP research has found that Fancy Bear, which Secureworks dubs "Iron Twilight," was actively trying to break into the military wives' mailboxes around the time that CyberCaliphate struck.

Lee Foster, a manager with cybersecurity company FireEye, said the repeated overlap between Russian hackers and CyberCaliphate made it all but certain that the groups were linked.

CyberCaliphate faded from view after the TV5 Monde hack, but the over-the-top threats issued by the gang of make-believe militants found an echo in the anti-Muslim sentiment whipped up by a St. Petersburg troll farm in Russia — an organization whose operations were laid bare by a U.S. special prosecutor's indictment earlier this year.

The trolls — Russian employees paid to seed American social media with disinformation — often hyped the threat of ISIS militants to the United States. A few months before CyberCaliphate first won attention by hijacking various media organizations' Twitter accounts, for example, the trolls were spreading false rumors about an ISIS attack in Louisiana and a counterfeit video appearing to show an American soldier firing into a Quran.

The AP has found no link between CyberCaliphate and the St. Petersburg trolls, but their aims appeared to be the same: keep tension at a boil and radical Islam in the headlines. By that measure, CyberCaliphate's targeting of media outlets like TV5 Monde and the military spouses succeeded handily.

Ricketts, the author, said that by planting threats with some of the most vocal members of the military community, CyberCaliphate guaranteed maximum press coverage. "Not only did we play right into their hands by freaking out but the media played right into it," she said. "We reacted in a way that was probably exactly what they were hoping for."

USAF slashes computer-based required training

BY CHAD GARLAND
Stars and Stripes

The Air Force is eliminating mandatory computer-based training on all but three courses and giving commanders wide discretion in how they conduct most ancillary training, the service's top leaders said in a new memo.

Under the latest guidance, the remaining courses airmen are required to take via computer modules are the Pentagon's Information Assurance Training-Cyber Awareness Challenge, to be performed annually, and several courses related to the Defense Travel System, or DTS. First-time travelers must complete the two-part DTS basic course and personnel must complete a DTS policy module once every three years.

"Effective immediately, commanders and supervisors are empowered to conduct nearly all mandatory ancillary training as they see fit," said the memo signed last month by Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, Chief of Staff Gen. David Goldfein and Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force Kaleth O. Wright.

The move follows Pentagon efforts to streamline required training at the direction of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who has put a focus on renewing the combat effectiveness of the force and reducing obligations unrelated to that goal.

The latest changes are being billed as the second phase of an effort that began in October 2016 aimed at cutting excessive or redundant training unrelated to airmen's primary jobs. After a review of 42 courses, the earlier phase sought to slash training time by eliminating 15 stand-alone courses and streamlining 16 others. Nine of the 10 courses airmen identified as most burdensome were cut entirely or in large part.

"Computer-based training will no longer be the primary tool for providing this information unless otherwise directed by law, Department of Defense policy, or a commander entrusted with the mission," the memo said.

The guidance is the second big change in training requirements for the Air Force in less than a month. A little over two weeks ago, Wright announced that enlisted airmen would no longer be required to complete distance training, known as Course 14 and 15, before attending noncommissioned officer and senior NCO academy resident courses.

That change prompted airmen to post memes on social media expressing their joy and some to praise Wright's leadership.

The Air Force leaders said the latest changes are just the first of many.

"Today, we're taking the next steps," the memo said. "There will be more steps to come."

In vets, even mild case of TBI linked to dementia risk

Los Angeles Times

Mild traumatic brain injury might sound like an oxymoron, along the lines of "jumbo shrimp" or "random order." But a new study shows that mild TBIs can have serious consequences for military veterans by raising their risk of dementia.

Researchers who examined the medical records of more than 350,000 Americans who served during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan found that men and women who experienced at least one mild TBI were more than twice as likely as their uninjured peers to develop dementia after they retired from the military.

The finding was published Monday in the journal *JAMA Neurology*.

Experts already knew that moderate and severe traumatic brain injuries were linked with an increased risk of dementia and Alzheimer's disease, as well as an earlier onset of these conditions. Whether mild TBIs pose risks as well has been unclear.

The question is important because 15 to 20 percent of veterans who participated in Operation Enduring Freedom and Operation Iraqi Freedom had at least one mild TBI, typically through exposure to a shock wave that follows an explosion. Suffering multiple mild TBIs was not uncommon.

A team led by Deborah Barnes, a researcher with the San Francisco Veterans Affairs Health Care System and the University of California at San Francisco, hoped to gain some insight by casting a very wide net.

The team members scoured two large government databases to identify every patient treated by the Veterans Health Administration who was diagnosed with any kind of TBI during a 13-year period between 2001 and 2014. They found 178,779 such patients.

For 10 percent of those veterans, the most severe instance of traumatic brain injury was a mild TBI without any loss of consciousness. Another 13 percent had a mild TBI that did cause them to lose consciousness for no more than 30 minutes.

In addition, nearly 31 percent of the veterans were diagnosed with mild TBI but their medical records did not say whether they had lost consciousness as a result.

The remaining 46 percent of veterans had a TBI that was classified as moderate or severe.

All of these patients were matched with another veteran who was treated by the VHA but did not have a TBI. These 178,779 patients served as controls.

In the control group, 2.6 percent of veterans went on to be diagnosed with dementia. So were 6.1 percent of the veterans with a history of TBI.

The more serious a veteran's brain injury, the greater the risk that he or she would subsequently develop dementia.

After accounting for factors like age, medical history and psychiatric conditions that could affect the results, the researchers found that those who experienced a mild TBI without losing consciousness were 2.36 times more likely to develop dementia during the study period than those in the control group.

The risk of dementia was 2.51 times greater for veterans with mild TBI who did lose consciousness for a short period of time, and it was 3.19 times greater for veterans with mild TBI whose records didn't indicate whether they had lost consciousness.

Barnes and her team also calculated that veterans with moderate or severe TBI were nearly four times more likely than their uninjured peers to develop dementia during the study period. That was consistent with previous studies, they wrote.

On average, the time between entering the study and being diagnosed with dementia was 3.6 years for those who had suffered a TBI, compared with 4.8 years for those who hadn't.

The researchers cautioned that their findings might not apply to the public at large, since their study was based solely on military veterans who had served since 2001. Even so, they wrote, the results strengthen the case that mild TBIs can have serious consequences.

2 Marines shot during live-fire training in Calif.

SAN DIEGO — The U.S. Marine Corps said two Marines were shot during a live-fire training exercise at a Southern California base involving hundreds of troops.

The military said both were airlifted Sunday from the Marine Corps Air Ground Combat Center at the Twentynine Palms base to a California hospital.

Second Lt. Samuel Banks said one Marine was released and the other remains hospitalized in serious condition. He said the Marines are stationed at Twentynine Palms. The Marine Corps said in a press release that officials are investigating the incident.

From The Associated Press

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Raccoon family drops in through ceiling

MI SHERIDAN TOWNSHIP — A family of raccoons created a chaotic scene when they fell through a ceiling and into the living room of a Michigan home.

The Jackson Citizen Patriot reported a homeowner in Sheridan Township sought help Friday after the raccoons fell from an attic.

Police and firefighters easily picked up the four baby raccoons, but the mother eluded capture. She bit a responder's gloves before hiding in a closet.

Police said in a statement that a dog catcher pole was used to collar the raccoon. The raccoons were released into the wild.

Girl, 3, is found safe following carjacking

TX SAN ANTONIO — Authorities said a 3-year-old girl who was inside her family's vehicle when it was stolen near San Antonio has been found safe.

Bexar County sheriff's officials said the child's mother was unloading groceries in the driveway of their home when the car was stolen around 3 a.m. Monday.

The girl was inside the vehicle. Authorities said the girl was found about 20 minutes later in front of a house about 4 miles away.

Emergency medical workers were dispatched to the home. Investigators said they determined the child hadn't been physically injured. Authorities are still looking for the stolen vehicle and the suspect.

School apologizes for pushy usher

FL GAINESVILLE — The University of Florida

is apologizing to students who complained that an usher was aggressively pushing and grabbing them as they entered the stage during a graduation ceremony.

University of Florida President W. Kent Fuchs said on Twitter on Sunday the usher was "inappropriately aggressive in rushing students across the stage."

The Gainesville Sun reported that Oliver Telusma, 21, said the usher reached under his arms, picked him up and turned him around when he started to dance onto the stage. Telusma said he and other black students wanted to "stroll" across the stage, which is a tradition among historically black fraternities and sororities, and that the usher seemed to be targeting them.

Fuchs said the school has changed its practice for ushering graduating students.

Officials work on plan to fund pay phone

WA VERLOT — A Washington community with little to no cellphone service is fighting to keep a nearby pay phone that had been removed briefly last year.

The Daily Herald reported Snohomish County and the U.S. Forest Service are working on a plan to fund the phone in the ranger station in Verlot. The phone allows residents and visitors to make emergency calls.

Forest Service Verlot corridor manager Erica Keene said the new funding plan should be final in the coming months. The Forest Service will purchase the phone, and the county will pay for monthly service.

Lobster fishing ban to save whales extended

MA MARSHFIELD — Massachusetts officials have extended a ban on

lobster fishing along Cape Cod Bay because critically endangered right whales are feeding in the area.

The Patriot Ledger reported that the state Division of Marine Fisheries announced lobstermen won't be able to set their traps until May 16, two weeks later than usual. The state says surveys have found up to 100 right whales are still in western Cape Cod Bay.

Lobstermen have faced a three-month ban on setting their traps since 2015 as part of an effort to lower the amount of whales caught in fishing gear.

Woman cited over blown-up urine sample

CO DENVER — A Denver woman was cited by police after a container of what appeared to be urine blew up as she was heating it in a microwave at a 7-Eleven.

Police said the incident occurred in the convenience store chain's Aurora location last week when the clerk heard a loud bang and saw Angelique Sanchez, 26, take a white, plastic bottle out of the microwave.

A police report says that when confronted by the clerk, Sanchez wiped a yellow liquid that smelled like urine onto the floor and walked out.

Police located Sanchez at a nearby clinic, where she had planned to take a urinalysis test for a potential employer. She was issued a summons for damaged property.

Drug dogs used more with black drivers

OH COLUMBUS — Records show the Ohio State Highway Patrol uses drug-sniffing dogs on stops involving black drivers at a higher rate than stops involving whites.

Patrol data show blacks made up 28 percent of the nearly

17,000 stops in which dogs were used from 2013 to 2017, although blacks make up about 13 percent of the population.

The patrol said dog usage is based not on race but on "criminal indicators" such as the origin and destination of trips, visible contents in cars and statements by occupants.

Cops: Man uses gun to return paintball fire

IL AURORA — A suburban Chicago man shot at with a paintball gun faces charges on suspicion of shooting back with a real gun.

An Aurora police statement says someone shot a paintball from a car at Aurora resident Malcom Wheeler, 25, as he walked his dog on May 2. The statement says he ran to grab a gun and tracked the car he believed was involved.

Police said Wheeler shot once at the car, grazing the 18-year-old driver's head. Another man in the car drove him to a hospital, where he was treated for a non-life-threatening injury.

Wheeler was charged with aggravated battery with a firearm and aggravated discharge of a firearm.

Zoo visitors will get to pet sharks, stingrays

MO KANSAS CITY — Visitors to the Kansas City Zoo will get a chance to pet sharks and stingrays starting later this month.

The Kansas City Star reported the new \$3.5 million Stingray Bay officially opens May 18.

It features 20 cownose rays, eight southern stingrays and 12 white-spotted bamboo sharks.

Eventually, the public will be able to feed them chunks of fish.

From wire reports

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Capitals top Pens to reach East finals

Associated Press

PITTSBURGH — The Washington Capitals kept trying to downplay their own forgettable playoff history, the one pockmarked with disappointment and despair. Still, they couldn't run from it.

No one bore the weight more than Alex Ovechkin. All the goals in the world — and the star forward is at over 600 and counting now — couldn't take the sting away from the endless cycle of postseason runs that ended far too soon.

"It's so hard to move forward some time," Washington coach Barry Trotz said. "It's always thrown in your face everywhere you turn. I know it's thrown in Ovi's face everywhere he turns and he's a great player in this league."

One who is finally headed to a conference final, with a team few expected to make it this far. The Capitals advanced to the Eastern Conference finals for only the third time since the franchise's inception in 1974 with a 2-1 overtime victory in Game 6 against Pittsburgh on Monday night, a victory secured by Evgeny Kuznetsov's breakaway 5:27 into the extra period.

"It feels like something is

over," Kuznetsov said. "It's pretty hard to speak."

Maybe because — for now anyway — Washington's long-held role as playoff fodder for the Penguins is over. The Capitals beat Pittsburgh in the playoffs for only the second time in 11 tries by playing a disciplined style dictated by Trotz, one that focuses on responsibility at both ends of the ice.

The game-winning sequence began with Kuznetsov poking the puck away from Penguins star Sidney Crosby as Crosby tried to enter the Washington zone. The puck made its way to Ovechkin and he threaded a pass to a sprinting Kuznetsov, who beat Matt Murray to spark a celebration two decades in the making.

"I don't want to lie, it tastes a little bit better (beating the Penguins)," Kuznetsov said. "You know, I never focus on the history. I only focus game by game. It feels very nice. You keep playing hockey, it's unbelievable."

Washington went 1-1-1 against the Lightning in three regular season meetings, the last a 4-2 loss at home on Feb. 20. That was two long months ago, and the team that celebrated in an equal parts joyous and relieved dressing room on

Monday night doesn't look like the one that was still searching for its legs in mid-winter.

Injuries forced the Capitals to put together a patchwork lineup that included a handful of rookies, such as Nate Walker, who became the first Australian to record a point in the playoffs when he set up Alex Chiasson's second-period goal.

"We did have our moment in the first period when we said 'Do we have five rookies playing tonight?'" Capitals owner Ted Leonsis said. "I thought our window had closed and we had an old team and we had five rookies. So our future remains bright and now we just have to focus on the third round."

Washington will do it with a resurgent Braden Holtby. Benched at the start of the playoffs in favor of Philipp Grubauer, Holtby heads to the conference finals playing some of the finest hockey of his career. He stopped 21 of 22 shots in Game 6 and is now 8-3 since Trotz put him back in the lineup.

"Obviously everyone knows the difficulties we had getting out of the second round," Holtby said. "But that doesn't make a difference in our main goal. Our main goal is still the Stanley Cup. The third round

isn't the Stanley cup. We have to refocus now. We can enjoy it and use that energy as kind of a recharge for the halfway point and push full force into the next round because it's going to be a hard test."

One the Capitals believe they're finally ready to pass. The franchise has only reached the Cup once, getting swept by Detroit in 1998, long before Ovechkin, Holtby and Leonsis came on board. This is their best chance at the club, one they're intent on not squandering.

"We set goals every year," Leonsis said. "Make the playoffs. First round. Second round. Third round and win a championship. So we're trying to check them off. It's almost embarrassing that it's taken this long for us to get past it."

Now that they have — at last, becoming the first professional team in the nation's capital to reach a conference final since the '98 Capitals did it — they're eager to shed the past. It's over and done. The future — and the Lightning — await.

"We beat the Pittsburgh Penguins today and they're a hell of a hockey team and we're only halfway," Trotz said. "We haven't done anything yet."

Forsberg, Rinne help Preds force Game 7

Associated Press

WINNIPEG, Manitoba — Filip Forsberg, Pekka Rinne and the Nashville Predators showed they aren't ready for their season to end yet.

Forsberg had two goals and an assist, Rinne stopped 34 shots for his second shutout of the playoffs, and the Predators beat the Winnipeg Jets 4-0 on Monday to force a decisive Game 7 in their Western Conference semifinal series.

"Desperation," Rinne said after his fifth career playoff shutout. "It just shows that we have a really tight group."

Viktor Arvidsson also scored twice, including a late empty-netter, and added an assist for the Predators. Roman Josi and Ryan Johansen each had two assists.

After the Jets' top line combined for eight points in a 6-2 victory in Game 5 in Nashville to take a 3-2 series lead, the Preda-

tors No. 1 trio of Forsberg, Arvidsson and Johansen did the same when it mattered most.

"It's the most fun," Forsberg said. "You can never have more fun than playing these elimination games. ... Just try to enjoy it as much as possible."

Connor Hellebuyck stopped 25 shots for the Jets.

Game 7 in this series in which neither team has won consecutive games is Thursday at Nashville, Tenn., with the winner advancing to face the expansion Vegas Golden Knights in the Western Conference final. Each team has also won twice on the road.

"It's been back and forth, up and down," Winnipeg head coach Paul Maurice said. "It's probably right that it's going seven."

The Jets finished 0-for-4 on the power play, including three chances in the first period.

"The power play is probably just a micro-

cosm of the way we played," Winnipeg center Paul Stastny said. "We probably weren't moving as well or as sharp as we wanted."

With the Predators up 1-0 after one period, Forsberg doubled the lead at 8:44 of the second on a great solo rush for his sixth of the postseason. After breaking his stick in the defensive zone blocking a shot, the Swedish forward raced to the bench to get a new one as the puck almost simultaneously arrived at his feet. Forsberg stayed onside, fought off Jets defenseman Ben Chiarot and beat Hellebuyck short-side before crashing into the net.

Winnipeg had made an earlier push coming out of the first intermission, with Paul Stastny's shot just wide being the best chance after Mathieu Perreault's dump in hit the linesman and caromed into the slot. Stastny also missed from a tight angle off the boards on the follow up on Rinne.

Cavs sweep Raptors, await East finals foe

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Their doubters are dropping off as quickly as the competition.

Only one team has advanced to the conference finals in these NBA playoffs, and it's the same squad that looked vulnerable during a chaotic regular season, beatable in the postseason and was one loss from a possible franchise collapse.

The ending's been postponed. The Cleveland Cavaliers aren't nearly finished.

On Monday night, the Cavs completed their second straight four-game sweep of the Toronto Raptors, the East's top team and the one that was supposedly built to dethrone them, with a 128-93 win in Game 4 that has perhaps changed Cleveland's outlook.

LeBron James, whose future hangs over this city like a looming thunderstorm, scored 29 points with 11 assists and eight rebounds on 12-for-19 shooting — an ordinary performance by his standards — as the Cavs

won their 10th straight over the Raptors with one of their most complete games in months.

After all the injuries, the failed Isaiah Thomas experiment, the roster overhaul at the trading deadline and other distractions, the Cavs, who can get some rest while waiting for the Philadelphia-Boston winner, are peaking at the right time.

Their path to the East finals wasn't straight. But they arrived.

"We've had four or five seasons wrapped in one, we know what the narrative has been about our team," said James, who averaged 34 points, 8.3 rebounds and 11.3 assists in the series. "But I can only speak in the moment. To be able to put ourselves in position where we can represent the Eastern Conference in the Finals, that's all you can ask for. So we're excited about being part of the Eastern Conference finals once again and having the opportunity to compete for a championship."

"That is what our goal is."

James has been reluctant to

discuss the Cavs' chances to win a title or get back to the Finals for the fourth straight year, but his confidence has grown with each victory.

Kevin Love, who struggled in a seven-game scrap with Indiana in the first round, had another solid game with 23 points. Kyle Korver added 16, J.R. Smith scored 15 on 6-for-6 shooting and point guard George Hill, who was sidelined for three games in the Pacers series, added 12.

The Cavs were balanced and were finally able to take some of the pressure off James, who had seemingly been abandoned by his teammates through much of the postseason.

In fact, things had gotten so bad that "Saturday Night Live" did a skit last weekend that went viral on social media called "The Other Cavaliers," a parody that poked fun at Cleveland's supporting cast.

James, though, said his faith never wavered.

"I believe in my teammates so as everyone was burying my

teammates alive throughout that first-round series, I just continued to tell them, 'Listen, we can't win without each and every one doing their jobs and being as great as they can be,'" James said. "I continued to preach that so it's impossible for me to lose confidence in our ballclub no matter what the stakes are or where we're down because if I do that — then where are we going to go from a team aspect?"

After winning 59 games in the regular season, the Raptors had the East's top seed and figured that this was their year. James had other plans.

"Everyone had counted Cleveland out," said coach Dwane Casey, whose job could be in jeopardy. "They struggled a little bit. They had the big trade and all that. Everyone thought they were vulnerable but as long as they have him, they have a chance and that's what we were looking at. But 10 days ago we had all the confidence in the world."

76ers hold off Celtics, avert elimination

Associated Press

PHILADELPHIA — The chants for "TJ! TJ!" grew louder each time T.J. McConnell darted through the lane for an easy basket or buried a three to build an insurmountable lead for the 76ers. He wore a sheepish look as teammates rubbed his head on the bench in appreciation, the big moment due an undrafted guard who plugged a role in the early Process days and morphed into a surprise postseason savior.

McConnell turned an eye-popping start into the save of the season and Dario Saric scored 25 points to help Philadelphia stave off elimination in a 103-92 win over the Boston Celtics in Game 4 on Monday night.

"If I saw a lane, I took it. If I had an open shot, I would try and take it," McConnell said.

Easy enough.

Yet the Sixers still face daunt-

ing odds headed into Game 5 and trailing 3-1 in the Eastern Conference semifinals: No NBA team has ever won a series down 3-0.

McConnell had a career-high 19 points, seven rebounds and five assists in only his second start of the season and meshed well in the backcourt with Ben Simmons. The crowd chanted his initials each time he touched the ball in the fourth and he proved why he has been so valuable even as bigger stars have sliced his playing time.

He was just what coach Brett Brown needed in a must-win game.

"I can tell you the Philadelphia 76ers spirit is just fine," Brown said.

With NBA teams down 3-0 having lost all 129 series, the Sixers may need more than spirit to pull off this stunner.

Joel Embiid had 15 points and 13 rebounds and Simmons

had 19 points and 13 boards.

Jayson Tatum led the Celtics with 20 points and Marcus Morris had 17.

The Sixers spent the second half in control in what could be their last home game of the season.

Embiid was still in the mix in his mask, stirring it up with any Celtic within his wingspan. He chirped at Marcus Morris in the third and the Celtics forward flashed a "3-0" with his hands. McConnell buried a three for a 14-point lead that would soon make that combination obsolete.

The "TJ!" chants soon echoed throughout the Wells Fargo Center.

"It was a pretty special moment," McConnell said of the chants. "I think we have the best fans in the NBA. They've been here through the dark times and they've certainly been here on our rise."

So has McConnell.

Brown was desperate to spark the Sixers and benched slumping forward Robert Covington (0-for-14 combined in Games 1 and 3) for McConnell.

With a chance to shine, McConnell zipped inside for easy buckets, made the extra pass to keep the offense rolling and made the dive for loose balls.

The anticipation of elimination and a 6 p.m. EDT tip sharply cut into attendance and the game had more of an early-season feel until Embiid and Terry Rozier shook everyone up with pushing and shoving late in the first half. Embiid tried to strip the ball from Rozier after the whistle. Rozier tightened his grip and Embiid slapped at the ball again. The 6-foot-1 Rozier shoved the 7-2 Embiid in the chest with his right hand and the two quickly had to be separated.

Astros' Springer goes 6-for-6 with HR

Associated Press

OAKLAND, Calif. — George Springer came up short in three attempts at completing the cycle with a triple. The Astros' leadoff man settled for a spot in the team's record book instead.

Springer went 6-for-6 with a home run to match a Houston mark as the Astros routed the Oakland Athletics 16-2 on Monday night.

"I don't even know how to explain it," Springer said. "I'm happy to get six hits in a week, let alone six hits in a game. I'm pretty speechless, to be honest."

Last year's World Series MVP doubled and scored in the first inning, hit a three-run homer in the second and then singled and scored in the fourth. Needing a triple for the cycle, he reached on infield singles in the fifth and seventh before adding a fourth single up the middle in the ninth.

Springer's batting average jumped from .264 to .292. He became the second player in club history to go 6-for-6 and the first to do it in a nine-inning game. Hall of Famer Joe Morgan accomplished the feat in a 12-inning game against the Milwaukee Braves on July 8, 1965.

"It was a remarkable night," Astros manager A.J. Hinch said. "You don't see

that many at-bats and then on top of that, that many hits, in a lot of different ways, different parts of the ballpark. He's obviously seeing the ball really well."

Three-time batting champ Jose Altuve was in awe.

"Six hits, that's so crazy," Altuve said. "How do you get six hits? That was impressive."

Springer was given the ball from his sixth hit.

"I'll save it," he said. "I don't think I'll ever sniff (six hits) again. For me to get six, that means that the guys behind me were productive as well. It was a good night for the team."

Marwin Gonzalez also went deep and matched his career high of five RBIs. Derek Fisher hit his third home run and Max Stassi doubled twice and scored two runs for the Astros.

Houston set season highs for runs and hits (20) in its most lopsided win this season. The Astros beat the A's 11-0 on April 28.

Dallas Keuchel (2-5) yielded one run and five hits over eight innings. The Houston left-hander, who gave up three homers and six runs the last time he faced the A's on April 27, struck out four and walked two.

"I owed them a butt whipping so that

was nice," Keuchel said. "I've been attacking the inside part of the plate with the cutter, the two-seamer and the four-seamer. That's allowed me to put doubt in the hitters' minds."

Jonathan Lucroy had two hits and an RBI for Oakland.

The A's played without outfielder Stephen Piscotty, whose mother died late Sunday night, less than a year after being diagnosed with Lou Gehrig's disease.

Gretchen Piscotty was diagnosed with ALS in May 2017 when her son was with St. Louis. The Cardinals traded him to Oakland in December in part to allow Piscotty to be closer to his home in the East Bay suburb of Pleasanton during his mother's terminal illness.

Gonzalez hit a two-run homer in the fourth, when the Astros scored six runs.

Oakland lefty Brett Anderson (0-1) failed to make it out of the fourth in his first start at the Coliseum in an A's uniform since Sept. 22, 2013. Anderson allowed seven earned runs and 10 hits.

"I didn't have any pitches to finish them off," he said. "Nobody should feel comfortable enough in there to get six hits whether or not they're Tony Gwynn with Billy Hamilton's speed, regardless of who's out there."

MLB roundup

Cubs stop five-game slide with win over Marlins

Associated Press

CHICAGO — The Chicago Cubs broke out of their offensive slump in a big way.

Two powerful swings by Ian Happ played a key role.

Happ homered from both sides of the plate, and Chicago stopped a five-game slide by routing the Miami Marlins 14-2 on Monday night.

The Cubs collected 15 hits after scoring three or fewer runs in 10 of the previous 11 games. Kris Bryant and Javier Baez also connected, and Happ finished with five RBIs.

"It was nice to see Happy get going again," manager Joe Maddon said. "KB had a nice day [and] Javy continues to drive in runs."

Kyle Hendricks (3-2) also provided a lift by pitching eight innings of two-run ball. The

Cubs dropped their previous two on game-ending hits in St. Louis, taxing their bullpen.

The only downer for Chicago was an early exit for Baez, who departed in the sixth with right groin tightness. Maddon said Baez was lifted because of the lopsided score and he doesn't believe the injury is a concern.

Miami starter Jarlin Garcia (1-1), who entered with a major league-best 1.09 ERA, was rocked for seven runs and six hits in four innings. The 25-year-old left-hander allowed just two earned runs in 23 innings in his previous four starts.

Twins 6, Cardinals 0: Fernando Romero struck out nine in six innings in his second straight scoreless start to begin his major league career, leading visiting Minnesota to its season-high fourth straight

win.

The Twins have won 13 of their last 16 games against National League opponents dating to last year.

Mets 7, Reds 6: Jay Bruce hit a two-run homer against his former team, rounding the bases to a familiar "BRU-UUCE" chant, and Adrian Gonzalez connected twice in the Mets' victory.

Nationals 8, Padres 5: Matt Adams homered in consecutive innings, Trea Turner went deep in his first at-bat at Petco Park and Washington's Stephen Strasburg beat his hometown team again.

Adams hit a towering two-run drive to right off Tyson Ross in the sixth and a three-run shot to right-center in the seventh off Matt Strahm.

Phillies 11, Giants 0: Odubel Herrera homered twice

and drove in five runs, helping Zach Eflin and the host Phillies to the runaway win.

Carlos Santana and Cesar Hernandez also connected for Philadelphia, which had dropped six of eight. Santana drove in four runs, and Hernandez had two RBIs.

Rangers 7, Tigers 6: Jurickson Profar hit a tiebreaking RBI triple, Nomar Mazara homered again and the host Rangers beat the Tigers after a strange seventh inning.

Delino DeShields and Shin-Soo Choo both scored from first in the seventh. DeShields reached on a two-out error and then raced around the bases when Choo singled on a grounder that trickled off the outstretched glove of second baseman Dixon Machado. Profar followed with his big hit.