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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Trump welcomes home 3 freed by N. Korea

Associated Press

JOINT BASE ANDREWS, Md. — In a made-for-TV ceremony in the dead of night, President Donald Trump on Thursday welcomed home three Americans freed by North Korea and declared their release a sign of promise toward his goal of denuclearizing the Korean Peninsula.

With the former detainees by his side on a dark air base tarmac, Trump called it a “great honor” to welcome the men back to the U.S. but said “the true honor is going to be if we have a victory in getting rid of nuclear weapons.”

But while Trump said North Korea’s Kim Jong Un “was excellent to these three incredible people,” Vice President Mike Pence hinted in an ABC interview they had

endured harsh conditions.

Pence said Secretary of State Mike Pompeo told him that at a refueling stop in Anchorage, “one of the detainees asked to go outside the plane because he hadn’t seen daylight in a very long time.”

Pence, Pompeo, first lady Melania Trump and other top officials joined Trump in the highly scripted celebration in the wee hours of Thursday morning at Joint Base Andrews near Washington. The men — Kim Dong Chul, Kim Hak Song and Tony Kim — had been released Wednesday amid a warming of relations between the longtime adversaries.

Trump thanked the North Korean leader for releasing the Americans and said he believes Kim wants to reach an agree-

ment on denuclearization at their upcoming summit. “I really think he wants to do something,” the president said.

Pence, despite his words about conditions the three detainees endured, was careful in a round of morning TV appearances to strike a positive note. He said North Korea “has taken steps that indicate this may be an opportunity for a breakthrough” in relations with the U.S.

“In this moment the regime in North Korea has been dealing, as far as we can see, in good faith,” he told NBC News.

The men were taken to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, where they are to be evaluated and will receive medical treatment before being reunited with their families.

Trump, Kim to meet June 12 in Singapore

By KIM GAMEL

Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — President Donald Trump and North Korean leader Kim Jong Un will hold the first-ever U.S.-North Korean summit June 12 in Singapore, Trump said Thursday.

The announcement sets the stage for tough talks that will test recent diplomatic efforts at ending the crisis over the North’s nuclear weapons program.

The details were revealed hours after three freed American detainees arrived home following more than a year in North Korean custody, clearing the last major hurdle for the historic meeting.

“The highly anticipated meeting between Kim Jong Un and myself will take place in Singapore on June 12th,” Trump said in a tweet. “We will both try to make it a very special moment for World Peace!”

Trump agreed to meet with Kim in a surprise move after the reclusive leader expressed a willingness to discuss denuclearization.

But the lack of a date and a venue raised speculation that the two sides were facing disagreements over key issues.

The choice of Singapore was widely ex-

pected after Trump ruled out plans to meet in the truce village of the Demilitarized Zone that divides the Korean Peninsula.

Singapore, a prosperous island city-state of 5.6 million people, is considered a neutral site for both countries. It maintains diplomatic relations with the North and is believed to be close enough that Kim may feel comfortable flying there on his aging, Soviet-era plane.

Trump is hoping to build on the dramatic success of the April 27 summit between Kim and South Korean President Moon Jae-in, which was held in the DMZ.

The two leaders appeared to foster a warm relationship and emerged with an agreement to try to formally end their 1950-53 war and to achieve the “complete denuclearization” of the peninsula.

But the deal was lacking in specific measures, and experts warn the sides are likely to face sharp differences over the meaning of denuclearization.

The U.S. has demanded the verifiable dismantling of the North’s nuclear weapons program, while Kim has called for a phased approach.

The Kim family that has ruled North Korea since it was founded in 1948 has long sought a meeting with a sitting U.S. president, and many observers have ar-

gued that Trump’s agreement to hold the summit represented a victory in itself for Pyongyang.

Trump expressed optimism earlier Thursday after he greeted the three Korean-American men once held by North Korea with fanfare at Joint Base Andrews, Md.

He thanked Kim for allowing the detainees to return with Secretary of State Mike Pompeo after his visit to Pyongyang.

“We’re starting off on a new footing,” Trump said. “This is a wonderful thing that he released the folks early. That was a big thing, very important to me, and I really think we have a very good chance of doing something very meaningful.”

The North Korean leader also welcomed plans for the summit earlier Thursday in a report on the state-run Korean Central News Agency.

Kim said the summit would be an “excellent first step toward promotion of the positive situation development in the Korean Peninsula and building of a good future,” KCNA said in a report about Pompeo’s visit.

Diplomatic momentum has been building since the North Korean leader agreed to join the Winter Olympics earlier this year.

Fighter pilot faces sex assault charges

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

A Colorado-based Air Force fighter pilot is facing court-martial on sexual assault charges for incidents spanning from 2012 to 2014.

Col. Jason Costello, an F-22 Raptor pilot with North American Aerospace Defense Command and U.S. Northern Command in Colorado Springs, is charged with raping a sleeping woman while in Rhode Island in 2014, according to Air Force documents.

He's also charged with sexually groping women in several incidents in 2012 and 2014.

The identities of the women have been redacted from the charge sheet provided by the 21st Space Wing at Peterson Air Force Base, Colo.

Costello is also charged with hitting a person in the face in 2013 and "unlawfully" grabbing an individual's arms and wrists in April 2017. The charges were referred on March 29. A trial date is tentatively set for October.

Reports of sexual assault in the military increased in 2017 over the previous year, according to Pentagon data released last month, with reports in the Marine Corps up by 15 percent,

in the Navy and Air Force up by 9 percent and in the Army up by 8 percent.

Meanwhile, fewer service-members faced court-martial for sexual assault in 2017 as commanders more often opted for punishment outside the court system, Pentagon data showed.

Costello remains on active-duty status pending court-martial but has been removed from operational duties, according to an emailed statement from Michael Kucharek, a spokesman for NORAD and U.S. Northern Command.

Costello has been assigned

to the NORAD training and exercise directorate since July 2016 and "is currently working on projects as directed by his chain of command," Kucharek said.

Costello is a 1995 graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy and attended pilot training at Reese Air Force Base, Texas, according to an Air Force article posted online in 2012 when he was a lieutenant colonel in command of the 325th Training Support Squadron at Tyndall Air Force Base, Fla. He also served at Kadena Air Base, Japan; Fort Carson, Colo.; Langley Air Force Base, Va.; and at the Pentagon.

USS Truman group strikes Islamic State targets in Syria

By SCOTT WYLAND

Stars and Stripes

ABOARD USS HARRY S. TRUMAN — The most powerful carrier strike group to operate in the Middle East in years is pounding Islamic State in Syria, where it is still seen as a serious threat to the region.

The aircraft carrier USS Harry S. Truman has been launching around-the-clock sorties this week from its location in the eastern Mediterranean to bomb remaining ISIS militants, who are confined mostly to two small pockets of the Middle Euphrates River Valley, comprising about 2 percent of the territory in Syria and Iraq that the group once occupied.

Although ISIS has been severely depleted, the Navy has deployed one of the largest strike groups in the region since Desert Storm to deal with the remnants.

"This is the biggest one that's sailed from the East Coast for quite some time," Vice Adm.

Gene Black, carrier strike group commander, said Tuesday. "It's a pretty potent force with lots of capabilities the Navy can put to sea."

The strike group includes the destroyers USS Farragut, USS Forrest Sherman, USS Bulkeley and USS Arleigh Burke, along with the missile cruiser USS Normandy and several aviation and support squadrons. A German frigate is also part of the force, and the destroyers USS Jason Dunham and USS The Sullivans will join later.

The strike group, which began launching sorties on May 3, is operating in a politically tense region.

President Donald Trump on Tuesday withdrew the U.S. from a nuclear agreement with Iran, a longtime ally of Syria. Russia, which has a naval base in the Syrian port of Tartus, has condemned the U.S., France and Britain for launching a joint attack on suspected Syrian chemical weapon sites in April.

Chance puts sailor on ship for great-grandfather's sea burial

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

For one family, a burial-at-sea ceremony brought its Navy legacy full circle recently in the Mediterranean.

Gunner's Mate 3rd Class Robert Ashman spotted a familiar name last month when scrolling through a list of those to be buried at sea from his ship, the destroyer USS Winston S. Churchill.

"I saw the name 'James Mitchell,' and I thought it was a coincidence," he said, according to a Navy statement. "Then I saw his rate was the same as my great-grandfather — chief signalman — and shortly after my dad messaged me and confirmed they were really his ashes."

Ashman joined the Navy in February 2015, following in the footsteps of his father, grandfather and great-grandfather. When he deployed with the Churchill last month, he had not been told that his great-grandfather's remains would be aboard.

"The Navy became a tradition in my family when my father joined and became a third-generation Sailor," he said in the statement. "I knew I wanted to

continue that from pretty early on."

Ashman was asked to take part in the April 23 ceremony in the Mediterranean Sea, and he agreed — saying it felt like the right thing to do, the Navy said.

He stood on the flight deck with his great-grandfather's urn in his hand at the end of a long, red carpet lined with sailors in their dress blues. The Churchill's chaplain stood across from him and waited to receive the remains to commit them to sea.

The ship's bell struck twice before the master of ceremonies announced the words, "Chief Signalman James Mitchell, departing," the Navy statement said. As the boatswain's mate began the traditional pipe-whistle call, Ashman walked down the carpet with the urn as sailors saluted on both sides.

Ashman said having the rare opportunity to participate in his great-grandfather's sea burial was an honor he never expected.

"I loved my great-grandfather to the moon and back," he said. "It was a huge coincidence that I ended up going on deployment on the same ship that was carrying his remains, and in a way it felt like it was meant to be."

Lawmakers OK aviation safety panel

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The House Armed Services Committee on Wednesday approved a plan to create an independent National Commission on Military Aviation Safety in the wake of a series of deadly aircraft crashes in the past 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.

The plan's author, Rep. Adam Smith, D-Wash., said Wednesday during a House Armed Services Committee hearing that a series of factors could be contributing to the crashes, not just budget cuts.

"This is becoming a very large problem and it's costing the lives of the men and women serving us," said Smith, the ranking Democrat on the committee. "I don't think it's just the money. The money is certainly part of it. ... I want to figure out the entire picture, get every answer we can to make sure that we are creating the safest possible environment in our armed services."

The discussion was part of a marathon "markups" hearing to approve a first draft of the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, which directs policy and spending plans for the Defense Department. The hearing was slated to go late into Wednesday evening with about 400 amendments under consideration for the next NDAA, or H.R. 5515.

Smith said the Navy's reports on the deadly crashes of the USS Fitzgerald and the USS John S. McCain were reminders that Congress can do more to get to the bottom of such incidents.

"I don't think all of us are 100 percent satisfied with what the Navy came back with us on the accidents that happened with the ships," Smith told the committee. "I want to make sure we have an independent commission that really looks at this."

DOD: Systemic problems led to death of 4 troops in Niger

BY COREY DICKSTEIN
AND JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — No single failure was to blame for a botched Special Forces mission in Niger that led to the deaths of four U.S. troops at the hands of Islamic State-aligned militants, according to a Pentagon investigation.

"Systemic issues" ultimately contributed to the deaths on Oct. 4 of Staff Sgt. Bryan Black, Staff Sgt. Dustin Wright, Staff Sgt. Jeremiah Johnson and Sgt. La David Johnson when their team was ambushed by a much larger and better-gunned enemy force just outside the village of Tongo Tongo in southwestern Niger, according to an eight-page summary of the investigation into the attack officially released Thursday at the Pentagon. Their deaths sparked questions and debate about the

U.S. military's missions in Africa, where troop numbers have quietly grown in recent years.

Though the summary of the report does not explicitly place blame on any single soldier or recommend specific punishments, it does call on Pentagon officials to consider disciplinary measures. It also calls for a review of Special Forces' training and operations policies for working with foreign partners.

Army Maj. Gen. Roger Cloutier, the U.S. Africa Command chief of staff who led the investigation, said Thursday that "three cases" were referred to U.S. Special Operations Command for action, potentially including punishment. He did not provide specific details about the cases.

The team — on only its third mission since arriving in Niger a month earlier — was sloppy in its preparations for its mission, Cloutier said. He deter-

mined they were not prepared to face a well-trained force of ISIS fighters that outnumbered them 3-to-1.

The full report, which includes some 6,300 pages of evidence collected over six months, is not expected to be released for several more months as officials determine what elements of it can be distributed publicly, U.S. officials said Thursday.

The investigation found the members of the Special Forces team — in Niger to train and assist that nation's forces to fight terrorism — had spent insufficient time training together before deployment, did not properly train with their Nigerian partners, misled higher-ups about the intention of their initial mission, were twice re-tasked to other missions and failed to report they needed aid to push back the enemy until nearly an hour after the ambush started.

DOD mutes climate change in '16 report

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Internal changes to a draft Defense Department report de-emphasized the threats climate change poses to military bases and installations, muting or removing references to climate-driven changes in the Arctic and potential risks from rising seas, an unpublished draft obtained by The Washington Post reveals.

The earlier version of the document, dated December 2016, contains numerous references to "climate change" that were omitted or altered to "extreme weather" or simply "climate" in the final report, which was submitted to Congress in January 2018. While the phrase "climate change" appears 23 times in the draft, the final version used it just once.

Those and other edits suggest the Pentagon has adapted its approach to public discus-

sion of climate change under President Donald Trump, who has expressed doubt about the reality of a phenomenon that scientists agree presents an increasing danger to the planet. While military leaders have said they see a changing climate as a driver of instability worldwide, they have also sought to stay out of a politically charged debate about its causes.

Heather Babb, a Pentagon spokeswoman, declined to comment on the draft report, which outlines the results of DOD's first-ever survey of officials at different installations about the effects of climate change. The Post was not able to verify who made the changes reflected in the two documents.

"As highlighted in the report, the effects of climate are a national security issue with potential impacts to missions, operational plans, and installations," Babb said in a state-

ment. "DOD continues to focus on ensuring its installations and infrastructure are resilient to a wide range of threats, including climate. The Department has a proven record of planning and preparing for such threats."

According to John Conger, who served as a senior Pentagon official under the Obama administration and was among the officials who initiated the multi-base survey that forms the basis of the report, employees from a dozen different DOD offices could have made changes to the text as it made its way through the bureaucracy's clearance process, which often makes for "lowest-common-denominator" documents.

Conger said the alterations "change the feeling of urgency in the report, but not its fundamental conclusion — that our military installations are clearly experiencing climate impacts."

Executive order urges businesses to hire servicemembers' spouses

BY NIKKI WENTLING
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump signed an executive order Wednesday encouraging federal agencies to hire more military spouses, a population whose employment lags behind the rest of the U.S.

"You're going to be given better treatment than ever before," Trump promised military spouses Wednesday. "We can never repay you for all that you do, but we can and we will give you the opportunities you deserve. When you are strong, your families are strong, and America thrives."

The White House described the order as the first step in a larger effort by the Trump administration to increase military spouse employment. Based on a survey, the U.S. Chamber of Commerce estimated the unemployment rate for military spouses was 16 percent in 2017. The overall unemployment rate in the United States

was 3.9 percent as of April. The veteran unemployment rate in April fell to 3.7 percent.

"We are going to change that, and we are going to change it as quickly as we can," Trump said. "It will go fast."

The executive order pushes agencies to apply more liberally a federal law that gives preference to military spouses for government jobs. The Defense Department is putting the preference to use, but other agencies could do more, said a Trump administration official who spoke on the condition of anonymity.

The order also directs the Office of Personnel Management to increase awareness of the hiring preference for military spouses and train agencies about how to use it. It requires government agencies to report how many military spouses they hire each year.

"As a federal government, if we are going to be working with our private sector and asking for others to hire mili-

tary spouses, we need to lead by example," said Jennifer Korn, a special assistant to the president.

Last year, Kellyanne Conway, a presidential counselor, announced she would examine employment challenges for military spouses. Ivanka Trump, the president's daughter and personal adviser, has also taken up the issue, Korn said.

Military families frequently move, often with little notice. It is viewed as the biggest challenge facing military spouse employment. Spouses often must quit their jobs and face long periods of unemployment or underemployment after they move, according to a Chamber of Commerce report from 2017.

Spouses who hold professional licenses must also overcome the obstacle of getting licensed in a new state or country.

Trump said Wednesday that his administration is working with states in an attempt to have them remove licensing barriers for military spouses.

Doctors reattach sailor's hand

Stars and Stripes

An American sailor who lost his hand in an industrial accident aboard a submarine off Spain's southeastern coast had it reattached by a Spanish surgical team.

The accident happened March 27 aboard the guided-missile submarine USS Georgia, the U.S. Navy's 6th Fleet said in a statement Friday.

After being stabilized by the medical team aboard the Georgia, the injured sailor was taken to the hospital by boat and helicopter in the early hours of March 28, according to Spanish maritime rescue agency Salvamento Marítimo, which released a video of the rescue.

Then it was time for Dr. Pedro Cavadas, a surgeon at Hospital de Manises in Valencia, and his team to get to work.

It took about 10 hours between the amputation and the sailor's arrival at the hospital, the doctor told the Spanish newspaper El País. The surgical team used a catheter between the artery of the stump and an artery from the hand to provide irrigation. Then they used a skin graft from the submariner's leg to help with the reattachment, which took about five hours, the doctor said.

Cavadas and his team were given awards for their efforts by the U.S. Navy on May 4. Adm. James Foggo III, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and Allied Joint Force Command Naples, said in a Navy statement, "The response to this incident is a testament to enduring partnership between the U.S. and Spain."

The sailor is expected to recover fully, Foggo said.

US, Philippine troops storm beach in drills

BY SETH ROBSON
Stars and Stripes

American and Philippine troops stormed a beach on the western shore of Luzon island Wednesday during the allies' largest joint drills since President Rodrigo Duterte assumed power nearly two years ago.

About 8,000 from both countries are participating in the 34th iteration of the annual Balikatan exercise, which means "shoulder to shoulder" in Tagalog. It runs through May 18 in the Philippines.

Before the beach landing, four Marine Corps amphibious assault vehicles from the Hawaii-based 3rd Combat Support Company launched from Zambales province carrying a platoon of American and Philippine Marines, according to a statement issued Thursday by forces involved in Balikatan.

The floating troop carriers maneuvered around the Philippine navy's landing platform dock ship BRP Davao Del Sur before heading back to shore, where the Marines stormed onto the beach, the statement said.

The beach assault took place in the same area where the allies conducted similar training during annual PHIBLEX amphibious landing exercises before they were canceled by Duterte shortly after he took office. The maverick strongman had clashed with U.S. officials over his war on drugs and was looking for closer ties with China and Russia.

However, U.S.-Philippines relations improved last year as American troops supporting Philippine soldiers battled Islamic militants in the south and China continued to militarize outposts on disputed sea territory.

The goal of the Luzon landings was to improve the rapid deployment of forces during military operations on a hostile shore, exercise director Lt. Gen. Emmanuel Salamat said in the statement.

"Amphibious training is an important part of Balikatan Exercise as it enhances the capabilities of both [militaries] during operations from sea to land," he said.

Troops landing on a beach could face dangerous weather or even an aggressive enemy, the statement said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Video shows girl, 11, escaping carjacking

IL AURORA — Surveillance video shows an 11-year-old girl jumping out of a carjacked SUV in suburban Chicago as her father tries to stop a car driven by the carjacker's accomplice.

The carjacking took place early May 4 in Aurora at a gas station.

In the video, the girl is seen jumping out of the SUV and rolling on the ground. Her father leaps onto the hood of the accomplice's car as both vehicles speed away. Police say the girl and her father were not hurt.

An Illinois State Police trooper spotted the stolen SUV less than an hour later on Interstate 290 and a 20-year-old Chicago man was arrested following a brief chase. His accomplice is being sought.

Goats at school help stressed students

ME ORONO — The University of Maine deployed a herd of goats to help students get through a stressful final season during the end of the semester.

There was a line of students waiting this week to get up close with the goats. WABI-TV reported the goal is for the goats to cheer up students who may be dealing with stress.

Assistant Director of Student Activities Brittney Smith said the animals are important in helping students find an outlet for mental health exercises.

Geyser erupts for 4th time in 7 weeks

WY YELLOWSTONE NATIONAL PARK — The world's largest active geyser has erupted four times in seven weeks, a spate of ac-

tivity that has geophysicists excited about the Yellowstone National Park water feature.

The Steamboat Geyser, which can shoot water up to 300 feet high, erupted May 4 and continued to spew water into Monday.

Steamboat has gone dormant for as long as nine years. Its first eruption since 2014 occurred in mid-March, followed by two other eruptions in April.

Geophysicist Bob Smith told the Jackson Hole News & Guide that there is no consensus for what's behind the geyser's unusual activity.

Suspect arrested in theft of SUV, dog

MA BOSTON — Police arrested a man they said stole an SUV from outside a Boston convenience store with the owner's beloved dog inside.

Police said David Brady, 50, was caught Monday following a foot chase.

Rosa Nese said she had visited her mother's grave Monday morning when she stopped at an East Boston convenience store. She left her vehicle running, with the windows cracked and air conditioning on because her 8-year-old yellow Labrador retriever, Chief, was in the back. When she came out minutes later, the SUV was gone.

The vehicle and an unharmed Chief were recovered at an Everett cemetery on Monday.

Manager accused of taking lottery tickets

NC ASHEVILLE — Authorities accused a manager at a North Carolina grocery store of stealing more than a half-million dollars' worth of lottery tickets.

Local news outlets report a warrant filed with the Buncombe County Magistrate's Office said the customer service manager stole tickets from an

Ingles store in Asheville for nearly two years.

The search warrant said the manager was fired from the job in March after admitting to Ingles in a handwritten statement to activating and taking lottery packs out of the store.

The warrant said members of the manager's family were named as co-conspirators for validating and cashing the tickets.

Police: Armored truck robbed in school lot

MI TROY — An elementary school in suburban Detroit was placed on lockdown after an armored truck was robbed while stopped in a parking lot outside the building.

Police said two suspects approached the truck about 10:45 a.m. Tuesday at Wattles Elementary School in Troy. WXYZ-TV reported that the truck was on a routine stop at the school.

Pepper spray was used on one of the armored truck company's employees before the suspects fled with the contents of the vehicle.

Sacred war pipe being returned to Sioux

MN WORTHINGTON — A clay pipe linked to the U.S.-Dakota War of 1862 and considered sacred by Native Americans in Minnesota is being returned to the Sioux people after being sold at auction.

The Lower Sioux Indian Community unsuccessfully tried to stop the sale. Minnesota Public Radio reported the pipe was auctioned in Boston on Saturday for \$40,000, nearly twice its estimated value.

The buyer is remaining anonymous. But Prairie Island Tribal Council President Shelley Buck said the buyer wished to return the relic, and that's being arranged.

The pipe was a peace offering for a soldier from Sioux Chief White Dog, one of 38 Sioux hanged in Mankato on Dec. 26, 1862, for alleged war crimes.

Man injured when elevator drops

DE WILMINGTON — Firefighters in Delaware said a man was injured when an elevator he was riding in dropped.

News outlets reported firefighters were dispatched to a downtown Wilmington office building Monday morning for a report of an elevator falling an unknown number of floors.

Firefighters determined one passenger was in the elevator and that it fell about 6 to 8 feet. Crews secured power to the elevator carriage, which was stopped between the first floor and the basement.

The man, who is in his late 50s, was taken to a hospital after being freed from the carriage.

Dinosaur tracks at park thrown into lake

UT SALT LAKE CITY — Officials said visitors at a Utah state park have been dislodging dinosaur tracks imprinted in sandstone and throwing the pieces into a nearby lake.

Red Fleet State Park Manager Josh Hansen said that the site lined with hundreds of the prehistoric raptor tracks has been heavily damaged the past six months.

Utah Division of State Parks spokesman Devan Chavez said his conservative estimate is that at least 10 of the larger, more visible footprints, which range from 3 to 17 inches, disappeared in the past six months.

From wire reports

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updated 24/7 from bases
around the world.
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STARS AND STRIPES®

Rockets-Warriors series most-wanted

Associated Press

The buildup for this series began in February, with some pointed comments from Golden State's Draymond Green.

Or in October, when Houston won at Golden State on ring night.

Or in June, when the Rockets landed Chris Paul.

Whenever it started, however it started, it's clear that this is the series that the NBA-watching world wanted. Western Conference finals, Golden State versus Houston, Game 1 on Monday on the Rockets' home floor. Series winner to the NBA Finals, series loser will undoubtedly feel like they let a championship ring slip away.

"They got us. We got them," Green said. "Got to go out there and play. We'll see who better."

After more than 10 months of playing, posturing and some pontificating, it really is that simple.

This Rockets team was assembled — the key being the trade for Paul last summer — with hopes of unseating the reigning champion Warriors from their perch atop the NBA.

So far, so good. Houston set a franchise record with 65 wins in the regular season, went 2-1 against the Warriors in games that were hyped at the time though seem meaningless now, and has the likely MVP in James Harden.

How this Houston season will be remembered hinges largely on the outcome of this series.

"Everybody at the beginning of the year thinks they've got a chance to be here," Houston's P.J. Tucker said. "Everybody talks about winning. Everybody talks about fighting for a championship. ... We really believed it. We're really fighting to get there. This is not a game. Everybody takes their job serious."

He's right on all counts, particularly on the talking.

The talking will most definitely continue over the next few days. With five off days between the Warriors' and Rockets' respective second-round clinchers on Tuesday and Game 1 of their series, a lot of people will be saying a lot of somethings.

"I think it's going to be a

great series," said New Orleans coach Alvin Gentry, whose Pelicans fell in five games to the Warriors in the West semifinals. "I think it will be very entertaining. I think the people will have a great time watching that series, because you have great players out there. ... I'm looking forward to it."

He's hardly alone.

For as great as LeBron James has been, again, the West matchup is going to overshadow the East finals between Cleveland and Boston or Philadelphia. That's no disrespect to the East; that's just reality given the seasons that the Warriors and Rockets have had, and the collision course that seemed so inevitable for either to avoid.

"The whole world's been waiting for this matchup," Hall of Famer Shaquille O'Neal said in his role as an analyst Tuesday night on TNT.

The three Warriors-Rockets games were about as anticipated as any in the regular season: Golden State lost two of the three, and the final combined score of those matchups was

Warriors 353, Rockets 352.

"That was so long ago," Warriors forward Kevin Durant said. "I think both teams are different and playing better. So you know, I try not to look at those games but we kind of know, they know what we do and they know what we do."

It's the second time in four years that Houston and Golden State have met in the West finals; the Warriors ousted the Rockets in five games in 2015 on their way to the NBA title. Golden State was the No. 1 seed that year, Houston was No. 2. The seeds are flipped this time, after Houston finished the regular season with the league's best record.

This is the first time since 2014 — a span of 15 series — where Golden State will have to play Game 1 on the road.

"Every series you play, it gets harder and harder and harder," said Warriors guard Stephen Curry, who is seeking a fourth consecutive trip to the NBA Finals and third ring in four years. "So following that trend for sure."

Celtics oust Sixers, advance to East final

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Boston Celtics have been mining possibility out of improbable odds throughout the 2017-18 season.

A season filled with so much promise was jolted just five minutes into their season opener back in October when Gordon Hayward was lost for the year to a fractured ankle.

It looked to be derailed for sure when Marcus Smart suffered a torn ligament in his thumb in March, followed by Kyrie Irving being sidelined for the season a month later following a pair of knee surgeries.

Yet, after completing a 4-1 series win with their 114-112 victory over the Philadelphia 76ers on Wednesday night, the Celtics are somehow back where no one — except maybe only them — believed they

could be: headed to a second straight Eastern Conference final.

A rematch with the Cleveland Cavaliers and LeBron James awaits them, but for a Celtics team that has had to trudge uphill throughout the season, still playing at this point of the postseason feels like reason to celebrate.

Coach Brad Stevens said this group has never stopped playing together despite all the challenges they've faced. It's a testament to a program they've been nurturing since he took over as coach five years ago.

"I always hoped we would get to a point where if things don't go our way, we're still extremely competitive because we have a kind of foundation in place," he said. "Things haven't always gone our way,

but these guys are really talented, they're really tough, they fit Boston. And, hopefully, we keep playing well."

According to Elias Sports Bureau, the Celtics are the first team in NBA history to reach the conference finals in back-to-back seasons, while returning only four players from one year to the next (Smart, Jaylen Brown, Al Horford and Terry Rozier). That are advancing to the Eastern Conference finals in consecutive seasons for the first time since doing so five straight times from 1984 to 1988.

Brown was reinserted back into the starting lineup Wednesday for the first time since he injured his right hamstring last round in Boston's Game 7 win over Milwaukee.

He made the most of it, combining with rookie Jayson

Tatum to score 49 points on 18 of 28 shooting.

Tatum, who had the go-ahead layup in the closing seconds Wednesday, has helped fortify that quartet over the latter half of the season. Like Brown, he has become one of the go-to players on a reconfigured Celtics roster that in many ways is now being led by his youthful core.

He made his NBA debut against the Cavs back in October. He said he feels like a completely different player as he prepares to face them again.

"It's like night and day," he said. "I remember the first time we played them I was so nervous. But it's been 90 games since then. We've been through a lot. I'm a lot more relaxed and calm, but ready to go out there and play."

Lions' Patricia denies '96 assault allegation

Associated Press

ALLEN PARK, Mich. — Detroit Lions coach Matt Patricia said Thursday he was “falsely accused” in a 1996 sexual assault allegation that resurfaced this week, and he indicated that the matter has not been an issue as he has climbed from job to job in the years since then.

Patricia held a brief news conference one day after a Detroit News report that he and a friend were indicted 22 years ago by a Texas grand jury on one count each of aggravated sexual assault. They were accused of assaulting a woman on South Padre Island. The accuser did not testify and the case was dismissed.

“I was innocent then, and I am innocent now,” Patricia said.

The Lions said Wednesday night that a pre-employment background check did not turn up the incident. The team said Patricia was 21 at the time and on spring break in Texas. The Lions said they were standing by Patricia.

An NFL spokesman said Thursday the league “will review the matter with the

club to understand the allegations and what the club has learned.”

Lions owner Martha Firestone Ford, general manager Bob Quinn and president Rod Wood were at Thursday's news conference but did not speak.

“I'm here to defend my honor and clear my name. Twenty-two years ago, I was falsely accused of something very serious,” Patricia said. “There were claims made about me that never happened. While I'm thankful on one level that the process worked, and the case was dismissed, at the same time, I was never given the opportunity to defend myself.”

Patricia took a few questions but did not provide details about the day in question.

“I was falsely accused of something that I did not do,” he said.

Patricia's first NFL coaching job was as an assistant with the New England Patriots in 2004, and he remained with them through last season, when he was the defensive coordinator. He was hired by the Lions in February to replace Jim Caldwell.

Before joining the Patriots, Patricia

worked as a graduate assistant in 1996 at Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, his alma mater. That was before he spent two years working as an aeronautical engineer. Patricia was an assistant coach at Amherst and a graduate assistant at Syracuse before moving on to the NFL.

“I've interviewed for a lot of jobs,” Patricia said. “Interviewing for jobs in engineering right after the situation happened, it was never an issue, it never came up as anything, because it was dismissed, and I was innocent, so it just has never been part of any process that I've been involved with.”

Patriots coach Bill Belichick said the team wasn't aware of the legal case and expressed support for Patricia.

“For 14 years in our organization, Matt conducted himself with great integrity and is known to be an outstanding coach, person and family man,” Belichick said in a statement. “We have always been confident in Matt's character and recommended him highly to become the head coach of the Detroit Lions.”

Ovechkin, Trotz in uncharted territory with Capitals

Associated Press

ARLINGTON, Va. — The smiling side of a handshake line at the end of the second round was a brand-new experience for Alex Ovechkin and Barry Trotz.

Ovechkin received a message of good luck and a pat on the chest from Sidney Crosby, while Trotz got to enjoy a happy moment with longtime coaching friend Jacques Martin. Ovechkin acknowledged he'd been in that position a lot of times — though never as the one moving on to the third round.

Until now.

The Washington Capitals reaching the Eastern Conference final for the first time since 1998 is perhaps most special to the superstar captain and his coach who had never made it out of the second round before. No coach in NHL history had been behind the bench for more games than Trotz and no active player had been in as many playoff games as Ovechkin without reaching the conference finals.

“There is a kinship there, there's no question,” Trotz said. “I've been at this for a while and it's so hard to move forward sometimes. It's always thrown in your face everywhere your turn. I know it's thrown in Ovi's face everywhere he turns, and he's a great player in this league. ... I knew the frustration because you're so close and you just can't get it, and you just got to stay with it.”

After 51 playoff games together, Ovechkin and Trotz will take part in their first East final starting Friday night in Tampa Bay against the Lightning. Now that they've gotten over a hump that defined their respective careers, Ovechkin, Trotz and the Capitals are in unfamiliar territory.

“It's something new for us and cool,” Ovechkin said Wednesday, less than 48 hours after Washington eliminated the defending champion Pittsburgh Penguins. “Right now it's just satisfaction we beat the Stanley Cup champions finally and we move forward and now we're going to play against a

very good team, against very good goaltending and solid players over there.”

The Atlantic Division-champion Lightning present a formidable challenge, but the Capitals had to overcome something altogether different after losing in the first or second round in all nine playoff appearances that have come during the Ovechkin era dating to 2008. Beating the rival Penguins in overtime in a Game 6 on the road made the breakthrough even more emotional.

“We should be proud of that,” defenseman Matt Niskanen said. “It's a big achievement. But I think we've got to be greedy. We've got to want more because this is a heck of a run. I don't know if there is a group out there that knows how hard it is to get to this point.”

The Capitals are at this point with Ovechkin on top of his game with eight goals and seven assists, his best playoff output since 2009. And they're here in large part because of Trotz, a well-respected, 19-year NHL coach who does not have a

contract for next season.

“I had a summer which was very enlightening to me, and I just look at everything way differently than I ever have,” Trotz said. “I just recognized that I can only control what I can control.”

Trotz can't control upper-body injuries to Nicklas Backstrom and Andre Burakovsky or a three-game suspension handed out to winger Tom Wilson, only the decisions he makes in replacing them. So far, Trotz has pushed the right buttons, like putting Braden Holtby back in net in Game 2 of the first round and promoting Jakub Vrana to the top line in Game 5 against Pittsburgh.

His players know Trotz is in control as he and the Capitals advance further into the spring than they have in 20 years.

“He wants to win a Cup,” forward Chandler Stephenson said. “He doesn't want to make it past the second round. It's obviously a little accomplishment, a little confidence-boost. But we're not done yet. We're only halfway.”

Batting-order gaffe costly for the Mets

Associated Press

CINCINNATI — First-year manager Mickey Callaway knew something was badly wrong when Wilmer Flores went to the plate for the first time. At that point, it was too late to change the Mets' mistake.

New York wasted a first-inning rally by batting out of turn, and Adam Duvall led off the 10th inning with a homer that sent the Cincinnati Reds to a 2-1 victory Wednesday, concluding a series that will be remembered for an unexpected trade and an embarrassing mistake.

This one simply wasn't in the lineup cards for New York.

"It is frustrating," said Callaway, who blamed himself for an administrative mistake. "It probably cost us a game. We

had a chance to score in the first and we didn't."

The Reds took advantage. Duvall connected for the first game-ending homer of his career off A.J. Ramos (1-2), sending New York to its eighth loss in nine games. The Mets have scored two runs or less in seven of them, including three shutouts.

The Reds took two of three for only their second series win of the season. They're 10-27, their worst start since the Great Depression. Raisel Iglesias (1-0) retired six straight batters, fanning three.

It started with a miscommunication. The Mets handed Callaway's lineup card to the umpires, which had Asdrubal Cabrera batting second and Flores third. However, the line-

up sent out by computer pregame and posted on the dugout wall incorrectly had the two hitters switched in the order. Callaway did not identify who sent out the incorrect lineup.

Callaway knew there was nothing he could do when Flores batted out of turn and struck out for the second out. Cabrera then doubled to left, and the Reds pointed out the discrepancy. The double was nullified and an out was called, credited to Jay Bruce, the next batter.

"I felt bad," Reds interim manager Jim Riggleman said. "It's so easy to have that happen."

Crew chief Jerry Meals had never been involved with a batting-out-of-turn in the majors.

"I've seen it in the minor leagues," Meals said. "It's been

a long time, 32 years."

It was the first time a major league team was caught batting out of turn since the Brewers did it in 2016. The previous time the Mets batted out of order was 1977.

Following their correct order the next time through, the Mets got a run in the third when Brandon Nimmo tripled off Sal Romano and scored on Cabrera's groundout.

Zack Wheeler had retired 12 straight before the Reds rallied in the sixth to tie it on Joey Votto's single. Wheeler had to wait until the umpires sorted out the batting-out-of-order situation to throw his first pitch.

"I don't know," Wheeler said. "Some weird baseball. Unfortunately it happened, but it does happen every once in a while."

MLB roundup

Dodgers top D-backs to end 3-game skid

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — It took a series of quirks for the Dodgers to end their three-game skid.

Kyle Farmer's sacrifice fly scored the go-ahead run in a sixth inning that included mistakes by Arizona's bullpen and helped Los Angeles beat the NL West-leading Diamondbacks 6-3 on Wednesday night.

The scuffling Dodgers improved to 4-8 against their division rivals this year and avoided being swept for the second time this season on a night when they got back one of their injured stars. Yasiel Puig went 3-for-4 with two runs scored in his return from the disabled list.

"We realize the position we put ourselves in. The urgency is there," manager Dave Roberts said. "We're just still not playing complete baseball."

After playing Arizona 12 times in their first 36 games, the Dodgers won't see the D-backs again until Aug. 30.

"It's going to be nice not to throw against them," starter Alex Wood said. "Their lineup

reminds me a lot of ours, a lot of slug in their lineup. If you leave it over the plate, they're going to hit it."

With the score tied 1-all, the Dodgers loaded the bases in the fifth but failed to cash in.

Their luck changed in the sixth.

Yasmani Grandal, Austin Barnes and Puig reached on singles off Fernando Salas (3-3) to load the bases. Farmer followed with a fly to left field, scoring Grandal for a 2-1 lead.

Andrew Chafin came in and walked pinch-hitter Max Muncy to load the bases again.

Silvino Bracho followed and hit Chris Taylor with a pitch, forcing in Barnes. Bracho unleashed a wild pitch that scored Puig and the Dodgers led 4-1 before Enrique Hernandez struck out to end the inning.

Yankees 9, Red Sox 6: Brett Gardner capped a slump-busting performance with a go-ahead, two-run triple off Craig Kimbrel in the eighth inning, Aaron Judge followed with a homer and host New York rallied for their 17th victory in 18

games.

Astros 4, Athletics 1: Gerrit Cole struck out nine to raise his major league-leading total to 86, and visiting Houston completed a three-game sweep.

Phillies 11, Giants 3: Carlos Santana had three hits and five RBIs, Nick Pivetta struck out seven in five scoreless innings and host Philadelphia improved to 20-11 since a 1-4 start.

Blue Jays 5, Mariners 2: Yangervis Solarte hit a game-tying double in the eighth inning and Justin Smoak followed with a go-ahead double as host Toronto rallied to beat Seattle.

Braves 5, Rays 2: Nick Markakis hit a three-run homer and Atlanta set a franchise record for consecutive shutout innings on the road.

Orioles 5, Royals 3: Mark Trumbo delivered a tiebreaking two-run single in the eighth inning, Chris Davis homered and host Baltimore ended a seven-game losing streak.

Indians 6, Brewers 2: Carlos Carrasco struck out 14 in a complete game and Tyler Naquin and Francisco Lindor homered

for visiting Cleveland.

Cubs 13, Marlins 4: Kris Bryant hit his 100th career homer, Anthony Rizzo and Addison Russell connected in an eight-run third inning, and host Chicago routed Miami.

Angels 8, Rockies 0: Rene Rivera homered with a sore right hand, Jaime Barria threw efficiently into the sixth inning and the Angels ended host Colorado's six-game winning streak.

Rangers 5, Tigers 4: Nomar Mazara led off the 10th inning with his second homer of the game, giving host Texas its first winning home series this season.

Pirates 6, White Sox 5: Colin Moran hit a two-run homer that capped a four-run rally against Nate Jones in the ninth inning, and visiting Pittsburgh sent the White Sox to their fifth straight loss.

Padres 2, Nationals 1: Matt Szczur hit a go-ahead double in the seventh inning and host San Diego's bullpen pitched four scoreless innings against Washington.