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Errors, radar cited in Fitzgerald hearing

BY DIANNA CAHN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Faulty radar was a way of life on the USS Fitzgerald and was a key contributing cause for its collision with a merchant vessel in June 2017 in the busy waters off the coast of Japan.

Those and other details about a chain of errors leading up to the deadly crash were revealed Wednesday in a preliminary hearing for two junior officers at the controls that night. It's now up to a hearing officer to determine whether there's enough evidence to try those officers in a court-martial and whether they should be held negligently responsible for the deaths of seven sailors.

Wednesday's Article 32 proceeding at the Washington Navy Yard also laid bare the stresses in a Navy that demands excellence from its sailors even while pushing parts of the fleet to what some say was the breaking point.

The ACX Crystal took the Combat Information Center by surprise. Until just moments before the collision, the accused officers in the center, which is several levels below deck, were unaware of the danger from nearby ships, and there was little communication between the center and the bridge. Data pulled from the Fitzgerald and the Crystal and presented at the hearing showed the Crystal was tracking 25 to 30 ships in its orbit in the lead-up to the crash. The Fitzgerald was tracking four or five.

Information coming into the information center was, at best, incomplete. On that, the government and the defense agreed. But that's where the stories diverge.

In an 11-hour hearing, prosecutors painted a picture of Lt. Irian Woodley, the ship's surface warfare coordinator, and

Lt. Natalie Combs, the tactical action officer, as failing at their jobs, not using the tools at their disposal properly and not communicating adequately. They became complacent with faulty equipment and did not seek to get it fixed, and they failed to communicate with the bridge, the prosecution argued. Had they done those things, the government contended, they would have been able to avert the collision.

"Imagine the Crystal, a 29,000-ton container ship, suddenly takes up the entire (radar) screen," prosecutor Lt. Cmdr. Katherine Shovlin told the hearing officer. "There was not a breakdown of communication. There was ... no communication."

Defense attorneys countered, saying the officers were strong performers whose equipment didn't work properly. The radar and the Automatic Identification System they were working with were in a "degraded" state, so many of the ships around the Fitzgerald did not appear. The officers were unaware of the other ship's approach. The problems were systemic, the defense argued, with operational tasking so intense that the ship had no time to train or do repairs and with sailors who were exhausted from working 20-hour days.

"The Fitz was a wreck of a ship — I do not state that lightly," said David Sheldon, Combs' civilian attorney. "And the U.S. Navy knew that."

"The blame here lies not just with the (Commanding Officer) or the (Executive Officer), it lies with the Navy. And the Navy is putting its head in the sand and not dealing with a ship that should never have gotten underway. Instead it wants to hold these officers responsible," he said.

Woodley and Combs face three charges: dereliction in the

performance of duties through neglect resulting in death, negligent hazarding of a vessel and negligent homicide.

The hearing officer has 14 days to make his recommendation on whether all or some of those charges should go forward in a court-martial. It will be up to the convening authority, Adm. Frank Caldwell, to decide whether to accept those recommendations.

Prosecutors said Woodley failed at his main duties, which were to maintain an accurate picture of all the vessels around the Fitzgerald, oversee other surface watch standers in the combat center, and share information and recommendations with those navigating and driving the ship. The prosecution's case was in the details of the CIC's failure to capture nearby ships on radar or other systems and the failure of Combs and Woodley to recognize the obstacles impairing their work or to keep close communication with the bridge.

The defense argued that the crew made the best of what they had but were given no time to train or upgrade, no time for maintenance. Lt. Cmdr. Ritarsha Furqan, who had been the combat systems officer on board the Fitzgerald until March 2017, said she had warned her boss that the ship was in too great a state of disrepair. After a period in dry dock and heavy crew turnover, the ship had been on back-to-back missions. It needed time for training and equipment repairs, she said.

"I stood in my boss' office and said we should not be going out, we are not ready," she said.

Furqan said the demand for ships in 7th Fleet meant that the Fitzgerald had been having what was known as "red line issues," meaning higher level permission was needed to get underway because something

wasn't working properly.

In her prior assignment, red line issues were a "show stopper," Furqan said.

On the Fitzgerald, "they weren't a show stopper. Find a part. Find a body and make due to get under way."

Rear Adm. Brian Fort, who conducted a Navy investigation of the crash, testified for the prosecution that the SPS-67 radar in the CIC was set to the wrong pulse, which added what is known as clutter, or fuzziness, to the picture. He said that through his interviews with dozens of sailors on the Fitzgerald that night, the CIC had learned to live with it.

"Quite frankly, they accepted the clutter on the radar and did absolutely nothing about it," he said in testimony by telephone.

Defense witnesses testified that the pulse setting was controlled in a separate room by engineers, and that those in the CIC would not have known it was on the wrong setting. Clutter is also created by weather and atmospheric conditions.

Similarly, Fort said the AIS — which identifies the name and location of every ship on the system — would frequently go down because of a loose cable, and neither Woodley nor Combs complained.

Fort testified that he'd spoken with half a dozen of Woodley's shipmates who, Fort said, spoke negatively of Woodley's performance. He said he concluded the same, in part because of Woodley's failure to track 13 ships that came close enough to be considered "contact" — that is, requiring tracking on the CIC systems — but the watch standers were not aware that any ships had come within 10,000 yards of the Fitzgerald. One ship had come within 650 feet, he said.

Defense attorneys argued that Fort's report was unreliable and biased.

QUESTIONS REMAIN DOD report doesn't explain how militants carried out Niger attack

The Washington Post

The Pentagon released a slim, eight-page executive summary of a larger report detailing the disastrous special operations mission in Niger that left four U.S. soldiers dead on Oct. 4.

New information, such as how Sgt. La David Johnson fought off Islamic State-linked militants until his death and how long responding units took to arrive, have answered some lingering questions about the ill-fated mission.

But in the absence of the full 180-page report — which officials have said must be carefully reviewed and redacted before it is publicly released — many other questions and concerns are unaddressed.

■ How did the enemy gather in such a large group and remain undetected?

The summary and official remarks Thursday did not shed much light on a major issue: how roughly 100 militants were able to mass, plan and coordinate a complex assault with rocket-

propelled grenades, machine guns and trucks with mounted heavy weapons.

That kind of activity would have created dust clouds as pickup trucks and motorcycles with roaring engines crisscrossing the shrub land. Militants at one point set up in a wooded area near the road to attack from multiple angles as the team grasped that the attack was much larger than they first anticipated.

Some members of the 11-man team had left the ambush site, unaware three soldiers were left behind 700 meters away. They also came under heavy fire in their position, indicating enough enemy forces effectively coordinated to break off and pursue the second group of soldiers.

Killed in the battle were Staff Sgt. Jeremiah W. Johnson, 39, Staff Sgt. Bryan C. Black, 35, Staff Sgt. Dustin M. Wright, 29, and Johnson, 25. Black and Wright were Special Forces soldiers, while both Johnsons were conventional soldiers assigned to the same 3rd Special Forces Group team.

■ Why did the commander pull surveillance aircraft away?

Marine Gen. Thomas D. Waldhauser, the chief of U.S. Africa Command, revealed a key detail about the surveillance posture.

Operational Detachment-Alpha Team 3212 commander Capt. Michael Perozeni directed a surveillance aircraft to head north of their position to monitor “crossing points” at the Mali border after they reached the village of Tongo Tongo the night before the ambush and believed enemy forces were not in the immediate area.

But Waldhauser did not explain why the aircraft was diverted. That aircraft could have helped spot consolidating enemy forces or other activity that would have warned about an imminent attack.

It is possible Perozeni was concerned enemy troops would mass in Mali and head to their position, but officials did not elaborate.

■ How did senior commanders respond during the attack?

The patrol on Oct. 3 initially was filed as a routine reconnaissance mission near Mali's border by Perozeni and another Army captain planning it. No one higher in the chain of command was

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“aware of the true nature of the mission,” which actually was designed to pursue a high-value target, according to the Pentagon summary.

Yet after they came up short and left to return to their base, the battalion commander overseeing those forces, based in Chad, ordered the team to pursue a target on recent intelligence

showing he was at a camp.

The team was to back up an air assault force, but bad weather forced them to turn back. The commander in Chad still ordered the team to pursue the target.

That means he would have understood his forces faced increased risk, and likely, so would other senior commanders.

But it is not clear if the battalion commander revised the plan to accommodate for increased danger with resources like more intelligence aircraft, or if he notified reaction forces they should be on alert in case enemy forces were encountered.

Delays in friendly response during and after the ambush was significant. A Nigerien helicopter took off 40 minutes after the request for support, and left the area to avoid a collision with responding French

Mirage jets.

Those jets were armed but could not engage because they did not have radio contact with U.S. troops and could not identify their positions. A Nigerien ground force arrived more than six hours after enemy contact.

The report does not say why senior commanders did not coordinate details with those aircraft beforehand. Synchronizing radio frequencies with ground and air support and ensuring their communication is a fundamental task for commanders in operations centers.

■ Will anyone be punished for command failures?

The report summary did not recommend punishment for any command decisions. That is left up to Special Operations Command and the Army, Waldhauser said.

A military official said the full report singles out three people for possible fault, though it is unclear if that includes Perozeni and the other captain.

Don Christensen, a former Air Force chief prosecutor, told The Washington Post that even with no official punishment, the episode likely will blemish their careers permanently.

The executive summary revealed little about how much accountability should rest on the battalion commander who ordered the capture mission, or other senior leaders responsible for ensuring troops were adequately trained and had ready and timely support.

Perozeni had warned commanders before the mission that his team was not adequately provided intelligence or equipment necessary for a kill-or-capture mission, the New York Times reported.

Notably, the investigation was handled by Army Maj. Gen. Roger L. Cloutier Jr., who is Waldhauser's chief of staff at Africa Command.

Put another way, the command investigated itself amid questions its senior leaders could have contributed to failures of situational awareness and command oversight in this mission and in Niger itself.

Christensen said Africa Command has shied away from publicly blaming senior commanders, saying it is an example of “different spansks for different ranks” — military parlance for meting out harsh penalties for junior troops while senior leaders escape penalties.

“It seems like an intentional avoidance. There is enough smoke there to make you think, ‘Why aren't you looking above them?’” Christensen said, referring to the two captains.

Iraqi forces capture 5 top ISIS leaders

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi forces in coordination with U.S.-backed Syrian forces have captured five senior Islamic State leaders, the U.S.-led coalition said Thursday in a statement.

The arrest was a “significant blow to Daesh,” coalition spokesman Army Col. Ryan Dillon said, using the Arabic acronym for the extremist group.

A Pentagon spokesman, Marine Maj. Adrian J.T. Rankine-Galloway, said the U.S. credited Iraqi security forces with the militants’ capture “on the Iraq-Syria border.”

“These arrests are a significant blow to ISIS as we continue to remove its leadership and fighters from the battlefield,” Rankine-Galloway said.

ISIS fighters no longer control significant pockets of territory inside Iraq, but do maintain a grip inside Syria along Iraq’s border.

The U.S.-led coalition supported Iraqi ground forces and Syrian fighters known as the Syrian Democratic Forces in the more-than-three-year war against ISIS.

After Iraqi forces retook the Iraqi city of Mosul from ISIS last summer, Syrian forces on the other side of the border claimed a series of swift victories, but the campaign was stalled recently when Turkey launched a cross-border raid into Syria’s north.

Earlier this month, the coalition announced a drive to clear the final pockets of ISIS territory inside Syria.

U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted about the anti-ISIS raid Thursday, saying those arrested were the “five most wanted” ISIS “leaders.” It was unclear what criteria, if any, Trump was using to describe the ISIS operatives as the “five most wanted.”

A U.S. national security official said there were no indications that the operation had captured Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, the leader of ISIS who has long been the coalition’s top target. The official wasn’t authorized to discuss the targets publicly and requested anonymity.

Last year, the Pentagon said that there were “some indicators” that al-Baghdadi was still alive a month after Russia claimed to have killed him in a strike near the Syrian city of Raqqa.

None of the statements released Thursday from the president or the coalition named the ISIS fighters arrested.

ISIS fighters swept into Iraq in the summer of 2014, taking control of nearly a third of the country. At the height of the group’s power, their self-proclaimed caliphate stretched from the edges of Aleppo in Syria to just north of the Iraqi capital Baghdad.

California man accused of hacking West Point website

Associated Press

NEW YORK — A California man hacked and defaced websites for a West Point counterterrorism research center and a New York City government agency during a campaign of vandalism, federal prosecutors said on Thursday.

A criminal complaint accuses Billy Ribeiro Anderson, 41, with hacking the two sites using the online pseudonym “Alfabeto Virtual.” It says he modified them to display “Hacked by Alfabeto Virtual.”

The FBI arrested Anderson early Thursday at his home in Torrance, Calif. He was to make a court appearance later in the day in Los Angeles.

Before his arrest, Anderson had used his computer skills to vandalize U.S. military, government and business web-

sites more than 11,000 times since 2015, authorities said.

“Among other possible effects, website defacements can disrupt an organization’s operations and damage its credibility,” said William Sweeney, head of the FBI’s New York office.

The alleged hacker struck the website for the New York City Comptroller in 2015 and, along with his pseudonym, plastered “#FREEPALESTINE” and “#FREEGAZA” on the site. About a year later, he defaced the site for the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point.

Both West Point and the city agency had to spend thousands of dollars to correct the security breach, authorities said.

Muslim scholars say suicide attacks violate Islamic principles

Associated Press

BOGOR, Indonesia — Muslim scholars from three countries issued an edict Friday saying that violent extremism and terrorism, including suicide attacks, are against Islamic principles, in an effort to convince the Taliban to end its violence.

Seventy prominent Muslim scholars from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia issued the fatwa, or edict, at a conference in Indonesia on ways to achieve peace and stability in Afghanistan.

Indonesian President Joko “Jokowi” Widodo, who opened the one-day meeting, stressed Indonesia’s commitment to helping build peace in the war-torn country.

Jokowi said the conference was part of Indonesia’s efforts to encourage the role of Islamic clerics, or ulema, in promoting peace in Afghanistan.

“Through the voice of ulema, mainly from Afghanistan, Pakistan and Indonesia, presumably the spirit of brotherhood for peace in Afghanistan can be strengthened,” Jokowi said.

“Ulema are the agent of peace ... they have the power to form the face of peace-

ful people,” Jokowi said.

He expressed hope that the conference could contribute concretely to peace in Afghanistan.

In a declaration, the scholars said Islam was a religion of peace and denounced all kinds of violent extremism and terrorism.

“We reaffirm that violence and terrorism cannot and should not be associated with any religion, nationality, civilization or ethnic group, as violent extremism and terrorism in all its forms and manifestation including violence against civilians and suicide attacks are against the holy principles of Islam,” the declaration said.

The Taliban urged Islamic clerics to boycott the Bogor conference and warned Afghan clerics, “Do not afford an opportunity to the invading infidels in Afghanistan to misuse your name and participation in this conference as means of attaining their malicious objective.”

The conference at the presidential palace in Bogor, a West Java town on the outskirts of Jakarta, was organized by the Indonesian Ulema Council.

Trump rails at DHS head on immigration

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump unloaded on Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen at a heated Cabinet meeting this week, railing against her for failing to stop illegal border crossings.

Trump, who is increasingly frustrated by a spike in apprehensions at the border and other legal setbacks, blamed Nielsen for failing to do enough to stop them, according to people familiar with the exchange.

Nielsen, one person said, tried to explain the issues were complex and the department's powers were limited by legal restrictions. She told Trump her team was doing everything it could, but he was unconvinced.

The episode, first reported by The New York Times, left Nielsen on the verge of resignation, according to the paper, which also said Nielsen, the former deputy White House chief of staff, had drafted — but not submitted — a resignation letter.

But the department pushed back on that characterization.

Homeland Security spokesman Tyler Houlton said in a tweet that, “The @nytimes article alleging that the Secretary

drafted a resignation letter yesterday and was close to resigning is false.”

Nielsen did not deny the meeting grew heated in a statement Thursday but said she shared the president's frustrations.

“The President is rightly frustrated that existing loopholes and the lack of Congressional action have prevented this administration from fully securing the border and protecting the American people. I share his frustration,” she said in a statement.

She added, “Border security is the most basic and necessary responsibility of a sovereign nation” and said she would “continue to direct the Department to do all we can to implement the President's security-focused agenda.”

Trump has repeatedly called on Congress to pass new legislation to strengthen what he calls the nation's “horrible” immigration laws.

Trump has also been frustrated with Nielsen, who previously served as chief of staff John Kelly's deputy, according to people familiar with the dynamic, who spoke on condition of anonymity because they were not authorized to disclose private conversations.

WH aide mocks McCain's illness

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A White House official dismissed Sen. John McCain's opposition to President Donald Trump's CIA nominee, saying “it doesn't matter” because “he's dying anyway,” two people in the room told The Associated Press.

Kelly Sadler was discussing McCain's opposition to Gina Haspel, Trump's pick for CIA director, at a staff meeting on Thursday when she made the comment, according to the two people. They were not authorized to discuss internal deliberations and spoke to AP on condition of anonymity.

The White House did not dispute the remark. In a statement, they said, “We respect Senator McCain's service to our nation and he and his family are in our prayers during this difficult time.”

The Hill newspaper first reported the comment.

The 81-year-old Arizona Republican, who has spent three decades in the Senate, was

diagnosed in July with glioblastoma, an aggressive form of brain cancer. He left Washington in December and underwent surgery last month for an infection.

Sadler is a special assistant to the president. She did not respond to a request for comment Thursday evening.

McCain's wife, Cindy, responded with a tweet tagged to Sadler, “May I remind you my husband has a family, 7 children and 5 grandchildren.”

Sen. McCain, a Navy pilot who was beaten in captivity during the Vietnam War, has urged his fellow senators to reject Haspel. He said Wednesday that he believes she's a patriot who loves the country but “her refusal to acknowledge torture's immorality is disqualifying.”

During a grilling Wednesday by the Senate Intelligence Committee about her role overseeing some CIA operations after the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, she told senators she doesn't believe torture works as an interrogation technique.

Chatter grows about Trump's prospects for a Nobel

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Barack Obama won it.

So did Jimmy Carter, Theodore Roosevelt and Woodrow Wilson.

Now, President Donald Trump's supporters are pushing for him to be the next U.S. leader to win the Nobel Peace Prize — a move that's being met by smirks and eye rolls in Europe, where Trump remains deeply unpopular.

But that's not stopping a growing list of champions from pushing the Nobel committee to consider Trump for the world's most coveted diplomatic prize.

As is customary, lawmakers in the Nordic region where the Nobel is awarded refrain from commenting on possible nominees. But in Copenhagen, Denmark, there was little appetite for the prospect of a Trump

win.

“Trump ... the peace prize? You must be joking,” said Lene Larsen, 46, an accountant before bursting out laughing. “Maybe it should be a sex prize or a prize for being unpopular.”

Hasse Jakupsen, 52, said the prospects of a win were dim.

“I am pretty sure the Norwegians can see through this. Being nominated does not mean that you actually get the prize. It is pretty ridiculous to have such hopes” of getting the prize.

The push comes as Trump is preparing for a historic summit with North Korea's Kim Jong Un, which will serve as the highest-stakes diplomatic test to date for a president whose unconventional approach to foreign policy also has prompted fears of nuclear winter. Trump scored a substantial

win on Wednesday when he announced that three Americans who had been detained by Kim were on their way home to the U.S.

To be considered for the Nobel Peace Prize of the year, nominations must be sent to the Norwegian Nobel Committee before Feb. 1 of the same year. There are currently 330 candidates for the 2018 prize, including 114 organizations. Nominations are required to be kept secret 50 years.

In January, Henrik Urdal, manager of the Peace Research Institute Oslo, told The Associated Press that Trump's name had been submitted for the 2018 prize, but said the nomination lacked “a strong academic justification.” The leader of the independent Norwegian peace institute said Trump had been nominated by “an American player with the right to nominate a candidate,” but declined to name the source.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

People mistake bobcats for domestic kittens

TX SAN ANTONIO — Three well-meaning people suffered bites when the kittens they rescued after hearing them mewling in a San Antonio alley turned out to be ravenous bobcat cubs.

The caretakers found the blue-eyed, stub-tailed pair of young bobcats on Saturday and, thinking they were Bengal kittens, took them in. They fed the bobcats milk from pet-feeding bottles, but realized something was amiss when the aggressive animals tore the bottles apart and bit them.

They called animal control officers, and a wildlife rescue group took the wild cats away. Workers intended to wait in the alley hoping to find the mother and reunite her with the cubs.

Man says his dog shot him while playing

IA FORT DODGE — With best friends like these, who needs enemies?

An Iowa man said his dog inadvertently shot him while they were roughhousing Wednesday.

Richard Remme, 51, of Fort Dodge, told police he was playing with his dog, Balew, on the couch and tossed the dog off his lap. He said when the pit bull-Labrador mix bounded back up, he must have disabled the safety on the gun in his belly band and stepped on the trigger.

The gun fired, striking one of Remme's legs. He was treated at a hospital and released later that day.

Remme told The Messenger newspaper that Balew is a "big wuss" and laid down beside him and cried because he thought he had done something wrong. Police Chief Roger Porter called the shooting a freakish occurrence.

Man accused of taking Warhols, selling fakes

MA BOSTON — Authorities said a Massachusetts man took two Andy Warhol paintings from his college friend and then pretended to sell them on eBay but delivered fakes instead.

Federal prosecutors said Brian Walshe, 43, of Lynn, told his friend that he would sell the Warhols for him for a good price, then took the paintings and stopped responding to his friend's calls and emails.

Prosecutors said Walshe listed the paintings on eBay, and a buyer in California agreed to pay \$80,000 for the pair but ended up getting fakes. When the buyer tried to get a refund, Walshe made excuses for delaying and only returned some of the money.

Walshe is charged with wire fraud and is being held pending a hearing Friday. His attorney didn't immediately respond to an email Thursday.

School gets bat visit after fixing problem

NH MERRIMACK — A New Hampshire elementary school that paid \$600,000 to fix a problem with bats in its classrooms may not be done yet.

At least one bat was seen in a classroom Wednesday at the James Mastricola Upper Elementary School in Merrimack. Principal Marcia McGill told WMUR-TV that workers are in the process of sealing some cracks in the building, and the bat got in before it was done.

Administrators said a pipe also has been installed in a wall to redirect any curious bats.

McGill said they aren't expecting any more bats.

In November, workers found bat feces in a cavity between an exterior brick wall and an inside

block. Eight classrooms were closed during the cleanup.

3rd dead gray whale found in bay since March

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Marine experts said a dead gray whale found in San Francisco Bay appears to have died from blunt-force trauma from a ship.

It's the third gray whale found dead in San Francisco Bay since March, when a gray whale that died of malnutrition was found on Angel Island. Another died last month after an orca attacked it, and it then got entangled in fishers' nets.

The Marine Mammal Center in Sausalito says a team of 11 scientists found significant bruising and hemorrhaging to the whale's blubber and muscle tissue and several skull fractures.

It says the team on Wednesday performed a necropsy on the 44-foot adult female gray whale.

Gray whales are making their annual northward migration from Mexico to Alaska.

Frantic mom learns son found sleeping on bus

IA DES MOINES — Officials said a 4-year-old boy being taken to day care was found sleeping in a bus after the driver missed a stop in Des Moines.

Kelsey Adcock told station KCCI Wednesday that she frantically called Des Moines Public Schools when her son, who has special needs, didn't show up at day care Tuesday. She said a Des Moines district bus is supposed to take her son, Boston, from Mitchell Elementary to Leaps and Bounds day care.

The district said in a statement that "a driver new to her route missed a stop, and when

she checked the bus, she found a preschool student asleep." The driver quickly reported her discovery.

The school district transportation director apologized to the little boy's family.

Woman leaves utility worker suspended in lift

NJ NEPTUNE TOWNSHIP — Police in New Jersey said a woman got angry at a cable utility worker, so she left him stranded in the air on his utility lift by turning off his truck.

Ridgewood police said the dispute started in Ridgewood on Monday afternoon between a woman and an Optimum employee. The Record reported the 59-year-old woman turned off the worker's truck while he was up in the lift, stranding him in midair.

Police said the woman took "utility property" before walking away and leaving the worker stranded.

The woman was charged with harassment, false imprisonment, disorderly conduct and criminal trespassing. She was released from custody with a pending court date.

Officer helps snapping turtle cross road

NJ HAMILTON TOWNSHIP — A police officer in New Jersey took no chances when he helped a snapping turtle safely cross a road.

In video posted on the Hamilton Township Police Facebook page, the officer is seen using a shield to protect himself from the turtle's fierce bite. The turtle lunged at the shield several times.

The department, in Atlantic County, says it isn't sure the shield was meant to be utilized for that purpose.

From wire reports

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Jets stun Preds for spot in West final

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The young Winnipeg Jets have grown up fast this postseason, so quickly that now they are headed to the first Western Conference final in their short history after knocking off the NHL's best team in the regular season.

Tyler Myers and Paul Stastny scored 2:06 apart in the first period, and the Jets stunned the Nashville Predators 5-1 on Thursday night in their first Game 7 — continuing an amazing run for a team swept in its previous two playoff appearances.

"The telling stat for me in this series is we played four games in here and never lost in regulation against the best team in the league," Jets coach Paul Maurice said. "That's what you worry about with a young team. It's a physical series. We've got some skaters. ... But that's a difficult thing to do, to get out on the road ... to play well in here

as consistently as we did, it's impressive."

Stastny finished with a second goal and an assist, and Mark Scheifele also had two goals. Blake Wheeler and rookie Kyle Connor each had two assists.

Connor Hellebuyck made 36 saves for Winnipeg, which won three of four games in Nashville after missing the Presidents' Trophy by three points to the Predators.

The Jets now host Vegas in Game 1 on Saturday night in a conference final nobody could've predicted when this season started.

"I like it," Hellebuyck said. "I'm excited, and looking forward to it."

P.K. Subban scored for Nashville, now the ninth Presidents' Trophy winner in 10 years not to win the Stanley Cup.

The best season in Predators history ended earlier than a year ago, but in the same fashion on their own ice. They lost to Pittsburgh in Game 6 of the

Stanley Cup Final last June.

Pekka Rinne, Nashville's Vezina Trophy finalist along with Hellebuyck, was chased for the third time in this series after giving up two goals on seven shots. He lasted just 10 minutes, 7 seconds for the quickest exit by a starting goalie in a Game 7.

"It's heartbreaking," Hellebuyck said on seeing Rinne pulled.

Rinne tried to take responsibility for the Predators' season ending far earlier than they expected.

"The biggest moment of the season, it's a terrible feeling," Rinne said. "You let your teammates down, and that's what happened tonight. That's tough to swallow."

These teams combined for 231 points in the regular season, making this series the two best teams on points ever to meet in a series before a conference final. This was the third Game 7 all-time for Nashville with a big edge in experience over the

Jets playing on this stage.

Nashville also brought out the star power once again with Sheryl Crow singing the U.S. anthem and former NFL Titans running back Eddie George waving the towel to rev up the crowd. A couple catfish hit the ice before the puck dropped.

The Predators took five of the first six shots, then the Jets stunned the crowd. Myers squeezed a wrister between the post and Rinne's left skate for a 1-0 lead at 8:40 of the first. Then Stastny put a backhand off Rinne and into the net 2:06 later for a 2-0 lead on just seven shots.

Wheeler said the Jets will take a night to celebrate a thrilling win over Nashville that was every bit the series they expected.

"It's too bad one of us had to be knocked off here," Wheeler said. "But nights like tonight, you try to really soak it in and enjoy it. And then, wake up and get ready for a big game on Saturday."

D. Johnson among 6 tied after 1st day of TPC

Associated Press

PONTE VEDRA BEACH, Fla. — The PGA Tour gave its premier tournament even more sizzle by putting Tiger Woods, Phil Mickelson and Rickie Fowler in the same group Thursday afternoon. For the undercard, Rory McIlroy, Jordan Spieth and Justin Thomas played together in the morning.

None was anywhere near the lead at The Players Championship.

McIlroy was the only player from those two groups who managed to break par. He shot 1-under 71.

The best golf — and there was plenty of it on an ideal opening round for scoring — was all around them.

Dustin Johnson, Webb Simpson and Alex Noren set the pace early. Matt Kuchar, Chesson Hadley and Patrick Cantlay joined them late. All were at 66,

part of the largest share of the lead in the opening round at the TPC Sawgrass, and the most players tied at the top at The Players in 40 years.

"If you're on your game, this course suits you," Kuchar said.

That's been the story of the TPC Sawgrass over the years — a design that doesn't favor one particular style of play. That notion was on overdrive in warm sunshine and moderate wind, conditions so ideal that 12 players were separated by one shot after the opening round, and 68 players in the 144-man field broke par.

Woods wasn't among them. He shot 72 in his first time at The Players since in three years. Neither was Mickelson, who had three double bogeys on the back nine and shot 79. Fowler shot 74.

"Toward the back nine, it started getting a little sparse," Woods said. "I think they might

have tipped back a couple and got a little sleepy."

There was plenty of excitement elsewhere.

Johnson played like he was determined to keep the No. 1 ranking, which he could lose if he finishes 12th or worse. And he putted like he was fed up with not seeing enough go in. He tried the "AimPoint" method that some players use to help them read the greens. He liked the results.

Johnson started on No. 10 and went out in 31, and when he rolled in a 10-foot birdie putt on the par-5 second hole, he was on his way. Johnson only gave himself a few reasonable chances the rest of the way, though he was more than happy with his 66. It was his best score ever on the Stadium Course, and only his fourth time in the 60s.

"I was just not making enough putts," Johnson said. "It's definitely helped. Because

I'm a feel putter, anyway, and so the way you're doing it really is you're just feeling. So it definitely works. I was pretty good the first time I switched. I had done it a little bit, like messing around with it. I'm very pleased with the way I putted today."

Rookies and veterans alike were in the group at 67. The rookie was Keith Mitchell, who didn't even know he was in the field until Paul Casey withdrew on Wednesday. Mitchell birdied his opening four holes, made seven birdies over his first 11 holes and was slowed only by a double bogey on the par-3 third.

The veteran was 51-year-old Steve Stricker, who still can't decide whether to hang his hat in the big leagues or the senior circuit. He was irritated by a late bogey and failing to birdie the par-5 ninth, settling for a 67.

Raptors fire Casey after playoff sweep

Associated Press

TORONTO — The Toronto Raptors have fired Dwane Casey after the team was swept in the playoffs by the Cleveland Cavaliers for second straight season.

Toronto President Masai Ujiri on Friday said the move was a “very difficult but necessary step.”

“As a team, we are constantly trying to grow and improve in order to get to the next level,” Ujiri said in the statement released by the team.

Ujiri thanked Casey for what he has done for the organization, saying Casey was “instrumental in creating the identity and culture of who we are as a team.”

The Raptors will hold a news conference Friday afternoon and are expected to provide more details on the decision to part ways with Casey.

The move comes two days after Casey

was honored as coach of the year by the National Basketball Coaches Association.

Casey, 61, led the Raptors to a franchise-record 59 wins and a top seed in the Eastern Conference for the first time. He posted a 320-238 record and is the franchise’s winningest coach.

The Raptors won four Atlantic Division titles and advanced to the postseason five consecutive seasons. But Toronto could not get past Cleveland in the playoffs.

Ujiri and Casey met for two-hours Wednesday, after which Ujiri the Raptors were “absolutely disappointed” at their playoff exit. He had demanded a “culture reset” last spring, leading a greater emphasis on ball movement, depth, and three-point shooting.

Kyle Lowry was equally dejected in the team’s playoff performance, calling it a “wasted year” Tuesday when players were

cleaning out their lockers.

“We felt like we could possibly make the NBA Finals,” Lowry said. “That was our goal.”

Both Lowry and teammate DeMar DeRozan spoke glowingly of Casey earlier this week.

DeRozan credited Casey with all of his success and Lowry said he was “one of the best coaches out there.”

But Casey could not solve the Cavaliers and LeBron James puzzle.

Casey insisted on Wednesday that “the gap is closing” between the Raptors and Cavaliers, who ousted Toronto from the postseason for the third year in a row.

“A lot of folks have run up against Cleveland in the last few years and had the same challenge and it went down the same way,” he said. “That’s the mountain this organization has to climb.”

NBA’s best on display in conference finals

Associated Press

The franchise with the most titles. The best player of this generation. The reigning champions. The probable MVP.

The NBA has its Final Four.

It certainly does not disappoint.

Boston’s win over Philadelphia on Wednesday night brought down the curtain on the postseason’s second round — one that wasn’t exactly loaded with drama, since it was the first time since 2002 that none of the NBA’s four conference semifinal series went past five games. Cleveland swept Toronto, while Houston, Golden State and the Celtics all prevailed by 4-1 counts.

Everyone gets to catch their collective breaths for a few days, with the league going dark until the weekend. Cleveland and Boston don’t tip off the Eastern Conference finals until Sunday, and the Warriors and Rockets start their West title series on Monday. And yes, the Cavaliers and Warriors are four wins away from a fourth consecutive meeting in the NBA Finals.

A few things to know going into the conference finals:

LeBron, of course

Any list of anything this time of year basically has to start with LeBron James, still generally considered the best player on the planet even at 33 years old and in his 15th NBA season.

Cleveland’s star is trying to reach the NBA Finals for the eighth straight season — something only four other players have done, and they were all Boston Celtics. Bill Russell went to 10 straight title series, Sam Jones and Tom Heinsohn went to nine, and Frank Ramsey went to eight.

James is already the NBA’s all-time playoff leader in points, steals and minutes played. He’s fifth in playoff wins with 152, behind only Derek Fisher (161), Tim Duncan (157), Robert Horry (155) and Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (154).

MVP watch

Houston’s James Harden seems like the probable winner of the NBA’s MVP award this season, with the only other realistic candidate for top honors probably LeBron James.

They won’t know who won until June 25 — after the season.

Regardless, they could wind up adding to a recent trend.

The league MVP has played in the NBA Finals in four of the last six seasons — James and the Miami Heat won titles in 2012 and 2013, Stephen Curry and the Warriors won in 2015 and lost to Cleveland in 2016.

Matter of time

Ray Allen is still the league’s all-time leader in playoff three-pointers made, with 385.

LeBron James and Stephen Curry are coming his way.

James is No. 2 on the all-time list with 346 playoff three-pointers. Curry is No. 3 with 329 — in only 79 playoff games. Allen played in 171, and James has played in 228.

Schedulers nail it

Here’s how the NBA season began, back on Oct. 17: Boston at Cleveland, and Houston at Golden State.

Almost seven months later, the conference finals begin with Cleveland at Boston, Golden State at Houston.

Win Game 1

Winning Game 1 of any NBA playoff series is important; under this format that the

league has been using since 1984, teams that take 1-0 series leads ultimately win those matchups about 80 percent of the time.

That’s even more pronounced in this round.

Of the 68 teams that have taken 1-0 series leads in the conference finals, 57 have gone on to make the NBA Finals. But four times in the last seven years, a team has dropped Game 1 in this round and made The Finals anyway.

More days off?

The Finals start May 31.

There could be a lot of days without basketball before then.

If both series end in sweeps — unlikely, of course, but possible — the Boston-Cleveland winner would have 10 days off before The Finals and the Houston-Golden State winner would have nine.

Starting Thursday, there will be no games five times in a nine-day span. There’s no games until Sunday, and there’s no games in either series on May 17 and 18. Those needing a basketball fix on those last two days, fret not — there will be NBA Combine activities going on in Chicago.

Red Sox hand Yanks 2nd loss in 19 games

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Alex Cora watched the New York Yankees erase a late deficit for the second straight night, and the Boston Red Sox manager wasn't surprised.

"For them, it's fun to watch," he said. "For me, it's like, oh God, here we go again."

This time, the Red Sox rebounded after wasting a four-run lead for a win that seemed more important than most.

J.D. Martinez hit a tiebreaking home run against Dellin Betances leading off the eighth inning, just beyond Aaron Judge's reach at the right-field wall, and the Red Sox escaped New York with a 5-4 victory Thursday night that handed the Yankees only their second loss in 19 games.

"Definitely huge," Martinez said. "Kind of hoping that we can almost slow them down in a sense."

Boston moved back into a tie with the Yankees for the AL East lead at 26-11, the best record in the major leagues. The rivals have split six games this year and meet 13 more times but not until June 29 in the Bronx.

"You walk off there disappointed but also proud of the way the guys continue

to compete through the end and give ourselves a chance on a night when maybe it doesn't look that way," Yankees manager Aaron Boone said.

Boston built a 4-0 lead against CC Sabathia as Hanley Ramirez drove in three runs with a run-scoring groundout in the first, an RBI single in a two-run third and a homer in the fifth just before a 55-minute rain delay.

But the Yankees tied the score in the seventh after loading the bases with one out against Heath Hembree.

Joe Kelly (2-0), who served a six-game suspension for hitting the Yankees' Tyler Austin with a pitch last month, was booed loudly when he entered. Kelly forced in a run with a four-pitch walk to Brett Gardner, gave up an RBI single to Judge and a run-scoring groundout to Didi Gregorius, who is hitless in 24 at-bats. Kelly then bounced a run-scoring wild pitch off catcher Christian Vazquez.

Martinez had driven in a run in the third with a liner off the glove of second baseman Gleyber Torres that was turned into a forceout, and as he walked to the plate in the eighth, Ramirez told him to hit a home run.

"He was saying it as a joke," Martinez remembered.

No joke. Martinez sent a 97 mph fastball from Betances (1-2) to the opposite field, just over Judge's outstretched glove.

"I was like blowing, praying, doing everything I can to push it over," Martinez said.

Austin flied out on the first pitch he saw from Kelly with a runner on in the eighth. Kelly threw a called third strike past Neil Walker to end the inning with two on — the seventh Yankees batter caught looking as New York repeatedly questioned the strike zone of plate umpire Stu Scheurwater.

A night after giving up Gardner's go-ahead, two-run triple in a four-run eighth, Craig Kimbrel struck out Gardner, then retired Judge on a flyout and Gregorius on a chopper that Kimbrel snagged on the left side of the infield for his 301st career save and 10th in 12 chances this season.

"I enjoyed having the same part of the lineup up and getting another chance," Kimbrel said. "Mentally, yesterday's not going to get to me. I've blown many a save and come back the next day. It's part of my job."

MLB roundup

Ohtani leads surging Angels past Twins

Associated Press

ANAHEIM, Calif. — Shohei Ohtani hit his fifth homer and added an RBI double, and Ian Kinsler had a two-run homer among his three hits as Los Angeles defeated Minnesota 7-4 for its seventh victory in nine games.

Justin Upton also homered in his third straight game and Kole Calhoun drove in the tie-breaking run in the sixth inning as the Angels snapped Minnesota's five-game winning streak.

Brian Dozier hit a three-run homer in the sixth before Max Kepler followed with a tying solo shot for the Twins off reliever Jose Alvarez (2-0), but the Angels reclaimed the lead moments later and eventually ended Minnesota's longest streak of the season.

Mariners 9, Blue Jays 3:

Kyle Seager hit two home runs, including his fourth career grand slam, and Jean Segura had four hits as Seattle beat host Toronto.

Seager hit a two-out grand slam off left-hander J.A. Happ (4-3) in the first and a leadoff shot against Jake Petricka in the fifth, his seventh career multihomer game.

Phillies 6, Giants 3: Vince Velasquez recovered from a slow start to strike out 12 in six innings, Carlos Santana hit a three-run homer and host Philadelphia rallied past San Francisco for a four-game sweep.

Odubel Herrera added three hits and drove in two runs, extending his on-base streak to 39 games for the Phillies, who improved to 15-5 at home.

Braves 9, Marlins 2: Ozzie Albies hit visiting Atlanta's first grand slam of the season to highlight a seven-run sixth

inning, Freddie Freeman had a career-high five hits and the NL East-leading Braves beat Miami.

Atlanta has won eight straight games on the road, outscoring opponents 50-8 in that span.

Orioles 11, Royals 6: Adam Jones homered, scored three runs and had three RBIs, and host Baltimore outslugged Kansas City to emerge with its second winning streak of the season.

Manny Machado and Trey Mancini also went deep for the Orioles, who trailed 4-0 in the first inning and 6-3 in the second before rallying to beat the Royals for the second night in a row.

Brewers 5, Rockies 2: Lorenzo Cain homered on the first pitch of the game, Jhoulys Chacin kept his former team in check into the sixth inning and visiting Milwaukee beat

Colorado.

Cardinals 2, Padres 1: Miles Mikolas won his fifth straight decision to begin the season and Tommy Pham homered to help St. Louis edge host San Diego.

Mikolas (5-0) allowed one run in 6 2/3 innings against his former team, lowering his ERA to 2.51. The right-hander had never faced the Padres, who drafted him in 2009 and used him as a reliever from 2012-13.

Nationals 2, Diamondbacks 1 (11): Matt Adams singled home the tiebreaking run in the 11th inning and Washington won the opener of a four-game series in Arizona.

Reds 4, Dodgers 1: Scooter Gennett homered and drove in three runs, Tyler Mahle and three relievers combined on a four-hitter and Cincinnati beat host Los Angeles for its third straight victory.