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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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ISIS group emerges as force in West Africa

By JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — Islamic State militants in West Africa are gaining the upper hand, carving out a “proto-state” in northern Nigeria, where government forces have been overwhelmed by attacks, U.S. military officials and security analysts say.

ISIS-West Africa, which broke away from the militant group Boko Haram three years ago, continues to launch high-profile attacks that have placed the Nigerian military “under tremendous strain,” a new threat assessment by Stuttgart-based U.S. Africa Command says.

Now the group appears to be building on its battlefield gains in northeastern Nigeria and the borderlands in the Lake Chad region, from which they have launched cross-border attacks in places like Niger.

“Additionally, the group is also attempting to replace state institutions for the population under its control,” said Samantha Reho, an AFRICOM

spokeswoman, in an updated assessment of the terrorist group.

A concern is that the group’s affiliation with ISIS has the potential to provide access to “funds, fighters, weapons or other assistance from other components of the self-described Islamic State,” Reho said.

AFRICOM’s latest threat assessment echoes the findings in a new report by the International Crisis Group, which said ISIS-West Africa has succeeded in distinguishing itself from other militant groups and the Nigerian government itself when it comes to gaining the trust of local populations.

“It digs wells, polices cattle rustling, provides a modicum of health care and sometimes disciplines its own personnel whom it judges to have unacceptably abused civilians,” said the ICG report released last week.

The militants also impose taxes, which are generally accepted by communities under the group’s control, the report found. The focus on providing services has given a boost to re-

cruitment and popular support that has resulted in a “jihadist proto-state,” it said.

ISIS-West Africa is estimated to have between 3,500-5,000 fighters. Since last August, they have overrun dozens of Nigerian army bases and killed hundreds of soldiers.

AFRICOM, in its 2019 posture statement, acknowledged that Nigeria has faced “multiple setbacks” as it battles ISIS-West Africa, which “has seized military bases and materiel, including armored vehicles, weapons, and ammunition.”

With the Nigerian military under increased pressure, members of a multinational task force composed of regional militaries need “to increase their commitments, resources, troop deployments,” to counter the extremist group’s momentum, AFRICOM said.

For its part, the command says it continues to provide training to regional militaries involved in the fight against militants. The U.S. military also plans to open a new drone base

in neighboring Niger later this summer, from where it will be positioned to conduct more intelligence gathering missions.

Still, ISIS-West Africa’s continued rise comes as the U.S. has reduced the number of special operations troops in the region, where four U.S. soldiers were killed during an ambush in Niger in 2017. The U.S. has cut about 300 counterterrorism troops, mainly in western Africa, in connection with a strategy shift that calls for more focus on great-power competition, AFRICOM’s Gen. Thomas Waldhauser said last month.

However, some analysts say the effort to counter the militant group’s expansion will require more than just military power. Governments in the Lake Chad area need to find a way to deal with food and water shortages and access to health care if they are to compete with ISIS’ local appeal, the ICG report said.

US ship sails near disputed islet for 2nd time in a week

By CAITLIN DOORNBOS

Stars and Stripes

YOKOSUKA NAVAL BASE, Japan — For the second time in the past week, the United States has sent a ship into the vicinity of a South China Sea islet claimed by China, the Philippines and Taiwan.

The guided-missile destroyer USS Preble on Monday sailed within 12 nautical miles of Scarborough Shoal to “challenge excessive maritime claims and preserve access to the waterways as governed by international law,” said 7th Fleet spokesman Lt. Joe Keiley.

The Navy last week sent a U.S. vessel to an exercise in the area near the contested shoal.

The Coast Guard cutter Bertholf and two Philippine coast guard vessels practiced search-and-rescue procedures May 14 near Scarborough Shoal, according to the Navy. Chinese coast guard vessels kept watch, according to Japanese broadcaster NHK.

Competing claims in April 2012 led to a standoff between naval and coast guard vessels from the Philippines — a U.S. ally — and China at Scarborough Shoal, which lies 120 nautical miles west of the Philippine island of Luzon, according to the Center for Strategic and International Studies Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative.

China “effectively controls” Scarborough Shoal, as it has constantly kept its coast guard present at the feature since 2012, ac-

cording to the transparency initiative.

Scarborough Shoal in the past was a popular spot for Philippine fishermen before the Chinese coast guard arrived. Since then, China has barred fishermen from entering the shoal, according to the center, a nonprofit policy research group based in Washington, D.C.

Monday’s freedom-of-navigation operation came as China and the U.S. continue trade talks aimed at easing the escalating tariffs each country has imposed on the other, but Keiley said the operation was not geared toward any specific nation.

Monday’s operation was the fourth of its kind reported this year and the third to include the Preble since February.

Shrouded in secrecy

75 years after '2nd Pearl Harbor,' Hawaii's West Loch disaster still remains a mystery

BY WYATT OLSON
Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — At age 20, Pfc. Noel Mercer fought with the first wave of Marines to hit the beaches of Tarawa in the Pacific Ocean in November 1943.

The flamethrower operator survived the bloody three-day battle, which killed more than 900 men with the 2nd Marine Division, and left another 2,200 wounded.

Mercer was shipped back to Hawaii to train for the fights yet to come in the Pacific theater, but in a letter to his father, he lamented that “if all these battles are like the one I just saw, I’m not sure how I can survive this war.”

Mercer never saw battle again, but he lost his life months later in a disaster that was shrouded in secrecy for years to come.

Seventy-five years ago, on May 21, 1944, a massive chain of explosions aboard ships berthed at West Loch in Pearl Harbor left hundreds of servicemembers and civilian workers dead or injured. The disaster has been dubbed by some as the “second Pearl Harbor,” harking back to the surprise attack by the Japanese on Pearl Harbor that turned Battleship Row into a melee of fire, smoke and death.

On Tuesday, the Surface Navy Association, Afloat Training Group Middle Pacific and Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam are commemorating the lives lost during a shipboard ceremony on the waters of West Loch. One survivor and family members of survivors are slated to attend.

In the hours before the explosions, Mercer had been standing guard aboard Landing Ship Tank, or LST, 179 berthed in West

Loch as it was being loaded with ammunition, fuel and supplies. LST vessels were used to support amphibious operations by transporting tanks, cargo and troops to shores having no docks.

Twenty-nine LSTs were docked closely along six berths, with the bows of six to seven ships moored nose to nose in a star shape called “nesting,” according to a Navy account of the disaster.

The close formation of the ships proved deadly. With crews of roughly 120 men, an LST carried about 90 drums of high-octane fuel in the forward hold, 6,000 cubic feet of ammunition stored on deck and the magazines for many other weapons stored throughout.

An initial blast is believed to have come from the bow of LST 963, where soldiers had been unloading mortar ammunition at about 3 p.m., but investigators were never able to pinpoint the origin because no witnesses survived the first blast.

Flaming shrapnel landed on the other LSTs, igniting gasoline drums, setting off a chain reaction of explosions that killed about 163 men, wounded another 396, sank six LSTs and damaged several more. The number of people killed is disputed to this day.

After the disaster, Mercer’s parents received a telegram that their son was missing in the South Pacific, said Dave Mercer, the Marine’s nephew. They were later notified that he was missing and presumed dead, Mercer said. But shortly after the end of World War II, a few of Mercer’s friends from LST 179 visited his parents and talked of what they knew of his last day.

After standing guard as the ship was loaded that Sunday, Mercer was relieved of duty and went below deck to clean up with the intention of joining his friends during his time off.

“Shortly after he left them, the first explosion occurred on LST 353, which was rafted to their ship,” Dave Mercer said. “LST 179 blew up minutes later and burned for several hours, drifted into the channel and sank. Noel’s friends never saw him again.”

The media was not allowed to report on the disaster — the territory of Hawaii was under martial law at that time — and the official inquiry was top secret until being declassified in the early 1960s.

Six LSTs sank, with others badly damaged or grounded. Today, the rusty hulk of LST 480 still pokes through the surface of Pearl Harbor.

Bodies that were too badly burned to be identified were buried in 36 gravesites in the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, also called the Punchbowl cemetery, in Honolulu. The headstones originally carried only the simple inscription “Unknown,” but in recent years, the wording was changed to “Unknown, West Loch Disaster, May 21, 1944.”

Noel Mercer’s body was never identified after the disaster, and Dave Mercer believes he might be lying beneath one of those unknown gravestones. His hope is that the remains will someday be exhumed and examined by the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency.

Special Forces soldiers honor WWII fighters with jump

Stars and Stripes

About 135 Special Forces soldiers jumped from three Air Force aircraft above the ancient Mont Saint-Michel abbey in Normandy as part of the commemoration for the upcoming 75th anniversary of D-Day.

The 352nd Special Operations Wing and the 86th Airlift Wing delivered the 10th Special Forces Group (Airborne) soldiers on Saturday to the drop zone, which was a little over a mile from Mont Saint-Michel.

The event was sponsored by

the nearby town of Avranches, which was liberated by U.S. forces in 1944. The soldiers greeted the crowds and then headed to Avranches for a wreath-laying at the Gen. George S. Patton Jr. Memorial and a ceremonial toast with the town mayor.

The event Saturday recalled the original “Jedburgh” three-man teams that jumped behind enemy lines to train, arm and direct local resistance fighters.

The teams included about 300 total Allied troops from

the U.S., Britain, Free France, Belgium, Canada, the Netherlands and South Africa.

The 10th Special Forces Group draws their lineage from the Jedburghs, a senior enlisted soldier assigned to the group said, according to an Army statement.

“We’re celebrating their combined effort to liberate Western Europe with local forces,” the soldier said. “The airborne operation celebrates the long relationship between America and France and 10th SFG’s commitment to continu-

ing the tradition of training and working with our allies in Europe.”

The 10th Special Forces Group was established in 1952 and immediately afterward deployed to Europe during the Cold War, the statement said.

Mont Saint-Michel is a fortified abbey that, due to the tides, periodically turns into an island. It has been the home to monks since the 8th century.

The 75th anniversary of D-Day on June 6 is expected to draw large crowds to Normandy.

Pentagon spending on sex assault quadruples

USA Today

WASHINGTON — Pentagon spending on sexual assault prevention and response programs has quadrupled since 2008, according to figures released by the Defense Department.

Whether that investment has paid dividends depends on where you stand:

n Pentagon officials point to a long-term trend of lower estimates of sexual assaults in the ranks over the last decade.

n Critics of the military's approach to prevention, however, note that the Pentagon's report on sexual assault released recently showed a nearly 38% increase in the estimated number of sexual assaults between 2016 and 2018 — the latest period available. There were an estimated 20,500 assaults in 2018.

"I am deeply disturbed by the results of this year's survey on sexual assault in the military," said Rep. Jackie Speier, the California Democrat who chairs the Armed Services Committee's panel on personnel. "Despite the hundreds of millions of dollars the Defense Department has spent on preventing and responding to sexual assaults over the last decade, more sexual assaults occurred in fiscal year 2018 than fiscal year 2010. The number of assaults jumped 37% from two years ago."

Speier called for Congress to force the Pentagon to take more aggressive steps to curb sexual assault among troops.

Pentagon officials credit the total \$192 million investment over time for an increase in troops reporting such crimes and seeking help.

Spending increased from \$4.9 million in 2008 to \$23.2 million in 2018 for the Pentagon's Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office. Each of the armed services also funds programs to prevent, respond to and prosecute sexual assault cases.

Report: Uranium production surges in Iran amid tensions

Associated Press

TEHRAN, Iran — Iran has quadrupled its production of low-enriched uranium amid tensions with the U.S. over Tehran's unraveling nuclear accord, two semi-official news agencies reported Monday, an announcement just after President Donald Trump warned Iran it would face its "official end" if it threatened America again.

While the reports said the production is of uranium enriched only to the 3.67% limit set by the 2015 nuclear deal that Tehran reached with world powers, it means that Iran soon will go beyond the stockpile limitations established by the accord.

This follows days of heightened tensions sparked by the Trump administration's deploy-

ment of bombers and an aircraft carrier to the Persian Gulf over still-unspecified threats from Iran. While Trump's dueling approach of flattery and threats has become a hallmark of his foreign policy, the risks have only grown in dealing with Iran, where mistrust between Tehran and Washington stretch back four decades.

So far this month, officials in the United Arab Emirates alleged that four oil tankers sustained damage in a sabotage attack; Yemeni rebels allied with Iran launched a drone attack on an oil pipeline in Saudi Arabia; and U.S. diplomats relayed a warning that commercial airlines could be misidentified by Iran and attacked, something dismissed by Tehran.

All these tensions are the

culmination of Trump's decision a year ago to pull the U.S. out of Tehran's nuclear deal with world powers. While both Washington and Tehran say they don't seek war, many worry any miscalculation at this fraught moment could spiral out of control.

Both the semi-official Fars and Tasnim news agencies reported on the quadrupled production quoting Behrouz Kamalvandi, the spokesman of Iran's nuclear agency. He said the increase in production of 3.67% enriched uranium does not mean Iran increased the number of centrifuges it has in use, another requirement of the deal.

He said Iran "in weeks" would reach the 300-kilogram limit set by the nuclear deal.

Google cuts off Huawei after crackdown

The Washington Post

Google is restricting future business with Huawei, cutting off access to its Android operating system and its popular apps, after the Trump administration escalated a crackdown on the Chinese tech firm.

Google's suspension, first reported by Reuters, amounts to a major blow to the world's largest telecommunications equipment maker, which will no longer receive access and support for Google's proprietary apps like Gmail, YouTube and Chrome.

The open source version of Android will still be available to Huawei, according to the report, but the Chinese tech giant will immediately lose access to updates to the operating system. And though existing Huawei users can still download popular Google apps through the Google Play store, they won't be available on future

Huawei handsets.

People who already own Huawei phones will not see a sudden disappearance of their services.

"We are complying with the order and reviewing the implications," Google said in a statement Monday. "For users of our services, Google Play and the security protections from Google Play Protect will continue to function on existing Huawei devices."

Google's suspension is the latest blow against Huawei. Last week, the U.S. government added Huawei to its "Entity List," forcing the company to obtain a U.S. government license to buy American technology. Known to some as the "death penalty," the designation makes it virtually impossible for firms to survive once U.S. businesses cut off their dealings.

The penalty was seen as a dramatic escalation of the eco-

nomic clash between the Trump administration and China.

The Commerce Department said it had initiated the crackdown because Huawei "is engaged in activities that are contrary to U.S. national security or foreign policy interest." The Department of Justice has also accused it of violating Iran sanctions.

The listing will have an immediate effect on the telecommunications company, which has significant backing from the Chinese government. Huawei said last week that it spends more than \$1 out of every \$7 of its annual \$70 billion procurement budget buying equipment from U.S. companies. The ban could also hinder Huawei's ability to produce its latest equipment since the company relies on U.S. suppliers for components including wireless chips, antennas and handset operating software.

New sanctuary opened after South Texas church shooting

Associated Press

SUTHERLAND SPRINGS, Texas — A South Texas church began a fresh chapter of worship Sunday as it unveiled a new sanctuary a year and a half after a gunman opened fire and killed more than two dozen congregants in the deadliest mass shooting in state history.

Parishioners, elected leaders and relatives of those killed or injured at the First Baptist Church in the tiny town of Sutherland Springs gathered at the new sanctuary for its dedication. Some among the hundreds in attendance wore royal blue shirts with “#evildidnot-

win” written across the back.

In the large, white sanctuary amid a stained glass panel, Pastor Frank Pomeroy told the crowd they were celebrating God’s glory while remembering “those who have paid a price for this incredible facility.”

The church commemorated the victims by reading their names as the church bell rang, and those connected to them stood up in the crowd. Pomeroy’s 14-year-old daughter, Annabelle Pomeroy, was among those killed.

Republican Gov. Greg Abbott told the worshippers that despite the trying time since the

attack, Sunday marked another giant step forward on a path to healing and recovery.

The new worship center and memorial room honoring the victims were made possible through millions of dollars in donations from around the world. The facility features enhanced security elements, along with a new church bell tower and an additional prayer space.

A gunman shot and killed 25 people at the church on Nov. 5, 2017. Authorities put the official death toll at 26 because one of the victims was pregnant.

Brawl breaks out at Calif. government convention

Los Angeles Times

LOS ANGELES — A conference of local government officials from across California erupted into violence over the weekend when several attendees began throwing punches, with at least one person apparently knocked unconscious, according to five witnesses to the incident.

A spokesman with the Riverside County Sheriff’s Department confirmed that a brawl at the Renaissance Indian Wells Resort & Spa had been reported to police around 12:30 a.m. Saturday. Seven people were involved in “an altercation and physical battery,” said Deputy Mike Vasquez.

Police tried to identify the people involved but “none of them were cooperative,” Vasquez said. One man was hospitalized for minor injuries, he said.

It was not immediately clear who started the fight, but it involved members of the Commerce City Council and other public officials, according to a written statement from Mayor John Soria and several witnesses who spoke on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the incident.

Some witnesses said the melee involved more than seven people — including some who were trying to break up the combatants — and included political consultants, government vendors and elected officials from the Los Angeles area.

In an interview with the Los Angeles Times, Councilman Leonard Mendoza said he recalled having a heated exchange with a council colleague, Ivan Altamirano, who he said interrupted a conversation he was having.

“I asked him if he could step away, and he wouldn’t step back,” Mendoza said. “I guess he didn’t like that and it got heated and it got loud.”

Shortly after the exchange, Mendoza said, he felt a blow from behind and woke up in a hospital.

Constitutional debate on revenge porn

The Washington Post

Bethany Austin learned her fiancé had been unfaithful in late-May 2016.

After sharing a home with him for seven years, she found Matthew Rychlik was having an affair with a neighbor. The relationship was unsalvageable according to court documents; they even argued over how to call off the wedding — Rychlik wanted to tell family and friends it was mutual, Austin wanted to tell them the truth, that Rychlik was cheating on her.

But the situation escalated, and Rychlik told the world in his own way, from his own point of view. According to court documents, he spread rumors about his “crazy” fiancée and announced he was “sleeping at another girl’s house” because Austin “never cooks or does house chores,” NPR reported.

Then, Bethany Austin admits she sent friends and family a four-page letter that contained text messages between Rychlik and the neighbor, Elizabeth Dreher, including nude photos of Dreher. Austin had access to

all of their conversations and photos because she shared an iCloud account with Rychlik, court documents show. Because of that, she received all of his conversations with the neighbor on her own phone. Rychlik and Dreher acknowledged they knew this.

Austin was arrested and charged with a felony: “non-consensual dissemination of private sexual images,” otherwise known as revenge porn.

In a motion filed in March at the Supreme Court of Illinois, Austin challenged the revenge-porn law itself, calling it unconstitutional. Yes, she was a scorned woman. But according to court documents, Austin argued she was exercising “her freedom of speech.”

Appeals courts are beginning to take up cases involving the constitutionality of “revenge porn” statutes. Legislation criminalizing these actions has gained traction in most of America. Forty-five states, including Illinois, have revenge-porn laws in place.

The Constitution protects freedom of speech, even when it is “offensive or disagreeable.”

But rules have exceptions; the First Amendment does not protect certain speech, such as threats, obscenity, incitement of violence and public disclosure of private information.

If the government is imposing a restriction on a specific statement or image, it must satisfy the strictest, and often insurmountable, level of legal scrutiny. The restriction must serve a “compelling government interest” and must be as minimal as possible.

Emerging technology has created a new category of criminal cyber offenses: revenge porn (referred to as non-consensual pornography) or sextortion. These offenses enable abusers to threaten, harass and coerce their victims.

Harassment is already criminalized federally and in all 50 states. Revenge-porn laws aren’t necessary for it to be charged as such.

The Illinois Supreme Court heard arguments last week over whether the First Amendment protects “revenge porn.” A decision is expected in the upcoming months.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Car plows into picnic area; family of 4 hurt

CO LOVELAND — Authorities in Colorado said a vehicle veered off a roadway and crashed into a picnic area at a Dairy Queen, injuring a family of four.

Loveland Police Department Lt. Jeff Pyle said the accident occurred just after noon on Saturday. A witness told authorities that a driver in a Toyota Corolla was driving erratically when the car went off the road and careened into the picnic area, striking the victims as they sat at a table.

All four were taken to the hospital with injuries that weren't life-threatening.

The driver was taken into custody. Pyle said alcohol or drugs are suspected to have played a role in the accident.

Vehicle plunges down embankment; 1 killed

MN MORRIS — A man who was fishing in western Minnesota was killed when he was struck by a vehicle that struck a parked pickup truck and then plunged down an embankment.

The Stevens County Sheriff's Office said Nicholas Hervin, 32, of Morris, was fishing on Long Lake last Wednesday evening when he was hit by a vehicle driven by Joshua Dewald, 40, of Brooten.

Officials said Dewald had been driving east on County Road 10 when he drifted into the westbound lane and hit the parked pickup.

That caused Dewald's vehicle to slide sideways down the embankment.

Hervin died at a local hospital. Authorities said Dewald was arrested on several outstanding warrants.

Mayday in May: Snow leads to travel alert

ND BISMARCK — Snow in May in North Dakota is not all that unusual — and not all that much fun for some.

The North Dakota Department of Transportation on Saturday issued a travel alert for southwestern North Dakota for blowing snow. The DOT reported slippery road conditions and reduced visibility in Dickinson, Beach, Richardton and surrounding areas.

DOT spokeswoman Peggy Anderson said there were two travel alerts issued because of wintry weather in May of 2015, one for the south central part of the state and one for the north-central region.

Melrene Carlson, cashier at the County Line Truck Stop north of Dickinson, said the snow "is really coming down" and that her customers had reported numerous accidents. Carlson was taking the weather in stride because "after all, it's spring in North Dakota."

50 arrested, guns, drugs seized in bust

CT WATERBURY — Police in Connecticut said they have arrested 50 people and seized drugs and guns during an investigation that was spurred by heroin-related deaths.

Authorities in Waterbury began the raids at 5 a.m. Friday after getting 92 arrest warrants for 52 people. Officials said 135 law enforcement officials took part. Police said officers arrested 41 of the 52 people who were sought and took another nine people into custody on drug-related charges.

Officials said they seized 8 ounces of raw heroin, several thousand bags of heroin

packaged for sale, more than \$15,000 in cash, two cars, two handguns and one rifle.

State scraps old state fish record for catfish

SD SIOUX FALLS — South Dakota wildlife officials are voiding their oldest state fish record after determining that the fish had been misidentified.

State Fisheries Program Administrator Geno Adams said the 55-pound fish caught by Roy Groves in 1949 has been the subject of controversy for years. It was originally identified as a channel catfish, but many have argued that it was a blue catfish. Adams took "an informal poll" by sending the photo to experts in fish identification and to South Dakota State University fisheries professors. The group unanimously agreed it was a blue catfish.

Sculptures of illegal snare traps displayed

MI ROYAL OAK — Sculptures made from illegal snare traps that threaten wildlife in Africa are on display at the Detroit Zoo.

The exhibition "Snares to Wares: Capacity for Change" is on view at the Wildlife Interpretive Gallery at the zoo in the Detroit suburb of Royal Oak through next March. It includes works created by artisans in Uganda who live near a national park where poaching is a serious problem.

The Snares to Wares Initiative was created by students and conservationists at Michigan State University to provide alternative sources of income for people who may otherwise turn to poaching. Steel wires are often used to create the traps. Under the initiative, traps are removed and the wire is used for sculptures of animals. The

sculptures then are sold.

Big spoon sculpture targets opioid crisis

NH CONCORD — A giant spoon aimed to draw attention to the country's opioid crisis was on display this past weekend in New Hampshire.

The Concord Monitor reported that Boston artist Domenic Esposito brought the 10-foot-long spoon to Kimball Jenkins in Concord on Sunday afternoon. Esposito, who lost a family member to drug addiction, said he created the 800-pound spoon to highlight those responsible for the epidemic. He initially created a similar spoon and placed it outside Purdue Pharma, the maker of Oxycontin, in June 2018.

Van passenger impaled by tripod on freeway

CA SACRAMENTO — Authorities said somebody stole a tripod from a California Department of Transportation crew and then dropped it from an overpass onto a Sacramento freeway, impaling the lung of a passenger in a van.

The van's driver, Tim Page, told KCRA-TV that he was on Interstate 5 on Thursday morning when the tripod smashed through the glass. He said it went through his passenger's lung and popped out. The man survived but with broken ribs and a partially punctured lung.

Authorities said a 32-year-old man who they suspect threw the tripod was arrested on a warrant but may face a charge of attempted murder.

Page, who volunteers with El Dorado Veteran Resources, had picked up his passenger and another veteran from the airport.

From wire reports

STARS AND STRIPES

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Koepka holds on at PGA Championship

Associated Press

FARMINGDALE, N.Y. — Brooks Koepka should know as well as anyone that nothing in golf comes easily.

His well-documented journey to the PGA Tour took him to remote outposts like Kenya and Kazakhstan. Even after Koepka won a second straight U.S. Open last summer, which no one had done in 29 years, it didn't seem enough to be the first name mentioned among the next generation of stars.

So he spent three days setting records at Bethpage Black in the PGA Championship — the first player to shoot 63 in consecutive years in the majors, the lowest 36-hole score in major championship history and a seven-shot lead, the largest ever for 54 holes in the PGA Championship.

And then he endured the toughest day of his career Sunday, which turned into the most rewarding.

"I'm glad I've got this thing sitting next to me," Koepka said as he looked at the shiny Wanamaker Trophy. "It's very satisfying, this one. This is definitely the most satisfying of all the ones I've won."

Moments earlier, after he turned a potential meltdown into the kind of clutch play that has defined his career, Koepka draped his muscular arms around the top of the trophy and let out a deep sigh from stress and satisfaction, and then he smiled.

Koepka said at the start of the week that majors are sometimes the easiest to win.

This one should have been.

It wasn't.

His seven-shot lead was down to one with four holes to play and the No. 1 player in the world — Dustin Johnson, his best friend in golf — was piecing together the best round of a final day in 25 mph gusts that made Bethpage Black as fearsome as ever.

Koepka answered with all the right shots. Johnson faded with two bogeys. Koepka closed with a 4-over 74, the highest final round by a PGA champion in 15 years, and he didn't care how it looked.

His place in history was secure. He joined Tiger Woods as the only players to win back-to-back in the PGA Championship since it switched to stroke play in 1958. He became the only player to hold back-to-back titles in two majors at the same time.

Four years ago, he had one PGA Tour title in his first full season as a full member. Now he has four majors out of the last eight he has played, a stretch not seen since Woods won seven out of 11 after capturing the 2002 U.S. Open at Bethpage Black.

"I just don't understand why he doesn't do it more often," said Rory McIlroy, who won his four majors in a span of 15. "He obviously gets into these mindsets of the majors, and he really goes and gets into a different state. You'd obviously have to ask him. But it's awesome. It's great to watch."

Woods twice won back to back in the PGA Championship, with tight battles in 1999 and 2000, comfortable wins in 2006 and 2007. Koepka was starting to draw comparisons with Woods for the way he obliterated the competition at Bethpage Black, much like Woods used to do.

In the end, there were no style points, only the trophy.

But that trophy spoke volumes.

No sooner was the PGA Championship over than Koepka was installed as a 5-1 favorite to win the U.S. Open.

No one has won three straight U.S. Open titles since Willie Anderson in 1905. That might be all the motivation Koepka needs.

Blues on brink of Final after victory

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — From last in the league in early January all the way to the brink of their first Stanley Cup Final in nearly a half-century, it has been quite a ride for the St. Louis Blues.

A remarkable turnaround continued Sunday with perhaps their most convincing win of a charmed playoff run.

Jaden Schwartz started a dominant second period with the first of his three goals, Vladimir Tarasenko scored on a penalty shot and the Blues moved within one win of the Cup final with a 5-0 victory over the San Jose Sharks in Game 5 of the Western Conference final.

"It's probably tough to put into words," Schwartz said. "It's something that everyone's worked for and dreamed about. You don't want to look too far ahead. We all know how important and how hard that last win's going to be. It would be a dream come true."

St. Louis used a relentless forecheck to take control of the game and series in the second period, scoring twice and outshooting the beleaguered Sharks 20-6 during the frame. It also got 21 saves from Jordan Binnington in his first playoff shutout and a first-period goal from Oskar Sundqvist to overwhelm the Sharks.

Schwartz added two goals in the third for his second hat trick this postseason, becoming the first player with two in one playoff run since Johan Franzen for Detroit in 2008.

The victory gave the Blues a 3-2 series lead, the closest they've been to making the final since getting there in their first three seasons as the winner of the all-expansion Western Conference. St. Louis can earn its first trip back to the final since 1970 with a win at home in Game 6 on Tuesday night, an improbable journey for a team that was last in the standings on Jan. 2.

"We're close. We're very close right now," forward

Patrick Maroon said. "I think the guys know that. It's in the back of their heads, but we know that that's a good hockey team over there too and they're not going to give up."

Martin Jones made 35 saves for the Sharks but got little help from his teammates, who have been held to one goal in losing the past two games. San Jose now faces elimination for the third straight series, having overcome a 3-1 series deficit to Vegas in the first round and winning a Game 7 at home in the second round against Colorado.

"We've been here before," coach Peter DeBoer said. "Had to go on the road and win in Vegas in order to get to a Game 7. You're never comfortable when your back's against the wall like that, but we have been here before and found a way and I'm confident we can do that again."

San Jose got off to a spirited start in the rare afternoon contest that led to a more subdued crowd than usual at the Shark Tank. Evander Kane hit the post just 12 seconds into the game and the Sharks had the better of the play in the opening 20 minutes despite falling behind 1-0 when Sundqvist converted a turnover from a hobbled Erik Karlsson into a goal less than six minutes into the contest.

Karlsson tried to make a quick outlet under pressure but his pass went through teammate Brenden Dillon's skates, off the boards and right to Sundqvist, who beat Jones to give the Blues their fourth goal of the series from the fourth line.

The Blues then took over in the second period, putting 11 shots on goal in less than five minutes. They added to the lead when Tarasenko's shot was partially blocked. Jones then swept it away but it went right to Schwartz, who knocked it into the open net.

Schwartz added the two goals in the third, giving him 12 in the playoffs after scoring just 11 in 69 regular-season games.

Briefly

Skins' Foster carted off field at practice

ASBHBURN, Va. — Washington Redskins linebacker Reuben Foster was carted off the field Monday with an apparent left leg injury, just a few minutes into the first session of the team's offseason workouts.

Foster fell to the ground during the first practice drill — a light team scrimmage — appearing to be in significant pain as he pounded his hand against the turf. Foster remained on the ground for about 10 minutes before being lifted onto a cart and taken off with an air cast on his left leg.

Magic cites Pelinka as reason for quitting

Magic Johnson's abrupt departure from the Los Angeles Lakers' front office in April never was really explained all that well, with Johnson himself only saying that he wanted "to go back to being a businessman and helping the black community and the Latino community" and that he didn't like being "handcuffed" by NBA anti-tampering rules that prevented him from talking about players on other teams.

On Monday, however, Johnson spun an entirely different tale, mainly that he resented the "backstabbing" and "whispering" behind his back, and he pointed the finger directly at General Manager Rob Pelinka, who was hired at the same time Johnson assumed the team's presidency.

Johnson added later that his only problem was with Pelinka, whom he said was trying to undercut him with the goal of assuming his job.

Nadal tops Djokovic for Italian Open title

ROME — Rafael Nadal is right back where he wants to be.

After losing in the semifinals of three straight clay-court tournaments, Nadal dominated for stretches against his long-time rival, Novak Djokovic, in a 6-0, 4-6, 6-1 win Sunday for a record-extending ninth Italian Open title.

— Wire reports

Leonard carries Raptors in 20T

Associated Press

TORONTO — Pascal Siakam felt guilty about a pair of missed free throws and the extra minutes they added to his teammates' night.

Fortunately for Siakam and the rest of the Raptors, Kawhi Leonard didn't seem to feel any fatigue.

Leonard scored 36 points, including eight in the second overtime, and Toronto beat Milwaukee 118-112 on Sunday night to cut the Bucks' lead in the Eastern Conference finals to 2-1.

Leonard made 11 of 25 shots and went 12-for-13 at the free throw line in more than 52 minutes of action, a playoff career high.

"At the end of the game, Kawhi said he played an hour of basketball," Siakam said. "I told him 'My bad.'"

Leonard had nine rebounds and five assists despite appearing to be bothered by some leg discomfort. He said he would keep fighting and playing.

"I mean, it's 52 minutes and

it's in the playoffs, so you definitely feel it. When you play 30 minutes, you feel it still," Leonard said. "Just got to not worry about it, get my treatment and move on to the next one."

Leonard's previous career high in playoff minutes was 46, set with San Antonio against Miami in Game 6 of the NBA Finals on June 18, 2013. The Spurs lost that game in overtime, then lost Game 7 two days later.

Siakam had 25 points and 11 rebounds, Norman Powell scored 19 points before fouling out, and Marc Gasol had 16 points and 12 rebounds. The Raptors will try to draw even when they host Game 4 on Tuesday night.

Giannis Antetokounmpo had 12 points and 23 rebounds before fouling out with 4:24 to go in the second overtime. Antetokounmpo shot 5-for-16.

"They were just playing better than us," Antetokounmpo said. "Whenever we got close, they'd hit some shots and take the lead back to seven or eight. At the end of the day, it wasn't

our best game. We can get a lot better."

Toronto won despite guards Kyle Lowry and Powell both fouling out in the fourth quarter. Siakam also missed a pair of free throws with 7.4 seconds left in regulation that could have iced the game for the Raptors.

"It's tough," Siakam said. "Those are shots that you practice and think about every day."

Siakam redeemed himself by blocking a potential tying shot by Brook Lopez with 43 seconds to go in the second overtime, leading to a layup for Leonard that put Toronto up 114-110 with just over 30 seconds to play.

George Hill scored 24 points and Malcolm Brogdon had 20 for the Bucks, who lost for the first time in five road games this postseason. Milwaukee is 10-2 overall in the playoffs.

"We were right on the cusp of winning a game when we didn't play that well," Bucks coach Mike Budenholzer said.

Alonso, McLaren bumped at Indy

Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Fernando Alonso and McLaren missed the Indianapolis 500 after a 23-year-old American in a rebuilt race car for an underfunded team snagged the final spot in the field.

Kyle Kaiser bumped Alonso out of "The Greatest Spectacle in Racing" by .02 mph in the "Last Row Shootout" to set the 33-driver field. All the attention was on McLaren, which leaned on Andretti Autosport, Team Penske, Chevrolet and anyone who would help in an effort to get the two-time Formula One champion into the race.

Alonso made his final qualifying attempt Sunday on a cold track for an undermatched McLaren group and only had to beat three other drivers to make the race. It seemed he

had enough until Sage Karam jumped to the top of the running order and Alonso fell to the bubble.

Max Chilton and Patricio O'Ward were both eliminated, and that left only Kaiser to keep the Spaniard out of the race.

Nothing to worry about, right?

Hardly.

Kaiser turned four nearly flawless laps to claim that final spot. Alonso, swarmed by fans and media as he tried to watch Kaiser's qualifying lap, saw the final speed, hopped on a waiting golf cart and was driven away.

"I don't think I can wrap my mind around what we just did," Kaiser said.

Karam and James Hinchcliffe, who crashed in Saturday

qualifying and needed a back-up, took the other two qualifying spots.

Simon Pagenaud put Roger Penske back on the pole for the Indianapolis 500. And he may not be finished.

Pagenaud traded high-fives and pumped his fist along pit row after earning the first Indy pole by a French driver in a century. He had a four-lap qualifying average of 229.992 mph to edge Ed Carpenter and Spencer Pigot and give Chevrolet a clean sweep of the front row for next Sunday's race.

"Watching him run in that road race, in the water, I've never seen a run like that in my life," Penske said after the team captured its 266th Indy-Car pole. "And then to come out here and win the pole? We've got great momentum."

Red Sox top streaking Astros, avoid sweep

Associated Press

BOSTON — Michael Chavis pointed to a young boy in the press box, letting him know how impressed he was that a 5-year-old announced his name so well.

Boston's rookie sparkplug then stepped to the plate and gave the kid something extra to be excited about.

Chavis homered on the next pitch after acknowledging the boy, Xander Bogaerts hit a tie-breaking double in the seventh inning and the Red Sox averted a series sweep against Houston with a 4-3 victory Sunday that snapped the Astros' 10-game winning streak.

"I heard a kid's voice and I looked up and I was so surprised," Chavis said after hitting his eighth homer in 25 major league games. "I was impressed how confident he was. When I was a kid, I don't think I would have even done it. Right before I got in the box, I thought I should say good job."

For an inning on Sundays, the Red Sox have kids announce players' names as they walk up to the plate.

Mookie Betts scored three runs for Boston, which lost the first two games in the first meeting with the Astros since beating them in the 2018 AL Championship Series.

Carlos Correa hit a two-run homer off Chris Sale for Houston, which is 13-4 in May.

"They played better today, they outhit us, but our at-bats against Sale were good," Astros manager AJ Hinch said. "We'll see him again in five days."

Houston outfielder George Springer, who began the day leading the American League with 17 homers, exited in the fifth with lower back stiffness. He took three big swings in the first inning, striking out. On the last two, Springer appeared to reach briefly for the lower right side of his back. He also struck out swinging his next two times up against Sale.

"My back stiffened up," Springer said. "Not necessarily ideal. We'll see what happens. Hopefully, I'll feel better (Monday)."

Hinch said Springer will be re-evaluated in Houston and won't play Monday night.

In the seventh, Bogaerts' double off Framber Valdez (1-2) to deep left-center scored Betts scored from first base.

Sale struck out 10 in 5¹/₃ innings, giving up three runs and four hits with five walks. In his previous start, he became the first major league pitcher to strike out 17 batters in seven innings.

"It was kind of a weird day," he said. "I was kind of all over the place."

Marcus Walden (6-0) escaped a bases-loaded, one-out jam and tossed 1²/₃ scoreless innings of relief. Brandon Workman got three outs for his first career save.

Trailing 3-1 in the fifth, the Red Sox scored twice with two outs against Wade Miley. Chavis

homered over the Green Monster. Betts then doubled and scored on Bogaerts' single, a pop fly that dropped in shallow right field after second baseman Yuli Gurriel drifted out for it and got twisted around.

Correa drove a 94 mph fastball an estimated 448 feet into the center field bleachers, making it 3-1 in the third.

Miley gave up three runs in five innings.

Chavis batted leadoff for the first time, going 2-for-4.

"Just watching the other side, why not?" Red Sox manager Alex Cora said in reference to Springer, the Astros' leadoff hitter. "Swing hard and hit it out of the ballpark. We'll see what happens."

The move gave Boston six right-handed batters at the top of the order against Miley, a lefty.

Asked if he was excited after the game, Chavis said: "Yeah, of course. That probably means I'm going to get more at-bats. It's awesome."

Roundup

Cubs' Cishek comes through against Nats

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The Chicago Cubs had watched most of their five-run lead against the Washington Nationals dissipate by the time Steve Cishek entered Sunday night's game in the seventh inning.

Cishek closed it out, pitching 2¹/₃ scoreless innings for his fourth save as the Cubs held on for a 6-5 win.

Chicago led 6-1 before Washington closed to within one on a three-run homer by Anthony Rendon in the sixth inning and a solo home run by Howie Kendrick in the seventh.

Cishek retired Rendon with a man on to end the seventh and allowed a single in the eighth before a 1-2-3 ninth.

Anthony Rizzo homered and Albert Almora Jr. had three hits for the Cubs, who took two

of three from the Nationals and improved to 10-1-1 in their past 12 series.

Yankees 13, Rays 5: Brett Gardner homered early, then got two hits during a seven-run burst in the sixth inning fueled by five walks that sent host New York past Tampa Bay.

Phillies 7, Rockies 5: Bryce Harper homered for the second straight day and pinch-hitter J.T. Realmuto also went deep as host Philadelphia completed a three-game sweep of Colorado.

Marlins 3, Mets 0: Sandy Alcantara threw a two-hitter in a pitching duel with Noah Syndergaard, and Miami beat visiting New York to finish a three-game sweep.

Brewers 3, Braves 2 (10): Ben Gamel led off the 10th inning with a homer that lifted visiting Milwaukee over Atlanta.

All five runs in the game came on homers.

Dodgers 8, Reds 3: Hyun-Jin Ryu threw seven shutout innings to extend his major league-leading streak to 31, and Cody Bellinger hit his 17th homer as Los Angeles defeated host Cincinnati.

Indians, 10, Orioles 0: Shane Bieber struck out a career-high 15 in his first major league complete game and Cleveland routed visiting Baltimore.

Blue Jays 5, White Sox 2: Vladimir Guerrero Jr. hit another home run, Danny Jansen and Billy McKinney also connected, and Toronto beat host Chicago.

Rangers 5, Cardinals 4 (10): Nomar Mazara hit a sacrifice fly off reliever Carlos Martinez to cap a two-run rally in the 10th inning that lifted Texas

over visiting St. Louis.

Royals 5, Angels 1: Danny Duffy won his third straight start and Kansas City beat host Los Angeles to stop a four-game skid.

Mariners 7, Twins 4: Edwin Encarnacion hit a three-run homer in the seventh inning to help host Seattle snap Minnesota's five-game winning streak.

Giants 3, Diamondbacks 2 (10): Pablo Sandoval opened the 10th inning with a pinch-hit homer after shortstop Brandon Crawford made a game-saving stop in the ninth, sending San Francisco past host Arizona.

Pirates 6, Padres 4: Colin Moran hit a three-run homer and finished with four RBIs, and Joe Musgrove beat his hometown Padres for the second time in two seasons as Pittsburgh beat host San Diego.