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Friday, November 16, 2018

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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Judge allows lawsuit by vets with PTSD

Associated Press

HARTFORD, Conn. — Thousands of Navy and Marine Corps veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan who developed post-traumatic stress disorder but were denied Veterans Affairs health benefits have been given a green light to sue the military, under a ruling by a federal judge in Connecticut.

Senior U.S. District Judge Charles Haight Jr. in New Haven on Thursday certified a class-action lawsuit against Navy Secretary Richard Spencer by veterans who say they were unfairly given less-than-honorable discharges for minor infractions linked to their untreated mental health problems.

The discharge designation prevents them from getting VA benefits including mental health treatment.

"This decision is a victory for the tens of thousands of military veterans suffering from service-connected PTSD and TBI (traumatic brain injury)," lead plaintiff and Marine veteran Tyson Manker, of Jacksonville, Ill., said in a statement Friday. "The fact that the Court has now recognized this class of veterans is further evidence of the Department of Defense's disgraceful violation of the legal rights of the men and women who have served their country."

Manker developed PTSD after serving in the 2003 invasion of Iraq and received an other-than-honorable discharge for a single incident of self-medicating with an illegal drug, according to the lawsuit. The Naval Discharge Review Board rejected his request for

a discharge upgrade, as it has done with similar applications by thousands of other veterans.

Navy officials did not immediately return messages seeking comment Friday.

The Connecticut U.S. Attorney's Office, which is defending the Navy against the lawsuit, declined to comment.

In a court filing, a federal prosecutor listed several reasons why a class-action lawsuit should be rejected, including that the plaintiffs could reapply for discharge upgrades under new rules put in place last year that call for more leniency for veterans with mental health problems.

Yale Law School students are representing the veterans and have filed a similar lawsuit against the Army. They say nearly a third of the more than 2 million Americans who served in Iraq or Afghanistan suffer from PTSD and related mental health conditions and the military is issuing less-than-honorable discharges at historically high rates, often for minor infractions attributable to undiagnosed mental illness.

Last year, the discharge review boards for the Army and Air Force granted about 51 percent of discharge upgrade applications involving PTSD, while the Navy board granted only 16 percent. Haight called the discrepancy "stark."

"We filed this lawsuit to make sure that the Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with service-connected PTSD do not suffer the same injustices as the Vietnam generation," said Garry Monk, executive director of the veterans group.

Pentagon to cut hundreds of US troops in Africa amid evolving mission

BY JOHN VANDIVER

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The Pentagon said it will cut about 10 percent of its force in Africa, with most reductions focused on slashing the numbers of troops providing tactical help to local soldiers in the western part of the continent.

The decision, which comes a year after four U.S. soldiers were killed in a counterterrorism mission gone awry in Niger, means U.S. Africa Command will rely more on intelligence and surveillance operations in the region.

The U.S. has about 7,200 troops operating in Africa. The coming reductions, about 700 in all, will happen over the course of the "next several years" the Pentagon said Thursday.

The change in strategy "preserves the majority of U.S. security cooperation partnerships and programs in Africa to strengthen partner networks, enhance partner capability and support ongoing programs," the statement said.

Counterterrorism missions based out of Somalia, Djibouti and Libya will largely remain unchanged, it said. In western Africa, the "emphasis shifts from tactical assistance to advising, assisting, liaising, and sharing intelligence."

The U.S. is developing a new drone base in Niger that is expected to give a boost to surveillance capabilities stretching into Mali and Libya, which could reduce the need for ground troops. Earlier this year, the U.S. also was given permission to conduct armed drone flights out of Niger.

So far, no airstrikes have been launched in either Niger or Mali, AFRICOM said Friday.

AFRICOM's new drone site in Agadez, Niger, is expected to be operational by mid-2019.

Counterterrorism operations in Somalia have been the main effort for AFRICOM during the past year. Dozens of airstrikes have been launched in the country and U.S. special operations forces serve as advisers to government troops in their battle against Islamic militants.

In Western Africa, the military mission also has grown during the past two years. However, last year's deadly ambush in Niger, launched by militants against a U.S. special operations team, brought scrutiny to the mission and raised questions about whether U.S. troops were taking unnecessary risks in the that area.

An AFRICOM investigation found that special operations forces serving as advisers to Nigerien troops were poorly trained for their mission. Several troops were issued reprimands in the wake of the ambush, including U.S. Special Operations Command Africa boss Maj. Gen. Marcus Hicks, who was faulted for insufficient oversight of his subordinate officers.

While there are various Islamic militant groups that operate in and around Niger, military officials have acknowledged none currently pose a direct threat to the U.S.

The coming force reduction in Africa also comes as the Pentagon moves forward with a new strategy focused on "great power competition," which emphasizes countering Russia and China, and places less importance on countering obscure terrorist groups in remote corners of Africa.

Families of slain Green Berets sue Jordan

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The families of three Green Berets killed by a member of the Jordanian Air Force as they entered a base in Jordan filed a lawsuit against that country's government, charging it attempted to cover up the incident and slander their fallen sons.

The lawsuit filed in U.S. District Court in Washington seeks monetary damages from the Kingdom of Jordan, where the Special Forces soldiers were stationed when they

were gunned down Nov. 4, 2016, by Jordanian Air Force 1st Sgt. Maarik al-Tawayha. The Green Berets — Staff Sgts. Matt Lewellen, Kevin McEnroe and Jimmy Moriarty — were driving onto King Faisal Air Base in southern Jordan at midday after training Syrian rebel forces when al-Tawayha inexplicably opened fire on them.

"Their families seek justice for their unnecessary deaths and believe that the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan aided and abetted this terrorist act by seeking to silence the families and hiding behind the de-

fense that the Jordanian soldier who hunted down and brutally murdered their loved ones was acting within the internationally accepted rules of engagement," the lawsuit reads. It does not seek a specific amount of money, said John Eubanks, a lawyer with the firm Motley Rice, which brought the suit.

Though al-Tawayha was charged with their murders months after the attack and in July 2017 was sentenced to life in prison, the fathers of the slain soldiers told reporters in Washington on Friday that it was not enough. The convicted killer

never revealed his motivation for the attacks.

The families alleged the government of Jordan, a key U.S. ally, quickly began a campaign to blame the American soldiers for the incident, initially telling their state news organization that the Green Berets failed to follow protocol to enter the base. Later, the families charge, the Jordanian government launched a "whisper campaign" accusing Lewellen, McEnroe and Moriarty of being intoxicated when they attempted to enter the base and also accused them of accidentally discharging a firearm.

Army probing abuse claims at Fort Riley

By CHAD GARLAND

Stars and Stripes

The Army is investigating a Fort Riley soldier's claims he was subjected to physical punishment that left him seriously injured.

"It was probably the most terrifying experience of my entire life," Pvt. Tanner Frederick, a soldier in the Army's 1st Infantry Division, told Cleveland television station WOIO.

While Frederick's infantry was at Fort

Polk, La., undergoing urban combat training. The private said a noncommissioned officer slammed his head into the ground several times, causing him a traumatic brain injury and a broken nose.

This spring, a broad Pentagon order addressing all forms of harassment within the ranks required each service to report data for a first-of-its-kind report on hazing and bullying due on Dec. 1.

Frederick, who had been in the Army six months, said he was "getting smoked" for discussing his plans to report misconduct

and hazing. But the physical punishment went on too long, and his team leader took things too far.

After what he said were hours in the pushup position, he collapsed and was barely conscious. But a corporal wouldn't let him quit and kept pushing him.

"He put one hand on the back of my neck, he put one hand in my hair, he lifted my head and I couldn't move," Frederick said. "He slammed my head into the ground. He completely smashed my head into the ground. I thought he was going to kill me."

Seals, Marines charged in Green Beret's death

By COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Military prosecutors levied a slew of charges including murder against four U.S. special operators who they accused of strangling to death a Green Beret last year while they were on a deployment in West Africa.

Two Navy SEALs and two Marine Raiders face several charges including felony murder, involuntary manslaughter, conspiracy, obstruction of justice, hazing and burglary in the June 2017 death of Army Staff Sgt. Logan Melgar in Bamako,

Mali, according to military charging documents released Thursday.

The names of the individuals charged in the Special Forces soldier's death were redacted in those documents. They were identified only as a Marine gunnery sergeant and staff sergeant assigned to Marine Corps Forces Special Operations Command and two Navy chief petty officers assigned to the Naval Special Warfare Development Group, better known as SEAL Team 6. The Marines were based at Camp Lejeune in North Carolina and the SEALs in Virginia Beach.

The charges were approved Wednesday by Rear Adm. Charles Rock, the commander of Navy Region Mid-Atlantic, following the completion of an investigation into Melgar's death, according to the Navy. The four are scheduled to appear in court for an Article 32 preliminary hearing on Dec. 10.

The Naval Criminal Investigative Service recently completed the investigation and turned it over to Rock, said Adam Stump, a spokesman for NCIS. He declined to provide additional information Thurs-

day about the investigation that took more than one year to complete.

The charging documents provide the most detailed account to date about the alleged killing of Melgar, an incident Pentagon officials have long declined to discuss on the record other than to acknowledge the soldier's death.

Melgar and the four accused servicemembers were assigned to a secretive special operations team operating out of Mali's capital to help French and Malian troops target terrorist cells aligned with al-Qaida and the Islamic State.

Pentagon \$1 billion audit finds many failures

BY CAITLIN M. KENNEY

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON— The Defense Department has spent nearly \$1 billion on its first agency-wide audit, which has revealed widespread problems with cybersecurity, Pentagon officials said Thursday.

“We failed the audit. But we never expected to pass it,” Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan told reporters at the Pentagon about the audit, which took nearly a year to complete.

Shanahan said the audit, which began in December 2017, revealed many issues including inventory accuracy and complying with cybersecurity discipline. The audit itself cost \$413 million. But in addition, the Pentagon has spent \$406 million on audit

remediation and \$153 million on financial system fixes.

With \$2.7 trillion in assets and \$2.6 trillion in liabilities, David Norquist, the Defense Department’s comptroller, said he thinks this is the largest financial statement audit ever undertaken.

About 1,200 auditors from nine independent public accounting firms and staffers from the department’s Office of the Inspector General conducted 900 site visits at more than 600 department locations, including military bases, warehouses and depots, he said. The audit report is 236 pages.

“Fifty-five percent of the department’s assets and liabilities were under audit for the very first time this year,” Norquist said.

The auditors used statically valid sam-

ples to look at the accuracy and completeness of count, location, and condition of military equipment, property such as buildings, and inventory, he said. They also tested the security of the department’s business systems, such as finance and personnel records.

The Office of the Inspector General gave an overall opinion of “disclaimer” on the reports provided by the auditors. In a statement, the inspector general said it was because they “could not obtain sufficient appropriate evidence on which to base an audit opinion.” Audit opinions are given as “unmodified” or “clean” are the best, then “modified,” followed by “disclaimer,” and “adverse” as the worst opinion. The inspector general’s opinion is factored into the audit report.

Lawmakers demand information on GI Bill delays

BY NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Department of Veterans Affairs officials contended Thursday delays in housing payments weren’t causing rampant hardships for student veterans, though at the same time they admitted thousands were still waiting for their stipends and the agency had received credible complaints from veterans facing eviction.

VA officials were summoned to Capitol Hill to explain widespread delays in GI Bill payments this semester caused by information technology issues. VA Undersecretary of Benefits Paul Lawrence was defensive at times during the hearing and engaged in tense exchanges with lawmakers

on the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs subpanel on economic opportunity. During his testimony to committee members, Lawrence made a point to call out an “allegation of widespread veteran homelessness due to missed payments.” That allegation “is false,” he said.

Later in the hearing, another VA official noted the agency had received confirmed cases of veterans being evicted because of the delays. Robert Worley, director of VA education services, said the cases were “very few” in number.

Rep. Beto O’Rourke, D-Texas, described the VA’s response to the problem as “not very encouraging.”

“I think you failed to account for the scope of the problem, minimized the prob-

lem and tried to remind us [the Veterans Benefits Administration] is doing great work in many cases,” O’Rourke said. “But there’s the very real problem that veterans who have earned these benefits are not receiving the payments they need to complete their education.”

The problems started when the VA began to implement measures from the Forever GI Bill — legislation that Congress passed last year to expand veterans’ education benefits. Part of the legislation called for a change to how veterans’ housing allowances are calculated. When the VA went to alter its information technology systems to account for the change, the systems failed.

The errors caused incorrect payments to go out, as well as widespread delays.

Trump responds to criticism with military, vet events

BY CLAUDIA GRISALES

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Donald Trump, slammed with a barrage of criticism for skipping ceremonies honoring the military veterans in Paris and Washington during the Veterans Day weekend, hosted several events Thursday focusing on current and former servicemembers.

In brief remarks during a daylong White House conference, Trump took credit for several ongoing programs and accomplishments that serve the military and veterans.

“Fact is, I’ve done a lot,” he said to a

filled auditorium at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building just west of The White House. “I’ve done so much I could leave now.”

In addition to conference attendees, several White House officials were present in the South Auditorium during the remarks, including adviser Kellyanne Conway and Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert Wilkie. Trump remarked Wilkie was “doing a great job.”

“This is a tremendously important group of people to me, America’s veterans. These are special people,” Trump said in welcoming conference for guests including Labor

Secretary Alex Acosta.

Trump claimed he was overseeing a great economy, lauded the veterans’ unemployment rate and praised the VA Accountability Act signed into law last year and the VA Choice program, an effort passed in 2014 to let veterans seek private medical care, which was expanded through the VA Mission Act this year.

He also praised other efforts, such as the White House veterans hotline center in Shepherdstown, W. Va., launched under his administration. However, the hotline is not operated by the White House but instead it is handled by VA employees.

Source: Mueller investigation to continue

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Acting Attorney General Matthew Whitaker has told Republican Sen. Lindsey Graham in a meeting that special counsel Robert Mueller's investigation will proceed, according to a person familiar with the meeting.

The meeting with Graham and Whitaker Thursday came as a bipartisan group of senators is pushing legislation to protect Mueller's job. The senators are concerned about Whitaker's past criticism of the Mueller probe, which is looking at Russian interference in the 2016 election and ties to President Donald Trump's

campaign. Trump appointed Whitaker acting attorney general last week.

Whitaker told Graham the investigation would be allowed to proceed, the person said. The person wasn't authorized to speak publicly about the meeting and spoke to The Associated Press on condition of anonymity.

Senate Democratic leader Chuck Schumer and other Democrats have called for Whitaker to recuse himself from overseeing the Mueller investigation.

A Justice Department spokeswoman said earlier this week that Whitaker will follow Justice Department protocols

and consult with senior ethics officials "on his oversight responsibilities and matters that may warrant recusal."

Democrats have also called for a special counsel bill to be added to a year-end spending bill that must pass in December to avoid a partial government shutdown. The bipartisan legislation, introduced more than a year ago, would give any special counsel a 10-day window to seek expedited judicial review of a firing and put into law existing Justice Department regulations that a special counsel can be fired only for good cause.

On Wednesday, Republican Sen. Jeff Flake, of Arizona, said

he would not vote to confirm judicial nominees unless GOP leaders hold a vote on the Mueller protection legislation.

Whitaker is now overseeing the Mueller probe, which had previously been overseen by Deputy Attorney General Rod Rosenstein. Rosenstein told Congress that he saw no reason to fire Mueller.

Recently ousted Attorney General Jeff Sessions had recused himself from overseeing Mueller because he had worked on Trump's Republican campaign — a decision that infuriated Trump and led to Sessions resigning at the president's request.

Fire death toll hits 63; hundreds still missing

Associated Press

CHICO, Calif. — At least 63 people are now dead from a Northern California wildfire, and officials say they have a missing persons list with 631 names on it in an ever-evolving accounting of the victims of the nation's deadliest wildfire in a century.

The high number of missing people probably includes some who fled the blaze and don't realize they've been reported missing, Butte County Sheriff Kory Honea said. He said he's making the list public so people can see if they are on it and let authorities know they survived.

"The chaos that we were dealing with was extraordinary," Honea said of the early crisis hours last week. "Now we're trying to go back out and make sure that we're accounting for everyone."

Some 52,000 people have been displaced to shelters, the homes of friends and relatives, to motels — and to a Walmart parking lot and an adjacent field in Chico, a dozen miles away from the ashes.

At the vast shelter parking

lot, evacuees from California's deadliest fire wonder if they still have homes, if their neighbors are still alive — and where they will go when their place of refuge shuts down in a matter of days.

The Northern California fire that began a week earlier obliterated the town of Paradise. Searchers have pulled bodies from incinerated homes and cremated cars, but in many cases, the victims may have been reduced to bits of bones and ash. The latest toll: 63 dead and 9,800 homes destroyed.

At the other end of the state, more residents were being allowed back into the zone of a wildfire that torched an area the size of Denver west of Los Angeles. The fire was 62 percent contained after destroying nearly 550 homes and other buildings. At least three deaths were reported.

Air quality across large swaths of California remains so poor due to huge plumes of smoke that schools from Sacramento to the Pacific Coast were closed on Friday, and San Francisco's iconic open-air cable cars were pulled off the streets.

Florida's Senate race headed to hand recount

Associated Press

TALLAHASSEE, Fla. — Florida's acrimonious U.S. Senate contest is headed to a legally required hand recount after an initial review by ballot-counting machines showed Republican Gov. Rick Scott and Democratic Sen. Bill Nelson separated by fewer than 13,000 votes.

The contest for governor between Republican Ron DeSantis and Democrat Andrew Gillum appeared all but over Thursday, with a machine recount showing DeSantis with a large enough advantage over Gillum to avoid a hand recount in that race.

Gillum, who conceded on Election Night only to retract his concession later, said in a statement, saying that "it is not over until every legally casted vote is counted."

The recount has been fraught with problems. One large Democratic stronghold in South Florida was unable to finish its machine recount by the Thursday deadline due to machines breaking down. A federal judge rejected a request to extend the recount deadline.

Meanwhile, election officials in another urban county in the Tampa Bay area decided against turning in the results of their machine recount, which came up with 846 fewer votes than originally counted. And media in South Florida reported that Broward County finished its machine recount but missed the deadline by a few minutes.

Counties were ordered last weekend to conduct a machine recount of three statewide races because the margins were so tight. The next stage is a manual review of ballots that were not counted by machines to see if there is a way to figure out voter intent.

Scott called on Nelson to end the recount battle.

It's time for Nelson "to respect the will of the voters and graciously bring this process to an end rather than proceed with yet another count of the votes — which will yield the same result and bring more embarrassment to the state that we both love and have served," the governor's statement said.

Six election-related lawsuits are pending in federal court in Tallahassee.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Pair of Thanksgiving turkeys headed for DC

SD HURON — South Dakota is readying a pair of turkeys raised for the White House's Thanksgiving meal to make the ceremonious journey to Washington D.C., where the white-feathered birds will likely receive a presidential pardon.

The Daily Republic reports that tourism officials in the birds' hometown of Huron paraded the turkeys around the city on Wednesday as part of a formal send-off. This year marks the first time South Dakota has been chosen to present a gobbler to the president as part of the 70-year tradition.

The 40-pound birds will be packed into a sport utility vehicle Saturday and driven 1,400 miles to the nation's capital, where they're scheduled to arrive at a five-star hotel Sunday. The turkeys will be "interviewed" at a press day on Monday. The pardoning ceremony will be held Tuesday.

Parents charged with using kids' identity

NY BATH — A couple has been charged with identity theft after the man's son applied for a college loan and discovered his credit rating had been ruined by unpaid utility bills and credit card debts.

New York State Police on Thursday say 44-year-old Thomas Cash and his wife, 39-year-old Alisha Cash, were arrested in Madison County, Ala., and extradited to face fraud charges in New York. Both are in Steuben County Jail.

Investigators say the couple opened numerous accounts over five years while living in Hammondsport, N.Y., using the identities of their three children under 18 who didn't live with them.

Police say they racked up nearly \$10,000 in unpaid utility bills. The children were unaware of the scheme until one applied for a loan.

Police help corral 'unruly' runaway pig

ME PALMYRA — Maine State Police say they helped corral a rather "unruly" pig on the run along Interstate 95.

State police say in a Facebook post they were alerted to the "uncooperative" pig along the interstate in Palmyra on Wednesday.

Police say the pig was spotted several times over the past week, but had managed to elude capture.

Authorities say Cpt. Rick Moody and Trooper Jeremy Caron moved the pig off the highway with the help of a town animal control officer.

Rock buttress falls above overlook

WY JACKSON — A rock buttress tumbled down above the popular Hidden Falls Overlook in Grand Teton National Park, about four months after it developed a crack.

Park spokeswoman Denise Germann said Wednesday that the overlook was not damaged. Park officials concluded that seasonal weathering likely induced the collapse. Based on snow cover, park staff estimate the rock likely crumbled sometime before a Nov. 4 snowstorm.

Chief slips on ice, accidentally shot

MI CARLETON — An official says the police chief of a small southeastern Michigan community was ac-

cidentally shot in the foot after he slipped on ice and his gun discharged.

Carleton Village President Larry Buckingham tells the Monroe News that Chief Roy Johnson was taken to a hospital Thursday with what was described as a "minor gunshot wound." The newspaper says he's expected to be OK.

Carleton police were responding to a breaking and entering call in the village about 25 miles southwest of Detroit when Johnson slipped.

A suspect in the break-in was apprehended.

No damage reported following earthquake

ID BLACKFOOT — Authorities in southeastern Idaho say there are no reports of damage following a 3.8-magnitude earthquake.

The U.S. Geological Survey says the temblor struck at about 2:30 a.m. Thursday about 7 miles east of Soda Springs.

The Soda Springs Police Department says no one reported any damage.

U.S. Geological Survey geophysicist Julie Dutton says small earthquakes occur in the area, but a 3.8-magnitude quake is larger than usual.

Man carrying weed whacker shuts schools

UT CEDAR CITY — Three schools in Cedar City were put on lockdown after a driver reported seeing a man carrying an assault rifle in the area, but responding police quickly found a man fitting the description but carrying a weed whacker.

The Spectrum reports that the man was doing yard work at townhomes when the incident occurred Wednesday and that the lockdowns at Canyon View High, Canyon View Middle and

Fiddler's Canyon Elementary lasted about 30 minutes.

The intersection where the driver reported seeing a balding white man in his 40s with a rifle is within a half-mile 0.5 mile of all three schools.

Iron County School District Superintendent Shannon Delaney said school personnel are more cautionary and alert because of school shootings and mass shootings around the country.

Police looking for man who stole donations

WV ST. ALBANS — Police in West Virginia say they are looking for a man who stole a large donation bin meant for the Children's Miracle Network.

St. Albans Police Department spokesman Levi Pardee told news outlets on Wednesday that security footage shows a man going into a Dairy Queen, picking up the bin while no one was at the register and walking out with it.

Pardee says the funds donated go to help children in the community.

He said the bin was supposed to be collected in a couple of weeks and he thinks there was about \$200 inside it.

Deputies arrest man in animal neglect case

OR SHERWOOD — Authorities arrested a man on animal neglect charges after deputies served a search warrant at a home southwest of Portland and found dogs in crates that could barely walk.

KATU-TV reports deputies arrested Russell Fernandez Tuesday on six counts of animal neglect and one count of possessing dog fighting paraphernalia.

From wire reports

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Yelich, Betts earn league MVP awards

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Mookie Betts is ready to become an ambassador for baseball, now that he's won a batting title, World Series and Most Valuable Player award with Boston.

"I enjoy being kind of a face around the game. I've kind of used this pedestal or whatever you want to say to spread knowledge that the game is fun," he said Thursday after his runaway victory for the AL MVP award.

Milwaukee's Christian Yelich was close to a unanimous pick for the NL honor. A 26-year-old outfielder just like Betts, Yelich also won a batting championship and led his team to a division title. But while Betts has been with the Red Sox since he signed after the 2011 amateur draft, Yelich didn't join the Brewers until he was dealt to Milwaukee last January by the payroll-paring Miami Marlins.

"I'm thankful it all worked out because being traded, you never know how it's going to be," Yelich said. "Luckily for myself, it all went amazing."

Yelich is signed through 2021 and his deal includes a team option for the following season. Betts didn't want to speculate whether he would be a Red Sox lifer, like former Boston MVPs Ted Williams, Carl Yastrzemski and Jim Rice. Betts can become a free agent after the 2020 season.

"Right now I'm just focusing on the 2019 season coming up," he said.

Betts received 28 first-place votes and 410 points from the Baseball Writers' As-

sociation of America.

Los Angeles Angels outfielder Mike Trout, a two-time MVP, followed with one first-place vote and 265 points. Trout tied the record of four second-place finishes shared by Stan Musial, Williams and Albert Pujols. Trout won in 2014 and 2016, finished second in '12, '13 and '15, and was fourth in 2017.

Cleveland third baseman Jose Ramirez was third with 208 points, and Red Sox designated hitter J.D. Martinez was next with one first and 198 points.

Betts hit a major league-leading .346 with 32 homers, 80 RBIs, 42 doubles and 30 stolen bases as the leadoff hitter for the Red Sox, who won a team-record 108 games and their fourth World Series title in 15 seasons. Votes were submitted before the postseason.

Betts, second to Trout in the 2016 vote, raised his profile when he fed homeless people on the steps of Boston's Public Library after the second game of the World Series. Unlike some baseball players, he doesn't eschew off-the-field limelight. Commissioner Rob Manfred criticized Trout during the All-Star Game for not making enough of a marketing effort.

"I definitely think it's pretty cool in some settings," he said, "and in some setting settings I just kind of want to be with my family."

Both batting champions won MVP awards for the first time since San Francisco's Buster Posey and Detroit's Miguel Cabrera in 2012.

Yelich got 29 first-place votes and 415

points, and the other first-place vote went to New York Mets pitcher Jacob deGrom, the NL Cy Young Award winner, who finished fifth. Chicago Cubs infielder Javier Baez was second with 250 points, followed by Colorado third baseman Nolan Arenado with 203.

Yelich won the first batting title in Brewers history with a .326 average. He set career highs with 36 homers and 110 RBIs and had a 1.000 OPS.

Yelich nearly became the NL's first Triple Crown winner since Joe Medwick in 1937, finishing two homers shy of Arenado and one RBI back of Baez. Yelich was especially impressive in the second half, hitting .367 with 25 homers and 67 RBIs — including 11 homers in August and 10 in September.

Milwaukee reached the playoffs for the first time in seven years, swept Colorado in the Division Series then lost to the Los Angeles Dodgers in a seven-game League Championship Series, falling one win short of its first World Series appearance since 2002.

Yelich gets a \$100,000 bonus for winning, and the price of the 2022 team option in his contract increased by \$1 million to \$16 million.

Yelich celebrated in Southern California with family and friends, including Heisman Trophy winner and Browns quarterback Baker Mayfield. Yelich is from Westlake Village, Calif., near the site of a recent mass shooting and the Southern California wildfires. He wore a Los Angeles Fire Department cap during TV interviews.

Seahawks shut down Rodgers, Packers in second half

Associated Press

SEATTLE — After a shaky beginning, Russell Wilson got hot in the fourth quarter, Bobby Wagner and Seattle's defense stymied Aaron Rodgers and the Seahawks stayed in the middle of the NFC playoff race.

"We've been through so much throughout this season it was time to get over the hump," Wagner said. "We've been down, we've been up, we've lost close games, we've won close games. It was time."

Wilson threw for 225 yards and his 15-yard touchdown pass to Ed Dickson with 5:08 left was the difference in the Seahawks' 27-24 victory over the Green Bay

Packers on Thursday night.

In a key matchup in the battle for the two NFC wild-card spots, Seattle (5-5) snapped a two-game losing streak by overcoming an early 14-3 deficit. Wilson was inconsistent at times early, but was outstanding in the fourth quarter, capping the winning drive by recognizing a blitz and hitting Dickson for his second TD pass of the night.

"I thought that whole drive was pretty exceptional. ... When it came down to it, third-down, you've got to win in the red-zone and we were pretty clutch in the red-zone there at the end of the game," Wilson said.

Seattle still has not lost three

straight games since the middle of the 2011 season and the Seahawks finally closed out a one-score victory after consecutive close losses to the Chargers and Rams. Seattle was 1-8 in its previous nine games decided by one score.

Rodgers had a huge first half and threw for 332 yards, but the Packers (4-5-1) had just one scoring drive in the second half, helped by a 57-yard strike from Rodgers to Davante Adams. Rodgers threw a pair of touchdown passes in the first half, but never got the ball back after Green Bay punted with 4:20 left. Seattle got first-down runs from Wilson and Mike Davis and finished the game

kneeling three times.

"It was definitely consideration, but with the one time out and the clock stopped at two minutes, we played the numbers," Green Bay coach Mike McCarthy said.

Chris Carson rushed for 83 yards and a touchdown, overcoming the mistake of fumbling on the first play of the game and setting up Green Bay's opening score. Tyler Lockett had two key receptions late in the fourth quarter and Doug Baldwin had his first TD catch of the season for Seattle.

Rodgers was 21-for-30 passing with 10 of those going to Adams for 166 yards receiving.

Top 25 roundup

Underdogs UConn, Iowa prevail in NYC

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Unranked teams made a statement at the 2K Classic.

Jordan Bohannon scored 16 points to lead Iowa to a 77-69 upset of No. 13 Oregon in the second semifinal of the 2K Classic on Thursday night.

Luka Garza added 12, and Ryan Kriener finished with 11.

The Hawkeyes (3-0) will play UConn in the championship game tomorrow, while Oregon (2-1) will meet No. 15 Syracuse in the consolation game. Connecticut upset Syracuse, 83-76, in the first game.

The Huskies passed the first major test of the Dan Hurley era with the win against their former Big East rival.

"They had a look the last couple days that they couldn't get here and play. They went out and performed at such a high level," Hurley said.

Iowa coach Fran McCaffery was watching the first game of the doubleheader at Madison Square Garden.

"I was impressed with how hard [UConn] played," he said. "I thought they shared the ball and I thought they really competed defensively."

He could have said the same about his team, as the Hawk-

eyes held the Ducks to 37.1 percent shooting from the field (23-62) and 33.3 percent shooting from 3 (6-18).

"It was a disappointing effort," Oregon coach Dana Altman said. "Our ball movement was not good. Our transition, we looked over the top a few times and didn't finish, and really kind of quit running after that. Our ball movement was bad. We didn't penetrate to make shots for our teammates. And when you're playing poorly like that offensively, you have to do something defensively and we were bad there."

Oregon only forced eight turnovers while committing 14. Moreover, Iowa made 35.2 percent of its shots from the field (19-54), 35.7 percent from three (10-28) and knocked down 29-33 from the foul line.

"I know I'm disappointed in what I saw," Altman said. "We just didn't do a good job. We didn't compete, and I know they're disappointed in that."

Syracuse coach Jim Boeheim was also disappointed in the way his team played. The Orange dropped to 2-1 in a game in which the Orange missed 40 of their 66 shots from the field, including misfiring on 16 of 22 threes.

Not improving his mood was the fact UConn out rebounded Syracuse 46-32.

"We weren't in any way, shape or form good on the offensive end," said Boeheim, who later added, "we got crushed on the boards. We got crushed inside."

Jalen Carey led all scorers with 26. Tyus Battle had 16, and Elijah Hughes chipped in with 15.

"Jalen played with a lot of poise," said Boeheim, "but the guys we count on to score did not play well."

From the opening tip, an unceasing cacophony filled Madison Square Garden, a reminder that these programs—Syracuse in the ACC, Connecticut in the American Athletic Conference—can trace their roots to the World's Most Famous Arena, and more specifically, the Big East Conference.

The Huskies led 38-32 at halftime due in part to a 13-4 run in the first 4:29, and outscoring the Orange, 9-7, in the last 5:01.

"We got after them to start the game," Hurley said. "They were rattled."

No. 3 Gonzaga 94, Texas A&M 71: Zach Norvell Jr. scored 22 points and Rui

Hachimura added 18 for host Gonzaga.

Brandon Clarke had 14 points and 11 rebounds for Gonzaga (3-0), which won its first three games for the eighth consecutive season.

No. 16 Virginia Tech 73, Ball State 64: Nickeil Alexander-Walker scored 21 points for Virginia Tech and opened the Charleston Classic with a victory.

The Hokies (2-0) watched a 16-point lead slip to 49-44 midway through the second half before going on a 14-4 run to take control.

No. 21 TCU 77, Fresno State 69: Desmond Bane scored 23 points on 10-for-15 shooting, including the go-ahead three-pointer, to lead five players in double figures for TCU in a win over visiting Fresno State.

Alex Robinson had 13 points and 14 assists for TCU, and Kevin Samuel also had a double-double with 14 points and 10 rebounds.

No. 23 Purdue 92, Appalachian State 70: Carsen Edwards had 25 points, 17 in the first half, as Purdue powered past Appalachian State at the Charleston Classic.

The Boilermakers improved to 3-0.

England shuts down US in Pulisic's return

Associated Press

LONDON — Christian Pulisic nearly put the United States ahead against England midway through the first half, only for goalkeeper Jordan Pickford to come off his line and make a kick save. A short while later, Pulisic lost the ball and Jesse Lingard gave England the lead. Just 104 seconds later, Trent Alexander-Arnold doubled the advantage.

"We need to get a lot better if we want to beat a good side like that," Pulisic said after Thursday night's 3-0 defeat. "We're not happy with the result."

Callum Wilson beat Brad Guzan in the 77th minute, and Wayne Rooney entered

in the 58th minute in his English national team farewell. The United States is 0-3 in three matches at old and new Wembley, outscored 7-0.

"We were a little timid and we allowed a little bit too much space," U.S. interim coach Dave Sarachan said.

Pulisic, the top player on the rebuilding Americans, played just his second game for the U.S. since the loss at Trinidad and Tobago in October 2017 ended a streak of seven straight World Cup appearances. This marked the first joint appearance by Pulisic and midfielders Weston McKennie, Tim Weah and Tyler Adams, who entered in the 62nd minute.

Sarachan deployed Pulisic on a wing,

where Borussia Dortmund used the 20-year-old midfielder.

"That's always going to be a debate," Sarachan said. "You have arguably our best player and so most would think, well, we should use him in the middle of the field, and I'm not saying maybe that won't happen, but I also know that when you watch him play for his club in the position he plays, he's very dangerous in confined space, so our thinking tonight was let's put him in a comfortable spot, having the freedom to cut inside and make the game, and I think there were moments when he did."

U.S. center backs John Brooks and Matt Miazga had trouble closing down England, a World Cup semifinalist.

NBA roundup

Rockets get back to .500

Associated Press

HOUSTON — James Harden scored 27 points and the Houston Rockets routed the Golden State Warriors 107-86 on Thursday night in a rematch of last season's Western Conference finals.

The Rockets (7-7) have won three straight and six of their last eight games after starting 1-5 to reach .500 for the first time since they were 1-1.

The Warriors, who were without Stephen Curry for the fourth straight game, have lost two of their last three. Curry has already been ruled out for Golden State's next two games because of a groin injury.

Kevin Durant had 20 points for the Warriors on a night

they were just 4-for-18 on three-pointers.

Draymond Green had five rebounds and five assists in his return after serving a one-game team-imposed suspension for a dustup with Durant in Monday night's overtime loss to the Clippers. Green addressed the situation for the first time after shootaround but did not apologize for his actions in the heated exchange.

Nuggets 138, Hawks 93: Juancho Hernangomez scored a season-high 25 points to lead seven Denver players in double figures and the Nuggets set the tone for a runaway victory with a big first quarter against Atlanta.

Paul Millsap and Gary Har-

ris added 18 points apiece for the Nuggets, who unleashed a torrid offensive display to snap their season-high, four-game losing streak.

Jamal Murray, who came off the bench rather than start, had 14 points, as did Trey Lyles.

Jeremy Lin scored 16 points and Kent Bazemore had 14 in the Hawks' sixth straight loss.

Clippers 116, Spurs 111: Lou Williams hit a go-ahead three-pointer with 40 seconds remaining and Los Angeles beat San Antonio for its first three-game winning streak of the season.

The Clippers improved to 7-1 at home after blowing leads of 14 points in the second quarter and 10 in the fourth.

Melo out of Houston

Associated Press

HOUSTON — Carmelo Anthony is done in Houston.

Rockets general manager Daryl Morey released a statement Thursday saying the team is "parting ways" with Anthony and "working toward a resolution."

Anthony played just 10 games for the Rockets after signing a one-year, \$2.4 million deal during the offseason.

"Carmelo had a tremendous approach during his time with the Rockets and accepted every role head coach Mike D'Antoni gave him," Morey said. "The fit we envisioned when Carmelo chose to sign with the Rockets has not materialized, therefore we thought it was best to move on as any other outcome would have been unfair to him."

Anthony was traded from the Oklahoma City Thunder to the Atlanta Hawks in July before the Hawks released him to clear the way for him to sign with the Rockets.

Houston star James Harden said he liked having Anthony on his team but that the decision was out of his hands.

"It's one of my friends. He's a great guy, great teammate," Harden said. "It just didn't work out."

Houston thought he could be the piece it needed to finally get past Golden State and win its first championship since back-to-back titles in 1994-95. Instead the Rockets limped out to a 6-7 start and the emergence of undrafted rookie Gary Clark made it appear that Anthony would have to take a reduced role. In the end, the Rockets decided it would be better to move on.

"We just had to see how things worked out," D'Antoni said. "It just wasn't a fit."

The 34-year-old is a 10-time All-Star who has had a tough time over the last two seasons. He averaged a career-low 16.2 points in 78 starts in a tumultuous season for the Thunder last season before coming to Houston — and accepting a reserve role for the first time in his 16-year career.

NHL roundup

Kapanen helps Leafs get past Sharks

Associated Press

SAN JOSE, Calif. — The San Jose Sharks seemed intent to go after Nazem Kadri right from the start. That didn't bother the Toronto Maple Leafs a bit and they ended up with the win.

John Tavares opened the scoring just after a power-play for an early run at Kadri ended and Kasper Kapanen had two goals, including a short-handed tally that broke a tie in the second period and sent the Maple Leafs to their fifth win in six games, 5-3 over the Sharks on Thursday night.

"I don't know what was going on to be honest," Kapanen said about Barclay Goodrow going after Kadri right off the opening faceoff.

"Nazzy loves that stuff. It got him into the game. I think that was a mistake by them. To go after Naz like that is not going to do anything to him. I think it's the opposite. It's going to get him going. I thought our

line had a pretty good night tonight."

The Sharks were still upset at Kadri for pulling out a chunk of Joe Thornton's beard during a scrum last season in Toronto. Goodrow sought revenge early and the Sharks kept going after Kadri for most of the night.

Lightning 4, Penguins 3: Brayden Point scored three straight power-play goals in 1:31 — the sixth-fastest three goals in NHL history — and Tampa Bay beat host Pittsburgh.

Senators 2, Red Wings 1: Craig Anderson stopped two third-period penalty shots and Drake Batherson scored in his NHL debut to help host Ottawa.

Islanders 7, Rangers 5: Anthony Beauvillier had three goals and an assist, and host New York held off the Rangers to keep up their recent mastery over their cross-town rival.

Canadiens 3, Flames 2: Carey Price made 43 saves and Artturi Lehkonen broke a tie

midway through the third period to help Montreal beat host Calgary.

Wild 6, Canucks 2: Mikko Koivu had a goal and two assists and host Minnesota beat Vancouver.

Blue Jackets 7, Panthers 3: Joonas Korpihalo stopped 38 shots and host Columbus routed Florida.

Coyotes 2, Predators 1: Darcy Kuemper had a career-high 44 saves and the host Coyotes held off Western Conference-leading Nashville.

Devils 3, Flyers 0: Keith Kinkaid made 29 saves for his third shutout of the season and seventh of his career, leading New Jersey past host Philadelphia.

Maple Leafs 5, Sharks 3: Kasper Kapanen scored his second goal of the game with Toronto short-handed and the Maple Leafs won for the fifth time in six games, beating host San Jose.