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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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US probing claims of Afghan civilian deaths

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

KABUL, Afghanistan — The military is investigating claims that a U.S. airstrike in southern Afghanistan killed dozens of civilians, including children and elderly people, officials said Wednesday.

Military officials in Kabul confirmed that U.S. aircraft conducted a strike in Helmand province's Garmsir district on Tuesday as Afghan special forces and their U.S. advisers battled Taliban fighters. Officials were still trying on Wednesday to determine whether civilians were among the dead, a military statement said.

If proven, the deaths would add to a spike in civilian casualties caused by airstrikes. A rise in civilian deaths documented by the United Nations this year has corresponded with a surge in U.S. bombings.

Tuesday's fatalities included children and the elderly, said Abdul Wadoud, a Helmand lawmaker.

"Some of the bodies are unrecognizable," he said in a phone interview.

The strike was carried out against an insurgent position after Afghan and U.S. ground troops came under heavy machine-gun and rocket-propelled grenade fire from a compound in the area, the military said.

"At the time of the strike, the ground force was unaware of any civilians in or around the compound," the military statement said. "They only knew that the Tal-

iban was using the building as a fighting position."

Militants had stockpiled ammunition in the area, which the military said could have caused civilian casualties.

Meanwhile, the Taliban on Wednesday claimed responsibility for an attack on the compound of security contractor G4S in Kabul, saying it was revenge for civilians killed in operations by Afghan and international forces, including in Helmand.

The Associated Press reported that 10 people were killed and 19 injured in the attack, which included a car bomb explosion and gunfire.

The Helmand operation killed at least 16 Taliban fighters, Attahullah Afghan, head of the provincial council, told The Associated Press. But most of the casualties were civilians, he said.

An Afghan investigation was underway, the AP reported, citing the provincial governor's office.

Casualty figures in the embattled southern province are difficult to independently confirm, and Afghan officials sometimes inflate the numbers of enemy fighters killed or wounded.

Helmand province has long been a Taliban stronghold and has been the bloodiest province for coalition forces during the 17-year war. Nearly 1,000 coalition troops — largely U.S. Marines and British soldiers — have died fighting there since 2001.

When the bulk of U.S. forces withdrew from the country in late 2014, the coalition handed over its base in Helmand to government forces. As the Taliban gained ground in the following years and after they nearly seized the provincial capital in 2016, U.S. soldiers deployed to bolster government forces. Since early 2017, several hundred Marines have been training Afghan army and police forces as they work to recapture districts lost to the insurgents.

Late last year, after President Donald Trump announced plans for a reinvigorated strategy in Afghanistan, U.S. warplanes began striking drug labs and other targets in Helmand before expanding the operation to other provinces. Since then, there has been a sharp rise in airstrikes against Taliban insurgents as well as the Islamic State and al-Qaida terrorist groups.

Airstrikes have caused more noncombatant deaths and injuries in the first nine months of 2018 than during any similar period since the U.N. began documenting them in 2009. Airstrike casualties included 313 dead and 336 wounded, a 39 percent increase from the same period last year, a recent U.N. report said.

The U.N. attributed just over half of the airstrike casualties to international forces — namely the U.S., the only foreign country officially conducting strikes — while Afghan forces were blamed for 38 percent. Eleven percent were undetermined.

USS Ashland wraps up recovery work in Northern Marianas

By CHRISTIAN LOPEZ
Stars and Stripes

The USS Ashland recently completed a 17-day stint helping the Northern Marianas recover from Super Typhoon Yutu, the strongest storm ever to strike the Pacific islands.

The crew of the Ashland — an amphibious dock landing ship based in Sasebo, Japan — pitched in alongside local authorities, the Federal Emergency Management Agency, the Guam Air and Army National Guards and other service branches to provide storm

cleanup, drinking water and temporary shelter for locals, a recent Navy statement said.

The Ashland arrived in the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, a U.S. territory, on Nov. 3, nine days after Yutu passed directly over Tinian, leaving hundreds of destroyed homes in its wake.

Tinian and Saipan took the brunt of the storm, leaving about 2,000 residents without power or running water.

"I can only hope that our efforts and the continued efforts of all other branches of service can bring a sense of ease to the

citizens of Saipan and Tinian during this time of hardship," the Ashland's commanding officer, Cmdr. Patrick German, said in the statement.

The Ashland's sailors and Marines, who departed the islands on Nov. 20, were among more than 800 servicemembers from across all military branches working on relief efforts in the aftermath of Yutu, according to the Navy statement.

Nearly 160 sailors, Marines and Guam Army National Guard soldiers cleared more than 150 miles of debris along commonwealth roads and dis-

tributed more than 300,000 gallons of drinking water, the statement said. About 400 tents were erected to serve as temporary housing in Saipan and Tinian.

Yutu, the equivalent of a Category 5 hurricane, packed winds of up to 180 mph. It was the strongest storm to hit a U.S. territory this year and the strongest ever to strike the Northern Marianas when it made landfall Oct. 25, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

F-35B makes inaugural landing at Futenma

By SETH ROBSON

Stars and Stripes

An F-35B Lighting II has landed at Marine Corps Air Station Futenma, marking the advanced stealth jet's first visit to the Okinawa base.

U.S. Forces Japan released a photograph of the aircraft from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121 — the “Green Knights” — at Futenma on Tuesday.

“An F-35B landing at MCAS Futenma demonstrates the air warfighting capability, opera-

tional flexibility and tactical supremacy that this platform brings to the Indo-Pacific region, our allies and our partners,” the photo's caption said.

The short takeoff/vertical landing F-35Bs have been operating out of Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni since January 2017 and have notched a number of milestones, including their first operations last spring from the Sasebo, Japan-based USS Wasp amphibious assault ship.

Meanwhile, the Japan Air

Self-Defense Force began flying its first F-35As, which perform conventional takeoffs and landings, from Misawa Air Base on northern Honshu in January.

Japan had planned to buy 42 F-35As to replace its fleet of 60-year-old F-4 Phantom II jets. However, the U.S. ally is in the market for another 100 F-35s to replace aging F-15s, according to a Wednesday report in the Nikkei Asian Review.

Japan's government is concerned about China's growing

military might and has faced pressure from President Donald Trump, who wants Japan to buy more U.S. military gear to balance trade between the two countries.

Experts have speculated that Japan could upgrade its massive helicopter destroyers — the JS Izumo and JS Kaga — to carry F-35Bs. Nikkei reported that F-35Bs were part of the purchase plan and that the ships would be revamped to accommodate them.

Push made to track health woes for vets, families

By NIKKI WENTLING

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The National Academy of Sciences called on federal agencies Wednesday to launch a new, coordinated effort to monitor and research the health of Gulf War and post-9/11 veterans affected by toxic exposures, as well as track the health of their living and future children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren.

The recommendation came in a new report from the Committee on Gulf War and Health, which was tasked by the Department of Veterans Affairs with reviewing existing scientific research on toxic exposures to find areas that need more study.

The committee spent two years looking through more than 4,000 papers on toxic exposures written by VA, Defense Department and outside researchers. What they found was a lack of information about how servicemembers' exposures affect their

descendants.

Servicemembers in the Gulf War and post-9/11 generation have been at risk for exposure to chemical and biological agents, smoke from burn pits and oil-well fires and depleted uranium. Some evidence exists of links between those exposures and developmental problems in their descendants, as well as low birth weight, preterm birth and childhood leukemia, the committee found.

“This is an area where evidence is very hard to collect,” said Kenneth Ramos, the committee chairman and professor of medicine at the University of Arizona Health Sciences.

The committee envisions a future program that would monitor servicemembers' health from recruits through the remainder of their lives. For children, health monitoring would begin in the womb.

Committee members described it as an

expensive undertaking that would require vast resources and collaboration between the Defense Department and the VA. They predicted ethical challenges with collecting data from participants during their lifetimes.

It's up to government agencies to decide whether to follow through on the committee's recommendation. The support and help of large veterans organizations would be “absolutely essential,” Ramos said.

The VA recognizes a link between toxic exposures and birth defects for descendants of Vietnam War veterans. Enough evidence exists to connect spina bifida, in which a developing baby's spinal cord fails to develop properly, to parents' Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam. Those descendants are eligible for VA benefits.

Benefits are also available to children of women who served in Vietnam and suffer from birth defects.

USO brings ‘a touch of home’ to Hawaii-based troops

By WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

FORT SHAFTER, Hawaii — USO Hawaii will host events on Oahu throughout December to bring a bit of extra cheer to servicemembers separated from friends and family during the holiday season.

Holidays for Heroes is intend-

ed to bring “a touch of home” to soldiers, Marines, airmen and sailors serving in Hawaii, said Alesha Burkeen, a USO Hawaii spokeswoman.

“We know how hard it can be for our servicemembers stationed overseas to be separated from family during the holidays,” she said. “And we've made it our mission to bring

as much holiday joy as we can to them with events, food and gifts to those not going home this year.”

This is the first time USO Hawaii has participated in the annual program, which began as an effort to deliver gifts to servicemembers downrange at remote locations throughout the Middle East.

Among the scheduled free events are a water park excursion, breakfast with Disney characters, contests, organized sports games and a Christmas Day dinner.

Information about all events is available online at USO Hawaii's Facebook page. The event schedule and offerings are subject to change.

Mattis, Pompeo press senators on Yemen

By CLAUDIA GRISALES
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo pressed senators in a closed-door meeting Wednesday to thwart a resolution that would stop U.S. military aid to the Saudi-led coalition fighting in the Yemen civil war.

The private meeting at the Capitol comes in the midst of rising concerns of U.S. support to Saudi Arabia, especially in light of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi's slaying at the country's consulate in Istanbul.

Mattis and Pompeo told senators the United States was at a critical juncture in the Yemen confrontation and couldn't afford to withdraw at this time.

"Pulling back our limited U.S. military support, our weapons sales to our partners and our protection of the Saudi and Emirati populations would be misguided on the eve of the promising initial negotiations," Mattis said, according to prepared remarks. "It took us too long to get here, but at this key juncture, a change in our approach would work against" United Nations efforts.

U.S. forces have provided support for Saudi Arabia and the Yemen government in their fight against Iran-backed Houthi rebels, which some lawmakers contend the U.S. military has not been given proper authority to do. The U.S. forces have assisted in coordinating, refueling and providing target guidance and intelligence to the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

The stakes were high for Wednesday's meeting between Mattis, Pompeo and the senators. Democrats have said after winning the House in the midterm elections earlier this month that they would push for greater oversight of U.S. operations, and look at efforts to withdraw the U.S. presence in Yemen, with some Republicans echoing the concerns. Also this week, Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., said he could have enough support to force a Senate vote on his measure that would force the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Yemen.

Mattis and Pompeo were at the Capitol on Wednesday as part of a White House effort to push against such a resolution. Peace talks involving all sides of the Yemen civil war are slated to take place in Sweden as early as next week.

"The view of the [President Donald Trump] administration, Secretary Mattis and myself [is] that passing a resolution at this point undermines that," Pompeo said in comments to reporters following the meeting. "It would encourage the Houthis. It would encourage the Iranians. It would undermine the fragile agreement for everyone to go to Sweden and have this discussion. So we hope that they'll consider that, be thoughtful in how they proceed, and we're happy to give them further information if they should so choose."

The 11 a.m. meeting Wednesday wasn't without controversy, with some lawmakers and pundits questioning why CIA Director Gina Haspel wasn't included in the briefing with senators. As senators exited

Wednesday's meeting, some of them said Haspel wasn't at the meeting at the direction of the White House, according to news reports.

Mattis, in his remarks, said if the United States was to pull its support, it would disrupt ongoing efforts by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths and breathe new life into the Houthis' combat operations just as they are reluctantly engaging with a U.N. interlocutor.

Mattis said he has had eight meetings with Griffiths since his February appointment to align those efforts with the U.S. mission in Yemen.

"We actively facilitate diplomacy and the U.N.-brokered peace process led by U.N. Special Envoy Martin Griffiths to end this civil war," Mattis said of the progress so far in the Yemen conflict. "We have worked assiduously with the State Department to assist him in bringing all parties to the negotiating table to discuss substantive issues."

In his prepared remarks, Pompeo said abandoning Yemen would do immense damage to U.S. national security interests and the interests of its Middle East allies and partners. He also suggested Griffiths' efforts are gaining momentum.

Mattis and Pompeo called for a cease-fire on Oct. 30, with the goal of causing all sides to take a step back from the fighting, Pompeo said in his remarks.

"If that diplomacy starts to make breakthroughs, our hopes are high that hostilities will soon stop entirely," he said.

Republican prevails in Mississippi Senate runoff

Associated Press

JACKSON, Miss. — Republican Sen. Cindy Hyde-Smith returns to Washington as a solidly loyal Trump supporter after the president stumped for her in a divisive runoff marked by racial turmoil over a video-recorded remark Hyde-Smith made that was decried as racist.

Hyde-Smith defeated Democrat Mike Espy, who was vying to become the state's first black senator since Reconstruction, during Tuesday's runoff. The win makes Hyde-Smith, 59, the first woman elected to Congress from Mississippi.

The race was rocked by the video, in which Hyde-Smith said of a supporter, "If he invited me to a public hanging, I'd be on the front row." A separate video showed her talking about "liberal folks" and making it "just a little more difficult" for them to vote. The comments by Hyde-Smith,

who is white, made Mississippi's history of racist lynchings a theme of the runoff and spurred many black voters to return to the polls on Tuesday.

In the aftermath of the video, Republicans worried they could face a repeat of last year's special election in Alabama, in which a flawed Republican candidate handed Democrats a reliable GOP Senate seat in the Deep South. The GOP pumped resources into Mississippi, and President Donald Trump made a strong effort on behalf of Hyde-Smith, holding last-minute rallies in Mississippi on Monday.

Speaking to supporters after her win, Hyde-Smith vowed to fight for everyone in the state when she goes back to Washington.

"I want everybody to know, no matter who you voted for today, I'm going to always represent every Mississippian. I will work

very hard and do my very best to make Mississippi very proud," she said. Speaking to reporters later she said Trump had called to congratulate her and said she'd "been through a storm" and "survived it with grace."

Her supporters said the furor over her comments was overblown. They also stuck by her as a photo was circulated of her wearing a replica Confederate military hat during a 2014 visit to Beauvoir, the last home of Confederate president Jefferson Davis.

"So many things are taken out of context," said Elizabeth Gallingshouse, 84, from Diamondhead. "The fact that she toured Jefferson Davis' house. You or I could have done the same thing. They said, 'Put this cap on. Hold this gun.' It was a fun time. She wasn't trying to send any messages."

With Hyde-Smith's victory, Republicans control 53 of the Senate's 100 seats.

Putin: Ukrainian politics to blame for standoff

Associated Press

KIEV, Ukraine — Russian President Vladimir Putin on Wednesday blamed the latest standoff with neighboring Ukraine on the presidential ambitions of Ukraine's leader as the Russian military announced it was boosting its defenses in Crimea.

Ukraine, for its part, released what it said was the exact location where its ships were fired on Sunday by Russia, showing that they were in international waters approaching the Kerch Strait from the west, not from the east, as Putin suggested.

Russia and Ukraine are still reeling from their first overt military confrontation since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, a clash Sunday in the Kerch Strait near Russia-occupied Crimea. Russian border guards fired on three Ukrainian ships, seizing them and their 24 crewmembers. Ukraine insists its vessels were operating in line with international maritime rules, while Russia says they had failed to

get permission to pass through a Russia-controlled area.

Meanwhile, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov claimed that detained Ukrainian officers from one of the confiscated boats secretly sought to break through the Russian-controlled strait.

Speaking Wednesday after a bilateral U.N.-backed conference on Afghanistan in Geneva, Lavrov said Russian border agents and interrogators turned up documents that “clearly show that these ships had been ordered to not inform the authorities of Kerch Strait and to try and break into the Sea of Azov secretly.”

The strait links the Black Sea with the Sea of Azov and is where Russia has built a long new bridge — the only land link between Crimea and the Russian mainland.

The incident has drawn strong criticism of Russia by the United States and its allies and has fueled fears of wider fighting in the region. It's part of the long-simmering con-

flict between the two countries, in which Russia annexed Ukraine's Crimean Peninsula in 2014 and supported separatists in Ukraine's east with clandestine dispatches of troops and weapons. That fighting has killed at least 10,000 people since 2014 but eased somewhat with a 2015 truce.

Putin on Wednesday broke his silence on the maritime clash, blaming it on Ukrainian President Petro Poroshenko's desire to get re-elected.

“That was a provocation which was certainly organized by the sitting officials, including the president,” ahead of Ukraine's presidential election in March, Putin said.

Poroshenko's original proposal — to impose martial law in Ukraine for two months after the clash with Russia — would have meant the March president vote would have to be scrapped due to election rules. He later halved the martial law time frame to a month, which would allow the election to go ahead as planned.

Brexit will make Britain poorer, analysis finds

Associated Press

LONDON — Britain will be poorer after leaving the European Union than if it had stayed in, no matter what sort of trade deal it has with the bloc, the government said Wednesday — unwelcome news for Prime Minister Theresa May as she tries to sell her Brexit divorce deal to a skeptical nation.

A government assessment estimated that 15 years from the day of departure on March 29, the country's GDP will be 0.6 percent lower than it would have been if Britain had stayed in the EU — and that's if the U.K. maintains frictionless trade with the bloc.

If Britain leaves the EU without a Brexit deal and there are significant barriers to trade, the British economy would be up to

9.3 percent smaller, economists from the Treasury and other government departments said.

“This analysis does not show that we will be poorer in the future than we are today,” May insisted — correctly, since the data say the economy would still grow, albeit less robustly than if Britain remained in the EU.

May told lawmakers that her Brexit agreement “is the best deal available for jobs and our economy that allows us to honor the referendum and realize the opportunities of Brexit.”

The analysis looked at a range of options, from leaving without a deal to staying in the EU's single market for goods and services.

It did not analyze the specific deal agreed upon between Britain and the bloc

last week. But it estimated that under similar terms, involving no tariffs but some non-tariff barriers to trade, the economic hit would be at the lower end of the range — a decline in GDP of between 2.5 and 3.9 percent.

Independent experts have said that 3.9 percent of Britain's GDP will amount to about \$128 billion a year by the 2030s.

“If you look at this purely from an economic point of view, there will be a cost to leaving the European Union, because there will be impediments to our trade,” said Treasury chief Philip Hammond.

But he said the deal agreed on between May's Conservative government and the EU, which calls for continued close economic ties, would minimize the economic damage.

Report blames Lion Air crash on poor safety plans

Associated Press

JAKARTA, Indonesia — Faulty equipment and Indonesian carrier Lion Air's own safety failures had pilots fighting for control of their Boeing 737 MAX 8 as it plunged into the Java Sea on Oct. 28, killing all 189 people aboard, investigators said Wednesday.

Briefing reporters on the

aircraft's black box data, the investigators said they were still struggling to understand why the plane crashed but cited multiple factors centered on faulty sensors and an automatic safety system that repeatedly forced the plane's nose down despite the pilots' efforts to correct the problem.

Based on the number of prob-

lems with the aircraft beforehand, they suggested the jet should not have been in service.

The National Transportation Safety Commission's Nurcahyo Utomo said investigators were trying to figure out from interviews with engineers why they deemed the Boeing 737 airworthy.

“We need to compare the

statements of the engineers with the required procedures,” he said.

Once the jet was airborne, the pilots appeared to have been overwhelmed, said another of the crash investigators, Ony Suryo Wibowo. “The problem is if multiple malfunctions occur all at once, which one should be prioritized?” Wibowo said.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Apology issued for insensitive greeting

MA BOSTON — A neighborhood historical society in Boston is apologizing for an awkwardly worded holiday greeting card that some people interpreted as insensitive.

The Dorchester Historical Society in a postcard promotion for its annual Christmas open house featured the phrase “We’re dreaming of a white Dorchester” along with a picture of a building inside a snow globe.

The image drew rebukes on social media and the organization quickly issued an apology via Twitter.

The slogan was meant to be a play on the classic holiday song “White Christmas,” but the organization said it did not “think it through properly.”

4 puppies taken in armed robbery

CA PERRIS — A 22-year-old Southern California man was arrested in connection with an armed robbery that netted four puppies.

The Riverside County Sheriff’s Department said the victims had agreed to meet the suspect Nov. 22 at a Perris shopping center to sell him an 8-week-old English bulldog.

When the victims arrived, they were confronted by two suspects, and one had a weapon. The robbers took four puppies and fled.

A Sheriff’s Department statement said investigators arrested Alexxys Octavio Jimenez on Friday at his Moreno Valley residence where all four puppies were recovered.

Crews haul away junk from property

AK ANCHORAGE — Anchorage crews hauled

away hundreds of thousands of pounds of junk from a property in Bear Valley as part of the city’s efforts to address neighborhood blight.

Crews recently removed 343 tons of junk, five drums of liquid waste and 21 junk vehicles from the property over a week, the Anchorage Daily News reported. The cleanup cost \$84,000 and was the largest in the city’s history, said Jack Frost, chief code enforcement officer.

The cleanup comes more than a year after a group of residents pleaded with the Anchorage Assembly to take action on the property.

Stranger returns lost wallet with extra cash

SD BRANDON — A South Dakota man has his lost wallet back with some extra cash thanks to a stranger.

Hunter Shamatt thought he’d never see the wallet again when he lost it on a flight to Las Vegas for his sister’s wedding. Inside was \$60 cash and a check for about \$400.

Shamatt told KSFY-TV he received a package a few days later along with the wallet and a letter. The stranger wrote he found the wallet wedged between a seat and a wall on a flight from Omaha, Neb., to Denver. He added \$40 so Shamatt would have “an even \$100” to celebrate the wallet’s return. The stranger signed the letter with only initials.

Shamatt was able to thank the man after tracking down his return address in Omaha.

Military, farm work to ship trees overseas

NY BALLSTON SPA — The New York state Army and Air National Guard, alongside area military veterans, worked with an upstate

tree farm to send more than 100 trees to military bases around the country and overseas.

Now in its 14th year, “Trees for Troops” has delivered more than 200,000 trees to service-members and their families in every branch of the military at nearly 65 bases in 17 countries. Ellms Family Tree Farm in the village of Ballston Spa helps provide the trees to be shipped to members of the military who are not able to come home for the holidays.

Second auction for mayor’s stuff planned

PA PHILADELPHIA — An estate sale at the home of former Philadelphia Mayor Frank Rizzo went like gangbusters last weekend — and some new treasures were found afterward.

The agent in charge of the sale said an additional trove of personal items was discovered in the attic. They included phone numbers for Frank Sinatra and Richard Nixon, Rizzo’s gold watch, and passports.

Agent John Romani said those new items will go up for auction Jan. 29.

Top sellers over the weekend were Rizzo’s single-digit license plate, which went for \$5,000, and a Rolodex that went for \$2,500.

Cited driver: I was eating a hash brown

CT WESTPORT — A Connecticut man who said he was wrongly cited for distracted driving after police mistook a McDonald’s hash brown for a cellphone is continuing his legal fight.

The Hour reported that Westport police gave Jason Stiber a \$300 distracted driving ticket in April. The Westport man challenged the charge and lost

in court. He was granted a retrial that’s scheduled to start Dec. 7.

Stiber said the officer thought a hash brown he was eating while driving was a cellphone. Stiber says phone records show he didn’t make any calls around the time he was pulled over, and he has Bluetooth so has no reason to hold a phone while driving.

Prehistoric reptile left Grand Canyon tracks

NV LAS VEGAS — A Nevada geology professor said he recently identified fossilized tracks from a reptile along a popular trail in Grand Canyon National Park.

The Las Vegas Review-Journal reported that University of Nevada, Las Vegas, professor Steve Rowland said the tracks belong to a primitive reptile the size of a baby alligator and date back about 315 million years.

The 28 footprints run diagonally across a boulder on the edge of the Grand Canyon’s Bright Angel Trail.

Guide escapes serious injury in avalanche

CO ASPEN — A tour guide in the Aspen Mountain Powder Tours permit area on Richmond Ridge was unharmed after being buried by an avalanche.

The Aspen Daily News reported the Aspen Skiing Co. employee was rescued Saturday by his skiing partner. The company said the staff members were scouting terrain prior to Sunday’s season opening.

Company Vice President of Communications Jeff Hanle said neither employee was seriously injured, and both staff members have returned to work.

From wire reports

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Clemson's preparations stay the same

Associated Press

CLEMSON, S.C. — Clemson safety Denzel Johnson is very familiar with the routine leading up to the Atlantic Coast Conference championship game. Like most of his Tigers teammates, he's been through it before.

No. 2 Clemson (12-0, CFP No. 2) is seeking its fourth consecutive ACC crown and the Atlantic Division champ has a big edge in experience over first-time Coastal Division winner Pittsburgh (7-5) on Saturday night. Johnson, a redshirt junior, said players know exactly the effort needed at drills and meetings this week to be primed to play for another ACC title.

There's a difference, Johnson said, between well-prepared and comfortable.

"As far as comfort, not at all, we're never satisfied," Johnson said. "We're just treating this like any other game, just the next game."

A game in which the Tigers have feasted on first-time opponents.

The Panthers are the fourth different Coastal team Clemson has faced since its ACC

title streak began in 2015. The Tigers topped North Carolina that year, Virginia Tech in 2016 and Miami a year ago.

Clemson co-offensive coordinator Tony Elliott often doesn't have to tell players what's next as the week progresses.

"They know what to expect out of each other," he said.

The consistency in routine is something Clemson coach Dabo Swinney has built into his program since he got the full-time job after the 2008 season. Players can't perform at their best each game if they think some games are bigger than others, Swinney believes. So he's kept the focus on the Tigers and not on the opponent, the start time or how high the stakes might be.

All of that, though, is magnified for Clemson in this one.

A victory over Pitt would make Clemson the ACC's first ever with four consecutive championship game victories. It would also propel them back into the College Football Playoff for a fourth straight year and give them a chance at their second national title since 2016.

"I think experience is definitely the best teacher than

you can have for sure," Swinney said. "We have a very veteran team. We got a lot of great leaders. We got a lot of guys, a bunch of guys on this team that have won three conference championships. That certainly doesn't hurt."

Elliott thinks players appreciate knowing how the week's preparation is going to unfold. He's also confident that if adversity arises during the title game, Clemson's veterans can call on how the team has handled it in past games.

"I think the guys have confidence in the routine," Elliott said. "Obviously, they've got to go out and execute four quarters and play at a high level. But I think they understand what our week's going to look like."

Pitt coach Pat Narduzzi may be one of the few in his program to have been through a conference championship game experience. He was Michigan State's defensive coordinator when the Spartans played and won the Big Ten title in 2011 and 2013. He accepts the Panthers can't match Clemson's past ACC experiences.

"Clemson has obviously been there before. This will be noth-

ing new to them," Narduzzi said. "I think it's going to be important for our football team to obviously stay focused and locked into why we're there, what our job is."

A big part of that job is slowing down Clemson's surging offense. The Tigers gained 744 yards in a 56-35 win over South Carolina this past Saturday, the seventh straight game where they've won by 20 or more points. The ACC honored left tackle Mitch Hyatt with the Jacobs Blocking Trophy given to the top offensive lineman. Three Tigers were honored in the league's weekly awards, receiver Tee Higgins, center Justin Falcinelli and rookie quarterback Trevor Lawrence.

Clemson running back Adam Choice is a fifth-year player who was part of the team in 2014 before its run of ACC championship success. He'll spend part of this week reminding younger teammates not to take playing for an ACC crown for granted.

"We know what it's like not to be in the ACC championship game," he said. "It's definitely not something to be taken lightly."

Oklahoma edges Ohio State for No. 5 in CFP rankings

Associated Press

Oklahoma is on the doorstep of the College Football Playoff.

The Sooners were No. 5 in the pivotal second-to-last College Football Playoff rankings released Tuesday night, ahead of Ohio State heading into championship weekend when the final four will be set.

The biggest question facing the selection committee this week was how much to value Ohio State's 62-39 blowout of Michigan on Saturday. The answer: The Buckeyes moved up four spots but were still stuck behind the Sooners.

"I really don't have a measurement for closeness," selection committee chairman Rob Mullens said when asked

what separated Ohio State and Oklahoma.

Mullens cited Oklahoma's historic offense. The Sooners are on pace to set an FBS record for yards per play, averaging 8.92.

"While their defense has been a challenge, their offense has been superior," Mullens said.

The top three teams in the selection committee's rankings held steady for a fourth straight week. Alabama, Clemson and Notre Dame — all unbeaten — are Nos. 1, 2 and 3. Georgia moved into the fourth spot that was previously occupied by Michigan, heading into its SEC championship game against Alabama. It's a given the SEC winner makes the playoff.

Maybe the loser, too.

Notre Dame is already in the clubhouse at 12-0 and Clemson faces Pittsburgh in the Atlantic Coast Conference championship game. That leaves one spot very much in play.

Maximum outrage

The defense-smitten committee could be presented with an alternative option for the fourth spot depending on how things go in the SEC championship game. It will drive fans outside of SEC country out of their minds, but Alabama seems like a lock to make the playoff even if it loses — barring some kind of epic beatdown of the Tide by the Bulldogs in Atlanta. Note: Alabama has never lost a game

by more than 14 points under Nick Saban.

What could make SEC haters even angrier? Alabama beats Georgia 31-28 on a last-play field goal and the committee is so impressed with the Bulldogs they just throw them in there at No. 4, despite the two losses and lack of a conference championship.

That seems extreme considering the committee has yet to include a two-loss team in the playoff, bypassing ones with conference championships for one-loss teams without. But if Ohio State and/or Oklahoma are unimpressive winners on Saturday — or they both lose — the CFP could have two SEC teams in it for the second straight season.

College basketball roundup

Louisville outlasts No. 9 Michigan St.

Associated Press

LOUISVILLE, Ky. — No matter what line he shot from behind against No. 9 Michigan State, Louisville junior guard Ryan McMahon was feeling it.

The Cardinals fed off his energy to not only give first-year coach Chris Mack a significant win, but a gutsy one at that.

McMahon made two free throws with 7.1 seconds remaining in overtime before Jordan Nwora made another from the line with 3.1 seconds left to seal it as Louisville upset the Spartans 82-78 on Tuesday night in the ACC/Big Ten Challenge.

McMahon scored all seven of his points in the extra session from the foul line to finish with a career-high 24. Highlighting that total was 12-for-13 free-throw shooting and four three-pointers to top his previous best of 15 points last tied in January against Pittsburgh. He missed his one two-point attempt, but that was forgotten as he converted frequent opportunities at the line.

"I would say it's being ag-

gressive," McMahon said. "It really helps when I'm knocking down shots, too, because then guys have to play me a little bit tighter, they've got to run out at me a bit longer and I can get a step on them and cause help to come over or the guy on me has to foul me."

Nwora's clinching free throw followed his three-pointer with 2:05 left that gave the Cardinals (4-2) the lead for good in an exciting matchup that ended a two-game slide and followed a 77-74 loss to Marquette in OT on Friday in Brooklyn, N.Y.

This one didn't slip away.

"We didn't let those negative thoughts creep in our mind," Mack said. "I'm sure they were there and we were tough enough and showed the fortitude to get the job done against a really good team."

Louisville needed just about every point to hold off the Spartans (5-2), who had a chance to get close with Joshua Langford (15 points) at the line. But he missed the first of two free throws with 4.2 seconds left and failed to hit the rim on an intentional miss, a violation that

gave Louisville the ball and led to Nwora's free throw.

"It was a game of inches," said Michigan State coach Tom Izzo, whose team committed 17 turnovers leading to 18 Louisville points. "We just did some things that weren't good enough to win. It's a game of inches and we didn't value the inches. Give them credit, they hit some shots and made some plays. We just made some uncharacteristic ridiculous plays."

Dwayne Sutton and Christen Cunningham each had 13 points for the Cardinals, who won despite shooting 40 percent and getting outrebounded 47-30.

Kyle Ahrens had 15 points for Michigan State while starting in place of injured senior guard Matt McQuaid, who did not travel for the game because of a thigh bruise. Nick Ward had 14 points and Cassius Winston 13, while Kenny Goins grabbed a career-high 17 rebounds.

No. 3 Duke 90, Indiana 69: Zion Williamson scored 25 points, RJ Barrett added 22 and the host Blue Devils routed the Hoosiers in the ACC/Big

Ten Challenge.

No. 5 Nevada 79, Loyola-Chicago 65: Caleb Martin had 21 points, twin brother Cody Martin scored 20 and the visiting Wolf Pack beat the Ramblers in an NCAA Tournament rematch.

Loyola beat Nevada by one point in the NCAA South Regional semifinals last season.

Penn State 63, No. 13 Virginia Tech 62: Myreon Jones scored 13 of his 18 points in the second half to lead the Nittany Lions to an upset win of the visiting Hokies.

No. 14 Iowa 69, Pitt 68: Freshmanguard Joe Wieskamp had 18 points and 11 rebounds, Nicholas Baer scored 14 of his 16 points in the second half and the host Hawkeyes held off the Panthers for their third win over a power program this season.

No. 22 Wisconsin 79, N.C. State 75: Ethan Happ had 19 points and 11 rebounds, D'Mitrik Trice hit a long jumper with 23.6 seconds left and the host Badgers withstood the Wolfpack's in-your-face defense to rally for a win.

Saints' young players earning trust of quarterback

Associated Press

METAIRIE, La. — In his 18th NFL season and less than two months from turning 40, Saints veteran quarterback Drew Brees has exhibited a knack for connecting with young people recently.

Or, to be more specific, the young receivers on New Orleans' roster.

Brees' four touchdown passes last week to four former undrafted free agents, who'd all turned pro within the past three years, was the latest instance of what has been an increasingly encouraging sign for New Orleans during its 10-game winning streak. Relatively young, inexperienced receivers are

winning their record-setting QB's trust and getting in the end zone.

Four Saints have caught their first career touchdowns this season, among them: receivers TreQuan Smith, Austin Carr and Keith Kirkwood, and tight end Dan Arnold. Smith, a third-round selection out of mid-major UCF, is the only one among them who was drafted.

The 6-foot-6, 220-pound Arnold was a Division III college receiver who has been transformed into an NFL tight end since turning pro in 2017, but never played before this season. The 6-3 Kirkwood, who spent most of his youth focused on basketball, didn't start playing football until his senior year

of high school and was signed as an undrafted rookie out of Temple. Carr is in his second season after being undrafted out of Northwestern. He played in one game last season without a catch.

All of them have played prominent roles in the Saints' offense in recent weeks, along with Smith, who two games ago caught 10 passes for 157 yards and a touchdown.

Arnold's first-career touchdown came on a 25-yard throw down the middle in which he leaped with arms outstretched to grab it and came crashing down in the end zone. Recalling the explosion of noise in the Superdome and celebrating teammates converging on him,

he said, "Surreal is the perfect word to describe it."

"It's really cool just to look back and think of how far you've come," he said.

Arnold was inactive the first four games and made his first two catches at Baltimore in Week 7. He then caught two passes apiece against Cincinnati and Philadelphia before his career-high four catches for 45 yards and a TD last week against Atlanta.

Saints coach Sean Payton said Arnold was "big for a receiver, yet he came in here and made a good impression ... we felt like he could make that switch (to tight end). He's done a really good job."

NBA roundup

Nuggets have no trouble with Lakers

Associated Press

DENVER — The Denver Nuggets have never been better against the Lakers.

Paul Millsap, Jamal Murray and Malik Beasley scored 20 points apiece, and the Nuggets rolled to their most lopsided victory ever over Los Angeles, a 117-85 rout on Tuesday night.

The 32-point margin surpassed a 29-point win in 1993.

"I thought we came out and just took it to them," Millsap said. "Our halfcourt defense was tremendous. We were not allowing them to get any shots. We could have done a little better job of shutting them down in the paint but overall I think we did a really good job of coming in and establishing what we wanted to do, paying attention to the game plan. And it completely took them out of their game."

Nikola Jokic added 14 points and Juancho Hernangomez

had 12 for the Nuggets, who won their fourth in a row.

Kyle Kuzma scored 21 points for Los Angeles, while LeBron James and Brandon Ingram added 14 apiece.

The Lakers, who handed the Nuggets their first loss of the season in late October in Los Angeles, struggled to find their shooting touch against Denver's defensive pressure.

The Lakers were outshot 48.5 percent to 39.5 percent and finished just 5-for-35 (14.3 percent) from three-point range. And for the 10th time this season, the Nuggets held an opponent to under 100 points.

Raptors 122, Grizzlies 114: Kyle Lowry had 24 points and six assists, Fred VanVleet added 18 points and Toronto used a three-point shooting burst in the fourth quarter to beat host Memphis.

VanVleet made all six shots on the night, including three from outside the arc in the fourth,

when Toronto was 7-for-12 from three-point range. Lowry was 5-for-8 on three-pointers.

Kawhi Leonard finished with 17 points and 10 rebounds, and Serge Ibaka scored 16 points.

Pistons 115, Knicks 108: Blake Griffin scored 30 points and Stanley Johnson added 21 to lift host Detroit over New York.

Reggie Jackson contributed 21 points for Detroit. The Pistons held New York to 40 percent shooting from the field and led throughout the final three quarters.

Allonzo Trier scored 24 points for the Knicks, who had won a season-high three in a row.

Pacers 109, Suns 104: Bojan Bogdanovic sank the go-ahead three-pointer with 31 seconds to play to lift Indiana over host Phoenix.

The Pacers, coming off a 33-point victory at Utah the previous night, had their hands full

in a tight fourth quarter.

After Bogdanovic's long-range basket, Devin Booker's attempt at a game-tying three barely rimmed out. Darren Collison's two free throws wrapped up the scoring.

Doug McDermott and Domantas Sabonis scored 21 points apiece for Indiana. Myles Turner added 16 and Bogdanovic 15.

Hawks 115, Heat 113: Taurian Prince scored 18 points, Trae Young finished with 17 points and 10 assists and Atlanta held off host Miami to snap a seven-game road slide.

John Collins scored 16 points, Omari Spellman had 14 and Kent Bazemore finished with 12 for the Hawks, who are 2-0 against Miami this season and 3-16 against everyone else.

Josh Richardson led Miami with 22 points, but his potential winning three-pointer with 3 seconds left — a wide-open look — bounced off the rim.

NHL roundup

Sabres edge Sharks in OT, stretch streak to 10 games

Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. — Perfect it wasn't. The Buffalo Sabres still made it to 10.

After squandering a 2-0 lead in the final 8½ minutes of the third period, Jeff Skinner scored 1:41 into overtime to seal a 3-2 win over the San Jose Sharks on Tuesday night.

"Well, you can count the gray hairs on the back of my head," coach Phil Housley said with a chuckle. "But the guys dug in."

Buffalo matched its longest winning streak in franchise history, and is enjoying the NHL's best run since the Columbus Blue Jackets won 16 in a row from Nov. 29, 2016, to Jan. 3, 2017.

Very few of the Sabres' wins have come easily since their

last loss on Nov. 4.

Nine of the 10 games have been decided by one goal, and this marked the seventh one decided after regulation — and third in a row.

"When it's a tight game, we feel confident. If we're down we don't panic," said defenseman Rasmus Ristolainen, who opened the scoring with a deke around Brent Burns. "We believe."

Skinner sealed the victory with his team-leading 19th goal, and fifth in five games.

Senators 4, Flyers 3: Brady Tkachuk scored twice in the third period and Matt Duchene scored the eventual winner with 2:59 left, lifting visiting Ottawa to the win in Philadelphia's first game since it fired general manager Ron Hextall.

Ducks 3, Lightning 1: Ryan Miller made 34 saves and Nick Ritchie had a goal and an assist to lead visiting Anaheim past Tampa Bay.

Hurricanes 2, Canadiens 1: Curtis McElhinney stopped 48 shots and visiting Carolina won in Shea Weber's return from injury for Montreal.

Golden Knights 8, Blackhawks 3: Cody Eakin and Shea Theodore each had two goals and an assist, and visiting Vegas picked up its season-high fourth consecutive victory by beating Chicago.

Avalanche 3, Predators 2: Nathan MacKinnon scored twice and Semyon Varlamov made 36 saves for streaking Colorado in its win over host Nashville.

Tyson Jost had the other goal

for the Avalanche, who have won five straight.

Penguins 4, Jets 3: Zach Aston-Reese scored the tie-breaking goal with 5:12 remaining off a perfect pass from Phil Kessel, and visiting Pittsburgh rallied past Winnipeg.

Coyotes 4, Wild 3: Josh Archibald had two goals and an assist, and visiting Arizona rallied from a two-goal, third-period deficit to beat Minnesota.

Oilers 1, Stars 0 (OT): Oscar Klefbom scored his first goal of the season in overtime, leading Edmonton past Dallas in coach Ken Hitchcock's home debut.

Kings 2, Canucks 1 (OT): Dustin Brown scored 53 seconds into overtime, giving visiting Los Angeles a victory over Vancouver.