

NATO allies turn to low-budget lethality

By PHILLIP WALTER WELLMAN
Stars and Stripes

NOWA DEBA, Poland — U.S. soldiers are training alongside Polish and Romanian forces on a counter-drone system rushed to NATO's eastern flank after a recent spate of unmanned aerial incursions across Europe.

U.S. and NATO officials, drawing lessons from the war in Ukraine, have long argued that the alliance needs cheaper ways to counter drones, since firing traditional air-defense systems at them is too expensive and often impractical. That urgency grew after about 20 unmanned aircraft crossed into Polish airspace in September, followed days later by an incursion into Romania.

NATO blamed Russia for those violations, which proved to be the final push for Poland and Romania to purchase the U.S.-made Merops counter-drone system. The system has been battle-tested in Ukraine, where local forces have used it to shoot down Russian-made Shahed drones and other incoming threats, according to U.S. military officials.

Poland and Romania received their first Merops systems this month, and training alongside U.S. soldiers began here at one of Poland's largest military training areas a little over a week ago.

"It's very lethal, very effective, but the key piece here is that it's cost effective," said Brig. Gen. Curtis King, head of the 10th Army Air and Missile Defense Command.

During a demonstration Tuesday, the Merops system sat in the back of a midsize pickup truck. Once launched, its interceptor shot through the air at speeds officials said exceeded 150 mph, identifying drones and passing within feet of them in flight.

Officials said that in a real-life scenario, the interceptor would carry explosives and detonate to destroy its target. Each interceptor costs about \$15,000, and the system overall is roughly one-tenth the price of the Shahed drones Moscow builds and employs, they said.

That matters because, until now, responding to incursions often meant scrambling NATO fighter jets, which cost tens of thousands of dollars per flight. And in a conflict like the one playing out in Ukraine, large numbers of interceptors would be needed to counter repeated drone swarms.

Another advantage of Merops, made by the company Project Eagle, is its ability to use artificial intelligence to navigate even when satellite and electronic communications are jammed, according to the company.

"This is one of many capabilities that NATO nations are going to have to look to employ to defeat the drones," King said, adding that the war in Ukraine shows how quickly modern warfare evolves and how weapons development must keep pace.

U.S. Army Europe and Africa says Merops is the first system fielded since the announcement of the Eastern Flank Deterrence Line, a concept unveiled earlier this year by commander Gen. Christopher Donahue. The plan envisions a mix of manned and robotic forces linked by a shared data network to repel any attack on NATO territory.

Under the concept, low-cost, easily replaceable hardware and software feed live targeting data to front-line robotic platforms, which can strike enemy drones and ground forces while absorbing the first wave of an assault. The goal is to deter an attack or blunt one long enough for NATO's manned units to regain the initiative and launch a counteroffensive.

Army officials say the approach is meant to be scalable and repeatable across the eastern flank, using rapidly deployable technologies that can overwhelm an adversary and deny key terrain.

US military sees spike in aircraft accidents in 2024

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — The number of major accidents involving military aircraft spiked in 2024, internal Pentagon figures show, and a series of high-profile aviation mishaps with deaths and the loss of aircraft in 2025 suggest the disturbing trend may be continuing.

Across the military, the rate of severe accidents per 100,000 flight hours rose 55% in the 2024 budget year compared with four years earlier. The Marine Corps saw the highest increase, nearly tripling its rate over the same period.

The data, which was released by the Defense Department to

Congress and provided exclusively to The Associated Press, tracks Class A mishaps — the most serious accidents, which result in death or a permanent full disability.

An aviation expert noted that broader worsening trends are unlikely the result of a single factor but rather a reflection of multiple smaller issues that accumulate to create an unsafe culture. These issues include increased operational demands, riskier aircraft like the V-22 Osprey and interruptions like the COVID-19 pandemic, which led to a significant curtailing of flying time across the military.

But the rising number of seri-

ous accidents has some in Congress looking for answers.

The data was released to Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a Massachusetts Democrat, in January after her office asked for the figures after a spate of deadly mishaps involving the V-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. Warren's office provided the data to the AP, which reviewed it independently.

The statistics cover the full budget years 2020-23 and then the first 10 months of the 2024 budget year, through July 31. In those 10 months of last year, 25 service members and Defense Department civilian employees were killed and 14 aircraft were destroyed.

The Osprey, which flies like a plane but converts to land like a helicopter, has been among the most dangerous aircraft, as the AP has reported extensively.

In addition, the new Defense Department data shows the Apache helicopter had about 4.5 times the rate of the most serious Class A accidents during the 2024 budget year compared with four years earlier. The C-130 transport plane, a workhorse of the military, nearly doubled its rate over the same period, even as it reported safer years in between.

The Pentagon, when asked about these trends, did not immediately respond.

Trump sending DOD officials to Ukraine for talks

By JOHN VANDIVER
Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — The U.S. Army's top two leaders will arrive in Ukraine this week for unannounced high-level talks expected to focus on boosting efforts to negotiate an end to the country's war with Russia.

President Donald Trump dispatched Army Secretary Dan Driscoll and Army Chief of Staff Gen. Randy George to Ukraine, where discussions on hastening an end to the 3-year-old conflict were expected to get underway Wednesday, *The Wall Street Journal* and *Politico* reported.

The top Army leaders also were expected to discuss how to move forward with a potential deal on exchanging drone technology with Ukraine, which has become an innovator of such weapons systems during the war, the news organizations reported Tuesday, citing unidentified U.S. officials.

The meeting in Kyiv comes at a critical time for Ukraine, which has faced an onslaught of Russian drone and aerial bombardment attacks in recent weeks.

Ukraine also has been scrambling to deal with a growing manpower crisis as more military-aged men flee to the West to avoid fighting.

"We have huge problems with soldiers, with human resources," Kyiv Mayor Vitali Klitschko told *Politico* last week.

Although Trump has called for an end to the war, there has been little indication that Russia is prepared to end the con-

flict. However, the administration has quietly been negotiating with Moscow, Washington-based news organization Axios reported Tuesday.

A 28-point peace plan is being drafted, Axios said, citing U.S. and Russian officials. The proposal is said to involve security guarantees for Ukraine, but it's unclear how territorial control of eastern Ukraine would be handled.

The U.S. has begun briefing Ukrainian and European officials about the concept, the report said.

Separately, there are other signs of cooperation between the U.S. and Ukraine.

On Tuesday, the State Department cleared a potential sale of Patriot air defense system sustainment gear to Ukraine for an estimated \$105 million.

Ukraine has requested the equipment, which includes upgraded launchers, to strengthen its ability to defend against Russian attacks.

The U.S. is also poised to bolster gas supplies to Ukraine, which has faced repeated attacks on its energy infrastructure.

The American Embassy in Vilnius, Lithuania, said Tuesday that a shipment of liquefied natural gas from the U.S. had arrived this week in the country, where it will be processed for onward movement.

"This will mark the first Ukraine-bound shipment of natural gas to come through Lithuania," the embassy said.

Navy also honors 250 years with Army-Navy uniforms

By MATTHEW ADAMS
Stars and Stripes

Sticking with the theme of this year's Army-Navy game — Dec. 13 in Baltimore — the Midshipmen on Tuesday revealed their uniforms that pay tribute to 250 years of service.

"The goal of this year's uniform was to tell a compelling story that seamlessly combines the history of the U.S. Navy, the (service's original) six frigates and the United States Naval Academy," Navy athletics said in a statement.

The Navy last month celebrated its 250th birthday, which traces its founding to an Oct. 13, 1775, resolution by the Second Continental Congress that "a swift sailing vessel to carry ten carriage guns" be established and dispatched to protect colonists' ships from British forces in the early days of the Revolutionary War.

The washed navy uniform color ties to the original uniforms issued by the Naval Committee to sailors at the time. The Navy woodwork and number font on the jersey are inspired by the typography found throughout the "Act to Provide Naval Armament" document, according to the Navy athletics announcement. The 1794 document authorized the construction of the original six frigates and marked a significant step in the development of the United States Navy and its transition toward becoming a maritime power.

Embedded into the sleeves and collar of the jersey are six ropes, representing the original six frigates and mimicking the ornate detailing found throughout the USS Constitution's bow. Within these ropes, there are 250 knots to honor the 250th anniversary of the Navy.

Wikoff takes command of Navy in Europe, Africa

By ALISON BATH
Stars and Stripes

NAPLES, Italy — A hard-charging fighter pilot who led the Navy in the Middle East took the helm of the service's top job in Europe and Africa this week from a submariner credited with helping to reshape the way the U.S. military fights wars.

Adm. George Wikoff took command of U.S. Naval Forces Europe-Africa and Joint Force Command Naples from Adm. Stuart Munsch on Wednesday during a ceremony at the NATO installation in Naples.

Wikoff most recently led U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. 5th Fleet, coming in to the role in February 2024 as tensions soared in the Middle

East and Navy forces in the Red Sea came under fire from Iranian-backed Houthi militants in Yemen.

Gen. Alexis Grynkeiwich, the head of U.S. European Command and NATO Supreme Allied Commander Europe, and Gen. Dagvin Anderson, commander of U.S. Africa Command, presided over Wednesday's ceremony.

With war raging in Ukraine, Russian threats in the High North and China's increasing activity in the Arctic, Wikoff assumes command of Naval Forces Europe at a time when U.S. and NATO adversaries are working together in ways unimaginable just a few years ago, Grynkeiwich said.

Abortion bill with penalties stalls in SC

Associated Press

COLUMBIA, S.C. — A South Carolina bill that would allow judges to sentence women who get abortions to decades in prison and could restrict the use of IUDs and in vitro fertilization has stalled after failing to get out of a legislative subcommittee Tuesday.

Four of the six Republicans on the subcommittee refused to vote on the bill, which would ban all abortions unless the woman's life is threatened. The three Democrats were then able to vote against sending the bill forward.

The proposal is not dead, but the effort did reveal a lack of support for the most extreme positions among groups opposing abortions. If the bill had been sent to the full Medical Affairs Committee, it would have gone

further than any other such proposal across the U.S. since the Supreme Court overturned *Roe v. Wade* in 2022.

In declining to vote on the bill, Republican state Sen. Jeff Zell said he wants to stop as many abortions as possible but that most people aren't interested in such extreme positions. He said other issues are more important to South Carolina residents.

"Say what you want. Play your politics. I'm not interested in that. What I'm interested in is speaking on behalf of South Carolinians and they're not interested in this bill right now," Zell said.

South Carolina already bans abortions after cardiac activity is detected, which is typically six weeks into a pregnancy, before many women know they are pregnant. The state allows abor-

tions for rape and incest victims up to 12 weeks.

Tuesday's vote came after two failed attempts to either lessen or eliminate a proposal in the bill to punish a woman who gets an abortion and anyone who helps them with up to 30 years in prison. An attempt to remove a provision making it a crime to tell someone where they could obtain an abortion or taking them someplace where the procedure is legal also failed.

The bill also appeared to ban any contraception that prevents a fertilized egg from implanting, which would ban intrauterine devices and could limit in vitro fertilization.

Providing information about abortions would be illegal, leaving doctors worried they couldn't suggest places where the proce-

dures are legal.

Republican Sen. Richard Cash, who sponsored the bill and is one of the Senate's most strident voices against abortion, wanted to keep the criminal penalties.

He said that before *Roe v. Wade* was overturned, abortion opponents did not consider all the ramifications of banning abortion, like how to treat embryos.

"We never even thought about it. And now we do," Cash said.

Democratic Sen. Brad Hutto said he is glad this bill isn't advancing because it had so many bad components. But he expects abortion to be an issue again when the regular General Assembly session starts in 2026.

"I say, if it's January, there's an abortion bill," Hutto said.

Probe: Ship had 2 blackouts before hitting Md. bridge

Associated Press

ANNAPOLIS, Md. — The loss of electrical power from a loose wire caused a huge cargo ship to lose propulsion and steering before crashing into Baltimore's Francis Scott Key Bridge, causing it to collapse last year and kill six construction workers, National Transportation Safety Board officials said Tuesday.

The board approved the findings and a set of recommendations to prevent similar tragedies during a hearing in Washington.

Investigators managed to identify one loose wire out of thousands on the container ship called the *Dali*. The label on the wire slid down too close to the end and prevented it from being fully inserted into the terminal.

The board also found the crew didn't have enough time to recover propulsion and avoid collision because the *Dali* was so close to the bridge when it lost power.

"The crew's actions were as timely as they could be, and they

were appropriate and also impressive considering the circumstance," board member Michael Graham said.

The *Dali* was leaving Baltimore for Sri Lanka when it crashed into a supporting column of the bridge about 1:30 a.m. on March 26, 2024, causing the bridge to collapse into the Patuxent River. Six men on a road crew, who were filling potholes, fell to their deaths.

The *Dali*, which sailed under the Singapore flag, experienced two power blackouts on its way out of Baltimore. The crew got the power back on after the first blackout, but a second shortly thereafter was caused by a lack of fuel because the flushing pump used to supply the generators doesn't restart automatically the way the main pumps do.

The flushing pump must be restarted manually by a crew member leaving the engine room and heading down two decks in darkness to reach that pump.

On visit, Saudi prince and Trump finalize F-35s sale

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — A jovial President Donald Trump held a warm and friendly meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman at the White House, packed with plenty of handshakes and back pats. He brushed aside questions about Saudi Arabia's human rights record, praised the prince for his statesmanship and announced hundreds of billions of dollars in new Saudi investment in the United States.

The White House rolled out plenty of pomp for the Saudi royal on Tuesday, dispatching fighter jets that the two leaders watched from a red carpet, parading out an honor guard on horseback and giving a lavish dinner in the East Room.

In a sitdown in the Oval Office that took place just seven years after Prince Mohammed was implicated by U.S. intelligence agencies in the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, Trump and the prince took numerous questions

from reporters — one of whom was repeatedly insulted by Trump — on everything from commerce to the sale of advanced F-35 fighter jets to Riyadh.

Trump had previewed his decision to sell F-35s on Sunday but formalized it before the prince on Tuesday when he said the approval was complete and that Israel's fears about maintaining its qualitative military edge in the Middle East would be addressed.

Details of the deal were not immediately clear, but some in the Pentagon and other agencies have opposed the sale because of the potential for advanced technology being shared with China, which also has close ties with Saudi Arabia.

Trump also said the U.S. and Saudi Arabia would complete a broader agreement on military and security issues during the visit and that the U.S. would proceed with a civilian nuclear agreement with Saudi Arabia, about which Israel also has raised concerns.

Israel military warns of more strikes in Lebanon

Associated Press

TEL AVIV, Israel — The Israeli military on Wednesday warned two villages in southern Lebanon to evacuate buildings close to what it said are Hezbollah sites, as tensions between Israel and militant groups escalate.

At least 14 people were killed in Lebanon in the past day by Israeli strikes on what the military said were sites belonging to groups associated with Hezbollah and Hamas.

Earlier Wednesday, an Israeli airstrike on a car in southern Lebanon killed one person and wounded 11 including students aboard a nearby bus, the Lebanese Health Ministry said.

The strike in the village of Tiri followed an Israeli drone attack on the Palestinian refugee camp of Ein el-Hilweh in southern Lebanon that killed 13 people and wounded several others. The Tuesday night strike was the deadliest among scores of Israeli attacks since a ceasefire in the Israel-Hezbollah war a year ago.

State-run National News Agency said a school bus with students happened to be passing near the car that was hit Wednesday morning. The bus driver and several students were wounded, the report said. The identity of the person who died in the car wasn't immediately clear.

In the Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp, just outside the port city of Sidon, life appeared normal Wednesday but Lebanese authorities prevented journalists from entering.

At the scene of the strike, paramedics searched for human remains around a wall that was stained with blood. Several cars were burnt and broken glass and debris littered the ground.

On Tuesday night, the Israeli military said it struck a Hamas training compound that was being used to prepare an attack against Israel and its army. It added that the Israeli army would continue to act against Hamas wherever it operates.

Hamas condemned the attack

and denied in a statement that the sports playground that was hit was its training compound.

Palestinian factions in Lebanon's 12 refugee camps earlier this year began handing over their weapons to the Lebanese state. The government has said that it will also work on disarming Hezbollah but Hezbollah has rejected it as long as Israel continues to occupy several hills along the border and carries out almost daily strikes.

The U.S. has recently increased pressure on Lebanon to work harder on disarming Hezbollah and canceled a planned trip to Washington this week by Lebanese army commander Gen. Rudolph Haikal.

Iran releases seized tanker and crew

Associated Press

DUBAI, United Arab Emirates — Iran on Wednesday released a Marshall Islands-flagged tanker with all its 21 crew members aboard days after Tehran seized the ship without explanation, the vessel's managers said.

Tehran had no immediate comment on the release of the Talara, which marked the first ship seizure by Iran in months. The Middle East remains tense after its 12-day war in June with Israel.

"We have informed their families, and the vessel is now free to resume normal operations," the firm said.

Ship-tracking data analyzed by The Associated Press showed the Talara traveling away from Iran.

On Friday, Iran's military seized the vessel as it traveled through the Strait of Hormuz, the narrow mouth of the Persian Gulf through which 20% of all oil traded passes.

The ship had been traveling

from Ajman, United Arab Emirates, onward to Singapore.

The U.S. Navy has blamed Iran for a series of limpet mine attacks on vessels that damaged tankers in 2019, as well as for a fatal drone attack on an Israeli-linked oil tanker that killed two European crew members in 2021.

Those attacks began after President Donald Trump in his first term in office unilaterally withdrew from Iran's 2015 nuclear deal with world powers.

In May 2022, Iran took two Greek tankers and held them until November of that year.

Iran also seized the Portuguese-flagged cargo ship MSC Aries in April 2024.

Those attacks found themselves subsumed by the Iranian-backed Houthis assaults that were targeting ships during the Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, which drastically reduced shipping abilities throughout the crucial Red Sea corridor.

Fire in Japan ruins 170 homes, forces evacuations

Associated Press

TOKYO — Firefighters and army helicopters battled a fire Wednesday that burned through a neighborhood of old wooden houses in a fishing town in southwestern Japan, killing one person, injuring another and forcing more than 170 people to evacuate.

A man in his 70s was unaccounted for and firefighters later found a body, possibly of the missing man, and a woman in her 50s suffered a minor injury, the Oita prefecture disaster response team said.

Dozens of fire engines and more than 200 firefighters were mobilized to battle the fire, which was not still fully under control more than a day after it started. The Ground Self-Defense Force dispatched two UH-1 army helicopters to assist.

It may take a few more days before the fire is completely extinguished, town mayor Shinya Adachi told reporters after he visited the devastated neighborhood Wednesday.

At least 170 homes have been

damaged or burned down, the disaster response team said. The residential section struck by the fire is close to the coastal area of Oita known for mackerel fishing but not near the prefecture's popular hot spring resorts, called onsen, and historic, thatched-roof homes.

The fire started during strong winds Tuesday evening near a fishing port in the Saganoseki district of Oita City on the southern main island of Kyushu. The blaze spread to a forest, affecting about 12 acres, the Fire and Disaster Management Agency said. There was an advisory for strong winds when the fire broke out.

A firefighter told the Kyodo News Agency the firefighting operation was hampered by narrow backstreets where fire engines could not enter. There were also abandoned homes in the rapidly aging and shrinking neighborhood, Kyodo said.

The local network YTV noted that the narrow alleyways where the fire burned had old wooden houses.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Dad charged with murder of sons missing since 2010

MADRIAN — A Michigan man charged with murder in the Thanksgiving weekend disappearance of his three sons made his first appearance in court Monday, the latest turn in a saga that has unsettled a small town for 15 years.

John Skelton was taken to Lenawee County from a state prison. He was close to finishing a sentence for failing to return 9-year-old Andrew, 7-year-old Alexander and 5-year-old Tanner Skelton to their mother on the day after Thanksgiving in 2010.

Skelton, 53, now is facing three counts of murder and tampering with evidence. The boys have never been found, despite searches in Michigan and Ohio and tips from across the country, but the father has long been identified by police as the culprit.

Skelton appeared in court and was returned to jail on a \$60 million bond.

Lawsuit filed over deaths in air ambulance crash

PA PHILADELPHIA — The families of two of the eight people killed earlier this year when an air ambulance crashed in Philadelphia filed a lawsuit on Monday, claiming the medical air transport company and others negligently caused their deaths.

The wrongful death case was filed by the estates of Dr. Raul Meza Arredondo, a pediatrician, and Lizeth Murillo Osuna, the mother of a girl who was flying home to Mexico after being treated at a Philadelphia hospital.

All six people on board the Learjet 55 were killed, along with two people on the ground. More than 20 people were hurt.

About a minute after takeoff from Northeast Philadelphia Airport on Jan. 31, the Tijuana, Mexico-bound plane crashed into a busy neighborhood, “erupting in a massive explosion that engulfed multiple vehicles and houses and sent fiery debris raining down on terrified and helpless bystanders,” the plaintiffs alleged in the lawsuit.

The National Transportation Safety Board has said the voice recorder on the plane was not working and that the crew made no distress calls to air traffic control.

The defendants are the Guadalajara air ambulance company Med Jets S.A. de C.V., which does business as Jet Rescue, along with unspecified others who were responsible for the plane’s design, manufacture, maintenance and inspection.

Homeowner charged in fatal shooting of maid

IN LEBANON — An Indiana homeowner accused of killing a house cleaner who mistakenly arrived at his front door was charged with voluntary manslaughter Monday in a case that could test the limits of stand-your-ground laws.

Curt Andersen, 62, could face anywhere from 10 to 30 years in prison and a \$10,000 fine if he’s convicted. He was being held in the Boone County Jail pending an initial court hearing.

Officers found Maria Florinda Rios Perez De Velasquez, 32, dead on the front porch of a home in Whitestown, an Indianapolis suburb, on Nov. 5. Authorities said the Guatemalan

immigrant was part of a cleaning crew that went to the wrong house just before 7 a.m.

Andersen shot her through the front door with no warning about a minute after hearing someone trying to unlock the door, according to a probable cause statement.

Indiana is one of 31 states with a stand-your-ground law that permits homeowners to use deadly force to stop someone they believe is trying to unlawfully enter their dwelling. But police said that there’s no evidence Rios entered the home before she was shot.

Police: Man sets fire to a woman on L train, flees

IL CHICAGO — A man doused a woman with a fluid and set her on fire on a Chicago L train, leaving her in critical condition, authorities said Tuesday.

The attack happened Monday night on a Blue Line train, police said. Witnesses told investigators that the 26-year-old woman and a man believed to be in his 40s began arguing, and that the man then doused her with a liquid and set her alight.

When the train pulled into the Clark and Lake stop, the man fled and the woman stumbled out and fell on the ground, police said, noting that she was taken to a hospital in critical condition. The hospital declined to discuss her condition.

A person of interest in the attack was taken in custody, police said later Tuesday.

Like many other major cities, Chicago has seen a drop in violent crime after a pandemic-era spike. Urban crime has been a hot topic of late following President Donald Trump’s charac-

terization of several Democratic-led cities, including Chicago, as crime-ridden wastelands in need of federal intervention. Local officials have pushed back against that narrative.

No prison time for pilot who tried to cut engines

OR PORTLAND — A former Alaska Airlines pilot won’t serve prison time for trying to cut the engines of a flight in 2023, a federal judge ruled Monday.

U.S. District Court Judge Amy Baggio in Portland, Ore., sentenced Joseph Emerson to time served and three years’ supervised release, ending a case that drew attention to the need for cockpit safety and more mental health support for pilots.

Emerson was subdued by the flight crew after trying to cut the engines of a Horizon Air flight from Everett, Wash., to San Francisco on Oct. 22, 2023, while riding off-duty in the cockpit. The plane was diverted and landed in Portland with more than 80 people.

Emerson told police he was despondent over a friend’s recent death, had taken psychedelic mushrooms about two days earlier, and hadn’t slept in over 40 hours. He has said he believed he was dreaming and was trying to wake up by grabbing two red handles that would have activated the fire suppression system and cut fuel to the engines.

He spent 46 days in jail and was released pending trial in December 2023, with requirements that he undergo mental health services, stay off drugs and alcohol, and keep away from aircraft.

— From wire reports

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James returns, helps lead Lakers to win

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — LeBron James certainly didn't look like he had been away from an NBA court for nearly seven months when he began his unprecedented 23rd season Tuesday night — even if his burning lungs told him otherwise.

After reaching another landmark in what is now officially the longest career in league history, James was not at all surprised to return from his lengthy injury absence by fitting in seamlessly with the surging Los Angeles Lakers in yet another victory.

James had 11 points, 12 assists and three rebounds while starting and playing 29 minutes in the Lakers' 140-126 win over the Utah Jazz, kicking off his new season with an impressive playmaking performance.

"The pace tested me, but I was happy with the way I was able to go with the guys," James said. "As the game went on, my wind got a lot better. Caught my second wind, caught my third wind. Rhythm is still coming back, obviously. First game in almost seven months, so every-

thing that happened tonight was to be expected."

That's because not much can surprise James at this point in his basketball odyssey — not even the work necessary to overcome injuries.

The 40-year-old James had been sidelined since the start of training camp by sciatica, keeping him out of the preseason and Los Angeles' first 14 games of the regular season. James, who had never missed a season opener since he started playing organized basketball three decades ago, returned to contact basketball activity last week before participating in his first Lakers practice of the new season Monday.

James realized that some observers wondered whether his presence would disrupt LA, which got off to a 10-4 start without him. The four-time NBA champion could only laugh.

"I can fit in with anybody," James said. "I don't even understand why that was even a question. What's wrong with these people out here? I can fit in right away with anybody.

Just watching the guys the first 14 games, I was putting myself (mentally) in position while I was watching the games of how I could help the team and how I could be successful to help those guys. I'm still able to gain a lot of eyes when I'm driving the ball or have the ball."

About 30 minutes before tip-off, the team confirmed James would start for the 1,561st time in his 1,563rd regular-season game. He got a loud ovation when he was announced first in the Lakers' starting lineup.

James didn't score in his first 11 minutes on court, but soon found his rhythm. After hitting a pair of 3-pointers in the second quarter, he recorded eight assists in the second half — including six in just over three minutes early in the fourth quarter.

Deandre Ayton was visibly impressed by James' passing during his first chance to play in a game alongside his new teammate. Los Angeles' new center noted that the alley-oop pass he threw down for a dunk was actually the second lob he had ever received from James — the

first was at James' basketball camp in Las Vegas when Ayton, a future No. 1 overall pick, was in the eighth grade.

"He played with the right spirit," Lakers coach JJ Redick said of James. "Very unselfish all night. Was a willing passer. Didn't force it. Took his drives and his shots when they were there. The defense is going to pay attention to him, and I just thought he made a lot of great decisions tonight. Really great to have him back."

James said Monday that his body isn't in ideal game shape, but he was eager to get started on his latest milestone achievement in a career packed with distinction. Redick was also impressed by James' fitness, saying he could have played more minutes if LA hadn't already run away from Utah.

"LeBron is, for a lot of us that played with him, or some of these guys that grew up watching him, he's a superhero," said Redick, who played 15 NBA seasons. "What he's been able to do in this game, there's a handful of guys that have been able to do it."

Magic get team effort to defeat Warriors, stay hot

Associated Press

ORLANDO, Fla. — Desmond Bane had 23 points and five steals, Anthony Black came off the bench to score 21 points and the Orlando Magic beat the Golden State Warriors 121-113 on Tuesday night.

Six Orlando players scored at least 13 points, offsetting 34 points and nine assists from Golden State's Stephen Curry and 33 points from Jimmy Butler.

Franz Wagner had 18 points and eight rebounds and Wendell Carter Jr. had 17 points and 12 rebounds for the Magic, who have won four of their last five games. Tristan da Silva had 15 points and Jalen Suggs finished with 13 points and eight assists.

Curry passed Vince Carter on the NBA's all-time scoring list, moving into 22nd place. Curry now has 25,749 points, 21 more than Carter.

Celtics 113, Nets 99: Jaylen Brown scored 29 points, Payton Pritchard had 22 points and

10 rebounds, and visiting Boston beat Brooklyn to move above .500 for the first time this season.

Derrick White added 15 points for the Celtics, who won their third straight game to improve to 8-7. They played the Nets even for about three quarters before smothering them defensively in the fourth, allowing just one basket for the first 10 minutes of the period.

Michael Porter Jr. scored 25 points for Brooklyn, his career-best seventh straight game with at least 20. But after his 3-pointer gave the Nets a 90-89 lead with 9:08 left, they didn't make another basket until 1:56 remained.

Pistons 120, Hawks 112: Cade Cunningham returned from injury with 25 points and 10 assists as visiting Detroit won its 11th straight game over short-handed Atlanta.

Jalen Duren added 24 points for the Pistons (13-2), who have their best start since going

15-2 out of the gates in 2005-06. That team finished 64-18 and reached the Eastern Conference finals. The Pistons have the NBA's longest winning streak this season and their longest since an 11-gamer during the 2007-08 season, the last time they won a playoff series.

Spurs 111, Grizzlies 101: De'Aaron Fox had 26 points, Harrison Barnes added 23 points and host San Antonio escaped with a victory over Memphis in a battle of injury-riddled rosters with Victor Wembanyama and Ja Morant both out.

MRIs revealed Spurs All-Star center Wembanyama has a left calf strain and his teammate, guard Stephon Castle, has a left hip flexor strain. Both Wembanyama and Castle are expected to miss two to three weeks.

Suns 127, Trail Blazers 110: Devin Booker scored 19 points and visiting Phoenix pulled away in the second half for a victory over Portland.

Georgia, Miami highlight updated CFP rankings

Associated Press

Georgia got a boost to No. 4, Ohio State, Indiana and Texas A&M stayed in the top three and, in what is beginning to feel like a weekly ritual in the College Football Playoff rankings, everyone is wondering what the heck might happen to Miami.

The Hurricanes were ranked 13th in Tuesday's playoff reveal — the best Atlantic Coast Conference team and a placeholder in the projected 12-team bracket. But their two conference losses make them a long shot to win the league, and their best chance of getting into the playoff — with an at-large berth — hinges on getting some help from above them.

"Miami needs to continue to win the football games they have in front of them, and good things

will happen," explained Hunter Yurachek, who took over this week as chair of the selection committee and answered more questions about the Hurricanes than any other team in the rankings.

Clearly, their best chance would be leapfrogging No. 10 Alabama, No. 11 BYU and No. 12 Utah to move into the same section of the bracket as Notre Dame, ranked ninth this week. That, in turn, would make Miami's win over the Fighting Irish back in August more relevant to the committee, which likes to compare teams in close proximity to each other.

Meanwhile, it's No. 16 Georgia Tech and No. 19 Virginia, each with one ACC loss, that have the best chance to win the confe-

rence and the automatic bid into the 12-team field that goes with it.

Make sense? There are two more Tuesday night rankings reveals to position everyone before the official bracket comes out Dec. 7.

The playoffs start Dec. 19, with the title game set a month later just outside — where else? — Miami.

No. 10 Alabama fell six spots after its 23-21 loss to Oklahoma, which moved up three notches to No. 8.

Ranking the Crimson Tide below the Sooners was an easy choice. Why they were below Notre Dame had a lot to do, Yurachek said, with comparing losses: The Irish fell to the Hurricanes and Texas A&M, while

Alabama's Week 1 loss to Florida State seems to look worse every week.

Georgia moved up a spot to No. 4, which would give the Bulldogs the last first-round bye in this week's projected bracket. They were followed by Texas Tech, Mississippi and Oregon.

The No. 3 Aggies overcame a 30-3 halftime deficit to beat South Carolina 31-30. It came a week after No. 2 Indiana needed a late rally to barely beat Penn State.

"What the committee saw in both Indiana and Texas A&M is that good teams find ways to win even when they don't play their best," Yurachek said.

Meanwhile, nobody has come within 17 points of No. 1 Ohio State since Week 1.

Guentzel gets hat trick as Lightning hold off Devils

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Jake Guentzel scored three goals for his eighth career hat trick and the Tampa Bay Lightning beat the New Jersey Devils 5-1 on Tuesday night.

Darren Raddysh had a goal and two assists, and Nikita Kucherov had a goal and assist. Andrei Vasilevskiy finished with 31 saves as Tampa Bay improved to 9-3-0 since a 1-4-2 start.

Nico Hischier scored for New Jersey, which got Dougie Hamilton, Connor Brown and Evgeni Dadanov back in the lineup. Jakob Markstrom stopped 24 shots for the Devils, who lost in regulation for the first time since Nov. 2 to end a five-game point streak (4-0-1).

The Lightning played without coach Jon Cooper, who missed the game for what the team described as personal reasons. Cooper, the head coach for Team Canada at the Olympics in February, last missed a game Dec. 21, 2021, at Las Vegas when he tested positive for COVID. Jeff Halpern served as the head coach Tuesday.

Guentzel opened the scoring on a breakaway 11:40 into the game, and added his second of the game at 10:38 of the second period with a power-play goal as he shoveled in a pass from Raddysh. Guentzel completed his third hat trick in a Tampa Bay uniform at 7:48 of the third period from the left post as

he again shoveled a puck into the net off a cross-ice pass from Kucherov.

Islanders 3, Stars 2: Bo Horvat scored his 13th goal of the season in the second period before being ejected for high-sticking in the third, and visiting New York held on against Dallas.

Calum Ritchie and Kyle Palmieri also scored and David Rittich made 22 saves for the Islanders, who are 5-1 on their seven-game road swing.

Blackhawks 5, Flames 2: Connor Bedard scored three more goals, and host Chicago beat Calgary for its second straight win.

Ryan Donato and Oliver Moore also scored as the Blackhawks improved to 5-0-1 in its last six games. Arvid Soderblom made 19 saves.

Maple Leafs 3, Blues 2 (OT): William Nylander scored at 4:06 of overtime as underperforming and injury-ravaged Toronto picked up a victory over visiting St. Louis to snap a five-game slide.

Jake McCabe and Steven Lorentz also scored for the Maple Leafs, who had dropped five straight, including four in regulation.

Red Wings 4, Kraken 2: Nate Danielson had a goal and an assist for his first two NHL points as Detroit rookies fueled a victory over visiting Seattle.

Lucas Raymond and Emmitt Finnin

scored in a three-goal second period and Dylan Larkin added an empty-netter as the Red Wings began a four-game homestand. Danielson, Finnie and defenseman Axel Sandin-Pellikka, all rookies this season, combined for four points in the second period.

Jets 5, Blue Jackets 2: Mark Scheifele had three assists, Josh Morrissey extended his scoring streak to six games, and host Winnipeg defeated Columbus.

Adam Lowry and Neal Pionk each scored their first goals of the season, Kyle Connor had a nifty third-period goal to go with an assist, while Logan Stanley capped off the scoring for the Jets in the third period.

Golden Knights 3, Rangers 2: Rookie forward Braeden Bowman scored his second career goal and host Vegas defeated New York.

The Golden Knights improved to 2-0-1 in their past three games following an 0-2-2 stretch.

Sharks 3, Mammoth 2 (OT): Macklin Celebrini scored a power-play goal in overtime to complete his second hat trick of the season, and host San Jose overcame a blown third-period lead to beat Utah.

Celebrini scored twice in the first six minutes of the game and capped it when he beat Vitek Vanacek with 2:09 left in overtime after the Mammoth had been called for too many men on the ice.

Boozers, No. 5 Duke defeat No. 24 Kansas

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Cameron Boozer had 18 points and 10 rebounds, twin brother Cayden made a couple of big second-half baskets and fifth-ranked Duke outlasted No. 24 Kansas, defeating the undermanned Jayhawks 78-66 on Tuesday night in the annual Champions Classic.

Isaiah Evans scored 16 points and Patrick Ngongba had 13 on 4-of-4 shooting for the Blue Devils (5-0).

Kansas (3-2) was still without its best player, freshman Daryn Peterson, the nation's top recruit and potentially the top pick in next year's NBA draft, because of a lingering hamstring injury. Peterson has missed three consecutive games since hurting himself during a shootaround.

Peterson's absence was enough to make a difference at Madison Square Garden even though Duke was less consistent than in its last four victories. The Jayhawks rattled the Blue Devils with some fast-break points early before getting worn down by foul trouble

and a depth disparity.

All five Kansas starters had at least one foul and three had two apiece in the first half, and Duke closed it out on a 17-5 run to lead by eight. The Jayhawks trimmed their deficit to 67-64 on Melvin Council Jr.'s 3-pointer with 4:59 left.

Cameron Boozer scored four of the eight points in an 8-0 run by the Blue Devils to pull away.

No. 18 North Carolina 73, Navy 61: Caleb Wilson had 23 points and 12 rebounds, leading the host Tar Heels over the Midshipmen.

The Tar Heels led wire-to-wire, but Navy trimmed the deficit to three points midway through the first half on a layup from Donovan Draper. UNC responded with a 14-5 run to retake a comfortable double-digit advantage.

The Midshipmen cut the Tar Heels' lead to four points early in the second half, but North Carolina answered with a 24-7 run, highlighted by three spectacular transition dunks from Wilson.

The Tar Heels became the third program in Division I

men's basketball to reach 2,400 victories, joining Kentucky and Kansas.

This victory marked the final of five consecutive home games to start the season for North Carolina, the longest season-opening home stretch it's had since 1918. The Tar Heels won't return to the Dean Smith Center until Dec. 7.

No. 19 UCLA 79, Sacramento State 48: Eric Dailey Jr. had 15 points and 12 rebounds, Xavier Booker scored 12 and the host Bruins rode a new-look starting lineup to a home victory over the Hornets.

Trent Perry, Jamar Brown, Steven Jamerson II and Brandon Williams all started for UCLA (4-1) after making just two starts between them in the first four games of the season. Booker, Tyler Bilodeau, Donovan Dent and Skyy Clark all began the game on the bench.

The revamped starting unit helped to hold Sacramento State scoreless over the opening six minutes, and the defense overall limited the Hornets to 24.1% shooting for the game.

Perry had 11 points and

Brown added 10 for the Bruins.

Prophet Johnson had 13 points with 10 rebounds and Jahni Summers scored 11 as Sacramento State fell to 0-4 against UCLA.

The Hornets (3-3) lost leading scorer and second-leading rebounder Jeremiah Cherry to a right knee injury with 8:18 remaining in the first half.

Only when Bilodeau, Booker and Clark entered with 15:17 remaining in the half did the Hornets finally score on a jumper from Brandon Gardner following a turnover by Perry.

No. 21 Arkansas 84, Winthrop 83: Meleek Thomas scored a career-high 26 points as the host Razorbacks scored the final six points to rally past the Eagles.

Arkansas took their final lead with 11 seconds left when Nick Pringle scored at the rim after a Winthrop turnover. After the basket, he and the Eagles' Logan Duncomb became tangled. As the officials attempted to break up the entanglement, Pringle threw Duncomb to the floor, leading to a brief delay as the play went to review.

No. 17 Michigan State tops No. 12 Kentucky with 3-point burst

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Tom Izzo had some nit-picking to do even after 17th-ranked Michigan State pulled away to beat No. 12 Kentucky 83-66 in the Champions Classic on Tuesday night. The Hall of Fame coach also pointed out a major positive.

The Spartans shot 11 of 22 from beyond the arc at Madison Square Garden after making just 13 of their first 60 3-point attempts in their first three games, good for 21.7% and fourth-worst out of 361 Division I programs.

"I'm not really sure," Kur Teng, who had three of those 11, said when asked what changed. "But we can only go up from here. We've just got to make

sure we keep on stacking these type of performances."

Izzo recalled telling his wife and athletic director J Batt that the previous three days were his team's best practices so far this fall. While rebounding and defending has been a hallmark of his three decades in East Lansing, this most recent stretch had a lot to do with trying to ease offensive concerns from missing shots.

"This entire week we've been really trying to step up our game in terms of shooting," senior forward Jaxon Kohler said. "This week in shooting, we've been shooting very well. The key is to go into this game and have confidence in your shot."

It worked. After falling be-

hind 5-0 in the opening minutes, Michigan State scored its first 12 points by going a perfect 4 of 4 on 3s. The burden lifted from there.

"The first one went in, and you just kind of build on that confidence," said Kohler, who made two 3-pointers as part of his game-high 20 points. "I feel like that gave a leeway for everybody to make their shots. Us as a team, (we) shot the ball really well tonight."

Izzo acknowledged the Spartans "weren't great" other than their shooting early and took advantage of some uncharacteristically poor shooting by Kentucky. The lead was 17 at half-time, and when the Wildcats began to close the gap, Teng hit

back-to-back 3s to keep the margin from dipping into single digits.

"I'd seen them kind of flying at me for that one 3, so I kind of up-faked, took a dribble and knocked it down," said Teng, who scored a career-high 15 points. "I just want to make sure I'm there for my teammates in them type of moments."

Izzo, one of the old guard left on the college sidelines in an era predicated by the transfer portal and name, image and likeness deals, was gratified to see practice habits pay off. The 70-year-old joked that having a couple of sessions a day may be against the rules, but he was happy to see the shots fall for a change.