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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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General: US needs a revised strategy

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. commander in Afghanistan said Tuesday he has recommended the White House delay the withdrawal of U.S. troops planned for next year because Afghan forces lack the capability to defend the country.

Gen. John Campbell told the Senate Armed Services Committee that the U.S. and Afghan security forces were surprised last week by the Taliban seizure of Kunduz, and the ability of local forces to repel such attacks remains “uneven and inconsistent.”

The general has given President Barack Obama troop-strength recommendations for the coming years as the president reviews plans to draw down to just an embassy force, beginning in January. Campbell said his recommendations will include keeping more troops to gird security, though he declined to share details publicly during the testimony.

“The Afghans and quite frankly the coalition were surprised when the Taliban was

able to take over Kunduz city,” he said.

The Taliban under a new commander seized the provincial capital last week as part of its largest offensive in years that involved thousands of fighters and focused on taking other key hubs in northern Afghanistan.

Campbell said the fighting in Kunduz underscores several shortcomings in the Afghan security forces.

“They do not possess the necessary combat power and numbers to protect every part of the country,” he said in written testimony to the Senate committee.

The U.S. military is backing the Afghan army as it attempts to retake the city, though one of its airstrikes destroyed a key hospital, complicating the battle and triggering an investigation.

Campbell said the U.S. strike that killed 22 civilians and damaged a hospital run by the French aid agency Doctors Without Borders was a mistake. He guaranteed a thorough and transparent investigation and ordered in-depth training of the entire force on the rules of engagement.

“We would never intention-

ally target a protected medical facility,” he said.

Afghan forces requested close air support, Campbell said, reversing initial reports that U.S. special operations forces were under attack. He also said it was a U.S. decision within the U.S. chain of command to conduct the airstrike.

The strike was carried out by an AC-130 gunship but specifics on the deadly incident would be held pending investigations, the general said.

Campbell told the Senate that the U.S. drawdown has contributed to the situation.

“Our force reduction, drop in enablers, and resultant [close-air-support] gap have created challenges for the [Afghan security forces]. They have understandably struggled at times to adjust,” he said in the written testimony.

The White House is now deciding how many troops to keep in Afghanistan next year.

Obama agreed to slow his withdrawal plans earlier this year after a meeting in Washington with Afghanistan President Ashraf Ghani by keeping 9,800 troops there, instead of reducing the number to 5,000.

But the president has said he still plans to bring the war to an end by the end of his second term.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., said the situation in Afghanistan and the condition of its security forces are similar to the situation in Iraq, as the United States pulled all its forces from that country in 2011, following an eight-year ground war.

“The shortfalls are hauntingly familiar — intelligence, logistics, air lift and close air support, special forces, and institutional development,” McCain said.

“And yet, the White House remains committed to its politically driven withdrawal of nearly all U.S. forces from Afghanistan.”

McCain and other Republicans have hammered Obama for his decision to pull out of Iraq, a move that eventually led to an Islamic State invasion there and in Syria.

That conflict has drawn the United States into a protracted air campaign with about 3,000 troops, including trainers and advisers, that the Obama administration and military brass has said will likely last for years.

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Carter warns Russia on incursions into Turkish airspace

BY TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

MORON AIR BASE, Spain — Defense Secretary Ash Carter intensified U.S. warnings to Russia on recent violations of Turkish airspace, telling a group of rapid-response U.S. forces here that further incursions would be met with a military response.

“We will react,” Carter said, asserting that “their behavior needs to be checked.”

Carter’s comments followed reports of a second incursion by Russian fighters into Turkish airspace on Tuesday. While Carter could not confirm those reports, he said the U.S. and NATO would not tolerate additional violations.

“We will react,” he said. “And certainly the Turks will, and have said they will. So it is a serious matter, and we take it very, very seriously.”

On Saturday, a pair of Russian fighters entered Turkish

airspace. Turkish fighters intercepted the overflight, which lasted about two and a half minutes, a senior U.S. official said.

NATO also reacted strongly to the incidents Tuesday, with Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg accusing Russia of a deliberate incursion into alliance airspace and dismissing Moscow’s assertion that it was a mistake.

Russian, U.S. and coalition aircraft have continued their separate bombing campaigns

over Syria in recent days, escalating the risk that miscommunication could lead to unintended collisions.

Carter said Thursday’s NATO defense ministerial would focus on the Russian aerial incursions.

The U.S. was already planning to discuss Russia’s unilateral actions in Syria and their ramifications for the NATO alliance.

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Ohio-class submarines undergo changes to accommodate women

The Brunswick (Ga.) News

ST. MARYS, Ga. — The Navy is taking applications from sailors who want to be among the first enlisted women to serve aboard Ohio-class submarines. But before they begin their duties, modifications are needed to accommodate women on the submarines that were designed and built when only males served on them.

Work has already started in a Bangor, Wash., shipyard on the USS Michigan, the first of seven Ohio-class submarines scheduled to undergo the modifications. Navy officials estimate the renovations

to cost about \$6 million for each boat. Renovations on the Michigan are scheduled for completion next summer.

The renovations will create living space for two chief petty officers and 27 enlisted women from the lower ranks. They will share three nine-person bunk rooms and a bathroom.

The Navy's goal is to add about 550 enlisted women to the crews of the seven Ohio-class submarines by 2020. Another 115 women will be assigned to the crews aboard new Virginia-class fast attack submarines in coming years.

Navy retires last modern ship to sink enemy vessel

The Florida Times-Union

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. — The United States Navy decommissioned its last Perry-class frigate, reducing the Navy's number of ships that have sunk an enemy vessel to just one. The end of the Navy's frigates marks a new era of naval warfare where ships are less likely to go to battle in the open sea.

The USS Simpson removed its weapons, covered its windows, and on Sept. 29, it lowered its flags. Now, the ship will travel to Philadelphia until a foreign nation buys it.

After 30 years of service — including an April 1988 battle when it fired missiles at and sunk an Iranian oil platform and an Iranian Navy vessel — the ship's service came to an end with a ceremony at Mayport Naval Station.

Now the only Navy ship that has sunk an enemy is the USS Constitution, which did so during the War of 1812.

About 90 percent of the Simpson's final crew will face new assignments in Jacksonville, according to the ship's final commanding officer, Cmdr. Casey Roskelly.

The Simpson was built and commissioned in the waning years of the Cold War. It searched for and escorted submarines, and it fought narcotics traffickers and pirates. Roskelly couldn't detail the ship's most recent security missions other than to say it occurred in the Mediterranean Sea.

The Navy has focused its energies on close-to-shore littoral combat ships.

"There is really no deep-water threat now," Roskelly said. "It's now in closer."

So far Pakistan, Bahrain, Egypt, Turkey and Poland have purchased the Navy's decommissioned frigates.

DOD's Syria program likely to be cut

Tribune Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON — The Obama administration's initial effort to build a proxy military force inside Syria to help fight the Islamic State group appears to be on shaky ground as key U.S. lawmakers consider closing a \$500 million Pentagon program widely considered an embarrassing failure.

Partly as a result, the Pentagon has proposed a plan to the White House that would shift the focus of future training to rebel groups already fighting in Syria, rather than try to set up a separate force from scratch.

Congress must vote to keep the current program running beyond September 2016. But

lawmakers are weighing a plan to require the defense secretary to seek approval from Congress each time he wants to spend more on the training before that date.

The program drew widespread criticism after the Pentagon acknowledged its yearlong attempt to train and deploy 5,400 rebel fighters had produced only a handful. The White House initially had touted the plan as a way to create a reliable partner in Syria and to avoid more direct U.S. involvement there.

The first 54 recruits were mauled by the Nusra Front, an al-Qaida franchise, after they crossed into Syria. The second

class of 71 surrendered some of their U.S.-issued ammunition and trucks to the Nusra Front in exchange for safe passage.

Gen. Lloyd Austin, who heads U.S. Central Command, told the Senate Armed Services Committee last month that only "four or five" from the first class were still on the battlefield.

Given the setbacks, the Pentagon has put the program on hold, saying no new recruits are allowed out of the training camps. If Congress cuts the funding, the military will begin shutting the operation down.

In a letter, four senators urged Defense Secretary Ash Carter to end the "failed" initiative.

Ex-Navy pilot sues over VA diagnosis

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — A former Navy pilot has filed a \$35 million lawsuit against the federal government alleging that a Veterans Affairs doctor misdiagnosed him with a mental illness that caused him to lose his ability to fly commercial airplanes and be wrongly treated for the disorder for a decade.

William Royster, 53, of Kansas City, said in the lawsuit filed Friday that a doctor at the local

VA medical center diagnosed him with bipolar disorder in April 2004 and said he could not work in any capacity. The doctor also said the condition was permanent, he contends.

After he had been treated and medicated for more than 10 years for the disorder, Royster said a different psychiatrist at the medical center told him last November that he was not bipolar.

Royster was flying a fighter

jet on a training mission associated with Desert Storm on June 4, 1996, when he was shot down, the lawsuit says. He was injured when he ejected from the jet and honorably discharged from the Navy that November.

After his discharge, Royster was hired by United Airlines to fly Boeing commercial planes in January 1998.

He held that position until the bipolar diagnosis in April 2004 grounded him.

New faces dot Chicago lineup

Associated Press

After the Chicago Blackhawks raised the Stanley Cup on home ice in June to celebrate their third title in six years, they spent the summer figuring out how to pay for it.

That meant making significant changes, including the departures of several key players.

That also left the Stanley Cup race remarkably wide-open.

The league has no overwhelming favorite when play begins Wednesday night with four games. Seemingly half of the NHL's teams have legitimate hopes of being the next to raise the Cup in a league that's financially healthy, remarkably competitive and ready for a busy winter.

"No team can live on what they did in the past," said Los Angeles captain Dustin Brown, whose Kings missed the playoffs last spring after winning the Cup in 2014. "You always have a new challenge at this time of the year, and everybody has it this season."

Chicago is the closest thing to a modern NHL dynasty after its lengthy run of excellence, but the Blackhawks will have to do it again without Patrick Sharp, Brandon Saad, Johnny Oduya, Antoine Vermette, Brad Richards and a handful of other contributors. Patrick Kane will be in uniform — and he'll even have a bobblehead night Jan. 24 — while he is under investigation for an alleged sexual assault.

Chicago coach Joel Quenneville plans to lean on Jonathan Toews, Duncan Keith and his other veteran leaders to get through this transition period with a chance to repeat.

"It's what we're bred to do. It's what we're all about," Quenneville said. "You get to this level, or at any level, I think you want to win every shift, you want to win the game, you want to be productive, you want to contribute in a meaningful way,

in a positive way. Nothing better than winning."

The Anaheim Ducks are a popular pre-season pick for their franchise's second title after taking the Blackhawks to the seven-game limit in the Western Conference finals. Coach Bruce Boudreau's squad is loaded with an enviable mix of veteran excellence and young talent, but has been knocked out of the last two postseasons by the eventual Stanley Cup champion.

While the West still appears to be the superior conference with St. Louis, Los Angeles and hard-charging Calgary and Winnipeg in the mix, the Eastern Conference could finally break through next summer after losing seven of the last nine Stanley Cup Final series.

The Tampa Bay Lightning are widely considered the favorite to defend their East title after making few changes to an impressive squad. Washington, Montreal and the New York Islanders all are title contenders, while returning powers like the New York Rangers will look to stay in the race.

Here are some more things to watch when the NHL season begins this week:

3-on-3

For the first time, NHL overtimes will feature 3-on-3 play. Preseason tests have demonstrated the thrill of unleashing NHL scoring talent in this format, which is all but certain to reduce the number of shootouts dramatically, essentially trading in one non-traditional strategy of avoiding ties for another.

Throw the flag

The NHL will allow coaches to challenge rulings on the ice for the first time. Defending teams can ask for offside calls after a goal is scored, or a team that believes it got the puck into the net can

ask for a review of a no-goal call. Both teams can ask for a review of goalie interference, as long as the team has retained its timeout. The Kings are among the teams that plan to have an iPad near the sticks on the bench to help them determine whether to challenge calls.

New boss

Mike Babcock will be the NHL's most scrutinized coach after accepting an eight-year, \$50 million contract to leave Detroit for the Toronto Maple Leafs, who haven't won a playoff round or finished higher than third in their division since 2004. No coach has more international respect than the longtime Canadian Olympic boss, but fixing this legendarily underachieving marquee franchise is the biggest challenge of his career.

New teams

The NHL continues to move toward expansion to Las Vegas and Quebec City, although recent comments by Boston owner Jeremy Jacobs cast doubt on the league's willingness to do it quickly. It's tough to imagine the NHL owners passing on \$1 billion in expansion fees, but we should find out during this season whether the NHL will have new teams two years from now.

Empty your pockets

Fans at all 30 NHL arenas — including Barclays Center in Brooklyn, the Islanders' new home — will have to pass through metal detectors. Some buildings already had the security measure in place, but others expect longer lines until fans and arena employees get used to the new procedures.

AP Sports Writers Larry Lage in Toronto and Jay Cohen in Chicago contributed to this report.

Goalies' workload a concern

Associated Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. — The speculation started even before the Nashville Predators lost in the Western Conference quarterfinals last season, that goaltender Pekka Rinne was working a bit too much during the regular season and he was going to be worn out for the games that matter most.

The Predators talked about whether fatigue played a role in their ouster from the postseason, then dismissed the idea.

So does Rinne.

"I'm not too worried about the number," said Rinne, who started 64 games last season and was still tied only for seventh among the workhorse goalies in the NHL. "Obviously going deeper this season, you want to feel fresh and you want to be able to give everything you have and help this team. But in the past, I've played a lot of games, and I feel like that helps me, too, having that experience."

Balancing a goalie's workload over an 82-game season is tricky. Earning a playoff berth usually means playing the best goalie as much as possible — even when the team is going to need him in the long, long postseason where he is the one player who can steal a game and even a series in the chase for a Stanley Cup championship.

So how much is too much?

Nobody played more games in the NHL last season than Braden Holtby. The Washington goalie was in net 73 games, and he also led the league winning 91.1 percent of the Capitals' games with 41 of 45 victories. Holtby said he simply feels better when he plays more.

"If you can just keep rolling, it makes things easier," Holtby said. "But at the same time, it's great if you're not getting fatigued, mentally fatigued, with injuries or whatnot, so that just depends on the season. You can't plan on those things. You just take it one day at a time and see where it ends up."

Holtby's workload was on Washington coach Barry Trotz's mind when he ran into Martin Brodeur at the NHL Draft in June. Brodeur started 78 games for the New Jersey Devils in 2006-07 and 77 games in three other seasons. Only Grant Fuhr started more games in a single season with 79 for St. Louis in 1995-96, and Brodeur won two of his three Stanley Cups in seasons he started 72 and 73 games.

Trotz said Brodeur believed he got into a rhythm playing game after game, and off days hampered the run.

"I guess 'a body in motion stays in motion' type thing," Trotz said.

Patrick Roy always tried to talk coaches into letting him play more, only to be kept around 60 games per season (his career high was 68 games played in 1993-94). Now coaching Colorado, Roy is using that approach with Semyon Varlamov.

Devan Dubnyk set the standard last season playing 38 straight games after Minnesota acquired him from Arizona in January. Dubnyk started 39 of 40 games overall with a 1.78 GAA.

Fourth lines required to have more skill

Associated Press

Goons are pretty much gone in the NHL. More and more teams are using four lines of forwards who can skate — and score. The days of having seldom-used tough guys on the fourth line just to throw punches or protect stars are over.

"One-dimensional players are almost extinct," Detroit Red Wings general manager Ken Holland said. "The game is faster than ever. Teams that used to want a physical and intimidation factor on the fourth line now are more interested in having four lines that can contribute offensively and play with discipline to stay out of the penalty box."

Fights are down in the league, and playing time is up for more players.

There were 0.63 fighting majors per game last season, the seventh straight year in which there was a decline, according to STATS. And, the number of forwards who play 10-plus minutes has been trending up for years.

"Because of the competitiveness of our league, teams are more focused on having skilled players to make a difference," NHL commissioner Gary Bettman said.

Instead of sending a message with a fight, teams would rather do it by scoring. The average goals in a game has hovered around 5.3 the past four seasons as goaltenders have gotten more skilled, so teams are looking for contributions from everyone.

New York Rangers forward Tanner Glass, though, hopes the trend doesn't make it tougher for him to keep his job. He also doesn't want it to lead to players using their sticks instead of fists to do damage. Glass had more fights (nine) than goals last year, ranking among league leaders. He has scored 19 times over eight seasons, but five teams have wanted his physical presence on their rosters over the years.

Is he concerned teams are devaluing fighting?

"I think there's still a spot for that, and

there always will be a spot for that," Glass said. "I know it won't be as prominent as it is and as it has been, but I think if you talk to guys around the league, no one wants a league with no toughness and no accountability."

In other words, he said, slashing majors might become more common if fighting goes away.

"Guys kind of play a different way when there's no accountability," Glass said.

Holland and Red Wings senior vice president Jim Devellano both credit Hall of Fame coach Scotty Bowman with leading the charge to change the way fourth lines are used a couple decades ago.

While he did put notorious tough guy Darren McCarty on a fourth unit in Detroit that was known as the "Grind Line," McCarty could light the lamp as well. McCarty's linemates, Kris Draper and Kirk Maltby, could skate and hit hard while contributing offensively, at least occasionally.



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Chancellor, refs rescue Seattle

Associated Press

SEATTLE — With one big punch, Kam Chancellor showed his importance to the Seattle Seahawks.

With one little touch, K.J. Wright provided another Monday night controversy in the same end zone where the infamous "Fail Mary" took place.

"Now that you look at it, we were fortunate," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said.

Chancellor knocked the ball free from Detroit wide receiver Calvin Johnson at the 1-yard line when it appeared the Lions were going to take the lead, and Seattle held on for a 13-10 win.

With Detroit on the verge of capping a 91-yard drive with the go-ahead touchdown with less than 2 minutes remaining, Chancellor came from the side and punched the ball from Johnson's arm as he was being tackled by Earl Thomas. It bounded into the end zone where it was guided over the back line by K.J. Wright for a touchback and Seattle's ball at the 20.

But Wright should have been called for an illegal bat for hitting the ball out of the end zone, NFL VP of Officiating Dean Blandino told NFL Network. The penalty would have given the ball back to Detroit

at the Seattle 1.

No flags were thrown and on the ensuing possession, Russell Wilson found Jermaine Kearse for 50 yards on third down. With Detroit out of timeouts, the Seahawks (2-2) ran off the final seconds of their second straight win.

"The back judge was on the play and in his judgment he didn't feel it was an overt act so he didn't throw the flag," Blandino said. "In looking at the replays it looked like a bat so the enforcement would be basically we would go back to the spot of the fumble and Detroit would keep the football."

Wright said he did not know the rule and was purposely guiding the ball over the end line.

"That was definitely the thought process just to get the ball out of bounds and not try to catch it and fumble it and hit my foot and the Lions recover it," Wright said.

The non-call provided another memorable Monday night moment in Seattle. It was three years ago when replacement officials credited Golden Tate with a disputed touchdown reception on the final play in nearly the same spot as Seattle beat Green Bay.

Now it was Tate, playing for Detroit, on the opposite side of a strange play in the Emerald City. Detroit (0-4) is off to its worst start since it also started 0-4 in 2010.

"What can you do? You're not going to cry about it that's for sure," Detroit coach Jim Caldwell said.

It was an ugly performance by the home team, filled with offensive mistakes and two fourth-quarter fumbles by Wilson, the second returned 27 yards for a touchdown by Caraun Reid to pull Detroit to 13-10.

But in the end, Seattle's defense came through.

Starting on their 9 with 6:23 remaining, the Lions converted a big third down on Tate's 22-yard catch-and-run and reached the Seattle 46 with 3 minutes left on Ameer Abdullah's 9-yard run. Matthew Stafford then zipped a pass to tight end Tim Wright down the seam for 26 yards to the Seattle 20 with 2:30 remaining, placing it in-between Richard Sherman, Earl Thomas and Chancellor.

The Lions reached the Seattle 11 and on third-and-1, Stafford passed to an open Johnson. As he stretched for the goal line, Chancellor came across and knocked the ball free.

Chicago anxious to make next leap

Associated Press

CHICAGO — No matter how the playoffs turn out for the Chicago Cubs, manager Joe Maddon wanted to know one thing.

"How can you possibly be disappointed with anything our players have done this year?" he wondered.

The emergence of several young prospects helped elevate the Cubs to their first postseason appearance in seven years despite finishing third in their division. They visit Pittsburgh on Wednesday night for a matchup of two of the majors' best teams in the NL wild-card game.

"Fast forward from a year ago, we put our organization in a great position top to bottom for success," All-Star slugger Anthony Rizzo said. "Now it is on us players to go out and repeat that success."

Jake Arrieta gets the ball against Gerrit Cole and the Pirates, hoping his dominant run continues into the postseason. If they win, the Cubs meet St. Louis in the division series. Otherwise, it's on to next year.

Given the youth and the strides this team made, that does not sound like a terrible proposition. But the Cubs are looking for more than just a one-game cameo in the playoffs.

"Joe said at the beginning of spring training that the hardest thing to do is crack the postseason the first time," Rizzo said. "Then you learn how to win. I think this organization has really grown, especially since I've been here."

The Cubs went from winning 73 games to finishing with the third-best record in baseball at 97-65.

They are in the postseason for the first time since the 2007 and 2008 teams won the NL Central. And if they beat Pittsburgh, the Cubs will do something they have not done since Game 4 of the 2003 NL championship series — win a playoff game. No need to recount what happened in that series against the Florida Marlins. Or that the Cubs last won the World Series in 1908.

Don't plan Super Bowl trip yet, Bengals fans

Associated Press

Andy Dalton is ready to take the Bengals further than Ken Anderson and Boomer Esiason.

Dalton is off to a great start, the offense is flying and Cincinnati is 4-0. Nevermind the fact Dalton is 0-4 in the playoffs. Book a February trip to Santa Clara, Bengals fans.

One quarter of the NFL season is in the books, so let's overreact to what we've seen.

Sure, Dalton and the Bengals have been impressive. But they have four wins against teams with a combined record of 6-10. Let's see where they stand after a tough three-game stretch against Seattle, at Buffalo and at Pittsburgh.

Besides, there's a pair of unbeaten AFC teams with pretty accomplished quarterbacks who will make the path to Super Bowl 50 tough. Tom Brady and the

Patriots are 3-0. Peyton Manning and the Broncos are 4-0.

Here are other overreactions from Week 4:

Overreaction: Chip Kelly can only win in college. The Eagles blew a fourth-quarter lead and fell to 1-3 with a 23-20 loss at Washington.

Realistic reaction: They're a kicker away from 3-1. Cody Parkey missed a field goal in the fourth quarter in a 26-24 loss at Atlanta in Week 1. Caleb Sturgis missed an extra point and a 33-yarder against the Redskins. The Eagles were 1-3 in Kelly's first season in 2013 and rallied to win the NFC East. Plus, the division is weak with three teams tied at 2-2.

Overreaction: The Cowboys are doomed without Tony Romo. Dallas is 0-2 with Brandon Weeden after a 26-20 overtime loss at New Orleans.

Realistic reaction: It's not Weeden's fault. He led the Cowboys to 28 points in a

loss to Atlanta and threw a tying TD pass with 1:51 left against the Saints.

Overreaction: The Fins are fried. A 27-14 loss to the Jets in London dropped the Dolphins to 1-3 and cost coach Joe Philbin his job.

Realistic reaction: The Dolphins have a bye so it was the best time for owner Stephen Ross to make a change. They have winnable games against Tennessee (1-2) and Houston (1-3) coming up so new coach Dan Campbell has a chance for a quick turnaround.

Overreaction: The Lions are going 0-16 again. Detroit is the only winless team in the NFL after a 13-10 loss to the Seahawks.

Realistic reaction: If an illegal bat on the Seahawks was called after Calvin Johnson fumbled into the end zone, the Lions would've upset Seattle on the road. They're better than 0-4.

4 moments that changed baseball's 2015 season

Associated Press

It could have been one of the most memorable comebacks in Los Angeles Angels history, but instead it will go down as a mere footnote.

When the Angels scored five runs in the ninth inning Saturday to beat the Texas Rangers 11-10, they kept themselves in the postseason race for another day and prevented Texas from clinching the AL West. Then on Sunday, Texas beat L.A., wrapping up the division and ensuring that Houston, not Los Angeles, would end up with a wild card.

The sheer length of the baseball season makes it hard to tell the difference between a fleeting moment of glory and a true turning point. Fortunately, we now have the benefit of hindsight, so even though that amazing ninth inning by the Angels ended up being fairly meaningless, here are four other moments that really did change the 2015 season:

May 17: Jeff Banister shakes up his bullpen. Banister, the Texas manager, told his relievers before a May 17 game against Cleveland that there were no set roles in the bullpen any more. The Rangers were 15-22 at that point, and closer Neftali Feliz had already blown three saves. Shawn Tolleson pitched the ninth for Texas that day, and the Rangers won 5-1.

A few days later, Tolleson earned the first save of his career. He would finish the season with 35 in 37 chances, adding stability to the late innings as the Rangers rallied to take the division by two games over Houston.

May 21: Jaime Garcia returns to the mound. Garcia made only nine starts in 2013 and seven in 2014. He had thoracic outlet surgery in July 2014 to alleviate numbness and tingling in his pitching arm and hand. So it was fair to wonder what the St. Louis Cardinals could expect from

him this year, but in his first game back, he allowed only two runs in seven innings against the New York Mets, an encouraging sign for sure.

Garcia ended up making 20 starts, going 10-6 with a 2.43 ERA. For a team that lost Adam Wainwright early on, it's fair to suggest that Garcia's performance was the difference between winning the NL Central and dropping to a wild card. The Cardinals won the division by two games.

July 3: Miguel Cabrera injures his left calf. The Detroit slugger would not play again until Aug. 14, and the team he came back to looked far different from the one he left. The Tigers went 15-20 in the interim and were in bad enough shape at the deadline that they traded stars David Price and Yoenis Cespedes. Price led Toronto to the AL East title, and Cespedes played a huge role for the New York Mets in their NL East championship.

Shortly after the deadline, the Tigers

let general manager Dave Dombrowski go. He's now running things in Boston, so the butterfly effect from Cabrera's injury could last a while.

July 29: The Mets don't trade for Carlos Gomez. They'll be talking about this night in New York for years. Reports surfaced that Gomez was going to the Mets, and Wilmer Flores, who was expected to leave New York in the deal, was wiping tears from his eyes on the field during a game.

The trade was never completed, though. Instead, the Mets kept Flores and traded for Cespedes. From July 31 on, Flores hit .296 with six homers. Cespedes hit .287 with 17 home runs and 44 RBIs in 57 games for New York. The Mets outlasted Washington in the NL East, and there's no telling what changes await the Nationals as a result.

Gomez, meanwhile, was traded to Houston and hit only .242 for the Astros.