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A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

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DOD: Iranian missiles might have been fired at US ships off Yemen

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon won't rule out that Iranian missiles provided to rebels in Yemen were used to fire upon two U.S. warships in the Red Sea on Sunday, spokesman Capt. Jeff Davis said Tuesday.

The destroyer USS Mason and amphibious warship USS Ponce were conducting "routine operations in international waters" in the Red Sea on Sunday night when the first of two cruise missiles was detected heading toward them, Davis

said. The commanding officer of the Norfolk, Va.-based USS Mason believed the missiles to be "a threat to his ship and launched countermeasures," Davis said. The second cruise missile, launched about an hour later, fell into the sea before it was considered a threat to the ships, Davis said.

"The initial thoughts are that this (attack) was aimed at them," Davis said.

On Tuesday, Davis confirmed that both missiles were launched from a coastal area of Yemen that is under the control of Iranian-backed Houthi

Shiite rebels. The Houthis took control of Yemen in early 2015; within a month, the U.S. Embassy evacuated all personnel, including its security contingent of Marines. U.S. special operations forces have remained in the country to help support the Yemeni military.

Since then, the U.S. has supported Saudi Arabia-led bombing of the rebels by providing air support, refueling, logistics and targeting assistance. Davis said Tuesday that while the Houthis may have obtained advanced weaponry through the facilities they now control

in Yemen, the U.S. was not ruling out that the missiles might have come from Iran.

"It's no secret that Iran has been actively supplying them and giving them the tools of war," Davis said.

Davis said the Pentagon "was looking very hard at" the missiles used and the location of their launch to identify who was responsible, and was keeping all options open to respond.

"Anytime anybody engages a U.S. Navy ship at sea in hostility ... they do so at great peril to themselves," he said.

Troops help with cleanup in several US states, Haiti

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — Normal operations were resuming at military bases along the East Coast of the United States on Tuesday, and officials reported little major damage on bases hit by Hurricane Matthew, which flooded parts of the region and killed at least 26 people in five states.

The storm that pounded the East Coast from south Florida through southeast Virginia caused flooding and wind damage at several posts from Patrick Air Force Base in Florida to Fort Bragg in North Carolina. However, military officials said there had been no reports of injuries on any of the more than a dozen military installations hit by the hurricane.

Meanwhile, more than 11,000 troops remained committed to

cleanup, recover and humanitarian operations in areas affected by the deadly storm in Haiti and in five U.S. states.

Hurricane Matthew was responsible for more than 500 deaths in the impoverished Caribbean nation of Haiti, and it killed at least 14 people in North Carolina, five in Florida, three each in Georgia and South Carolina and one in Virginia, according to The Associated Press.

The Marine Corps on Tuesday began moving some 6,000 recruits back to Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island in South Carolina, said Capt. Gregory Carroll, a spokesman for the Marines basic training base. The base was largely back to normal by Tuesday morning, and it planned to host a recruit graduation ceremony Friday, he said.

The recruits were moved for their safety in the days before

Hurricane Matthew hit South Carolina, though the future Marines were able to continue "limited training" at Marine Corps Logistics Base Albany in Georgia, Carroll said.

At Fort Stewart in coastal Georgia, 3rd Infantry Division soldiers returned to a major training exercise Tuesday, said Kevin Larson, Fort Stewart spokesman.

Major flooding was expected to last in eastern North Carolina for several days, but officials at Fort Bragg and Camp Lejeune reported Tuesday morning that the storm did not cause serious problems on the posts.

Air Force and Navy officials at the Pentagon on Tuesday morning said there were no reports of significant issues at their bases. Air Force planes evacuated from several bases ahead of the storm had returned to bases in Florida, the Carolinas and Vir-

ginia by Tuesday, said Erika Yepsen, a spokeswoman for the service.

Meanwhile, about 8,000 National Guard troops remained on duty in Florida, Georgia, the Carolinas and Virginia, said Lynn Kirby, a National Guard Bureau spokeswoman. She said she expected about 2,000 Guardsmen to be dropped from duty by Wednesday afternoon, mostly from Florida and Georgia.

In Haiti, active-duty troops had delivered more than 90 tons of relief supplies to areas affected by the storm, said Navy Capt. Jeff Davis, a Pentagon spokesman. The U.S. military has sent more than 3,000 servicemembers to aid the humanitarian response there. Two Navy ships and more than 16 aircraft are among the assets sent to the impoverished nation.

Deadly attack on Kabul shrine

Associated Press

KABUL, Afghanistan — An Afghan official says 14 people have been killed in a militant attack on a Shiite shrine in the capital, Kabul.

The Interior Ministry's spokesman, Sediq Sediqqi, said on Tuesday an additional 26 people were wounded in the attack on the Sakhi Shrine.

He said that 13 civilians and one policeman were killed, and that three police were among the wounded. Contrary to ear-

lier reports of three gunmen, Sediqqi said only one attacked the shrine. He was shot dead by police.

The attack took place as Shiites gathered ahead of Wednesday's Ashoura Day, which commemorates the death in 680 AD of the Prophet Muhammad's grandson, Imam Hussein.

The Public Health Ministry spokesman, Ismail Kawasi, said that so far 18 people had been wounded and were admitted to hospitals around the city.

On Wednesday, Shiites will mark the climax of the holy month, which in Afghanistan is a public holiday.

Kabul police had warned Shiites against large gatherings as attacks were expected. Lt. Gen. Gul Nabi Ahmadzia, the commander of the Kabul garrison, told The Associated Press on Monday that he had received credible reports that Ashoura activities would be targeted and called for Shiites to hold the ceremonies "within limits."

US bombing intensifies over Libya

Stars and Stripes

STUTTGART, Germany — U.S. warplanes conducted 51 airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Libya during a four-day span, marking some of the heaviest bombing since the start of Operation Odyssey Lightning, Africa Command said.

In all, the strikes between Friday and Monday hit about 155 targets, taking out almost exclusively "enemy fighting positions," AFRICOM said.

The AFRICOM-led strikes are targeting Islamic State positions in and around the coastal city of Sirte, which is the focus of the U.S. mission in Libya.

The airstrikes are in support of an offensive by ground forces aligned with the internationally backed Libyan government.

Since Aug. 1, the U.S. has conducted 261 airstrikes in Libya.

A few months ago, Islamic State fighters were in control of large parts of Sirte, where several thousand fighters were holed up. Since the offensive, the fighters — perhaps fewer than 200 — have been forced into a smaller section of the city, according to the U.S. military.

Militants use armed drone in Iraq attack

The Washington Post

In a possible first-of-its-kind attack on western forces, the Islamic State group used a drone loaded with explosives to strike a Kurdish and French position in northern Iraq earlier this month, according to a report in the French newspaper *Le Monde*.

The Oct. 2 strike outside Irbil killed two Kurdish peshmerga fighters and wounded two French special operations troops, according to the report. One of the soldiers is critically injured.

It is unclear what type of drone the militants used and

if it dropped its munitions on the troops or was rammed into their position before exploding.

Drone use by militants and insurgent groups has risen steadily for years as cheap, off-the-shelf models have become easily acquired and simple to fly.

In Iraq and Syria, a host of insurgent and opposition groups have used the drones in similar roles, though there have been a few instances of the remotely piloted craft being used to drop what appear to be explosives. Insurgents including the Islamic State group also use the vehicles to film propaganda videos.

The apparent Oct. 2 attack raises questions about how conspicuous western troops look when embedded alongside their local counterparts and if the Islamic State drone was specifically searching for them.

Certain types of uniforms, weapons and vehicles are often giveaways for special operations troops despite their propensity to try to blend in with facial hair and similar-looking camouflage patterns on their equipment. It is unclear if those western forces will take more steps to blend in or will acquire more robust, counter-drone measures if drone attacks continue.

US sailors in Korea celebrate 241 years of Navy history

Stars and Stripes

Sailors stationed in Korea celebrated 241 years of Navy history Friday during the Navy Ball in Busan, South Korea.

The birthday party, whose theme was "America's Sailor: Tough, Bold and Ready," drew 300 guests from throughout the peninsula, including Rear Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Korea, and U.S. Ambassador to South Korea Mark Lippert.

"Tonight, we come together to honor the men and women who have chosen to proudly wear the Navy uniform," Cooper said in a statement.

Lippert, a Naval Reserve officer, spoke about the service's deep history.

"We have a rich and proud tradition of defending America and protecting American interests on the world's oceans since 1775," he said in the statement. "We were ready then, and we are ready now."

The ambassador seized the opportunity to discuss the U.S.-South Korea alliance and its importance in the region.

"Our relationship has matured into a dynamic, strong and effective partnership that works collaboratively and cooperatively on a range of issues, not just on the Korean peninsula, but also in the Asia-Pacific region and around the world," he said. "And although we continually do hard things together during this critical pe-

riod, we have seen the popularity of the [U.S.-South Korean] relationship — among both Americans and Koreans alike — reach very high levels."

Guests were treated to music from the South Korean navy band, traditional toasts and an official cake-cutting by U.S. and South Korean navy officials, along with help from the oldest and youngest sailors in attendance.

news@stripes.com

'Increased activity' at satellite launch site in North Korea

BY AARON KIDD
Stars and Stripes

"Increased activity" has been spotted at North Korea's Sohae satellite-launching station, a Washington-based think tank says.

The North claimed late last month to have tested a powerful new rocket engine at the site, raising concerns that Pyongyang is preparing for another long-range launch.

Satellite images taken Oct. 1 show crates on the launch pad next to a gantry tower and vehicles near a newly built fuel/oxidizer bunker, said an analysis by 38 North, a website run by Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies that monitors North Korean activities.

Both the tower and assembly structures on the launch pad are covered, making it difficult to predict whether a launch is imminent.

"Environmental covers make it impossible to observe if a space launch vehicle or related components are located at the gantry tower or have been

moved into the assembly structures," Saturday's report said.

Work is also continuing at the site's vertical engine-test stand, the think tank said. A "rail-mounted environmental shelter" seen next to the stand indicates ongoing work whose purpose is unclear.

"It may indicate preparations for a new engine test or continued work at the test stand in the aftermath of the September 20 engine test," said 38 North, which noted that vegetation burned during the test is nearly double that of previous ones.

Sohae, near Tongchang-ri in the communist country's hilly northwest, was used in February to successfully launch a long-range rocket that the North claimed put a satellite into orbit. Critics said the real purpose was to test ballistic-missile technology banned by the United Nations.

North Korea has defied U.N. Security Council resolutions and sanctions with two nuclear tests and a series of missile launches this year.

First multinational mine exercise off S. Korea underway

BY KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — The U.S. and South Korean navies on Tuesday kicked off the first combined multinational mine warfare exercise to take place off the peninsula's southeastern coast since the Korean War.

The drills are the latest show of force as tensions have skyrocketed on the divided peninsula after North Korea conducted two nuclear tests and nearly two dozen missile launches since January.

Naval units will practice clearing shipping routes and operational areas, while mine-clearing helicopters will rehearse countermeasures from the air, a Navy statement said.

Underscoring the international nature of the threat, eight other nations are participating, including the Philippines and Thailand for the first time.

The event combines an expert-level mine-countermeasures symposium and the Clear Horizon live-action exercise in waters near the southeastern port of Chinhae.

"Mines can disrupt sea lines of communication, which are vital to the economic vitality

of this great nation and the entire Pacific region," Rear Adm. Brad Cooper, commander of U.S. Naval Forces Korea, said in the statement.

"Mines impede our freedom of navigation in international waters — a principle that underpins international commerce on the open seas and the prosperity of all of our countries represented here today and that is why we are here, to improve our collective ability to defeat the real threat of mines," he added.

The training includes personnel from the USS Pioneer, Mine Countermeasures Squadron 7, along with MH-53E helicopters from Helicopter Mine Countermeasures Squadron 14 and teams from Explosive Ordnance Disposal Unit 5.

Washington and Seoul conduct about 20 annual joint training exercises they say are aimed at strengthening their alliance and preserving stability on the peninsula and regionwide.

North Korea frequently lashes out at the drills, which it considers rehearsals for an invasion.

Federal veterans' employment preference scrutinized

The Washington Post

WASHINGTON — Facing allegations it manipulated the veterans' employment preference, the Justice Department has been ordered not to hire a nonveteran. The position is on hold during an Office of Special Counsel investigation.

Acting on an OSC request, the Merit Systems Protection Board, a quasi-judicial agency that reviews federal personnel matters, prohibited the hiring for 45 days, with the order issued Sept. 30.

Although this concerns allega-

tions that the department essentially cheated two veterans out of assistant director positions, it also highlights the debate over whether the preference is too great and conflicts with other goals such as more diversity in federal employment. The Senate has voted to limit the preference, though chances for that provision now seem dim.

In the current case, the OSC contends Justice Department managers granted "advantage to their preferred nonveteran candidate when they attempted to manipulate the hiring pro-

cess," according to the MSPB order. Both veterans were rated "best qualified." The nonveteran candidate, however, was the highest-ranking applicant.

The OSC, an independent agency that investigates prohibited personnel practice allegations, said Justice officials told the veterans "the highest-ranked candidate was a nonveteran who could not be hired unless Veteran A and Veteran B withdrew from competition," according to the MSPB.

They refused.

Department officials tried

to hire the nonveteran anyway, but the human resources office stopped it. The officials then canceled the job opening without hiring anyone. In June, the department reposted the positions, but with a change. That announcement made command-level law enforcement experience a minimum qualification instead of one of a number of factors. No vets were found qualified under the rewritten qualifications. The OSC then asked MSPB to block hiring for the positions until the OSC had time to investigate.

GOP divisions over Trump cause strain

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump's candidacy has long exposed divisions within the Republican Party. But GOP leaders had hoped to prevent an all-out civil war at least until after the election.

They appear to be failing.

The top Republican in Congress on Monday effectively abandoned Trump, while the head of the Republican National Committee, or RNC, declared he was in full coordination with the embattled presidential nominee — opposing positions that highlight a political party increasingly battling itself as Election Day approaches.

Pro-Trump protesters clogged the sidewalk in front of the RNC's Capitol Hill headquarters on Monday.

"He already has to fight Hillary and Bill (Clinton) and the media. Now he has to fight other Republicans?" asked Kelley Anne Finn, 58, from northern Virginia. "We're not voting for any of the people who aren't voting for Trump."

Forty Republican senators and congressmen have revoked their support for the Republican presidential nominee — with nearly 30 of them calling on him in recent days to quit the race altogether. Few were passionate Trump supporters to begin

with, the last straw being a video released late last week revealing the former reality television star using predatory language regarding women a decade earlier.

House Speaker Rep. Paul Ryan, of Wisconsin, told fellow lawmakers on Monday he would not campaign for or defend the floundering businessman in the election's closing weeks. Ryan essentially conceded defeat, saying he would devote his energy to ensuring Clinton doesn't get a "blank check" as president with a Democratic-controlled Congress, according to people on his private conference call with GOP House members.

Later in the day, one of Ryan's closest friends, Republican Chairman Reince Priebus, privately assured anxious RNC members the party would not abandon its nominee under any circumstances.

Meanwhile, Trump's Virginia chairman, Corey Stewart, who helped organize the RNC protest, said Ryan and other party elite didn't understand that "the grass roots took control of this party when we nominated Donald Trump." Stewart was fired immediately after the gathering as Trump's staff worked to downplay intraparty tensions.

Legal pot could upend drug smuggling in Ariz.

Associated Press

NOGALES, Ariz. — The hills on the Arizona border with Mexico are steep and bumpy as Paul Estrada drives along the fence, patrolling for smugglers of drugs and humans.

Passing traffic signs that are pocked with bullet holes, the sheriff's deputy points at parts of the wall that are but a few feet tall and laments how easy it is to get drugs into Arizona.

In a month, Estrada and his colleagues on the border could confront a new challenge: legal marijuana. Five states will vote Nov. 8 on whether to allow recreational pot, including Arizona and California, the first two border states to consider the idea.

If Arizona's ballot measure passes, pot shops would soon arise in a place that has long been a center of drug smuggling. In cities such as Nogales, Ariz., smugglers are seen almost daily scaling the border fence with backpacks of weed.

"This is a day-in and day-out fight," said Col. Frank Milstead, head of the Arizona Department of Public Safety. "I can't tell you that a day goes by that we don't actually interdict somebody smuggling some sort of drug into the state."

Law enforcement leaders say the change will strengthen cartels, allowing them to infiltrate the legal pot market and driving them to sell more hard drugs. Advocates of legalization

say it will undercut the cartels by eliminating a key segment of their business.

Carlos Alfaro, the deputy campaign manager for Proposition 205, says legalization in other states has already led to a drop in marijuana seizures by the United States Border Patrol.

From fiscal year 2011 to 2015, the number of seizures made by the agency nationwide fell by 39 percent. In the Tucson Sector, at one point the busiest smuggling corridor in the nation, seizures fell by 28 percent, according to Border Patrol statistics.

As marijuana becomes legal in more places, the cartels "are seeking to increase market share in other controlled substances, notably heroin and methamphetamine," Tucson Sector Chief Paul Beeson said in a written statement.

For now, cannabis remains the primary drug seized on the border, Beeson said.

The region's roads and highways are peppered with Border Patrol checkpoints, where agents look for drugs and smugglers.

Those checkpoints will remain even if pot is made legal because marijuana is still illegal under federal law, which trumps state regulations. Border Patrol agents at checkpoints would seize marijuana from anyone who had it, regardless of its legal status in the state, a spokesman said. But it's unlikely they would detain anyone.

Samsung halts production of Galaxy Note 7

Associated Press

SEOUL, South Korea — Samsung Electronics said Tuesday that it is discontinuing production of Galaxy Note 7 smartphones permanently, a day after it halted global sales of the star-crossed devices.

The South Korean company said in a regulatory filing that it decided to stop manufacturing Note 7s for the sake of consumer safety.

Samsung is struggling to re-

gain consumer trust after a first round of recalls that prompted criticism both for the faulty devices and for the company's handling of the problem.

After the earlier recall, the company said it had identified a manufacturing defect in the batteries of its top-of-the-line smartphone.

It started shipping new Note 7 phones that were supposed to be safer. But reports that even the replacements were catching fire led Samsung to an-

nounce it was stopping sales of the devices.

Meanwhile on Tuesday, China's product safety regulator said Samsung will recall all Galaxy Note 7 smartphones sold in mainland China, amounting to around 191,000 units.

The General Administration of Quality Supervision, Inspection and Quarantine said it was investigating for defects in the devices.

Samsung will either provide a full refund at the original price

or replace Note 7 units with any other model of Samsung phone, and give refunds of the difference in prices, along with a \$45 voucher.

Initially, Samsung had said in September that the Note 7s sold in China would not be affected because their batteries came from a different supplier, ATL. Samsung recalled 1,858 Note 7 phones in China in September, saying they were distributed for testing before sales to the public began on Sept. 1.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Father breaks son's giant pumpkin record

RI WARREN — A Rhode Island man grew a pumpkin weighing more than 2,250 pounds that took first prize at the Frerichs Farm Pumpkin Weigh Off in Warren.

WJAR-TV reported Richard Wallace's 2,261.5-pound gourd beat the North American giant pumpkin record set by his son, Ron, at the same event last year.

Ron Wallace was the first person in the world to break the 2,000-pound, or 1-ton, barrier when he grew a 2,009-pound pumpkin in 2012.

The younger Wallace's previously record-setting pumpkin weighed in at 2,230 pounds in 2015.

Baby delivered in line at a Wal-Mart store

UT PAYSON — A Payson Wal-Mart received a special delivery as a woman had her baby while in the checkout line.

The Provo Daily Herald reported that the woman was checking out with her groceries Sunday morning when she went into labor.

Payson Fire Department spokesman Terry Reilly said employees and other customers had to help deliver the baby in the checkout line.

Once emergency crews arrived, the mother and baby were taken to Mountain View Hospital in Payson. Both mother and baby are healthy.

Columbus memorial vandalized on holiday

MI SAGINAW — A memorial to Christopher Columbus in front of Saginaw County's government offices

has been vandalized with red paint.

The Saginaw News reported workers arrived at the Saginaw County Governmental Center on Monday, the federal Columbus Day holiday, to find the paint splashed on the front of the monument.

Saginaw County sheriff's Lt. Mike Gomez said investigators will review video surveillance.

The Saginaw Lodge of the Order Sons of Italy placed the memorial in front of the Saginaw County building in September 1991.

Lecturer put on leave after internet post

VA CHARLOTTESVILLE — A lecturer at the University of Virginia "has agreed to take leave" after comparing the Black Lives Matter movement to the Ku Klux Klan on social media.

Media outlets report the comment was posted last week by Douglas Muir, an adjunct lecturer at the engineering and business schools.

Last week, Charlottesville real estate agent Roger Voisinet wrote a Facebook post about Black Lives Matter, and Muir left a comment on the post stating in part: "Black lives matter is the biggest racist (sic) organization (sic) since the Klan (sic)."

The comment has since been removed.

Legion post agrees to penalty for racial bias

MA BOSTON — The Massachusetts attorney general said an American Legion post in Boston agreed to a \$15,000 penalty to resolve allegations of racial bias at an event last year.

As part of the agreement, Post 76 in the city's Jamaica

Plain neighborhood will require staff to attend training on state and federal laws that bar discrimination based on race, religion and other factors.

Authorities said a black woman hired the veterans' organization's hall last year for her daughter's 16th birthday party. Workers allegedly refused to host the party, suggested guests were armed gang members and made derogatory comments about minorities.

Council votes against backyard chickens

ND MINOT — Minot's city limits remain off-limits to chickens after the city council rejected a proposed ordinance that would have allowed up to three hens in backyard coops.

A ban on chickens in North Dakota's fourth-largest city has been in place since 1984.

Opponents worried about odors, loose fowl in the city and the possibility of opening the door to such activities as chicken fighting.

Supporters of city chickens said benefits would include food, companionship, education, bug control and waste for compost.

Crew repairing water main held at gunpoint

MD TEMPLE HILLS — Authorities said a crew working to repair a broken water main in a Washington suburb was robbed at gunpoint over the weekend.

Prince George's County police said four Washington Suburban Sanitary Commission employees were working early Sunday morning in the Temple Hills area when a suspect, who was armed with a gun, approached them.

The suspect stole some of the

victims' personal belongings before fleeing. No injuries were reported.

The WSSC said repairs to the broken water main were completed and that service was restored.

Eagle freed unharmed from perch in car grill

FL GREEN COVE SPRINGS — A bald eagle that somehow managed to get wedged in the front grill of a car was freed unharmed after a passing motorist noticed the bird.

The Clay County Sheriff's Office said a resident noticed the bird peering out of a passing car Saturday as the area recovered from Hurricane Matthew. The resident urged the motorist to pull over and called rescue crews.

The sheriff's department said personnel worked the bird free from the car. It was taken to a wildlife sanctuary in Jacksonville but authorities said the eagle appeared to be unharmed.

Dorm stays closed after hibachi-style grill blaze

NH HANOVER — Officials at Dartmouth College said a dormitory set ablaze by a hibachi-style grill left unattended will stay closed through at least the fall.

The Valley News reported that officials said they're still determining the extent and cost of the damage at Morton Hall. President Phil Hanlon said the building is "no longer habitable."

Officials said the dorm's 70 students escaped without injuries.

From wire reports

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Odds stacked against a Penguins repeat

Associated Press

After the Penguins paraded the Stanley Cup through the streets of Pittsburgh, Sidney Crosby took it to his hometown of Cole Harbour, Nova Scotia, Evgeni Malkin to Moscow and Phil Kessel to a children's hospital in Toronto as part of the summer-long celebration.

If there's one thing champions in the NHL have learned, it is to savor those moments because history says they won't happen back-to-back. No team has repeated as Cup champion since the salary-cap era began in 2005, and the last back-to-back winners were the Detroit Red Wings in 1997 and 1998.

Sorry, Penguins. And sorry to the San Jose Sharks, as no team in the past eight seasons has lost in the Final and gotten back the next year.

The Chicago Blackhawks and Los Angeles Kings are rested from an unusually short spring, the Tampa Bay Lightning boast the deepest team in the league and the Washington Capitals are virtually unchanged after dominating the regular season. All those things, plus playing into June, stack the odds against the Penguins raising the Cup again in 2017.

"You're coming off such a high, it's going to be tough to get to that (level) right away," Pittsburgh defenseman Trevor Daley said. "How you become a great team in this league is you

have the hunger every night. Teams that are proven winners are usually the great teams, the L.A.s and Chicagos. Pittsburgh is right up there now in that conversation. We're hungry to do it again."

Because they have two top goalies in Matt Murray and Marc-Andre Fleury, the Penguins are perhaps the best positioned team to repeat in recent history. That doesn't mean it'll be easy.

Online sportsbook Bovada set the Penguins and Blackhawks as co-Cup favorites with the Capitals, Lightning, Dallas Stars, St. Louis Blues and Sharks not far behind. It wouldn't be a surprise if any of those teams make it through a World Cup of Hockey-condensed regular season and a grueling division playoff format and get to celebrate in June.

"The parity in the league allows for a lot of teams to have the same goal and actually legitimately have a chance at it," said Washington winger Justin Williams, who won the Cup with Carolina in 2006 and Los Angeles in 2012 and 2014. "There's a handful of teams that have those aspirations and they're real."

Rather than parity, Commissioner Gary Bettman prefers the term "competitive balance," which speaks not only to the lack of repeat champions and the death of NHL dynas-

ties but the variance in playoff teams. Of the 30 teams, 24 have made the playoffs at least once over the past three seasons.

"Unless you're (cheering for) the team in the dynasty market, you could care less," Bettman said. "All you care about is that your team is competitive."

Competition isn't the problem. It's so high that playoff teams can't miss a beat for fear they'll drop out. The Florida Panthers look like a team just beginning a run of playoff appearances with young stars like Aaron Ekblad and Aleksander Barkov, but president of hockey operations Dale Tallon knows it'll come down to breaks and injuries because "it's going to be a battle to return to the playoffs."

It's a battle because the top teams haven't lost much.

The Penguins made a few tweaks and will be without Cup-winner Murray and Crosby — who's out indefinitely after suffering his third concussion — to start the season, but they can turn to 2009 winner Fleury and still lean heavily on Malkin and defenseman Kris Letang. Elsewhere in the East, the Lightning re-signed Steven Stamkos, the Capitals are primed for another run with Alex Ovechkin and Vezina Trophy winner Braden Holtby, and the Montreal Canadiens should be back in contention with all-world goalie Carey

Price healthy after missing most of last season with a knee injury.

Chicago has cycled pieces in and out while winning the Cup in 2010, 2013 and 2015, but the core of Jonathan Toews, Patrick Kane and Duncan Keith is as strong as ever. The Blackhawks would have liked to go deeper in last year's playoffs, but not doing so could pay dividends this season as it has in the past.

"It might be good for the guys to have a longer offseason and come back hungry for the start of the season," defenseman Niklas Hjalmarsson said.

Trading off years with the Boston Bruins' 2011 championship mixed in, the Blackhawks and Kings know all too well about the Cup hangover that the Penguins will try to avoid. Peaking at playoff time and maintaining that level amid injuries and bounces takes a lot, plus the system is skewed against back-to-back champions.

"It's more hard than before when teams were really dominating and could spend so much on salaries and they can buy different players," said Blackhawks winger Marian Hossa, who lost in the final in 2008 with Pittsburgh and 2009 with Detroit before winning three times with Chicago. "In this modern day, it's extremely hard."

World Cup of Hockey gave players extra preparation

Associated Press

TORONTO — Brad Marchand and Patrice Bergeron have been skating, scoring and setting each other up as if they're in midseason form with the Boston Bruins.

Sidney Crosby, picking right up where he left off a few months ago in winning the Stanley Cup with the Pittsburgh Penguins, looked as dominant as ever during the preseason.

The trio played together on

the same line during Canada's undefeated run through the World Cup of Hockey, giving them a chance to get and stay in a groove that should serve their teams and perhaps the entire NHL well.

The two-week, best-on-best tournament that ended two weeks ago with the Canadians beating Team Europe forced the game's top players to start training earlier than usual. It also put the league's standouts and stars in highly competitive

games that tested them in a way preseason games simply can't.

"I think they're going to come out flying," Dallas Stars general manager Jim Nill said. "They've been playing at a high level. Everybody else is just getting into that level. They've been there for a month already. They're playing against the best. The pace and the tempo they've been playing at, I think those players I think are going to be leading the league early on."

More than half of the league had at least six players picked to play, including Tampa Bay (12) and Chicago (10) with double digits in participants.

"This is our ninth game before October," said San Jose's Logan Couture, counting the pre-tournament games in his total. "That's a lot of hockey early in the year. We'll see how that affects us going forward. I'm sure with our coaching staff we'll come up with a plan with rest."

Nationals one win from closing series

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Jayson Werth always wanted to hit a home run out of Dodger Stadium when he played two seasons in the venerable ballpark. His latest attempt came close with a 450-foot blast into the upper reaches of the left-field pavilion.

Werth's homer helped break open a one-run game in the ninth inning, moving the Washington Nationals within one victory of taking a postseason series for the first time with an 8-3 win over the Los Angeles Dodgers on Monday and a 2-1 lead in their best-of-five NL playoff.

Heck, he even tied Babe Ruth with his 15th career postseason homer, good for 11th all-time.

"Ever since Dusty [Baker] moved me into the two-hole, I just felt like my job is to get on base for the animals behind me," said Werth, whose three hits tied a postseason career high.

Four relievers combined for 4²/₃ shutout innings, putting the Nationals in position to wrap up the NL Division

Series on Tuesday at Dodger Stadium.

"They work quick and they're not afraid to go after anybody," said third baseman Anthony Rendon, who hit a two-run homer in a four-run third that chased Kenta Maeda.

Werth added, "It gives us confidence. I feel like the bullpen is going to hold up and that might not have been the case or the feeling in years past."

NL East champions for the third time in five years, the Nats were unable to advance during their two previous trips to the postseason. They lost in the Division Series to St. Louis in 2012 and San Francisco in 2014.

"I'm hoping this is our year," Werth said. "We're battle-tested, we're playoff-tested, and we've got a good group of guys. We've been playing together a long time now, so I feel like this is our opportunity."

Now 37 and with his 2008 World Series championship in Philadelphia long behind him, Werth senses time encroaching on him.

"Obviously, I can't play this

game forever," he said. "So I feel like this is our chance and I also feel like maybe this is my last chance to do it."

The franchise has won one playoff series — the Montreal Expos beat Philadelphia following the strike-shortened 1981 season before losing to the Dodgers in the NL Championship Series.

The team moved from Montreal to Washington before the 2005 season.

Playing 23 hours after the Nationals tied the series at home in a rain-postponed Game 2, the Dodgers again struggled against left-handed pitching, a problem throughout the season when they had a major league-worst .213 average against lefties.

Four Washington lefty relievers stymied the Dodgers in the first two games. Facing lefty starter Gio Gonzalez in Game 3, they got three runs and four hits in 4¹/₃ innings.

The only Dodgers hitter with proven success against Gonzalez was catcher Carlos Ruiz, and he came through with a two-run, pinch-hit homer in

the fifth that cut their deficit to 4-3.

"I made one bad pitch, but the bullpen was incredible," Gonzalez said. "It's tough to go on the road and win in the playoffs. I went after them but I wish I had that one pitch back."

After that, the Dodgers mustered just a pair of singles off a Nats' bullpen that included lefties Sammy Solis and Oliver Perez, and didn't advance a runner past first base.

Now, the four-time defending NL West champions are facing elimination.

"We're not afraid of this," rookie manager Dave Roberts said. "There's no quit in our guys. We'll be ready tomorrow to win a baseball game, I can promise you that."

It was still 4-3 when Werth homered on a 1-0 pitch from All-Star closer Kenley Jansen leading off the ninth.

Ryan Zimmerman added a two-run double that bounced off right fielder Josh Reddick's glove at the wall — the hit scored Daniel Murphy and Bryce Harper, who both walked.

Panik's double in 13th helps San Francisco stay alive

Associated Press

SAN FRANCISCO — Sure is hard to send these San Francisco Giants home in October.

Joe Panik doubled off the right-center wall in the 13th inning to drive in Brandon Crawford, and the Giants outlasted the Chicago Cubs 6-5 on Monday night in Game 3 to extend their NL Division Series.

Boosted by Conor Gillaspie's go-ahead triple in the eighth off Aroldis Chapman, the Giants rallied from a three-run deficit and won their 10th straight game when facing postseason elimination.

San Francisco overcame Kris Bryant's two-run homer off closer Sergio Romo that tied it 5-all in the ninth, and an early three-run shot by pitcher Jake Arrieta against Giants ace

Madison Bumgarner.

"Just because we're down, we're not out. If we're breathing, we're still fighting," Panik said.

The wild-card Giants forced Game 4 at their raucous ballpark, postponing a potential Cubs clinch party in the visitors' clubhouse.

Chicago leads the best-of-five playoff 2-1 and will send John Lackey to the mound Tuesday night opposite lefty Matt Moore.

"We played it hard, we played it right — and they beat us," Cubs manager Joe Maddon said.

Teammates piled on Panik in celebration after he came through on the 57th pitch from Mike Montgomery, beginning his fifth inning of relief. Craw-

ford hit a leadoff double on an 0-2 curve, bringing Panik to the plate.

His big hit ended a 5-hour, 4-minute game that was only 29 minutes shy of the total time it took to play the first two series games combined last week at Wrigley Field.

"Somehow we always just find a way with our backs up against the wall," Panik said. "It's always somebody."

Gillaspie hit a two-run triple in the eighth and Crawford added an RBI single to give the Giants a 5-3 lead.

Rookie left-hander Ty Blach earned the win, escaping a 13th-inning jam when pinch-hitter David Ross bounced into a double play.

"There's a sense of calmness," Panik said. "It's like

we've been there before."

Bryant's tying drive hit the top of the left-field fence and bounced into the seats, silencing the orange towel-swirling sellout crowd. The slugger received a warm hug of congratulations in the dugout from Chapman, who had just given up the lead.

On a night when the early focus was the marquee pitching matchup between Bumgarner and Arrieta, the bullpens decided this one hours later.

Arrieta's three-run drive in the second held up most of the way.

"The game had everything — pitching, timely hitting on both sides. It was just a fun game to be involved with," Giants manager Bruce Bochy said.

Indians sweep BoSox, advance to ALCS

Associated Press

BOSTON — The Cleveland Indians swept the Boston Red Sox out of the post-season and sent David Ortiz into retirement on Monday night with a 4-3 victory that completed a three-game American League Division Series sweep.

Coco Crisp hit a two-run homer, closer Cody Allen got four outs and the Indians advanced the AL Championship Series for the first time since 2007. That year, they took a 3-1 lead in the best-of-seven series against Boston before losing three in a row.

Cleveland also blew a 2-0 lead against Boston in the best-of-five round in 1999.

But this year there would be no fold.

Perhaps inspired by the Cleveland Cavaliers' NBA title — the city's first pro sports championship since 1964 — the Indians shut down Ortiz and the most prolific offense in the league. Rookie Tyler Naquin delivered a two-run single and Josh Tomlin pitched five strong innings for the Indians, who will open the ALCS at home against Toronto on Friday.

Cleveland went 4-3 this year against the wild-card Blue Jays, who swept AL West champion Texas to reach the ALCS for the second straight year.

"Nobody in this clubhouse doubts what we're what capable of," reliever Andrew Miller said as corks popped in the visitors' clubhouse. "I think we saw in our games in Cleveland how much support we have. It's a special place to be. I think we have bigger things ahead of us, but it's not going to be any easier."

To advance, the Indians had to shut down the most prolific offense in the major leagues and weather the emotional farewell to Ortiz. The Red Sox designated hitter went 1-for-9 in the series, collecting a sacrifice fly in Game 3 before walking on four pitches in his final plate appearance.

Ortiz was lifted for a pinch runner in the eighth and left to a standing ovation.

But that wasn't enough for the crowd of 39,530 — the largest at Fenway since at least World War II. Chanting "We're not leaving!" and "Thank you, Pa-pi!" for more than 10 minutes while the Indians celebrated, the crowd finally drew Ortiz back onto the field. He made one last farewell, in tears.

Making it their goal to send their beloved Big Papi out as a winner, the Red Sox managed to win the AL East — the second time in four seasons they went from worst to first. But they lost eight of their last nine games, including the playoffs.

After winning the first two games in the best-of-five AL Division Series, and then waiting an extra day because of Sunday's rainout, the Indians it took a 2-0 lead off Clay Buchholz in the fourth inning on Naquin's single.

Tomlin gave up Andrew Benintendi's Green Monster-scraping RBI double in the fifth, which gave some life to the Fenway crowd. However, in the sixth, Crisp hit a two-run homer over the left-field wall to make it 4-1.

After walking on four pitches in the eighth, Ortiz stood on first and waved his arms at the fans. They rose to cheer for him and stayed there as Hanley Ramirez singled to make it 4-3.

With Allen pitching in the bottom of the ninth, Jackie Bradley Jr. singled with two out and Dustin Pedroia drew a walk on a 3-2 pitch. Travis Shaw worked the count full but then popped up to end it.

"I was cheering so bad," Ortiz said. "Once I got out of the game I was screaming at my team to put me back in it. Make me wear this uniform one more day. Because I wasn't ready to be over with the playoff."

Buchholz allowed two runs and six hits in four innings, joining David Price and Rick Porcello as postseason losers.

Rookie kicker boosts Bucs over Panthers

Associated Press

CHARLOTTE, N.C. — Roberto Aguayo's shaky rookie season got a big lift Monday night.

The rookie made up for missing two earlier field goals by converting a 38-yarder as time expired to lift the Tampa Bay Buccaneers over the Carolina Panthers 17-14 on Monday night.

Aguayo, the most accurate kicker in NCAA history, had clanked a 33-yard field goal attempt off the right upright and missed wide left from 46 yards that would have given the Bucs the lead with 3:38 left in the game. He was just 3-for-7 on the season before the winning kick.

"Obviously you get a little angry when you miss them," Aguayo said. "You can't dwell

on it or you won't be ready for the next one."

When asked how comfortable he was with the field position on the final kick, Bucs coach Dirk Koetter replied, "I wasn't comfortable. We couldn't get close enough."

Jameis Winston was 18-for-30 for 219 yards and threw a TD pass to Mike Evans. He also led a 66-yard drive to get the Buccaneers (2-3) into field goal range. A costly 15-yard facemask penalty on Kony Ealy hurt the Panthers along the way.

Jacquizz Rodgers ran for 101 yards on 30 carries in place of the injured Doug Martin.

The Bucs, who came into the game ranked 28th in the league in rushing, made a conscious effort to move the ball on the ground early on. They handed

the ball off to Rodgers on the first six plays of the game, and Rodgers had 62 rushing yards before the end of the first quarter. Tampa Bay maintained possession for 21:45 over the first two quarters en route to a 6-0 halftime lead.

"I saw him carry it about 50 times in one game at Oregon State against USC a few years back, so I knew he could do it," Koetter said.

The Panthers turned the ball over four times, three of those by quarterback Derek Anderson, who was filling in for the concussed Cam Newton.

"We moved the ball when we wanted to and had a lot of good things happen, but we had bad plays at the wrong times," Anderson said.

The most costly turnover came late in the fourth quarter

with the game tied at 14 and the Panthers having a first-and-goal at the Tampa Bay 2. Anderson threw into double coverage in the right corner of the end zone and was intercepted by Brent Grimes.

"If I had it back I would have thrown it away," Anderson said. "That was a difference maker."

The Panthers ruined a memorable night from Greg Olsen, who had a career-high 181 yards receiving on nine catches. Cameron Artis-Payne ran for two touchdowns for the Panthers.

Carolina is now 1-4 after reaching the Super Bowl last season.

The Panthers, who have won three straight NFC South titles, are now three full games behind the Atlanta Falcons.