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House probes National Guard bonuses

BY TRAVIS J. TRITTEN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A House oversight committee on Tuesday launched an investigation into the Army National Guard reclaiming wartime re-enlistment bonuses.

The Committee on Oversight and Government Reform requested the service turn over all documents and audits related to it taking back the decade-old payments of \$15,000 or more to soldiers who agreed to re-enlist for the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Meanwhile, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said he has tasked a top Pentagon official to look into and resolve the bonus payments issue.

The National Guard has said the bonuses were wrongly paid but its effort to reclaim them from thousands of soldiers and veterans in California and across the country has caused public outcry, including wide-

spread criticism from Congress and veteran groups.

"The committee is seeking information about this serious matter, and to see that officials who mismanaged bonus programs are held accountable," the committee wrote in a letter to Gen. Joseph Lengyel, chief of the National Guard Bureau, and Adjutant Gen. David Baldwin of the California National Guard.

The House's principal oversight committee requested the National Guard turn over all audits related to the bonuses, the total dollar amounts of bonuses paid and still owed, documents showing whether the National Guard considered options other than repayment and how many soldiers in states other than California might be affected.

The committee, led by Rep. Jason Chaffetz, R-Utah, also has asked the National Guard for documents showing whether anyone was fired or reassigned for wrongly paying bonuses to thousands of soldiers.

The Pentagon has been demanding the repayment of re-enlistment bonuses from 9,700 California Guard members and similar efforts might be underway in other states, according to the Los Angeles Times. The bonuses were used to boost National Guard recruitment and attract needed specialties during the height of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars from 2005 to 2008.

A federal investigation found the bonuses and some student loan payments were made inappropriately or without proper documentation, the newspaper reported.

In Paris on Tuesday, Carter called it a significant issue for the Pentagon and said Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work is looking into the matter.

"It's got its complexities to it. We are going to look into it and resolve it," Carter said during a news conference.

Republicans in the House, including leadership and commit-

tee chairmen, wrote to Carter on Tuesday urging him to stop reclaiming the bonus payments. The letter included Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy of California, Armed Services Chairman Mac Thornberry of Texas, Veterans Affairs Chairman Jeff Miller of Florida and Foreign Affairs Chairman Ed Royce of California.

Some soldiers and veterans said they faced aggressive debt-collection tactics.

"This is no way to treat those who have fulfilled their commitments to our country," according to the letter. "They should be held harmless in light of the fraud that perpetrated upon them by overzealous recruiters."

Democrats asked for cooperation from the GOP leadership in the House and Senate in hopes of passing legislation to relieve the soldier and veteran debt when Congress returns from recess in mid-November.

Taliban face double the number of US airstrikes

Tribune Washington Bureau

BAGRAM AIR FIELD, Afghanistan — One after another, American fighter jets and armed drones screech down the runway at this mountain-fringed northern military outpost, launching missions around the clock to support Afghan forces battling militants aligned with the Islamic State group and the Taliban.

More than 700 U.S. airstrikes have been carried out this year against the militants, twice as many as last year, as Afghan soldiers and police have struggled to contain a perpetual insurgency.

The ferocity of the fight-

ing, more than 15 years after the U.S.-led military invasion, highlights Afghanistan's deepening security crisis and unremitting reliance on the United States.

The Taliban has waged a campaign of attacks on government-held provincial capitals throughout the country and is expected to continue its assault well into the winter months, beyond what was historically referred to as the "fighting season."

The Afghan military, riddled with corruption and taking orders from President Ashraf Ghani's fragile government, lacks intelligence-gathering and other essential capabili-

ties to ward off attacks. As a result, the security forces depend upon American air power and special forces to help them in their fight, two years after President Barack Obama formally ended U.S. combat operations in Afghanistan.

In June, the White House authorized changes to restrictions on airstrikes against Taliban and Islamic State targets, which would be hit only as a self-defense measure to protect forces from harm. The new authorization gave U.S. commanders the power to launch a strike if it promises to bring "strategic effects" on the battlefield.

The move widened the air war by expanding the U.S. mili-

tary's ability to provide close air support to the Afghans as they maneuver on the battlefield.

M-9 Reaper drones, F-16 fighter jets and other aircraft here along the wind-swept flight line at Bagram have dropped about 1,000 bombs so far this year, according to the U.S. military.

Gen. John W. Nicholson Jr., the commander for U.S. and NATO forces in the country, told a small group of reporters at his headquarters in Kabul, the Afghan capital, on Sunday that the broader authorizations handed down by the White House had "significantly enabled our ability to help the Afghans this year."

USS Wasp to move to Japan next fall

BY ERIK SLAVIN
Stars and Stripes

Starting next fall, the amphibious assault ship USS Wasp will homeport at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, where it will eventually replace the USS Bonhomme Richard, Navy officials said Tuesday.

The Norfolk, Va.-based Wasp can support the next-generation F-35B Lightning II fighter, which is capable of short takeoffs and vertical landings. U.S. Forces Japan said Japan was formally notified on Oct. 13 that Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni will receive 16 F-35B aircraft next year.

The Bonhomme Richard will remain in Sasebo along with Wasp for an undetermined period in 2018 before heading to its new home in San Diego, where the ship will undergo maintenance and upgrades.

The Bonhomme Richard crew will leave along with the ship when the transfer takes place, Commander Naval Forces Japan officials said Tuesday.

The transfer is another step for the Navy's plan of placing its most advanced ships and aircraft in the Asia-Pacific region, Navy officials said.

Wasp is now operating in the 6th Fleet area of responsibility, where it had been conducting air strikes against Islamic State targets in Libya, a Navy state-

Mayor of Iwakuni visits US to see F-35Bs

BY DENISSE RAUDA
Stars and Stripes

The mayor of a Japanese city near Marine Corps Air Station Iwakuni has traveled to the U.S. to gather information about the next-generation stealth fighters that will start flying over his constituents next year.

U.S. officials notified the Japanese government last week that 16 F-35B Lightning II fighters jets from Marine Fighter Attack Squadron 121 will replace the base's AV-8B Harriers and F/A-18 Hornets.

Seeking to determine the aircraft's potential effects on the community, Iwakuni Mayor Yoshihiko Fukuda visited Marine Corps Air Station Yuma, Ariz., on Monday to see the F-35s in action.

"The government of Japan already briefed me about the deployment plan," Fukuda said, according to a Marine Corps statement. "However, I would rather have real information based on first-hand experience rather than the information given over the tabletop, such as listening to the [sound of the jets] in reality, and be able to confirm it myself."

The F-35B boasts a short takeoff and vertical landing capabilities, while incorporating elements of all of the force's current aircraft

(the AV-8B, F/A-18 and EA-6B) into a single airframe, a U.S. Forces Japan statement said.

"The type of training we will be conducting will be very similar to that of the F-18 you already see in Iwakuni," Lt. Col. J.T. Bardo, the squadron's commander, said in the Marine Corps statement. "The opportunity to be in Japan and as one of the first units and be able to train jointly with our partner services there is a great honor, and we are looking forward to it."

Fukuda said his visit gave him a better understanding of the F-35 and its potential.

"I would like to thank all the commanders, leaders and pilots that provided me the information about the F-35B's safety and about how the Marine Corps would respond to the community's concerns and also the benefit from having the most state-of-art, advanced technology and what it has to offer compared to its predecessors," he said.

The Navy announced this week that the Norfolk, Va.-based USS Wasp, which is capable of supporting the F-35s, will homeport at Sasebo Naval Base, Japan, starting next year. The amphibious assault ship will eventually replace the USS Bonhomme Richard.

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ment said.

Wasp typically includes a crew of about 1,000 sailors and can embark more than 1,600 Marines. The 844-foot flattop ship employs 31 aircraft, as well

as Marine amphibious craft out of its well deck.

Wasp was commissioned in 1989 but has received upgrades to its MK2 Ship Self-Defense System, SPQ-9B horizon search

radar and MK 57 Sea Sparrow missile system, as well as added network and data capability, officials said Tuesday.

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GAO: DOD should further examine burn pit exposure

Star Tribune (Minneapolis)

The Pentagon needs to study the long-term health effects of exposure to the chemicals inhaled from burn pits at its overseas military bases, the Government Accountability Office says in a report.

While the report, released in September, credited the Department of Defense with improving practices to mitigate the risks of exposure to the burn pits, the department still

needs to ensure that "research specifically examines the relationship between direct burn pit exposure and long-term health issues."

The GAO found there hasn't been enough progress on this issue over the past five years, when it first said more study was needed.

Open-air burning has always been a mainstay of waste disposal during times of war. But the technology of modern warfare means that such new items

as plastic bottles and electronics are being burned, presenting new health risks.

Burn pits were constructed at more than 230 U.S. military bases across Iraq and Afghanistan before their use was restricted in 2009.

Massive open-air burn pits at the bases billowed the toxic smoke and ash of everything from Styrofoam, metals and plastics to electrical equipment and even human body parts.

The flames were stoked with

jet fuel.

A 2011 report by the Institute of Medicine outlined the data needed for assessing exposures and potential related health risks. In response, the Department of Veterans Affairs established a registry to collect information. However, the DOD has not undertaken data-gathering and research efforts to specifically examine this relationship to fully understand any associated health risks, the GAO report said.

Iraqi forces fight militants near Mosul and in Rutba

Associated Press

BAGHDAD — Iraqi forces backed by U.S.-led coalition airstrikes battled Islamic State militants for a third day on Tuesday in a remote western town, hundreds of miles to the south of the operation to retake the northern city of Mosul, U.S. and Iraqi officials said.

The clashes underway in Rutba, in Iraq's western Anbar province, are apparently part of the extremist group's tactics to divert attention — as well as Iraqi and coalition resources — from the battle to retake Mosul from Islamic State militants.

"Fighting is ongoing in Rutba, which is still contested," said Col. John Dorrian, a spokesman for the U.S.-led coalition.

"The coalition continues conducting strikes to support the Iraqi security forces' response efforts, including one against a Daesh convoy that was attempting to flee the area," he added, referring to the Islamic State group by an Arabic acronym.

Brig. Gen. Yahya Rasool, an Iraqi military spokesman, said the situation was under control and there were no Islamic State fighters in the town. But Rajeh Barakat, an Anbar provincial councilman who sits on the se-

curity committee, said Islamic State fighters were still clashing with security forces in two southern neighborhoods.

"The clashes are still ongoing," he said. "We have reports saying the militants killed some civilians and members of the security forces, but we don't know how many."

The Islamic State group launched a complex attack on Rutba on Sunday, almost a week into the operation in Mosul, where U.S.-backed Iraqi forces are waging a wide-scale offensive to drive the militants from Iraq's second-largest city.

Last week, the militant group launched a similar assault in and around the northern city of Kirkuk, some 100 miles southeast of Mosul. The assault ignited gunbattles that lasted two days, killing at least 80 people.

Near Mosul, the fighting was still underway on Tuesday in a belt of villages and towns to the north, east and south of the city.

Also Tuesday, about 335 civilians were evacuated to a refugee camp from Tob Zawa, about 5½ miles from Mosul, that was retaken by special forces on Monday. Maj. Gen. Haider Fadhil said the civilians were evacuated to protect them from possible Islamic State shelling.

Carter: Raqqa is next anti-terror op

BY TARA COPP

Stars and Stripes

PARIS — Initial operations to retake the Islamic State group's capital in Raqqa, Syria, are underway and likely to overlap with the assault launched 10 days ago to drive the terror group out of Mosul, Iraq, Defense Secretary Ash Carter said Tuesday.

"We've already begun laying the groundwork with our partners to commence the isolation of Raqqa," said Carter, who was in Paris to meet with his French defense counterpart, Jean-Yves Le Drian, and 11 other coalition defense ministers.

"The next step is Raqqa," Le Drian said, declining to go into detail.

The Pentagon has long hinted that the assault on the two de facto capitals of the Islamic State group would occur simultaneously, but in recent weeks, most of its pronouncements have been focused on the Iraqi security forces' readiness to retake Mosul.

Mosul operations launched 10 days ago, with 18,000 Iraqi

troops and 10,000 Kurdish peshmerga fighters closing in on the eastern, southern and northern borders of the city. The Islamic State group still controls the western region of the city. In preparation for the assault, the coalition sharply increased the number of airstrikes it conducted in and around the city — using U.S. special operators and U.S. and coalition air power to target more than 35 Islamic State group commanders, Carter said Tuesday.

A senior U.S. military official who spoke on the condition of anonymity said that while there is benefit to overlapping the two operations, the coalition needs to generate additional local ground forces in Syria before launching an assault in Raqqa. The official also said that due to the size and complexity of the initial attacks on Mosul, it was better not to have the operations launching simultaneously because of the strain it would put on assets such as strike and surveillance aircraft and refuelers.

"Mosul is in a very challenging phase," the official said.

US finds it difficult to oust last of Islamic State in Libya

The Washington Post

A U.S. air campaign against Islamic State militants in Libya, which was supposed to be a brisk illustration of the effectiveness of U.S. support for local forces, has turned into an extended operation with no clear end in sight.

About 100 militants are believed to remain in the coastal city of Sirte, which in 2015 became the most important Islamic State stronghold outside of Iraq and Syria. They are holed up in a small, densely packed residential area. For months, U.S.-backed local militia fighters have struggled against militant defenses and sniper attacks; last week, 14 fighters were killed on one day alone.

The elusiveness of victory in Sirte underscores the challenges that continue to face U.S. efforts to defeat extremists from North Africa to Afghanistan: the limitations of local fighting forces, including inadequate battlefield support and poor morale, and the

corrosive effects of local political feuds.

The same elements are certain to test the U.S.-backed effort to recapture Mosul, the large Iraqi city where a multipronged operation is now unfolding against the Islamic State group.

"It matters for the United States and other Western countries that an operation that was initially thought to last weeks could last months, and it's unclear what happens after ISIS disappears from Sirte," said Mattia Toaldo, a senior policy fellow at the European Council on Foreign Relations. ISIS is one of the acronyms for the Islamic State group.

The operation in Sirte, a small city that was largely depopulated after the Islamic State's arrival, was supposed to be relatively simple to execute. While the group's Libya branch had shown itself to be just as brutal as its parent, its members were far fewer in number. They lacked the same local support they found in Iraq and Syria, and operated

with fewer revenue sources.

Militia forces from the nearby city of Misurata quickly became bogged down after they launched their operation to retake Sirte in May. When the U.S. strikes began at the request of the U.S.-backed Libyan unity government on Aug. 1, military officials hoped the operation would conclude in a matter of weeks. Since then, U.S. aircraft have conducted about 330 strikes on militant targets in Sirte. The operation has been extended twice.

It has been harder than expected "getting this last little bit," a U.S. defense official said, speaking on the condition of anonymity to discuss operations by partner forces. "Because of the casualties the Misuratans have taken, they want to be judicious and precise ... without leveling entire buildings," he said. "When you work by, with and through, you accept the timeline of the forces you're fighting with."

Obama health plan to see rate hikes

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Premiums will go up sharply next year under President Barack Obama's health care law, and many consumers will be down to just one insurer, the administration confirmed Monday. That's sure to stoke another "Obamacare" controversy days before a presidential election.

Before taxpayer-provided subsidies, premiums for a midlevel benchmark plan will increase an average of 25 percent across the 39 states served by the federally run online market, according to a report from the Department of Health and Human Services. Some states will see much bigger jumps, others less.

Moreover, about 1 in 5 consumers will have plans only from a single insurer to pick from, after major national carriers such as UnitedHealth Group, Humana and Aetna scaled back their roles.

"Consumers will be faced this year with not only big premium increases but also with a declining number of insurers participating, and that will lead to a tumultuous open enrollment period," said Larry Levitt, who tracks the health care law for the non-

partisan Kaiser Family Foundation.

The new numbers aren't too surprising, said Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, who chairs a committee that oversees the law. It "does little to dispel the notion we are seeing the law implode at the expense of middle-class families."

Administration officials are stressing that subsidies provided under the law, which are designed to rise alongside premiums, will insulate most customers from sticker shock. They add that consumers who are willing to switch to cheaper plans will still be able to find bargains.

The vast majority of the more than 10 million customers who purchase through HealthCare.gov and its state-run counterparts do receive generous financial assistance.

But an estimated 5 million to 7 million people are either not eligible for the income-based assistance, or they buy individual policies outside of the health law's markets, where the subsidies are not available. The administration is urging the latter group to check out HealthCare.gov. The spike in premiums generally does not affect the employer-provided plans that cover

most workers and their families.

In some states, the premium increases are striking. In Arizona, unsubsidized premiums for a hypothetical 27-year-old buying a benchmark "second-lowest cost silver plan" will jump by 116 percent, from \$196 to \$422, according to the administration report.

HHS said if that hypothetical consumer has a fairly modest income, making \$25,000 a year, the subsidies would cover \$280 of the new premium, and the consumer would pay \$142. Caveat: If the consumer is making \$30,000 or \$40,000, his or her subsidy would be significantly lower.

Dwindling choice is another issue.

The total number of HealthCare.gov insurers will drop from 232 this year to 167 in 2017, a loss of 28 percent. (Insurers are counted multiple times if they offer coverage in more than one state. So Aetna, for example, would count once in each state that it participated in.)

Overall, it's shaping up to be the most difficult sign-up season since HealthCare.gov launched in 2013 and the computer system froze up.

Trump insists he's winning, polls 'phony'

Associated Press

TAMPA, Fla. — Even as his path to the presidency narrows, a defiant Donald Trump is insisting he is "winning" and urging his supporters to defy what he is calling an establishment conspiracy to deny the White House to his populist movement.

Trump, in the middle of a three-day swing through battleground Florida as thousands began voting there in person, hammered the "disgusting" media on Monday for its "phony polls" that he claimed were the latest signs of a "rigged election."

"The media isn't just against me. They're against all of you," Trump told cheering supporters in St. Augustine. "They're against what we represent."

"I believe we're actually winning," he said.

Even as Trump publicly dis-

played his trademark bravado, his team conceded publicly as well as privately that he was trailing — and that crucial Pennsylvania may be slipping away to Democrat Hillary Clinton. That would leave him only a razor-thin pathway to the 270 electoral votes needed to win the White House on Nov. 8.

With Election Day two weeks away, Trump's electoral map looks bleak.

Trump's campaign manager Kellyanne Conway outlined a path to 270 electoral votes on Sunday that banks on victories in Florida, Ohio, Iowa and North Carolina along with New Hampshire and Maine's 2nd Congressional District. Assuming Trump wins all of those — and he currently trails in some — he would earn the exact number of electoral votes needed to win the presidency and no more.

Clinton gains ground with younger voters

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Liane Golightly has finally decided who she'll vote for on Election Day. Hillary Clinton is not a choice the 30-year-old Republican would have predicted, nor one that excites her. But the former supporter of Ohio Gov. John Kasich says it's the only choice she can make.

"I kind of wish it were somebody else, somebody that I could really get behind 100 percent," said Golightly, an educator from Monroe, Mich. She's voting for Clinton, she said, only because she can't stomach "childish" Donald Trump.

Like Golightly, many young voters are coming over to Clinton in the closing stretch of the 2016 campaign, according to a new GenForward poll of Americans 18 to 30.

Driving the shift are white voters, who were divided between the two candidates just a

month ago and were more likely to support GOP nominee Mitt Romney than President Barack Obama in 2012.

In the new GenForward survey, Clinton leads among all young whites 35 percent to 22 percent, and by a 2-to-1 margin among those who are likely to vote. Clinton held a consistent advantage among young African-Americans, Asian-Americans and Hispanics in earlier GenForward polls, as she does in the new survey.

GenForward is a survey of adults age 18 to 30 by the Black Youth Project at the University of Chicago with the Associated Press-NORC Center for Public Affairs Research.

Overall, Clinton leads Trump among young likely voters 60 percent to 19 percent, with 12 percent supporting Libertarian nominee Gary Johnson and 6 percent behind the Green Party's Jill Stein.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Coast Guard vessel Tamaroa to be sunk

NJ CAPE MAY POINT — A ship that once towed warships to safety during World War II and battled 40-foot waves to help rescue seven people in what was portrayed in the book and film “The Perfect Storm” is poised to be sunk off the New Jersey and Delaware coasts.

Officials told The Record newspaper the Coast Guard vessel Tamaroa will help grow a reef near Cape May Point by drawing large game fish and boosting recreational fishing.

The sinking is planned around Oct. 30, the 25th anniversary of the 1991 storm in which the Tamaroa helped rescue the crew of a sailboat and a downed Air National Guard helicopter near Massachusetts.

Efforts to convert the ship into a museum and memorial ended in 2012 after its hull sprung a leak.

Woman hurt just prior to surprise proposal

MO OVERLAND — What was supposed to be a joyous day turned into tragedy for a suburban St. Louis police officer and his girlfriend.

KSDK-TV reported that Overland Officer Shaun Terry planned to propose to his girlfriend, Holly Williamson, on a dirt bike track on Oct. 15. Both are avid dirt bike riders.

Terry and a friend of the couple planned to pretend there was a bike malfunction. He was going to give her the ring when she came over to help.

Just moments before the surprise would have taken place, Williamson crashed. She was airlifted to a hospital with a spine injury, a fractured skull

and other injuries. Her prognosis is uncertain because more than a week later, she remains sedated.

Armed men with clown masks and gun foiled

CA SAN FRANCISCO — Authorities say three men with clown masks and a gun ran from a downtown San Francisco shopping center after they were discovered by security guards on Sunday.

The San Francisco Examiner reported San Francisco Police Department spokesman Officer Carlos Manfredi said the guards were doing their rounds in the emergency stairwells in the mall when they came across the three men. Manfredi says one brandished a gun.

The men remain at large.

Police officer arrested for DUI while on duty

DC WASHINGTON — A District of Columbia police officer was arrested and charged with drunken driving while on duty.

Metropolitan Police Officer Arthur Thompson was arrested at about 2:20 a.m. on Sunday.

Police say Thompson’s impairment was discovered by a supervisor who was investigating a citizen complaint about Thompson. Police say a field sobriety test was conducted and Thompson was found to be under the influence of alcohol.

Museum’s sale of antiquities criticized

OH TOLEDO — The Toledo Museum of Art is selling 68 antiquities from its collection, a move drawing criticism from a nationally known archaeologist and Egyptian officials.

The Blade newspaper reported about half the items are from Egypt. Others come from Cyprus, Greece and Italy.

The museum’s director said its board approved selling the items that didn’t meet the current collection’s quality. He said it expects to generate about \$500,000, which can be used on other acquisitions.

The newspaper said the Egyptian government indicated in news coverage there that it’s seeking to stop the sales.

Barking dog alerts neighbors to fire

PA PHILADELPHIA — An animal rescue group said a barking dog alerted neighbors to a first-floor blaze at a Philadelphia home where the dog and its owner were later found unconscious inside.

The Red Paw Emergency Relief Team told The Philadelphia Inquirer the dog was uncharacteristically barking early Sunday, waking up neighbors who called 911 after seeing the two-story rowhome ablaze.

The group said firefighters found the dog lying on top of his owner. Both were unconscious and had to be revived.

The dog’s owner has been hospitalized for burns and was listed in critical condition.

The dog was being treated at an animal hospital in guarded but stable condition.

Emu escapes, visits Irish pub, is captured

FL CAPE CANAVERAL — An escaped emu sent deputies on a wild goose chase after it walked up to a bar in central Florida.

The long-legged bird, which resembles an ostrich, hopped its 4-foot fence in Cape Canaveral on Friday and sauntered up to a local Irish pub.

The emu’s owner, Paul Eaton, said the bird was spooked by a stray dog. It took Brevard County Sheriff’s deputies and an animal control officer more than an hour to capture the 8-year-old bird, named Taco.

Emus are the second-largest living bird by height. They are fast sprinters and, when agitated, can jump and kick with considerable force.

Pedestrian shot with blow dart from vehicle

VA RADFORD — Authorities say a man was shot with a blow dart near Radford University by someone who was driving by.

Radford City police told news outlets that the incident occurred Saturday night. The victim told police he was walking in the area when he was shot with a blow dart from a passing vehicle.

Officials say the victim suffered a minor injury and was treated and released by EMS.

Police say the vehicle is described as a passenger car that is silver or light in color.

Visitor killed by tree at monument ID’d

NM LOS ALAMOS — Authorities at New Mexico’s Bandelier National Monument have identified the female park visitor killed by a tree earlier this month.

The Los Alamos Monitor reported Bandelier National Monument Superintendent Jason Lott said Beverly Modlin, 81, of Wheeling, Ill., was fatally struck by the falling tree while visiting the park.

Officials said Modlin was returning to her car in the Frey Trailhead parking lot when a live Ponderosa reportedly snapped in half.

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STARS AND STRIPES®

Storylines plentiful as NBA tips off

By BRIAN MAHONEY
Associated Press

The storylines are as long as a Stephen Curry three-pointer.

With a superteam in the West, a megastar in the Midwest, superstars all around the league, its global popularity at an all-time high, more revenue than ever and labor peace looming, this season has the potential to be like no other the league has ever had. Yes, rivaling the Celtics' run in the 1960s, possibly topping Magic-Bird rivalry of the '80s and Michael Jordan's run of the '90s.

LeBron James is holding the title in Cleveland and Kevin Durant has settled in Golden State, so the NBA Finals could be headed for the same destination again next June.

But what a journey it should be getting there.

"I think there is a somewhat inevitability of this Cleveland-Warriors meeting in the finals again, which can sometimes make you overlook how enjoyable the regular season can be if you love basketball," ESPN analyst Jeff Van Gundy said. "So I think they'll meet in the finals again, but that doesn't make the regular season uninteresting to me."

A summer spending spree created new contenders and enticing questions for a global audience that will begin being answered Tuesday when the new season opens in the places the last one ended.

The record-setting Warriors

will be must-see TV again with Durant, the former scoring champ and league MVP, sharing shots with Curry, the current scoring champ and MVP.

James is on a Jordan-like run, looking for a seventh straight trip to the NBA Finals and hoping to build a dynasty where there was once just despair.

There's Dwyane Wade in Chicago and Dwight Howard in Atlanta after both went home.

Derrick Rose left home, traded from the Bulls to the New York Knicks.

Former Commissioner David Stern used to say the NBA was in its golden age.

Under Adam Silver, it may be even shinier.

"There are a lot of charged-up players in this league," Silver said. "There are a lot of teams, young teams in the development cycle, where I think they would even say realistically they're unlikely to win the championship this season, but they're on the road to winning a championship."

He gave James and the Cavaliers their rings before the season opener, and Durant joined Curry, Draymond Green and Klay Thompson in the expensive and explosive Warriors lineup later that night against San Antonio.

Their teams are heavily favored to meet in the NBA Finals for the third consecutive year, a rivalry that could turn into something like the Celtics-Lakers, or before that of Bill Russell and Wilt Chamberlain.

But this is no two-team show.

"It's tough," Green said. "But at the same time I'm almost certain that it's a goal of [Cleveland's] to get back to try to win a championship. With that being said, there's a lot of great teams in this league. And they're not saying we're going to watch the Cavs and the Warriors in June."

Like Russell Westbrook and Oklahoma City being defiant, not devastated by Durant's departure the way the Cavs were when James bolted for Miami in 2010.

Or young stars like Karl-Anthony Towns growing up into the spotlight, now that Kobe Bryant, Tim Duncan and Kevin Garnett, titans for so long, have grown old and retired. And yet another batch of unmatched international talent, led by No. 1 pick Ben Simmons, an Australian whose debut will be delayed as he recovers from a foot injury.

It's what the league sought to create during the 2011 lockout, when more revenues were shifted from players to teams in hopes the clubs would then distribute them better and chip away at the gulf between the big-market haves and the little-market have-nots.

Money really started pouring in with the extension of the league's national TV contracts, which kicked in this season to the tune of about \$2.6 billion annually. The TV deal has sent salaries soaring so much that

owners and players are poised to agree to a new labor agreement soon without the type of fight that led to the last one.

The wealth of talent, and the wealth to acquire it, has emboldened teams to spend now where they once may have stood pat.

Durant, Al Horford and many more switched teams during the dizzying days of July free agency, with the Spurs putting Pau Gasol alongside Kawhi Leonard and LaMarcus Aldridge into the frontcourt spot that Duncan for so long had anchored.

A third of the league changed coaches, with clubs like Minnesota (Tom Thibodeau) and Houston (Mike D'Antoni) turning to proven winners to steer them through the rough Western Conference waters.

The Spurs or Clippers could emerge as the toughest test out there for the Warriors. Things look easier for James in the East, where he has emerged as the champion for six straight years. But he never thinks about what happened in the past.

"There are going to be so many more challenges, so many different obstacles that we're going to have to face this year as a ballclub," James said. "We have to be mentally focused, mentally prepared for it all. I think we will, but it will not be easy and it shouldn't be."

Warriors are 'as good as it gets in the NBA'

Tim REYNOLDS
Associated Press

For Golden State, 73 is irrelevant. Only one number matters, and it's 16.

The Warriors' chase of being the greatest team in NBA history last season fell short in a big way, when the team that posted the best regular-season record of all time blew a 3-1 lead in the Finals and lost the title to Cleveland.

So entering this season, any talk of setting another win record — even after add-

ing Kevin Durant — would be foolish. The only thing the Warriors are interested in is getting the 16 postseason wins that would secure a second championship in three years, and they'll again be the consensus pick to get out of the Western Conference for the third straight season.

"They're as good as it gets in the NBA," said new Los Angeles Lakers coach Luke Walton, who most recently was a Warriors assistant.

Much of the look of the West has changed.

Tim Duncan, Kobe Bryant and Kevin Garnett — all champions, all future Hall of Famers — are now all retired as well. And there's new coaches in Sacramento (Dave Joerger), Memphis (David Fizdale), Minnesota (Tom Thibodeau) and Houston (Mike D'Antoni), along with Walton taking over for the Lakers.

But the targets in the West, they remain the same. It's still the Warriors, then San Antonio, and from there it might be anyone's guess.

Broncos back in form, halt skid

Associated Press

DENVER — The Denver Broncos are whole again.

Trevor Siemian's healthy. Gary Kubiak's back on the sideline. C.J. Anderson is running wild once more, thanks to a nudge from rookie Devontae Booker, and the defense is forcing fumbles like it used to.

Von Miller & Co. turned Brock Osweiler's homecoming into a house of horrors with a 27-9 win over the Houston Texans on Monday night that snapped a two-game skid.

The Broncos (5-2) kept pace with the resurgent Raiders atop the AFC West, a division they've owned for five years. A loss would have plummeted them into third place.

The Texans (4-3) limped home still leading the middling AFC South, where every team has surrendered more points than it's scored.

"We kept Brock out of the end zone and that's perfect," cornerback Aqib Talib said. "That's the goal every week. So, we got our job done this week."

Osweiler managed just 131 yards on 22-for-41 passing.

"I looked up in the fourth quarter, before I think that last drive, and he had like 70 yards passing," Talib said. "I just smiled on the inside. That's what we wanted to do. We wanted Brock to come out here and

Pro Bowl RB Foster retires

Associated Press

MIAMI — Four-time Pro Bowler Arian Foster says he can no longer take the punishment an NFL running back endures, so he is retiring midway through an injury-plagued season with the Miami Dolphins.

Foster, 30, tried to come back from a torn Achilles tendon, but was slowed this season by groin and hamstring injuries. He announced his retirement Monday on the website Uninterrupted as the Dolphins began their bye week.

The team confirmed the decision, effective immediately.

"There comes a time in every athlete's career when their ambition and their body are no longer on the same page," Foster wrote. "I've reached that point. It's hard to write those words because this game has been everything to me ... my therapy, my joy, my solace and my enemy."

Foster signed a \$1.5 million, one-year contract with the Dolphins in July after spending his first seven seasons with Houston. He holds the Texans' franchise record with 6,472 yards rushing.

This season he rushed for 55 yards on 22 carries, and he had 5 yards Sunday against the Buffalo Bills.

"My father always said, 'You'll know when it's time to walk away,'" he wrote. "It has never been more clear than right now. I'm walking away with peace. I know it's not commonplace to do it midseason, but my body just can't take the punishment this game asks for any longer."

Foster's playing time was curtailed with the emergence of Jay Ajayi, who tied an NFL record by surpassing 200 yards rushing in consecutive games.

Since 2010, Foster ranked second in the NFL with 115.2 yards from scrimmage per game, trailing only Le'Veon Bell's 121.9.

but his only sack came when he mishandled a shotgun snap and fell on the football.

And although Siemian's numbers were pedestrian — 14-for-25 for 157 yards — he threw a touchdown and had no interceptions or sacks. He moved around much better than he had 11 days earlier against San Diego in his return from a sprained left A.C. joint that clearly affected him in a 21-13 loss to the Chargers.

The Broncos avoided their first three-game skid since 2011.

"It was huge," safety T.J. Ward said. "Just to get that momentum, get that feeling back in here, that confidence that we've been running with and playing with. After the two losses you could kind of feel the aura of the team just kind of going down. We had great preparation this week, came in and played how we prepared."

"We back up."

Miller saw his sack streak snapped at eight games, counting the playoffs.

"There was a sack streak? I wasn't even paying attention to it. My bad, guys," Miller said. "You know, I'm all about wins. I'll take a win any day. Sacks are great. That's what I do. That's my job. I wasn't able to get it done today, but we got the win."

struggle. He came out here and struggled."

Denver shut down Osweiler

without the usual sum of sacks they typically pile up on QBs.

Osweiler was hit eight times

Ryan: League should consider ejection for hits like Landry's

Associated Press

ORCHARD PARK, N.Y. — Bills coach Rex Ryan challenged the NFL to consider ejecting players for blindside hits to the head such as the one by Dolphins receiver Jarvis Landry that leveled Buffalo safety Aaron Williams.

Ryan called Landry's hit "dirty" and "deliberate," while saying on-field officials made the right call in flagging the player for unnecessary roughness. Ryan then went further in questioning why the league doesn't adopt college football's

policy and have such hits immediately reviewed by replay officials to determine whether they merit an ejection.

"Yeah, it was totally unnecessary. Did he target? Did he launch? Yeah, he did all those. You can check every box you want," Ryan said Monday. "If we really want to protect our players, then we need to look at things. And maybe in the future we will look at things differently."

Ryan spoke a day after Williams was hurt and taken to the hospital during Buffalo's 28-25 loss to the Dolphins. Williams

was cleared to travel home with the Bills and attended team meetings Monday.

Williams, who has a history of head and neck injuries, was hurt in the second quarter on a running play at Buffalo's 11. Williams was tracking running back Jay Ajayi and moving to his right when he was blindsided by Landry, who led with his shoulder and caught Williams in the head and sent him to the turf. Williams squirmed in pain and remained on his back before slowly getting up and being led to the locker room.

Following the game, Landry

apologized for the block and wished he could take it back, and offered little defense when asked if the hit was dirty.

"Call it what you want," Landry said. "It's football."

On Monday, Dolphins coach Adam Gase acknowledged Landry needs to lower his target when blocking, but doesn't consider him to be a dirty player.

"For anybody to start thinking 'dirty play,' I've been around the guy less than a year and I haven't seen that from him," Gase said.

Chicago in Tribe's Kipnis' DNA

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — Jason Kipnis was raised on Chicago's North Side, and like so many other kids, he grew up idolizing Ryne Sandberg, watching Sammy Sosa smash home runs and listening to Harry Caray.

He bled Cubs blue.

And he never once blamed Steve Bartman — they went to the same high school, by the way.

"We have a joke," the Indians second baseman said, referring to the infamous fan vilified in Chicago for a failed attempt to catch a postseason foul ball. "The only thing I'm mad at Bartman for is missing an easy flyball."

Kipnis finds himself in a unique situation in his first World Series, facing the team that helped shape his life. The Cubs are in his DNA. They're the team he learned to love, the one that taught him the game and the one that often broke his heart. But while Kipnis' family and friends intend to remain true to their Cubbies over the next week, his loyalties are not

divided.

"There's zero conflict at all," he said Tuesday on the eve of Game 1. "Let's be clear about that."

Kipnis, though, said watching the Cubs wrap up their first NL pennant since 1945 on TV was emotional. Some of his friends were at Wrigley Field on Saturday night and when the last out was recorded, part of Kipnis was there, too.

"I didn't know how to handle it," he said. "I didn't know if I was happy, mad, sad. I was emotional. I was choked up, I was like, 'Oh, no what does this mean right now?' But it's nothing more than excitement for the games."

He was in high school when Bartman, innocently sitting in a front row seat down the left-field field lane, became an unintentional celebrity in Game 6 of the NL Championship. The slight man, wearing a Cubs cap and headphones so he could listen to the game on the radio, reached out and tried to catch a foul ball in the eighth inning as Cubs outfielder Moises Alou

tried to close in.

The Cubs derailed from there, blowing a big lead and losing and then dropping Game 7.

The Curse had a new chapter.

Kipnis wishes those Chicago fans who haven't been able to let go would finally forgive Bartman and turn an ugly moment into something special.

"I would love to see him throw out a first pitch," he said. "Everyone would go nuts."

Despite his Second City roots, Kipnis knows he'll be treated like a complete stranger — and sworn enemy — when the Series shifts to Wrigley for Game 3. He's taking solace that there will be a few welcomed faces in the crowd.

But the Friendly Confines won't be very friendly.

He wouldn't have it any other way.

"If they're Cubs fans, they'll boo as they should if you're a baseball fan," he said. "But I'll have enough there that you'll hopefully hear a couple cheers."

Versteeg lifts Flames in shootout

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Kris Versteeg scored the lone goal of the shootout in the seventh round of the tiebreaker to give the Calgary Flames a 3-2 win over the Chicago Blackhawks on Monday night and just their second victory this season.

Versteeg, a former Blackhawk, faked Corey Crawford and connected on a wrist shot.

Sam Bennett and Sean Monahan scored in regulation for Calgary, which snapped a two-game losing streak.

Patrick Kane and Brian Campbell connected in regulation for Chicago.

Campbell's goal, his first with the Blackhawks since rejoining them as a free agent in the off-season, tied it 2-all at 4:12 of the third. Campbell's feed from the right circle, intended for Artem Anisimov, deflected in off Calgary defenseman T.J. Brodie.

Brian Elliott made 31 saves through overtime and blocked all seven in the shootout to earn his first win with Calgary after three losses.

Acquired from St. Louis in June, Elliott had allowed 14 goals in his first three starts for the Flames.

Crawford blocked 29 shots through overtime and made several close in saves early to keep it close.

Canadiens 3, Flyers 1: Brendan Gallagher scored midway through the third period as host Montreal extended its winning streak to four games.

First-place Montreal (5-0-1) remains the only team unbeaten in regulation time.

Shea Weber and Alexander Radulov, into the empty net, also scored for Montreal. Carey Price made 31 saves for his third consecutive win to start the season.

Jakub Voracek scored the lone goal for the Flyers (2-3-1). Steve Mason stopped 30 of 32 shots.

Gallagher scored on the power play at 13:08 of the third period, just four seconds into Montreal's man advantage.

Baez, Lindor have Puerto Rican bond

Associated Press

CLEVELAND — About four months before the 2011 draft, over a hundred scouts descended upon the baseball complex at a private academy west of Orlando. They were there to eye a couple of teenagers born in Puerto Rico who would become the draft's most coveted shortstops.

At 12 years old and with minimal knowledge of English, Javier Baez and Francisco Lindor left the island and moved to Florida. They excelled with sparkling play, Baez for Arlington Country Day School in Jacksonville and Lindor for Montverde Academy, which hosted that hyped high school game.

"That was like a mini World Series," said Baez on Monday, reminiscing about the game his team won in their senior years. "That was a special eve-

ning. So many scouts, so much attention."

Five years later, Baez and Lindor will face each other again as rivals in the World Series, starting Tuesday.

Baez is a slick second baseman with the Chicago Cubs. Lindor is a smooth shortstop for the Cleveland Indians.

Breakout stars of the postseason with their exceptional play and poise, Baez and Lindor also epitomize a talented crop of players from Puerto Rico.

In the 2011 draft, the Indians drafted Lindor with the eighth overall pick, and the Cubs picked Baez with the next one. There's also Carlos Correa, the Houston Astros shortstop who in 2012 became the first Puerto Rican drafted first overall and who won the AL Rookie of the Year in 2015.

"We spent a ton of time with both of them," said Indians scouting director Brad Grant.

"Javy was a really good player, too. We went back and forth with those two. And our scouts did a really good job of getting to know them. In the end, what separated it for us, it was Francisco's ability to play short, which is very hard to come by. And a switch-hitter on top of it, with offensive abilities as well."

The 22-year-old Lindor marveled Monday about the similar path he shares with Baez ever since they were kids in Puerto Rico.

"We follow the same route to the majors. He left to help his family, and I did the same for mine, looking for a better future," Lindor said. "We are two shortstops from Puerto Rico, drafted eight and nine, now playing each other in the World Series, still growing. This is insane. It's a blessing. I feel so proud for Puerto Rico."