

STARS AND STRIPES®

Thursday, September 1, 2016

A news digest for U.S. forces serving overseas

stripes.com

Rapid increase seen in F/A-18 crashes

Services experience loss of pilots, jets after funding cut for training, repair

BY TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — A year ago, Navy and Marine Corps leaders gave a dire warning to Congress: Budget cuts have hurt nondeployed units and could cost lives during a major conflict.

The losses happened, but not in combat. Pilots died training at home.

Since May, four F/A-18 Hornet or F/A-18E/F Super Hornet crashes involving nondeployed units killed two pilots and destroyed five planes.

The crashes are the latest in a sharp increase in military aviation accidents overall for nondeployed squadrons, which have absorbed the bulk of budget cuts through reduced training and delayed maintenance at home so the best aircraft and personnel can be used on the front lines.

In 2011, Congress passed the Budget Control Act that instituted automatic federal spending cuts known as sequestration. By March 2013, the across-the-board cut to all spending programs started to take effect.

The Defense Department's operations and maintenance account, which pays for flight training and repairs on aircraft, lost \$20.3 billion that year, according to the Government Accountability Office.

Two workhorse aircraft of military aviation — the F/A-18 Hornet and Super Hornet — were affected.

Since 2012, the number of major Navy and Marine Hornet and Super Hornet accidents — incidents causing at least \$50,000 in damage and in some cases leading to injury, death or the loss of the \$60 million aircraft — skyrocketed 44 percent, according to data collected by the Naval Safety Center in Norfolk, Va.

"It's extremely clear what's happened," said California-based Navy F/A-18E/F Super Hornet pilot Lt. "Versace," who asked to be identified by his call sign only because he was not authorized to speak on the issue. "These aircraft have reached their life span and they continue to extend their life spans for another few thousand flight hours, which hasn't worked for them due to significant budget decreases. Yet they continue to run these jets that have

caused catastrophic incidents."

After the most recent F/A-18 Hornet crash Aug. 2 at Fallon Naval Air Station in Nevada, some experts who watch military readiness said Navy and Marine aviation is in trouble.

"I believe naval aviation is at risk of eventual systemic failure," said retired Navy Cmdr. Chris Harmer, now a senior naval analyst with the Institute for the Study of War, a nonprofit think tank in Washington. "Either funding needs to be significantly increased in order to restore airframe availability and pilot proficiency and support current operations, or operational tempo needs to be drastically reduced."

Recent accidents

The Navy and Marines rank their aviation accidents as mishaps, with the top three most damaging as Class A through C. Class A is the highest level of crash and means a pilot was killed or permanently disabled or the aircraft sustained at least \$2 million in damage.

Since sequestration, the number of Class A through C mishaps involving Hornets or Super Hornets has climbed from 57 in fiscal year 2012 to 82 as of Aug. 2 of this fiscal year, according to data from the Naval Safety Center.

Not only Hornets or Super Hornets have been affected. Across the board, the number of Navy and Marine aircraft lost in accidents has doubled during the first 11 months of fiscal year 2016 compared with the same time in 2015. Twenty aircraft had been destroyed as of Aug. 29, compared with 10 aircraft during the same time in 2015, according to Naval Safety Center data obtained by Stars and Stripes.

But attention has focused on the Hornets after a recent string of crashes.

On Aug. 2, a Navy pilot safely ejected after the F/A-18C he was flying experienced an engine fire at Nevada's Naval Air Station Fallon. Flights are required to test aircraft after having certain engine or cockpit repairs or if the plane hasn't been flown in 30 days, according to the Navy.

Marine pilot Maj. Richard Norton was killed July 28 when the F/A-18C he was fly-

ing crashed near Twentynine Palms in California during a nighttime training mission.

A crash in June of another F/A-18C during a Blue Angels practice flight killed Marine Capt. Jeff Kuss.

Two Super Hornet F/A-18/F aircraft collided in May during a training mission off the coast of North Carolina. The four crewmembers ejected and were rescued.

The role of flight hours

Lt. Gen. Jon Davis, deputy commandant for Marine Corps aviation, told lawmakers in July that the spike in Class A mishaps involving the Hornet looked worse than it is because the service was flying fewer hours.

"It's actually kind of on par where it has been in the past," he said. But with a smaller number of flight hours, "every mishap makes this bump up a lot."

However, the Marines and Navy have seen their overall number of flight hours — deployed and home training — stay relatively the same during the past few years, according to data from the Naval Safety Center.

Combat demands on aircraft remain high and are the priority, the Navy and Marine Corps said. Since Operation Inherent Resolve began in late 2014, aircraft from the Navy's carrier strike groups have taken on an increasing amount of the combat load. When the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt ended its deployment to the Middle East in late 2015, it had set a record for the number of bombs it had dropped against the Islamic State group. When the USS Harry S. Truman took its place, the Truman set new records again, not only in bombs dropped but in total flight hours.

That means even fewer hours available at home.

"Regrettably ... you're going to see [nondeployed] pilots that aren't flying very much," Rear Adm. Michael Manazir, director of Navy air warfare, told the Senate Armed Services Committee in April.

SEE CRASHES ON PAGE 2

Obama OKs 1.6 percent raise for military

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — President Barack Obama has approved a 1.6 percent pay raise for U.S. servicemembers next year, the White House announced Wednesday.

The raise, which would go into effect Jan. 1 for 2017, is

in line with the increase the Senate approved for the 2017 defense spending bill but less than the 2.1 percent the House of Representatives had pushed for.

“I am strongly committed to supporting our uniformed service members, who have made such great contributions to our Nation over more than a de-

cade of war,” Obama said in a statement.

The president said the size of the increase had to be weighed against the overall budget needs.

“As our country continues to recover from serious economic conditions affecting the general welfare, however, we must maintain efforts to keep

our Nation on a sustainable fiscal course. This effort requires tough choices, especially in light of budget constraints.”

The House and Senate are still negotiating the differences between the two chambers’ defense spending bills. The resulting bill would go to Obama for his signature.

Crashes: Flight time cuts can have negative effect on pilots

FROM PAGE 1

Manazir told committee members that the minimum number of hours a Navy pilot can fly each month to stay safe is 11.

“We call that the tactical hard deck,” he said. “Studies have been done by the safety center that say, ‘If pilots fly less than 11 on a regular basis, there is a chance that mishaps will go higher.’”

Versace said he’s noticed the difference in the amount of time that he gets to fly.

“A lot has changed since I first started flying with the Navy,” he said. “Budgets are taking a significant toll on many military personnel. Many aviators have had their hours decreased. Personally, since flying the F/A-18E/F for 4½ years, my flight hours have annually decreased by 15 percent.”

The Marines saw its low point for F/A-18 Hornet flight hours last summer, when it averaged 8.8 hours per month per pilot for nondeployed squadrons, Davis said. Increased funding and an emphasis to improve readiness has upped that average to 11.1 as of August 2016, said Capt. Sarah Burns, a spokeswoman for the Marines.

Naval Air Forces Rear Adm. Mike Shoemaker said at a recent defense forum that the average flight hours for the Navy for the nondeployed squadrons is 12 to 14 hours a month.

“That’s the average, there some who are down in the probably single digits and there are some who are flying above that ... squadron [commanding officers] are managing that,” he said.

What about the pilots?

An average flight is about 1.2 to 1.4 hours, said retired Col. John Venable, who piloted F-16s for the Air Force for two decades and is now a senior defense fellow at the Heritage Foundation, a conservative Washington think tank.

Eleven hours means each pilot is flying

only about twice a week. Venable said getting enough hours is key to being ready to fly.

“Flying is very volatile,” he said. “Your ability to not have to think about the task at hand was all related to how often you flew.”

Venable said a pilot needs to fly at least three times a week to maintain readiness. Twice a week isn’t enough.

A lack of flying time does add to the rise in accidents, said Seth Cropsey, a former Navy officer who served as the deputy undersecretary of the Navy in the Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush administrations.

“When you send pilots up there who haven’t had time in the planes — [that is] what you get,” he said. “Something has to give.”

Lack of aircraft

Reduced funding at a time when the Navy and Marine aircraft are required for many missions has dropped the number of aircraft available to pilots, members of Congress and the military have said.

“Intense budgetary pressures and years of high levels of ongoing operations have created a situation where the Navy and Marine Corps do not have enough ready basic aircraft for our aviators to fly,” Sen. Roger Wicker, R-Miss., said at a Senate hearing in April.

Increased use of aircraft has required more repairs on them or aged them to the point of no longer being useful, the Navy and members of Congress said. The budget cuts in 2013 forced layoffs at depots where the work was being done, Naval Air Forces Cmdr. Jeannie Groeneveld said. The rate of repairs has still not recovered.

In April, Davis said those pressures have specifically affected the Hornets and the pilots who fly them. He cited a report showing that of the Marines’ 276 Hornets, only 87 were available for missions.

Of the Navy’s 259 Hornets, 55 were mission-capable, or able to perform “at least one and potentially all of its missions” as of July 28, Groeneveld said.

Of the Navy’s 544 Super Hornets, 290 were mission-capable, she said.

Working on a fix

The Navy planned to stop buying Super Hornets in anticipation of the arrival of the F-35C, its version of the new Joint Strike Fighter.

As the F-35 program faced delays and setbacks, it was unable to relieve pressure from the F/A-18. It is expected to reach initial operational capability in mid-2018.

As a result, the older Hornets are reaching the end of their service life faster, and newer Super Hornets are aging more quickly than the Navy planned.

To address that, the Navy is pushing the aircraft to last 8,000 hours of flight time, Groeneveld said. In some cases, the planes are being overhauled to squeeze 10,000 hours out of them, she said.

“The F/A-18 Hornet was originally designed for a 6,000-hour service life,” Groeneveld said.

The Navy is considering buying extra Super Hornets to fill any gap between the time that the current jets wear out and the F-35 is finally ready.

Without ready replacements, there is not another option, Groeneveld said.

“Despite its age and high-utilization rates, we continue to depend on the Hornet to be combat-ready,” she said. “We have an extensive ongoing effort to monitor, assess and repair, to safely extend some of our Hornet aircraft to a 10,000-hour service life,” she said.

But a fix won’t be quick, as the Navy and Marines deal with the limitations caused by funding cuts.

“It will take time to recover from the significant challenges we have faced in recent years,” she said.

Base damage could delay Mosul push

Associated Press

QAYARA AIR BASE, Iraq — The air base that Iraqi forces hope to use as a staging area to take Mosul back from the Islamic State group was almost destroyed by the retreating militants, raising new doubts over whether the long-awaited operation will begin this year.

Iraqi forces seized the Qayara air base south of Mosul in July, in what U.S. and Iraqi officials said was a major step toward the eventual liberation of the country's second-largest city, which fell to the Islamic State group in 2014. Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi called on Mosul residents "to get ready for the liberation of their areas."

But Iraqi army commanders stationed at the base say it will take months of reconstruction before it is ready to receive cargo planes and house the tens

of thousands of troops needed for the march on Mosul. Their assessments call into question whether Iraq will be able to launch the operation this year, as the prime minister has repeatedly pledged.

"Daesh began destroying this base from the moment they took it over," Col. Karim Rodan Salim said, referring to the Islamic State group by its Arabic acronym. "No less than 95 percent of the base has been destroyed."

Islamic State militants stripped buildings of wiring, toppled blast walls, leveled airplane hangars with explosives and mined runways.

Salim and his men are living in trailers on a patch of tarmac in the shadow of one of the partially collapsed hangars. At a nearby runway dozens of piles of dirt and rocks mark suspected explosives left by the Islamic State group, Salim said. He

estimates it will take at least six months of rebuilding before the base is ready for the 50,000 troops he says will be needed to retake Mosul.

Originally built in 1979, the facility was renamed Saddam Base after it was rehabilitated by the former Iraqi dictator. The Islamic State group captured the base in the summer of 2014, when it swept across much of northern and western Iraq and drove panicking Iraqi troops out of Mosul.

The base is more than 4 miles long and has runways large enough to accommodate cargo planes.

The coalition hopes to transform the base into a logistics center ahead of the Mosul operation. The Pentagon announced earlier this month that about 400 soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division will deploy to Iraq as part of that effort. They are among 560 addi-

tional troops President Barack Obama approved for the Iraq mission in July.

On Monday, a convoy of dozens of armored coalition vehicles carrying heavy equipment and supplies could be seen along the road leading to the base.

The U.S.-led coalition has stepped up a campaign of airstrikes around Mosul in recent weeks and fast-tracked training programs for Iraqi forces in an effort to meet the prime minister's deadline of launching the operation by year's end.

"The seizure of this base is important because it demonstrates the Iraqi security forces' ability to maintain momentum as Daesh gets weaker and continues to lose territory," said U.S. Army Maj. Gen. Gary Volesky, commander of coalition land forces in Iraq.

Officials bracing for significant funding cuts to MWR

BY JENNIFER H. SVAN

Stars and Stripes

KAISERSLAUTERN, Germany — Programs that support fitness, community centers, libraries and other family and recreational programs at U.S. Army installations are bracing for significant funding cuts in fiscal 2017 that will affect the level of service they can provide.

Lt. Gen. Kenneth Dahl, commander of U.S. Army Installation Management Command, said the Army is reducing its financial support to Family and Morale, Welfare and Recreation programs so the service can "remain combat-ready."

"This is not earth-shattering; this is not dramatic; this is not going to be very difficult for us," he said in a 5-minute video message posted to social media on Wednesday, "but I want you to know about it up front because you will go and see when you show up at one of these activities, there may be a change in the service delivery."

He said patrons should start noticing changes by the end of the calendar year.

Installations are reviewing which programs are affordable and popular, with decisions on where to make reductions to be made at the garrison level.

"We're allowing garrison and senior commanders at the local level to determine how they can absorb this reduction in funding," Dahl said.

For many garrisons, details on what services might be cut are still pending.

In Europe, no final decisions have been made, said IMCOM-Europe spokesman Ray Johnson on Thursday, adding that announcements are expected in mid-September.

Some programs and locations won't be affected at all. The Child Development Centers will continue to be fully supported, Dahl said. Garrisons will attempt to sustain Child and Youth Services at current levels. Remote and isolated installations won't see cuts, ei-

ther, he said, "because there are no alternatives" off base.

Areas that likely will see changes include outdoor recreation, arts and crafts and auto skills, Dahl said.

It could be that those programs reduce their operating hours, charge higher customer fees or scale back some of their services, he said.

"Perhaps you'll go to auto skills and you'll find out there's a sign hanging there, saying, 'We're closed on Wednesdays,'" Dahl said.

Installations could be able to avoid reductions by integrating volunteers into the workforce, he said.

The hit to the Army's family and recreational budget across the Army is about \$105 million in fiscal 2017, a reduction of about 23 percent from the current fiscal year, according to Army officials.

"It's basically a decision that's been made on the senior Army level, the senior levels of Installation Management

Command, to use funds that typically have been funding FMWR programs to use them to pay for other, more important priorities," Fort Jackson, S.C., FMWR Director Daniel Ahern was quoted as saying last month in the Fort Jackson Leader, the post's newspaper.

Fort Jackson last month announced cuts to its family and recreational programs. A fitness center at the post is closing, the post library will no longer be open on weekends, and recreational trips and delivery services will be reduced or eliminated, according to the post newspaper. The post will also close one of its pools next year.

Other bases in the States have made similar announcements. The frame shop at Fort Leonard Wood, Mo., was to be shuttered at the end of last month, and full-service car repairs were to be eliminated at the Auto Skills Center, according to the post newspaper.

Trump retreats on his deportation vow

Associated Press

PHOENIX — Donald Trump is retreating from his vow to deport everyone living in the United States illegally, even as he sticks with an aggressive tone on illegal immigration and remains committed to building a wall along the U.S. border with Mexico.

The Republican presidential nominee promised Wednesday to remove millions of people living in the United States illegally if elected, warning that failure to do so would jeopardize the “well-being of the American people.”

“Anyone who has entered the United States illegally is subject to deportation,” Trump said in a highly anticipated speech hours after his meeting with Mexican President Enrique Peña Nieto.

But the billionaire New Yorker also said the effort of a proposed immigration task force in a Trump administration would focus on removing criminals, people who have overstayed their visas and other immediate security threats.

Left unanswered by Trump: What would happen to those who have not committed crimes beyond their immigration offenses?

Aimed at ending weeks of confusion over just where he stands

on immigration, Trump’s fiery speech was filled with applause lines for his loyal supporters.

Anyone living in the country illegally who is arrested “for any crime whatsoever,” he said, will immediately be placed into deportation proceedings. “There will be no amnesty,” he added, saying immigrants in the country without permission who wish to seek legal status must return to their home countries in order to do so.

There was no direct mention of a core promise of his primary campaign — to create a “deportation force” that would remove all of the estimated 11 million immigrants living in the United States illegally.

Trump instead repeated the standard Republican talking point that only after securing the border can a discussion begin about all such immigrants, ducking the major question that has frustrated past congressional attempts at remaking immigration laws.

That omission didn’t bother Dan Stein, who leads the Federation for American Immigration Reform, a group that pushes for stricter immigration policies. He called Trump’s speech the outline of “a coherent and workable strategy.”

“But even more important than the details of the plan it-

self,” Stein said, “Trump laid out the most fundamental principle for true immigration reform: The policy exists to protect and serve ‘the well-being of the American people,’ and ‘protect all aspects of American life.’”

Critics, meanwhile, said Trump’s glossing over the fate of people who are peacefully living in the U.S. without permission doesn’t make up for his overall approach.

“It is still the most extreme position of any modern presidential candidate,” said Frank Sharry, a leading immigration advocate. “It is deeply unpopular with voters, and profoundly un-American.”

Even as he beat a retreat from his earlier pledge to deport all illegal immigrants from the country, Trump’s aggressive tone in Phoenix marked a shift from earlier in the day.

A much more measured Trump described Mexicans as “amazing people” as he appeared alongside Peña Nieto in Mexico’s capital.

The good feelings from his first meeting with a head of state as his party’s presidential nominee lasted only a short time, as a dispute arose in the hours after he left over the most contentious part of his plans to fight illegal immigration: his insistence that Mexico pay to build a physical

wall along the roughly 2,000-mile border.

Trump told reporters during his afternoon appearance with Peña Nieto that the two men didn’t discuss who would pay for the construction, pegged in the billions. Silent at that moment, Peña Nieto later tweeted, “I made it clear that Mexico will not pay for the wall.”

With the meeting held behind closed doors, it was impossible to know who was telling the truth.

Democratic vice presidential nominee Tim Kaine said Wednesday on NBC’s “Today” that even if Trump’s account is accurate, it showed he “folded under pressure” by not raising the issue with Peña Nieto.

Trump told the rowdy Arizona crowd that he respects the Mexican president. “We agreed on the importance of ending the illegal flow of drugs, cash, guns and people across our border and to put the cartels out of business,” he said. Yet, standing on American soil, he addressed directly a question he sidestepped in Mexico.

“Mexico will pay for the wall, 100 percent,” the New York businessman said. “They don’t know it yet, but they’re going to pay for the wall.”

More US adults don’t think pot use is risky

Associated Press

NEW YORK — Marijuana use is becoming more accepted among U.S. adults as states loosen pot laws, new national survey data show.

More are using marijuana, and using it more often, and fewer think it’s risky, the government survey found. That’s understandable, experts say, as dozens of states now allow medical marijuana and four states have recently legalized pot for recreational use.

More than 500,000 U.S. adults participated in the survey over a dozen years, and the responses show a shift in attitude. Only a third of adults in 2014 said they thought weekly marijuana use was dangerous, down from half of adults in 2002.

That runs counter to scientific research,

said Dr. Wilson Compton, lead author of the study published online Wednesday by the journal *Lancet Psychiatry*.

“If anything, science has shown an increasing risk that we weren’t as aware of years ago,” said Compton, deputy director of the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Other research has increasingly linked marijuana use to mental impairment, and early, heavy use by people with certain genes to increased risk of developing psychosis, he noted.

Some highlights of the report, which compared 2002 with 2014:

■ About 1 in 8 adults said they used marijuana in the past year, up from 1 in 10. The number of marijuana users grew to about 32 million.

■ Daily use doubled, to 3.5 percent or

about 8.4 million U.S. adults

■ Changes in marijuana use and perception began to really climb in 2006-07.

■ No increase was seen in reported marijuana use disorders, like impaired memory, difficulty thinking and withdrawal symptoms.

Marijuana use remains illegal under federal law. Twenty-five states and the District of Columbia have medical marijuana laws, and starting in 2014, Colorado and Washington began allowing recreational sales. Alaska and Oregon now also allow sales without a doctor’s note.

The study reported on those 18 and older. Research drawn from another large survey has shown marijuana use among high school students dropped from 25 percent to about 22 percent over 2 decades.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Patrols increase over clown sightings

SC GREENVILLE — Deputies in South Carolina have increased patrols after getting new reports of people dressed as clowns trying to lure children into the woods.

News outlets report that Greenville County sheriff's deputies were called to an apartment complex Monday about 20 minutes from a complex where people reporting seeing clowns last week.

Deputies responding to the report last week said they found no evidence of anyone in the woods behind Fleetwood Manor Apartments.

A family who called Monday night from Emerald Commons apartments said a child saw a man wearing a clown mask in woods near the complex. Deputies said there was a third report of someone dressed as a clown about 10 p.m. at Shemwood Apartments.

5 people charged in expressway shootout

NJ EGG HARBOR TOWNSHIP — Four men and a teenager have been charged in a rolling shootout on a New Jersey highway that left one man dead and four of the suspects injured.

State police announced Tuesday that they had located a pickup truck that may have been involved in the Monday afternoon shootout on the Atlantic City Expressway.

Rosemond Octavius, 22, was killed in the shooting that happened in his hometown, Egg Harbor Township. He was a passenger in a car driven by Anthony Hicks, state police said. Hicks, 24, of Mays Landing, was not injured in the shootings, but he does face

weapons charges.

Three men and a 16-year-old who were in an SUV were also shot and wounded, and two of them remained hospitalized Tuesday in stable condition. The men — Lenardo Caro, 24, of Little Egg Harbor Township; Yahshaun Stukes-Williams, 19, of Mays Landing; and Shaun Stukes, 38, of Atlantic City — and the teen all face weapons charges. The men are also accused of employing a juvenile in a crime.

Bail was set at \$250,000 for all five suspects.

Pair of blue whales seen in New England

NH RYE HARBOR — A rare sighting of two blue whales has been made in New England.

Blue Ocean Society for Marine Conversation co-founder Dianna Schulte told WMUR-TV she was working aboard the Granite State off the coast of Rye Harbor, N.H., when she spotted the whales.

The group's executive director, Jen Kennedy, said blue whale sightings are rare in New England. She said a blue whale might be seen every five to 10 years so spotting two whales together is "simply unheard of."

Blue whales are the largest mammals on Earth and can be up to 100 feet long.

Contractor blamed for outage in 911 system

DC WASHINGTON — Officials say a contractor who was trying to turn off an alarm and hit the wrong switch caused a 90-minute outage of the 911 system in the nation's capital.

Alan Etter, spokesman for the Office of Unified Communications, told media outlets that the contractor's mistake

shut down the 911 system between 11 p.m. Saturday and 1 a.m. Sunday.

Officials say the contractor has been banned from all District buildings.

Chris Geldart, director of the city's Homeland Security and Emergency Management Agency, said the loss of power prevented calls from being transferred to a backup center.

Former official jailed for accepting bribes

IL CHICAGO — A former Chicago transportation official was sentenced Monday to 10 years in prison for taking bribes to steer \$100 million in red-light camera contracts to a company in Phoenix.

U.S. District Judge Virginia Kendall sentenced John Bills, 55, in Chicago. Federal prosecutors had asked the judge for at least a 10-year prison sentence.

The former second-in-command at Chicago's Department of Transportation was convicted in January of bribery, conspiracy and extortion.

Bills was accused of accepting envelopes stuffed with cash, along with gifts to help Redflex Traffic Systems obtain contracts in a decadelong scheme.

City to take control of failed gate system

PA PITTSBURGH — Pittsburgh Mayor Bill Peduto said the city will take over inspections and maintenance of a gate system that failed to keep people off an oft-flooded road five years after four people were killed in flash floods there.

Peduto said, "We'll own it from here on out" — referring to the \$450,000 system that PennDOT installed along Washington Boulevard in the

wake of the deadly August 2011 flash floods.

Peduto and his public safety and public works officials held a news conference Monday to announce the change.

The road flooded again Sunday evening during heavy rains. Two vehicles containing four people got stuck, including a 54-year-old woman who had to be rescued. The other three people got out on their own.

Man hurt in hash oil blast; house destroyed

OR MEDFORD — A hash oil explosion sent a man to the hospital and destroyed a house and garage.

The Mail Tribune reported the explosions and fire also damaged two nearby homes.

Greg Kleinberg, of Medford Fire-Rescue, said there were a couple of hundred containers of butane in the garage.

Marijuana plants were found in a room. Butane is used in the process of extracting hash oil from marijuana.

Property records say Jackson County Circuit Judge Ron Grensky owns the property along with some others in Medford. He lives in Jacksonville and could not be reached for comment.

Woman, 79, assaulted and robbed in home

IN INDIANAPOLIS — A 79-year-old woman is recovering after police say someone broke into her home, beat the woman with her walker and stole her TV and purse.

WRTV-TV reported the crime occurred Wednesday night at Nancy Quest's home on Indianapolis' east side. Quest's credit cards were later used at a nearby BP gas station.

From wire reports

On a mission to provide objective reporting
to America's military, wherever they serve.
Read us online at www.stripes.com.

STARS AND STRIPES®

SEC extends trend of powerful openers

Associated Press

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. — With so many high-profile inter-sectional matchups on neutral sites, the Southeastern Conference's opening-week schedule bears a striking resemblance to a bowl lineup.

Alabama faces Southern California in Arlington, Texas. Ole Miss meets Florida State in Orlando, Fla. LSU takes on Wisconsin at Lambeau Field in Green Bay, Wis. Georgia meets North Carolina in Atlanta. The trend continues Sept. 10 when Tennessee plays Virginia Tech at Bristol Motor Speedway in Bristol, Tenn.

And that doesn't even include prestige nonconference games taking place on campus the first two weeks of the season. Auburn hosts Clemson and Texas A&M hosts UCLA on the season's opening weekend. Arkansas visits TCU on Sept. 10.

"Whether it's Clemson or whether it's UCLA, whatever that is and anybody in between, this league's not ducking anybody," Texas A&M coach Kevin Sumlin said. "I think that says a lot about the scheduling that's going on."

The SEC's knack for scheduling these high-profile open-

ers — and winning them — has helped the league make an early case each year that it's the nation's toughest conference. The SEC is criticized for scheduling Football Championship Subdivision programs or low-level Group of Five teams in November, but it doesn't shy away from anyone early.

SEC teams went 5-0 in non-conference games at neutral sites during last season's opening week, which included Alabama starting its national title run by beating Wisconsin in Arlington, Texas. The SEC was 3-0 in neutral-site games during the opening week of 2014. Six of those eight games were against other Power Five teams.

An SEC team hasn't lost a neutral-site game during the opening week of a season since 2013, when Mississippi State fell to Oklahoma State in Houston and Western Kentucky knocked off Kentucky in Nashville.

These games may take place long before the playoff committee releases its rankings, yet they still have an impact.

"Strength of schedule is one of the factors that the committee considers. And the committee evaluates teams based on their full schedules," College

Football Playoff executive director Bill Hancock said in a statement. "Games against top opponents, no matter when they are played, are significant."

The SEC could have a tough time continuing its opening-week success this year.

In recent years, the SEC has benefited from partisan crowds at games that technically took place at neutral sites. That certainly was the case when Texas A&M beat Arizona State in Houston and Tennessee defeated Bowling Green in Nashville last season.

This season, LSU must face Wisconsin at the home of the Green Bay Packers. Ole Miss isn't expecting a friendly reception when it meets Florida State in Orlando.

"I did get a kick out of our AD telling me it's a neutral-site game, and I'd use that in quotes, 'neutral site,'" Ole Miss coach Hugh Freeze said. "I explained to him, anytime you go on the road to a neutral-site game, and you have to use silent cadence, it shouldn't be considered a neutral site."

These high-profile openers allow the SEC to maintain its schedule strength while continuing to play only eight con-

ference games. The Big Ten is joining the Pac-12 and Big 12 in having nine-game conference schedules this year, leaving the SEC and Atlantic Coast Conference as the only Power Five leagues still playing only eight conference games.

Tennessee athletic director Dave Hart, who favors the nine-game conference schedule, said the league hasn't had "a second's worth of discussion" on a possible switch ever since SEC presidents and chancellors voted in 2014 to keep the eight-game schedule.

If only some of these attractive intersectional games could be spread out. Instead, the SEC often has one dull week in November while other Power Five leagues are in the heart of their conference schedules.

Check out the SEC schedule the week of Nov. 19. Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Kentucky and South Carolina are all playing FCS programs. Texas A&M is hosting Texas-San Antonio, LSU faces South Alabama and Georgia meets Louisiana-Lafayette. That week also features Arkansas-Mississippi State, Ole Miss-Vanderbilt and Missouri-Tennessee conference matchups.

Six collegiate games you don't want to miss

Associated Press

If you can only watch six games this college football season, well, you should probably consider changing jobs or something because that is no way to live. If that truly is your plight, though, we're here to help.

Out of the more than 700 FBS regular season games (conference championships not included) scheduled to be played from Aug. 27 (Aug. 26, Australia time) to Dec. 2, these six will have the greatest impact on which teams reach the College Football Playoff.

Oklahoma vs. Houston at NRG Stadium in Houston, Sept. 5: The "neutral site" is about a 10-minute drive from the Cougars' campus, but expect plenty of Sooners support at the home of the NFL's Texans. The stakes are high for

the Sooners, but Oklahoma can slip here and recover to make the playoff. This nonconference game makes the list because of its importance to Houston and the American Athletic Conference. If Tom Herman's team pulls the upset, it could vault the Cougars and by extension the entire AAC into the playoff conversation.

Oklahoma at TCU, Oct. 1: Since the Horned Frogs joined the Big 12 in 2012, every game against Oklahoma has been decided by one score. The Sooners and Frogs have split the last two, with the winner taking home at least a share of a conference title. There will still be a long way to go in the season, and the Big 12 has the feel of a conference that will produce an upset or two from the middle of the pack.

But these are the best two rosters and the winner in Fort Worth has the inside track to being the league's One True Champion.

Clemson at Florida State, Oct. 29: The winner of this game has won the last seven Atlantic Division titles and as Jimbo Fisher and Dabo Swinney have grown their programs into national title contenders, it has become one of the most significant rivalries in the country. In each of the last three seasons, the winner has gone into the postseason with a chance to win the national championship.

Alabama at LSU, Nov. 5: Since the Tigers' 9-6 Game of the Century victory in 2011, the Crimson Tide has won five straight in the series. As Ole Miss can attest, beating Alabama does not guarantee an SEC

West championship. But no SEC West team has won the division in college football during Nick Saban's time at Alabama without beating the Tide.

Stanford at Oregon, Nov. 12: The Ducks (two) and Cardinal (three) have won all the Pac-12 titles since the conference broke into divisions in 2011. The twist last season was Oregon won the head-to-head meeting and probably spoiled Stanford's playoff hopes. The Pac-12 could be looking at another season with a two-loss champion.

Michigan at Ohio State, Nov. 26: The second Harbaugh-Meyer matchup sets up to be the first of many to decide the Big Ten East, and send the winner to Indianapolis looking to win not only a conference title but a spot in the playoff.

Hill steps in for injured Bridgewater

Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS—Minnesota's replacement plan for Teddy Bridgewater has received an emergency activation.

Shaun Hill will be the first remedy.

"I have confidence in him," Vikings coach Mike Zimmer said. "I have confidence in this football team."

Bridgewater's recovery from a badly damaged left knee, sustained during a seemingly harmless drill in practice Tuesday with nobody near him, will be the most important development for the Vikings over the next year and beyond.

The most crucial issue for the team's immediate future will be how well Hill, or whoever else might wind up leading the huddle in the 2016 season, can handle the caretaker role while Bridgewater embarks on an arduous rehab.

Hill has started 34 games over a borderline-nomadic career in the league. None came in the playoffs. As a 15-year veteran, the value of Hill's experience is deeper than the spot

duties he has handled with San Francisco, Detroit, St. Louis and now Minnesota following the injuries that thrust him into action.

Zimmer, at the beginning of training camp when Hill's capability as a backup was being discussed, recalled a scenario from 2015 when Hill was running the offense in spring practice. The timeouts in this particular drill were used up, so Hill was already thinking a step ahead.

"He said, 'Do you want an incompleteness, or should I take a sack in this situation?'" Zimmer said then. "Things like that make me think, too. He has seen so many things. He catches on quick. He understands the offense. And he's a good guy."

Hill is 17-for-25 for 192 yards with no interceptions, or touchdowns, in the preseason. He probably won't play on Thursday when the Vikings host Los Angeles in their final exhibition game. Keeping him healthy is far more important than giving him a few extra snaps to tune up for the opener at Tennessee on Sept. 11.

Hill never threw a pass that counted in a four-year stint with the Vikings, who signed him out of Maryland as an undrafted free agent in 2002. The two kneel-downs he took in the 2005 season finale marked his only official appearance.

He started 16 games over four years with the 49ers because of injuries to Trent Dilfer and Alex Smith. Matthew Stafford went down in 2010, giving Hill a 10-game run in his first of four seasons with the Lions. Sam Bradford was hurt in 2014 during training camp with the Rams, so Hill took his turn in the opener against, fittingly, the Vikings. He started eight games that year before rejoining his original team, going 3-5 to bring his career record to 16-18.

Lacking the arm strength to stretch the field, there's nothing special about Hill and his skills. If there's a reason for hope for Vikings fans, it's that they were second to last in the league last season in passing touchdowns and yards and still won the NFC North with an 11-5 record.

The plan was to strike more of a run-pass balance this year, and Bridgewater was showing strides with the deep throws throughout the preseason. But Adrian Peterson is still in the backfield, and the defense is still stacked.

"We have a good defensive team. Our offensive line is much better. We have good receivers. We have maybe the best running back in the NFL," Zimmer said. "So this is about a team."

Taylor Heinicke, the third-stringer last year, has been out with a severed tendon around his left ankle. He could be back soon and work his way into the mix. Regardless, general manager Rick Spielman will be scrutinizing veteran options the rest of the week.

Matt Flynn, Michael Vick and T.J. Yates are among the free agents. Current backup quarterbacks who could become available, if they're let go this weekend or offered in a trade, include Mike Glennon, Colin Kaepernick, Mark Sanchez, Geno Smith and Brandon Weeden.

Wimbledon runner-up Raonic ousted from US Open

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The cramping became so debilitating, Milos Raonic said, he couldn't grip his racket properly.

The Wimbledon runner-up just last month, and seeded No. 5 at the U.S. Open, Raonic began to feel pain near his left wrist midway through the second set of what would become a stunning 6-7 (4), 7-5, 7-5, 6-1 second-round loss to 120th-ranked American qualifier Ryan Harrison on Wednesday.

Eventually, the problem spread to Raonic's right forearm. Then both thighs. Then his left hip flexor. Afterward, his back seized up when he tried to sling his equipment bag over a shoulder. No way to try to win a tennis match. Or to serve: That's normally his most

effective stroke, yet he double-faulted 15 times.

"It was just catching me all over," Raonic said. "I started getting small [cramps] where I couldn't hold the racket. I couldn't switch grips from one point to the next. There were a few points where I would hold the racket with my left and try to stretch out my right hand in between shots — and that's not going to work."

He was one of a trio of highly seeded players to exit Flushing Meadows on Day 3, although the other departures were less surprising.

No. 3 Garbine Muguruza, the French Open champion, made 38 unforced errors and bowed out 7-5, 6-4 against Anastasija Sevastova at night. All four of Muguruza's U.S. Open appear-

ances have ended in the first or second round. No. 9 Svetlana Kuznetsova, the 2004 champion, took the first four games before losing 6-4, 6-4 to Caroline Wozniacki, who is unseeded but can rely on the muscle memory from two trips to the final in New York.

Later under the lights, the tournament's new, \$150 million retractable roof above Arthur Ashe Stadium was closed during a match for the first time, when there was rain during the second set of Rafael Nadal's 6-0, 7-5, 6-1 victory against Andreas Seppi. With the cover shut, the most noticeable difference was all of the crowd chatter that could be heard during points.

Nadal called the addition of the roof "an unbelievable improvement" at a tournament

that for years has been plagued by rain delays. At the end of Nadal's on-court interview, ESPN reporter Tom Rinaldi asked the 14-time major champion if he would try to hit a ball hard enough to touch the roof. Nadal obliged, but couldn't get the ball far enough, then said with a smile: "Impossible for me."

Raonic was a semifinalist at Wimbledon in 2014 and at the Australian Open this January. Then, while briefly working with John McEnroe, he beat Roger Federer in the semifinals at the All England Club in July to reach his first Grand Slam final.

"I was my own worst enemy today," Raonic said. "I tried the best I could to find my way out of it. My body didn't let me."

Toles' slam rallies Dodgers to DH split

Associated Press

DENVER—Dodgers skipper Dave Roberts had his speech all ready to go — the one he was prepared to deliver after being swept out of Coors Field.

Thanks to Andrew Toles, there was no need.

Toles hit a grand slam with two outs in the ninth inning, helping Los Angeles overcome a late six-run deficit in a 10-8 win over the Colorado Rockies on Wednesday night for a doubleheader split.

Toles didn't think it was going out, either.

"I was amazed. I still am," Toles said. "All I want to do is

contribute."

Has he ever. In his last 10 games, Toles is hitting .579 with three homers.

None bigger than Wednesday, of course.

"He is so calm and cool," Roberts said. "He doesn't know how good some of these pitchers are. Or the ballpark."

"I was preparing my pep talk in the middle innings. To get them up after being swept."

With good reason. It wasn't looking promising. Then again, this is Coors Field, where anything can happen — and often does.

Trailing 8-2, the Dodgers scored three times in the

eighth and added five more in the ninth. Toles capped the final inning with an opposite-field homer off closer Adam Ottavino (0-1) for his first career slam.

Ottavino tried to start the pitch inside, but it drifted into the middle of the plate.

Luis Avilan (1-0) threw a scoreless eighth to earn the win. Kenley Jansen pitched the ninth for his 40th save, getting David Dahl on a called third strike to end it.

The Dodgers began their comeback in the eighth with an RBI double from Yasmani Grandal, an RBI single by Joc Pederson and a sacrifice fly by

Howie Kendrick. Chase Utley nearly brought in more, sending a two-out grounder up the middle with two on, but DJ LeMahieu ranged to his right, snared the ball and threw Utley out by a step to end the threat.

Los Angeles scored once in the ninth on an RBI single from Josh Reddick and then loaded the bases with two outs, setting the stage for Toles.

In the opening game, left-hander Tyler Anderson (5-5) threw 6¹/₃ stellar innings as the Rockies cruised to a 7-0 win for their first home shutout this season.

Yankees overcome 4-run deficit

Associated Press

KANSAS CITY, Mo. — The Yankees appeared to be in sell-off mode at the non-waiver trading deadline, sending away starter Ivan Nova and top relievers Aroldis Chapman and Andrew Miller in what looked like a nod to the future.

Turns out the future may have been a month away.

The Yankees beat the Kansas City Royals 5-4 in 13 innings Wednesday night, their second straight extra-inning win against the reigning World Series champs. It capped a strong August for the Yankees that left them just 2¹/₂ games out of the second AL wild-card spot.

Royals reliever Chris Young (3-9) gave up a single to Didi Gregorius and a double to Starlin Castro to lead off the decisive 13th inning. Matt Strahm came in against Brian McCann for a lefty-lefty matchup, and the New York designated hitter lofted a fly ball to left to score the go-ahead run.

Ben Heller (1-0) pitched a perfect 12th to earn his first major league victory, which Dellin Betances preserved by working around a leadoff walk for his seventh save.

Cubs 6, Pirates 5: Kris Bryant hit his 36th homer and made three solid plays at third base,

helping Jason Hammel and host Chicago top Pittsburgh for a three-game series sweep.

Giants 4, Diamondbacks 2: Matt Moore struck out seven over 5¹/₃ innings for his first career victory at AT&T Park, and San Francisco beat Arizona.

Mets 5, Marlins 2: Kelly Johnson's three-run double in the eighth inning broke a tie and lifted surging host New York.

Astros 4, Athletics 3: Evan Gattis hit an RBI single to cap a three-run rally in the eighth inning keyed by a wild pitch on a strikeout, leading host Houston.

Rangers 14, Mariners 1: Rougned Odor homered twice a day after hitting a game-ending shot and Carlos Gomez connected for a grand slam off Felix Hernandez, sending host Texas past Seattle for a three-game sweep.

Red Sox 8, Rays 6: Hanley Ramirez hit a grand slam, and Aaron Hill later sliced an RBI single to break an eighth-inning tie to help host Boston.

Brewers 3, Cardinals 1: Kirk Nieuwenhuis homered, Matt Garza pitched into the eighth inning and host Milwaukee beat St. Louis to end a six-game losing streak.

Nationals 2, Phillies 1: Jayson Werth homered and Gio

Gonzalez pitched six strong innings to lead Washington to a three-game sweep of host Philadelphia.

Angels 3, Reds 0: Ricky Nolasco pitched a dynamic four-hitter for his fifth career shutout and his first victory for host Los Angeles, leading the Angels to an interleague sweep of Cincinnati.

Indians 8, Twins 4: Corey Kluber struck out a season-high 11 and in his seventh straight victory, helping host Cleveland hand Minnesota its 13th straight loss — one shy of tying the club record.

Blue Jays 5, Orioles 3: Jose Bautista homered on the game's first pitch and Russell Martin went deep four batters later in support of Aaron Sanchez, leading Toronto past host Baltimore.

Tigers 3, White Sox 2: Jacoby Jones doubled twice in his second major league game, then dashed home for the winning run on Tyler Collins' sacrifice fly in the ninth inning to lift host Detroit.

Braves 8, Padres 1: Matt Wisler had a career-high 10 strikeouts in six innings, Gordon Beckham drove in two runs with a pinch-hit bases-loaded double in the sixth and host Atlanta beat San Diego.

Red Sox call up top prospect Moncada

BOSTON — The Boston Red Sox will add hyped prospect Yoan Moncada to the major league roster prior to a game at Oakland on Friday.

The team announced the move Wednesday night. The Cuban infielder signed with Boston for \$31.5 million in February 2015 in a deal that cost the Red Sox \$63 million due to a tax penalty on international amateur free agents.

The 21-year-old Moncada will report from Double-A Portland, where he is hitting .285 with 11 homers and nine stolen bases in 44 games.

In other baseball news:

■ Second baseman Neil Walker will likely opt for season-ending surgery on a herniated disc in his back, Mets manager Terry Collins announced following New York's victory over Miami on Wednesday.

Already without Matt Harvey (thoracic outlet syndrome) for the remainder of the year and with lingering injuries to Noah Syndergaard (bone spur), Steven Matz (shoulder/elbow), Asdrubal Cabrera (knee) and Yoenis Cespedes (quad), losing Walker comes at an inopportune moment. The Mets have won 10 of their last 13 to close to within 1¹/₂ games of St. Louis for the second NL wild card.

— The Associated Press