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GAO: USAF should reassess training plan

BY WYATT OLSON

Stars and Stripes

Maintenance and high deployment rates are among the issues keeping Air Force combat fighter squadrons from meeting annual training requirements, according to a federal audit released Monday.

But the Government Accountability Office says those unmet requirements for the full range of core missions might not reflect current and emerging training needs and threats because the Air Force has not comprehensively assessed the assumptions underlying them, such as “the total annual live-fly sortie requirements by aircraft” and the “criteria for designating aircrews as experienced or inexperienced.”

The GAO said squadrons were able to complete mission-training requirements for ongoing contingency operations such as close air support to ground forces, but had limited ability to complete training for all core missions.

Based on interviews with

wing and squadron commanders, the audit found that the four most common reasons for incomplete training were unavailability of aircraft because of maintenance, high deployment rates, extensive use of aircraft for large exercises and personnel shortages.

Seven squadron commanders told the GAO that in recent years maintenance units for U.S.-based squadrons have been “consistently manned below their authorized levels.” Lack of maintenance personnel has led to shortages of the aircraft needed to meet annual live-fly training requirements.

Frequent deployment has also curtailed core-mission training.

“Certain fighter squadrons have been deploying every 18 months for a six-month period each time,” the audit said. “When they return from deployment, squadrons have 12 months to rebuild proficiency across their full range of core missions before their next six-month deployment. Some squadron commanders told us that this high deployment rate

typically reduces aircrews’ 12-month training schedule by at least 2 months, because they must focus on close air support training in preparation for the next deployment.”

Squadrons are also spending more time playing an “adversary air” role during large-force exercises, such as the multinational Red Flag drills. The squadrons pose as the “enemy” during training sorties.

Air Force officials told the GAO that the demand for adversary aircraft has increased because one of the two squadrons dedicated to adversary role-playing at Nellis Air Force Base was eliminated last year because of budget cuts.

An F-15E squadron commander told the GAO that his squadron had spent three of the first nine months of fiscal year 2016 providing adversary air for exercises. Another squadron commander said involvement as adversary air in a single large-force exercise can take up to two months of training.

Squadrons have also been experiencing personnel

shortages.

“Specifically, with fewer aircrews assigned to a squadron, aircrews are required to take on a larger share of the administrative functions of the squadron, including scheduling training and weapons evaluation,” the audit said.

This problem is exacerbated in squadrons that operate using aircrews from reserve components.

“For example, the two F-22 squadrons in the 1st Fighter Wing are integrated with F-22 aircrews from the 192nd Fighter Wing of the Virginia Air National Guard,” the audit said. “As a result, there are fewer active-duty aircrews in the squadron. However, according to both F-22 squadron commanders, these aircrews are required to perform the administrative duties for the full squadron, because the Air National Guard aircrews are typically available only on the weekends, and their time with the squadron is used for training.”

Some sex-change operations to be provided by DOD

BY COREY DICKSTEIN

Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The Pentagon will provide sex-change operations to some active-duty transgender servicemembers if a military doctor determines that surgery is required to treat the individual’s gender dysphoria, a Defense Department spokesman said Tuesday.

The department will begin providing transgender servicemembers on active duty all “medically necessary” treatment starting Oct. 1, said Air Force Maj. Ben Sakrisson, the

Pentagon spokesman.

Treatment could include behavioral health care, hormone therapy and, in some cases, gender reassignment surgery. Servicemembers must be diagnosed as stable in their preferred gender for 18 months before they can receive treatment.

“The Secretary of Defense has made clear that servicemembers with a diagnosis from a military medical provider indicating that gender transition is medically necessary will be provided medical care and treatment for the diagnosed

medical condition,” Sakrisson said.

Defense Secretary Ash Carter on June 30 repealed the long-standing ban on transgender men and women serving openly in the U.S. military, but he gave the services one year to determine and implement many of the changes that would be necessary for transgender servicemembers — ranging from policies on communal shower facilities to physical fitness standards.

It remained unclear at the time whether the Pentagon would consider gender-reas-

signment surgery “medically necessary,” or an elective, cosmetic surgery, a defense official said. The Defense Department will not pay for any such surgeries not required for medical reasons.

Transgender servicemembers who are approved for sex-change surgery will be treated at either a military hospital or a private hospital through Tri-care, if there is not a qualified provider at the military facility, Sakrisson said. Surgeries, and all other care, will be funded through the Defense Health Program appropriation.

Electrical problem still plagues USS Ford

BY HUGH LESSIG
(Newport News, Va.) Daily Press

Leading national experts have been called to assess a persistent electrical problem on the aircraft carrier Gerald R. Ford, and the Navy needs to work through this and other issues before the ship is delivered.

This summer, the Navy announced the Ford could be delivered as early as November, 14 months beyond the original date. However, the power-generation problem that surfaced months ago remains a concern, according to a memo from Navy Secretary Ray Mabus.

Now the Navy is not specifying a date for delivery.

Mabus said the problem “must be addressed prior to ship’s delivery” and was “likely due to a manufacturing defect.” The memo was first reported by Defense News, which said it wasn’t clear if the problem could be traced to the component’s main supplier or a sub-system manufacturer.

The goal is getting the ship to sea as soon

as possible, said Capt. Thurraya Kent, a Navy spokeswoman.

“The nation’s leading experts on shipboard power generation systems are working (on a) resolution of these issues with a priority on safe, reliable system performance while balancing cost and schedule considerations,” the Mabus memo states.

The Ford is the first of a new carrier class, packed with new technology. Built by Newport News Shipbuilding, a division of Huntington Ingalls Industries, its construction is essentially complete.

However, developing, testing and integrating the new components has cost time and money. Besides being behind schedule, the ship’s \$12.9 billion price tag is more than 20 percent over earlier estimates.

The problem described by Mabus gets to the heart of Ford’s capabilities: its ability to generate electricity to power the ship’s systems.

His Aug. 31 memo was sent to Frank Kendall, a Defense Department undersecretary and lead weapons buyer. It responded to

Kendall’s plan to initiate a 60-day independent review of the Ford program, examining the electrical problem and other issues.

The Daily Press obtained a copy of the Mabus memo Monday.

Mabus said he understands the need for oversight, but he questioned the timing of Kendall’s probe.

An electrical problem surfaced on the night of June 12, when personnel detected a burning smell on the ship. It was first reported to the Daily Press as coming from an electrical cable connection. A second problem was detected some weeks later.

Kent said in an email Monday that the Ford experienced “two main turbine generator issues” during the last several months. It did not affect the ship’s nuclear reactor plant.

The Mabus memo addresses four other areas of concern on Ford: the electromagnetic catapult that launches aircraft from the flight deck, the advanced arresting gear that allows aircraft to land, the dual band radar systems and advanced weapons elevators.

Report: Young, male troops often don’t vote

BY NANCY MONTGOMERY
Stars and Stripes

VICENZA, Italy — Military voters can vote early. They can also vote often. Yet many don’t vote at all.

A variety of factors, including age, gender, education, marital status, mobility and complexity of the voting process all influence voting behavior, experts say, and tend to make those serving their country — particularly young, enlisted men posted overseas — among the least likely to vote.

“Historically, male and younger voters participate at lower rates than female and older voters, which can drive down the overall voter participation rates of the military,” which is predominantly male and younger, according to a 2014 report to Congress by the Federal Voting Assistance Program.

The program, part of the Defense Department, is tasked with providing troops, their eligible family members and overseas citizens with knowledge and tools to vote, no matter

where they’re stationed. It also conducts post-election surveys of active-duty servicemembers.

“Research shows that the military and civilian populations are significantly dissimilar regarding two additional characteristics,” the report said: “education and mobility.”

Older people and those who feel a part of their community “become acculturated” to voting, said Michael McDonald, an associate professor of political science at the University of Florida who is an expert on voter research. They also start “rooting for their own team.”

Servicemembers, however, may not feel connected to their communities; they move frequently. Some 75 percent are eligible to vote absentee because they’re stationed away from their voting district in the U.S. or overseas.

The main determinants for whether a person votes are interest in the election, conviction that the voter’s choice matters and “if they see an important difference between the candidates and their policies,” Mc-

Donald said.

In 2012, 52 percent of active-duty military members voted, according to the FVAP, compared with 58 percent of eligible U.S. civilians counted by the United States Election Project.

In the 2014 midterm elections, 21 percent of troops voted, and just 14 percent of unmarried troops voted, according to the FVAP. That compared with 36 percent of eligible civilian voters. Midterm elections historically draw fewer voters.

The rate of military voting in the 2008 election is unclear because updated analyses since that ballot make comparisons difficult, FVAP said. But according to national data, turnout among young voters in 2008, when Obama was running for his first term against John McCain, was significantly higher than in 2012.

A 2014 survey indicated that 67 percent of military personnel were not confident that their ballot would be counted during the election.

Whatever the voting rate, experts believe that the some-

times confusing process of voting absentee, particularly when overseas, which lengthens mail delivery times, lowers rates for military and overseas voters.

According to an FVAP survey, 12 percent of troops said that they hadn’t voted in 2012 because the process was too complicated or that they’d started but couldn’t complete it. Four percent said their ballot arrived in the mail too late, and 18 percent said their ballot never arrived.

Nearly 15 percent of military absentee ballots were deemed undeliverable as addressed in 2012. But that was down from almost 50 percent in 2010, according to FVAP.

To try to make voting easier and more predictable, officials have redesigned websites and how-to guides. They’ve also updated the use of a Federal Post Card Application to register and request a ballot, as well as an emergency write-in ballot.

Both forms are available online at sites such as FVAP.gov or overseasvotefoundation.org.

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New bomber name is a nod to past

By TARA COPP
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The name of America's future stealth bomber, the B-21 "Raider," honors the legacy of World War II's Doolittle Raid, one of the most innovative strategic missions in Air Force history, service Secretary Deborah Lee James announced Monday.

The name was revealed at the end of a video showcasing the Air Force's strategic bombing past that kicked off the annual Air Force Association meeting in Washington. As part of the announcement, James introduced retired Lt. Col. Richard E. Cole, the last living airman of the 1942 Doolittle Raid, the United States' first strike against Japanese mainland targets in the war.

"I am very humbled to be here representing Gen. [Jimmy] Doolittle and the Raiders at the naming of the B-21 Raider," said Cole, who is 101 years old. "And wish they were here. We are deeply honored."

In the 1942 raid, the then-U.S. Army Air Forces adapted its B-25 Mitchell bomber to be light enough and fly far enough to strike Japan as an important response to the Pearl Harbor attack.

James also recognized two of the three airmen who entered the winning name in a contest the Air Force held for the bomber: Lt. Col. Jaime Hernandez, with the 337th test and evaluation squadron at Dyess Air Force Base in Texas, and Tech. Sgt. Derek White, with the 175th civil engineering squadron in Maryland.

The B-21 Raider, a next-generation stealth bomber, will look like the current B-2 Spirit stealth bomber in many ways. However, the B-21 will have better propulsion and stealth abilities to stay ahead of rapidly modernizing Russian and Chinese forces. The B-21 is not expected to be in service until the mid-2020s.

N. Korea: Test of powerful new rocket engine a success

By KIM GAMEL
Stars and Stripes

SEOUL, South Korea — North Korea said Tuesday it has "successfully" tested a powerful new rocket engine and ordered preparations to launch a satellite, signaling it is determined to advance its missile program despite threats of new sanctions.

The claim, which came more than two weeks after the North conducted its fifth underground nuclear test, raised concerns that Pyongyang is preparing for another long-range rocket launch.

North Korean leader Kim Jong Un supervised the ground test, according to the state-run Korean Central News Agency. It did not give the date of the test, as is customary.

The ruling party's official newspaper, Rodong Sinmun, published photos purporting to show Kim at the Sohae Space Center test site, smiling as officials around him applaud, in Tuesday's edition.

The U.S. and its allies have been pressing for strong new measures after the Sept. 9 atomic blast — the largest since the North began the tests in 2006

— this week on the sidelines of the U.N. General Assembly.

President Barack Obama discussed the issue with Chinese Premier Li Keqiang on Monday on the sidelines of the assembly.

Both leaders condemned the nuclear test and agreed to strengthen cooperation in the Security Council as well as law enforcement channels on North Korea, the White House said in a statement.

China has blocked efforts to punish its communist ally in the past. Beijing signed onto the latest round of sanctions imposed in March but has been accused of lagging on implementation.

Commercial satellite imagery from Saturday showed preparations for the engine test, according to the 38 North blog that monitors activities in North Korea. Those included a heavy lift crane at the test site, positioning of the rail-mounted environmental shelter midway up the approach ramp and several vehicles at the VIP observation area.

"This test represents an anticipated and significant step in the continued development of larger, more advanced space launch vehicles," said the

website, which is run by the U.S.-Korea Institute at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies.

Kim ordered officials, scientists and technicians to round out preparations for launching a satellite as soon as possible, according to KCNA. He also told them to focus on developing satellites for different uses and "to turn our country into a possessor of geostationary satellites in a couple of years to come."

South Korea's military said further analysis was needed, but it appeared the North had conducted a performance test of a new type of high-thrust engine that can be used for long-range missiles.

"We can see its thrust has been improved based on North Korea's claim," said Jeon Haggyu, a spokesman for the South Korean Joint Chiefs of Staff.

He said the military will be monitoring the situation closely amid speculation that North Korea is gearing up to launch another long-range missile to mark the founding day of its ruling Workers' Party on Oct. 10.

Pentagon probes its own airstrike in Syria

By COREY DICKSTEIN
Stars and Stripes

WASHINGTON — The U.S. military watched an armed group in eastern Syria for at least two days before launching an airstrike on Saturday that was halted after Russia reported the attack hit Syrian regime forces, a U.S. Central Command spokesman said Tuesday.

The Pentagon has launched a formal investigation into the incident to determine who was attacked near Deir al-Zour, Air Force Col. John Thomas told reporters at the Pentagon.

"We did take a couple of days to look at it, to develop the target, and then the decision was made ... that it was a good target after looking at all the intelligence and considering that," Thomas said. "The decision was not made on the spur of the moment."

It was not immediately clear Tuesday how long the investigation would take. Thomas said lessons learned from the investigation would be added to the coalition's future planning and operations.

The Russian Defense Ministry blamed the strike for killing 62 Syrians.

Thomas said coalition aircraft, including American jets, hit the target with "a good number of strikes" for about 30 to 50 minutes before the Russian military informed the coalition that it was bombing Syrian military. The assault was immediately called off after the call from the Russians, Thomas said.

The coalition regularly communicates with the Russian military to avoid mishaps in the air over Syria, but the U.S. and Russia have no formal military relationship and do not work together on any operations.

Jolie files for divorce from Pitt

Associated Press

Brangelina is no more. Angelina Jolie Pitt has filed for divorce from Brad Pitt, bringing an end to one of the world's most star-studded, tabloid headline-generating romances.

An attorney for Jolie Pitt, Robert Offer, said Tuesday in a statement that she has filed for the dissolution of the marriage. Offer said the decision to divorce was made "for the health of the family."

Offer refused to answer questions about the divorce.

The couple has six children together: Maddox, Pax, Zahara, Shiloh, and twins Knox and Vivienne.

Though together for 12 years, Pitt and Jolie Pitt only wed in August 2014.

This is the second marriage for Pitt, who previously wed Jennifer Aniston. It's the third for Jolie Pitt, who was previously married to Billy Bob Thornton and Jonny Lee Miller.

Though their initial romance — begun after the pair starred together in 2005's "Mr. and Mrs. Smith" — sparked an ava-

lanche of tabloid interest, Jolie Pitt and Pitt settled into their own unique kind of globe-trotting domesticity.

The pair adopted children from Cambodia, Vietnam and Ethiopia. And they sought to direct the glare of their celebrity toward other causes. Jolie Pitt, a goodwill ambassador for the United Nations, became an outspoken voice for refugees and various causes in Africa.

Jolie Pitt also launched herself as a film director. Last year, the couple starred together in her "By the Sea," playing

a glamorous couple vacationing in France while their marriage was on the rocks. It made just \$538,000 at the box office.

In a 2014 interview, Jolie Pitt said playing a couple with marital problems was cathartic.

"It almost makes you get past those issues because you can laugh at them," Jolie Pitt said. "You do a film about bad marriage and you witness that behavior. You study it, you let it out, you attack each other and then you just want to hold each other and make sure you never behave that way."

Trump son's Skittles refugee tweet attacked

Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Donald Trump Jr. has posted a message on Twitter likening Syrian refugees to a bowl of poisoned Skittles.

Seeking to promote his father's presidential campaign, the younger Trump posted a tweet featuring a bowl of the candy Skittles with a warning.

"If I had a bowl of skittles and I told you just three would kill you, would you take a handful?" said the tweet on the verified @DonaldTrumpJr handle.

"That's our Syrian refugee problem," said the post, which caused a stir and negative tweets on the internet.

Trump Jr.'s tweet said, "This image says it all. Let's end the politically correct agenda that doesn't put America first."

His father has advocated sharply restraining immigration and has accused opponent Hillary Clinton of advocating acceptance of tens of thousands of refugees.

Skittles parent company Wm. Wrigley Chewing Gum Co. distanced itself from the tweet with a terse response.

"Skittles are candy. Refugees are people. We don't feel it's an appropriate analogy," Vice President of Corporate Affairs Denise Young said in the state-

ment. "We will respectfully refrain from further commentary as anything we say could be misinterpreted as marketing."

Trump Jr.'s tweet repeats an analogy that has been on the internet for years, using M&Ms and other foods, and targeting a variety of groups. When former Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee was running for the Republican presidential nomination last year, he used peanuts to warn about the risk of admitting refugees. In a Nov. 17 interview on MSNBC, he asked, if there was a five-pound bag of peanuts and "there were about 10 peanuts that were deadly poisonous, would you feed them to your kids? The answer is no."

Trump Jr.'s tweet came as world leaders meeting at the United Nations on Monday approved a declaration aimed at providing a more coordinated and humane response to the global refugee crisis. During the campaign Trump has repeatedly called for a moratorium on accepting Syrian refugees. This is part of a policy on immigrants that has ranged from an outright ban on foreign Muslim immigrants entering the U.S. "until we know what the hell is going on" to "extreme" vetting and an ideological test for would-be immigrants from regions plagued by extremism.

Clinton: Trump rhetoric fuels terrorist groups

Associated Press

ESTERO, Fla. — Hillary Clinton is accusing Donald Trump of giving "aid and comfort" to Islamic terrorists, declaring his anti-Muslim rhetoric helps the Islamic State group and other militants recruit new fighters. Trump is insisting the U.S. should "use whatever lawful methods are available" to get information from the Afghan immigrant arrested in this weekend's bombings.

As Trump supporters at a packed rally in Florida shouted "Hang him!" the Republican presidential candidate mocked the fact that Ahmad Khan Rahami, 28, a U.S. citizen originally from Afghanistan, would receive quality medical care and legal representation.

"We must deliver a just and very harsh punishment to these people," he said. "These are enemies, these are combatants and we have to be tough, we have to be strong."

Both candidates moved swiftly to capitalize on investigations into a weekend of violent attacks — bombings in New York and New Jersey and stabbings at a Minnesota mall — casting themselves as most qualified to combat terrorism at home and abroad. Clinton touted her national security credentials at a hastily arranged news con-

ference outside her campaign plane, accusing Trump of using the incidents to make "some kind of demagogic point."

Clinton and her team see her experience and what they say is her steady judgment as key selling points for her candidacy. On the campaign trail, she frequently invokes her role in the 2011 raid that killed Osama bin Laden, describing to voters the tense atmosphere in the White House alongside President Barack Obama at that moment.

While much of the foreign policy establishment has rallied around Clinton, Trump's anti-immigrant rhetoric, promises to close U.S. borders and vows to aggressively profile potential terrorists have fueled his presidential bid.

On Monday, he called for tougher policing, including profiling foreigners who look like they could have connections to terrorism or certain Middle Eastern nations.

Pointing to her Monday morning comment that Trump's words give "aid and comfort" to Islamic extremists, his campaign said Clinton was accusing him of treason, going beyond the bounds of acceptable campaigning and trying to change the subject from her own failures.

AMERICAN ROUNDUP

Robber waits in line to appear like customer

PA BETHEL PARK—Police are searching for a robber who waited patiently in line and then handed a clerk a note saying he wanted to appear to be a normal customer while stealing painkillers from a pharmacy in the Pittsburgh suburbs.

Police in Bethel Park said the man who robbed the Walgreens there at about 8 p.m. Sunday used a note saying, "Make me look like a regular customer and don't make me jump the counter." The note also asked for specific, name-brand prescription drugs.

Police said the man didn't show a weapon, and they don't know if he had one.

Defendant says judge biased against drinkers

UT SALT LAKE CITY — A Utah man whose murder conviction in his wife's death was overturned said the judge's comments about alcohol are among the indications he's biased and should be removed before a new trial.

Defense attorneys say in court documents that Judge Samuel McVey pointed to Conrad Truman's drinking as the most significant danger of potential release when he refused to lower Truman's bail.

Attorneys argue McVey has shown a definite bias against someone who uses alcohol.

Truman and his wife were drinking the night of her death, but he's maintained his innocence.

While they say Truman is grateful the judge overturned his conviction, lawyers argue McVey has often given prosecutors the benefit of the doubt and downplayed defense arguments.

100 pot plants seized after burglary report

NY CAMILLUS — Officials say police have seized 100 marijuana plants and some growing equipment while responding to a report of a possible burglary of a shed in the backyard of a central New York home.

The Syracuse Post-Standard reported that Capt. Steve Rotunno said a neighbor called police last week when something appeared "suspicious" at the property in the Onondaga County village of Camillus.

Officers found a shed with the doors open and items out of place. Rotunno said they found evidence of a marijuana growing operation and later found a sophisticated operation within the residence.

Nicholas Fretwell has been arrested and faces drug-related charges.

Firefighter saves man trapped in burning car

CT NORTH HAVEN — State police said a volunteer firefighter from South Windsor was in the right place at the right time when he was able to rescue a man trapped inside a burning vehicle in North Haven.

The volunteer was driving along state Route 15 at about 6:30 a.m. Sunday when he saw the flaming car on the shoulder near Exit 63.

State police said Sandeep Ahuja struck a wire guardrail along the highway and crashed into a tree, which ignited his vehicle. Ahuja was freed before the car became fully engulfed.

With Ahuja's passenger still trapped inside, the volunteer firefighter used a tire jack to break the window and pulled the man to safety.

Ahuja and his passenger were treated at Yale-New Haven Hospital for injuries not believed to be life-threatening.

Man pursued by police drives directly to jail

TX SAN ANTONIO — San Antonio police said a driver being pursued by officers refused to pull over and instead drove himself directly to jail.

When he arrived there, authorities said, he got out and tried to run up the stairs to the jail.

Police said the incident began Sunday night with a call for officers to investigate a domestic dispute, and when they arrived at the residence, the man already had left. They had a description of his car, and patrol officers spotted him and tried to pull him over. That's when he began his drive to the jail.

Authorities said the man, whose name hasn't been released, had an outstanding warrant for driving while intoxicated. He now faces additional charges for refusing to pull over his vehicle.

Young boy found alone roaming on town street

SC GASTON — A little boy was found wandering alone on a street in Gaston.

Media outlets report that according to the Lexington County Sheriff's Department, deputies responded at about 5:20 p.m. Saturday to a report of a small child who had wandered from his home. The boy was wearing a diaper and a T-shirt.

Deputies said the child was placed into emergency protective custody.

The boy's parents were located Sunday morning as deputies

canvassed the neighborhood. However, it isn't clear whether the child was returned to their custody or if any charges will be filed.

Deputies searching for owner of 600-pound hog

FL GAINESVILLE — Deputies in Florida are searching for the owner of a 600-pound hog that was found roaming around.

Local news organizations reported that Alachua County deputies found the domestic hog Sunday after getting reports of the animal running at large.

Deputies caught the hog using a rope and took it to the Alachua County Sheriff's Office Livestock Impound.

The sheriff's office said in a news release that the 600-pound Hampshire hog appeared to be in good health. The animal will be put up for auction if its owner doesn't claim it.

Farmer opts for Jimmy Fallon corn maze design

ID MERIDIAN — An Idaho farmer has shunned 2016 corn maze trends and opted instead for an image of comedian Jimmy Fallon.

The Capital Press reported that Meridian farmer Jim Lowe said he chose the theme because he was looking for something lighthearted and playful. Fallon is a former star of "Saturday Night Live" and the current host of "The Tonight Show."

Lowe owns The Farmstead Corn Maze & Pumpkin Festival and has previously designed corn mazes featuring Abraham Lincoln, a bumblebee and the Statue of Liberty.

From wire reports

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After clinching title, Cubs at loose ends

Associated Press

CHICAGO — While a bunch of teams are fighting for playoff spots all over baseball, the Chicago Cubs are feeling their way through rare territory.

The Cubs clinched the NL Central title a full three weeks before their first playoff game, giving the organization plenty of time to rest players and analyze possible postseason opponents, but also making for a tricky stretch when it comes to staying sharp when there isn't as much at stake.

After the Cubs dropped three of four against the Brewers last weekend, manager Joe Maddon met with his hitters before Monday night's 5-2 victory over Cincinnati and talked to them about making the most of the final part of the season.

"It's unusual being in this position like we are right now," Maddon said after the meeting. "So you've got two weeks of baseball, major league baseball, left in September, so let's work on some stuff. Let's work

on things that we need to work on individually or as a group. Like I said, not unlike a spring training situation, while within the context we're just going out there playing the same game, we're trying to win this game."

The Cubs' win over the Reds and the Nationals' loss at Miami made it a seven-game lead for Chicago over Washington in the race for home-field advantage throughout the NL playoffs. The Mets, Cardinals and Giants are fighting for the two wild cards, making one of them the likely division series opponent for Maddon & Co.

"I probably will watch Washington more than anything right now," Maddon said. "That's the one that we're shooting for, is to have the best record."

While the wild cards likely will go down to the final few days of the season, the Cubs will have organizational meetings Tuesday and Wednesday to discuss possible playoff matchups and how they might line up for each series. They have scouts watching each po-

tential postseason opponent.

"Each team presents its own set of challenges and might have roster implications one way or another, too," president of baseball operations Theo Epstein said.

The Cubs also are planning for their four-day break between the end of the regular season and their playoff opener on Oct. 7, which Maddon also covered in his meeting with the hitters.

"That's a long time, so we have to really get our minds right over the next couple, three weeks to really be prepared properly for that first game," Maddon said, "and I wanted it to start today."

Epstein said the Cubs are considering having a simulated game during the four-day break before Game 1 of the Division Series, providing a chance for the starters and relievers to get some work in and for the hitters to see live pitching.

The 42-year-old Epstein has never been in a situation like this before, with the team

clinching so early, but said he likes it compared to the alternative.

"I think it's what you make of it," he said. "To me, it's a lot better than having to push your guys extra hard and put more innings on guys' arms and not giving them enough rest and then maybe waking up and being worn down."

Chicago had to wait until Sept. 25 to clinch its 2015 wild card, and then made it all the way to the NL Championship Series before it was swept by New York.

The early clinch also allows the Cubs to go as slow as they want with any players with health issues. Maddon said outfielder Jorge Soler, who left Friday's 5-4 victory over the Brewers with tightness on his right side, could be available to pinch hit on Tuesday. Key reliever Pedro Strop, who is coming back from knee and groin injuries, is on track to pitch in a simulated game soon.

Rookie Wentz comes through again for Eagles

Associated Press

CHICAGO — Carson Wentz followed up an impressive NFL debut with another solid performance, throwing for 190 yards and a touchdown, and the Philadelphia Eagles beat the Chicago Bears 29-14 on Monday night.

Wentz showed plenty of poise, just as he did in his debut against Cleveland.

Playing in the city where he was drafted by the Eagles with the No. 2 overall pick, he completed 21 of 34 passes and played turnover-free ball in his second straight game despite absorbing several big hits.

"He took care of the football and made some nice, tough throws. It wasn't perfect. But at the same time, he's seeing things really well," Eagles coach Doug Pederson said.

Throughout the week, I just

realized I'm going back to kind of where my life changed so to speak," Wentz said. "It was cool to be back here, especially to come out here with the win."

Ryan Mathews ran for two scores, and the Eagles (2-0) scored a pair of touchdowns late in the third quarter to break open a two-point game.

While Philadelphia was pulling away, Chicago quarterback Jay Cutler walked to the locker room with a right thumb injury and did not return.

That was the biggest blow for the Bears (0-2), who lost several players and fell again after opening with a loss at Houston. It's not the sort of start they envisioned in their second year under coach John Fox after finishing last in the NFC North. But they continued to struggle at home, where they were 1-7 a year ago.

Cutler, who completed 12 of

17 passes for 157 yards, walked to the locker room following an interception by Nigel Bradham late in the third quarter. Cutler was seen having his right hand examined on the sideline early in the third following a strip-sack by Destiny Vaeao, though he said it happened sometime earlier in the game. That play just aggravated it.

Brian Hoyer took over for Cutler and was 9-for-12 for 78 yards.

Heated exchange: Along with the injury, Cutler got an earful from injured Bears linebacker Pernell McPhee. Cameras caught the two having a heated exchange following the interception.

"He's a passionate guy," Cutler said. "Everybody's got a lot vested into this. He does as well. No one likes to lose. No one likes to lose in that type of fashion. He's upset, I'm upset.

Everyone in that locker room is upset right now."

Pulling away: The Eagles were leading 9-7 late in the third when Mathews bounced off the line and spun outside before lunging in for a 3-yard touchdown.

With Cutler throwing off his back foot on the next play from scrimmage Bradham intercepted a pass apparently intended for Alshon Jeffery, who was about 10 yards behind him, at the 30 and returned it to the 2.

Wentz then hit Trey Burton with a touchdown pass to make it 22-7 with four seconds left.

Neat pass: Cutler set up the game's first touchdown when he spun to his left and unloaded a 49-yard heave to Jeffery that put the ball on the 5 in the opening minute of the second quarter. Langford ran it in from the 1, giving Chicago a 7-3 lead.

Teammates pay tribute to CB Jackson

Associated Press

NEW YORK — The colors of Brandon Jackson's short life filled the church and helped tell his tale of "promise and purpose."

The bright green and gold jerseys on the dozens of high school football players, just like the ones Jackson used to wear. The NYPD blue on the colleagues of his mother, Morna Davis, a police detective. The white and gray uniforms worn by 10 bus-loads of U.S. Military Academy cadets who made the trip from West Point to say goodbye to a teammate, classmate and brother.

The framed black jersey with the dark gold 28, the number Jackson wore while quickly becoming one of the Black Knights' best players in a college football career that lasted just 14 games.

Hundreds of people came together Monday at a funeral service for Jackson, the sophomore cornerback killed in a one-car accident during the early morning hours of Sept. 11 at the age of 20.

He was remembered for his uplifting smile and infectious confidence. For rapping 50 Cent lyrics on the school bus and pushing teammates to lift more weight than even coaches required of them. For an ac-

cent that mixed Queens with a splash of Savannah, Ga. For never giving his mom a reason to "raise her hand to him." And for leaving Davis a new extended family.

"You will never have to worry years from now if this group of men will remember your son," Academy superintendent Lt. Gen Robert L. Caslen said to Davis, an Iraq War veteran of the Army Reserves. "You may have lost Brandon, but you have gained about 120 new sons. And about 4,000 cadets."

Photos of Jackson were displayed on two large video boards at the front of The Greater Allen A.M.E. Cathedral in the Jamaica section of Queens. They told the story "of a life barely 20 years lived, and it was jam packed," the Rev. Alfonso Wyatt said during a rousing and rhythmic eulogy.

The accident that killed Jackson occurred about 20 miles south of the West Point campus in Westchester County, according to police and the Academy. The crash, which remains under investigation, happened several hours after Army had defeated Rice in the Black Knights' home opener at Michie Stadium.

The team returned to the practice field a few days later and last Saturday improved to 3-0 for the first time since 1996

with a 66-14 victory at UTEP.

"Through you, his spirit was on the field," Jackson's uncle, Fitzgerald Miller, told his teammates.

The Black Knights play at Buffalo on Saturday.

When Davis was deployed, Jackson was sent to live with his grandparents in Savannah. It is in Georgia where he will be buried, Miller said.

Out of loyalty to his mother, Jackson developed a love for Army football.

Jackson mostly grew up in the St. Albans neighborhood of Queens and attended Holy Cross High School, a bus ride away in Flushing. The school has a tradition of playing some of the best football in the city. Recent graduates include former Stanford receiver Devon Cajuste and Carolina Panthers safety Dean Marlowe.

Longtime former Holy Cross coach Tom Pugh, who retired after the 2014 season, said he went to West Point to watch Jackson in the Army spring game this year. Pugh said he told Jackson the old coach expected his former player to make an interception during the intrasquad scrimmage.

"And he started laughing," Pugh said. "He goes, 'Coach, this is Army. We don't throw the ball.'"

"And guess what, he got a

pick in the spring game. He pointed up to the seats where I was. He was special. Special young man."

Jackson earned a starting job as a freshman and had 68 career tackles and three interceptions.

"Brandon embodied everything it means to be part of this brotherhood," Army linebacker and co-captain Andrew King said. "Because of him, we're not afraid of failure."

Monken said Jackson had a disarming smile.

Even after a mistake on the field, "I couldn't stay mad at him," Monken said.

The program mourners received at the church had printed on the front over a photo of Jackson: "Celebration of a Life Full of Promise and Purpose." A two-hour viewing preceded the service, the casket half open to display Jackson in cadet's full dress and white cap. The service was about two hours and ended with Wyatt imploring those gathered to "keeping on marching."

"March through the tears. March through the fears. March through your pain. Keep on marching," he said to applause and replies of "Amen."

USC promotes frosh Darnold to starting QB

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — Freshman Sam Darnold will be Southern California's starting quarterback on Friday night at Utah, replacing Max Browne after just three games.

Coach Clay Helton made the announcement Monday after practice for USC (1-2).

Browne is 55-for-87 for 474 yards with two touchdown passes and two interceptions in his first three games as the starter for the Trojans, who are coming off a 27-10 loss at Stanford.

The redshirt junior waited three years behind Cody Kessler before beating out Darnold for the starting job in training camp this summer, a decision Helton said

he does not regret.

But Helton wants to "see a spark" after scoring only one touchdown in losses to Alabama and Stanford. The Trojans are in their worst scoring drought against Power 5 opposition since being held to two offensive touchdowns in losses to California and Arizona State in 1999.

"I hope Sam can bring that," Helton said. "I'm confident in it after watching three games of watching him perform, seeing him in the arena and seeing what he can do."

Helton said he first considered making a change on the flight back home from the Bay Area and spent Sunday reviewing game film. Helton told Browne and Darnold of the move Sunday night and informed the team Monday morning.

"He is not the reason we are 1-2. He is not the scapegoat here," Helton said of Browne. "The way he has competed and performed was more than honorable."

Darnold has played occasionally this season, going 14-for-22 for 136 yards and two touchdowns with one interception. His athleticism provides a counterpoint to Browne, and that mobility will be needed against the Utes' pass rush, given the struggles of a USC offensive line that was touted as one of the nation's best coming into this season.

Darnold also fits the spread elements of the USC offense, whereas Browne's best work against the Cardinal came working under center in a more pro-style system.

Dodgers top Giants after scuffle

Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Giants-Dodgers rivalry is still nasty.

Adrian Gonzalez hit a game-winning double in the bottom of the ninth inning, and Los Angeles rallied past San Francisco for a 2-1 victory Monday night that increased its NL West lead to six games.

“It was awesome,” Dodgers ace Clayton Kershaw said. “A really fun team win and a pretty important one, too.”

Two innings after a shoving match broke out when tempers flared between Madison Bumgarner and Yasiel Puig again, the Dodgers’ comeback in the ninth began with pinch-hitter Andrew Toles’ leadoff single.

Corey Seager singled past diving second baseman Joe Panik on a two-strike pitch from Javier Lopez (1-3), allowing the speedy Toles to reach third.

Justin Turner’s two-strike single tied the game, and Gonzalez followed with a drive to deep right field that eluded Hunter Pence.

“That’s what we love about our team — we’re never out of games,” Turner said.

Joe Blanton (6-2) won in relief after the latest bullpen flop by the struggling Giants, which followed a tense pitchers’ duel between Bumgarner and Kershaw.

Both benches and bullpens emptied during the seventh-inning scuffle.

Bumgarner fielded a slow tapper by Puig along the first base line and threw him out to end the inning. The left-hander punched his glove emphatically and said something that didn’t appear to be very cordial.

“That wasn’t Puig’s fault,” Kershaw said. “We all know Bum is pretty intense out there. He definitely stirred the fire on that one and he deserved it.”

Puig glared back and responded, and soon both teams massed near first base before the dustup ended without any punches.

“He asked me, ‘Why you looking at me?’” Puig said through a translator. “I asked him why he was looking at me.”

In the second, Puig doubled for the lone hit given up by Bumgarner.

“Maybe because it was his only hit and he was angry,” Puig said. “Every time I face him it seems like we have those prob-

lems. We’re tired of it. It definitely motivates us and seems to have a distraction in their head.”

Bumgarner appeared to be annoyed after the game.

“I didn’t hear what was going on,” he said. “I just got him out and he tried to stare me down or something. That’s what it looked like to me.”

Bumgarner and Puig have clashed in the past, leading Turner to joke, “Those two like each other a lot.”

Giants manager Bruce Bochy had his back turned and was retreating down the dugout steps when the fracas broke out.

“They’re not going to go out to dinner,” he said. “It’s been going on for a while, so it doesn’t surprise me anymore.”

The theatrics overshadowed a scintillating matchup between two of the game’s top left-handers.

Bumgarner allowed one hit over seven scoreless innings. He struck out 10, walked none and retired his final 10 batters.

Kershaw gave up an unearned run and three hits in six innings.

Estrada helps Jays tie O’s for wild card

Associated Press

SEATTLE — After weeks of mostly poor performances, Marco Estrada once again flirted with a no-hitter for Toronto.

And just when the Blue Jays needed that quality of a performance.

Estrada took a no-hitter into the seventh inning, Edwin Encarnacion hit his 41st home run and the Blue Jays beat the Seattle Mariners 3-2 on Monday night in the opener of a critical three-game series.

Estrada (9-9) had allowed only two walks before Robinson Cano led off the seventh with a line drive up the middle on a 2-1 pitch. Cano and Nelson Cruz walked in the fourth — an inning that ended on Kevin Pillar’s sliding catch to save a run — but Estrada otherwise kept the Mariners off the bases before Cano’s single.

Estrada’s outing was exactly what the slumping Blue Jays needed. They arrived in Seattle

having dropped two straight and four of six, and their wild-card lead dwindled in the process. Estrada was partly to blame for the September swoon. In his previous six starts, he was 1-4 with a 7.53 ERA. In September alone, Estrada had allowed 12 earned runs in 12²/₃ innings.

But he was brilliant against the Mariners, keeping the thousands of Blue Jays fans that made the trip south from British Columbia cheering all night as Toronto pulled even with Baltimore for the first wild-card spot. Both teams are 2½ games clear of Detroit and three ahead of Seattle and Houston.

Estrada was pulled after walking Leonys Martin leading off the eighth inning, leaving to a standing ovation from the huge Blue Jays contingent. He struck out eight and walked three before being replaced by Jason Grilli.

Red Sox 5, Orioles 2: Rick Porcello pitched a four-hitter

for his major league-high 21st victory while David Ortiz and Mookie Betts hit two-run homers as visiting Boston extended its lead in the American League East.

Adam Jones homered and Mark Trumbo picked up his 102nd RBI

Rangers 3, Angels 2: Ian Desmond had an RBI single with no outs in the ninth inning as host Texas moved closer to the AL West title.

Cubs 5, Reds 2: Dexter Fowler hit a tiebreaking single with two outs in the seventh inning as host Chicago beat Cincinnati.

Braves 7, Mets 3: Aaron Blair won for the first time in 13 major league starts, Freddie Freeman drove in three runs off a misfiring Noah Syndergaard and Atlanta slowed host New York’s wild-card chase.

Cardinals 5, Rockies 3: Carlos Martinez threw five effective innings and added a two-run double, helping visit-

ing St. Louis gain ground in the NL playoff race.

Astros 4, Athletics 2: Marwin Gonzalez hit a tiebreaking, two-run single off Ryan Madison in the ninth inning as visiting Houston came from behind to win.

Marlins 4, Nationals 3: Giancarlo Stanton homered and host Miami beat Washington.

Royals 8, White Sox 3: Yorlano Ventura picked up his first complete-game victory, Kendrys Morales hit a three-run homer and host Kansas City defeated Chicago.

The Royals have won three straight, keeping their faint playoff hopes flickering with 12 games remaining. The Royals went 14-5 against the White Sox this year.

Padres 3, Diamondbacks 2: Clayton Richard was sharp for six-plus innings and Wil Myers homered as host San Diego defeated Arizona.