

RAO

BULLETIN

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DoD



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Editor/Publisher RAO Bulletin

DoD 2015 Budget ► Proposed by Pentagon

The Pentagon on 24 FEB proposed the deepest and most far-reaching cuts to military compensation in the 40-year history of the all-volunteer force, explaining that such cuts are necessary in order to pay for more modern gear and high-tech weaponry. Some highlights of the Defense Department’s budget proposal for fiscal 2015 include the first-ever rollback in Basic Allowance for Housing; a military pay raise that would match last year’s 1 percent hike, the lowest in the volunteer era; massive cuts to commissary subsidies; and potentially increased health care fees for both active-duty families and retirees. Together, the proposals signal an end to a decade-plus wartime era of rising pay and benefits for troops. Even after the proposed cuts, military compensation would remain comparatively more generous than it was in the 1980s and ’90s. But the Pentagon has never before sought to pare back existing benefits in the all-volunteer era. Moreover, personnel costs would be slashed further by significant reductions to the size of the force, including the smallest Army since the before the Second World War.

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the changes are part of an overarching decision to protect big-ticket programs and research projects by saving money on people. “We chose to slow the growth of military compensation costs in ways that will preserve the quality of the all-volunteer force, but also free up critical funds needed for sustaining training, readiness, and modernization,” Hagel said Monday at a briefing with reporters. “We chose further reductions in troop strength and force structure in every military service — active and reserve — in order to sustain our readiness and technological superiority, and to protect critical capabilities like special operations forces and cyber resources,” Hagel said. Hagel also said this is “the first budget to fully reflect the transition DoD is making after 13 years of war.” Major changes include:

- On **housing allowances**, Hagel said the Pentagon will “slow the growth” until BAH covers only about 95 percent of estimated rental costs, with troops paying the other 5 percent out of pocket. In addition, the monthly BAH check provided to about 1 million service members will be cut further by eliminating the stipend for renters insurance that for years has been a key component in calculating BAH.

- Next year's **pay raise** for troops would be 1 percent, the same as this year. Those are the lowest pay raises since the end of the draft in 1973 and fall below estimated growth in average private-sector wages in recent years.
- The Defense Department aims to slash \$1 billion from the \$1.4 billion **commissary subsidy**. Pentagon officials insist that no commissaries will be closed but acknowledge that prices will likely rise on many items as local facilities absorb the reduced subsidies.
- Changes are also coming to **Tricare**. "We will ask retirees and some active-duty family members to pay a little more in their deductibles and co-pays," Hagel said. Officials have not provided specific details.

Many of the proposed changes to compensation will require approval from Congress. In the past lawmakers, have been reluctant to reduce troops' pay and benefits. But Pentagon officials believe that may change as combat tours end and reducing compensation is presented as the only viable alternative to vastly diminished readiness. "I think there is a growing recognition that there is a direct tradeoff," said one senior defense official. Hagel said the Pentagon is seeking a base budget of about \$496 billion, roughly the same amount the military is allowed to spend this year. Hagel reiterated the Pentagon's call for Congress to set up a new Base Realignment and Closure Commission to help make politically difficult decisions about shuttering domestic installations and eliminating jobs. He also raised the specter of big reductions to the military footprint in Europe by noting that "BRAC authority is not needed" to close facilities there, which means DoD could make those closure decisions unilaterally.

Underpinning many of the budget decisions is the firm belief that "after Iraq and Afghanistan, we are no longer sizing the military to conduct long and large stability operations," Hagel said. The size of the special operations force would grow slightly to 69,700, up from today's 66,000, Hagel said. Yet the rest of the force would shrink.

- The **Army** would take the biggest hit. Today's Army of about 530,000 soldiers was already slated to drop down to 490,000 during the next several years. But Hagel announced that the new target level will be an active-duty end strength of 440,000 to 450,000 soldiers. Also, the Army will terminate its Ground Combat Vehicle program to save money. The Air Force will eliminate its entire fleet of A-10 Warthogs, a aircraft popular with ground troops because it flew thousands of close-air-support missions over Iraq and Afghanistan during the past 13 years. The savings would help pay for dozens of new F-35 Lightning II Joint Strike Fighters.
- The **Air Force** would also retire its entire fleet of U-2 spy planes. The Pentagon plans to fulfill that mission in the future with unmanned Global Hawks. The Air Force will press ahead with plans to build and buy a new tanker and a new bomber, Hagel said.
- For now, the **Navy** can keep its fleet of 11 aircraft carriers. But Hagel threatened to cut that to 10 if Congress does not raise current budget caps in 2016. Specifically, he said the carrier George Washington would have to be retired before its currently scheduled nuclear refueling. The big impact on the Navy's surface fleet will be on cruisers. Half of the Navy's cruiser fleet — 11 ships — will be "laid up," meaning they will be taken out of normal deployment rotations and essentially left unmanned. Among the most controversial provisions of the Navy budget is the decision to scale back the long-term Littoral Combat Ship program from 52 vessels to 32. Amid concerns that the LCS is too vulnerable to attack, Hagel directed the Navy to consider building a new ship "consistent with the capabilities of a frigate."
- The **Marine Corps** was spared any troop reductions for now and will retain its end strength of 182,000 Marines. However, Hagel said that if Congress does not lift sequestration spending caps on the defense budget before next year, the Corps' end strength likely would have to be cut to 175,000.

The budget proposal is unlikely to end the internal battle simmering between the Army's active and reserve components. The bad news for the Army National Guard is Hagel's order to turn over its Apache helicopters to the active force. The good news is that the Army reserve components will get to keep more soldiers. The force reductions for the reserve components amount to a 5 percent cut, compared to the 13 percent drop for the Army's active force. Hagel's preview of the 2015 budget comes one week before the full details of the plan are sent to

Congress, where the proposal's many controversial decisions are likely to hit resistance. But as one senior military official said Monday: "It's hard to cut this much money out of anything and expect people to cheer about it."
[Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | 24 Feb 2014 ++]

DoD Mental Health Programs ► Prevention Mostly Ineffective

The military has produced dozens of programs aimed at preventing mental illness among troops during the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, but there's little evidence that most of them work, a blue-ribbon panel of scientists said in a report released Thursday. The findings by a committee of 13 experts appointed by the Institute of Medicine of the National Academies come as about 1,000 Iraq- and Afghanistan-era veterans are being diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder each week, according to data from the Department of Veterans Affairs. "There's no substantive indication of effectiveness (in the military prevention programs) and most importantly, there's no evidence of an enduring impact," said panelist David Rudd, provost at the University of Memphis and an authority on suicide in the military. The Pentagon issued a statement 20 FEB saying that it is reviewing the study's findings, said Army Lt. Col. Catherine Wilkinson, a spokeswoman.

The Institute study, requested by the Pentagon, follows an earlier Institute of Medicine review released last year concluding that the Pentagon and Department of Veterans Affairs are struggling to keep pace with a growing number of mental health problems generated by the wars. The scientists in the study released Thursday singled out for prominent criticism the largest and costliest program, the Army's Comprehensive Soldier Fitness effort — since expanded and renamed Comprehensive Soldier and Family Fitness. The program teaches soldiers and family members coping strategies such as keeping a positive or optimistic outlook on life or cultivating strong social relationships. Army leaders said it provides soldiers with the tools to become emotionally resilient. The Army began the program in 2009 amid increasing cases of suicide and mental illness. It has cost \$125 million to teach the coping skills to a million soldiers. The scientific panel said there is little or no evidence the program prevents mental illness.

The Army quickly disputed the findings, saying that its own research shows that the program improves an individual soldier's "level of overall fitness in areas of social, emotional, spiritual, family and physical strength." But the committee said the Army's method for measuring the program's effectiveness has never been subjected to peer review. While those measurements appear significant, they do not mean improved mental health, the scientists said. "This committee does not find these results meaningful," the report said. The panel cited other internal Army studies that showed no preventive benefits for combat troops who had received the training compared with those who did not for conditions such as PTSD, anxiety, depression and substance abuse. Rudd characterized the Army program "as not a particularly wise investment to spend those kinds of dollars on."

Lt. Col. Justin Platt, an Army spokesman, said the program was redesigned in recent years and is not now intended as a way of preventing illnesses such as PTSD or depression. When it was started in 2009, it was supposed to be a "long-term preventative health strategy." New goals released last year are now more generally worded. One of them, for example, says the program should provide soldier and families with "self-awareness and psychological resources and skills to cope with adversity and thrive in their lives." Rudd said the panel acknowledged the difficulty of developing preventive programs during wartime. He said many of the efforts, including comprehensive soldier fitness, clearly may have made sense at the time. But he said that adjustments should be made and unsuccessful programs abandoned. "If we are going to invest these kinds of dollars, it should be in things that are demonstrated to be effective," Rudd said. [Source: USA TODAY | Gregg Zoroya | 20 Feb 2014 ++]

DoD Benefit Cuts Update 35 ► Benefits Fights Not Over

The COLA penalty was a surprise provision in last December's Bipartisan Budget Agreement. More surprises could come in March, when the administration releases its fiscal year 2015 budget recommendations. Back in August 2011, the VFW unveiled its 10 for 10 Plan, which were 10 DOD/VA programs that they believed were under threat of elimination or reduction to help pay for (then) 10 years of war. Below are the 10 programs, which are still on the radarscope based on present-day budget battles, the deficit, the continued threat of sequestration, and the recommendations to be made next year by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission:

- Change the 20-year military retirement plan to resemble civilian plans.
- Increase healthcare premiums for military families and retirees on TRICARE.
- Increase pharmaceutical fees for military families and retirees.
- Reduce COLA increases.
- End government subsidies to military commissaries.
- Eliminate DOD elementary schools stateside.
- Eliminate DOD tuition assistance programs for service members.
- Eliminate presumptive service-connected conditions for disabled and ill veterans.
- Lock out or increase fees for VA Priority Group 7 and 8 veterans; and
- Lower or freeze military pay, similar to the recent three-year (FY 2011-13) freeze for federal civilians.

The VFW is asking veterans to become a VFW Action Corps member and help them stop the government from balancing the budget on the backs of veterans, service members and their families. You can join them at: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>. [Source: VFW Washington Weekly 14 Feb 2014 ++]

GTMO Prison ► DoD Billed \$660K for Interrogation Music

A Pentagon spokesman said 13 FEB that the Defense Department knows nothing about a Canadian rock band's claim for compensation for the use of its music during interrogations at Guantanamo Bay, Cuba. The Vancouver-based band Skinny Puppy says it sent the invoice for \$666,000 for "musical services" after learning that its music had been played at extreme volume at the U.S. prison at Guantanamo Bay. Keyboardist Cevin Key said the band found out from a fan, who was a former Guantanamo Bay guard, that its music was played in the military prison where top terrorism suspects have been held. Key told Canada's CTV News that band members were offended to find out that their music had been used "as an actual weapon against somebody." "I wouldn't want to be subjected to any overly loud music for six to 12 hours at a time without a break," Key said.



A Pentagon spokesman told DPA that the Defense Department had not received an invoice from the band, and said, "I'm not even sure how, functionally, how such a process might work." The spokesman said the United States was committed to ensuring detainees are treated humanely in all circumstances, consistent with treaty obligations and U.S. law and policy. The military prison was opened in 2002 to hold terrorist suspects after the September 2001 attacks. A bipartisan commission report issued in April 2013 included serious accusations about suspected terrorists being subjected to inhumane practices, including music played at extreme volume to cause sleep deprivation. President Barack Obama vowed in his first term to close the prison, but his effort stalled in Congress. He promised last year to renew the push, naming a special envoy for closing Guantanamo and ordering measures to speed detainee transfers to other countries. [Source: Military.com | Deutsche Presse-Agentur | 7 Feb 2014 ++]

DoD Sexual Abuse Update 13 ► Occupational Hazard

Did you know that sexual assault in the military is considered an occupational hazard? This was the ruling in the case of *Cioca v. Rumsfeld* (2011) where twenty-eight service members who were victims of rape while on active duty filed a lawsuit against Secretaries of Defense Rumsfeld and Gates. The case was dismissed stating that **sexual assault is incident to service**. This is an important piece of information because currently the Department of Veterans Affairs does not clearly define military sexual trauma as a service related disability. Currently the veteran must submit "burden of proof" that the incident took place in order to have a chance at receiving benefits and the help they need and deserve. The Ruth Moore Act of 2013 goal is to make it easier for veteran sexual assault victims to receive service connected benefits and treatment for mental-health conditions linked to military sexual trauma. The bill was named after a woman who sought Veterans Affairs benefits for 23 years after being raped several times while serving in the Navy.

According to the Defense Department there were more than 26,000 cases of sexual assault or unwanted sexual contact in fiscal year 2012, which is a 37 percent increase from fiscal year 2011. Additionally, the Department of Defense Sexual Assault Prevention Response Officer (SAPRO) briefing in March of 2012, reported that military sexual trauma is the leading cause of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among women veterans, while combat trauma is the leading cause of PTSD among men. Military sexual assault is receiving a wide array of public discussion currently because of the new data posted this year that illustrates the problem as epidemic in proportion. Therefore in addition to the Ruth Moore Act there are two other pieces of legislation that are targeting sexual assault in the military.

- The Military Justice Improvement Act of 2013 (S.967) aims to remove the chain of command from the prosecution of crimes punishable by a sentence of more than one year, preventing injustices related to military sexual assault and other forms of misconduct.
- The Sexual Assault Training Oversight and Prevention Act (STOP Act) H.R.1593 that would take the chain of command out of the oversight of military sexual assaults and instead create an autonomous Sexual Assault Oversight and Response Office comprised of civilian and military experts.

In addition to these new pieces of legislation, in 2012 a documentary, "The Invisible War" was released that documents firsthand accounts of sexual assaults in the military, the court systems, and how the VA is handling the PTSD claims [<http://www.tv.com/movies/the-invisible-war/watch/the-invisible-war-2560398/>]. This grassroots film created a movement to raise public awareness, coordinate policy, and energize the change to military policy and behavior by engaging advocacy organizations. [Source: New Bern NC Sun Journal | Misty Benedti | 15 Feb 2014 ++]

BRAC Update 35 ► DoD Can Close Bases w/o Congress Approval

The tug of war between the Pentagon and Congress about base closures might have gotten a little more interesting. According to a story published 19 FEB in the online defense magazine Breaking Defense, largely forgotten laws give the Defense Department authority to close facilities without the Base Realignment and Closure process -- without DOD even getting permission from Congress. Speaking at the Association of the U.S. Army's winter conference in Huntsville, Ala., House Armed Services Committee staffer Vickie Plunkett said Wednesday that buried in Title 10 -- the chapter of the US Code that governs the Defense Department -- is Section 2687, which, she said, "does give the services authority to do closures, and it only requires notification to Congress," Breaking Defense reported.

If the Pentagon and the White House were willing to take the political risk, they could shut down facilities and dare a gridlocked Congress to undo it. "It's notification with time for Congress to act" before the closure is carried out, the magazine reported her saying. But, the veteran staffer went on -- emphasizing her opinions were her own, not committee policy -- "Congress is basically dysfunctional right now. "The authorities only require notification. Take your chances," she said to an eruption of laughter, "because it's going to require us to get our act together to stop it." The Army has recommended to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and Congress that a new round of BRAC is needed for 2017. More than 350 installations have been closed in five BRAC rounds in 1989, 1991, 1993, 1995 and 2005. No one is suggesting that the Pentagon should try to slip something past Capitol Hill, Breaking Defense stressed. As a matter of constitutional law, any such actions need to be included in the annual budget, which has to be passed by Congress. As a matter of practical politics, the military informs Congress when it lets go even a handful of arsenal or depot employees, even people fired for misconduct, because it just takes one angry person to call their congressman to bring all sorts of hell down on the Army's head.

The Pentagon is in an even stronger position when it comes to the Army's arsenals, the government-owned manufacturing facilities for military equipment. Section 4532 of Title 10 -- portions of which predate the Civil War - is the Arsenal Act, which Plunkett pointed out contains this language: "The Secretary may abolish any United States arsenal that he considers unnecessary." And that's not even the Secretary of Defense, because the Act was written before that job existed: It's the Secretary of the Army. "The Secretary of the Army," Plunkett emphasized "has unilateral authority -- standing, statutory, Title 10 authority -- to close arsenals. Unilateral. "Now the issue is," she said, "will the services ... take advantage of those statutes?" [Source: Stars and Stripes article 20 Feb 2014 ++]

DECA Budget Cuts Update 04: 20% Shopper Savings Drop Proposed

The long-feared cuts to military commissaries appear to be real: The Defense Department subsidy would drop from \$1.4 billion annually to \$400 million under a defense budget proposal the Obama administration plans to deliver to Congress next week, Pentagon officials announced 24 FEB. The commissary cut will be accomplished not by eliminating any commissary locations, but by reducing the amount of savings over civilian markets that servicemembers enjoy. The cut will be phased in over several years. A recent study by Defense Commissary Agency, or DeCA, found that using the commissary saves shoppers an average of 30.5 percent annually when compared to other stores off base. The savings would drop to about 10 percent, defense officials said in a briefing that covered all aspects of the 2015 defense budget, including hardware and military pay. "I want to make a point that nobody's take-home pay is going to go down under this plan, and we are not closing commissaries," a senior military official said. It was unclear Monday whether savings would be sought by raising prices on some goods, or whether there might be an increase in the stores' 5 percent surcharge, long presented as a way to pay for commissary construction, equipment and maintenance. According to a media report out last month, one plan which was under

consideration was closing all but 24 rural stores stateside, while overseas stores would remain open. However, there was no mention of that in the proposal. DeCA operates 247 stores worldwide, and was getting \$1.4 billion annually in taxpayer funding. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Patrick Dickson | 24 Feb 2014 ++]

Commissary Food Stamp Use Update 01: Increases Leveling Off

More troops and military families redeemed food stamps at military commissaries last year than ever before, according to statistics from the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) — but is it really the dire situation it seems? About five percent more shoppers used food stamps at commissaries in 2013 than used them in 2012. But the increase is actually a sign that use is leveling off instead of quickly increasing as it had been before. Between 2011 and 2012 it went up 13 percent. And back between 2008 and 2009 it went up 70 percent, according to figures from DeCA. Of note is that the food stamp increase doesn't track with the rate of use of the Woman and Infant Children (WIC) subsidy. Army Times reported in October that those numbers were trending steadily downward. About 6 percent fewer military families used WIC at the commissary in 2013 than in 2012.



Food stamp eligibility is based on income, assets (including vehicle), household size and a series of deductions to arrive at “gross monthly income.” If you are living in on-base housing, the calculation does not include BAH. One of the reasons you read so little about food stamp eligibility is that it’s a complex issue. You can see in the links above from the USDA, which administers the federal portion of the program, and Military One Source, which had details on the military side just how complex it is. In addition, some of these rules vary by state. Based only on the federal information a married E-2 without any children who lives on base qualifies for food stamps. That same couple living off base somewhere like Fort Campbell, Ky. increases their income by about \$13,000 and no longer qualifies. Many E-4s living on base with even one child would also qualify for food stamps if they chose to apply. But, again, the more than \$13,000 they’d making living off base bumps more than likely bumps them out of the qualification bracket.

There is no question that hunger is a very serious issue. Whether it is because they lack financial literacy or the skills to make good financial decisions or because their family size outweighs their military income, some military families really are in need to food assistance and financial help. And we don’t want to ignore or make light of their situation. But simply flinging around food stamp redemption statistics without diving into the whole story has a “poor you, military family” flavor.. When you combine allotments, base pay and benefits like commissaries and Tricare (which are thought of as “non-monetary compensation” for a reason — because they make the rest of the payout reasonable), life isn’t so bad. Most would agree that it is a little embarrassing that, without going into the matter further, the cash military members are making puts them below the poverty line and qualifies them for food stamps. But is this really something we SHOULD be embarrassed about? Are servicemembers really as hard off as this data makes them seem? Probably not. [Source: Miliraey.com Spouse Buzz | Amy Bushatz | 18 Feb 2014 ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, & Abuse ► Reported 16 thru 28 FEB 2013

A company that handles moves for some military members in South Carolina and Georgia is being accused of inflating costs and overbilling the federal government, allegations that could potentially result in millions of dollars in penalties and fines. **Covan World-Wide Moving Inc.**, and an affiliate, **Coleman American Moving Services, Inc.**, move soldiers to and from South Carolina’s Fort Jackson and Georgia’s Fort Gordon, according to the lawsuit. The companies are paid on the weight of the shipments they handle. According to the lawsuit, initially filed in 2012 but only unsealed last month, Covan and Coleman inflated the net weight of the shipments — gross weight of the packaged belongings, minus the weight of shipping crates — and then sent the exaggerated invoices to the federal government.

Relying in part on information from several Coleman employees acting as whistleblowers, the U.S. Department of Justice said the falsified paperwork sometimes resulted in billing the government for thousands of excess pounds. Covan is based in Ogden, Utah, and works with Coleman’s facilities in Augusta, Ga. Attorneys for the companies have said in court papers that the meritless claims should be dismissed and don’t contain enough specifics on alleged misdeeds. “The government’s allegations are woefully lacking in particularity concerning the time, place and manner of allegedly fraudulent claims,” they wrote. “Plaintiffs’ plan here appears to be to attempt to ‘flesh out’ their claims of fraud through the process of discovery.” On 11 FEB, one of the attorneys representing the companies reiterated the lack of specific allegations in the complaint. “The company is going to vigorously oppose this thing. We just don’t believe this is a case,” said Jim Wyrsh, an attorney based in Kansas City, Mo. “We just don’t think there is any kind of a pattern here.”

The lawsuit was filed in federal court in South Carolina, but the government said the overbilling is likely happening throughout the companies’ nationwide network, part of a “corporate policy designed to fraudulently increase corporate profits at the expense of the United States.” Court papers included anecdotes regarding service members’ moves to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, where government officials had also become suspicious of the accuracy of weights in the companies’ shipments. Upon further review, according to the government, Covan, Coleman and their affiliates consistently overbilled the U.S. by 9 to 10 percent of a shipment’s actual weight. “Defendants’ false claims scheme has resulted in a substantial loss to the United States and its taxpayers,” the government wrote. Since 2009, according to prosecutors, the companies and their affiliates have billed the federal government for \$723 million worth of shipping and relocation services for members of the armed services. If found guilty, the companies could face millions of dollars in fines for each inflated invoice. An audit found more than 430 instances of overbilling, according to the lawsuit. A motion hearing was scheduled for 14 FEB. [Source: AP | Meg Kinnard | 21 Feb 2014 ++]

DoD Mobilized Reserve 21 FEB 2014 ► Decrease of 605

The Department of Defense announced the current number of reservists on active duty as of 21 FEB 2014. The net collective result is 605 fewer reservists mobilized than last reported in the 15 FEB 2014 RAO Bulletin. At any given time, services may activate some units and individuals while deactivating others, making it possible for these figures to either increase or decrease. The total number currently on active duty from the Army National Guard and Army Reserve is 28,315; Navy Reserve 3,988; Marine Corps Reserve 1,720; Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve 7,345; and the Coast Guard Reserve 399. This brings the total National Guard and Reserve personnel who have

been activated to 41,767 including both units and individual augmentees. Since 911 there have been 889,747 reservists activated for duty. A cumulative roster of all National Guard and Reserve personnel currently activated as of 21 FEB is available at <http://www.defense.gov/documents/Mobilization-Weekly-Report-14-02-21.pdf>. [Source: DoD News Release No. NR-095-14 dtd 25 Feb 2014 ++]

VA



VA LGBT Care ► VHA Vanguard of Equality for LGBT Patients

Along with the growing acceptance of gay marriage, the repeal of "Don't Ask, Don't Tell" — the policy that prevented gays and lesbians from serving openly in the military — has been a central part of the LGBT (Lesbian Gay Bisexual & Transgender) community's fight for equality. Since DADT's repeal, the military has surprised us all. It surprised the far right by demonstrating that the military didn't implode. It surprised most everyone else by recognizing same-sex partners nearly a year before the federal government did. What is less known, however, is that the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), a branch of the Department of Veterans Affairs, is also at the vanguard of providing inclusive patient care for LGBT veterans and their families. This is an important development. For much of modern history, the U.S. medical community has been at odds with the LGBT community. Social prejudices seeped into patient care through physicians, nurses, and hospital staff, and shaped medicine's attitudes towards matters of sexual orientation and gender identity. Indeed, many of the prejudices that still face the LGBT community arguably stemmed from early decisions made by medical professionals and researchers.



A same-sex military couple at their home in San Diego, Calif.

As recently as 1973, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders — the industry bible for psychological conditions — had classified homosexuality as a mental disorder. Then there is the stereotype that gay men have HIV or AIDS, which continues to plague the community. Just consider the fact that men who have sex with men are still banned from donating blood, or that the events portrayed in *Dallas Buyers Club* — the Oscar-nominated flick about an AIDS patient who needed to smuggle drugs into America for treatment — took place not that long ago. Discrimination against LGBT healthcare professionals still happens on a regular basis, but there's no refuting that the medical community is moving towards more inclusion and understanding for L, G, and B. The wheels turn slower for T, however, since there are still loaded terms in the medical community such as gender

identity disorder. Transgendered people are still banned from joining any branch of the military. The recognition of gender identities is almost always a second thought after sexual orientation.

The VHA, for its part, is known for decent yet somewhat slow medical care. But in 2013, the VHA became a standout leader of equality for LGBT patients. Every year since 2007, the Human Rights Campaign has published a Health Equality Index (HEI) report that aims to measure the quality of health care for LGBT patients. Each institution is evaluated against four core criteria that relate to:

- Patient non-discrimination policies
- Equal visitation policies
- Employment non-discrimination policies
- Training in LGBT patient-centered care

How is the VHA meeting these criteria? Last year, the Human Rights Campaign reported that 80 percent of VHA hospitals (120 out of 152) voluntarily participated in HEI, and that more than three-quarters of them were given Equality Leader status, higher than the national average. (Leadership status is only given to those institutions that meet or surpass all four of the core criteria.) VHA hospitals are publicizing to patients that discrimination is prohibited against LGBT patients and employees. Senior managers are registered for HEI training. And equal visitation rights are granted to families and friends of LGBT patients. The actions needed to fulfill all four of the HEI core criteria may seem straightforward. But institutions that are supposedly more "progressive" — including Stanford Hospital and Clinics, LA County + University of Southern California Medical Center, and the University of Chicago Hospital — have yet to meet these marks, illustrating that becoming an Equality Leader is more than a simple fix. And while the impact of Equality Leader VHA facilities is less notable in liberal areas of the country, VHA hospitals play a critical role in promoting patient care equality in states where the VHA is the only Equality Leader, such as in Alabama, Arkansas, Louisiana, Mississippi, and Utah. [Source: The Week Magazine | Andrew Park | 25 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Grave Markers Update 06 ► No Living Relative, No Marker

Nanette Napoleon has identified about 48 Native Hawaiians who served in the Civil War - a number that's remarkable given that the American war was fought a world away. The expert on historic graveyards knows of the gravesite in Hawaii of just one: Pvt. J.R. Kealoha, a Union soldier in the 41st Regiment, U.S. Colored Troops. Kealoha's grave, for whatever reason, is completely unmarked at historic Oahu Cemetery, and Napoleon and some others would like to fix that. "We have in Honolulu a U.S. veteran and Hawaiian warrior that survived nearly nine months of trench warfare and then witnessed the end of the war in Virginia," said Eric Mueller, who's done research on Kealoha. "We may never know what compelled him to travel to the U.S. and then into the U.S. Army, but we cannot dispute his bravery." Napoleon's group would like the Department of Veterans Affairs to provide an upright marble marker for Kealoha. The VA said no.

On its website, the VA says that it "furnishes upon request, at no charge to the applicant, a government headstone or marker for the unmarked grave of any deceased eligible veteran in any cemetery around the world, regardless of their date of death." The reason for the denial in Kealoha's case? No relative can be found to approve it. Prior to the 2012 implementation of a 2009 VA policy change, that wasn't a problem. A third party with appropriate documentation could order a government headstone for the unmarked grave of a veteran. In 1879, Congress approved the furnishing of stones for unmarked veterans graves in private cemeteries. Christopher Erbe, a spokesman for the VA's National Cemetery Administration, said the policy change was made not due to the cost of providing the markers, but in deference to relatives of the dead. "In the past, there have been instances of well-meaning individuals and organizations taking action to mark graves or replace headstones without the knowledge of

family members," Erbe said in an email. "Making arrangements for interment and memorialization of a loved one is a very personal matter, and although we recognize that many families are grateful for assistance, we also understand that many family members do not want involvement with decisions regarding VA benefits from non-next of kin, third-parties."

But Jeff Richman, historian at Green-Wood Cemetery in Brooklyn, N.Y., testified before a congressional committee on Oct. 30 that such disputes over the old burials rarely, if ever, occur. Green-Wood, which installed 1,300 Civil War markers prior to the new policy, had no complaints from descendants, he said. The United States is seven generations removed from the Civil War, Richman noted, and it takes a tremendous amount of work to locate next of kin to authorize a VA marker for an old, unmarked grave. The VA admitted last year that the new rules are "over-restrictive." Erbe said the National Cemetery Administration is reviewing the regulation. In the meantime, that leaves Kealoha's grave, dug in 1877, unmarked and his service unaccounted for. His unmarked grave - along with those of 18 other individuals - is beneath a patch of grass just off the walled, gated and raised-ground burial plot of industrialist James Campbell and his family.

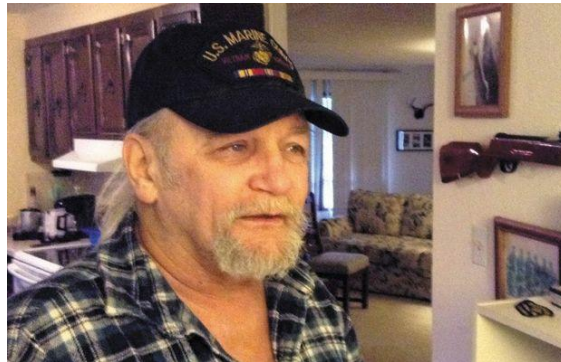
The four Hawaii members of the "Private J.R. Kealoha VA Marker initiative" think it's important for the government to recognize his service - with a marker. "Kealoha represents many Hawaiian men and men from Hawaii who served in the Civil War who knew what they were getting into, who took a risk, and we all are the beneficiaries of that work and risk that they took," said Anita Manning, one of those members. "We owe it to them to recognize that service." Manning, Napoleon, Mueller and Justin Vance, president of the Hawaii Civil War Roundtable, comprise the group. Kealoha is believed to have participated in the Richmond-Petersburg Campaign, which ended in March 1865. A Jan. 22, 1865, letter from Col. Samuel Chapman Armstrong, who was born on Maui, notes a conversation with Kealoha, his "orderly," holding his horse, before the Richmond fighting. "I asked him where he was from," Armstrong wrote. "He said he was from Hawaii! He proved to be a full-blooded kanaka, by the name of Kealoha, who came from the Islands last year." He also noted meeting another man named Kaiwi from Hawaii. "I enjoyed seeing them very much, and we had a good jabber in kanaka," the colonel said.

Marked graves for Civil War veterans who came to Hawaii after the war, both Union and Confederate, can be found at Oahu Cemetery. Some Caucasians who served were born or raised in Hawaii. But Kealoha's gravesite is the only one for a Native Hawaiian with a known location in the state, Napoleon said. Another Native Hawaiian, a sailor named Bush, is believed to be buried on Kauai, "but even the family can't find him," Manning said. Napoleon said many of the Hawaiians in the Union Army and Navy were whalers on ships that were converted to military vessels when the war broke out. Part of the problem in identifying Civil War veterans is pseudonyms were often used during the war, another name was used back in Hawaii, and the records are hard to match. The committee pushing for a VA marker for Kealoha said it will ask for help from Hawaii's congressional delegation. Plan B would be to purchase a private marker. But both Napoleon and Manning would like the government to recognize Kealoha's service. "To us, the government, by law, owes him this recognition," Napoleon said. [Source: The Honolulu Star-Advertiser | William Cole | 23 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Lawsuit ~ Steve Minter ► MRFA led to Leg Amputation

A Vietnam veteran living in Olympia Washington is suing the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs two years after a severe bacterial infection he developed while receiving care at the system's Seattle hospital led to the amputation of his right leg. Steve Garletts alleges VA doctors were negligent in their care over a three-week stretch in late 2011. It began when he sought treatment for an ankle fracture he suffered in an accident at his Alaska home. He took a turn for the worse when he contracted an antibiotic-resistant MRSA infection. The former Marine is seeking unspecified

compensation for his traumatic injuries, disfigurement and loss of earning capacity. “I came in with a simple fracture and I came out without a leg,” Garletts, 65, said in an interview this month. VA Puget Sound declined to comment on the specifics of Garletts’ lawsuit. He filed the claim in U.S. District Court in Seattle on Feb. 13.



Steve Garletts

Methicillin-resistant Staphylococcus aureus (MRSA) is an antibiotic resistant bacteria that can cause life-threatening infections, according to the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The VA in recent years has received positive attention in medical studies and in press reports for its efforts to prevent the spread of MRSA. It checks patients for the infections as soon as they’re admitted for care. Internal VA hospital reviews obtained by The Seattle Times last fall also noted the VA Puget Sound was among the best in the VA system at limiting MRSA infections. The MRSA rate was a bright spot in a report that documented the hospital’s poor performance in other internal comparisons, such as patient mortality following surgeries and pneumonia infections connected to the use of hospital ventilators. The MRSA infection rate at VA Puget Sound was recently reported at 0.01 percent per 1,000 patient bed days of care. In 2010, the rate in VA intensive care units across the country was .62 infections per 1,000 patient days, according to a 2011 study in the New England Journal of Medicine.

Doctors at VA Puget Sound tested Garletts for MRSA soon after he arrived at the hospital on Nov. 23, 2011. The test came back negative, according to Garletts’ lawsuit. He said he got to the hospital a day after he tripped and snapped his ankle while working on a cabin in a remote part of southeast Alaska. A friend drove him 40 miles to a medical clinic, and Garletts told doctors he preferred to get medical attention for the fracture at the Seattle VA instead of at a hospital in Ketchikan. Large fracture blisters swelled over his injury while he traveled from his cabin to the clinic and on to Seattle. VA doctors postponed surgery to give the blisters time to heal. They placed a cast on his ankle and released him to the care of his sister in Seattle. Five days later, doctors checked the injury and put a new a cast on his ankle. On Nov. 30, they removed the cast and drained Garletts’ blisters in what his lawyers described as a “non-sterile” setting. Garletts returned to the hospital the next day with “confusion and pain.” Doctors sent him home without recognizing the signs of illness setting in, his lawyers wrote.

On Dec. 3, Garletts was admitted to the hospital’s intensive care unit with sepsis and acute respiratory failure. His condition worsened and he was diagnosed with MRSA on Dec. 4. On Dec. 6, doctors found pus and dead skin accumulating around the ankle. They decided to halt the infection’s spread by amputating Garletts’ right leg below the knee on Dec. 9. Garletts walks with a prosthetic leg and a cane. He’s unable to work. He takes a daily mix of pain killers and respiratory medicine. “If the reasonable prudent standard of care had been by met by (VA doctors), Mr. Garletts would not have suffered such severe injury, leading to his amputation, pulmonary failure complications, complications related to infection and other serious health complications likely to shorten Mt. Garletts’ life,” wrote his attorneys, Gordon Webb and George Kargianis.

Garletts has lived most of life in Alaska since he left the Marines in 1970. He grew up in Bellevue and has extensive family ties in the Puget Sound area. He moved to Olympia in September after doctors told him he would have trouble making it through an Alaska winter, especially in the remote area where he lived. He still hopes to travel between Alaska and Washington in the years ahead. His mobile home in Olympia is decorated with mementos from the years he spent working on ships in Alaska and on helicopters in Vietnam, where he was a crew chief on CH-53 helicopters. The infection weakened his heart. He says he loses his breath quickly and can't exercise. He gave up working on the cabin last year. "I have a hard time going up steps," he said. [Source:

VA Hearing & Vision Benefit Update 03: OIG Report on Hearing Aid Repair

The Veterans Affairs Department is taking weeks to provide or repair hearing aids for its patients, leaving hearing-impaired veterans at risk in the latest failure by the agency charged with caring for America's war heroes. The VA has promised to provide hearing aids within five days, but the agency's Inspector General found that the average wait time was between 17 and 24 days. About 30 percent of veterans are waiting 30 days or more, and of those, 10 percent are waiting to have their hearing aids fixed for two months or more, a report released this week found. VA officials blamed staffing issues for the delays, but investigators actually visited a facility where large numbers of hearing devices were sitting undistributed in boxes and on carts. Veterans groups are outraged, saying that the delays pose a serious threat to veterans safety.

- "It's a safety issue, they are put at risk," said Gerald Manar, Deputy Director of National Veterans Service of the Veterans of Foreign Wars. "If they cross the street and don't hear an approaching car... anything can happen if you're not hearing well."
- Other groups have said the waiting periods for new hearing aids and hearing aid repairs is unsatisfactory. "We do believe that it is unacceptable that veterans are having to wait this long," said Edward Lilley, a senior field service representative at The American Legion. "The VA needs to meet their own standard." Mr. Lilley added that The American Legion planned to reach out to the VA's OIG to follow up on the report and obtain more information.

Investigators said they believe that 30 days – 25 days after the VA's goal - "allows sufficient time for medical facilities to issue a hearing aid to a veteran who depends on it for their daily activities. Inspectors visited the Denver Acquisition and Logistics Center (DALC), which serves as a central processing facility for the VA, and said they observed 19,500 hearing aids backlogged, unopened, sitting on carts and waiting for repairs or replacements. Part of the reason the agency kept veterans waiting was because staff never recorded when they received the hearing aids or requests for the devices. "Without a timely recording system, staff cannot adequately respond to or track inquiries from veterans and medical facilities concerning the status of a hearing aid pending repair services," the IG said in a report released Thursday. DALC said that five of their 21 technician positions for working on the hearing aids were vacant for much of 2012, and that the repair lab hasn't been fully staffed since February 2011. "Medical facilities' audiology staff attributed the delays to inadequate staffing to meet an increased workload," the IG said.

Meanwhile, the workload has been steadily ticking upward, with 358,000 repairs of hearing aids in FY 2011 and 394,000 in FY 2012. "VA needs to fill those positions so veterans can get their hearing aids back in a timely manner," Mr. Manar said. "They are really handicapped without them. If they can't hear, it's a real problem, not just conversationally but in terms of safety." But the IG said that more people wouldn't help fix the backlog, and that the problems lie elsewhere. "We estimated a fully staffed repair lab would only decrease the average number of days to complete repair services by about 5 days," investigators said. "This would make the average number of days 15, which is still 10 days more than their 5-day timeliness goal." The problem needs to be fixed, the IG said, because the demand for repair and replacement services is only going to increase. "Due to the aging veteran population, VA's

audiology service and repair workloads are expected to continue to increase,” the report said. “Therefore, it is imperative that VA effectively manages its delivery of hearing aid services and repairs.”

Tinnitus – ringing in the ears – and hearing loss were the first and second most common service-related disabilities among veterans, the IG said. During fiscal year 2012, the VA said it ordered roughly \$221 million worth of new hearing aid parts for veterans and repaired about \$16.5 million worth of parts. The Veterans Health Administration agreed with all of the inspector generals recommendations and has already taken steps to fix problems and make improvements. The VHA is already working on a plan to improve productivity standards by fiscal year 2015. In response to the report, the VHA has expanded the improvement plan to include the non-physician discipline of Audiology beginning in fiscal year 2016. In addition, the DALC is also making improvements to secure more staffing and to track and monitor hearing aids from the date received for repair. In their response the DALC wrote that it takes seriously the welfare of the Veterans it serves and reported that it has already made improvements to bring repair timeliness within standards and has secured funding for additional employees. [Source: Washington Times | Phillip Swarts & Kellan Howell | 21 Feb 2013 ++]

VA Advance Funding Update 03 ► Compensation Check Protection

A quiet backdrop to Washington's government shutdown last October was the anxiety rippling through 3.9 million disabled veterans who rely on government compensation for wounds and injuries, their advocates say. "It is not widely known, but during the last shutdown, we were seven, 10 days away from not being able to send out checks to disabled veterans," says Sen. Bernie Sanders, the Vermont independent who chairs the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee. The money is the only thing many veterans have in such cases, says Craig Prosser, who works with veterans in Tulsa, Okla. "I have veterans who are married, have kids and have severe PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), TBI (traumatic brain injury), depression and they are unable to actually work," he says. "I'm talking 27-, 28-, 30-, 35-year-old men and women ... who don't have anything else because they can't do anything else because of their diagnoses." Bipartisan bills were introduced last year in the House and Senate to provide what veterans organization, led by the Disabled American Veterans, say is a simple fix: approve a budget for the Department of Veterans Affairs one year in advance. The bills have yet to pass.

Similar legislation approved in 2009 led to advanced budget funding for veterans' medical care and the result was that during the shutdown last year VA hospitals remained open. There was no advanced funding, however, for the process of assessing compensation claims and sending out checks to veterans. That hurt the department's efforts to cut the backlog of aging compensation claims, and the VA very nearly ran out of money to pay ongoing compensation benefits. "Advanced funding works," says Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. "I think it's important that we do a two-year funding cycle or advanced funding cycle where we don't end up with an extremely hot political issue should Congress not be able to do its job, as we haven't on an annual basis."

Sanders and Miller say there is bipartisan support for advanced funding of VA operations including construction of new medical clinics, scientific research, education and homeless benefits, veteran cemetery burials and operations and more. Resistance to full advanced funding for VA within Congress comes from members of appropriations committees who worry they will not be able to closely monitor how the department operates, Miller and Sanders say. But both committee chairmen argue that the same level of oversight can be provided even if funding numbers are approved a year in advance. Moreover, the legislation costs nothing, says Joseph Violante, Disabled American Veterans national legislative director. "VA doesn't get the money until the fiscal year begins," he said.

Impatience over the failure of Congress to act pushed the DAV to rally disabled veterans on Capitol grounds on 25 FEB, urging them to visit members of Congress or use social media on that day to push for change. The organization is calling it Operation Keep the Promise. The VA would not comment on pending legislation, but offered a statement that appears to endorse the status quo, while referencing other federal agencies that do not have advanced funding: "The best way to care for veterans is for Congress to provide full funding for VA and the entire government each year through the established appropriations process." VA press secretary Drew Brookie declined to elaborate. Former department officials, however, say the off-and-on budgetary crisis plaguing Washington hampers efforts to provide care and services for veterans. "When you have (budgetary) uncertainty, you can only manage through the short-term and things can get stalled, things get delayed, decisions get altered," says Bob Epley, a former benefits executive who currently serves on a VA advisory committee.

Department chiefs will hesitate to spend money, knowing that any unspent funds can be used as an emergency resource should the government once again shut down, Epley says. "What you're talking about is placing a drag on service operations," says Ron Aument, formerly chief operating officer for the VA. He says that after a government shutdown, furloughed employees can recover lost pay but their services lost during the shutdown are never recovered. "Those hours of work that they should have been producing on those programs are gone," he says. Miller says allowing the advanced funding of VA operations would finally "do away with the potential of using veterans as a pawn in funding shutdowns in the future." [Source: USA Today | Gregg Zoroya | 20 eb 2014 ++]

VA Pharmacy ► CMOP Receives "Top Performer" Ranking

In 2012, VA medical facilities treated more than 6 million patients at their 1,276 hospitals, clinics and Vet Centers. VA consistently works to provide exceptional care, and it shows: from rankings of "Top Performer" by The Joint Commission to innovations in health care to new tools to help patients and health care providers succeed, you'll find success stories throughout the organization. Most recently, VA received word that its Consolidated Mail Outpatient Pharmacy (CMOP) has the highest customer satisfaction score among the nation's public and private mail-order pharmacies, according to a respected, independent survey - a rating it's held for the past three years.



"Our nation's Veterans deserve a world-class pharmacy as a part of the best health care available," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "It is an honor to hear from Veterans that we are delivering on that commitment." The 2013 independent survey was conducted by J.D. Powers and Associates. Veterans were asked to rate VA on value, delivery, ordering and service of its mail-order pharmacies. Out of 1,000 possible points, VA scored 871.m"The fact that we are rated higher than our private sector counterparts is due in part to our unique partnership with our patients and medical centers," said Dr. Robert A. Petzel, VA's Under Secretary for Health. "In

addition to the convenience of mail-order service, Veterans also have a pharmacist available to meet with them face to face." VA participates in this annual survey as a way to compare itself against industry leaders and to ensure VA health care meets the highest standards. [Source: Vantage Point | Jason Cain | 21 Feb 21014 ++]

VA Abe Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Awards ► 2013 Awardees

On 11 FEB Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki and VA's Vantage Point blogger Jason Cain announced the first recipients of the newly-established Abraham Lincoln Pillars of Excellence Awards (ALPEA). This new Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) award recognizes their state partners for outstanding programs that support Veterans in their states. The awards were presented at a White House ceremony, held in conjunction with the National Association of State Directors of Veterans Affairs (NASDVA) winter conference. VA's Office of Intergovernmental Affairs and NASDVA worked together to establish this award to recognize the states' dedication and the excellence among programs established and operated by our state partners. Every U.S. state, district, commonwealth and territory has a sister agency to VA, and their governors are equally dedicated to supporting and assisting Veterans. These agencies, while independent from VA, are key partners in the mission to fulfill the promise of Abraham Lincoln: "to care for him who shall have borne the battle, and for his widow, and his orphan."

The state agencies have a primary mission of assisting Veterans in their state with accessing and applying for federal VA care and benefits. More importantly, each state government has made additional commitments to their Veterans. From reduced or exempted state taxes, to education benefits and direct bonuses for war time Veterans, these programs represent significant investments and expenditures on behalf of state governments. Jason Cain has the distinct honor of working closely with the leadership in each of these agencies to ensure VA and their state partners are in synch when it comes to supporting our Veterans. "These outstanding programs are successful, proven initiatives being funded and run by our state partners," said Stephanie Birdwell, acting director, VA Office of Intergovernmental Affairs "The ALPEA not only recognizes and highlights the most effective and efficient state programs, it also encourages other states to look to these best practices as models for delivering care and benefits to their Veterans."

ALPEA awards were presented for programs in the following categories: Elimination of Veterans Homelessness, Elimination of the Disability Claims Backlog, Improving Access to Benefits and Services and Outstanding State Programs. We presented five awards in the four categories for achievements in 2013. Three of the established categories align with the agency priority goals outlined in VA's strategic plan, with a fourth reserved for outstanding state programs that address other state and VA priorities. The 2013 Awardees were:

- The award for programs aimed at eliminating Veterans homelessness went to the Washington Department of Veterans Affairs for its plan to eliminate Veterans homelessness. The program uses statewide Veterans housing summits to bring together various state and federal stakeholders to increase resource awareness and collaboration in the effort to eliminate homelessness among Washington Veterans.
- The Texas Veterans Commission for the establishment of Strike Force and fully developed claims teams received the award for programs aimed at eliminating the disability claims backlog. In 2012 the Texas Veterans Commission requested and received an initial appropriation of \$1.5 million to assist the federal VA in reducing the claims backlog in Texas. The state formed two eight-member Strike Force teams and five-member fully developed claims teams that operate out of the Houston and Waco regional offices. Additional staff was deployed to various underserved areas and to hold a series of "Beat the Backlog" events throughout the state. Texas was the first state to commit significant state resources to augment VA staff in order to expedite the reduction of the disability claims backlog.

- With a second award for the Washington Department of Veteran Affairs, the state was honored for its Veterans benefits enhancement program, which pairs the state Veterans Affairs department with the Washington State Department of Social and Health Services. Together, the partnership identifies and facilitates Veterans and their dependents, who are receiving state social and health services, to access the maximum federal benefits for which they are eligible. The goal of the program is to transition Veterans currently receiving Medicaid and other state benefits to VA’s health care system and other federally funded benefits and health care services.
- Two awards were presented in the category of Outstanding State Programs. The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs was recognized for the Alabama Veterans Treatment Court Task Force. Alabama established the first state-level task force to develop a statewide Veterans Treatment Court (VTC) program. The VTC Task Force advocates for the coordinated planning, growth and expansion of the VTC programs in municipal, district, and circuit court systems throughout the state.
- The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs was awarded their ALPEA for creating the Illinois Joining Forces. Illinois Joining Forces is a statewide, public-private network of more than 150 organizations working together to improve services to Illinois’ military and veteran communities.

It is important for VA to recognize the incredible work being done at the state level. The agencies all have the same goal of ensuring all Veterans receive the care and benefits they have earned through honorable service.

[Source: Vantage Point | Jason Cain | 21 Feb 21014 ++]



VA Sleep Apnea Claims Update 01 ► Claims Surge

Last June the VA Advisory Committee on Disability Compensation privately recommended to Allison A. Hickey, under secretary for benefits, that the Department of Veterans Affairs consider four steps to address a “recent surge” in VA compensation awards for sleep apnea. The proposals, which only now come to light, were drafted the same day that committee members received a public briefing on sleep apnea, which confirmed a 25-fold jump in compensation payments since 9/11. The VA briefer also noted that 13 percent of all veterans with service after 9/11 and who draw VA disability pay are being compensated for sleep apnea. The committee, chaired by retired Army Lt. Gen. James Terry Scott, recommended that VA:

- Have compensation exams for sleep apnea given exclusively by VA doctors to ensure required sleep tests are properly conducted.
- Have the Institute of Medicine conduct a detailed study on degree of actual disability associated with sleep apnea, particularly for veterans who are prescribed a CPAP (continuous positive airway pressure) machine, which under VA regulations results in an automatic rating of 50 percent.
- Conduct a review of criteria and methodology for establishing service connection to sleep apnea.
- Review criteria for establishing average earning loss for veterans diagnosed with sleep apnea.

Which of these did VA undertake over the last seven months? VA officials can't point to any action taken on these recommendations, but said they do inform an ongoing process to overhaul the VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities (VASRD). They may be "redundant of other research associated with the VASRD revision process Any recommendations regarding the rating criteria for sleep apnea are still under consideration by the regulation drafter for this body system." Ratings "assigned for sleep apnea and all other respiratory conditions are being evaluated on an objective basis, using advances in medical science and data from average earnings loss studies," the VA said. Meanwhile, in fiscal 2013, veterans receiving compensation for sleep apnea jumped by another 26 percent, or more than 29,000 beneficiaries, VA data show. As of Oct. 1, a total of 143,278 vets were rated disabled by sleep apnea, and 89 percent of their ratings were at least 50 percent.

Reached by email, Scott confirmed sending a memorandum to Hickey, which he said, "can be described as an interim report on the issue of sleep apnea," offering advice on behalf of the committee. "Our advice is based on our understanding of the issue and does not consider the political environment inside or outside VA," Scott said. "The Secretary may act on our advice, refer our advice to the VA staff for study, or reject our advice in whole or in part." The most common form of sleep apnea is obstructive. It occurs when breathing is interrupted, usually because soft tissue in the back of the throat collapses, blocking the airway. Breathing interruptions, or apneas, can be frequent and last seconds or longer, causing chronic fatigue if untreated. Incidence of sleep apnea is rising in tandem with obesity rates in this country, say medical experts, although there can be other causes. The most common path to a VA sleep apnea disability rating, the briefer told the committee, is to be "overweight" and have this common sleep disorder diagnosed as they separate or retire from service.

In revising the VASRD, officials said veterans would be grandfathered against rating downgrades. Any changes would apply only to new claimants. Discussion raises anxieties, however, and also gives rise to new claims. A 50-percent rating is a key threshold, making retirees eligible to receive both full retirement and VA disability pay, at that rate \$822 to \$1088 a month, depending on family size. Most retirees rated less than 50 percent see retired pay offset, dollar-for-dollar, by VA disability pay. Of roughly 29,200 veterans who began receiving sleep apnea compensation in the last year, 93 percent had ratings of 50 percent or higher. So that proportion, already high, appears to be climbing. By comparison, a soldier who loses two dominant fingers, such as a thumb and index finger, also earns a disability rating of 50 percent.

Michael Webster, a family law attorney in Shalimar, Fla., and former naval aviator, complained to the House Veterans Affairs Committee last year of widespread abuse in sleep apnea claims. He called the boom in payments a scam perpetuated mostly by retirees coached toward an easy 50-percent rating. If they snore, he said, they know to order a sleep study. Webster called it an offensive for veterans, like his late father, with "real disabilities." Is Under Secretary Hickey concerned about tax dollars being wasted in an explosion of sleep apnea claims? "It is the position of the Veterans Benefits Administration that it is never a waste of tax dollars to pay veterans the benefits to which they are legally entitled," the VA responded. "Our primary concern is to ensure that veterans, their families and their survivors receive disability compensation to which they are entitled." A staff member for the House Veterans Affairs Committee investigated Webster's charges and concluded "there does not appear to be widespread abuse of compensation related to this disorder."

His report is silent on the larger issues raised by VA advisors -- whether obstructive sleep apnea is disabling when a CPAP is prescribed and provides relief, and whether CPAP usage should trigger a 50-percent rating. As reported here last year, VA's own top expert on sleep apnea said if a CPAP gives its user a good night's sleep, there probably is no disability. "Many people who have sleep apnea and are on treatment are not disabled. I would say the majority," said Dr. Samuel Kuna, chief of sleep medicine at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center. VA didn't compensate for sleep apnea before 1996. In 2013, VA apnea payments likely totaled between \$1.5 billion to \$2 billion a year. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | 20 Feb 2014 ++]

VA ID Card Update 03 ► VHIC Phase in by JUL

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced 20 FEB the phased roll out of newly designed, more secure Veteran Health Identification Cards. The new cards are distinguished by additional security features and will have a different look and feel. In addition to being more secure, the card has been transformed into a Veterans Health Identification Card (VHIC). Similar to a typical health insurance card, the VHIC displays the Veteran's Member ID, a new unique identifier, as well as a Plan ID, reflecting the Veteran's enrollment in VA health care. "VA is committed to providing high quality health care while ensuring the personal security of Veterans," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. "These new identification cards are an important step forward in protecting our nation's heroes from identity theft and other personal crimes." The VHIC is personalized to display the emblem of the Veteran's branch of service. It also provides features that make it easier to use, such as the addition of "VA" in Braille to help visually impaired Veterans, and the printing of VA phone numbers and emergency care instructions on the cards. The card replaces the Veteran Identification Card (VIC), which was introduced in 2004. As part of a phased rollout, starting this month, the card will only be offered to newly enrolled and other Veterans who have not been issued a VIC. Then, in early April, VA will begin a three month effort to automatically issue the more secure VHIC to current VIC cardholders. VA recommends Veterans safeguard their VIC as they would a credit card, and cut up or shred the card once it is replaced. While not required to receive VA health care, all enrolled Veterans are encouraged to get a VHIC. Enrolled Veterans can get more information about the VHIC by visiting their VA medical facility enrollment coordinator or the website www.va.gov/healthbenefits/vhic, calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or visiting their local VA health care facility. Veterans who are not enrolled in the VA health care system can apply for enrollment at any time by visiting <http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/enroll>, Calling 1-877-222-VETS (8387) or visiting their local VA health care facility. [Source: VA News Release 20 Feb 2014 ++]



VA Suicide Prevention Update 20 ► Whistleblower Dr. Steven Coughlin Vindicated

A government whistleblower who suffered retaliation from his agency has been vindicated by a Department of Veterans Affairs admission that it failed to reach out to 2,000 veterans in a research study who said they had suicidal ideas, many of whom later committed suicide. The agency's admission, which has not been previously publicized,

resulted from a congressional inquiry into the allegations of Dr. Steven Coughlin, a former epidemiologist at the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Public Health, who disclosed that the VA was guilty of shocking ethical lapses. It has been nearly a year since Coughlin told the House Veterans Affairs Committee's (HVAC) Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations that he had waged a protracted battle against his supervisors over ongoing and very serious problems at VA, including its failure to follow up with some 2,000 vets who indicated in a survey that they'd had suicidal thoughts.



Dr. Steven Coughlin

Coughlin, who conducted surveys of 1991 Gulf War veterans as well as veterans from Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom--Afghanistan, also said that VA obscured facts about the impact of toxic exposures on troops in Iraq and Afghanistan and the causes of Gulf War illness, and that his bosses intimidated, bullied and admonished him for speaking out. His testimony last March prompted an inquiry of VA by the HVAC, and IBTimes has learned from Congressman Jeff Miller (R-FL), the HVAC chairman, that just a few weeks ago, without notifying the media, VA informed Congress that its Office of Research Oversight had conducted an internal investigation and substantiated the following Coughlin charges:

- VA personnel lost study results related to family members of veterans of the Persian Gulf War. The results related to whether diseases such as brain damage were passed from veteran parents to children due to toxin exposure during the war.
- VA personnel did not follow up on some veterans who admitted to having suicidal ideas -- and who later committed suicide -- during a study of Gulf War veterans.
- Some VA personnel retaliated against Coughlin for his involvement in highlighting deficiencies in VA studies.

According to Miller's office, VA also assured the subcommittee that it would hold Dr. Michael Peterson, a VA employee specifically cited by Coughlin during the hearing, accountable for these failures. "Now that VA has substantiated some of Dr. Coughlin's most troubling allegations, it's incumbent upon department leaders to detail the steps they are taking to hold the responsible parties accountable and ensure protections for future whistleblowers," Rep. Miller told IBTimes. "Who was held accountable for not following up on veterans who later committed suicide? What happened to the VA personnel who retaliated against Dr. Coughlin? What is VA doing to foster a culture of tolerance for employees who have the courage to speak out against problems despite hostile opposition from co-workers and managers? America's veterans, American taxpayers and VA's more than 300,000 employees deserve answers to these questions in short order."

VA would not answer any specific questions about Coughlin's charges. A spokesperson for VA sent IBTimes the following statement: "The Department of Veterans Affairs recognizes and respects the service, dedication and many challenges of Veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War, and is committed to improving the health and well-being of these Veterans. Research is a vital component in improving that treatment. VA agrees that there are health issues associated with service in the Gulf War, and the department wants to ensure Gulf War Veterans have access to the care and benefits they have earned and deserve. "The VA spokesperson also declined to answer questions about

Coughlin's supervisors because the Privacy Act precludes their discussing personnel matters concerning individual employees.

Dr. Coughlin, who quit his post at VA in December 2012 -- three months before appearing on The Hill -- was never told about VA's validation of his charges. He only learned of it when contacted by IBTimes last week, and said he was "very surprised" by the agency's response. "These are very serious admissions on the part of the VA," Coughlin said. "I took a beating trying my best to look out for the interests of U.S. veterans who were enrolled in our studies and other large-scale epidemiologic and clinical research studies conducted by VA. I hope that VA's admissions are a sign that the situation is improving. Of particular concern is the rights and welfare of vulnerable research participants, such as people with severe depression or suicidal thoughts. My thoughts go out to the veterans." Coughlin said he's paying attention to what happens next at VA, but from a distance -- both geographically and emotionally.

The 56-year-old scientist, who has never felt comfortable in the spotlight, did his part, he said, and seems happy now to be out of the fray. He described the past year as one filled with emotional highs and lows -- the lowest being VA's retaliation against him, which he said continued even after he left. "After I left VA, I was removed as a co-author from two journal articles on which I had been listed as a co-author and which had already been submitted to epidemiologic journals," he said. "When I found out that my previous supervisor had instructed the lead authors to drop me as a co-author, I emailed the chief of the Office of Public Health and the director of the VA Office of Research Oversight, and my name was added back to one of the two articles." Coughlin said after he left VA he was concerned that he would not be able to find another job and that he might lose everything. "It's more difficult to find a position if you do not have a positive recommendation from your last employer," he said.

"I was very fortunate to receive strong support from my family. My older brother let me live rent-free in his spare bedroom for a year while I searched for a new position. I took a big financial hit by quitting my job at the VA in Washington, D.C. However, I enjoyed spending time with my mother, brother, and my nephews and nieces." Coughlin said that while being a government whistleblower has earned him respect and praise, it also probably kept some potential employers from hiring him. But with the support of academic colleagues around the country, Coughlin, who was previously associate professor of epidemiology and director of the program in public health ethics at Tulane University, and who once chaired the writing group that prepared the ethics guidelines for the American College of Epidemiology, was able to return to academia.

"I have a great job now at the University of Tennessee College of Medicine in Memphis," he said. His job is as a senior researcher in the Research Center on Health Disparities, Equity and the Exposome, and a professor in the Department of Preventive Medicine. (An exposome is a measure of the health effects of lifelong environmental exposures.) "The focus of the center is on the pronounced black-white health disparities in Memphis," he explained. "African-American women in Memphis have a twofold increased risk of dying from breast cancer and the city also has the highest infant mortality rates in the U.S." In addition to finding satisfying new work, Coughlin said that what has kept his spirits up and reminded him that leaving VA and making his complaints public were the right thing to do are the supportive messages he's received from veterans. "I've heard from hundreds of veterans who have contacted me to thank me for standing up on behalf of veterans and telling the truth," he said. "My father was in the U.S. Navy and I have a nephew who was in the Marines in Iraq and Afghanistan." As Congress debates how to proceed following the VA's admissions, which were a direct outgrowth of Coughlin's whistleblowing, he added, "It was very difficult at times for me to do what I did. But I have no regrets."

Coughlin's whistleblowing efforts are getting further validation by the International Society for Environmental Epidemiology (ISEE), whose Ethics and Philosophy committee has nominated him for its Research Integrity Award, citing his "exhibition of great personal and professional risk in relinquishing his position at the VA after his calls to

stop the suppression of research findings and prevent needless death among research participants were left unanswered.” ISEE, in its announcement of Coughlin's nomination for the award, said that his “inspirational show of courage and integrity in the face of ethical dilemma can be seen in his refusal to redact complaints made about a study protocol’s failure to include a provision for mental health intervention, even under threat of removal from the study. Coughlin’s extensive requests to have mental health providers contact participants were met with backlash from his superiors.” ISEE concluded: "Dr. Coughlin’s highly ethical conduct makes him a living legend in modern environmental epidemiology. His actions should serve as an inspiration and model for epidemiologists both today and tomorrow.” [Source: International Business Times | Jamie Reno | 19 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Blue Water Claims Update 25 ► Restore AO Exposure Presumption

Nearly half of the surviving 100,000 members of the United States Navy and fleet marine services who fought in Vietnam between 1962 and 1975 could be experiencing wartime injuries from the long term effects of dioxin exposure. On Aug. 2, 2013, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association and Military Veterans Advocacy, Inc. jointly filed suit in the United States District Court for the District of Columbia against Eric K. Shinseki in his capacity as Secretary of the Department of Veterans Affairs. This lawsuit demands immediate restoration of presumption of Agent Orange exposure. The law would constitute implementation of The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2013 (H.R.543) pending before the 113th Congress. The Act, was introduced to the House floor by Rep. Chris Gibson (D-NY). This legislation will return the presumption of exposure to herbicide to Navy and Marine veterans who served in the offshore water of Vietnam. These conditions include, but are not limited to, many forms of cancer, ischemic heart disease, Parkinson's disease and diabetes II.

Approximately 21 million gallons of the dioxin herbicide was sprayed on Vietnam. It entered the food chain and water systems. Dairy products produced in Vietnam serviced the offshore carriers. The distillation process of the carriers amplified the toxin the crews drank and showered in. Over time crew members have reported Agent Orange barrels being carried aboard. There are reports of spillage and clean up. Records for the evidence of these occurrences are not available. Laine Wheatley said her husband, who is a member of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association, recalls black barrels, about two-gallon size, stored on board. Instructions were to stay away from the barrels. Recently, she discovered it was common for the dioxin to be transported this way. Agent Orange is a mixture of two formulas transported separately and mixed at one location. She believes that in transporting the formula separately the Navy would not have been required to orange tag or stripe the barrels as Agent Orange.

About twelve years ago the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs altered its internal policy and began denying benefits to the Blue Water Vietnam Veterans that had been receiving benefits for the presumed conditions. These service personnel are being denied all service-connected health care from Veterans Affairs hospitals and disability compensation for the presumed conditions. It can take 30 years for conditions to develop after exposure. For her husband they began seeing the effects within 15 years of his service, subtle but progressive. The Institute of Medicine released its fourth report Dec. 3, 2013 referring to its previous reports, reminding the Department of Veterans Affairs that there is "plausible routes for exposure of Blue Water Navy personnel." It said: The individuals who served off the shores of Vietnam should not be exempted from receipt of Veterans Affairs benefits of Agent Orange-related disabilities as:

- There is no medical or scientific evidence to deny those veterans the benefits that other service members from the Vietnam War receive on a regular basis;
- There were several viable pathways for exposure of the crews on the ships of the Seventh Fleet who served offshore Vietnam;

- There is no evidence that Agent Orange/dioxin did not poison the veterans in questions and there is overwhelming evidence indicating high probability that it did;
- No single group of veterans that served anywhere in Southeast Asia should be removed from the benefits for presumptive exposure to the deadly herbicides used in the broader geographical area thought out the Vietnam War.

Some crew logs have been purged. It is up to the veteran to provide evidence and contact possible witnesses. To attain available ship logs is costly both financially and in time to get them. For many their hands are tied. Their service medals are not enough to prove they served. Their health-related conditions are not enough evidence. For more information on the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association go to <http://www.bluewaternavy.org>. Lists of vessels that have been identified to date as experiencing exposure can be found at <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/shiplist/index.asp#find> and <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/agentorange/shiplist/list.asp>. [Source: The Belington Herald | Laine Wheatley | 18 Feb 2014 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure~Lejeune Update 42 ► VA Claims Frustration

After providing a measure of relief to some retired U.S. Marines, the Department of Veterans Affairs continues to frustrate others seeking compensation for exposure to contaminated water while stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C. “It’s pretty crazy,” says Englewood’s Cheryl Baillargeon, whose first husband, Dan Albert, died of cancer 24 years ago. “The VA keeps asking for the same stuff over and over again, and when I send it to them they say they can’t find it.” Sarasota leatherneck Jim Doner tells a similar story. “They tell us our paperwork is in Tennessee, then it’s someplace else, then someplace else,” says Doner, 74. “Whenever I get a letter from them yo-yos it just ruins my whole day.” Hundreds of thousands of military personnel, their families and civilian workers — perhaps as many as 1 million — are estimated to have ingested toxic water at the sprawling Marine base beginning in the 1950s.

For more than 30 years, the installation’s water supplies were contaminated by improperly secured chemical agents, most notably benzene, perchloroethylene and trichloroethylene. Cancers, illnesses, miscarriages, infertility, elevated childhood mortality and deformities such as spina bifida have been linked to Lejeune’s dangerous water. The most contaminated wells were closed in 1985. In 2012, Congress passed the Honoring America’s Veterans and Caring for Camp Lejeune Families Act to extend benefits to affected veterans or their survivors. Among the most celebrated recipients was Sarasota’s Tom Gervasi, whose marathon disability claims struggles for breast cancer compensation drew national media coverage. Gervasi won his fight just eight months before his death in December at age 77. According to the VA’s initial statement, “The law authorizes care for 15 illnesses or conditions, even if there is insufficient medical evidence to conclude that such conditions are attributable to the military service or residence at Camp Lejeune.” Eligibility is limited to veterans who were stationed at Lejeune for no less than 30 days between January 1, 1957, and December 31, 1987. But the new law has done little to mollify others who appear to meet those criteria.

Cheryl Baillargeon met Dan Albert right after he left the Marine Corps in 1966. He was stationed at Camp Lejeune for the previous 16 months. They wed in 1967 and were living in Michigan when Albert died in 1988. Since remarried, Baillargeon did not learn about the water contamination scandal — which base authorities initially concealed — until more than two decades after her husband died. According to Albert’s death certificate, four cancers were responsible for his death, including “adenocarcinoma of the left kidney.” In 2011, the Environmental Protection Agency identified trichloroethylene as a carcinogen, due largely to its links to kidney cancer. Kidney cancer is on the Families Act list. Baillargeon applied for dependency and indemnity compensation two years before

Congress passed the Families Act. Although Albert had no documentation to support it, the Marine veteran had complained that exposure to the carcinogenic defoliant Agent Orange in Vietnam created his ultimately fatal health problems. Ignorant of the Lejeune water controversy, Baillargeon decided to file an Agent Orange claim in 2010 after a friend suggested she would likely qualify as a widow.

In December 2012, the VA asked her to resubmit her claim, stating it had misplaced the original file. By then, Baillargeon had read about the Camp Lejeune controversy, largely through the reports about Gervasi's struggle for benefits. That prompted her to add Albert's 16-month tenure at Lejeune as a contributor to his death. In rejecting Baillargeon's claim last September, the VA acknowledged Albert "may have been exposed" to toxic water, and duly noted the kidney cancer as "the primary cause" of death. But the report added "the VA examiner concluded that the adenocarcinoma of the left kidney" was "less likely as not caused by or a result of" Camp Lejeune's water. Furthermore, without sharing the data that informed its conclusions, the denial stated Albert's exposure was "well below the dose which might be considered a risk for the development or renal cancer." The unnamed examiner added that renal cancers "are more common in men than women" and "usually occur within the sixth to eighth decade of life." Finally, the VA claimed, "Prior to Mr. Albert's death, service connection had not been established for any disabilities." Baillargeon, whose husband was 44 when he died, phoned the VA's rejection-letter hotline for clarification. She says she is still waiting for a callback, and has since filed an appeal. "My husband met all the requirements," Baillargeon says. "He had an honorable discharge, he was stationed at Camp Lejeune during the right time frame. How can a law that says you have to have been there for at least two months turn around and say 16 months don't give you enough exposure? This doesn't make any sense to me."

Equally exasperated are Jim Doner and his wife of 23 years, Bobbi. Diagnosed with bladder cancer in 1998, and also suffering from colon and prostate cancer, Jim was alerted to the Camp Lejeune situation in 2009. A seven-year USMC veteran, the retired sergeant was at Lejeune from 1962-64. The Doners filed an unsuccessful benefits claim in 2009. In its 2010 ruling, the VA conceded National Research Council studies discovered "some association with certain malignancies by the contaminated water," but "there is no causation that has been proven." The VA also stated Doner's diagnosis did not occur "within one year from your military separation." Sarasota urologist Dr. Alan Treiman went to bat for Doner, a patient, with a letter voicing strong suspicions of linkage between the Lejeune water and Doner's bladder/prostate cancers. "I would not expect any symptoms of exposure to occur during his years of service or within a year or two after service," Treiman wrote after reviewing Doner's records. "Exposure to these chemicals takes 20, 30, or even 40 years to manifest itself in terms of an increase incidence of cancer in the urinary tract."

The VA dismissed Treiman's concerns as "observational and not based on scientific studies." Two years later, as part of the Families Act, Congress mandated that bladder cancer be listed among the 15 eligible illnesses. But the inclusive new rules have made no impact on Jim Doner so far. "When you're talking to the VA," says Doner, who has filed an appeal, "you're talking to a brick wall. This has ruined my golden years." Bobbi Doner, who keeps track of the paperwork, says the system is rigged against them. In its last correspondence in December, the VA stated "We are still processing your application for compensation. We apologize for the delay." Says Bobbi, "Every time I try to call, it's always somebody different, or they want me to call somewhere else. Getting a straight answer from these people is like pulling teeth."

In its most recent news release last year, the VA stated 6,295 veterans applied for Camp Lejeune relief from Oct. 1, 2012, and Sept. 30, 2013. The agency noted 141 veterans were denied due to failure to "meet statutory requirements," and that 43 "are awaiting an eligibility decision." Last year's VA update also said treatment for family members has yet to begin, "pending the publishing of the family member regulations." One of those Marine family members is Mike Partain, born on base in 1968 and diagnosed for rare male breast cancer in 2007. A Winter Haven insurance claims adjuster, Partain describes his condition as so "devastating" that "I missed my middle age."

Partain's subsequent pursuit of answers was chronicled in the award-winning 2011 documentary "Semper Fi: Always Faithful."

"The 2012 law was a stop-gap measure," he says. "It didn't grant service-connection and that's the problem. The bill gives limited health care to the veterans, but then you've got to go and prove it. For the life of me, it is hard to fathom how on one hand they grant medical care for the veterans but then require them to prove their illnesses to receive any other benefits? They gave Tom (Gervasi) medical care, but what he really needed were pension benefits for his wife. "The fact that they passed a law to give you health benefits for this is an admission that these people were poisoned. But the VA's language is still 'you can't prove it.' So the law needs to be changed." The offices of Florida senators Bill Nelson and Marco Rubio say they support a bill that would extend the Lejeune veterans eligibility dates from 1957 to Aug. 1, 1953. Tom Gervasi, who was at the base in 1956, was granted an exemption to the existing parameters. Neither senator addressed the service-connection issue. "This is exhausting," says Cheryl Baillargeon. "I know they want us to shut up and go away." [Source: Florida Herald-Tribune | Billy Cox | 17 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 16 thru 28 Feb 2014

- **Merced CA** - The Department of Veterans Affairs has terminated its contract with Anthony J. Thompson, a Merced County ex-employee who was arrested in mid-FEB on suspicion of sexual bribery. Sheryl Grubb, public affairs chief with VA Central California, confirmed 18 FEB that Thompson's contract has been canceled and the agency will no longer place homeless veterans inside his two homes. Grubb said the contract was terminated pending the outcome of the case, and for the safety and welfare of the veterans. "Upon review, we terminated the contract as of today," Grubb said Tuesday. "Obviously, we can't say anything about the allegations, but we have no evidence of him doing anything wrong in terms of the VA contract." The 53-year-old operated two homes providing transitional housing to homeless veterans for a maximum of 120 days. Thompson was paid \$55 per night for each veteran, Grubb said.

Thompson, a collections supervisor for the Department of Revenue and Reimbursement, was arrested 11 FEB on suspicion of bribery after a three-week investigation by the Merced County Sheriff's Department. Before the contract's termination, eight veterans were housed inside Thompson's two homes, one at 2713 Lexington Ave. in Merced and the other at 3545 W. Michigan Ave. in Fresno. Grubb said it's unknown how many years Thompson operated the homes, but the contract was last renewed in October 2013. VA officials relocated the veterans. Thompson's arrest last week came on the heels of an internal investigation launched late last year by Merced County into complaints of harassment and discrimination. The county hired Susan Hatmaker of Fresno-based Sutton Hatmaker Law Corp. to conduct the investigation. Hatmaker was paid \$30,703.20 for her work on the investigation. Hatmaker's investigation of Thompson closed 13 NOV, and the county issued a letter 3 DEC, saying there was "insufficient evidence" that Thompson engaged in discrimination or harassment, based on race or any other protected characteristic.

Multiple county employees, who spoke on condition of anonymity to protect their jobs, said Thompson was offered a retirement package Friday. County officials confirmed Thompson is no longer a county employee, but would not say whether he's been offered retirement. Merced County detectives believe Thompson, who's worked for the county since 1987, promised to manipulate the amount of money one woman's son owed the county in exchange for "sexual favors" and "dates." Thompson is scheduled to appear in Merced County Superior Court on 11 MAR for his arraignment hearing. Deputies are asking

anyone with information about the case to contact Detective Aaron Rosenberg at the Merced County Sheriff's Department at (209) 385-7444. [Source: Merced Sunstar | Ramona Giwargis | 18 Feb 2014 ++]

- **Tuscaloosa AL** - Timothy Lee Hornsby, 55, pleaded guilty 18 FEB to fraudulently receiving nearly \$43,000 from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs over five years. Hornsby faces a federal charge of theft of government property. He entered a guilty plea during a hearing before U.S. District Judge Karon O. Bowdre. According to a plea agreement with prosecutors, Hornsby agreed to plead guilty to the charge against him and to pay restitution of \$42,749.72. Court documents lay out the details of Hornsby's theft: Certain veterans are eligible for payment or reimbursement for travel costs to receive VA medical care. Between 2006 and 2011, Hornsby submitted fraudulent VA travel reimbursement forms and received money to which he was not entitled. On more than 450 travel vouchers, Hornsby claimed to be traveling from an address in Lourin, Mississippi, to the Tuscaloosa VA Medical Center. An investigation revealed that he actually was living in Tuscaloosa at the time. Hornsby will remain free on bond as he awaits sentencing, which is set for 10:30 a.m. July 10. The maximum punishment for theft of government property is 10 years in prison and a \$250,000 fine, but prosecutors agreed that Hornsby should receive a reduced sentence for accepting responsibility, according to a plea agreement. [Source: Al.com | Kelsey Stein | 19 Feb 2014 ++]
- **Richmond VA** -- A Richmond woman was sentenced 19 FEB to twenty months in prison, followed by three years of supervised release, for defrauding the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, according to the U.S. Attorney's Office. Kimberly Gregory, 54, pleaded guilty to the charge of making a false statement on November 19, 2013. Gregory defrauded the VA out of educational benefits. Gregory ran a beauty school in Richmond called Become New Beauty and was certified by the VA to receive educational funds for veterans enrolled in its programs. Rose Simmons, who ran a beauty school called Advanced Cosmetology Institute in Chesapeake, was not certified by the VA to receive VA educational funds for veterans enrolled in that school. In order to tap into the veteran funds, Simmons and Gregory agreed to falsely submit claims to the VA for ACI students by falsely stating that they were attending BNB. In addition, they raised the tuition of BNB from approximately \$5,000 to nearly \$17,000. Gregory and Simmons caused a loss to the government in excess of \$85,000. Simmons also pleaded guilty on November 14, 2013 and will be sentenced in April. [Source: WVEC.com 19 Feb. 2014 ++]
- **Hampton VA** -- A man will serve a little more than five years in prison for stealing and using the identities of other people to obtain passports and to enlist in the Navy and Army then receive VA benefits. **Steven Jay Perrino**, 58, had used the identities of at least five other people since 1986, according to a news release from the U.S. Attorney's Office. He was sentenced 20 FEB in federal court to five years and one month in prison, followed by three years of supervised release for theft of government money and aggravated identity theft. He also was ordered to pay \$122,134 in restitution to the Department of Veterans Affairs. He pleaded guilty in November. The investigation began in September after diplomatic security analysts found possible fraudulent passport applications, the release says. They worked with the VA's Office of the Inspector General and U.S. postal inspectors along with police in Hampton and Virginia Beach. Perrino used information and documents to apply for passports and drivers licenses. He then used the fake identities to enlist in the Navy and Army. After being fraudulently enlisted in the Army for 10 years, he received VA benefits under someone else's name. He received more than \$138,000 in benefits because of the Montgomery and G.I. Bills and from federal student loans and grants. [Source: The Virginian-Pilot 21 Feb 2014 ++]
- **Alexandria, Va.** – Anthony R. Bilby, 40, was sentenced 21 FEB, after pleading guilty on 2 DEC 2013, to 16 months in prison followed by two years of supervised release, for conspiracy to commit wire fraud and

major government fraud. Bilby also was ordered to forfeit \$1,065,103.90, representing his personal proceeds from the conspiracy. According to court documents, from APR 2007 through NOV 2012, while Bilby was employed by two service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses, he participated in a conspiracy to obtain government contracts through fraud and misrepresentation. During this time period, Bilby caused employees at a nominal competitor to submit inflated bids on the same procurements for which Bilby submitted bids on behalf of his employers. Bilby also gained improper access to the procurement process through co-conspirators working within the government. These co-conspirators provided Bilby and others with internal government cost estimates, so that Bilby knew how much the government was willing to pay before he drafted his and his competitor's bids. Bilby also drafted portions of internal procurement documents in a manner that increased his odds of winning contracts without facing actual competition. One of Bilby's employers, with Bilby's knowledge and assent, agreed to pay ten percent of its profits on a contract worth more than \$24 million to co-conspirators within the government. These co-conspirators, in turn, provided Bilby and his employer with improper access to documents and a competitive advantage in obtaining the contract. In total, the conduct of Bilby and others resulted in the award of more than \$33 million in federal contracts through fraudulent procurement practices. [Source: USDOJ Dist of Eastern VA Press Release 21 Feb 2014 ++]

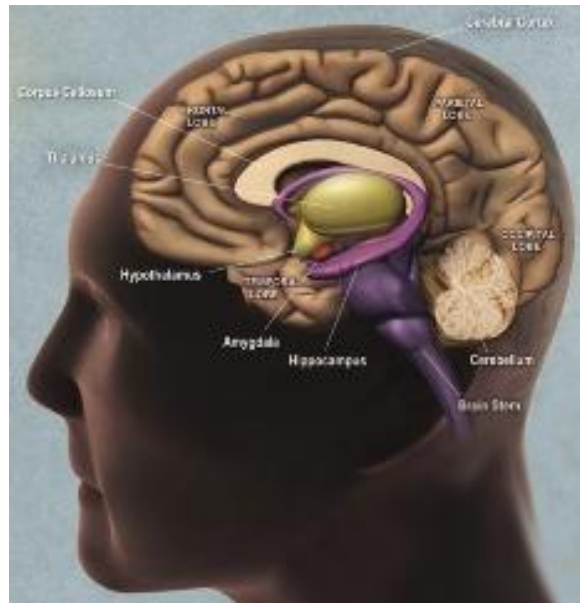
- **Nashville TN** -- A veteran pleaded guilty in U.S. District Court in Nashville on 24 FEB to theft of government property after embezzling more than \$26,900 from the Department of Veterans Affairs. **Maurice Sublett**, 48, applied for VA benefits in June 2000 because of complications stemming from a back injury he sustained in 1986 while serving in the U.S. Army's 82nd Airborne Division. Sublett applied for the benefits after his honorable discharge in 1993. In December 2002, a VA examiner determined that he was 100 percent occupationally and medically disabled and granted him the benefits. But from February 2006 to June 2006, after being awarded the total disability benefits, he was employed as a correctional officer at the Davidson County Sheriff's Office. He also worked as a cable technician at Comcast Communications between October 2006 and October 2007. Sublett was required to complete an annual employment questionnaire, certifying whether he was employed at any time throughout the year. He continuously lied on the questionnaires. Between March 2006 and November 2007, Sublett obtained about \$30,769 in permanent VA individual unemployment benefits, to which "he was not entitled," according to the indictment. He is requesting five years of probation and repayment of more than \$26,900 in restitution to the government. His plea agreement was tentatively accepted, pending U.S. District Judge Kevin Sharp's review of the pre-sentence report. If the agreement is denied, Sublett faces a maximum of 10 years in federal prison and a \$250,000 fine. Sentencing is scheduled for 16 MAY. [Source: The Tennessean | Mamie Nash | 24 Feb 2014 ++]

PTSD Update 161 ► **Why Some and Not Others**

Why do posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD) symptoms persist in some people and not others? An experiment performed more than 100 years ago is helping us find answers. The team and researchers of *the Division of Military Internal Medicine at Uniformed Services University (USU) and those* at other top universities are learning more about PTSD using Russian scientist Ivan Pavlov's famous "conditioned response" experiment. Working with service members with and without PTSD, they hope to better understand the disorder to improve diagnosis and treatment.

One experiment, based on Pavlov's discovery, involves observing how someone with PTSD experiences fear. The feeling of fear is an important cue to deciding if our surroundings are safe or dangerous. It also prepares us to respond. A part of the brain known as the **amygdala** plays a big role in deciding whether to stay where we are or run

away, the “fight or flight” response. In this experiment, they show individuals colored shapes on a computer screen. One pattern of shapes is paired with an uncomfortable puff of air directed to their throats. They show the shapes and then measure their physiological responses, such as heart rate, blood pressure, sweating and eye blinking. Their responses indirectly measure how their brain responds to stimuli. The amygdala and other parts of the brain trigger those responses.



This illustration shows a three-dimensional side view of the brain. The amygdala lies deep within the brain and the brain stem.

During the experiment, study participants learn that one pattern of shapes signifies danger with the puff of air, while another pattern signifies safety, or no puff of air. Participants with PTSD tend to have a greater physiologic response to the danger cues — increased heart rate, blood pressure, sweat response and eye blinking, than those who don't have PTSD. This holds true even if they've had similar traumatic experiences, such as combat. After study participants have learned whether danger is near or not by the pattern of shapes they see, they're shown the shape that means danger together with the one that means safety. Those with PTSD tend to pay more attention to the danger signal. Those who don't have PTSD focus on the safety signal. This is known by their physiological responses.

From this experiment it was learned that individuals with PTSD find it harder to control their fear response even when danger and safety signals are present at the same time. The danger cue promotes such a fear of something bad happening that they can't believe in the safety cue. This pattern fits with studies of the brain that show that the frontal lobes, which normally control the fear centers of the brain, don't perform as well in individuals with PTSD. To learn more about the relationship between PTSD and the brain, they look at how the brain functions in the same patients who did the shapes experiment. For this a special tool called functional MRI is used. The tool measures changes in oxygen levels in different parts of the brain. That gives certain types of information, such as how strongly the amygdala responds to fear. New imaging techniques, technologies such as virtual reality, and mobile applications such as smartphone apps can help us understand and treat PTSD. [Source: DcoE Blog | Col. (Dr.) Michael Roy, USA (Ret) | 20 Feb 2014 ++]

PTSD Update 162 ► USPHS Delaying Marijuana Clinical Study

Thousands of veterans and other medical marijuana patients nationwide use marijuana to treat symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), but the U.S. Public Health Service (PHS) is blocking researchers who are seeking to learn more about the risks and benefits of the treatment. A Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and University of Arizona Institutional Review Board (IRB)-approved protocol for a study of marijuana for symptoms of PTSD in U.S. veterans, sponsored by the non-profit Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS), has been on hold for over 3½ months, as researchers wait for the PHS to respond to their request to purchase marijuana for the study. The study would explore the safety and effectiveness of smoked and/or vaporized marijuana for 50 U.S. veterans with chronic, treatment-resistant PTSD. Animal studies have already shown that marijuana helps quiet an overactive fear system, but no controlled clinical studies have taken place with PTSD patients.

“This groundbreaking research could assist doctors in how to recommend treatment for PTSD patients who have been unresponsive to traditional therapies,” according to MAPS’ Executive Director Rick Doblin, Ph.D. The PHS marijuana review process exists only because the National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) has a Drug Enforcement Administration (DEA)-protected monopoly on the supply of marijuana legal for use in FDA-regulated research. This additional review is not required for research on any other Schedule I drug. MAPS resubmitted a revised protocol on Oct. 24, 2013, after the original protocol was rejected by the PHS in September, 2011. Unfortunately, unlike the FDA, which must respond to submissions within 30 days of receiving them, the PHS has no such time limit. Meanwhile, the PHS is successfully preventing FDA and IRB-approved research from taking place.

PTSD is considered a life-threatening illness, as people suffering from PTSD are at increased risk of homelessness, drug abuse and alcoholism, and are more likely to commit suicide. “If the PHS review requirement was removed,” says Dr. Sue Sisley, who would lead the study, “we would gather information that could help veterans today. The stifling of medical research on marijuana stands in the way of our vets returning to a normal life.” Founded in 1986, the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies (MAPS) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit research and educational organization that develops medical, legal, and cultural contexts for people to benefit from the careful uses of psychedelics and marijuana. MAPS is the only organization working to evaluate the safety and efficacy of botanical marijuana as a prescription medicine for specific medical uses approved by the FDA. [Source: MAPS | Brad Burge | 21 Feb 2014 ++]

American Legion ROAR ► VA Obstructs Legion Quality Review

A congressional staffer will accompany members of The American Legion during a survey of Department of Veterans Affairs regional centers after VA official blocked representatives of the veterans group from meeting with employees at the Seattle facility. House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) believes the interference was a "deliberate and retaliatory" response to Legion testimony in December that the VA's accuracy rate on disability claims is significantly lower than the department claims. "I caution that any obstruction to external review of [VA] work product is contrary to both transparency and government accountability," Miller said in a blistering 14 FEB letter to VA Secretary Erik Shinseki. "It will not be tolerated. ... Moreover, actions taken to frustrate the reviews of The American Legion are hostile to both the mission of the [VA] and the interests of our nation's veterans." To make sure there is no future obstruction of the Legion's work, a committee staffer will accompany Legion representatives on their VA center visits and report to him, Miller said.

The VA is not commenting on Miller's letter or the department's decision to bar employees from talking the Legion representatives. "VA is reviewing the issues raised in Chairman Miller's letter related to the American

Legion, and will respond to his office," VA spokeswoman Victoria Dillon said in an email on 20 FEB. The Legion has been conducting its Regional Office Action Reviews for 15 years. The oversight reviews check on the quality of work and assess work processes. They're intended to serve the interests of the veterans and also the VA by providing the perspective of an interested outsider. Legion officials were taken aback in January, however, when they were unable to meet with staff at the VA Regional Center in Seattle, Wash. "We worked quite well with the VA before this," said Verna Jones, the Legion's national director for veterans' affairs and rehabilitation. Recently, however, "there has been some criticism of the VA in our [congressional] testimony, a difference of opinion on their accuracy rate. We've been vocal about that."

In December, a Legion official challenged the VA on its accuracy rate during a hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs subcommittee on disability and memorial affairs. The VA has said its accuracy rate is about 90 percent. Zachary Hearn, deputy director of benefits for the Legion, said the Legion's review of 260 claims found errors in 55 percent. In his letter to Shinseki, Miller pointed the finger at Under Secretary for Veterans Benefits Allison Hickey for obstructing the Legion ROAR team. Hickey has been a frequent target of congressional criticism, and Miller has previously called for her resignation.

In December, Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC), ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, pressed Hickey over the conflicting statistics, noting that the GAO and other organizations have also come up with numbers far different than the VA's. The VA has continued to defend its own figures, arguing that the small samplings by the Legion, GAO and others don't give a full picture. "Before we went to Seattle [Hickey] said she wouldn't allow us to talk to the employees," Jones said. "There may be some hurt feelings over us disagreeing with their [VA] accuracy rates, but we have a responsibility to be transparent and up front with our members and veterans in general. ... None of this is intended to hurt anyone or speak ill of anyone. But it is intended to be honest so we can help veterans." [Source: Military.com | Bryant Jordan | 21 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Loans Update 15 ► What to do if Loan is Denied

Buying and owning your own home is part of the phenomena known as the American Dream. Property ownership here in these United States is emblazoned as something of a right and takes on a status like nowhere else in the world. Those with VA loan eligibility have an upper hand compared to those who don't have the VA home loan benefit and can get a piece of their own American Dream with no money down, lower closing costs and easier qualifying compared to conventional loans. Sometimes though the dream turns a little bit scary for some and eventually a nightmare when their VA loan application is turned down. What should someone do if their VA loan application is in fact denied?



Get the Facts. When lenders decline a loan, they do so reluctantly. VA lenders make money by approving loans, not denying them so they'll do what they can to get your approval. When they can't, they'll send what is called an

Adverse Action notice. This is an official form and required by law to provide you with a written explanation of why your loan was not approved. You'll get this form in the mail but before you do, your loan officer will likely be the one who first gives you the bad news. You need to first find out specifically, exactly why your loan was denied. Are your credit scores too low? Do you not make enough income to qualify? If your credit is impaired, you can begin the process of repairing it. If you can't afford the monthly payments then borrow less, put more down or get a longer term loan. The key is knowing exactly the cause of your declination. Without knowing, you can't address the problem.

Overlays. You know that the VA does not approve VA home loan applications directly, VA lenders do. However, the VA does establish minimum guidelines that the lender must follow. If the VA lender does in fact approve the loan using required VA criteria, the loan is eligible for the VA loan guarantee. As long as the lender followed proper underwriting protocol, should the loan ever go into default, the lender is entitled to 25 percent of the loan amount. Lenders must make sure the borrower has established an acceptable credit history. Borrowers must be able to prove their income and have enough money in the bank to cover closing costs associated with the loan such as for an appraisal and homeowner's insurance. Whatever the VA requires, lenders must not only follow those guidelines but document the process.

However, some lenders create additional guidelines of their own on top of what the VA requires. VA lenders can't subvert VA requirements in order to approve a loan but they can add additional qualifications making it more difficult to qualify for the loan. These additional guidelines are called "overlays." For example, while the VA doesn't have a minimum credit score requirement, most lenders have settled on a minimum credit score of 640 in order to be approved. If you get a phone call from your loan officer with the bad news that your credit score is 635 and the minimum is 640, don't think for a minute that you're a lost cause. Other lenders have a 620 requirement. If you get declined, find out why then call other lenders to see if they have a similar overlay.

Know Before You Go. Finally, in today's world, there really is no reason to get turned down for a VA loan if you've already been preapproved. Before you ever go out shopping or consider a refinance, contact a VA Lender such as <https://www.valoancaptain.com> and go over your situation. Take a look at your income, your debts and your credit. Answer all questions before you even get to the point of making an offer on a property. Most sellers today ask for a preapproval letter before reviewing any offer anyway, so it's best to get all questions answered in advance. If you submitted your application to a lender, supplied your documentation and your credit was reviewed, if you didn't get your approval once you found a property, it's likely your VA loan officer made a mistake somewhere or the information you provided on your application couldn't be verified.

[Source: Mil.com | VA Loan Captain | Sep 2013 ++]

VA Loans Update 16 ► Hawaii Water Catchment Homes

There's good news trickling down from Washington, D.C., for Hawaii Island's 17,000 veterans. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs will once again guarantee loans for homes on water catchment systems. The news was announced late 19 FEB by U.S. Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, a Democrat representing Hawaii's 2nd Congressional District. "Over the past year, I have worked to overcome tremendous obstacles that have prevented Hawaii's veterans from purchasing a home with their VA benefits simply because the only available water source for their home was a rainwater catchment system," Gabbard said in a statement. "For too long veterans who have served our country have been caught in an unacceptable bureaucratic stalemate which has prevented them from using the benefits they have earned and deserve."



Hawaii veterans Shep Kuester, left, and Caleb Churchill couldn't get a VA loan when they purchased homes

West Hawaii Today highlighted the problem in August in an article featuring two Hawaiian Paradise Park veterans who were forced to spend tens of thousands more to have their home loans backed by conventional sources because of their water catchment systems. VA loans are preferable because homes can often be financed with little or no money down, and the buyer doesn't have to pay inspection fees, mortgage insurance, closing costs and the like. It's estimated that more than 60,000 Big Island homes rely on water catchment because there is no municipal water service to their properties. Municipal water systems are tested regularly; catchment systems are not. Caleb Churchill, a disabled vet who along with Shep Kuester was profiled in the article, has kept up a steady drumbeat of resistance to the VA's 2011 decision to quit backing loans on homes with catchment. Churchill volunteers at the Veterans of Foreign Wars service office in Hilo, trying to help his former comrades in arms adjust to civilian life.

The new rule, circulated by the VA on Wednesday, allows catchment as long as the buyers are given a University of Hawaii pamphlet on guidelines for water catchment systems and have the catchment tank tested by a laboratory acceptable to the state Department of Health. "We're so excited," Kuester said 20 FEB, crediting his pal, Churchill, as the "engine that got this done." "This is going to help a lot of the veterans, especially the young veterans who will be able to afford their first home," Kuester said. "Our community is going to benefit tremendously from this influx of skilled workers and entrepreneurial families making this place home." Gabbard, herself a veteran, was given credit by most of those interviewed Thursday because of the consistent effort of her office getting the VA to reconsider its stance. Ronald P. Han Jr., director of the state Office of Veterans' Services was also pleased. "This is great news. Many veterans have waited two years and some longer," Han said. "We appreciate the veterans and their patience." A host of elected officials, government agencies and lenders have been involved in the discussion over the past three years.

- The state Department of Health tried to get a waiver, noting that all other federal mortgage agencies, including HUD, Fannie Mae, Freddie Mac and USDA Rural Development, approved waivers for properties with catchment systems in Hawaii.
- Mayor Billy Kenoi, former state Reps. Bob Herkes and Jerry Chang, both Democrats and vets who themselves have relied on catchment systems, and local real estate agents and lenders also kept up steady letter-writing campaigns.
- U.S. Sen. Mazie Hirono, a Hawaii Democrat, also praised the VA's decision. "After raising this issue directly with (VA) Secretary (Eric) Shinseki, I would like to thank him for his strong leadership in once again helping pave the way for veterans to buy a home, even in Hawaii's deep rural areas that don't have access to county water lines," Hirono said in a statement.
- Hirono said she also met with state Health Department acting director Gary Gill to discuss this issue.

Hawaii County has supplemented homeowners' private water catchment systems by providing a network of public water spigots around the island, so residents can draw water for drinking and cooking. In a 2004 environmental assessment, the county estimated expanding municipal water to the Puna District alone would cost upwards of \$88 million in 1999 dollars. [Source: West Hawaii Today | Nancy Cook Lauer | 21 Feb 2014 ++]

VAMC West Haven CT Update 01 ► VA OIG Inspection Results

A federal inspection of the [VA Hospital in West Haven](#) found poor cleaning procedures and inadequate safeguards in the operating room for handling infectious patients. The office of the inspector general of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs cited a number of deficiencies in the operating room at the VA Connecticut Healthcare System in West Haven. Among them:

- Cleaning procedures in the operating room were inadequately performed
- Insect control, which operating room workers said has been a problem — mostly seasonal — for about eight years.
- Inadequate safeguards for handling patients with infectious diseases, although the report states that the hospital had made improvements and updated its policies in this regard by the end of the review.

"We found that cleanliness of the OR could not be assured due to inadequate staff resources, incomplete and inconsistent [standard operating procedures], poor supervision and training of [cleaning staff], and lack of oversight," the report states. The report also states that despite an "increased risk to patients and staff, our review of Infection Control Committee minutes and quality assurance reports found no conclusive evidence that the environment of care deficiencies in the OR resulted in negative patient outcomes." Recommendations in the report include that the hospital bring its operating room policies and procedures up to industry standards, improve insect control in the operating room, improve training and staffing levels of its cleaning services and that the facility director "implement procedures to monitor the operating room environment of care and to address identified deficiencies."

The investigation was prompted by answers to an anonymous online survey, in which facility staff made several charges of poor cleaning and staffing in the operating room. In response to these allegations, the federal VA department made an unannounced visit to the VA campus in June and a scheduled visit in August. "We identified several concerns regarding [emergency management services] staff supervision," the report states. "During an unannounced evening inspection of the OR, we saw no EMS staff for almost an hour, when two staff members should have been present. EMS supervisors we spoke to could not explain the absence of employees during this time." The federal report includes letters from Dr. Michael Mayo-Smith, network director for VA New England Healthcare System, and Gerald Culliton, facility director for the VA Connecticut Healthcare System. Both wrote that they "concur" with the recommendations.

The report also includes the facility's plans to fulfill the recommendations, which include using checklists to standardize cleaning, an evaluation of staffing and the creation of a new position to educate EMS staff. All the facility's plans are expected to be completed no later than March 15. VA officials said in a statement late Tuesday that the report "a thorough and honest snapshot from an inspection that occurred in June 2013." "The amount of detail in the report and the corrective actions being undertaken demonstrate the seriousness with which VA Connecticut responded to the IG report," the statement said. "It also underscores the commitment of VA — both at the national and local levels — to provide veterans the best possible care environment." [Source: The Hartford Courant | William Heir | 19 Feb 2014 ++]

VAMC West Los Angeles Update 09 ► Medical Exam Requests Purged

Employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) destroyed veterans' medical files in a systematic attempt to eliminate backlogged veteran medical exam requests, a former VA employee told the Washington D.C. based Daily Caller. Audio of an internal VA meeting obtained by The Daily Caller indicates that VA officials in Los Angeles intentionally canceled backlogged patient exam requests. "The committee was called System Redesign and the purpose of the meeting was to figure out ways to correct the department's efficiency. And one of the issues at the time was the backlog," Oliver Mitchell, a Marine veteran and former patient services assistant in the VA Greater Los Angeles Medical Center, told TheDC. "We just didn't have the resources to conduct all of those exams. Basically we would get about 3,000 requests a month for [medical] exams, but in a 30-day period we only had the resources to do about 800. That rolls over to the next month and creates a backlog," Mitchell said. "It's a numbers thing. The waiting list counts against the hospital's efficiency. The longer the veteran waits for an exam that counts against the hospital as far as productivity is concerned."

By 2008, some patients were "waiting six to nine months for an exam" and VA "didn't know how to address the issue," Mitchell said. VA Greater Los Angeles Radiology department chief Dr. Suzie El-Saden initiated an "ongoing discussion in the department" to cancel exam requests and destroy veterans' medical files so that no record of the exam requests would exist, thus reducing the backlog, Mitchell said. Audio [<http://dailycaller.com/2014/02/24/va-employees-destroyed-veterans-medical-records-to-cancel-backlogged-exam-requests-audio/>] from a November 2008 meeting obtained by TheDC depicts VA Greater Los Angeles officials discussing methodology to cancel backlogged exam requests. "I'm still canceling orders from 2001," said a male official in the meeting. "Anything over a year old should be canceled," replied a female official. "Canceled or scheduled?" asked the male official. "Canceled. ... Your backlog should start at April '07," the female official replied, later adding, "a lot of those patients either had their studies somewhere else, had their surgery ... died, don't live in the state. ... It's ridiculous."

El-Saden, according to Mitchell, was "the person who said 'destroy' the records." And her plan was actually carried out. "That actually happened," Mitchell said. "We had that discussion in November 2008 and then in March 2009 they started to delete the exams. Once you cancel or delete an order it automatically cancels out that record" so that no record of the exam requests remained. Mitchell tried to blow the whistle on the scheme and ended up being transferred out of his department and eventually losing his job. "I actually filed a complaint with the VA [Inspector General] IG and the office of special counsel. The IG requested if I had any documentation. They wanted names. I gave them [about] a thousand names," Mitchell said. "The list I turned into the IG went all the way back to 1997. I filed the initial complaint with the IG. ... The IG instead of doing their own investigation just gave it to the facility and made them aware of my complaint." Mitchell eventually wrote to Congress about the issue in January 2011. Two months later, in March 2011, he was fired.

Mitchell received an April 30, 2013 letter from the U.S. Office of Special Counsel stating that OIG found in November 2009 that "all imaging services across the country were instructed to mass purge all outstanding imaging orders for studies older than six months, where the procedure was no longer needed" and that "patient imaging requests found to still be valid were scheduled. ... Approval was granted for this process by the MEC [Medical Executive Committee], and in collaboration with the Service Chiefs and/or Careline Directors within the health-care system." But Mitchell said that in Los Angeles, exam requests that were found to still be needed were "definitely" destroyed. VA disputed that valid records were destroyed. Under Secretary for Health Dr. Robert Petzel addressed questions from members of the House of Representatives 26 FEB on this topic saying, "There was no attempt to eliminate records." and that several hundred records were properly closed only after a thorough administrative review. [Source: The Daily Caller | Patrick Howley | 24 Feb 2014 ++]

VAMC West Los Angeles Update 10 ► VA Denies Record dumping

You may have seen recent news coverage alleging the mishandling of patient records by a VA medical facility in 2008. Some media reports on this issue have been inaccurate. VA did not destroy patients' personal medical records in VA's electronic health record system, which has been in place since the 1990s. The Department of Veterans Affairs cares deeply for every Veteran we are privileged to serve. Our goal is to provide the best quality, safe and effective health care our Veterans have earned and deserve. VA has established a record of safe, exceptional health care that is consistently recognized by independent reviews and organizations. Under Secretary for Health Dr. Robert Petzel addressed questions from members of the House of Representatives 26 FEB on this topic saying, "There was no attempt to eliminate records." and that several hundred records were properly closed only after a thorough administrative review.

The Greater Los Angeles VA Medical did identify that there were large numbers of very old imaging requests in the system. As part of appropriate patient care processes and in accordance with nationally established VA guidelines, the medical center performed a carefully planned project of administratively clearing old imaging requests after an extensive review of each individual request. At no time were "group" close-outs of imaging studies completed. If patients do not show for their appointment or do not respond to scheduling attempts, orders are eventually discontinued after 12 calendar months. This is in accordance with VA guidance. Any study older than a year would no longer have clinical relevance and patients would need to be reevaluated by their providers prior to performing the study. In no instance was a study not completed because of a scheduling issue. Reasons for studies not being completed included:

- Studies had been ordered when patients were inpatients but they had been discharged and did not follow-up at the Greater Los Angeles VA Medical Center.
- Studies were ordered out of the emergency department on patients who were from out of town and who did not return for follow-up.
- Studies were no longer clinically relevant because patients had had other evaluations that obviated the need for the imaging study yet the request was not deleted.
- Patients had not returned calls to schedule or did not show for the scheduled study.
- Patients were no longer in the system.

America's Veterans deserve the very best this nation can offer to honor their service and sacrifice. VA employees — nearly one-third of whom are Veterans themselves — care deeply for every Veteran we are privileged to serve. What Veterans do not deserve is misinformation and distortions that may cause them to avoid seeking earned services and benefits. They deserve facts. Military Times has more on the 26 FEB House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health hearing at <http://www.militarytimes.com/article/20140226/BENEFITS04/302260029/Top-VA-health-official-denies-dumping-patient-records>. [Source: Vantage Point | GLA COS Dr. Dean C. Norman | 26 Feb 2014 ++]

Agent Orange | C-123 Aircraft Update 06 ► VA Claim Submission

From 1971-1982 Air Force reservists, who flew in about 34 dioxin-contaminated aircraft used to spray Agent Orange and returned to the US following discontinuation of the herbicide spraying operations in the Vietnam War, were exposed greater levels of dioxin than previously acknowledged, according to a study published 21 FEB in the

Environmental Research Journal. A summary of the article is available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/lvm0gro114n285h/C-123%20Research%20Article%2021%20Feb%202014.pdf>). “These findings are important because they describe a previously unrecognized source of exposure to dioxin that has health significance to those who engaged in the transport work using these aircraft,” says lead investigator Peter A. Lurker, PhD, PE, CIH, an environmental engineer with many years of experience evaluating environmental exposures in the Air Force.



Wes Carter

Major Wes Carter USAF (Ret), webmaster of the C-123 Veteran Agent Orange Exposure sites www.c123cancer.org & c123cancer.blogspot.com believes that the Environmental Research article combined with the Yale Law review brief at http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/Clinics/vlsc_c123modelBrief.pdf provide the science and law to justify a VA claim for exposure to Agent Orange. He strongly recommends that all vets with claims pending submit this link to the VA along with a copy of the Journal's press release about their research. [Note: The article costs \$45 to download, so instead of providing the complete article, giving VA the link and summary noted above should be adequate for claims). In addition, he recommends the minimum evidence C-123 veterans appealing an exposure claim need to make sure the VA has in their C-file include:

- a. The Washington Post C-123 Contamination Exposure article found at http://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/va-reverses-denial-of-benefits-for-veteran-in-agent-orange-related-case/2013/08/07/7cf1a680-ff81-11e2-96a8-d3b921c0924a_story.html.
- b. The Yale Law review of C-123 exposure laws and eligibilities at http://www.law.yale.edu/documents/pdf/Clinics/vlsc_c123modelBrief.pdf.
- c. Flight orders or other evidence of your duty aboard one of the identified spray aircraft, such as Patches.
- d. Your diagnosis of an Agent Orange-presumptive illness.
- e. The Niesh statement at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/3j9v1wesla50q41/NIEHS%20Response%20to%20Air%20Force%20Retirees-Birnbaum.pdf>.
- f. The ATSDR statement at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/2ggizixnp1iwm6/ATSDR%20Director%20confirms%20C-123%20Exposure%20to%20VA%20%26%20US%20Army.pdf>.
- g. The US Public Health statement <https://www.dropbox.com/s/5r8adgy6li13767/USPHS%20Statements%20for%20JSRRC%20copy.pdf>.
- h. A copy of Paul Bailey's VA award - it doesn't make precedence but it shows the logic – available at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/2x6aezr5ec3ym3q/Bailey%20C-123%20Claim%20Reversal%20%26%20Award.pdf>.

- i. The Patches Agent Orange test at the USAF Museum located at <https://www.dropbox.com/s/3j9v1wesla50q41/NIEHS%20Response%20to%20Air%20Force%20Retirees-Birnbaum.pdf>.
- j. C-123 Evidence Hyperlinks <https://www.dropbox.com/s/g6r55qc9psp015b/C-123%20Source%20Materials%20%282%29.doc>.

For additional assistance or information go to www.c123cancer.org & c123cancer.blogspot.com or email <mailto:c123cancer@gmail.com>. [Source: Wes Carter msg. 22 Feb 2014 ++]

Vets



MOH Awards ► **Obama to Upgrade 24 Vet's Awards**

On March 18th, 2014, President Barack Obama will award 24 Army veterans the Medal of Honor for conspicuous gallantry. These veterans will receive the Medal of Honor in recognition of their valor during major combat operations in World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War. Each of these Soldiers' bravery was previously recognized by award of the Distinguished Service Cross, the nation's second highest military award; that award will be upgraded to the Medal of Honor in recognition of their gallantry, intrepidity and heroism above and beyond the call of duty. In 2002, Congress, through the Defense Authorization Act, called for a review of Jewish American and Hispanic American veteran war records from WWII, the Korean War and the Vietnam War, to ensure those deserving the Medal of Honor were not denied because of prejudice. During the review, records of several Soldiers of neither Jewish nor Hispanic descent were also found to display criteria worthy of the Medal of Honor. The 2002 Act was amended to allow these Soldiers to be honored with the upgrade - in addition to the Jewish and Hispanic American Soldiers. The 24 recipients of the Medal of Honor will be:

- Specialist Four **Santiago J. Erevia** for his courageous actions while serving as radio telephone operator in Company C, 1st Battalion (Airmobile), 501st Infantry, 101st Airborne Division (Airmobile) during search and clear mission near Tam Ky, Republic of Vietnam.
- Staff Sergeant **Melvin Morris** for his courageous actions while serving as Commander of a Strike Force drawn from Company D, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces, during combat operations against an armed enemy in the vicinity of Chi Lang, Republic of Vietnam on September 17, 1969.
- Sergeant First Class **Jose Rodela** for his courageous actions while serving as the company commander, Detachment B-36, Company A, 5th Special Forces Group (Airborne), 1st Special Forces during combat operations against an armed enemy in Phuoc Long Province, Republic of Vietnam on September 1, 1969.

Vietnam War Posthumously

- Sergeant **Candelario Garcia** for his courageous actions while serving as an acting Team Leader for Company B, 1st Battalion, 2d Infantry, 1st Brigade, 1st Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Lai Khe, Republic of Vietnam on December 8, 1968.
- Specialist Four **Leonard L. Alvarado** for his courageous actions while serving as a Rifleman with Company D, 2d Battalion, 12th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) during combat operations against an armed enemy in Phuoc Long Province, Republic of Vietnam on August 12, 1969.
- Staff Sergeant **Felix M. Conde-Falcon** for his courageous actions while serving as an acting Platoon Leader in Company D, 1st Battalion, 505th Infantry Regiment, 3d Brigade, 82d Airborne Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Ap Tan Hoa, Republic of Vietnam on April 4, 1969.
- Specialist Four **Ardie R. Copas** for his courageous actions while serving as a Machinegunner in Company C, 1st Battalion (Mechanized), 5th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy near Ph Romeas Hek, Cambodia on May 12, 1970.
- Specialist Four **Jesus S. Duran** will receive the Medal of Honor posthumously for his courageous actions while serving as an acting M-60 machinegunner in Company E, 2d Battalion, 5th Cavalry, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile) during combat operations against an armed enemy in the Republic of Vietnam on April 10, 1969.

Korean War Posthumously

- Corporal **Joe R. Baldonado** for his courageous actions while serving as an acting machine gunner in 3d Squad, 2d Platoon, Company B, 187th Airborne Infantry Regiment during combat operations against an armed enemy in Kangdong, Korea on November 25, 1950.
- Corporal **Victor H. Espinoza** for his courageous actions while serving as an Acting Rifleman in Company A, 23d Infantry Regiment, 2d Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Chorwon, Korea on August 1, 1952.
- Sergeant **Eduardo C. Gomez** for his courageous actions while serving with Company I, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Tabu-dong, Korea on September 3, 1950.
- Private First Class **Leonard M. Kravitz** for his courageous actions while serving as an assistant machinegunner with Company M, 5th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Yangpyong, Korea on March 6 and 7, 1951.
- Master Sergeant **Juan E. Negron** for his courageous actions while serving as a member of Company L, 65th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Kalma-Eri, Korea on April 28, 1951.
- Master Sergeant **Mike C. Pena** for his courageous actions while serving as a member of Company F, 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Waegwan, Korea, on September 4, 1950.
- Private **Demensio Rivera** for his courageous actions while serving as an automatic rifleman with 2d Platoon, Company G, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Changyong-ni, Korea on May 23, 1951.
- Private **Miguel A. Vera** for his courageous actions while serving as an automatic rifleman with Company F, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2d Infantry Division in Chorwon, Korea, on September 21, 1952.
- Sergeant Jack Weinstein for his courageous actions while leading 1st Platoon, Company G, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division in Kumsong, Korea on October 19, 1951.

Korean War Posthumously

- Private **Pedro Cano** for his courageous actions while serving with Company C, 8th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Schevenhutte, Germany on December 3, 1944.
- Private **Joe Gandara** for his courageous actions while serving with Company D, 2d Battalion, 507th Parachute Infantry Regiment, 17th Airborne Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Amfreville, France on June 9, 1944.
- Private First Class **Salvador J. Lara** for his courageous actions while serving as the Squad Leader of a rifle squad with 2d Platoon, Company L, 180th Infantry, 45th Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Aprilia, Italy on May 27 and 28, 1944.
- Sergeant **William F. Leonard** for his courageous actions while serving as a Squad Leader in Company C, 30th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy near St. Die, France on November 7, 1944.
- Staff Sergeant **Manuel V. Mendoza** for his courageous actions while serving as a Platoon Sergeant with Company B, 350th Infantry, 88th Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy on Mt. Battaglia, Italy on October 4, 1944.
- Sergeant **Alfred B. Nietzel** for his courageous actions while serving as a section leader for Company H, 16th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division during combat operations against an armed enemy in Heistern, Germany on November 18, 1944.
- First Lieutenant **Donald K. Schwab** for his courageous actions while serving as the Commander of Company E, 15th Infantry Regiment, 3d Infantry Division, during combat operations against an armed enemy near Lure, France on September 17, 1944.

[Source: White house Press Release 21 Feb. 2014 ++]

Vet Census Update 01 ► Numbers Don't Tally for Utah

How many veterans live in Utah? According to one local veterans advocate, the state has a pretty good idea, but the federal government is just guessing. Ogden resident and Vietnam veteran Terry Schow wants to change what he calls a "bogus policy" wherein the United States does not account for veterans in its nationwide census. Since 2000, the U.S. Census Bureau has not tracked the number of veterans residing in the country as a whole, or the number residing in each individual state. "They stopped doing it at the beginning of the 21st Century," Schow said. "I'm not sure why that happened, but it did." The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides official estimates and projections of the total number of veterans by using a mathematical model. According to the VA, Utah has about 150,000 veterans, as of September 2013. But the state's database, which Schow helped create while he served as director of the Utah VA, shows there are more than 176,000 veterans currently living in Utah.



Terry Schow

The state's database relies on information provided at the Utah Driver License Division and Department of Workforce Services. "In (Utah's) database, there are more than 176,000 unique Social Security numbers of veterans in the state," Schow said. "That's a hard count. The (federal) numbers are really just a guess. And a difference of 26,000 between their numbers and ours is not insignificant by any means." Schow, who currently chairs the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Rural Health Advisory Committee, says the government's failure to properly track veterans is a disservice on multiple levels. "There are a lot of reasons why they should be counted and recognized," Schow said. "But my biggest issue is that a lot of the federal dollars that come to the state to help veterans are allocated by the veteran population. So theoretically, the more vets you have, the more money you can qualify for."

According to the VA, only 13 states have smaller veterans' populations than Utah. Schow said he is currently working with the state Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion offices to create a resolution that would ask lawmakers to change the census policy. "That's kind of the first step that starts any legislative action," Schow said. "So it's kind of early in the process, but this is how it starts." Schow said he also plans to contact members of Utah's congressional delegation to bend their collective ear on the issue. "This is an issue that matters," Schow said. "And it's a simple fix -- all they would have to do is add two questions: Are you a veteran? And if so, are you a disabled veteran? It seems pretty easy to me." [Source: Washington Standard-Examiner | Mitch Shaw | 15 Feb 2014 ++]

Elder Vet Abuse Update 03 ► Josef Martin

Found unfit to be tried as a juvenile, a 16-year-old Fresno boy made his first appearance 29 JAN in Fresno County Superior Court in connection with the home-invasion robbery of 92-year-old World War II veteran **Josef Martin**. Keith Scott, wearing handcuffs and leg irons, appeared nervous in the courtroom filled with rough-looking, tattooed adult offenders in red jail jumpsuits. Because of the seriousness of the crime, Scott is being charged as an adult. After pleading not guilty to elder abuse, home invasion and attempted burglary charges, Scott was returned to the county's Juvenile Justice Campus where he is being held in lieu of \$405,000 bail. Outside court, Scott's attorney, Robert Lamanuzzi, said his client is remorseful. He also said Scott is a special education student who fell in with the wrong crowd. "He's a follower, not a leader," Lamanuzzi said. But Martin said that Scott should be punished severely.



WWII veteran Josef Martin, 92

In November, Sheriff Margaret Mims announced the arrest of three teens, including a 12-year-old boy, and accused them of breaking into Martin's home during the early hours of 23 OCT. Mims said one of the suspects thrust a gun in Martin's mouth and threatened to kill him. Martin also was pistol-whipped and then thrown into a closet, his head punching a foot-wide hole in the wall, as the assailants ransacked his home, stealing \$200 from under a rug and jewelry before getting away. Mims also said deputies were investigating other home invasions in the vicinity of Martin's home near Olive and Willow avenues. But so far, only Scott and the 12-year-old have been charged in connection with the attack on Martin. Wednesday, Lamanuzzi said neither Scott nor the 12-year-old was charged with personally using or holding a gun. That suspect has never been charged, he said. Sheriff's officials confirmed Wednesday an investigation of the third suspect is ongoing.

In December, Judge James Kelley sentenced the 12-year-old to the Juvenile Justice Campus for a year as part of a rehabilitation program for pre-adolescents. The Bee does not identify minors who are tried as juveniles. Scott could be facing a much stiffer penalty, if convicted, because he's being tried as an adult after Judge Gregory Fain found the crime against Martin to be serious with a high degree of sophistication. The suspects knocked on people's doors late at night, Lamanuzzi said. Lamanuzzi said Scott is a soft-spoken kid with no prior criminal record. He has learning disabilities, once lived in a group home, and was seeing a clinical psychologist, Lamanuzzi said. Scott was led to believe they were going to burglarize a home with no one inside, Lamanuzzi said. The suspects thought Martin wasn't home because they knocked on his front door and rang the doorbell several times and no one answered. Scott was arrested Nov. 1 while trying to break into another home, court records show. "He's sorry about what happened," Lamanuzzi said. "This is a difficult case because everyone who knows (Scott) says he is a gentle teenager."

Martin, who served in the Army for nine years as a corporal and tank driver, and was decorated for fighting in several battles, including the invasion of Normandy and the Battle of the Bulge, said the attack still affects him. "I have to take tranquilizers to kill the pain," he said in a telephone interview Wednesday. "My head still hurts from it being smashed into the wall." Martin said he can't shake what happened to him. "It was brutal. I can still hear the click of the gun and them saying, 'I'm going to kill you.'" And Martin recalled that when he begged for his life, the boys laughed as they hit him. "They used me as a punching bag." "I know they're kids, but I hope to heck someone stops them or they might do it to someone else," Martin said. [Source: The Fresno Bee | Pablo Lopez | 29 Jan 2014 ++]

SSA Disability Claims Update 04 ► Expediting Vet Disability Claims

Acting Commissioner of Social Security, along with Congressman John Sarbanes (D-MD) on 19 FEB unveiled a new initiative to expedite disability claims by veterans with a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation rating of 100% Permanent & Total (P&T). Under the new process, Social Security will treat these veterans' applications as high priority and issue expedited decisions, similar to the way the agency currently handles disability claims from Wounded Warriors. "Our veterans have sacrificed so much for our country and it is only right that we ensure they have timely access to the disability benefits they may be eligible for and deserve," said Acting Commissioner Colvin. "Social Security worked with Veterans Affairs to identify those veterans with disabilities who have a high probability of also meeting our definition of disability. I am proud of our collaboration and happy to announce this new service for America's vets."

In order to receive the expedited service, veterans must tell Social Security they have a VA disability compensation rating of 100% P&T and show proof of their disability rating with their VA Notification Letter. The

VA rating only expedites Social Security disability claims processing and does not guarantee an approval for Social Security disability benefits. These veterans must still meet the strict eligibility requirements for a disability allowance. Social Security plans to launch the expedited process in mid-March. For information about this service, visit <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/pgm/disability-pt.htm>. [Source: SSA Press Release 19 Feb 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Update 21 ► Hagel Orders Agency Shakeup

Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel is ordering a shakeup of agencies responsible for accounting for tens of thousands of Americans missing in action from foreign wars, a mission heavily criticized as wasteful and fragmented. Hagel's press secretary, Navy Rear Adm. John Kirby, announced 20 FEB that Hagel wants the two main accounting agencies combined into a single organization. For years the two groups have engaged in bureaucratic warfare. Hagel ordered his policy chief to give him a plan within 30 days to better account for as many of the missing as possible — and to make the government's accounting work more transparent to families of the missing. In a memo obtained by Stars and Stripes, Hagel said Lumpkin's action plan should propose ways to:

- Maximize the number of identifications.
- Improve transparency for families.
- Reduce duplicative functions.
- Establish a system for centralized, complete, fully accessible personnel case files for missing personnel.

In the memo, Hagel suggested he is considering making wide-ranging changes in areas such as: Civilian and military personnel policies; Contracting and acquisition policies; Statutory and regulatory authorities; Facilities; Budgets; Procedures; and Oversight of laboratory operations. "This is a top priority for the department," Hagel said. The issue surfaced last summer when The Associated Press revealed an internal report calling the accounting mission "dysfunctional" and inept. A Government Accountability Office audit released in July cited leadership failures and bureaucratic infighting as problems plaguing Pentagon recovery and identification efforts. In October, the Pentagon acknowledged that JPAC had been holding phony remains arrival ceremonies for seven years. In December, Stars and Stripes reported charges that JPAC and DPMO officials ignored leads, prematurely declared MIAs deceased and unrecoverable and argued against identifying unknown remains in government custody when evidence suggested they could be identified. In January, Stars and Stripes obtained internal communications from JPAC documenting allegations that JPAC's Central Identification Laboratory personnel were involved in the desecration and mishandling of remains, failure to keep critical records, excavation of incorrect sites, and waste of taxpayer funds on duplicate efforts.

Kirby said the JPAC report and other reviews led Hagel to issue his directive. "The reviews that we've seen of this mission tell us lots of things. One of them is, it's not being done as efficiently as possible from an organizational perspective," he told reporters. Hagel served in combat as an Army infantry squad leader during the Vietnam War. More than 1,600 Americans involved in that conflict remain unaccounted, according to DPMO. "As a veteran himself, the secretary has an especially personal commitment to ensuring we account for and bring home as many of our missing and fallen service personnel as possible," Kirby said. [Source: AP& Military.com News | Robert Burns | 20 & 21 Feb 2014 ++]

NPRC Lost Records Update 04 ► Clarification on Update 03

Two former employees of the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) were recently sentenced in Federal court to probation and community service for their roles in the unlawful removal and destruction of military documents. The documents had been sent to NPRC to be interfiled—that is, filed into existing military service folders. This brings to an end a multiyear joint investigation by NARA’s Office of Inspector General (OIG) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). I am now able to share with staff some details about the investigation and prosecution of the offenders.

- On the afternoon of July 3, 2012, a concerned citizen contacted NPRC to report the discovery of discarded military documents in a wooded area near Alton, Illinois. Within 45 minutes of receiving the call, the Director and a senior staff archivist had arrived at the location and recovered the documents. They then promptly notified the appropriate authorities, including NARA’s senior leadership, the Holdings Protection Team, and the OIG.
- Investigation began immediately, with OIG staff and NPRC managers working on the July 4th holiday. NPRC managers quickly identified the employee to whom the documents had been assigned and shared this information with OIG investigators.
- As the investigation unfolded, investigators determined that additional staff may have engaged in similar behavior. So NPRC managers conducted an unprecedented audit of the interfile function, examining the work of every individual who had worked on interfiles at any time during the previous year. Numerous staff from other NPRC departments were brought in to support this audit, which revealed five other individuals with suspicious discrepancy rates. Their names were furnished to criminal investigators and, to support the investigation and prosecution, the scope of the audit was expanded to include a 100-percent review of every interfile document that had been assigned to each of them. In all, the audits revealed over 4,000 instances where documents assigned to these individuals had not been properly filed.
- Based on the audit conducted by NPRC staff and on interviews with investigators, five suspects were presented to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for prosecution. The U.S. Attorney’s Office charged two individuals with unlawful destruction of Federal records, offered a third individual pre-trial diversion, and declined to prosecute the remaining two individuals.

As a veteran myself, I know firsthand the importance of maintaining comprehensive military service documentation. As the Archivist of the United States, I take seriously my responsibility to safeguard these important records. I was outraged to learn that documents had been removed from NPRC and treated with such disregard. Upon learning of this reprehensible act, I directed immediate actions to hold accountable those responsible, prevent such behavior from happening again, and, to the extent possible, provide remedy for anyone who may have been impacted. Actions taken to date include the following:

1. **Notification and credit-monitoring services for veterans and family members whose personal data was breached.** Fortunately, the documents that were compromised in 2012 were not entire service records but rather late-flowing documents sent to NPRC for filing into existing service folders that had been retired to NPRC many years ago. Many of the documents were computer-generated notifications of death of long-retired veterans, but some documents did contain extensive personal data pertaining to still-living veterans. All recovered documents were cross-referenced with death indexes, and notification and credit monitoring services were provided to 132 individuals not known to be deceased.
2. **Review of impact on veterans.** NPRC services more than a million requests each year for military service records, and the Case Management and Reporting System captures information about every one of these requests. Working with system developers, NPRC staff carefully examined this information and found no evidence of any veteran having been denied a benefit due to a missing, late-flowing document. Some of the documents that had been misfiled were recovered during the audit process. Furthermore, NPRC has a process in place to continuously detect and recover misfiled documents as records are referenced. NPRC also has extensive experience reconstructing service records that were lost in a 1973 fire. It is our hope

and expectation that we would also be able to reconstruct, if necessary, documentary evidence lost as a result of this incident.

3. **Removal of responsible employees.** Once investigators advised that it could be done without compromising the investigation, NPRC promptly initiated the removal of the offenders. One individual was removed. The others resigned in lieu of removal.
4. **Notifications to congressional staff.** NARA notified congressional oversight staff at the first report of a problem, and, as the investigation continued, provided briefings.
5. **Notifications to military departments.** NARA promptly notified records management officials in the Department of Defense, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and each of the military service departments.
6. **Implementation of exit screening at NPRC.** NPRC staff made arrangements with the Federal Protective Service to increase guard coverage and establish an exit screening program whereby all NPRC staff and visitors are subjected to a physical search of their belongings as they exit the facility. This is a permanent change in policy.
7. **Development and deployment of new procedures for servicing and auditing interfiles.** NPRC deployed a new auditing program that incorporates technology to track work assignments and randomly select items for audit. It requires auditors to document and retain the results and to immediately expand the scope of an audit upon the discovery of a discrepancy.
8. **Support of investigation.** Throughout the investigation, NPRC managers supported the efforts of investigators from NARA's OIG and the FBI. In addition to providing resources to respond to short-notice data calls and to conduct extensive ad hoc audits, at the request of the lead investigator, two senior managers from NPRC appeared in person to meet with representatives from the U.S. Attorney's Office to emphasize the seriousness of the offense and to appeal for prosecution to the fullest extent of the law.
9. **Follow-up OIG activity.** In addition to the actions listed above, I asked NARA's OIG to add to its planned activities a future follow-up visit to NPRC to ensure the effectiveness of its new interfile auditing program.

While I am deeply disappointed that a few individuals violated the public's trust, this reprehensible behavior is not indicative of our workforce. NPRC employs a large, diverse, and hard-working workforce, many of whom are veterans themselves. They were as outraged as I was to learn of this episode and have been extremely supportive of the improvements implemented to guard against reoccurrence. I want to thank the numerous NPRC staff who supported the investigation by conducting the extensive audits discussed above. Many of these staff members came from other NPRC departments and voluntarily worked evenings and weekends to complete the audits in a timely manner. The results were crucial to the investigation and the prosecution of the offenders. I also want to thank the lead investigator from NARA's OIG, Dave Berry, for leaving no stone unturned in his efforts to identify and prosecute all individuals who destroyed, deliberately misfiled, or abandoned these important documents. [Source: NPRC Archivist of the United States | David S. Ferriero | 26 Feb 2014 ++]

(Editor's Note: Previously reported 1800 records destroyed was misleading. These were pages vice records.)

OBIT | Denton~Helen ► 3 Dec 2013

The woman who typed General Dwight D. Eisenhower's final orders authorizing the June 6, 1944 D-Day Normandy invasion in World War II died 3 DEC in Fayetteville, Georgia. Helen Kogel Denton, 91, who kept that secret even from her husband of nearly four decades, was buried in the Jonesboro City Cemetery on 7 DEC 2013. The short obituary said this: "She retired from Delta Air Lines where she was a secretary in the Maintenance Department. She

was preceded in death by her husband Noel Denton and her son Jon Denton. She is survived by numerous extended family members and many loving friends. She was an active member of the Veterans of Foreign Wars Post #3650. She also served for many years as a volunteer for the American Red Cross.” The Fayette Woman, in October 2005 featured the story of this remarkable woman, who knew how to keep a secret — for a time, the biggest secret in the world. That story is reprinted in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Helen Denton’s WWII Story**” [Source: The Citizen | 11 Dec 2013 ++]

OBIT | Ehlers~Walter David ▶ 20 Feb 2014

Staff Sgt. Walter D. Ehlers, the last Medal of Honor recipient from the D-Day invasion in 1944, has died at the age of 92, of kidney failure in Long Beach California according to the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. In addition to the MOH he was a recipient of a Silver Star and three Purple Hearts. Ehlers was born on May 7, 1921, in Junction City, Kan. On June 9, 1944, he was serving with the 1st Infantry Division near Goville, France, when he led his men against heavily defended enemy positions. “Without waiting for an order, Staff Sgt. Ehlers, far ahead of his men, led his squad against a strongly defended enemy strong point, personally killing 4 of an enemy patrol who attacked him en route,” [his award citation](#) says. “Then crawling forward under withering machinegun fire, he pounced upon the guncrew and put it out of action.” Ehlers then led an attack on enemy mortars, killing three enemy soldiers himself. Next, he took out an enemy machine gun position although greatly outnumbered.



Ehlers speaking at a 2007 ceremony commemorating the anniversary of D-Day

By the next day, Ehlers’ platoon had advanced deep into enemy territory, the citation says. Facing an “untenable position,” Ehlers covered his squad’s withdrawal by standing up to draw the enemy’s fire. “At this point, though wounded himself, he carried his wounded automatic rifleman to safety and then returned fearlessly over the shell-swept field to retrieve the automatic rifle which he was unable to carry previously,” the citation says. “After having his wound treated, he refused to be evacuated, and returned to lead his squad. The intrepid leadership, indomitable courage, and fearless aggressiveness displayed by Staff Sgt. Ehlers in the face of overwhelming enemy forces serve as an inspiration to others.” On July 14, more than a month after D-Day, Ehlers learned that his brother Roland had died at Omaha Beach when his landing craft was struck by a mortar shell. He appeared in the 1955 film *The Long Gray Line*, starring Tyrone Power. [Source: ArmyTimes staff report 21 Feb 2014 ++]

Washington Vet Home ► Walla Walla Home Funding in Jeopardy

A bill that would help bring an 80-bed veterans' home to Walla Walla is getting another chance in the state House of Representatives. But federal funding that was once secure for more than half the cost is now in doubt. Senate Bill 5691, which passed 48-0 earlier this week, would authorize the state Department of Veterans Affairs to add the Veterans Home to a list of similar homes operated in Washington. It now goes to the state House of Representatives, where a similar measure died last year after also unanimously passing the Senate. Officials held a tribal blessing ceremony in May 2013 at the Walla Walla Veterans Affairs Medical Center site where the state-operated facility would be built and a groundbreaking was held. "We pushed shovels because it's supposed to be a done deal," said Sen. Mike Hewitt, R-Walla Walla, one of the bill's sponsors. "But it got hung up at the federal level."

The facility would add 93 permanent jobs and serve 10 counties, including Benton and Franklin counties, with a population of more than 50,000 veterans. It would be a complex of small houses on the Walla Walla VA campus and include a skilled nursing home to provide long-term care to honorably discharged veterans and the surviving spouses of veterans who have died. A \$21.8 million VA grant for the project was pulled after a longer than expected environmental review of the project, Hewitt said. That led to the project missing a deadline to transfer the land for the home from the federal to the state veterans' administration. The law requires homes receiving money from the VA's State Veterans Home Construction Grant Program to be owned by the state government. "The (federal) veterans department had to reprioritize the list and Walla Walla fell off," Hewitt said. The state plans to contribute \$14.4 million to the project.

The Walla Walla project was hurt because more states applied for veterans home money with the VA in 2014 than last year, said Walla Walla Deputy City Manager Tim McCarty. Some states either don't have veterans homes or the ones they do have are dealing with health and safety problems. More states were able to offer required matching money for their veterans homes because they were coming out of the recession, McCarty said. "We went from really high on the priority list to 60-something," he said. "I always thought that once you got in line, you were in line. But these other ones budged the line." The VA budget for veterans homes is about \$85 million, but it would have to be more than \$300 million for the Walla Walla facility to be funded, McCarty said. McCarty is chairman of a task force that has helped rally funding at the Walla Walla VA campus since the federal government threatened the facility with closure in 2004.

In Washington, the state Department of Veterans Affairs now has homes in Spokane, Orting and Retsil, near Port Orchard. Those homes have waiting lists, said Walla Walla Air Force veteran Don Schack, a member of the Governor's Veterans Affairs Advisory Committee. The Walla Walla site also would be ideal because it is close to a VA Medical Center, he said. If the project gets built, he said, "This is a win-win, not only for the city and the county and the VA, but also all the veterans." Heidi Audette, spokeswoman for the state Department of Veterans Affairs, is not sure where the Walla Walla home will fall on the priority list in 2015. "We would likely get on the list again next year, it just depends where we fall," she said. But officials from Washington state are in Washington, D.C., to try to get help.

Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) has discussed the veterans' home with Department of Veterans Affairs Under Secretary Robert Petzel three times, said her spokesman Sean Coit. And she continues to work with high-level VA officials, he said. "Her approach is we need a better system of ranking the projects, but also getting the money out the door and making that happen," Coit said. The state Department of Veterans Affairs also is working with Murray and Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric Shinseki, Audette said. State veterans department director Lourdes E. "Alfie" Alvarado-Ramos was in D.C. on Wednesday to receive an award from Shinseki. Audette said she did not address the Walla Walla home with him then, but Alvarado-Ramos plans to ask for time with Shinseki at the National Association of State Veterans Homes conference later this month.

The home would provide an unmet need for poor, aging or sick veterans in a service area that includes part of three states, said McCarty, himself a Navy veteran. "I don't believe they leave the home, most of them," he said. "This is where they die." McCarty said he feels it is too early to be upset about the project. The home still has a chance of being funded this year or next, he said. At the state level, the bill returns to the House. Hewitt said there was confusion last year in the House Appropriations Committee because the language in the bill had to match federal Department of Veterans Affairs wording so the home could get federal money. But he feels good about the bill's chances to pass this year. [Source: Union Bulletin | 18 Feb 2014 ++]

Vet Jobs Update 142 ► We got a problem: Too Many Vets Unemployed

Former President George W. Bush has taken on the high unemployment rate of veterans announcing a study at Syracuse University of how best to reintegrate service members into civilian society and asking that post-traumatic stress be classified as an "injury" not a disorder. "We got a problem: Too many vets are unemployed," Bush told ABC's Martha Raddatz in an interview that aired 23 FEB on *This Week*. "And there's what we call a civilian/military divide." The George W. Bush Institute is collaborating with the Institute for Veterans and Military Families at Syracuse University on a comprehensive survey of post-9/11 veterans that will be published in the spring. More than a decade after sending troops into Afghanistan, and then Iraq, and after the deaths of 6,800 service members and injuries of 51,000 more, Bush told Raddatz that he had "a duty" to help the veterans. "I'm in there with them," he said. Raddatz has also spent significant time with the troops, detailing the war in Sadr City, Iraq, in *The Long Road Home: A Story of War and Family*.



Bush is not the first to ask for the end of "disorder." Frank Ochberg, who edited the first textbook about treatment for the ailment and served on the committee that defined PTSD, is part of an ongoing debate about the topic, asking that the name be changed. "[Veterans] tell us that they will feel less stigmatized," he wrote in a recent blog. "But they also explain how the concept of an injury, rather than a disorder, does justice to their experience." Others, including Matthew Friedman, executive director of the Veterans Affairs National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, have argued that changing the name won't make people more likely to seek treatment. But those on both sides of the debate agree that more should be done to help civilians understand the the benefits of reintegrating veterans. While the unemployment rate for veterans has dropped, from 11.7% a year ago to 7.9% in January, it's still higher than the national rate of 6.6%. Homelessness has also been a problem.

Finding civilian jobs has been difficult for combat veterans for two reasons. First, as noted by Bush earlier this week, it can be hard to translate military skills, such as infantry soldier, to a civilian equivalent. And second, after a rash of headlines about a minuscule percentage of combat veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and becoming violent, there has been a fear that veterans won't interact well in the workplace. Experts on post-traumatic

stress disorder say veterans are much more likely to internalize their injuries by seeking solitude, just as the 1 out of 5 Americans diagnosed each year with depression do. And Bush emphasized the qualities of early leadership, remaining stable under pressure and creative thinking that veterans often learn on the job. He mentioned the veteran appearing on the program with him, Jake Wood, who served in combat twice, and then returned home to found Team Rubicon, an organization made up of veterans that reacts to disaster situations around the world. "Those are characteristics that are hard to teach," he said of Wood's willingness to serve twice. Earlier in the week, while announcing the study at Syracuse, Bush asked that the "D" be removed from PTSD. "An employer says, 'I don't want to hire somebody with a disorder,' " he said. "And so our mission tomorrow is to begin to change the dialogue in the United States." [Source: USA TODAY | Kelly Kennedy | 24 Feb 2014 ++]

Vet Cemetery Florida Update 09 ► 2 New Ones Named

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced the names of two new VA national cemeteries planned in Florida – the Cape Canaveral National Cemetery in Scottsmeer and the Tallahassee National Cemetery in Tallahassee. “These two new cemeteries are a priority for the growing Veterans’ community in Florida,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “As VA moves forward with these new cemeteries, Veterans, their spouses and families can have peace of mind knowing that they have a final resting place in a nearby national shrine.”

- The **Cape Canaveral National Cemetery** is planned for a 318-acre parcel located in close proximity to U. S. Route 1 in northern Brevard County in Scottsmeer, approximately two miles from Interstate 95 and 12 miles north of Titusville. The cemetery will serve more than 163,000 Veterans, spouses and their eligible dependents living in the central eastern Florida area. The initial phase of construction will provide more than 17,000 gravesites. VA purchased the central eastern Florida property, formerly known as Acosta Groves, for \$2.1 million on July 31, 2012.
- The **Tallahassee National Cemetery** is planned for a 250-acre parcel in Leon County, with frontage along U.S. Highway 27 (Apalachee Parkway) and Old St. Augustine Road near March Road east of Tallahassee. The cemetery will serve 83,000 Veterans and their eligible dependents in the Tallahassee area, as well as southwestern Georgia and southeastern Alabama. The initial phase of construction will provide more than 6,000 gravesites and an early turnover area so that the cemetery can begin burial operations soon after construction begins. VA purchased the Tallahassee property for \$6.8 million on Aug. 14, 2012, from the St. Joe Company.

Veterans with a qualifying discharge, their spouses and eligible dependent children can be buried in a VA national cemetery. Also eligible are military personnel who die on active duty. Other burial benefits available for eligible Veterans, regardless of whether they are buried in a national cemetery or a private cemetery, include a burial flag, a Presidential Memorial Certificate, and a government headstone or marker. In the midst of the largest expansion since the Civil War, VA operates 131 national cemeteries in 39 states and Puerto Rico and 33 soldiers' lots and monument sites. More than 3.8 million Americans, including Veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA's national cemeteries. In 2013, NCA achieved a customer satisfaction index of 96, the highest American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) score in either the private or public sector in the history of the ACSI. The score is nearly 28 points above the 68 point average for federal government agencies. Information on VA burial benefits can be obtained from national cemetery offices, from the Internet at www.cem.va.gov, or by calling VA regional offices toll-free at 800-827-1000. To make burial arrangements at any VA national cemetery at the time of need, call the National Cemetery Scheduling Office at 800-535-1117. [Source: VA Press Release 18 Feb 2014 ++]

Retiree Appreciation Days ► Mar 1 thru Dec 2014

Retiree Appreciation Days (RADs) are designed with you in mind. They're a great source of the latest information for retirees and Family members in your area. RADs vary from installation to installation, but, in general, they provide an opportunity to renew acquaintances, listen to guest speakers, renew ID Cards, get medical checkups, and various other services. Some RADs include special events such as dinners or golf tournaments. Due to budget constraints, some RADs may be cancelled or rescheduled. Also, scheduled appearances of DFAS representatives may not be possible. If you plan to travel long distances to attend a RAD, before traveling, you should call the sponsoring RSO to ensure the RAD will held as scheduled and, if applicable, whether or not DFAS reps will be available. Below is the schedule as of 22 DEC 2013. An up-to-date RAD list is always available online at <http://www.hostmtb.org/RADLIST-2014.html>. For more information call the phone number indicated below of the Retirement Services Officer (RSO) sponsoring the RAD.

2014 Retiree Appreciation Days (RAD) as of 25 February 2014

<u>RAD Locations</u>	<u>Dates</u>	<u>RAO\RSO Phone Numbers</u>
F.E. Warren AFB, WY (1)	19 April	307-773-3381\2309
Myrtle Beach, SC (2)	01-31 May	843-918-1014
Little Rock AFB, AR	03 May	501-987-6095
Watervliet Arsenal, Watervliet NY	03 May	518-266-5810
West Point, NY	03 May	845-938-4217
USAG Bavaria (Grafenwoehr), GE (3)	09 May	0049-09641-83-8709
JB Elmendorf-Richardson, AK	10 May	907-384-3500
Fort Jackson, SC	15-17 May	803-751-6715\5523
JB Lewis-McChord, WA	16 May	253-966-5884\5881
USAG Ansbach-Katterbach, GE (3)	16 May	0049-0981-183-3301
Malmstrom AFB, MT (4)	16-18 May	406-731-4751\406-866-0683
Fort Wainwright, AK	17 May	907-353-2099
Los Angeles AFB, CA	31 May	310-653-5144
Fairchild AFB, WA	06 June	509-247-5359
Buckley AFB, CO	14 June	720-847-9213
USCG Festival-Grand Haven MI (5)	25 Jul-03 Aug	616-846-5940
Rosemount, MN	15 August	507-474-9297
Des Moines, IA	28 August	515-277-6113
Boise, ID (Air NG RAD)	07 September*	866-482-7343
Boise, ID (Army NG RAD)	TBD	866-482-7343
Fort McCoy, WI	05 September	608-388-3716
Duluth, MN	12 September	218-590-3144
Redstone Arsenal, AL (6)	18-20 September	256-876-2022
Selfridge ANG Base, MI	20 September	586-239-5580

Camp Lejeune, NC (7)	27 September	910-451-0287
Fort Bliss, TX	27 September	915-569-6233\568-5204
Fort Hamilton, NY	27 September	718-630-4552
USAG Benelux, BE (3)	04 October	0032-65-44-6293
Kaiserslautern/Ramstein, GE (3)	15 October	0049-0631-411-8405
USAG Vicenza, IT (3)	17 October	0039-0444-71-7262
Camp Humphreys, KOR	18 October	010-3176-1696
USAG Stuttgart, GE (3)	23 October	0049-07031-15-2010
Wright-Patterson AFB, OH	24 October*	937-257-3221
Fort Leavenworth, KS	25 October	913-684-5583
Rock Island Arsenal, IL	25 October	563-445-0191

* = Tentative Date(s)
 (#) = Comment Number

COMMENTS:

1. F.E. Warren AFB WY is hosting a RAD on April 19, from 0900 to 1300. Scheduled activities include an opening ceremony; guest speakers; breakfast; base tours; base historical videos; ID cards; 24 base, medical and veterans organization booths; and a luncheon. Survivor benefit counselors and retiree pay issue representatives will also be available. Events will take place at the 90th Medical Group Center. For more information, call 307-773-5944\2309 or the base public affairs office at 307-773-3381, or send email to get [FE Warren RAD Info](#).
2. Myrtle Beach SC will host Military Appreciation Days (MAD) during May 2014. This month-long celebration is a "thank you" to our dedicated service men and women, and their families. The celebration includes active duty military personnel, reserves, the National guard and veterans from all service branches. During May, military personnel and their families can look for discounts at area restaurants and attractions, a traveling Vietnam Memorial Wall, a big Memorial Day weekend parade with Grand Marshal Montel Williams, live music, a 5K run and other special events. For more info about Myrtle Beach's 2014 MAD, please visit the [Myrtle Beach Website](#), call 843-918-1014 or send email to get [Myrtle Beach MAD Info](#).
3. For up-to-date information about Europe-based RADs, i.e., scheduled events, location, times, registration, etc., please call the sponsoring RAO\RSO, view the December 2013 [INCOM-Europe Retiree Bulletin](#) or visit the [INCOM-Europe Web Site](#).
4. Malmstrom Air Force Base near Great Falls, Montana, is planning a RAD Weekend during May 16-18, in conjunction with a commissary case-lot sale. Scheduled activities include a retreat ceremony followed by social hour, medical screenings, informational briefings, a formal dinner with Congressman Steve Daines as guest speaker, and a Sunday brunch. For more information, call 406-731-4751\406-866-0683 or send email to get [Malstrom AFB RAD Info](#).
5. Grand Haven MI, aka [Coast Guard City USA](#), will hold a Coast Guard Festival and National Memorial Service from 25 July to 03 August 2014. Coast Guard-only events include a Retirees Dinner on 30 July, reservations are required. For more Retirees Dinner information, please get a copy of the [Retirees' Dinner RSVP](#) form and submit it by 17 July by mail or fax (616) 846-2509. To find out more about the 2014 Grand Haven Coast Guard Festival and National Memorial Service, please visit <http://www.coastguardfest.org>, call 616-846-5940 or [Email](#) to get a 2014 festival brochure.

6. For scheduled events planned for the Redstone Arsenal RAD, please contact the Redstone [RAO/RSO Rep](#) or view the [Space Calendar](#).

7. Marine Corps Base Camp Lejeune will be holding its annual RAD on the 27th of September at 0900. Guest speaker is the Director of the NC Veterans Service Office Mr. Ilario Pantano. For more info, contact RAO or EMail [Camp Lejeune RAD Info](#).

8. Military Appreciation Day - Dec. 2014. Abilene TX Convention and Visitors Bureau. For more info, location, etc., visit [Abilene Visitors Website](#) or call 325-572-3365.

[Source: <http://www.hostmtb.org/RADLIST-2014.html> | Milton Bell | 25 Feb 2014 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs ► 1 Mar thru 30 Apr 2014

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce's (USCC) Hiring Our Heroes program **employment workshops** are available in conjunction with hundreds of their hiring fairs. These workshops are designed to help veterans and military spouses and include resume writing, interview skills, and one-on-one mentoring. For details of each click on the link next to the date in the below list. If it will not open refer to www.uschamber.com/hiringourheroes/events. **To participate, sign up for the workshop in addition to registering for the hiring fairs which are shown below for the next 8 weeks.** For more information about the USCC Hiring Our Heroes Program, Military Spouse Program, Transition Assistance, GE Employment Workshops, Resume Engine, etc. visit the USCC website at <http://www.uschamber.com/hiringourheroes/events>

Veterans Hiring Fair

March 1, 2014 – [Detroit, MI](#)

March 11, 2014 – [Military Spouse Networking Reception Ft. Carson, CO](#)

March 12, 2014 – [Houston, TX](#)

March 12, 2014 – [Military Spouse Hiring Fair and Career Forum Peterson Air Force Base, CO](#)

March 13, 2014 – [Salem, OR](#)

March 13, 2014 – [Bentonville, AR](#)

March 13, 2014 – [Grand Rapids, MI](#)

March 20, 2014 – [Greater Erie, PA](#)

March 20, 2014 – [Dallas, TX](#)

March 24, 2014 – [Camp Pendleton, CA Networking Reception](#)

March 25, 2014 – [Military Spouse Hiring Fair and Career Forum Camp Pendleton, CA](#)

March 25, 2014 – [Eau Claire, WI](#)

March 26, 2014 – [Chicago, IL](#)

March 26, 2014 – [Casper, WY](#)

March 27, 2014 – [New York City](#)

April 24, 2014 – [Evansville, IN](#)

April 24, 2014 – [Houston, TX](#)

April 29, 2014 – [Chicago, IL](#)

April 30, 2014 – [Fayetteville, NC](#)

April 30, 2014 – [Trenton, NJ](#)

April 30, 2014 – [Cheyenne, WY](#)

Note: A key tactic that most job-seekers overlook when attending a job or career fair is to Stop at every table! One mistake we all make on occasion is to generalize. For example, people assume that health-care companies are only hiring health-care workers, or that insurance companies only need agents. So when they encounter these tables or displays, they typically say nothing and keep moving. Also, sell yourself! Be an extrovert and your own agent! Finally, your mission is fact-finding and networking. By spending time at each table, one learns to overcome stereotypes that lead to erroneous assumptions [Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Assn 26 Feb 2014 ++]

WWII Vets 58 ► Ito-Susumu

Susumu Ito was in auto mechanic school when he was drafted into the military in 1940, two years before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. He worked as a mechanic, but was eventually assigned to the all Japanese-American 442nd Regiment. His posture is stooped, and at 94, he walks with care. But his voice is strong as he says, emphatically, “Yes.” Yes the young Nisei – second-generation Japanese Americans — who made up the 442 Regimental Combat Team felt they had something to prove, fighting Hitler’s armies in Italy and France and rescuing the “Lost Battalion” in one of the most remarkable combat stories of World War II. Their patriotism. “And we were gung-ho about proving it,” Ito says. “We as a group could either distinguish or disgrace our group. Virtually all of us were completely loyal to the U.S. and wanted nothing to do with Japan. And we were going to do the best we could in spite of the fact that many of our parents and relatives were in internment camps.”



Susumu Ito and Nelson Akagi

The 442nd – battle cry: “Go for Broke” – certainly distinguished themselves, individually as well as a group, ending the war one of the most decorated units in the American military history for its size and length of service. They earned seven Distinguished Unit Citations, more than 4,000 Purple Hearts, seven Presidential Unit Citations, and a large number of individual decorations for bravery, including 21 Medals of Honor, 29 Distinguished Service Crosses and 588 Silver Stars. In 2011 Congress bestowed the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation’s highest civilian honor, on the three World War II Nisei units, the 100th Infantry Battalion, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, and the Military Intelligence Service.

Ito was among seven members of the shrinking number of Nisei World War II veterans, now in their late 80s and 90s, on hand at the Holocaust Museum Houston for the recent opening of a traveling exhibition, American Heroes:

Japanese American World War II Nisei Soldiers and the Congressional Gold Medal. The Smithsonian Institution and the National Veterans Network, a nonprofit that promotes awareness of the Nisei contribution to the war effort, partnered in the tour. Elements of the 442nd that included Ito and Nelson Akagi, liberated subcamps of Dachau near the war's end. Seventy years later, the experience of Ito, a retired professor at Harvard Medical School, and Akagi, a retired machinist, remain vivid.



Ito, a forward artillery officer attached to Company I of the 442nd, was in the thick of the fight to save the Lost Battalion, he said. In October 1944, near the French-German border, more than 200 members of the 141st Texas Regiment of the 36th Infantry Division, also known as the Texas Division, had been ordered to advance four miles beyond allied lines. They ended up trapped on a ridge, surrounded by some 6,000 Germans. With no rest for 10 days, the 442nd was ordered to the rescue. The rugged terrain was as menacing as the Germans, Ito recalled. "It was heavy, dense pine forest, No roads except for trails. Very mountainous. And we were fighting against an enemy we could not see. To this day when I walk into a dark forest on a bright day – or even when I think about it – I get goose bumps." It took six days of hard fighting before the 442nd broke through to the trapped Texans. "Our unit of about 160 men was reduced to 8 riflemen – it was virtually decimated," says Ito, who still can't figure out how he survived the fight. The 442nd suffered casualties two to three times higher than the 211 fellow soldiers they saved. But those 211 were "unbelievably relieved when we reached them," Ito said. "They came out of the deepest foxholes I've ever seen."

For Akagi, he will never forget coming across concentration camp survivors. "During our advance we didn't know what was in front of us especially when we were near the Dachau subcamps after Dachau was liberated," he said. "It just so happened that the subcamps were in our route. So we just stumbled across them." They were not allowed to give solid food to the emaciated survivors, since it would kill them. So Akagi, 20, and his troop mates threw their leftovers into a garbage can filled with water. "It was just terrible, something you never will forget and don't want to happen again." Joyful moments abated pain. Akagi's captain asked a group of liberated inmates if any spoke English. An 18-year-old Lithuanian Jew named Larry Lubetzky – Akagi can still recite the inmate number the Germans tattooed on his arm, 82123 – announced he could speak English and German. So the captain made him the company translator. "Almost 70 years ago but I could never forget that kind of incident," Akagi said. "That was April 30 or May 1, 1945. We had him join our Charlie Battery. The captain put a GI uniform on him, and we treated him like one of us."

Relations between the Nisei enlisted men and white officers were generally good, Ito said. "Most of us admired them very much." Cultural differences arose among the Nisei themselves during training camp. About half the men in the 442nd were from Hawaii – members of the pre-war Hawaii National Guard. The other half hailed from the U.S. mainland. "Two completely different breeds," Ito said, laughing. "Most of us could not understand the pidgin English they spoke. And they had some animosity toward us because we sounded more like Caucasian employers in Hawaii – many came from sugar plantations and laboring jobs." But the unit cohered around the single goal of demonstrating Japanese American commitment to the war effort. Speaking at Asia Society Texas Center at

ceremonies for the exhibition, Secretary of Veterans Affairs and former Army Chief of Staff Eric Shinseki, a Nisei himself, said, "I do not know a better, more compelling, nor more moving story of what it means to be an American than the wartime performances of the men who served in these three legendary units we honor tonight – and their families." [Source: PRNewswire-iReach | Sarah Hua, Asia Society Texas Center | 25 Dec 2013 ++]

State Veteran's Benefits & Discounts ► Texas 2014

The state of Texas provides several benefits to veterans as indicated below. To obtain information on these plus discounts listed on the Military and Veterans Discount Center (MCVDC) website, refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Vet State Benefits & Discounts – TX**" for an overview of the below benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the below refer to <http://www.tvc.state.tx.us> & <http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/texas.html>.

- Veteran Housing Benefits
- Veteran Financial Assistance Benefits
- Veteran Education Benefits
- Veteran Employment Benefits
- Other State Sponsored Veteran Benefits
- Discounts

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/texas-state-veterans-benefits.html> Feb 2014 ++]

Vet Legislation



Vet Legislative Issues Update 01 2014 ► Omnibus Bill S.1950 Fails

A divided Senate on 27 FEB derailed Democratic legislation that would have provided \$21 billion for medical, education and job-training benefits for the nation's veterans. The Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Restoration Act of 2014 (S.1950) bill fell victim to election-year disputes over spending and fresh penalties against Iran. Each party covets the allegiance of the country's 22 million veterans and their families, and each party blamed the other for turning the effort into a chess match aimed at forcing politically embarrassing votes. Republicans used a procedural move to block the bill after Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Bernie Sanders (I-VT) chided GOP lawmakers about their priorities. "I personally, I have to say this honestly, have a hard time understanding how anyone could vote for tax breaks for billionaires, for millionaires, for

large corporations and then say we don't have the resources to protect our veterans," said Sanders, the measure's chief author.



Senate Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Sen. Bernie Sanders, I-Vt., stands in defeat after a divided Senate derailed S.1950

Democrats noted that more than two dozen veterans groups supported the legislation. But Republicans said they still favor helping veterans while also wanting to be prudent about federal spending. "We're not going to be intimidated on this," said Sen. Jeff Sessions of Alabama, top Republican on the Senate Budget Committee. "We're going to do the right things for the veterans of America." The fight over priorities demonstrated again the bitter divisions that have restrained the legislative process in recent years. Efforts to address immigration, a tax overhaul and job creation all seem likely to go nowhere this year. Republicans criticized how most of Sanders' bill was paid for — with unspent money from the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq and the winding down of American military involvement in Afghanistan. The GOP says those are not real savings because no one expected those dollars to be spent as those wars ended. Republicans also objected to provisions making more veterans without service-connected injuries eligible for treatment at Department of Veterans Affairs facilities. They said that would swamp an already overburdened system.

The vote sidetracking the bill was 56-41, with supporters falling four votes short of the 60 they needed to prevail. Sens. Jerry Moran of Kansas and Dean Heller of Nevada were the only Republicans voting to keep the legislation alive and the only lawmakers crossing party lines on the vote. Veterans groups complained about being caught in partisan crossfire. "Veterans don't have time for this nonsense and veterans are tired of being used as political chew toys," said Paul Rieckhoff, founder and CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, which supported the legislation. Democrats wasted little time trying to cash in on the vote. Within moments, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee unleashed an email headlined, "Mitch McConnell Votes Against Kentucky Veterans." McConnell is up for re-election this year. Republicans said there would be no retribution from voters because the Democratic bill would have harmed veterans' services by flooding them with too many people. They also said this year's election campaigns will focus on other issues, such as President Barack Obama's health law. "We're sort of fooling ourselves to believe that this drives the election issue list," said Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina, top Republican on the Veterans' Affairs Committee.

Thursday's showdown came after Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, D-Nev., refused to allow votes on a GOP amendment slicing the bill's size and adding the penalties against Iran for its nuclear program. Obama opposes new penalties while international negotiations with Iran proceed. Fifty-nine senators of both parties have sponsored a separate bill imposing the punishment if the talks fail, though Obama's effort has weakened Democratic calls for a quick Senate vote. A vote could put the administration and some Democrats who favor the proposal in an awkward spot. The White House did not issue a public statement on whether it supported the veterans' bill. Sanders' legislation addressed everything from making more veterans eligible for in-state college tuition to providing fertility or adoption services for some wounded troops left unable to conceive.

The VA would have been given more tools to eat into its backlog of 390,000 benefit claims awaiting action for more than 125 days. The bill also would have bolstered programs for veterans who suffered sexual abuse, and would have increased dental care and provided more alternative medicine, such as yoga for stress. In a two-year test program, some overweight veterans living more than 15 minutes from a VA gym would have been given memberships at private health clubs. Benefits for some spouses of deceased veterans would have improved, and aid to relatives caring for a wounded veteran would have been expanded to include those who served before the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

VRAP Update 09 ► Funding Stops 31 MAR if S.1950 Not Enacted

They served their country, but now they may soon be cut off from an assistance program and left footing a big bill. It's called the Veterans Retraining Assistance Program (S.1950), VRAP for short, and according to the VA, more than 74,000 veterans are enrolled in the program. It gives approximately \$1,600 a month in tuition assistance for veterans at community colleges, but VRAP is scheduled to expire 31 MAR. Veterans in Henrietta, N.Y gathered at Monroe Community College to support efforts to extend the VRAP program. "If you take this away from them, they may not be able to finish college," said David Chapin, a veteran attending MCC. "My hope is that every veteran gets the education they deserve and desire." The potential expiration date for the funding is making matters worse for veterans. It's scheduled to end in the middle of the semester.

Senator Chuck Schumer (D-NY) is now pushing to extend the program through 2016. He's co-sponsoring the "Comprehensive Veterans Health and Benefits and Military Retirement Pay Act" to try and reauthorize funding and make tuition assistance eligible at four-year institutions for comparable training programs if none can be found at a local community college. "I guess when they funded it they did it for the budget year as opposed to the school year," said Schumer when asked why the bill expired in the middle of a semester. "It doesn't make sense." Schumer said the bill is already funded and that all it needs is authorization. "That should make passing it easier," he said, also adding a word of warning. "These days in Washington, you never know even the best of things get caught up in the gridlock." Schumer said he expects the bill to come before the Senate as soon as this week. [Source: ABC WHAM 13 Henrietta, N.Y | 25 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Advance Funding Update 04 ► Putting Veterans Funding First Act

From the very first days of the founding of these United States, we have entered into a sacred compact with those who risk their lives to protect our freedom: When your service is over, you will return home to a grateful nation. That gratitude is made tangible by the health care system, disability compensation, education, transition and other benefits and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA). Unfortunately, this sacred compact has reached the breaking point, with the VA — and the veterans it serves — finding themselves stuck in the **partisan gridlock that has paralyzed Congress**. During 22 of the past 25 years, veterans appropriations bills have failed to pass by the start of the new fiscal year, and delays often last for months. Over the past five years, as partisan divisions have reached new lows, veterans appropriations bills were enacted 124 days late, on average.

October's government shutdown made matters worse. Work stopped on more than 250,000 claims awaiting appeals, burials at national cemeteries were scaled back, and critical medical and prosthetic research projects were almost suspended. For the VA, appropriations delays and shutdowns make it virtually impossible to efficiently

administer benefits and to implement strategic improvement plans. Indeed, the repeated failure to enact appropriations in a timely manner is itself one of the causes of the massive backlog of veterans' disability claims. The VA is now making important progress in reducing this logjam, but another year or two of delayed appropriations would undercut ongoing efforts to modernize that broken system. Beginning 25 FEB and extending during the next month, thousands of veterans will be coming to Capitol Hill to let Congress know that "enough is enough — it's time to keep the promise to America's heroes." Members of our three organizations are meeting and calling their representatives and senators, urging them to end gridlock for veterans by passing the bipartisan Putting Veterans Funding First Act (H.R.813), which would authorize advance appropriations for all VA programs, benefits and services.

In 2009, Congress passed advance appropriations for VA medical care services. In the four years since, it has proven a great success. The VA knows what its medical care funding situation is well before the start of each fiscal year, there are no delays, and veterans were able to receive the health care they needed even during the October shutdown. The Putting Veterans Funding First Act simply extends the same common-sense process to all other VA functions, including the administration of disability and pension benefits, information technology, construction, medical and prosthetic research, and cemetery administration. This urgently needed bill has already been overwhelmingly approved by the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees. All that's needed now is a decision by each chamber's leadership to bring it to the floor for votes by the full House and Senate. For a Congress that has struggled to pass much significant legislation, this ought to be an easy one — an approach both parties can support to fulfill our promises to the men and women who served.

Indeed, the impact of the Putting Veterans Funding First Act will extend far beyond the technical improvement of the appropriations process. What it really means is that our veterans will have their disability claims processed more expeditiously and will receive their benefits faster. They will no longer have to worry that government stalemates could prevent benefit checks from being mailed on time. It will mean that veterans who lost limbs on the battlefield will find the quality of their lives improved through prosthetic research that yields new breakthroughs. It will mean that those who pass away can be buried in national cemeteries without their families being subjected to delays or denials. It will mean that the entire VA functions far more efficiently, with services to veterans improving on every front. Surely, this is the least our elected leaders can do for those who put their lives on the line to defend our nation and our values. [Source: Washington times | DAV National Cdr Joseph Johnston, VFW CINC William Thien, & AL National Cdr Dan Dellinger | 21 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Rural Access Update 18 ► S.2009 Introduced

Sen. Dean Heller (R-NV) and Tom Udall (D-NM) on 10 FEB introduced legislation designed to improve access to health care for veterans living in rural areas. They said more than 6 million veterans live in rural communities and as many as half might be going without VA care because quality care isn't available locally. The Rural Veterans Improvement Act (S.2009) is designed to let the VA work with non-VA mental health providers in rural communities, improve the VA's transportation program so those veterans have a way to get to doctors' appointments, and create incentives to attract and retain doctors in rural facilities. It also would require the VA to do a full assessment of its community-based outpatient clinics and prioritize improvements. Some New Mexico veterans say they have to drive four hours or more to get to a VA hospital, Udall said. "Many rural veterans are also frustrated with the lack of healthcare options and the frequent turnover among staff at their local clinics," he said. "Our brave men and women have sacrificed a great deal to safeguard our freedoms and it is imperative that Congress meets their needs, no matter where they live," Heller said. [Source: The Record Courier | R-C Capitol Bureau | 19 Feb 2014 ++]

Vet Legislation Submitted to 113th Congress ► As of 26 Feb 2014

For a listing of Congressional bills of interest to the veteran community introduced in the 113th Congress refer to this Bulletin's "**House & Senate Veteran Legislation**" attachment. Support of these bills through cosponsorship by other legislators is critical if they are ever going to move through the legislative process for a floor vote to become law. A good indication of that likelihood is the number of cosponsors who have signed onto the bill. Any number of members may cosponsor a bill in the House or Senate. At <http://thomas.loc.gov> you can review a copy of each bill's content, determine its current status, the committee it has been assigned to, and if your legislator is a sponsor or cosponsor of it. To determine what bills, amendments your representative has sponsored, cosponsored, or dropped sponsorship on refer to <http://thomas.loc.gov/bss/d111/sponlst.html>.

Grassroots lobbying is the most effective way to let your Congressional representatives know your wants and dislikes. Members of Congress are the most receptive and open to suggestions from their constituents. The key to increasing cosponsorship support on veteran related bills and subsequent passage into law is letting legislators know of veteran's feelings on issues. You can reach their Washington office via the Capital Operator direct at (866) 272-6622, (800) 828-0498, or (866) 340-9281 to express your views. Otherwise, you can locate your legislator's phone number, mailing address, or email/website to communicate with a message or letter of your own making at <http://thomas.loc.gov/bss/d111/sponlst.html>. Refer to http://www.thecapitol.net/FAQ/cong_schedule.html for dates that you can access them on their home turf.

FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF VETERAN RELATED LEGISLATION INTRODUCED IN THE HOUSE AND SENATE SINCE THE LAST BULLETIN WAS PUBLISHED:

- **H.R.4068 : SCRA Rights Protection Act of 2014.** A bill to To amend the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to require the consent of parties to contracts for the use of arbitration to resolve controversies arising under the contracts and subject to provisions of such Act and to preserve the rights of servicemembers to bring class actions under such Act, and for other purposes.

[Source: <http://www.loc.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> 26 Feb 2014 ++]

Veteran Hearing/Mark-up Schedule ► As of 27 Feb 2014

Following is the current schedule of recent and future Congressional hearings and markups pertaining to the veteran community. Congressional hearings are the principal formal method by which committees collect and analyze information in the early stages of legislative policymaking. Hearings usually include oral testimony from witnesses, and questioning of the witnesses by members of Congress. When a U.S. congressional committee meets to put a legislative bill into final form it is referred to as a mark-up. Veterans are encouraged to contact members of these committees prior to the event listed and provide input on what they want their legislator to do at the event. Membership of each committee and their contact info can be found at <http://www.congress.org/congressorg/directory/committees.tt?commid=svete>. Missed House Veteran Affairs committee (HVAC) hearings can viewed at <http://veterans.house.gov/in-case-you-missed-it>. Text of completed Senate Veteran Affairs Committee (SVAC) hearings are available at <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/browse/committee.action?chamber=senate&committee=va&collection=CHRG&plus=CHRG>:

- **March 5, 2014.** House Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee will hold a joint hearing to receive the legislative presentation of Veterans of Foreign Wars.
- **March 6, 2014.** House Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a joint hearing to receive the legislative presentations of Veterans Organizations: BVA, JWV, MOPH, AMVETS, TREA, MOAA, VVA, NGUAS and NASDVA.
- **March 12, 2014.** House Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a joint hearing to receive the legislative presentations of Veterans Organizations: PVA, IAVA, GSW, WWP, FRA, AFSA, NCAO, AXPOW.
- **March 13, 2014.** HVAC, Full Committee, "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2015."
- **March 25, 2014.** SAC-MILCON-VA FY15 Budget Hearing.
- **March 25, 2014.** SVAC, Full Committee, "U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Budget Request for Fiscal Year 2015."
- **March 26, 2014.** House Veterans' Affairs Committee and Senate Veterans Affairs Committee will hold a joint hearing to receive the legislative presentations of The American Legion.
- **March 27, 2014.** HAC-MILCON-VA FY15 Budget Hearing.

[Source: Veterans Corner w/Michael Isam 27 Feb 2014 ++]

Military



Cost of Wars Update 03 ► **American Revolution thru OIF/OEF**

This below CRS report provides estimates of the costs of major U.S. wars from the American Revolution through current conflicts in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere. It gives figures both in "current year dollars," that is, in prices in effect at the time of each war, and in inflation-adjusted "constant dollars" updated to the most recently available estimates of FY2008 prices. All estimates are of the costs of military operations only and do not include costs of veterans benefits, interest paid for borrowing money to finance wars, or assistance to allies. The report also provides estimates of the cost of each war as a share of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) during the peak year of each conflict

and of overall defense spending as a share of GDP at the peak. This report will be updated periodically to reflect additional appropriations for ongoing conflicts and to adjust constant dollar figures to prices of the current fiscal year. For additional info refer to http://www.history.navy.mil/library/online/costs_of_major_us_wars.htm.

Military Costs of Major U.S. Wars

(Updated to Include Appropriations Enacted Through June 30, 2008)

	Years of War Spending	Peak Year of War Spending	
	Total Military Cost of War in Millions/Billions of Dollars	War Cost % GDP in Peak Year of War	Total Defense % GDP in Peak Year of War
American Revolution	1775-1783		
Current Year \$	101 million	NA	NA
Constant FY2008\$	1,825 million		
War of 1812	1812-1815		1813
Current Year \$	90 million	2.2%	2.7%
Constant FY2008\$	1,177 million		
Mexican War	1846-1849		1847
Current Year \$	71 million	1.4%	1.9%
Constant FY2008\$	1,801 million		
Civil War: Union	1861-1865		1865
Current Year \$	3,183 million	11.3%	11.7%
Constant FY2008\$	45,199 million		
Civil War: Confederacy	1861-1865		
Current Year \$	1,000 million	NA	NA
Constant FY2008\$	15,244 million		
Spanish American War	1898-1899		1899
Current Year \$	283 million	1.1%	1.5%
Constant FY2008\$	6,848 million		
World War I	1917-1921		1919
Current Year \$	20 billion	13.6%	14.1%
Constant FY2008\$	253 billion		
World War II	1941-1945		1945
Current Year \$	296 billion	35.8%	37.5%
Constant FY2008\$	4,114 billion		
Korea	1950-1953		1952
Current Year \$	30 billion	4.2%	13.2%
Constant FY2008\$	320 billion		
Vietnam	1965-1975		1968
Current Year \$	111 billion	2.3%	9.5%
Constant FY2008\$	686 billion		
Persian Gulf War /a/	1990-1991		1991
Current Year \$	61 billion	0.3%	4.6%
Constant FY2008\$	96 billion		
Iraq /b/	2003-Present		2008

Current Year \$	616 billion	1.0%	4.2%
Constant FY2008\$	648 billion		
Afghanistan/GWOT /b,c/	2001-Present	2007	
Current Year \$	159 billion	0.3%	4.0%
Constant FY2008\$	171 billion		
Post-9/11 Domestic Security (Operation Noble Eagle) /b/	2001-Present	2003	
Current Year \$	28 billion	0.1%	3.7%
Constant FY2008\$	33 billion		
Total Post-9/11--Iraq, Afghanistan/GWOT, ONE /d/	2001-Present	2008	
Current Year \$	809 billion	1.2%	4.2%
Constant FY2008\$	859 billion		

Notes

a. Most Persian Gulf War costs were offset by allied contributions or were absorbed by DOD. Net costs to U.S. taxpayers totaled \$4.7 billion in current year dollars. Source: Department of Defense Annual Report to Congress for Fiscal Year 1994, January, 1993.

b. Totals for post-9/11 operations include all funds appropriated through the enactment of FY2008 supplemental appropriations and FY2009 "bridge fund" appropriations in P.L. 110-252, which the President signed into law on June 30, 2008. Totals are for military operations only and do not include costs of reconstruction assistance, diplomatic security, and other activities by other agencies. Figures for post-9/11 costs are for budget authority--all other figures are for outlays.

c. Reflects funding for "Operation Enduring Freedom," the bulk of which is for operations in Afghanistan but which also includes amounts for operations in the Philippines, the Horn of Africa, and other areas.

d. Based on data available from DOD, CRS is not able to allocate \$5.5 billion (in current year dollars) in FY2003 by mission. That amount is included here in the total for all post-9/11 operations.

[Source: NHHC | Congressional Research Service Report for Congress (RS22926) | 8 Jul 2008 ++]

POW/MIA Update 22 ► Air Force Investigating Inappropriate Photo

The Air Force is “disappointed” in the airman who appeared in a photo that is being circulated of her posing with her tongue in the mouth of the prisoner of war depicted on the iconic black-and-white POW/MIA emblem. “We do not yet have all details behind the photo, but it certainly is a concern; it’s a concern any time someone shows disrespect for prisoners of war and those missing in action. They deserve our utmost respect and we must always remember their sacrifice and the legacy they’ve left for us as men and women serving our nation. “I want to make it clear that this is not a reflection of Airmen who wear this uniform; it is a case of poor judgment of one Airman ... to say we are disappointed would be an understatement. We are gathering all the details and will take appropriate

action at the appropriate level. Our Airmen fully understand the significance of the POW/MIA flag and the sacrifice of the men and women it honors,” Chief Master Sgt. of the Air Force James Cody said in a statement.



Second Lt. Rachelle Smith, a spokeswoman for Fairchild Air Force Base, told Stars and Stripes that the airman in the photo is Staff Sgt. Cherish Byers. She is with the 92nd Security Forces Squadron stationed at Fairchild Air Force Base, Wash. Byers was a senior airman when the photo was taken. An investigation into the incident was initiated 14FEB, Smith said. Joe Davis, a spokesman for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, was not amused by the photo. “There is nothing funny about [being] disrespectful and crude.” [Source: Stars and Stripes | Jon Harper | 15 Feb 2014 ++]

Funeral Honors Update 01 ► We put the FUN in funeral

A second Wisconsin National Guard member has been suspended in an investigation stemming from a photograph showing soldiers clowning around by an empty flag-draped casket, a Guard spokesman said 19 FEB. Sgt. Luis Jimenez was suspended because of comments he posted on social media defending the photo, which was taken at a guard training facility, spokesman Maj. Paul Rickert said. "He has been suspended from his duties as a funeral honors team member until the investigation is complete," Rickert said. Jimenez' comments have since been taken down, but in a screen shot confirmed by Rickert he defended the woman who originally posted the photo. "She isn't disrespecting anyone," Jimenez wrote of Spc. Terry Harrison. "... It's actually a selfless commitment she has made. These practice sessions are very long. It's good to let loose a little. When your job constantly asked you to be serious. And no there's no one in the casket."



We put the FUN in funeral - your fearless honor guard from various states

Jimenez was Harrison's task leader, or supervisor, in the Madison, Wis.-based 1st Battalion, 147th Aviation Regiment. Harrison also was suspended. No public telephone number for Jimenez could be found. Rickert said he would pass on a message from The Associated Press seeking comment. The photograph shows soldiers mugging for the camera around the empty casket. It shows 14 men and women posing, some lightheartedly. Two pairs of men hug playfully, another man has his back turned and is pointing off in the distance, and a kneeling woman flashes a peace sign. The caption reads, "We put the FUN in funeral - your fearless honor guard from various states." The photo, which originally was posted on Instagram, has sparked a furor online, drawing angry comments from people calling the picture disrespectful of veterans and those killed in action.

Rickert wouldn't say whether any other Wisconsin soldiers would be reprimanded, saying he couldn't comment while the investigation was ongoing. Gen. Frank J. Grass, head of the National Guard Bureau in Washington, D.C., said 19 FEB he ordered the investigation to what he called a "disgraceful incident." "This image is in very poor taste and clearly does not represent the values of the National Guard," he said in a statement. "I am confident the Army National Guard will quickly resolve this matter and take swift and appropriate action. Funeral duties are sacred and America's fallen deserve nothing less than our deepest respect." Attempts to reach Harrison by phone and email have been unsuccessful. The National Guard has taken steps to protect her after she received death threats through social media and other means, Rickert said. [Source: Associated Press | Dinesh Ramde | 19 Feb 2014 ++]

Medal of Honor Citations ► Roan, Charles Howard WWII



*The President of the United States
in the name of The Congress
takes pleasure in presenting the
Medal of Honor posthumously
to*

Roan, Charles Howard

Rank and organization: Private First Class Charles, U.S. Marine Corps, 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division

Place and date: Peleliu, Palau Islands, 18 September 1944

Entered service at: Claude, Texas

Born: 16 August 1916, Claude, Texas

Citation:

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty while serving with the 2d Battalion, 7th Marines, 1st Marine Division, in action against enemy Japanese forces on Peleliu, Palau Islands, 18 September 1944. Shortly after his leader ordered a withdrawal upon discovering that the squad was partly cut off from their company as a result of the rapid advance along an exposed ridge during an aggressive attack on the strongly entrenched enemy, Pfc. Roan and his companions were suddenly engaged in a furious exchange of handgrenades by Japanese forces emplaced in a cave on higher ground and to the rear of the squad. Seeking protection with 4 other marines in a depression in the rocky, broken terrain, Pfc. Roan was wounded by an enemy grenade which fell close to their position and, immediately realizing the eminent peril to his comrades when another grenade landed in the midst of the group, unhesitatingly flung himself upon it, covering it with his body and absorbing the full impact of the explosion. By his prompt action and selfless conduct in the face of almost certain death, he saved the lives of 4 men. His great personal valor reflects the highest credit upon himself and the U.S. Naval Service. He gallantly gave his life for his comrades.



Born in Claude, Texas Charles Howard Roan worked at a local service station and garage after school and on weekends. He moved to California at the age of 17 and stayed there with his brother, Henry Roan Jr. The youth enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve in December 1942. Roan, a private first class, shipped out to the Pacific in 1943, and served in Eastern New Guinea, the Bismark Archipelago, and the Palau Islands. Prior to his death, he had been in two previous battles — New Guinea and Cape Gloucester — and had seen 15 months of overseas duty. It was while in the Palau Islands, on September 18, 1944, that a small isolated group including Roan became involved in a furious and heavy exchange of small arms fire and grenades with the enemy. Roan was wounded by one exploding grenade before another live enemy grenade landed in the middle of his small group. Roan dove on the grenade and absorbed its explosion. For his selfless action, he was posthumously awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor, the Purple Heart, the World War II Victory Medal, and the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with three battle stars.

His Medal of Honor was presented to his family by President Truman in July 1945. In 1946, the Navy launched a destroyer named in his honor, the USS Charles H. Roan. A plaque which honors Roan in Claude, Texas, was donated by the USS Charles H. Roan Association. His name is engraved on the Wall of the Missing at the American National Cemetery in Manila, Philippine Islands.



Manila American Cemetery and Memorial RP



Plaque at Claude, Texas

[Source: Feb 2014 <http://www.history.army.mil/html/moh/wwII-m-s.html#MABRY> & http://www.cemetery.state.tx.us/pub/user_form.asp?pers_id=11246 ++]

Military Lingo/Jargon/Slang ► 028

USA Academy: *IRP* - A command: "Immediate Response, Please."

USA Acronyms: *TWAT* - Tanker Without A Tank. Used for tankers who are performing infantry duties. Mainly used by Infantry in Iraq.

USA Equipment: *MRE Bomb* - Using the chemical heating pouches from a field ration MRE (Meal Ready to Eat) by inserting them into a bottle, adding water and/or glowstick fluid and closing the cap. The bottle eventually expands and explodes. Can be left inside portajohn tanks and a number of other locations as a prank.

USA Field Slang: *Relaxin' Jackson* - Fort Jackson, for easy training standards

USA Misc: *Galloping-Trots, Trots, Quick-Step* - Army slang throughout the ages for dysentery.

USA Rank: *Sergeant Major* - the First Sergeant's wife or an E-9 staff position

USA Soldiers: *Do* - a term of respect for medical professionals; generally used for medics, it also applies to actual doctors and (rarely) physician's assistants

USA Unit Nicknames: *First Team* - First Cavalry Division.

USAF: *Fag* - Fighter Attack Guy; derogatory term for F/A-18 Hornet pilots.

USMC: *Bus Driver* - Air Force pilot; so called because early USAF uniforms were said to resemble those of municipal streetcar officials.

USN: *Cocked Hat* - A hat worn by officers with ceremonial uniforms commonly referred to as a "fore and aft" hat. During the 1700's the hat was worn parallel to the shoulders, but in the 1800's was modified to be worn with the points to the front and back. Wearing of the Cocked Hat was discontinued on 12 October 1940.

Vets: *Golden BB* - The bullet that kills you

Military History



Aviation Art 58 ► *Westbound*: A Date with the General



Westbound: A Date with the General

by William S. Phillips

When we get to Chunking, I'm going to give you all a party that you won't forget," was Lt. Colonel James Doolittle's promise to the 16 B-25 crews aboard the USS Hornet a few days before their historic air raid on Japan. By late afternoon on April 18th, 1942 the relative safety of the China coast was all that Lt. Donald G. Smith's crew had on their minds. The 15th aircraft (# 40-2267) to leave the carrier's deck had bombed its targets in Kobe, Japan but the crewmen knew they'd never make their designated landing strip on the Chinese mainland. The weather had become increasingly worse and visibility had dropped to zero. Lt. Smith was forced to ditch his bomber off an island on the Chinese Coast near Sangchow.

All of Aircraft 15's crew would eventually make their way to Chunking but sixteen of the other Doolittle's Raiders did not. Doolittle himself would rise to the rank of full General. It is the stuff of aviator legend that when the last Raider makes his final flight westward into the day's fading light he will be greeted by his fellow Raiders and the General, and they will have a party never to be forgotten.

[Source: <http://www.brooksart.com/Westbound.html> Feb 2014 ++]

Camp Asylum ► Civil War Excavation Site

Racing against time, South Carolina archeologists are digging to uncover the remnants of a Civil War-era prisoner-of-war camp before the site in downtown Columbia is cleared to make room for a mixed-use development. The researchers have been given four months to excavate a small portion of the 165-acre grounds of the former South Carolina State Hospital to find the remnants of what was once known as "Camp Asylum." Conditions at the camp, which held 1,500 Union Army officers during the winter of 1864-65, were so dire that soldiers dug and lived in holes in the ground, which provided shelter against the cold. The site was sold to a developer for \$15 million last summer, amid hopes it becomes an urban campus of shops and apartments and possibly a minor league baseball field.

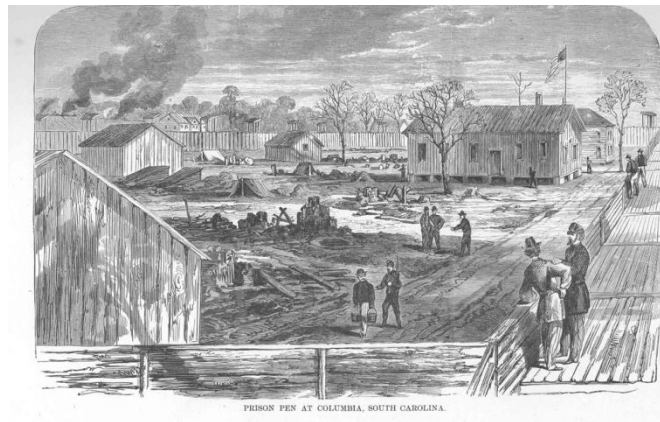
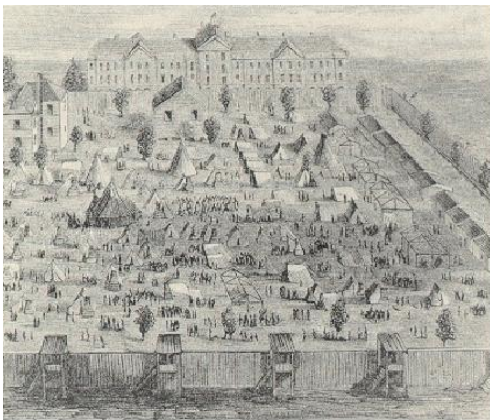


Crews Excavate the Site of Camp Asylum

Chief archaeologist Chester DePratter said researchers are digging through soil to locate the holes - the largest being 7 feet long, 6 feet wide and 3 feet deep - as well as whatever possessions the officers may have left behind. "Almost everybody lived in holes, although the Confederacy did try to procure tents along the way, as they could obtain them," said DePratter, a research archaeologist with the University of South Carolina's Institute of Archaeology and Anthropology. DePratter said he's been able to track down about 40 diaries written by camp survivors, telling tales of suffering and survival, as well as dozens of letters written by the prisoners about their experiences. He said they came from states across the North, and from many different military units. "It's hard to imagine. They all talk about their clothing being threadbare, many of them had no shoes. They shared the blankets they had, three or four together spoon fashion and put a blanket over them" to stay warm, DePratter said. "They

wrote about how every prisoner in the camp would walk about at night to keep from freezing to death." Amazingly, only one officer died there.

Officers were useful for prisoner exchanges, so they were shuttled from site to site as the war progressed. The enlisted men were sent to the notorious prison at Andersonville, Ga., where 12,000 Union soldiers died of illness and privation. The officers, however, were held in Richmond, Va., then Macon, Ga., before being sent to Savannah and Charleston, S.C. After a yellow fever outbreak in Charleston, they were brought to Columbia, where they were put in an open field dubbed "Camp Sorghum" on the western side of the Congaree River across from Columbia. But when hundreds started escaping into the surrounding countryside, they were shifted to the mental hospital's grounds, which are surrounded by a 10-foot brick wall. As the researchers dig and sift the reddish earth, they uncover buttons, combs, remnants of clothing and utensils presumably used by the prisoners. One hole contained crudely made bricks the prisoners fashioned by hand, which they stacked to offer protection from the wind and rain.



The developer has given DePratter \$25,000, which has been matched by the city, to start his dig. He's been able to raise another \$17,000. DePratter is hoping to raise additional funds to pay for ground-penetrating radar to avoid the utility pipes that crisscross the site. He has until the end of April to dig out as much as he can. Everything the crew finds is going to be held for preservation and study through the archaeology institute, he said. Tours - set up through the Historic Columbia Foundation at \$10 per person - are being conducted to help bring attention to the archaeology project. Eric Leonard, the director of education at the Andersonville National Historic Site in Georgia, which also houses a prisoner of war museum, said it is important to uncover the histories of prisoners even if it is an unpleasant topic. "Prisoners of war are an example of the extraordinary cost of war. It's not an easy story to tell, and it's not a happy story. But it delves into the consequences of war," Leonard said. Leonard added that unearthing artifacts is also important to do, since it gives people today a broader picture of the human story that might not jump out of the printed page.

Joe Long, the curator of education for the South Carolina Confederate Relic Room and Military Museum in Columbia, said the prisoners were educated officers, who were more hardened to the elements than people today. "These were intelligent, skilled men, and they produced some beautiful crafts," Long said. His museum has purchased a pipe carved by one of the prisoners from a hardened root ball of briarwood. Long added that the waning days of the Civil War have gotten little historical attention, and need to be academically documented. Long noted that in order to keep their spirits up, the prisoners formed a glee club, and sang for themselves and the local populace. "The camp commandant had a rule, he told them they could sing all the Yankee songs as they wanted, but they also had to sing a Southern song. So they'd sing 'Battle Hymn of the Republic,' and then they'd sing 'Dixie,'" Long said with a laugh. Three days before Gen. William Tecumseh Sherman's forces entered the city, the men were moved to Charlotte, and then to Wilmington, N.C. Shortly thereafter the war ended, and prisoners on both sides freed. [Source: AP | Susanne M. Schafer | 16 Feb 2014 ++]

CSA H.L. Hunley ► 150th Anniversary of Sinking

On a clear, moonlight night 150 years ago, the hand-cranked 12 meter long Confederate submarine H.L. Hunley glided out over glassy seas off South Carolina, sailing into history as the first submarine ever to sink an enemy warship. A century and a half later — and nearly a decade and a half after the sub was raised — just why the Hunley and its eight-man crew never returned is a mystery, albeit one that scientists may be closer to resolving. Monday marks the 150th anniversary of the Feb. 17, 1864, mission in which the Hunley sank the Union ship Housatonic as the Confederates desperately tried to break the Civil War blockade that was strangling Charleston. While the Housatonic sank, so did the Hunley.



H. L. Hunley, suspended from a crane during its recovery from Charleston Harbor & sitting in a conservation tank after the steel truss that had surrounded it was removed.

Re-enactors held a gathering 17 FEB at Breach Inlet between Sullivans Island and the Isle of Palms northeast of Charleston for a memorial service honoring both the Hunley crew and the five Union sailors who died. The loss of life came when the submarine set off a black powder charge at the end of a 200-pound spar, sinking the blockader. The remains of the Hunley — which was built in Mobile, Ala., and brought to Charleston in hopes of breaking the blockade — were discovered off the coast in 1995. Five years later, in August of 2000, cannons boomed, church bells rang and thousands watched from the harborside as the sub was raised and brought by barge to a conservation lab in North Charleston. There, scientists have since been slowly revealing the Hunley's secrets.

Among the first artifacts recovered from the silt and sand clogging the inside of the submarine were buttons from the crewmen's uniforms. Later came one of the most sought-after artifacts of the Hunley legend — a gold coin that had deflected a bullet and thus saved the life of Hunley commander Lt. George Dixon at the Battle of Shiloh. The \$20 United States gold piece was given to Dixon by his sweetheart, Queenie Bennett. The words "Shiloh April 6, 1862 My life Preserver" are inscribed on the coin. One of the initial surprises was that there were eight crewmen, not the nine thought to have been aboard before the Hunley was raised. The remains were found indicating the crewmen were at their positions at the crank. There was no evidence of an attempt to escape through the hatches, raising speculation as to what prevented the Hunley from returning from its mission. Scientists announced a year ago they may be closing in on exactly what happened.

An examination of the spar found it was deformed as if in an explosion. Scientists now believe the Hunley was less than 20 feet from the Housatonic when it sank. That means it may have been close enough for the sub's crew to have been knocked unconscious by the explosion — long enough that they may have died before awakening. For years, historians thought the Hunley was farther away and had speculated the crew ran out of air before they were

able to return to shore. Those who went down on the Hunley comprised the third crew of the submarine. Two previous crews died in accidents before the sub could even attempt its mission. In April of 2004, thousands of men in Confederate gray and Union blue as well as women in black hoop skirts and veils walked in a procession with the crew's coffins from Charleston's waterfront Battery to Magnolia Cemetery. There they were buried near the other crews in what has been called the last Confederate funeral ceremony. [Source: AP Bruce smith | 17 Feb 2014]

Military History Anniversaries ► 1 thru 31 Mar

Significant events in U.S. Military History are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Military History Anniversaries 1 thru 31 Mar**".

WWII Prewar Events ► Mock Gas Invasion Drill Mar 1938



England's biggest demonstration of its readiness to go through a gas attack was staged, March 16, 1938, when 2,000 volunteers in Birmingham donned gas masks and went through an elaborate drill. These three firemen were fully equipped, from rubber boots to masks, for the mock gas "invasion".

Spanish American War Image 34 ► **Roughriders Mascot 1898**



Mascot of the "Rough Riders" (1898)

Faces of WAR (WWII) ► **COL Neel E. Kearby**



COL Neel E. Kearby, 348th FG commander 1943. He was KIA flying this aircraft on 5 March 1944. Its vertical fin, the serial number still legible, resides today in the National Museum of the U.S. Air Force - along with Kearby's Medal of Honor.

Health Care



VA Pain Management Update 03 ► Opioid Safety Initiative

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has initiated a multi-faceted approach to reduce the use of opioids among America’s Veterans using VA health care. The Opioid Safety Initiative (OSI) is a comprehensive effort to improve the quality of life for the hundreds of thousands of Veterans suffering from chronic pain. Launched in October 2013 in Minneapolis, Minnesota, OSI is already demonstrating success in lowering dependency on this class of drugs. At eight sites of care in Minnesota, OSI practices have decreased high-dose opioid use by more than 50 percent. OSI incorporates the team approach with the goal of reducing opioid use by alleviating a Veterans’ pain using non-prescription methods. There is an emphasis on patient education, close patient monitoring with frequent feedback and Complementary and Alternative Medicine practices like acupuncture. “We have developed and implemented joint pain management guidelines which encourage the use of other medications and therapies in lieu of habit forming opiates,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki. “Early results give us hope that we can reduce the use of opioids for Veterans suffering with chronic pain and share these best practices across our healthcare networks.”

The Opioid Safety Initiative faces the challenge of opioid dependency with an innovative and comprehensive plan that closely monitors VA’s dispensing practices system-wide and coordinates pain management to include patient and provider education, testing and tapering programs, and alternative therapies like acupuncture and behavior therapy. Veterans enrolled in the VA health care system suffer from high rates of chronic pain. Each VA facility employs personnel including Interdisciplinary Pain Medicine Specialty Teams and Consult Services, Facility Pain Committees, Pharmacy staff and Primary Care/PACT, and other professionals to accomplish the goals and objectives of the OSI. VA has developed patient management initiatives including Pain Coach, which is a pain management app available for download by patients receiving pain management treatments, a Veterans’ Health Library, including a Patient/Family Management Toolkit, and resources for Pain Management on My HealtheVet.

All of these applications allow Veterans to better manage their pain without the use of opioids. VA’s measurement-based pain care includes the “Pain Scale,” which reduces uncertainty and helps Veterans by discussing the potential benefits of a medication and possible side-effects. “The Opioid Safety Initiative is an example of VHA’s personalized, proactive and patient-centered approach to health care. We are also using a full-range of support treatments for Veterans, including Complementary and Alternative Medicine ,” said Dr. Robert Petzel, VA’s Under Secretary for Health. “We are delivering health care with the patient’s long-term personal health goals at the forefront.” For further information, Veterans should contact their primary care health team. To learn more about VA health care, visit <http://www.va.gov>. [Source: VA News Release 24 Feb 2014 ++]

VA Mental Health Care Update 26: Bureaucracy Delays Treatment

Veteran Brad Marsh is a retired U.S. Marine who moved to Waco in an effort to control his mental disorders. But he found himself homeless for three months when a filing error prevented his immediate admittance to the Central Texas Veterans Health Care System. Marsh is one of dozens of veterans a year who migrate to Waco expecting to be immediately admitted into a program for either post-traumatic stress disorder or other mental disabilities, McLennan County veterans services officer Steve Hernandez said. But those patients often find they have to wait to be admitted, he said. “They come down here with the expectations that they’re going to get right in,” Hernandez said. “Then they find out for whatever reasons, they’re not immediately eligible or immediately admitted.” Those reasons can be issues with registration or eligibility or a lack of space, he said. Hernandez works at the Heart of Texas Mental Health Mental Retardation’s Veterans One Stop Center and assists veterans seeking help. He said many of these veterans often are **not equipped to navigate the bureaucracy of enrolling** in inpatient care and struggle to meet the basic needs of housing and food, he said. They often arrive confused, having misunderstood the process or accidentally filed information incorrectly, but don’t have the mental capacity to correct the errors, Hernandez said.

Hernandez helped a veteran who traveled from Louisiana expecting to be admitted to the Olin E. Teague Veterans Center in Temple, but accidentally canceled his spot for the program. Hernandez said when the veteran arrived he wasn’t allowed to stay longer than a few days because his spot had been given away. It can take anywhere from a few weeks to several months to get someone admitted into a mental health program, leaving veterans temporarily searching for alternate housing or stranded, Hernandez said. Marsh was caught in this limbo for three months in early 2013, several years after retiring from the Marines. Marsh declined to discuss his military service, but said he began having mental problems upon deployment, and that continued when he returned to Texas. When Marsh arrived in Waco, Hernandez walked him through the process of finding housing and enrolling in the VA’s inpatient program.

Marsh had lived in East Texas for about three years while working for a church. He had been traveling between East Texas and Waco for treatment until his condition escalated to the point that he qualified for one of the Waco VA Medical Center’s inpatient programs for the mentally ill. Marsh said he suffered anxiety attacks so severe while he was driving that he was forced to pull over and would eventually pass out, waking up hours later. His mental illness convinced him someone was after him and he stayed bedridden for days with exhaustion from the delusions, he said. He moved to Waco with the expectation he would be immediately admitted to an inpatient program. But when he arrived, there was a problem with his paperwork and he was refused admittance. He said he spent three months in Waco living out of his car until his paperwork was refiled and accepted. Hernandez often sees veterans move to Waco because there are many companies here who tend to hire retired military. The local veterans hospital also provides them with emotional and health care support.

Hernandez thinks the solution to eliminating the number of stranded veterans is to reach out to them earlier and get them into therapeutic programs before their conditions require inpatient therapy. “We’re trying to get into that segment now,” he said. He also is forming a coalition of organizations willing to provide finances, alternative housing and health care for those who come into his office without resources. He wants the Veterans One Stop to have a list of businesses and organizations that have volunteered to step in if a transient veteran is in need. Hernandez said he has seen a gradual shift since 2010 from Gulf War and Vietnam veterans seeking help to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans. Unfortunately, Hernandez said, the individuals often don’t come to him or reach out for help before they become paranoid or violent. Men returning from overseas often are thrown into the responsibilities of civilian life without a pause. They often must immediately search for a job and return to raising children. They don’t have time to learn how to cope with the symptoms they experience, Hernandez said. “More often than not, I run into

Iraq and Afghanistan veterans who are unfortunately having relationship issues, criminal issues or having addiction problems,” Hernandez said. “They’re having social and occupational problems . . . and by then it’s already created a blemish that they have to overcome. And sometimes that’s all they need to go into a downward spiral.” Young veterans get frustrated with the process and choose not to seek help because of the delays in treatment, Hernandez said. But it’s always better to begin the process sooner rather than later, he said. “A lot of times they’re coming in after there’s something that’s been a detriment in their life, and they feel they’re losing control,” he said.

U.S. Army veteran Martin Arellano, 24, is another Waco veteran struggling with his wartime experiences. He is proactively addressing his anxiety with group and individual therapy sessions. Arellano retired as an infantryman in May and moved from Kentucky to Texas to be near his parents. Arellano said he participated in one 11-month deployment to Afghanistan in 2010. “For the initial three months it was nothing but everyday combat,” Arellano said. “We would go out on patrol, get in a firefight and have to come back in. Then go back out later on. It was constant.” The residue of the firefights followed Arellano home to Kentucky. He would become angry at co-workers about trivial matters, he said. He suffered through bouts of depression, heavy drinking, insecurity and paranoia when in large crowds. “I wouldn’t sleep good,” he said. “I would think there was someone outside the house.” He attributes many of his symptoms to internalizing his emotions during deployment and after returning home. “The only thing I thought about during that time is ‘I can’t let it bother me because I’ve still got a lot to do and still have a family to go home to,’ ” he said. “Sometimes whenever we did the roll call for the fallen soldiers that we had, maybe sometime in there you would feel like breaking down, but we just wouldn’t. I didn’t want to do it in front of everybody else. You just try to hold it in.”

After Arellano, his wife and their two children moved to Texas, he met Hernandez at the Veterans One Stop in August when he enrolled in a work study program with his college classes. Upon hearing of Arellano’s struggle to manage the trauma of combat, Hernandez recommended he participate in a PTSD therapy group and see a doctor. Since enrolling in therapy Arellano says he’s been able to manage some of his symptoms. “I think it has helped me cope in certain situations and relax myself,” he said. “It’s not like you can control what happens, but you can help yourself get past that situation. You can’t stop everything you feel, but you can react to it so it won’t end in a negative way.” [Source: Waco Tribune | Stephanie Butts | 24 Feb 2014 ++]

Hepatitis C Update 03 ► Disease Progression Preventable

An estimated 3 million to 4 million persons in the United States are chronically infected with HCV, and approximately half are unaware of their status. These individuals may ultimately progress to advanced liver disease and/or hepatocellular cancer. However, those outcomes can be prevented by treatment, which is rapidly improving and offers the potential of a cure to more patients than has been previously possible. New direct-acting oral agents capable of curing hepatitis C virus (HCV) infection have been approved for use in the United States. The initial direct-acting agents were approved in 2011, and many more oral drugs are expected to be approved in the next few years.

As new information is presented at scientific conferences and published in peer-reviewed journals, health care practitioners have expressed a need for a credible source of unbiased guidance on how best to treat their patients with HCV infection. To provide healthcare professionals with timely guidance, the American Association for the Study of Liver Diseases (AASLD) and the Infectious Diseases Society of America (IDSA) in collaboration with the International Antiviral Society-USA (IAS-USA) have developed a web-based process for the rapid formulation and dissemination of evidence-based, expert-developed recommendations for hepatitis C management. New sections will be added, and the recommendations will be updated on a regular basis as new information becomes available.

An ongoing summary of "recent changes" will also be available for readers who want to be directed to updates and changes. To access the full Recommendations for Testing, Managing, and Treating Hepatitis C report go to <http://hcvguidelines.org/full-report-view>. [Source: Vietnam Veterans Web Weekly 21 Feb 2014 ++]

TFL Pharmacy Benefit Update 03 ► Pilot Program Begins 15 MAR

Tricare has begun notifying military retirees and family members who use Tricare for Life that they must start filling long-term prescriptions by mail or at a military treatment facility starting next month. Under the five-year pilot program, TFL beneficiaries must transfer prescriptions for maintenance medications to — or start new medications for chronic conditions through — the Tricare Mail Order Pharmacy or a military pharmacy by 15 MAR.

Army Maj. Gen. Richard Thomas, director of health care operations for the Defense Health Agency, started notifying beneficiaries Tuesday by mail of the pending change. According to Thomas, Tricare will no longer cover the cost of these medications at retail stores after two “courtesy fills” beyond March 14.

The requirement applies to long-term medications only, not those needed for acute illnesses or pain medications prescribed for a limited time. It also will not apply to prescriptions covered by other health insurance or generic medications, according to the Defense Department. Pentagon data show that nearly half of the 70 million prescriptions filled for Tricare beneficiaries at retail pharmacies in fiscal 2012 were for TFL beneficiaries, at a cost of \$2.2 billion to the government. Since DoD pays 17 percent less for maintenance medications filled by mail than those filled at retail stores, Pentagon analysts concluded that costs could be trimmed significantly — by at least \$120 million a year — if TFL beneficiaries were required to use mail order for long-term prescriptions. The requirement also will save beneficiaries money: a 90-day refill of a generic medication costs nothing by mail, but require a \$5 co-payment for a 30-day prescription at retail stores. Brand-name drugs cost \$13 for a 90-day prescription by mail but \$17 for a 30-day prescription at a store. Medication is dispensed free at military treatment facility pharmacies.

Case-by-case waivers may be granted for personal hardship, emergency or “other special circumstances,” such as living in a nursing home, according to the rule published in the Federal Register. Waiver requests would have to be made through Express Scripts, Tricare’s pharmacy contractor. The five-year pilot mail-order program was mandated by the 2013 National Defense Authorization Act. Under the law, beneficiaries can opt out of the program after one year, starting from the date they fill their first prescription through the program. Refills can be ordered by calling 1-877-363-1303 or by visiting Express Scripts online. Patients who want to start getting their medications at a military treatment facility may need to get a new prescription from their doctor, Pentagon officials said. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | 18 Feb 2014 ++]

Blast Health Effects Update 01 ► Paucity of High-Quality Information

Troops injured by bomb blasts — who absorb the full brunt of a shock wave, are hit by flying debris or even exposed to bomb-making chemicals — are at higher risk for developing long-term health problems such as post-traumatic stress disorder, persistent headaches and some skin conditions, a panel of top scientists says. In a report prepared for the Veterans Affairs Department and released 13 FEB, the Institute of Medicine reviewed past studies and reports on blast exposure to determine what long-term health consequences they may pose for veterans who were hit.



A medic attends to a wounded soldier in the aftermath of an IED explosion in Afghanistan in 2012.

According to the panel, some conditions clearly can be linked to exposure, such as penetrating eye injuries and injuries to the urinary tract and genitalia. Others, like PTSD and chronic headaches, were strongly associated with blasts. But some, including chronic traumatic encephalopathy — the brain disease implicated in the deaths of a number of NFL players and some service members — as well as hearing loss and osteoarthritis, showed a less direct link. “Acute physical and psychological health outcomes in people who survive blast explosions can be devastating, but the long-term consequences are less clear, particularly for individuals who show no external signs of injury ... or may not even be aware they were exposed,” said Dr. Stephen Hauser, committee chair and head of the neurology department at the University of California San Francisco.

The report confirms what many in the military have long suspected: that concussions, or mild traumatic brain injury, related to blast exposures are linked to post-traumatic stress disorder. Using advanced imaging technology, several studies, including a 2012 University of Rochester investigation, have found blast injury may “predispose” troops to PTSD. Why that’s so is unknown. The IOM said it could be a result of the direct blast experience or “indirect exposure, such as witnessing the aftermath of a blast or being part of a community affected by the blast. While there is substantial overlap between symptoms of mild TBI and PTSD, limited evidence suggests most of the shared symptoms could be a result of PTSD and not a direct result of TBI alone.” To compile its report, the IOM panel reviewed more than 12,800 articles and abstracts on blast trauma and health outcomes. Yet the 17 panel members found that their ability to draw conclusions about links between exposure to blast and health effects, particularly long-term health effects, “was severely restricted by the paucity of high-quality information.” The panel suggested that VA:

- Conduct research to identify biomarkers of blast injury.
- Support research on detecting, preventing and treating such injuries.
- Create a registry of blast-exposed — not just blast injured — troops to serve as a foundation for long-term studies.

The panel also said the Defense Department should improve its real-time data collection to understand the scope and impact of blast incidents and consider screening recruits to determine their susceptibility to blast injury. “Filling the data gaps is important for advancing the understanding of how blast affects humans in the short term and long term,” the IOM panel said. “Attention to those complexities has often been lacking in research studies.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | 20 Feb 2014 ++]

Toxic Exposure~Iraq Dust ► Long-Term Respiratory Diseases

When Army Sgt. Jayson Williams deployed to Iraq in 2003, he was a healthy 33-year-old who enjoyed the outdoors, running and playing with his son. When he returned home, he found he couldn't do routine chores without becoming exhausted or needing to take deep breaths. He deployed twice more, and his condition worsened. First thought to be emphysema, his diagnosis later was changed to chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. And after having an invasive lung biopsy, he received even grimmer news — constrictive bronchiolitis, an irreversible lung disease that robs a patient of lung function.



A soldier ducks the prop wash of a helicopter taking off near Kirkuk, Iraq, in 2010

Williams thinks his condition is the result of smoke from a burn pit near his barracks and fumes of a sulfur mine fire that raged for a month near Mosul, spewing toxic materials into the air. But a growing body of research indicates another factor may contribute to long-term respiratory diseases of veterans like Williams: microscopic dust particles containing heavy metals and other toxins. A long-term study has found that 14 percent of deployed troops reported chronic respiratory symptoms such as cough, bronchitis, shortness of breath and asthma, compared with 10 percent who did not deploy. The results suggest specific exposures, rather than long exposures, may play a role — particularly among ground troops who deployed to the desert environment of the Persian Gulf. Navy Capt. Mark Lyles, professor of health and security studies at the Naval War College in Newport, R.I., began warning of potential health hazards from fine dust particles in 2003.

His team's analysis found that soil and dust samples from the Persian Gulf region contained microscopic particles carrying microbes and 37 elements and metals, including aluminum, iron, magnesium and tin, some of which have been linked to respiratory problems as well as neurological conditions such as multiple sclerosis. "I still believe it's the smoking gun," said Lyles, who stressed that he was speaking as a researcher and not in an official Navy capacity. "I think the more people concentrate on the burn pits ... the more they dilute the number of people who actually were exposed to environmental toxins. I believe only 3 to 5 percent of service members were exposed to a burn pit. But 100 percent of people who served were exposed to mineralized dust."

Dr. Anthony Szema, assistant professor of medicine at Stony Brook University in New York, recently did a study that appears to confirm portions of Lyles' work. Szema exposed mice to sand collected from Camp Victory, Iraq, in 2007 and later determined they had "angular, sharp and solid" particulates containing titanium and iron in their lungs, which caused the lungs to thicken and provoked a systemic immune response. When Szema's team used dust from other locations, including the San Joaquin Valley in California; Kandahar, Afghanistan; and a titanium mine in

Montana, “we did not get the same findings,” he said. The results will be published in March. Szema also presented his findings Feb. 12 to the Defense Health Board in Washington, D.C. A 2011 study from the Institute of Medicine found there are insufficient data to determine whether burn pits cause long-term health effects. The same report noted that the biggest pollution concern at one of the most controversial sites, Joint Base Balad, Iraq, likely is particulate matter. The committee said its review of the literature and the data from Balad suggests that service in Iraq or Afghanistan — that is, a broader consideration of air pollution than exposure only to burn pit emissions — might be associated with long-term health effects, particularly in highly exposed populations.

A Defense Department spokeswoman, Army Lt. Col. Catherine Wilkinson, said officials there are aware that some troops experienced persistent or chronic respiratory diseases, “possibly as a result of increased susceptibility, elevated exposures, combined exposures, pre-existing conditions and other factors.” She said DoD is working to develop screening tools for troops and veterans with symptoms, as well as diagnostic tools to identify disease. “We take seriously the concerns associated with exposure to airborne hazards, and continue to study possible long-term health effects of this type of exposure during deployments,” Wilkinson said. But Lyles said the government is not doing enough. Defense and Veterans Affairs Department health officials have held two annual Airborne Hazards Symposia — both closed to the public — and have not invited him to speak or present his team’s data. In 2004, the Navy never acted on his recommendations that ground-based troops be supplied with masks to limit exposure. “No one wants me to sit down and show them the scientific facts and data that we gathered,” he said. “Obviously, once they see the facts and data, they can’t repudiate them,” Lyles said. “DoD has known about our data for 10 years. They don’t want to think about it, and they certainly don’t seem to want to know about it.” Szema suggested researchers should look at designing specific drugs “based on what we know the injury is. We need to assess [troops] for titanium and look at new drugs to block the effects of the dust.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | 20 Feb 2014 ++]

TRICARE Prime Update 27 ► Working Age Retiree Ban Impact

Pushing working-age military retirees out of Tricare Prime could save the Pentagon nearly \$90 billion over the next 10 years, a measure that would generate the most savings of the various options recently considered by the Congressional Budget Office to trim the defense health budget. In a report released 20 FEB, CBO analysts said the cost-cutting options that would make the biggest dent in the \$52 billion Defense Department medical budget would be those that increased military retirees’ contributions to their own health care. According to the CBO, proposals to increase Tricare enrollment fees and copayments for working-age retirees could save \$24.1 billion from 2015 to 2023, while introducing minimum out-of-pocket charges for beneficiaries using Tricare for Life would save roughly \$18.4 billion. But banning working age retirees from the Pentagon’s HMO-style Prime plan could save \$89.6 billion — an amount difficult to ignore, budget experts said.

“Shifting current cost-sharing arrangements so that beneficiaries pay a greater percentage of their health care costs would reduce DoD’s spending significantly ... primarily by encouraging people to leave Tricare in favor of other providers. It also would encourage those who continued to participate in Tricare to use fewer services,” the report states. CBO warned, however, that estimating the entire potential savings to the federal budget if the options were implemented is difficult, because they would force some Tricare users to other federal health programs, such as the Veterans Health Administration, or use nontaxable employer-offered care, which would lower the revenue those options generate. Veterans advocates have long been concerned about the impact of Tricare fee increases on their members. In 2013, 171,000 retirees and their families lost access to Tricare Prime — a change that had been in the works since 2007 — but they were not told about it until just months before, setting off a firestorm of complaints.

And each year, Congress has thwarted Pentagon efforts to increase fees sharply or implement enrollment payments for some programs.

“The proposed DoD increases have been very troubling to our beneficiaries,” Gold Star Wives President Sandra Drew told the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission in November. Pentagon officials have sought to assuage fears, however. Speaking to Military Times on 8 JAN, Defense Health Agency acting deputy director Al Middleton said the military health system must tread carefully in restricting retiree access to Prime at military hospitals because they often represent the most challenging cases that allow military medical personnel to keep their skills sharp. “It would be a worry to push this group from medical care because the clinical material would evaporate,” Middleton said. For its analysis, CBO considered three main areas in which DoD could control costs: improving chronic disease management; increasing efficiencies within the military health program and changing retirees’ access to Tricare.

Analysts concluded that the savings from educating patients on better monitoring their conditions and improving disease management would “be small, tens of millions of dollars each year.” In terms of streamlining administrative costs, CBO examined the potential savings of closing the Uniformed Services University of the Health Sciences and concluded that those savings also would be small because they would be offset by the costs of increasing the number of medical school scholarships needed to maintain force medical readiness. Also, the report said, the school is so small, shuttering it would only save “a few million to about \$150 million, significantly less than the savings that would result from cost-sharing options.” In 2012, the Defense Department spent \$52 billion on health care. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | 17 Feb 2014 ++]

Finances



COLA 2015 ► **Chained CPI Not in 2015 Budget Proposal**

White House official announced this week that the President’s fiscal 2015 budget, due 4 MAR, will not include a provision recommending a “chained Consumer Price Index.” The Chained CPI would revise the Cost of Living Adjustments (COLA) calculation, lowering the annual COLA adjustment to Social Security and related programs including military retirement pay and survivor compensation. A move to the chained CPI is still on the table in hypothetical future budget negotiations, White House spokesman Josh Earnest said at a press briefing on Thursday, but it will not be in the president’s fiscal 2015 budget. The announcement indicates a change in course for the President who made the proposal part of his budget roll out last year. Many who advocate for switching to the Chained CPI argue that the formula offers a more accurate measure of how people substitute one item for another in the face of a price increase. A number of lawmakers and federal employee advocates have disputed that logic,

however, and voiced opposition to the change just before the White House announcement. National Association of Uniformed Services (NAUS) President Jack Klimp said, "Removing the possibility of the Chained CPI, for now, is the right thing to help military retirees and all other Americans. For millions of disabled veterans and seniors living on fixed incomes, the chained CPI is a significant benefit cut." [Source: NAUS Weekly Update 21 Feb 2014 ++]

Cola 2016 Update 10 ► 2034 Retirees Still Stuck with Cut

Veterans welcomed the repeal of the reduction of the cost-of-living-adjustment for retirees starting in 2016, but veterans' advocate groups are disappointed the reduction will still apply to new troops. The bill now awaiting President Obama's signature grandfathers current retirees and troops as of Dec. 31, 2013, from COLA cuts that were created as a deficit reduction measure. However, troops entering service after that date will see smaller COLAs when they begin retiring in 2034. Representatives for several veterans organizations say that's not fair and want to see the entire law scrapped. "Future military retirees will be required to serve just as long and perhaps sacrifice even more than their predecessors," Veterans of Foreign Wars national spokesman Joe Davis said. "It is in that regard that the VFW will continue to fight for a full repeal of the COLA penalty, and we hope that this vote will continue that conversation."

Shortly after the vote on Capitol Hill on 12 FEB, various groups released statements praising the repeal of the current law but did not endorse Congress' decision to saddle future retirees with smaller COLAs. "While we are pleased to see the restoration of retirement benefits for those who already have served, we are concerned that Congress has left future retirement cuts in place, and we will keep fighting until benefits for all who serve are restored," Paul Rieckhoff, chief executive officer of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said in a statement. Michael Saunders, deputy legislative director for The Retired Enlisted Association, said that lawmakers' decision to put the COLA cap on future retirees will present a threat to recruiting and retention. "While we thank [them] for repealing the unjust cut contained in the Bipartisan Budget Act ... this legislation cuts compensation that we believe is needed to maintain the all-volunteer force," he said in an email.

The bill repealed by lawmakers this week would have set annual cost of living adjustments for military retirees under age 62 at 1 percentage point below the federal cost of living increase. It was to take effect in fiscal 2016. The intent of the measure was to reduce the deficit by \$6 billion over 10 years. "All of our friends [in both houses] voted for it. It was almost unanimous," Louis Celli, legislative director of The American Legion, said on Thursday. "You can't scream bloody murder because the people we trust voted for it." What makes little sense, says Celli, is that the money the government will save in the short term under the new law will be minuscule -- a small percentage of funds that the Defense Department annually saves and invests for future retirees.

With pensions trimmed back by 1 percent below the federal COLA starting in 20 years, the DoD will have to appropriate just a tiny bit less each year for the future. But nothing like the \$6 billion the government was supposed to be saving over 10 years with the original legislation, he said. "Is this [new bill] the worst thing in the world today? No. Because it accomplished the major goal that we needed to get accomplished right away," he said on Thursday. "Are we happy that they stuck in this last-minute provision to now penalize young enlistees who are looking at the military as a possible career? We're not happy about that. But I think lawmakers fully recognize that this will never go into effect." And since the first retirees to feel the COLA pinch won't retire until 2034, he said, Congress has given itself plenty of time to fix its mistake. [Source: Military.com | Bryant Jordan |14 Feb 2014 ++]

Living Trusts Update 02 ► Life and Death Decisions

In discussing your living trust with your attorney, there are several very important decisions for you to consider. Some of your decisions affect the management of property during life, and others will determine how your successor trustee manages your property for the benefit of family, friends and charity after you pass away.

Medical Care Planning - The living trust works together with other important estate planning documents in the event that you have a medical crisis or emergency. When you sign a living trust, your attorney will also prepare an advance directive or, in some states, a durable power of attorney for healthcare and a living will. These documents will be different in the various states, but have the same general purpose. The durable power of attorney for healthcare enables you to select a person who will make medical decisions if you are not able to advise the doctors yourself. A living will explains the circumstances that will be surrounding your final weeks or days and makes requests to the attending doctors and nurses concerning your preferences for care at that time. While these medical documents are important to ensure that you receive the best care, the living trust also contains provisions that make certain your property is managed for your benefit. If you are ill, your designated successor trustee may manage your property, pay bills and ensure good medical care for you.

Trust for Minor Children - If you are a single parent or a couple with minor children, then the living trust will usually include a family trust for the benefit of those children. If both parents have passed away, the successor trustee will manage the family trust for the children. The trust provisions frequently permit the trustee to allocate the income to the children based on his or her understanding of their individual needs. Unless the trust is quite substantial, it is common for the entire family trust for minors to be used to provide for the room, board, tuition and medical expenses of the minors until the youngest child reaches the age for distribution. For many parents, this is when the youngest child is age 25 or older. During the existence of the trust, a trustee of a family trust for minors generally has quite broad discretion. For example, the trustee may distribute income to any of the children and may invade principal for medical expenses, educational expenses or other needed items. The parent will frequently provide a general statement of guidance for distributions, especially of principal, but the trustee will often have broad discretion. Therefore, it is common to select a trusted friend, advisor or family member as trustee of the trust for minor children. If your estate is substantial, you may want to select one person as guardian of your children and another as successor trustee of your property. In this way, you build a "check and balance" into the plan that encourages both your guardian and trustee to use the assets to best benefit your children.

Single Person—"Give It Twice" Trust - The living trust directs the distribution of assets after the demise of a single person. Frequently, the assets are distributed to family and favorite charities. The family could be children, but many times includes nephews and nieces. A single person may choose to create a trust for nephews and nieces. One trust that is gaining popularity is a "Give It Twice" trust. The trust pays income to the nephews or nieces until the initial value of the trust has been paid out as income. Trust principal is then distributed to charity. For example, a single person with four nephews and nieces passed away and transferred \$500,000 into the "Give It Twice" trust. The trust paid approximately \$500,000 of income over a term of 18 years to the four nephews and nieces. After that time, the trust principal of \$500,000 was distributed to a favorite charity.

Planning by Married Couples - If married couples have minor children, then a family trust for minors is appropriate. However, particularly if the married couples have a larger estate, then your advisor may suggest a plan with two trusts. With a larger estate, your advisor may recommend a combination of a qualified terminable interest property trust (QTIP) for the surviving spouse and a bypass trust. The QTIP distributes all income to the surviving spouse. It can be invaded, but only for the benefit of the surviving spouse. After the surviving spouse passes away, the assets are distributed under the will of the first person to pass away. This distribution is frequently made to children, but may also include favorite charities. The QTIP protects both the surviving spouse and the children from

the first marriage. The second trust is the bypass trust. It is normally funded with the amount of the exemption equivalent. This trust usually distributes income to the surviving spouse. There is also a limited power to invade principal for the benefit of the surviving spouse if needed for health, education, maintenance or support. Because this trust uses the exemption of the first to pass away and follows the appropriate guidelines, it is not subject to tax in the estate of surviving spouse. Only the QTIP and the other personally owned assets will be subject to estate tax from the assets of the surviving spouse.

[Source: USS Midway Newsletter 22 Nov 2013 ++]

Saving Money ► Engagement Rings

Are you willing to go into debt for love? If you are ready to pop the question, but haven't saved for the ring you want to buy, you may be tempted to finance the purchase. But do that and you may find that already pricey engagement ring costs a lot more than you planned. The average engagement ring cost \$5,200 and about 12% of couples spent more than \$8,000 for an engagement ring, according to the XO Group Inc. 2011 Engagement Engagement & Jewelry Survey [<http://www.xogroupinc.com/press-releases-home/2011-press-releases/2011-08-30-2011-engagement-and-jewelry-statistics-released.aspx>]. The average ring was 1 carat for the center stone, and 1.4 carats total stones.

If you haven't socked that much away, don't worry. All of the major jewelry stores offer financing, with many of them promoting interest-free financing for six to 12 months. (No interest, no payments is no longer allowed thanks to the CARD Act.) But there's a catch: Miss a payment or fail to pay off the balance and you'll pay a lot more. For example, here is what some of the major jewelry stores are currently advertising. With all of these plans, if you make one late payment or fail to pay the balance in full during the promotional period, interest will be charged from the date of purchase -- not from the date the promotional period ends.

- Jared: 0% interest if paid in full within 12 months; up to 24.99%.
- Kay Jewelers: 0% interest if paid in full within 12 months; up to 24.99%.
- Shane and Company: 0% interest if paid in full in 6 months; 27.99%
- Zales: 0% interest if paid in full in 6 months; 23.73% to 28.99%

While interest-free financing may work out fine if you are able to pay off the balance, it is risky if you aren't able to come up with the cash to pay it off.

One more potential trap: Applying for one of the accounts will create an inquiry on your credit reports. [<http://www.credit.com/rs/vol7.jsp>] . Plus, if you accept the financing, you'll have a new account with a balance listed on your credit reports, and that could potentially have a negative effect on your credit scores. That's something to keep in mind if you hope to buy a home together soon, for example.

Avoiding Engagement Ring Debt. If you don't want to wait much longer, you may want to consider more affordable options:

- Buy a less expensive ring and start saving for an upgrade on, say, your fifth or tenth wedding anniversary.
- Use interest-free financing for the initial purchase, then use a low-rate balance transfer to pay off the balance before the 0% store financing ends. I am not recommending this, since you can run into traps here too, but if you pull it off, it's better than paying 25% or more for long-term store financing.
- Get a part-time job in a jewelry store and save substantially on your purchase (i.e. usually cost plus a small percentage). Put all of your earnings toward a ring.

And when you do choose a ring, shop carefully to make sure you are getting the best deal. Jennie Ma, the fashion editor [<http://www.theknot.com/>], offers these tips:

- **Buy Shy and Save:** Shop for diamonds that weigh just under certain weight thresholds. For example, if you want a 1.0 carat diamond, you can buy a .90 carat diamond and save more than \$1,000. And buying shy will hardly affect the diamond's outward appearance (the diameter of a 1.0 carat diamond is 6.5 mm, whereas the diameter of a .90 shy carat stone is 6.3 mm -- the difference is the thickness of a piece of paper). The price difference between a 1.90 carat diamond and a 2.0 carat diamond can be as much as \$5,000!
- **Hit the Internet:** There can be some great deals found on the Internet -- i.e. BlueNile and Union Diamond allow you to compare the going rate of loose diamonds and ring settings based on their grades and styles.
- **Buy Loose Diamonds:** Don't be dazzled by the pretty setting, the fancy box or the clever advertisements. Most jewelry ads are selling you on settings, not diamonds, even though the stone is a whopping 90 percent of a ring's cost. It's important to buy the stone loose, not mounted, so you can inspect the entire stone.
- **Don't be Afraid to Negotiate:** There's always room for negotiation, so don't be afraid to go after a deal. Never settle on the sticker price unless you've shopped around and you know it's already a fair price.

Keep one more thing in mind before going into debt for an engagement ring: You've got a much bigger expense coming up soon -- a wedding. [Source: Military.com | Gerri Detweiler | Sep 2013 ++]



Olympic Counterfeit Merchandise Scam ► How It works

You may not be headed to Sochi, Russia this month for the 2014 Winter Olympics, but that doesn't mean you can't show your Olympic spirit in other ways. One of the most popular methods of showing a little national spirit is by purchasing Olympic merchandise. However, when doing so remember to be aware of scams! Scammers know that Olympic merchandise is in super high demand right now and this creates the perfect opportunity to sell counterfeit merchandise or simply steal people's money. A recent search on eBay showed 5,693 items for "Sochi 2014." Many were authentic re-sales, but some were obviously fraudulent, including the "Olympic Torch Sochi 2014", yours for only \$7,000! You would most likely catch this blatant scam, but others might slip under your radar. If you are thinking of buying Olympic gear and supporting your country's team, make sure you are getting what you pay for, it's the real deal and you don't become the victim of a scam by following these tips:

1. Familiarize yourself with Olympic logos, graphics and branding in order to easily spot a counterfeit.
2. Consider shopping directly from the official website of the 2014 Sochi Olympics, sochi2014.com. It might be on the expensive side, but at least you know you are getting brand new and authentic Olympic merchandise.

3. If you want to check out a product found elsewhere, or report counterfeit merchandise, hover over the little plus sign in the upper right corner and click on "Authentication."
4. If you want to buy U.S. or Canadian team merchandise, go to these official sites: Team USA – teamusa.org or Team Canada – olympic.ca
5. Always use a credit card to make online purchases. If the seller turns out to be fraudulent, then the consumer can dispute the charge with the credit card company and may be eligible for reimbursement.
6. If you receive any unfamiliar or unsolicited email, don't open any attachments or click on any links, even if it promises a great deal on Olympic apparel or other merchandise.

[Source: BBB | Hannah Sassi | 7 Feb 2014 ++]

Dating Online Site Scam ► How it Works

Scammers play to our emotions. By invoking fear, anxiety or hope, they convince us to fall for cons we wouldn't rationally consider. Because there are few emotions stronger than falling in love, romance scams are particularly lucrative.

How the Scam Works:

- You sign up for an online dating site. You receive a message from someone (usually a man contacting a woman) who claims to be working abroad or serving in the military and stationed overseas.
- After exchanging a message or two through the dating website, he requests that you communicate through email or a chat service. You agree and start exchanging emails and photos. You even become friends on Facebook (See one fake account below).
- Soon, you two are communicating daily. Your new love interest tells you that he wants to use his upcoming leave to visit you. There's just one problem. He doesn't have money for the trip. He asks if you will lend it to him, and you agree. But after you send the cash, you find that your new sweetheart has suddenly stopped communicating. (Or maybe he sticks around long enough to ask for another loan.)

Tips to Spot a Romance Scam: Online dating is a great way to meet "the one." Unfortunately, it's also easy to encounter scammers. Be wary of anyone who:

- **Asks to talk or chat on an outside email or messaging service.** This allows fraudsters to carry out scams without the dating site having a record of the encounter.
- **Claims to be from this country but is currently traveling, living or working abroad.** In addition to military ploy described above, scammers also pretend to be temporarily working overseas.
- **Has a suspicious Facebook profile:** Scammers often use the names and photos of real people to create fake Facebook profiles. Their profiles tend to have few friends and be rife with grammatical errors. Also check to see when they joined. Recent pages are another red flag.
- **Asks you for money or credit card information.** In some cases the scammer will claim an emergency like a sick relative or stolen wallet, and will ask you to wire money. The first wire transfer is small but the requests keep coming and growing. Or he may ask for airfare to come for a visit.
- **Sends you emails containing questionable links to third-party websites.** Third-party links can contain malware that's designed to steal personal information off your computer.

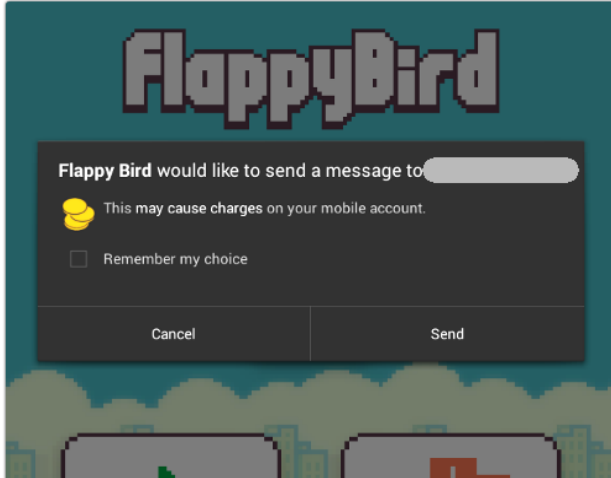
To find out more about scams, check out [BBB Scam Stopper](#). [Source: BBB Scam alert 7 Feb 2014 ++]

Flappy Bird App Scam ► How It works

When the maker of the popular smartphone app, Flappy Bird, pulled the hit game after just a month, scammers rose up to meet demand. Unfortunately, some copies of the app come with undesirable side affects.

How the Scam Works:

You want the new smartphone app that everyone is talking about, Flappy Bird. But the developer pulled it before you could download the game. You decide to look in the app store anyway. And sure enough, there is an app claiming to be Flappy Bird.



In order to install it, the scam app requires you to give it permission to send text messages, read your texts and access other apps. This is unusual. The real Flappy Bird app only asked downloaders to grant it access to the network, so it could serve up ads.

Once installed, The fake Flappy Bird app tries to force users into sending text messages to a premium number. (See image at left.) Even if you hit "cancel," the app keeps running in the background, where it could access information stored on your phone.

Tips for Avoiding Scam Apps:

Just as your computer can become infected with a virus, so can your smartphone. Follow these tips to avoid **malware infected apps**.

- **Stay away from discontinued apps: Don't attempt to download anything calling itself Flappy Bird, since the original version is "dead." This goes for other apps, too.**
- **Make sure to read the user reviews before downloading an app.**
- **Be sure to download apps through the official app stores, not alternative markets.**
- **Use security and anti-virus programs on your smartphone, just as you would a computer. Look in the app store for reputable solutions.**

To find out more about scams, check out [BBB Scam Stopper](#). [Source: BBB Scam alert 14 Feb 2014 ++]

Veteran Scams ► What to Watch Out for

United States veterans, the very people we have to thank for our freedoms and who deserve our respect and honor, are fast becoming one of the largest target audiences for scam artists. Reports of veterans being scammed are on the rise in the Sierra foothills of California.

- Tuolumne County residents have reported receiving calls from a phone solicitor stating they were with the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and were asking for donations. California State VFW Quartermaster Nick Guest warns against this type of solicitation. "The VFW solicits its members via mail," Guest said. "We do not solicit by phone or cold calls."
- In January, Placer County received a veteran scam report of a person claiming to be from the Department of Veterans Affairs attempting to verify a veteran's post office box number, stating that an item he had

mailed had been returned. However, this particular veteran had no post office box and the return number to call was not an in-service number. He immediately called the Veteran Service Office to report the attempt to collect personal data.

- Within the past few months, mailers have been sent out to veterans in our area advertising loans and credit by companies claiming affiliation with Veterans Affairs and wanting access to their DD214 or other personnel information.

While this may seem inconsequential, the reality is these scams could have dire effects. Scam artists target veterans, especially seniors, in hopes of bilking them of all their assets – or at the very least skimming what they can and then disappearing. According to the AARP, the most recent scam involves solicitors who call themselves “veteran advocates,” who target vets in community centers and nursing homes, claiming their victims are entitled to additional benefits. Once they gain the trust of the veterans, they ask to review the veterans’ investment portfolios and try to persuade them to place their assets in a trust, thereby creating an appearance of fewer assets, which would entitle them to additional benefits. Unfortunately, the “new” trust usually contains annuities and long-term investments that are not in the best interest or appropriate for seniors or retirees. This type of scam usually includes a faux-broker claiming to help veterans qualify for aid and attendance benefits but, in fact, may cause them to lose eligibility for Medicaid services or cut off victims from their money for a long time. In addition, once Veterans Affairs follows up on the claim, the veterans’ money may have been diverted and will demand repayment of monies paid out, causing financial stress on the veterans. Yet the scam artists have already made their money, leaving the veterans holding the bag for the repayment of the benefits with limited access to their long-term investments.

Benefits, or the receipt of more benefits, can be very enticing for many vets as they age and worry about their finances. Just as enticing is the promise of a valid claim being pushed through the system faster. The scam artists know this and prey upon this. Your County Veterans Services Office(CVSO) advises veterans to be careful. The paperwork can seem overwhelming, but that with a consent-to-release form, they can work on the veteran’s behalf, cutting through the red tape. In addition, veteran groups like the Veterans of Foreign Wars, American Legion and Vietnam Veterans of America are available for veteran support and will help if they can. “The V.A. does not charge money, nor do local recognized veterans groups, to get you help,” said Commander Walt Adams of West Point VFW Post 3322. To report a possible scam against veterans, contact your local Sheriff’s/Police Department or the Veterans Service Office for your area. [Source: Calaveras enterprise | Charity Maness | 21 Feb 2014 ++]

Capital Gains Tax ► How to Compute

Whether you invest in stocks, real estate or even rare coins, a basic understanding of capital gains and losses may help you lower your tax bill. Here is an overview to help you navigate this confusing part of the federal tax code.

What's a capital gain? A capital gain is an increase in the value of any capital asset you own. The IRS defines a capital asset as "almost everything you own or use for personal purposes or investment," including stocks, bonds, your home, personal property and collectibles. Capital gains or losses do not flow through to your tax return until you actually sell the asset. If you sell an asset at a higher price than your total costs, that's a capital gain. On the other hand, if you sell at a lower price than you paid, that's a capital loss.

How are capital gains and losses calculated? A capital gain or loss is the difference between the proceeds of your sale and what you originally paid, including any transaction fees or cost of capital improvements. If you sell an asset you inherited, the capital gain or loss is normally based on its value at the time of the owner's death.

How are capital gains taxed? Capital gains are taxed at different rates, depending on:

- *How long you hold the asset.* The IRS classifies capital gains as either short or long term. If you hold a capital asset for at least a year plus a day, any profit is considered a long-term capital gain. Short-term capital gains are from sales of assets owned for one year or less. Short-term capital gains are taxed as ordinary income (at your regular tax rate), while long-term capital gains are taxed at various rates, depending on the type of asset and your federal income tax bracket.
- *The type of asset you have.*

<u>Type of long-term asset</u>	<u>Maximum capital gains tax rate</u>
Stocks, bonds, mutual funds	23.8% Note 1
Property and real estate (other than primary residence) Note 2	25%
Collectibles (stamps, coins, etc.)	28%

Note 1: Includes 3.8% Medicare investment surtax on certain high-income taxpayers

Note 2: Sale of primary residence has unique rules; see IRS Publication 523

- *Your income from other sources.* If your overall income is low, you may not have to pay capital gains taxes: People in the 10% or 15% federal income tax brackets owe no taxes on long-term capital gains.

How can I lower my tax burden from capital gains?

- Knowing the tax implications before you sell can go a long way toward helping you navigate the best course. For example, it may make sense to delay a sale until a year in which your income is lower or put off a December sale until January to shift the gain to the following tax year.
- The IRS allows you to use capital losses to offset capital gains realized in the same year. If your capital losses exceed your capital gains, you can offset up to \$3,000 of ordinary income (an exception is \$1,500 if married filing separately). If your capital losses exceed these limits, you can carry over the remaining amount to future years.

Capital gains tax rules can be complex, and they change over time. Consult a professional tax advisor to ensure you're making informed decisions. [Source: Military.com Feb 2014 ++]

Cross-State Tax Liability ► Tips

Let's face it -- the American tax system isn't known for its simplicity. And the confusion factor just climbs higher when you lived or worked in more than one state during the year. To help out, here are answers to some of the most common cross-state questions. As you ponder your situation, remember that seven states have no income tax at all: Alaska, Florida, Nevada, South Dakota, Texas, Washington and Wyoming.

1. What if I lived in two different states during the year? In most cases, you have to file tax returns in each state in which you earned income.

2. What if I live in one state and work in another? You'll probably have to file a tax return in both states. Your state of residency usually taxes all your earned income -- no matter where you earned it. Meanwhile, states where you worked but didn't live usually require a non-resident income tax return. Fortunately, your resident state will often give you a credit for the taxes you pay to other states.

3. Where do active-duty military servicemembers file? Generally speaking, military personnel are subject to tax in their "home of record," which is the state where they resided at the time of their enlistment or commissioning. You may be able to establish a new home of record by taking actions there like:

- Establishing a permanent address.
- Registering to vote.
- Registering your vehicle.
- Getting a driver's license.

Under federal law, states are prohibited from taxing the military income of nonresident servicemembers who are stationed in their states. Note, this protection only applies to military income. If you also have a nonmilitary job, you'll be subject to paying resident state income taxes on those wages.

4. Where do military spouses pay taxes? Until 2009, they were usually subject to taxes in the state where their spouse was stationed. Thanks to the Military Spouse Residency Relief Act, however, they can now choose to be treated as if they still lived in their previous state. That could make them eligible for a state income tax refund. If they had taxes withheld, they could file a state return to claim it.

5. Can I deduct state income taxes on my federal return? Yes, but only if you itemize your deductions. You may also deduct real estate taxes, personal property taxes and state and local sales tax on your federal tax return.

[Source: Military.com Feb 2014 ++]

Tax Payment w/Credit Cards ► Pitfalls

When consumers receive their annual tax bill, it may be larger than they expected or can afford to pay at once, and in many cases, some may even consider paying the total off with their credit cards. However, there are a number of downsides to paying one's annual tax bill with credit cards, according to a report from USA Today. The most significant of them is that consumers will have to pay an added fee just to push the transaction through. This charge, known as an interchange fee, is something that shoppers very rarely see so plainly in everyday life, as the companies they're buying from almost always pay them -- and usually build that added cost into the prices of the items they sell. But the Internal Revenue Service will not pay them, and the interchange fee consumers pay on their tax bill depends on their credit card lender, and can range anywhere from 1.89% to 3.93%, the report said. That means a consumer who has a \$1,000 tax bill, for example, might have to pay as much as \$39.30 just to put the bill on their credit card.

However, there are a number of other consequences that consumers may end up facing if they put their tax bill on their credit card, the most obvious of which is that they'll be adding to their outstanding debt significantly. In addition to the added cost of the transaction fee, that might mean that they will have to pay far more in interest payments if they don't pay off the balance in full at the end of the next billing cycle. Another issue is that it can negatively affect consumers' credit standing. The second-largest portion of a consumer's credit score based on how much of their available credit they're using at any one time. Those who add thousands of dollars or more to that total in one fell swoop will likely take a huge chunk out of that rating, because as far as lenders are concerned, the less available credit that gets used, the better. In many cases, those who can't afford to pay tax bills all at once can contact the IRS to negotiate a repayment plan that will help them to better manage the bill without putting it on their credit card or not paying it at all. [Source: Military.com Feb 2014 ++]

State Tax Filing Information Feb 2014 ► Summary by State

For information on state income tax rules, organized alphabetically by state including U.S. territories and possessions refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**State Tax Filing Information FEB 2014**”. [Source: <http://www.military.com/money/personal-finance/taxes/state-tax-information.html?ESRC=finance.nl> Feb 2014 ++]

Tax Burden for Idaho Retirees ► As of Feb 2014

Many people planning to retire use the presence or absence of a state income tax as a litmus test for a retirement destination. This is a serious miscalculation since higher sales and property taxes can more than offset the lack of a state income tax. The lack of a state income tax doesn't necessarily ensure a low total tax burden. Following are the taxes you can expect to pay if you retire in Idaho:

Sales Taxes

State Sales Tax: 6% (prescription drugs exempt); Some Idaho resort cities, counties and auditorium districts have a local option sales tax in addition to the state sales tax which could add an additional 3%.

Gasoline Tax: 43.4 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Diesel Fuel Tax: 49.4 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Cigarette Tax: 57 cents/pack of 20

Personal Income Taxes

Tax Rate Range: Low – 1.6%; High – 7.4%; Details – <http://tax.idaho.gov/i-1110.cfm>

Income Brackets: Seven. Lowest – \$2,400; Highest – \$200,000. For joint returns, the taxes are twice the tax imposed on half the income. A \$10 filing tax is charged for each return and a \$20 credit is allowed for each exemption.

Personal Exemptions: Single – \$3,500; Married – \$7,300; Dependents – \$3,500. Idaho allows personal exemption or standard exemption as provided in the Internal Revenue Code.

Standard Deduction: Single – \$5,450; Married filing jointly – \$10,900 (age 65 and older)

Medical/Dental Deduction: Federal amount

Federal Income Tax Deduction: None

Retirement Income Tax: Generally, all income received by an Idaho resident, regardless of the source, is subject to Idaho income tax. Idaho does not tax social security benefits, benefits paid by the Railroad Retirement Board or Canadian social security benefits (OAS or CPP). Idaho does offer a retirement benefits deduction if you are age 65 or older, or if you are disabled and age 62 or older, and receive qualifying retirement benefits. Persons using the “married filing separate” filing status are not eligible for this benefit. The following are the types of benefits that qualify for this deduction (PERSI does not qualify for this benefit):

- Civil Service Employees: Retirement annuities paid by the United States to a retired civil service employee or the unremarried widow of the employee if the recipient is age 65 or older, or disabled and age 62 or older.
- Idaho Firemen: Retirement benefits paid from the firemen's retirement fund of the state of Idaho to a retired fireman or the unremarried widow of a retired fireman if the recipient is age 65 or older, or disabled and age 62 or older.

- Policemen of an Idaho city: Retirement benefits paid from the policemen's retirement fund of a city within Idaho to a retired policeman or the unremarried widow of a retired policeman if the recipient is age 65 or older, or disabled and age 62 or older
- Servicemen: Retirement benefits paid by the United States to a retired member of the U.S. military service or the unremarried widow of such member if the recipient is age 65 or older, or disabled and age 62 or older.

The amount deducted must be reduced by retirement benefits paid under the Federal Social Security Act and the Federal Railroad Retirement Act. The maximum amount that may currently be deducted is:

- Married filing jointly (age 65 or older): \$41,814
- Married filing jointly (age 62 or older and disabled): \$41,814
- Single (age 65 or older): \$27,876
- Single (age 62 or older and disabled): \$27,876

Retired Military Pay: Follows federal tax rules.

Military Disability Retired Pay: Retirees who entered the military before Sept. 24, 1975, and members receiving disability retirements based on combat injuries or who could receive disability payments from the VA are covered by laws giving disability broad exemption from federal income tax. Most military retired pay based on service-related disabilities also is free from federal income tax, but there is no guarantee of total protection.

VA Disability Dependency and Indemnity Compensation: VA benefits are not taxable because they generally are for disabilities and are not subject to federal or state taxes.

Military SBP/SSBP/RCSBP/RSFPP: Generally subject to state taxes for those states with income tax. Check with state department of revenue office.

Military Spouses Residency Relief Act: The earned income of qualifying spouses of Idaho servicemembers is no longer subject to Idaho income tax due to the federal Military Spouses Residency Relief Act (SR 475, HR 1182) passed in November of 2009.

- You are married to a servicemember who is serving in Idaho and has registered in the military with another state as a home of record; and
- You have located to Idaho with the servicemember and you have the same domicile (permanent residence) as the servicemember's home of record.

For specific tax information that applies to military service members and their families, go to <http://tax.idaho.gov/i-1011.cfm>.

Property Taxes

Taxable property is assessed at its full market value. A general property tax is imposed for local purposes and is limited to 1% of market value. The state property tax is suspended as long as the sales and use tax are in effect. There is no intangible personal property tax. A homeowner's primary residence is eligible for an exemption of 50% of the assessed value of the home, up to a maximum of \$81,000 (2013). If you are a qualified Idaho homeowner, you may be eligible for the circuit breaker program. To qualify you must own and occupy the home as your primary residence, you must meet income requirements and must be either age 65 or older, a widow(er), blind, former POW, fatherless or motherless minor, or a qualifying disabled person. This program may reduce property taxes on your home and up to one acre of land by as much as \$1,320. For more information on property and other taxes, go to <http://tax.idaho.gov/i-1128.cfm> or call 208-334-7733 or 800-972-7660.

Idaho has a property tax deferral program. For details go to <http://tax.idaho.gov/i-1128.cfm>

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

At the current time Idaho does not have an inheritance tax, gift tax or an estate tax.

For further information, visit the Idaho State Tax Commission site <http://tax.idaho.gov/index.cfm>. Information for newcomers is available at <http://tax.idaho.gov/s-results-quest.cfm?faqson=new@to@Idaho> or call 208-334-7660 or 800-972-7600. [Source: <http://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-alabama-iowa#IDAHO> Feb 2014 ++]

Thrift Savings Plan 2014 ► Share Prices + YTD Gain or Loss

TSP Share Prices for Feb 26, 2014

	Close	YTD
G Fund	\$14.3406	+0.38%
F Fund	\$16.0630	+2.04%
C Fund	\$23.9184	+0.18%
S Fund	\$34.7102	+3.09%
I Fund	\$25.7575	+0.76%
L 2050	\$14.2109	+1.05%
L 2040	\$25.0820	+1.00%
L 2030	\$23.6670	+0.89%
L 2020	\$21.9619	+0.76%
L Income	\$16.9130	+0.57%

[Source: <http://tspcenter.com/tspReturns.php?view=year> 27 Feb 2014 ++]

General Interest



Notes of Interest ► 16 thru 28 Feb 2014

- **CPI.** The Consumer Price Index jumped up in January to 230.040. It now stands only 0.1 percent below the FY2014 COLA baseline of 230.327.
- **American Flag.** Legislation has passed which mandates the DoD to purchase only flags made in the U.S. A similar bill requiring all other government-purchased flags be made in the U.S. has repeatedly failed.
- **Target Data Breach.** A new report from the Consumer Bankers Association estimates the cost of replacing half of the credit and debit cards compromised in the breach has already exceeded \$200 million. That's just card replacement costs reported by the CBA and the Credit Union National Association.
- **Army Treasure Room.** Check out <http://www.buzzfeed.com/bennyjohnson/inside-the-armys-spectacular-hidden-treasure-room> to view an unbelievable collection of military memorabilia.
- **Surviving Spouse Benefits.** A surviving spouse, who remarries, at any age, loses all military benefits (ID card) and Tricare/TFL unless the remarriage is to another retired service member. If the remarriage ends in divorce or death of a spouse, Tricare/TFL are still lost for good but other military benefits will start again.

Rental Rights & Responsibilities – Renters ► Do you Know?

Even as demand for rental housing remains very strong, there is a great deal of confusion over existing rental laws among many landlords, and among tenants themselves, according to a Zillow Rentals survey. On average, renters and landlords answered about half of survey questions incorrectly (47 percent incorrect for renters / 50 percent for landlords) when asked about their respective rights and responsibilities.

- 82% of renters / 76% of landlords lack understanding of laws on security deposits, credit and background checks.
- 77% of renters / 69% of landlords lack understanding of privacy and access rights.
- 62% of renters / 50% of landlords lack understanding of laws on early lease termination.

The survey included those who rent the home they live in ("renters") and those who own the home they live in and own one or more additional homes, which they rent to a tenant ("landlords"). Renters and landlords alike demonstrated the least amount of knowledge around credit and background checks, security deposits, early lease termination, and privacy and access rights. Both renters and landlords showed the most knowledge around discriminatory advertising for rentals, responsibility for repairs and maintenance, and requirements around terminating month-to-month agreements. "While rental laws vary by state and local jurisdiction, there are some important rules that affect just about everybody. Every landlord and renter should take time to research and understand their rights." To see how knowledgeable you are check out the following true or false questions:

1. If you are a male renter and the apartment advertisement says, "perfect for women," the owner has the right to refuse to rent it to you.
2. Landlords have the right to reject any rental application on the basis of a prior conviction for illegal drug use.
3. When moving out of a rental, federal law gives the landlord 60 days to either return my entire security deposit or provide an itemized statement of deductions and refund any deposit balance.
4. By law, my landlord must make him/herself, or someone designated to act on their behalf, available 24 hours a day in the event of an emergency.
5. As a renter, if my animal intimidates someone, my landlord has the right to demand I remove the animal from the premises.
6. If my landlord decides he/she wants to rent the home I'm leasing to one of their family members, I have the right to three months notice.
7. As of 2010, laws in most states allow landlords to send eviction notices by email.
7. After a lease has expired or gone month to month, my landlord must give me 30 days notice before terminating my lease.
8. It is legal to deduct my rent payments from my federal income taxes but only if I am caring for a minor who lives in the home, and I am the sole source of household income.
9. In the case of an emergency repair, the landlord can enter the premises as long as he/she comes during daylight hours and knocks first.

Answers

1. **False.** As a renter, you are protected from discriminatory advertising by the Fair Housing Act. Landlords may not make any statement in an ad or notice that indicates a preference, limitations or discrimination based on race, color, sex, national origin, family status (e.g., number of children) disabilities or religion.
2. **False.** While landlords do have the right to reject applications for criminal convictions of many kinds, they may not reject an applicant on the basis of a conviction for drug use. They can, however, reject a person who has been convicted of manufacturing or selling drugs, or who currently uses illegal drugs.

3. **False.** Security deposits are strictly regulated by state law and sometimes by city ordinance. While laws vary from state to state, in most states, the limit for returning a security deposit is between 14 and 30 days.
4. **True.** Landlords must make themselves, or someone they designate to act on their behalf, available to tenants 24 hours a day in the event of an emergency.
5. **True.** If a person injured by a vicious animal can prove that the landlord knew (or should have known) that the animal had dangerous tendencies, and failed to take reasonable steps to prevent the injury (such as demanding that the animal leave the property or evicting the tenant), the landlord may be held liable.
6. **True.** Actually, in this situation you have the right to stay for the entire duration of the lease. Landlords may not evict a tenant during the term of the lease because they would prefer to rent the unit to a friend or family member, or even to someone willing to pay higher rent.
7. **True.** The eviction process is lengthy, and the landlord must follow the law, which varies from state to state. Nearly everywhere, though, landlords are required to file with the local court and arrange to have you properly serviced with a summons or complaint as the first step in the eviction process. This usually requires having an authorized person attempt to physically deliver the legal notice to the tenant face to face. Check with your attorney for the requirements in your area.
8. **True.** Landlords can terminate any month-to-month tenancy with proper notice (30 days in most states). They needn't give a reason, as long as their motives aren't discriminatory or retaliatory. For a tenancy governed by a lease, they will have to wait until it expires on its own at the end of the lease term. Landlords are generally not required to renew a lease.
9. **True.** You cannot deduct your rent payments from federal income taxes. However, if your lease requires you to make property tax payments, you can deduct that portion of your rent or any property tax that you pay directly. You are also allowed to deduct expenses related to your business, and if you work from home, you may be allowed to deduct a portion of your rent, as well as a prorated portion of utility payments
10. **True.** A landlord must give prior notice (typically 24 hours) before entering your premises and can normally only do so to make repairs or in case of an emergency

[Source: <http://www.zillow.com/rentals/quiz/> Feb 2014 ++]

VFW Website Hacked ► Remote Access Trojan Discovered

China is spying on U.S. veterans and military service members through a breach of the largest veterans' organization. The attack was uncovered by security researchers at FireEye, who have dubbed it "Operation SnowMan" due to its strategic timing when government workers may be distracted by winter storms and a national holiday. The attack attempted to target anyone who visited the Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) website. The congressionally chartered organization, which has close to 2 million members, advocates for military benefits and assists veterans with disability claims to the Department of Veterans Affairs. It allowed Chinese hackers to monitor and gain control over users' computers by quietly installing a Remote Access Trojan (RAT).

"A possible objective in the 'SnowMan' attack is targeting military service members to steal military intelligence," states a blog post by FireEye describing the attack, noting "In addition to retirees, active military personnel use the VFW website." It notes that the attack coincides with Presidents Day, "and much of the U.S. Capitol shut down 13 FEB amid a severe winter storm." In the attack, Chinese hackers injected the VFW website with infected code that loaded their own code in the background any time someone visited the site. If someone accessed the site while using Internet Explorer 10 with Adobe Flash running, the malicious code on the site would then infect the user's computer. If the computer was otherwise configured, it would not be infected. Randi Law, the VFW public affairs manager, said in an email that the VFW National Headquarters was notified of the attack on 12 FEB, after which "VFW immediately identified the threat and rectified the code." "At this point, there is no

indication that any member or donor data was compromised,” Law said. “VFW is currently working with federal law enforcement and a computer security incident response team to locate the source of the attack and determine the extent of the event.”

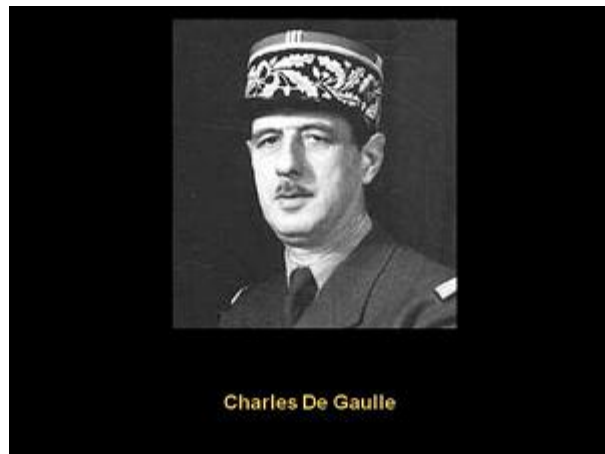
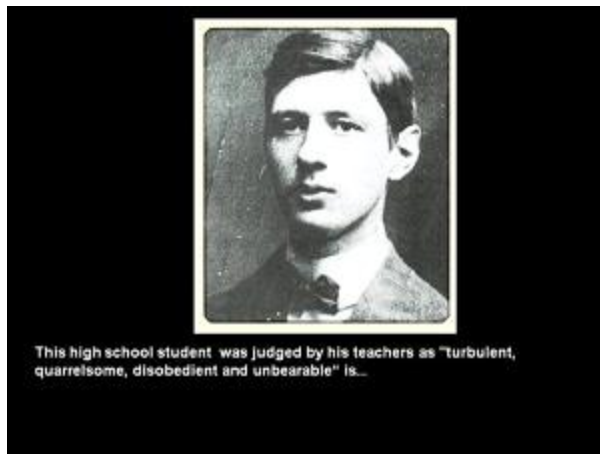
The form of attack is called a “watering hole.” The analogy is of victims unknowingly coming to drink from a watering hole where hackers, like alligators beneath the water, lie waiting. The method is commonly used in state-sponsored attacks by China and Russia. Researchers at FireEye said they believe the attack originates in China. It carries the signature of a state-run attack, due to the nature of the targets, forms of vulnerabilities exploited in the breach, and due to several similarities between it and other advanced attacks from China. After analyzing “Operation SnowMan,” researchers showed it connects to many of the addresses tied to two recent attacks from Chinese hackers, “Operation DeputyDog” and “Operation Ephemeral Hydra.”

“Operation [DeputyDog](#),” uncovered in September 2013, targeted computer networks in Japan. “Operation [Ephemeral Hydra](#),” uncovered in November 2013, installed similar spying systems on an unnamed website, which FireEye said draws “visitors that are likely interested in national and international security policy.” Both attacks were tied to the Chinese hackers who breached Bit9 security in February 2013. Aside from sharing many of the same Web addresses, the three attacks also shared similarities in methods of attack. They all used zero-day exploits, which are security holes that have not yet been patched, to install RATs on users’ computers. They also shared many more technical similarities. FireEye notes the Chinese hackers tied to these attacks have hit targets including the U.S. government, Japanese firms, defense companies, mining companies, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), and information technology (IT) companies. [Source: Epoch Times | Joshua Philipp | 16 Feb 2014 ++]

Photos That Say it All ► Once A Soldier Always A Soldier



They Grew Up to Be? ► Charles De Gaulle



Have You Heard? ► Idiot Sightings

You can't make this stuff up!!!

IDIOT SIGHTING

I handed the teller @ my bank a withdrawal slip for \$400.00
I said "May I have large bills, please"
She looked at me and said "I'm sorry sir, all the bills are the same size."

IDIOT SIGHTING

When my husband and I arrived at an automobile dealership to pick up our car, we were told the keys had been locked in it. We went to the service department and found a mechanic working feverishly to unlock the driver side door. As I watched from the passenger side, I instinctively tried the door handle and discovered that it was unlocked. 'Hey,' I announced to the technician, 'it's open!' His reply: 'I know. I already got that side.'

(This was at the Ford dealership in Canton, MS)

IDIOT SIGHTING

We had to have the garage door repaired.
The Sears repairman told us that one of our problems was that we did not have a 'large' enough motor on the opener. I thought for a minute, and said that we had the largest one Sears made at that time, a 1/2 horsepower. He shook his head and said, 'Lady, you need a 1/4 horsepower.' I responded that 1/2 was larger than 1/4. He said, 'NO, it's not..' Four is larger than two.'

(We haven't used Sears repair since.)

IDIOT SIGHTING

My daughter and I went through the McDonald's take-out window and I gave the clerk a \$5 bill. Our total was \$4.25, so I also handed her a quarter.
She said, 'you gave me too much money.' I said, 'Yes I know, but this way you can just give me a dollar bill back. She sighed and went to get the manager, who asked me to repeat my request.
I did so, and he handed me back the quarter, and said 'We're sorry but we could not do that kind of thing.'

The clerk then proceeded to give me back \$1 and 75 cents in change.
(Do not confuse the clerks at McD's.)

IDIOT SIGHTING

My daughter went to a local Taco Bell and ordered a taco.
She asked the person behind the counter for 'minimal lettuce.'
He said he was sorry, but they only had iceberg lettuce.
(From Kansas City)

IDIOT SIGHTING

I was at the airport, checking in at the gate when an airport employee asked, 'Has anyone put anything in your baggage without your knowledge?'
To which I replied, 'If it was without my knowledge, how would I know?'
He smiled knowingly and nodded, 'That's why we ask.'
(Happened in Birmingham , Ala.)

IDIOT SIGHTING

The spotlight on the corner buzzes when it's safe to cross the street.
I was crossing with an intellectually challenged coworker of mine. She asked if I knew what the buzzer was for. I explained that it signals blind people when the light is red.
Appalled, she responded, 'What on earth are blind people doing driving?!'
(She was a probation officer in Wichita, KS)

IDIOT SIGHTING

At a good-bye luncheon for an old and dear coworker who was leaving the company due to 'downsizing,' our manager commented cheerfully, 'This is fun. We should do this more often.'
Not another word was spoken. We all just looked at each other with that deer-in-the-headlights stare.
(This was a lunch at Texas Instruments.)

IDIOT SIGHTING

I work with an individual who plugged her power strip back into itself and for the sake of her life, couldn't understand why her system would not turn on.
(A deputy with the Dallas County Sheriff's office, no less.)

IDIOT SIGHTING

How would you pronounce this child's name?
"Le-a"
Leah?? NO
Lee - A?? NOPE
Lay - a?? NO
Lei?? Guess Again.
This child attends a school in Kansas City , Mo.
Her mother is irate because everyone is getting her name wrong.
It's pronounced "Ledasha".
When the Mother was asked about the pronunciation of the name, she said, "the dash don't be silent."
(SO, if you see something come across your desk like this please remember to pronounce the dash.
If dey axe you why, tell dem de dash don't be silent.)

STAY ALERT! They walk among us.....and they VOTE.

Interesting Ideas ► **Disguising Vodka**



Add two drops of blue food coloring and one drop of green to make vodka look like mouthwash.

“Love is that condition in which the happiness of another person is essential to your own.”
--- Robert A. Heinlein (1907 – 1988), Notable American writer of science fiction short stories.



Midshipman Heinlein, from the 1929 U.S. Naval Academy yearbook





If you can't afford a doctor, go to an airport - you'll get a free x-ray and a breast exam, and; if you mention Al Qaeda, you'll get a free colonoscopy.



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Notes:

1. The Bulletin will be provided as a website accessed document until further notice. This was necessitated by SPAMHAUS who alleged the Bulletin's former size and large subscriber base (94,000+) were choking the airways interfering with other email user's capability to use it. They directed us to stop sending the Bulletin in its entirety to individual subscribers and to validate the subscriber base with the threat of removing all email capability if we did not.
2. Readers who have not yet validated their email addressee who desire to continue to receive the Bulletin can send a message to raoemo@sbcglobal.net with the word "KEEP" in the subject line to restore their subscription. Anyone who no longer wants to receive the Bulletin should send a message to raoemo@sbcglobal.net with the word "DELETE" in the subject line. This Bulletin notice was sent to the 16,852 subscribers who have responded to date.
3. Bulletin recipients with interest in the Philippines can request to be added to the RAO's Philippine directory for receipt of notices on Clark Field Space 'A', U.S. Embassy Manila, and TRICARE in the RP.
4. New subscribers and those who submit a change of address should receive a message that verifies their addition or address change being entered in the mailing list. If you do not receive a message within 7 days it indicates that either I never received your request, I made an error in processing your request, or your server will not allow me to send to the email addressee you provided. Anyone who cannot reach me by email can call (951) 238-1246 to ask questions or confirm info needed to add them to the directory.
5. If you have another email addressee at work or home and would like to also receive Bulletin notices there, just provide the appropriate email addressee to raoemo@sbcglobal.net.
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7. The Bulletin is normally published on the 1st and 15th of each month. To aid in continued receipt of Bulletin availability notices, recommend enter the email addressee raoemo@sbcglobal.net into your address book. If you do not receive a Bulletin check either <http://www.veteransresources.org> (PDF & HTTP Editions), <http://frabr245.org> (PDF & HTTP Editions), or <http://vets4vets.zymichost.com/rao.html> (PDF Edition) before sending me an email asking if one was published. If you are unable to access the Bulletin at any of these sites let me know. If you can access the Bulletin at any of the aforementioned sites it indicates that something is preventing you from receiving

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