# RAO BULLETIN

## 1 April 2016

**PDF Edition**

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Commissary Prices Update 03 ➤ Budget-Neutrality | Variable Pricing

The commissary continues to be a favorite benefit for servicemembers, retirees, wounded warriors, and survivors. Yet, every year, we find the program coming under budget scrutiny. The money required to keep commissaries operating is small in terms of the overall defense budget, but the desire to use that money elsewhere (approximately
$1.4 billion annually) is high. Last year, Congress wrote a requirement into the defense bill for the Secretary of Defense to submit a report to achieve budget-neutrality for the commissary and exchange benefits no later than March 1, 2016. Then, the Department was tasked to begin pilot projects to achieve that goal - while also maintaining current levels of patron savings and satisfaction and product quality. Recently, Defense Chief Management Officer, Peter Levine, acknowledged budget neutrality couldn't be achieved while still meeting those criteria. But the requirement to proceed with the report remains.

March 1, 2016 has passed, and the report release has been delayed, but is expected later this year. After the report is submitted, DoD will be allowed to begin pilot programs using concepts such as variable pricing. Commissaries currently are not allowed to sell items for less than cost or more than cost. The variable pricing pilot would allow them to selectively modify product prices, up or down, for up to five years (or more if it works to reduce requirements for tax dollar support). Although the pilot still requires DoD to meet benchmarks for savings, product quality, and customer satisfaction, variable pricing could change the way commissaries deliver those savings. Civilian stores use variable pricing to create “loss leaders” - basic products that may be priced at a loss to the store, but attract patrons to buy other products with higher profit margins.

Variable pricing could also lead to varying commissary prices by location. For example, in areas where costs outside the gate are higher, commissaries could adjust pricing upward, so long as the patron experiences the equivalent level of savings compared to local groceries. Accordingly, if the local groceries are typically priced lower than the national average, the commissary would have to adjust their prices downward, potentially at a loss, to provide savings. Therefore, some assignments may result in higher or lower out of pocket cost to the patron to put the same food on the table. The military Officers association of America hopes these pilots are successful in finding efficiencies without deteriorating the benefit. The commissary isn't just a store inside the gates of a military installation. It's one of the key mechanisms through which the Defense Department delivers a military benefits package intended to sustain long-term retention and readiness. [Source: MOAA Leg Up | March 25, 2016 ++]

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**UCMJ** ► **Proposed Changes | 1st in 30 Years**

The Pentagon has proposed significant changes to how troops are tried and sentenced, two years after a comprehensive review of the military justice system was ordered by then-Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in the wake of persistent sexual assault controversies. The changes to the Uniform Code of Military Justice are the first proposed by the Pentagon in 30 years, after years of Congress mandating change, and would also make the system more transparent to public view. The Senate Armed Services Committee is expected to be briefed on the proposed guidelines in the next few weeks.

For decades, the military’s unique sentencing procedures have required untrained military jurors to decide guilt or innocence as well as impose sentences upon conviction. In most military crimes, there were no minimum sentences,
and legally allowed maximum punishment could include life in prison. Under the Pentagon proposal, military judges in all cases would decide sentences based on U.S. Department of Justice guidelines. Judges have always decided sentences in bench trials. Moreover, a number of crimes that have been tried under the catch-all Article 134 would be set out independently, perhaps with articles being added to the UCMJ. That means that prosecutors would no longer have to prove that a crime such as kidnapping was service-discrediting.

All convicted servicemembers also would have the right to appeal, under the changes, and military court documents such as judicial rulings — now accessible to the public only through Freedom of Information Act requests — would be filed in a public system as they are in federal courts. “In Federal Court, anybody may look up a case and view pleadings in current cases. The military trial courts should have a similar system where the public could view motions,” said Kyle Fischer, a former Army lawyer now in private practice.

Fischer said the move would benefit not just the public but also people he says are falsely accused. “Nobody knows about those frivolous cases except for the client, the panel, the attorneys in the case, and the military judge,” he said. “If we are going to raise awareness of problem of the falsely accused being tried on frivolous charges, then allowing the press access to these proceedings should be a concern.” The changes make sense and are long overdue, experts said. “There’s a lot of good stuff in this bill,” said retired Air Force former top prosecutor Don Christensen, now president of Protect Our Defenders, the sexual-assault victim advocacy group. “But the fact is that we lived with this insane sentencing process for so many years and the generals never said it made no sense.” Christensen said that the proposal was an effort to abort even more sweeping changes, in particular stripping the chain of command from its prosecutorial and judicial role in the military justice system. The proposed legislation would leave military commanders to still determine which cases go to court-martial, what charges will be brought against a defendant, whether to cut a deal, and whether to grant clemency after conviction.

“DOD didn’t want this,” Christensen said of the proposed legislation. “It’s a smoke screen, forced on them by Hagel.” Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) has been a vocal opponent of the current system. She has criticized the Pentagon review for not considering whether trained military prosecutors should replace commanders in deciding how to dispose of cases. Prosecutors have more expertise and less bias than commanders, according to her and other critics of the current system. Military sentencing reform has been proposed for decades, in part because the current system allows for widely varying sentences. “A panel can come in very high or very low,” said Army Reserve lawyer Maj. Joseph Wilkerson, a former editor of the Army Lawyer and the Military Law Review who currently serves on the defense team of one of the Guantanamo detainees. Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, for instance, is facing a misconduct-before-the-enemy charge that carries a maximum life sentence. But, he could also go unpunished. The only crimes that carried minimum sentences were murder, death of an unborn baby and spying. In addition, Congress in 2014 mandated punitive discharge as a minimum sentence for penetrative sexual assault.

Lack of sentencing guidelines can create chaos, critics say. Military juries have felt burdened by the lack of sentencing guidelines, Christensen said, and sometimes asked for guidance. But none could be given. “You’d have three guys get together and go shoplifting or abuse cough medicine — exactly the same history,” Christensen said. “One gets two years, one gets a month and the other guy gets restricted to base.” Disparate sentences aren’t solely due to military jury sentencing: Commanders’ decisions also play a role. In a 2011 case in which a soldier was sexually assaulted, three defendants — two soldiers and a Navy petty officer — were tried on a variety of charges stemming from the assault, and each received significantly different sentences. One soldier, tried at general court-martial, received a sentence of 11 months and a bad-conduct discharge. The other got a three-year sentence and a dishonorable discharge. The petty officer, though equally culpable according to the facts of the case, was tried at a lesser, summary court-martial. In part because the victim had already gone through two courts-martial and declined to participate in a third. His sentence was 30 days’ restriction. The Army Court of Criminal Appeals in 2013 declined to reduce the sentence of the first soldier, who had argued it was unfair his sentence was higher than the petty officer’s. “Simply put, (the petty officer) was able to negotiate a more favorable pretrial agreement with his convening authority than appellant
was able to with his,” the court opinion said, and there had been no “miscarriage of justice or an abuse of discretion.” Other military sentencing deficiencies are not addressed in the Pentagon’s proposal, Christensen said. Unlike in the civilian system, in which sentencing comes after a pause, along with a pre-sentencing report giving a full picture of a guilty defendant, military sentences are handed down immediately after guilty verdicts. “There’s such a rush to get it done,” he said. “The leadership would rather have a case done quickly than done right. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Nancy Montgomery | March 27, 2016 ++]

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**Pentagon Personnel Policy ► 9 Chiefs in 7 Years Hurting Reform**

Brad Carson went to Capitol Hill in FEB as President Barack Obama’s nominee for Pentagon personnel chief — and ran into a buzzsaw. Sen. John McCain blasted away at the personnel-policy reform package that Carson had crafted at the behest of Defense Secretary Ash Carter. “This initiative has been an outrageous waste of official time and resources during a period of severe fiscal constraints,” railed McCain. “It illustrates the worst aspects of a bloated and inefficient defense organization.” The Arizona senator is known for rough treatment of witnesses; still, many observers were startled at the chairman’s apparent rancor. Were the proposed “Force of the Future” reforms really that off base? Had Carson — a former Congressman — somehow failed to do the Hill outreach that generally precedes public hearings on important executive-branch initiatives?

Brad Carson, then under secretary of the Army, met with troops at Fort Bragg, N.C., in 2014. Now acting undersecretary of Defense for personnel, Carson announced he would resign in April.

Certainly, some of DOD’s proposed reforms, such as covering the cost of freezing egg cells, were likely to meet resistance from a conservative-controlled Congress. Others, like the quest for better ways to measure how well the military retains its top talent, are the kind of changes that lawmakers — and the defense bureaucracy — prefer to chew over for a long time. But Carson was also ensnared. Eleven months ago, when he was nominated as undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, he took the title of acting undersecretary and set to work. (Among other steps, Carson laid out his general thrust in an op-ed for Defense One.) He was still waiting for his Senate confirmation hearing in August when the rules changed: a federal court decided that a nominee for such an office cannot also serve as the “acting” official occupying the same office. (The reasoning was that the executive branch cannot have too much leeway to do things without Senate approval.)

In November, McCain complained to the White House, and in response, the administration gave its nominee a new title. But McCain was soon complaining anew that Carson was still doing a job for which he was not yet confirmed. (This ruling is also why Eric Fanning, tapped last year to become Army secretary, stepped down as acting secretary in January.) By this time, the leader of a major reform effort should have been making regular trips to Capitol Hill to talk to key staffers and lawmakers. But McCain didn’t want to hear that Carson was still the point person on personnel reforms, and Carter — with only a year left to serve in the Obama administration — was loathe to eject his hand-
picked deputy from the driver’s seat. Carson got a second new title and continued his work, giving Capitol Hill a regrettably wide berth.

So when Carson went before the Armed Services Committee on 25 FEB, GOP senators came loaded for bear. McCain, for one, took aim at proposed extensions of family leave and childcare services. “I find it deeply disturbing that you are proposing to add expensive fringe benefits allegedly aimed at retention during a time when we are asking 3,000 excellent Army captains to leave the service who would have otherwise chosen to remain on active duty,” the chairman said. Meanwhile, Sen. Mike Lee (R-UT) “criticized efforts to make the military more ‘progressive’ as off-base and unproductive,” Military Times reported.

Even after that shellacking, Carson’s decision to leave reportedly took even his staff by surprise; after the news broke on 14MAR, a Pentagon spokesman needed a few hours to cobble together the official statement. Carson was considered a highly regarded pick for the job one year ago. Now, whomever Carter finds to replace him for the 10 months remaining in this administration will be the Defense Department’s tenth personnel boss since 2009. So what’s next?

Some observers pronounced sweeping personnel reform dead until such time as a new administration decides to take it up once more. But Tom Philpott, a veteran reporter who specializes in military-personnel policy, noted in a detailed 6 MAR report that for all the barbs thrown at Carson’s hearing, no one seemed particularly interested in blocking or rolling back reforms already put in place. “That was seen as a favorable sign as Carter prepares to announce a third and final package of initiatives for reforming the military personnel system, some of which the committee itself has been studying to modernize force management tools. Those ideas include developing more convenient on- and off-ramps to military service and modification or repeal of the up-or-out promotion system for officers,” Philpott wrote. If he’s right, then Carson may depart having all but wrapped up the creation of his various reforms. It will fall to his successor, or successors, to implement what they can immediately and seek Congressional assent for the rest.

[Source: GovExec.com | Bradley Peniston | March 14, 2016 +]

Pentagon Personnel Policy Update 01 ► Reforms Will Go Forward

Pentagon officials said 15 MAR that the sweeping changes proposed under the "Force of the Future" military personnel reforms would go forward and even be expanded despite the surprise resignation of the plan's "architect." "Nothing's changed with regard to Force of the Future,” Pentagon Press Secretary Peter Cook said of the plan that has been trumpeted as a legacy initiative for Defense Secretary Ashton Carter. "The secretary remains squarely behind the initiatives he's already unveiled and has more to come," Cook said. Carter will be making the case for Force of the Future in upcoming congressional testimony, Cook said. "And he feels confident that these are changes that are critical to this department going forward” and adapting to retain personnel and recruit more into the ranks in a changing economy, Cook said. "It's our goal to continue working with Congress."

Force of the Future suffered a major setback 14 MAR with the resignation of Brad Carson, the Pentagon's top personnel chief as acting Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. Carson, considered the "architect" of Force of the Future, was expected to leave the building on 8 APR. Morgan Plummer, a former Army officer and Carson's top adviser, was expected to leave along with Carson, Pentagon officials said. In a statement after Carson announced his resignation, Carter said, "Brad Carson has developed some of the most important and groundbreaking work in years to modernize our personnel policies." "At my direction, he charted a path forward for the Department and our people that will leave a lasting legacy, and will improve the mission effectiveness, readiness and the quality of life for our civilian workforce, uniformed service members and families," Carter said.

Carson was nominated last year by President Obama to succeed Jessica Wright in the Under Secretary's personnel post but immediately ran afoul of the Senate Armed Services Committee over alleged violations of the obscure Federal
Vacancies Act, as well as the reforms he was proposing. The resignations of Carson and Plummer followed a particularly confrontational hearing before the Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC) at which the Force of the Future proposals were called "outrageous" and Carson's qualifications were questioned. "This initiative has been an outrageous waste of official time and resources during a period of severe fiscal constraints," Sen. John McCain, an Arizona Republican and the SASC chairman, told Carson. "It illustrates the worst aspects of a bloated and inefficient defense organization." "I find it deeply disturbing that you are proposing to add expensive fringe benefits allegedly aimed at retention during a time when we are asking 3,000 excellent Army captains to leave the service who would have otherwise chosen to remain on active duty," McCain said.

Carson's reform proposals under Force of the Future, which he billed as the "biggest personnel overhaul in 45 years," were aimed at fundamental changes in the way the Defense Department recruits, pays, promotes and manages the military. In an article for Defense One last June, Carson bluntly described what he was attempting in Force of the Future as an effort to discard the hidebound ways of doing things that had become entrenched in the Pentagon bureaucracy. "In this modern, data-informed world, neither the business community nor the Defense Department has time or decision space for the bureaucratic needs of hierarchical, linear organizations of a former era," Carson said. "Unfortunately, the department has been just that type of institution when it comes to personnel management -- until now," Carson said.

The major personnel changes sought by the Pentagon require the approval of Congress. Other changes can be authorized by Carter without the input of Congress. With only 10 months left in the Obama administration, it remained unclear whether the major changes could be put in place this year, or whether Carter would turn to seeking to lay the groundwork for reform for the next president. Critics of the plan question the viability of adding personnel programs that could potentially cost billions at a time when the Defense Department was cutting the Army to 450,000 troops and also was continuing to face the possibility that the arbitrary budget caps known as sequestration could be re-imposed.

One of the main proposals in the Force of the Future plan that would require congressional approval would revamp the military pay system by creating new basic pay tables for high-demand career fields such as cybersecurity to allow commanders to dole out merit-based cash bonuses. Another major proposal, also requiring congressional approval, would change the "up-or-out" system of promotions under federal law that limits the number of times an officer can be passed over for promotion before being forced to leave the military. Under Force of the Future, promotions would be based more on experience and performance rather than time in grade. Carter has unveiled the proposed Force of the Future changes in three "tranches," which were detailed by Military Times. The first tranche disclosed in November included:

- Creating a new high-tech personnel management system for matching individual troops with job assignments in an online network Carter compared to Facebook.
- Creating a new civilian "chief recruiting officer" to oversee efforts to attract top talent.
- Expanding corporate fellowship programs to allow service members to work in the private sector.

In January, Carter offered "tranche two," with changes that included:

- Extending the force wide maternity leave benefit to 12 weeks for all women and 14 days for men. (The Navy, which had a policy of 18 weeks maternity leave, would reduce the leave to 12 weeks.)
- Expanding mandatory hours for on-base child-care facilities.
- Expanding options for military service members seeking specific duty stations to provide more stability for their families.

Carter has also been considering a "tranche three" and possibly a "tranche four" of personnel changes. One of the additional reforms Carter was expected to propose involved changing regulations to make it easier for mid-career civilian professionals to seek "lateral entry" to join the military without having to start at the bottom of the traditional rank and pay structure. In his statement announcing his resignation, Carson said, "I'm very grateful to the men and women of the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness. Their commitment to those that
serve our country, in and out of uniform, is unparalleled, and I am deeply grateful for the opportunity to have served with such an outstanding team.” [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | March 15, 2016 ++]

Philippine U.S. Bases  ►  New Agreement | Five Permanent Bases

A new agreement between the United States and the Philippines clears the way for a new permanent American military presence across five bases that will support rotational deployments near the contested South China Sea. The bases include:

- **Antonio Bautista Air Base.** Located near the capital of the island province of Palawan, which is strategically located near the contested Spratly Islands in the South China Sea.
- **Basa Air Base.** Located about 40 miles northwest of the Philippines’ capital, Manila, the air base was originally constructed by the U.S. Army Air Corps before the Second World War.
- **Fort Magsaysay.** Located on the northern Island of Luzon. Fort Magsaysay is the largest military installation in the Philippines, and is one of the primary training areas of the Philippine Army.
- **Lumbia Air Base.** Located on the southern island of Mindanao, the air base is connected to a civilian airport. Local media reports say construction of a new U.S. facility will begin soon.
- **Mactan-Benito Eburn Air Base.** Located on Mactan Island of the coast of Cebu in the central Philippines. It was originally built by the U.S. Air Force before the American pullout in the early 1990s.

The U.S. will be setting up “permanent logistics facilities to support rotational deployments,” said one defense official familiar with the agreement. The Pentagon is likely to invest heavily on construction projects to enhance capacity at these five bases. The agreement was finalized 18 MAR. The rotational presence could, in effect, leave U.S. military assets and personnel on the ground in the Philippines for long periods if the missions are approved by the government in Manila.

The U.S. military presence in the Philippines, a former American colony, was once fiercely opposed by many Filipinos, partly because of notorious rowdy behavior and misconduct that was common among troops during the Vietnam era when the Philippines offered war fighters a respite from the combat zone. That led to the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces in the early 1990s. But the Filipino government has recently sought new support from the United States as China has grown more aggressive in asserting territorial claims and conducting military-style operations near Filipino shores. The list of bases surprised many analysts who expected it to include some of the former U.S. military outposts such as Naval Station Subic Bay and Naval Air Station Cubi Point, both strategically located on the northwest coast, or Clark Air Base near Manila. Those facilities were a backbone of logistics support during the Vietnam War.

China has stepped up its military activity in the region by claiming small uninhabited islands and even building new ones in the South China Sea off the western shores of the Philippines. It's likely that the American presence there will grow slowly because China's activities have threatened the stability of the region, which includes vital trade routes for global economy. "I suspect that it will ramp up slowly,” said Jan van Tol, a retired U.S. Navy captain and senior...
fellow at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments in Washington. "A suddenly much larger U.S. presence, even if just a rotational presence, that can be seen, certainty in Beijing, that this is a ratcheting up of a U.S.-Chinese competition in the South China Sea."

Van Tol noted the Antonio Bautista Air Base on Palawan is very close to the Spratly Islands where China has made its controversial territorial claims. "That puts them much closer to the scene where the Chinese are using what we consider to be illegitimate activities," he said. The announcement of the five bases comes almost two years after President Obama visited the Philippines in 2014 and signed a new 10-year agreement with the former U.S colony. The future U.S. activity in the Philippines may include Marine Corps units rotating through the country like the ongoing mission in Darwin, Australia. [Source: Military Times | Andrew Tilghman | March 21, 2016 ++]

DoD Windows 10 Deployment ► Department Wide by Jan 2017

The Department of Defense (DoD) will deploy Windows 10 department wide by January 2017 to strengthen cybersecurity and streamline the information technology operating environment. However Federal News Radio reporter Scott Mauconie reported the Army thinks the transition will take much longer than the Pentagon’s one-year mandate. The DOD-wide shift to a single operating system is unprecedented and offers several benefits including improving the cybersecurity posture by establishing a common baseline. Windows 10 also will help lower the cost of DoD information technology. New security features in Windows 10 will help the department enable faster software patching and counter a major cyber-intrusion technique called “pass the hash.” DoD will transition more than 3 million Windows-based desktops, laptops and tablets to Windows 10, a cross-platform release that does not include mobile phones. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update | March 25, 2016 ++]

Military Records/DD-214 Update 05 ► Available Online

It's official; DD-214s are NOW Online. Please pass on to other vets. The National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) has provided the following website for veterans to gain access to their DD-214s online: http://vetrecs.archives.gov or try http://www.archives.gov/veterans/military-service-records. This may be particularly helpful when a veteran needs a copy of his DD-214 for employment purposes. NPRC is working to make it easier for veterans with computers and Internet access to obtain copies of documents from their military files.

Military veterans and the next of kin of deceased former military members may now use a new online military personnel records system to request documents. Other individuals with a need for documents must still complete the Standard Form 180, which can be downloaded from the online web site. Because the requester will be asked to supply all information essential for NPRC to process the request, delays that normally occur when NPRC has to ask veterans for additional information will be minimized. The new web-based application was designed to provide better service on these requests by eliminating the records centers mailroom and processing time. [Source: Vet Council - St Johns Cnty FL | Michael Rothfeld | March15, 2016 ++]

DoD/VA Seamless Transition Update 33 ► 2012 Problems Not Mitigated

Five years ago, Congress mandated the creation of the first medical center to be operated by both the departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs as a model for joint delivery of health care across both agencies. In its short history,
however, the Chicago-based Federal Health Care Center has struggled with costly IT and planning issues, according to a new Government Accountability Office report. The report suggests IT infrastructure problems, first identified in 2012 when a $122 million project went over budget, have not been mitigated. Both VA and DOD share resources at the facility, but to accommodate the agencies’ different network security standards, they share resources over three networks -- not one. The resulting complexity has “impeded efficiency” for staff of both agencies to consistently access VA and DOD’s electronic health records system, according to the report.

Through upgrades and expanded data sharing support, DOD and VA have tried to improve the health care center’s IT infrastructure reliability. Aside from using a single network, there seems to be no clear-cut solution. In responses to the GAO report, officials said a single-network IT infrastructure is not going to happen. “VA and DOD officials told GAO that the departments do not plan to resolve differences in network security standards to the extent that the FHCC would be able to have a single-network IT infrastructure,” the report stated. “According to VA officials, this is due, at least in part, to the departments’ different missions.”

The problems uncovered in GAO’s latest report is, in one sense, a physical manifestation of the massive struggle between VA and DOD to seamlessly share electronic health records. The two agencies’ respective systems each manage some 10 million beneficiaries. Pentagon officials believe they are ready to certify health records interoperability required by the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act, but Congress and its watchdogs contend such interoperability is years away. Last year, the Pentagon awarded Leidos and its partners a $9 billion contract to develop its next-generation electronic health records system. By 2022, Pentagon officials expect its commercial system to be “interoperable and running” with VA and other commercial platforms. [Source: Next.gov | Frank Konkel | March 2, 2016 ++]

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**DoD Audits Update 01**  ►  **Unlikely | No Working Accounting Systems Exist**

The Pentagon dashed any hopes that it might soon be able to pass a simple audit, when it provided a surprisingly unhelpful response late last month to a simple question about how many widgets of a particular kind that it had in stock. Understanding the worrying significance of the Pentagon’s statement that it essentially had no idea what the number is requires a bit of detail.
The widget that was being asked about has a narrow purpose: It’s basically a portable power station that looks like a small, plastic toolbox. Dubbed the HotPlug, it was crafted to allow government investigators to transfer suspects’ computers to their laboratories for forensic analysis, without first shutting the computers down. And so an Oregon-based software developer, Martin Peck, who worries about privacy issues and government secrecy, in July 2015 sent the Defense Department a Freedom of Information Act request, asking how many such devices it had in its possession. Answering this simple question, the Pentagon said, would take the department — hold your breath now — 15 million labor hours. Doing so would cost — no, don’t breathe yet — $660 million, the Pentagon said. While this sum is essentially chump change at the Pentagon — a bit more than one-tenth of one percent of its annual budget — in the world outside the five-sided building it’s enough to buy the Washington Nationals baseball team, a 600-acre island off the coast of Australia, twelve of the most expensive Ferrari racecars, or about as much as the Pentagon is currently spending to train Iraqi soldiers in combat.

Critics, including those who study modern business practices, say the reply spoke volumes about how poorly the Pentagon keeps track of its own purchasing and contracting. That issue lies at the core of persistent criticisms that the department cannot meet modern accounting standards, a circumstance that critics say opens the door widely for waste, fraud, and abuse in military expenditures. Why does the Pentagon have so much trouble determining how many specific widgets it has in its possession? In a two-page response to Peck, the department’s FOIA office said Robert Jarrett, the Pentagon’s Director of Operations, Defense Procurement and Acquisition Policy, had explained that although the Pentagon maintains a database of all its contracts — in something called the Electronic Documents Access (EDA) system — it cannot be comprehensively searched.

The Electronic Documents Access system was switched on eighteen years ago after being constructed at a cost of millions of dollars, and it now includes an estimated 30 million contracts. But the FOIA officer, signing the letter to Peck on behalf of FOIA chief Stephanie L. Carr, wrote in the response: “No method exists for a complete text search of EDA, as some documents are scans of paper copies.” The estimate that someone would need 15 million hours, or about 1,712 years, to come up with an answer -- including any redactions required to keep company secrets out of the public domain -- was based on the department’s presumption that the person doing the searching would have to read all of the contracts, and spend 20 minutes on each one. “It makes me want to cry as a taxpayer and a citizen that DOD still doesn’t have working accounting systems,” says Rafael DeGennaro, a former congressional staff member who now directs the nonprofit Audit the Pentagon initiative, which presses for legislation to force better accounting of how the military spends its $580 billion annual budget. “They need this information to manage the place and they need this information to justify the burden of taxes we pay into the black box that is Pentagon accounting.”

It’s not the first time that the Pentagon’s inability to say what it’s got in its possession has been under a spotlight. It’s clear — even to top Pentagon officials — that one consequence is that a lot of money gets wasted buying things the Pentagon does not actually need to buy. Because the Pentagon did not know how many spare parts it already had for a military transport airplane, called the C-130, it spent $6.6 million between July 2012 and June 2014 on parts that it did not need, according to a June 2015 Department of Defense Inspector General’s report. Similarly, partly because the Pentagon didn’t know how many useful spare parts it had on hand for its V-22 Osprey military helicopter, it spent $8.7 million between August 2014 and May 2015 on parts it did not need, according to a separate Inspector General report. It predicted that storing those extra parts would cost $700,000 over the next five years.

Paul Bracken, a professor of management at Yale University, said in an interview that nearly all successful organizations have searchable parts databases. “All businesses keep meticulous control of inventory, what the product is, what it costs, how long it’s been on the shelf,” he said. “A private corporation would have that information literally at their fingertips because they have relational databases to store it all. A relational database means you can search by any criteria you want.”

A 1990 law requires federal agencies to pass an annual audit, which requires among other things that they be able to account for all their possessions. But the Pentagon has never complied — it is the sole outlier, responsible for roughly half of all federal discretionary spending — and its deadline for passing such an audit keeps extending. When
Peck made a similar FOIA request to the Drug Enforcement Agency, for example, asking how many Harris Kingfish systems it had bought to track phone calls, the DEA replied within a month that it had two. A press spokesperson for the DEA, Barbara Carreno, said in an emailed statement that the agency uses a Department of Justice database called the Unified Financial Management System to track “contracts and accountable property.” The database has a search function.

Presidential candidates Ted Cruz and Bernie Sanders don’t agree on much, but bringing the Pentagon’s self-awareness up to modern accounting standards is one topic they both feel is urgent. A bill they have co-sponsored with six other Senators [https://www.congress.gov/bill/114th-congress/senate-bill/327] would impose a series of graduated punishments if the Pentagon fails to pass an audit soon. These punishments include changing financial management positions if the Department fails to pass an audit for fiscal year 2016, and blocking the Defense Department from upgrading or acquiring certain new weapons if it fails to obtain an audit for fiscal year 2017. The bill has been referred to a committee, but no hearing about it has been scheduled. [Source: Center for Public Integrity | By Lauren Chadwick | March 17, 2016 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries ► Reported 16 thru 31 Mar 2016

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515), Korean War (7,841), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,627), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD’s personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to [http://www.dpaa.mil/](http://www.dpaa.mil/) and click on ‘Our Missing’. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

- Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420
- Message: Fill out form on [http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx](http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx)

Family members seeking more information about missing loved ones may also call the following Service Casualty Offices: U.S. Air Force (800) 531-5501, U.S. Army (800) 892-2490, U.S. Marine Corps (800) 847-1597, U.S. Navy (800) 443-9298, or U.S. Department of State (202) 647-5470. The remains of the following MIA/POW’s have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:
Vietnam

Army Sgt. 1st Class Alan L. Boyer, 22, of Missoula, Mont., was assigned to the Command and Control Detachment, 5th Special Forces Group, when lost in Laos on March 28, 1968. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location to be announced.

Korea

The Department of Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced 21 MAR that the remains of a serviceman, killed during the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Cpl. Eldon W. Ervin, 21, of Wyandotte, Oklahoma is scheduled for burial March 29 in Seneca, Missouri. On Nov. 27, 1950, Ervin was assigned to Headquarter Battery, 57th Field Artillery Battalion, 7th Infantry Division. Approximately 2,600 U.S. and 700 South Korean soldiers assembled into the 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT). The 31st RCT was deployed east of the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea, when it was engaged by overwhelming numbers of Chinese forces. In late November 1950, remnants of the 31st RCT, known historically as Task Force Faith, began a fighting withdrawal to more defensible positions near Hagaru-ri, south of the reservoir. Following the attack, a soldier saw Ervin die as a result of shrapnel wounds. As the unit withdrew from the area, only wounded soldiers were evacuated. The U.S. Army issued a report of death for Ervin with a date of Nov. 28, 1950.

Although the U.S. Army Graves Registration Service hoped to recover American remains that remained north of the Korean Demilitarized Zone after the war, administrative details between the United Nations Command and North Korea complicated recovery efforts. An agreement was made and in September and October 1954, in what was known as Operation Glory, remains were returned. However, Ervin’s remains were not included and he was declared non-recoverable. During the 21st Joint Recovery Operation in 2001, recovery teams conducted operations on the eastern bank of the Chosin Reservoir, Changjin County, North Korea, within one kilometer of where Ervin was reported killed in action. At least seven individuals were recovered and returned to the laboratory for processing. To identify Ervin’s remains, scientists from DPAA and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial and anthropological evidence, as well as DNA analysis; including mitochondrial DNA, Y-chromosome Short Tandem Repeat DNA analysis and autosomal STR analysis, which matched two sisters and a brother. Today, 7,820 Americans remain unaccounted for from the Korean War. Using advances in technology, identifications continue to be made from remains that were previously turned over by North Korean officials or recovered by American teams.

World War II

- Army Air Forces 1st Lt. Frederick W. Langhorst, of Yonkers, N.Y., was assigned to the 1130 Army Air Force Base Unit, Air Transport Command, when lost over India on July 17, 1945. He will be buried with full military honors on a date and location to be announced.

Korea

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains and burial dates of four servicemen who had been previously listed as missing in action from World War II and Korea.

World War II

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains and burial dates of three servicemen who had been previously listed as missing in action from World War II and Korea. They are:

[Source:  http://www.dpaa.mil | March 30, 2015 ++]
**VA Goals**  ►  Improving the Veteran Experience is #1

Improving the veteran experience is at the top of the list of priorities for the Veterans Affairs Department. Literally. Displayed in the lobby entrance to VA’s Washington, D.C., headquarters is a large poster board emblazoned with the image of former President Abraham Lincoln and 12 “breakthrough priorities.” The poster board is signed by dozens of VA employees, signaling a renewed commitment – as Lincoln called for in his second inaugural address – “To care for him who shall have borne the battle.” VA Secretary Bob McDonald announced the new priorities to Congress in early 2016, but work to improve the veteran experience began in earnest shortly after McDonald was confirmed by the Senate in mid-2014.

One of McDonald’s first major actions was hiring Tom Allin as the agency’s first chief veteran experience officer. Allin, who previously served as the CEO of a large Asia-based foods company, brought private sector experience to an agency mired in national scandals, disability claims backlogs and bureaucracy. “We excel in bureaucracy, and I’ll put our bureaucracies up against yours any day,” Greg Giddens, acting chief acquisition officer for VA, said Tuesday. “But the secretary came in and saw us as an organization that looked at ourselves from the inside out. He challenged us to think about how VA looks from the outside in, and how veterans look at VA. Veterans don’t see VA as an organization chart; they see it as an organization that is supposed to focus on their needs.”

A poster in the lobby of VA headquarters showing the agency’s 12 “breakthrough priorities.”

VA may not yet be on par with customer experience stalwarts of the private sector like Amazon and Disney – very few federal agencies are – but VA officials say they’re on the right track. VA recently launched a beta version of www.Vets.gov, a website site that intends to eventually give veterans single sign-on access to thousands of online
services. The single site is a response to the troubling confusion Allin said he experienced shortly after he was hired, when he learned VA has upward of 1,000 different websites pertaining to veterans’ needs. If a veteran tries searching on Google, “it’s just about impossible to get something done,” Allin said last August. VA also began consolidating its 950 toll-free numbers to VA facilities and health centers to simplify the process by which veterans reach contact centers. Additionally, VA is modernizing its approach to contact centers, striving for a “unified experience for veterans,” Giddens said, which means “collecting and securely sharing” the right data sets.

VA’s effort to improve the veteran experience has had other effects, too. The disability claims backlog, which once topped 600,000, has been reduced to 75,000, its lowest rate since VA began measuring the statistic in 2009. By the end of 2016, vets who enter a VA medical center will have their clinical needs addressed within the day, under VA’s new targets. Another goal is to provide veterans a faster decision when they appeal compensation decisions. Ninety percent should have an answer within a year. [Source: NextGov | Frank Konkel | March 23, 2016 ++]

VA Services ► How to Make It A More Pleasant Experience

Have you noticed that the outspoken majority on social media have complaints instead of praise for VA services. Negative experiences motivate these Vets to post their complaints more so than positive experiences. You and I at some point will fall through the cracks just like they have unless we become our own advocates. No matter how great an organization is it will happen. That is reality, but it doesn’t have to negatively affect your experience. To have a better experience than others keep in mind that the VA is not the military; you can’t wait around until you are told to do something. Veteran Tim Huda says you must advocate for yourself. But it’s so much more than being proactive, it’s using all of your available resources. Try using the following guidelines Huda uses to enhance your VA experiences:

Schedule your appointments first thing in the morning or right after lunch. You will be seen on time.
VA docs are not bound by quotas to see as many patients as possible despite the need. They focus on quality visits. (My last annual checkup was an hour) They tend to run over their scheduled times, often sacrificing their lunch breaks. Scheduling an appointment first thing in the morning or right away after lunch is one of my tricks to always be seen on time. It also makes it easy for you to be early and on time.

Have a referral to a specialty clinic? Call that clinic yourself to schedule an appointment.
If you wait around for the clinic to call you, it may be a few weeks. Sometimes VA will automatically schedule you. If so, you may not be happy when the appointment time frame is inconvenient for you. So don’t let it happen in the first place. Ask your physician or nurse for the phone number or location of that clinic and call or go there, tell them you have a referral and set a time that works for you.

Ask for an appointment tomorrow.
VA reports on a metric that claims majority of Veterans receive their appointments within 14 days of the desired date. I’ve always been curious to that number because no one ever asks me when I want to come in, rather tell me when I can come in. So, I decided to start asking for an appointment tomorrow, and it almost always works! I routinely will have an appointment within two weeks.

Use My HealtheVet secure messenger to talk to your physician
Have a question? Ask. Need a new appointment? Ask. Need to check your appointment schedule? Need to refill a medication? You can literally solve your own problems in a few clicks at https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/anonymous.portal?_nfpb=true&_nfto=false&_pageLabel=mhvHome. This is a game changer if you aren’t already using it. Every facility has a My HealtheVet coordinator and most staff can help you if you run in to any technical problems.

Choose a different VA.
You have the right to go to any VA facility you want to. Yes, it may be more inconvenient, but you have that right. I have a friend who plans a trip home every few months and schedules his appointments all in one day at his hometown VA because he likes it so much. Note that if you choose not to use the closest VA to you, you will not be eligible to receive travel pay to the one you select.

**Walk in to the emergency room if you need anything**
If you can’t wait, use the ER. At the least, they will put in a referral and you can walk to the hospital to be seen. If you have a referral, you can usually talk to the clinic front desk and offer to wait around until a spot opens. I’m not advocating to use this needlessly, but if your condition is getting worse or you feel you need to be seen sooner than your appointment, use the ER. Please, please, please don’t wait around for VA to contact you if you have an urgent need.

**Use the kiosks.**
Don’t wait around to check in for your appointment. Use the kiosk and avoid the lines. Every time I’m at VA there is a line at the front desk and a few kiosks open. The kiosk will even tell you if you are in the right area or not.

**Prepare and double check.**
If you are like me, you see your doctor once or twice a year. When I go, I bring a laundry list of issues I want addressed. As you go down your list with your doc, cross them out or write down the clinic he/she is referring you to. Verify at the end of the visit that the physician entered your referrals, mistakes can happen and you want to make sure you catch them before you leave.

**Have a problem? Speak up.**
Every facility has quarterly town hall meetings that you can attend to speak with the leadership. They hold these meetings because they want to hear your feedback. You can also speak with a patient advocate about anything. The best and quickest way to get a response or a solution is contacting your primary healthcare team via My HealtheVet secure messaging or calling their office.

[Source: VAntage Point | Tim Huda | March 16, 2016 ++]

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**VA Benefits Denials ► 125,000 Iraq & Afghanistan Vets | Bad Paper**

Joshua Bunn was a rifleman in one of the bloodiest valleys in Afghanistan, where his infantry unit killed hundreds of enemy fighters and lost more comrades than any other battalion in the Marine Corps in 2009. “We were so far out in Taliban country we rarely got resupply,” Mr. Bunn, 27, said in an interview from his apartment in Jonesboro, Ark. “We just got rockets and small-arms fire every day.” After deployment, Mr. Bunn, suicidal and haunted by nightmares, went absent without leave. The Marine Corps charged him with misconduct and gave him another-than-honorable discharge. As a consequence, the Department of Veterans Affairs does not technically consider Mr. Bunn a veteran and has denied him permanent health care, disability pay and job training intended to ease his return to civilian life. According to a new report, he is one of a growing number of veterans ruled ineligible for benefits because of less-than-honorable discharges.

Former members of the military like Mr. Bunn are being refused benefits at the highest rate since the system was created at the end of World War II, the report said. More than 125,000 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans have what are known as “bad paper” discharges that preclude them from receiving care, said the report, released 30 MAR by the veterans advocacy group Swords to Plowshares. The report for the first time compared 70 years of data from the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs. It found that veterans who served after 2001 were nearly twice as likely as those who served during Vietnam to be barred from benefits, and four times as likely as men and women who served during World War II. “We separate people for misconduct that is actually a symptom of the very reason they need health care,” said Coco Culhane, a lawyer who works with veterans at the Urban Justice Center in New York.
About 6.5 percent of all Iraq and Afghanistan troops have bad paper discharges, the report said. The highest rate is found in the Marine Corps, where one in 10 is now ineligible for benefits. “It has gotten worse with every generation, and it appears to hit the veterans Congress intended to protect,” said Bradford Adams, a lawyer and an author of the report. “They knew these folks had been through combat, and wanted to make sure they had help. The V.A. doesn’t seem to be doing that.” Specifically who is eligible for veterans benefits was detailed in the original Servicemen’s Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G. I. Bill. The law barred troops with dishonorable discharges — those convicted at court-martial of serious crimes — as well as spies, deserters and a few others considered particularly heinous. To allow leeway for less serious misconduct that might result from combat, Congress left open the door to benefits for a spectrum of discharges between honorable and dishonorable, including “undesirable” and “other than honorable.”

Joshua Bunn, a veteran whose category of discharge precludes him from getting various V.A. services, walks to and from work despite the injury to his legs and back that makes it painful for him to do so.

“We are trying to give the veteran the benefit of the doubt, for we think he is entitled to it,” Harry W. Colmery, a World War I veteran who wrote most of the G. I. Bill, told Congress at a hearing in 1944 before the bill was passed. The rising proportion of ineligible veterans is largely due to the military’s increasing reliance on other-than-honorable discharges, which have been used as a quick way to dismiss troubled men and women who might otherwise qualify for time-consuming and expensive medical discharges. The G. I. Bill instructed the veterans agency to care for veterans if their service was “other than dishonorable.” The agency interpreted this as excluding “other than honorable” discharges.

Though veterans can apply for a category upgrade, the process is confusing, inconsistent and slow, Mr. Adams said. Only 10 percent of veterans are successful; a decision takes, on average, four years, the report said. In some regions, all requests are rejected. In a statement, the deputy secretary of veterans affairs, Sloan D. Gibson, said he welcomed the report’s findings. “Where we can better advocate for and serve veterans within the law and regulation, we will look to do so as much as possible,” he said. Research has shown that veterans with bad paper discharges may be more likely to commit suicide. Those with untreated post-traumatic stress disorder are at higher risk of drug abuse and incarceration.

Ted Wilson, a Vietnam veteran in Concord, Calif., was hospitalized in 1966 in Okinawa, Japan, for a suicide attempt days after he participated what he called a “village massacre.” When the Marine Corps sent him back to combat, he went AWOL and got an undesirable discharge in 1968. He fell into a drug abuse and crime and spent years in prison. “I had to deal with everything myself,” he said. “Maybe having help would have made a difference.” Mr. Bunn feels the same. He was hospitalized for slashing his wrists when he got home from Afghanistan. He then became a target of abuse in his platoon and was denied help, he said, so he ran away from his base in California. When he was caught in 2010, he said, he was told that a medical discharge would take years, and that he would be better off voluntarily taking an other-than-honorable discharge. Now he works part time as a dishwasher but finds it hard to keep a job, he said. He has been in and out of jail. He has five years of health care given to all combat veterans, which
is set to run out this year. “I really don’t know what I’m going to do,” he said. “Afghanistan happened, and I’m a whole different person. But no one really wants to hear that.” [Source: The New York Times | Dave Philipps | March 30, 2016 ++]

Military Sexual Trauma Update 03 ➤ VA Offers Free Service to Help Vets

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. VA is asking that readers pass this information along to a friend, family member, or anyone in the community who works with veterans.

Military sexual trauma (MST) is the term that the Department of Veterans Affairs uses to refer to sexual assault or repeated, threatening sexual harassment that occurred while the Veteran was in the military. It includes any sexual activity in which one is involved against one’s will – he or she may have been pressured into sexual activities (for example, with threats of negative consequences for refusing to be sexually cooperative or with implied faster promotions or better treatment in exchange for sex), may have been unable to consent to sexual activities (for example, when intoxicated), or may have been physically forced into sexual activities. Other experiences that fall into the category of MST include unwanted sexual touching or grabbing; threatening, offensive remarks about a person’s body or sexual activities; and/or threatening or unwelcome sexual advances.

Both women and men can experience MST during their service. All Veterans seen at Veterans Health Administration facilities are asked about experiences of sexual trauma because we know that any type of trauma can affect a person’s physical and mental health, even many years later. We also know that people can recover from trauma. VA has free services to help Veterans do this. You do not need to have a VA disability rating (i.e., “service connected”) to receive these services and may be able to receive services even if you are not eligible for other VA care. You do not need to have reported the incident(s) when they happened or have other documentation that they occurred.

VA’s website http://www.mentalhealth.va.gov/msthome.asp has information about the health care services that VA has available for Veterans who experienced MST. For information about VA disability compensation for conditions related to MST, view this fact sheet about Disability Compensation for Personal Assault or Military Sexual Trauma at http://www.benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/serviceconnected/MST.pdf. For help with treatment and health care related to experiences of MST, please contact your local VA Medical Center and ask to speak to the MST Coordinator. For help with disability compensation related to MST, contact the MST Coordinator at your local Veterans Benefits Administration Regional Office at http://www.benefits.va.gov/benefits/mstcoordinators.asp. [Source: Veterans Benefits Administration | March 29, 2016 ++]

VA Suicide Prevention Update 30 ➤ Crisis Line Access

U.S. Rep. Rick Nolan has received assurances from Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Robert McDonald that by the end of December, any military Veteran who telephones the VA will have the opportunity to be connected to a crisis counselor by pressing a button, without hanging up to dial a special crisis line. McDonald made the commitment to Nolan during a meeting with members of the Minnesota Congressional Delegation in Minneapolis arranged by U.S. Rep. Tim Walz, a leading member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee.
“Those who attended the Veterans roundtables Congressman Walz and I held late last summer in Brainerd and Duluth repeatedly voiced concern that a Veteran calling the VA, possibly on the verge of suicide, can’t be put in the position of getting a recording instructing them to hang up and dial another number to get emergency counseling,” Nolan explained. Nolan continued, “A Veteran in crisis needs to be able to immediately connect with a trained counselor from any VA phone line, not just the Veterans Crisis Line. That was the message Congressman Walz and I took to Secretary McDonald after our meetings with Minnesota Veterans, and we are gratified that he and his team are committed to making the necessary improvements. Congressman Walz in particular deserves enormous credit and thanks for his leadership on behalf of the heroes who have served our nation in the military, and for bringing Secretary McDonald to Minnesota this week to answer our questions and hear our concerns.”

At the meeting, McDonald explained that much of the VA telephone system is antiquated and can’t be reprogrammed to connect Veterans to a crisis counselor. He termed the current situation, which requires a Veteran in crisis to hang up and redial the special Veterans Crisis Line, “unacceptable,” adding “By the end of the year we’ll have that fixed.” McDonald said that of the estimated 22 U.S. military Veterans who commit suicide every day, 17 have made no previous connection to the VA. He said suicides are particularly prevalent among Vietnam Veterans, and that connecting Vietnam Veterans to the VA is a top priority as the agency continues a major effort to modernize and restructure. [Source: LPTV News | Paul Stokes | March 28 2016 ++]

VA Vet Choice Program Update 35 ➤ Provider Tiers

At a hearing of the House Veterans Affairs Health Subcommittee in late MAR representatives of the Department of Veterans Affairs explained how the VA plans to manage an overhaul of the VA’s new Choice Program. According to an article on Federal News Radio.com, the VA wants to “let veterans choose whether they want to access a VA medical center or a private sector provider in the community for care. If the veteran chooses community care, he or she can pick a VA-approved provider from the network list.” The VA would organize a list of providers into three tiers:

- The first tier would consist of VA medical centers, DoD medical facilities, Indian Health Service medical facilities, Tribal health programs and federally qualified health center providers.
- The second tier would be community health care providers which will have been rated by the VA as the top in the quality of the health care they give.
- The third tier would be other community health care providers who would meet standard VA criteria.

The VA would still schedule most of the appointments within the VA system and those with private practitioners according to the plan. However, the congressional members of the committee expressed skepticism about the VA’s plans and noted that it was the poor performance of the VA in scheduling appointments that was the cause of the scandal that rocked the VA starting in 2014. The VA spokesman pointed out that under the current Choice Program a private contractor schedules the appointments for veterans and that VA has heard from veterans that they are tired of having to go through a “middleman.” He said that besides hearing complaints from veterans about having to deal with a middleman, the VA wants “… to figure out a way to get that information back, so when they do come back to the VA if they have to see another doctor, we have the clinical information from that community provider.”

Several members of the House committee felt there were too many levels of the VA bureaucracy in the new proposal. However, the spokesman reminded them that the VA is responsible for determining who is eligible for VA health care and for making sure the providers outside of the department get paid and that the VA has systems in place to do that. Both the House and Senate veterans committees are working on legislation to fix the problems that have arisen in the Choice Program and it is expected that they will pass legislation before the end of this year. [Source: TREA Washington Update | March 28, 2016 ++]
VA Vet Choice Program Update 36  ★  Private Sector Marketing Concerns

A leading hospital system in the U.S. is courting military veterans with a multimillion-dollar ad campaign, raising concerns from some veterans groups that private sector marketing could weaken the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system. The campaign tag lines — "Veterans have a choice in healthcare" and "You honored your oath, and so do we" — emphasize consumer preference and the shared values of medical professionals and the military. Starting 28 MAR TV, radio, print and online ads by St. Louis-based Ascension Health's will urge veterans to call a toll-free number for information about Veterans Choice, the cornerstone of the VA overhaul approved in 2014, which makes it easier for veterans to receive federally paid medical care from local doctors. Veterans groups say it's the first large-scale marketing to Choice-eligible veterans.

Vets are wary of proposals to privatize the VA health system and fear that draining off patients and dollars could hurt the VA in the long term, said Louis Celli of the American Legion, the nation's largest veterans group. While they supported the Choice legislation following a scandal over long wait times and falsified records, most want the program to remain temporary, he said. The VA said it encourages veterans to make sure they are eligible for the Choice program before signing up for private care. More than 4.6 million veterans used VA health care last year, and the VA says it has reduced its waiting list while authorizing millions of veterans to receive care in the private sector. Congress approved $10 billion over three years for the Choice program, money that will go to private sector providers at Medicare rates, a potentially valuable revenue stream. To be eligible, veterans must live more than 40 miles away from a VA medical facility or face a long wait for VA care.

"No community is more vulnerable than veterans," said Ascension spokesman Nick Ragone. "Our mission is to serve those who are underserved, no matter what the revenue stream or reimbursement levels." Ascension, the nation's largest nonprofit health care system with facilities in 24 states, estimates its efforts could lead to 24,000 veterans a year getting care from its providers, helping the VA reduce its backlog of cases. Ascension supports extending the Choice program beyond its 2017 expiration and will air ads in Washington, D.C., Ragone said. "We're looking to continue to be part of the solution," he said. Ascension plans to train providers in veterans' issues and has hired veterans in each of its markets to help new patients navigate the requirements of the Choice program, Ragone said. Some veterans groups are skeptical, however, about whether Ascension can live up to its marketing. "How many mechanical arms have they fitted recently?" said Celli after seeing an Ascension ad depicting a veteran with a prosthetic arm. "This campaign suggests that veterans are interchangeable with anyone else in society (paste head here), which clearly shows that they just don't get it."

Terri Tanielian, a Rand senior research analyst, said many private sector providers lack training in military culture and combat-related health conditions. Her research — a 2014 survey of mental health professionals — found only 13 percent met standards for culturally competent, evidence-based care for veterans. Ascension's ad campaign could lead to unexpected medical bills if veterans seek private sector care without making sure they're eligible, said Carlos Fuentes of Veterans of Foreign Wars. "If we hear from veterans that Ascension facilities are improperly billing them, we would object," Fuentes said. "The most important part is that (Ascension) keep their information and materials up to date. I commend them if they're up to that task." [Source: The Associated Press | March 25, 2016 ++]
The House Appropriations Committee on 22 MAR advanced an $81.6 billion 2017 military construction and Veterans Affairs bill, though the lower chamber’s budget blueprint remains stalled. The bill, which funds Pentagon infrastructure and veterans programs, includes $1.2 billion less than President Barack Obama’s budget request, but $1.8 billion more than last year’s level. The spending bill comes amid House Republican infighting over whether to stick to last year’s budget deal between Obama and former House Speaker John Boehner (R-OH) which set spending at $1.07 trillion. Fiscal hawks in the House Freedom Caucus are calling for a $30 billion cut to match 2011 budget caps eased by the 2015 deal, citing the nation’s economic security. Despite House Speaker Paul Ryan’s calls for regular order, the budget blueprint remained in limbo as the House went into recess through 11 APR. The Senate, in recess since 18 MAR, returns 4 APR.

At the hearing to mark up the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Subcommittee’s “milcon-VA” bill on 23 MAR, House Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-KY) touted the timing of the legislation, which comes several weeks before it was passed in 2015. “I want to commend you for working through your hearings expeditiously and putting this bill together in a very timely manner, at our request,” Rogers said. The Appropriations Committee’s ranking democrat, Nita Lowey, of New York, on the other hand lamented the “most extreme voices in the Republican party have taken over” and condemned the movement to renege on the budget deal. “It seems we are not on track for regular order or responsible governing as we are leaving for almost three weeks of recess. How irresponsible is that?” she said.

Debates over the defense portion of the budget blueprint continue, particularly its use of the Overseas Contingency Operations (OCO), which is exempt from budget caps, to fund defense. The plan, passed by the House Budget Committee on March 16, sets $574 billion in base budget requirements, with some funded through the base budget and some through OCO. Defense hawks argue that leaves OCO funding $18 billion short of the activities the president has asked for, and that it would be up to the next administration to address it through a supplemental funding measure. At Tuesday’s House Armed Services hearing, Tactical AirLand subcommittee Chairman Mike Turner (R-OH) said the president’s budget request fell short of the Bipartisan Budget Act, and Defense Secretary Ash Carter pushed back. “We’re going to have to agree to disagree about that — about whether we budgeted to the BBA, because we believe we did,” Carter said.

At the HASC, a key Democrat on the committee, Rep. Susan Davis, of California, questioned Carter on the wisdom of funding base requirements through OCO. Carter did not express an objection to the arrangement. “Generally speaking, the base and the OCO budgets have different managerial purposes,” Carter said. “The base budget is for things that are enduring, meeting enduring requirements, and OCO is for the variable costs associated with urgent, ongoing operations. That's still largely true, but it's not completely true.” On Wednesday, one Freedom Caucus member, Rep. Mark Sanford (R-SC) expressed concern that OCO, which originated as a wartime fund, was being “gamed” to fund baseline needs, and he disputed assertions that DoD is underfunded. “Look at the other 10 largest industrialized countries. They’re spending a de minimis among of their GDPs on defense, and they’re in essence resting on us to take care of it,” Sanford said. “I don’t know that’s going to be sustainable.”

Sanford, a Budget Committee member, voted for the plan in committee but is expected to vote against it on the House floor. He said the success of the budget resolution is “not contingent upon defense” and called for “a degree of reformation in every part of government.” “The concern for the budget hawks, and I’m one of those, is that the numbers in the long run don’t add up, and we will have a much bigger squeeze on defense spending unless we get our financial house in order,” Sanford said. “If we can’t cut tens of billions now, how will we do it down the road?” When the Budget Committee met 16 MAR to consider the budget plan, Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) offered a failed amendment to prevent any OCO increase, calling it a wasteful “slush fund,” improperly exploited to skirt spending caps. “We know it has expanded beyond what any contingency fund should be,” she said, “and it’s really a black box with no oversight.” [Source: Defense News | Joe Gould | March 24, 2016 ++]
VA Fiduciary Program Update 08 ► Additional Beneficiaries Identified

The VA fiduciary program provides oversight of beneficiaries who, due to injury, disease, or the infirmities of age, are unable to manage their VA benefits. VA’s role is to conduct oversight of beneficiaries to ensure their well-being, and oversee the fiduciaries it appoints to assist beneficiaries with the management of their VA benefits. In 2015, VA protected more than 224,000 beneficiaries, who received over $3 billion in VA benefits. Beneficiaries in the fiduciary program include Veterans, surviving spouses, dependent parents, adult children, and minor children. The number of beneficiaries served by the program has grown by 50 percent since 2011 and VA projects continued growth as it increases its benefit claims production (1.4 million claims in 2015) and the beneficiary population ages.

DVA announced 24 MAR that an information technology system that it deployed in 2014 and enhanced in 2015, the Beneficiary Fiduciary Field System, allowed it to identify claim processing errors affecting approximately 14,000 Veterans and survivors. These Veterans’ and survivors’ claims were initially filed over many years, with some going back as far as 2000. The errors concern cases in which VA had proposed that due to disability or age the beneficiary was unable to manage his or her VA benefits without assistance, but did not complete the action by transferring it within VA for appointment of a fiduciary. These cases represent approximately four percent of such proposals since 2000.

VA’s Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) became aware of a potential problem when it received inquiries about delayed fiduciary appointments from affected beneficiaries or their families. A system-wide review by VBA using the new technology found claim processing errors that had occurred at each of its regional offices and pension management centers across the country. In these cases, one or more of the procedures for controlling and transferring the workload were not followed, resulting in the fiduciary appointment delays. “We sincerely apologize to these Veterans and their survivors for this regrettable delay,” said VA Deputy Secretary Sloan D. Gibson. “We are taking immediate action to complete these cases, initiate the fiduciary appointment process, and ensure that these errors do not happen again. We must also continue to transform the claim process for beneficiaries needing fiduciary assistance and properly resource our fiduciary program to ensure that beneficiaries have the help they need to effectively use the benefits they earned.”

VBA has set up a dedicated team to immediately review the cases, notify beneficiaries, complete the claim processing steps, and appoint a fiduciary as quickly as possible. Because the law requires VA to check the qualifications of the fiduciaries it appoints, including conducting a face-to-face interview, VA anticipates that it may take as much as six months or more to complete the fiduciary appointment process for these beneficiaries. However, the beneficiaries will continue to receive their monthly benefits as VA works to appoint a fiduciary to assist them. Additionally, VBA has already modified its systems to better track this workload and plans to remove manual transfer processes that are prone to error through enhancements to its automated claims processing system, the Veterans Benefits Management System. For more information, Veterans can contact (1-888-407-0144). [Source: VA News Release | March 24, 2016 ++]

VA Lawsuit | Gila River Indians ► Health Care Non-reimbursement

The Gila River Indian Community claims in court that the Department of Veterans Affairs is illegally limiting and conditioning reimbursement for care provided to veterans who go to a reservation hospital rather than the scandal-plagued VA facility in Phoenix. In a complaint filed in federal court on 22 MAR, the Gila River Indian Community and Gila River Health Care Corporation, claim the department owes them for health care provided to veterans going back to March 2010.
Under President Barack Obama’s health care law, the VA must reimburse Indian tribes for health care services to veterans who seek care from tribal clinics or hospitals instead of a VA facility. "Despite this plain and mandatory language directing the Department of Veterans Affairs to reimburse Indian tribes and tribal organizations for health care services provided to veterans, the VA refuses to do so unless Indian tribes and tribal organizations agree to conditions well beyond the plain language of the law and which reduce the reimbursements that Indian tribes are entitled to under the law," the complaint says. Those conditions include limiting reimbursements to direct care services only and excluding purchased or referred care; excluding reimbursement for non-Native veterans, such as non-Native spouses of tribal members; and requiring the Gila River Health Care Corporation to "submit disputes with the VA for resolution by the VA’s own contracting officer."

The Gila River Health Care Corporation operates a hospital in Sacaton, Ariz., a small reservation town about 40 miles south of Phoenix. The hospital has seen an increase in veterans in recent years because patients are "unable to secure timely appointments through the VA" and because "the Phoenix VA in particular has been plagued by well-publicized health care scandals alleging poor quality of care and long waits for appointments," the lawsuit states. Gila River officials say they have tried for years to negotiate with the VA over these issues, and even sent a delegation to meet with department officials in Washington, D.C. In 2013, a lawyer for the department "confirmed that VA's position will not change unless it is required to change by the Department of Justice or unless the Community sued the federal government and prevailed in court," the lawsuit states. "All Community efforts have been rejected, and from March 23, 2010, through the date of this complaint, VA has provided no reimbursements to GRHC," the lawsuit says.

In addition to an award of an order for reimbursement, the tribe wants the court to declare that the VA is violating the Affordable Care Act by "conditioning reimbursements on a separate agreement by VA," and by limiting reimbursements to Native American veterans and direct care services only. It's unclear from the lawsuit how much the VA allegedly owes the Gila River Indian Community. Attorneys with the tribe’s Office of the General Counsel did not immediately respond to an email on Tuesday. The Department of Veterans Affairs also did not respond to a request for comment. Last week, the VA announced the proposed removal of three senior officials at the Phoenix VA Health Care System. After a whistleblower and media investigations revealed shocking problems at the Phoenix VA in 2014, an Office of Inspector General report confirmed that some 40 patients had died while on a wait list for care between April 2013 thru April 2014. The report also identified numerous cases of "unacceptable and troubling lapses in follow-up, coordination, quality, and continuity of care" at the Phoenix facility. [Source: Courthouse News service | Tim Hull | March 23, 2016++]

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**VA Lawsuit | Colorado Vets ► Medical Marijuana Use**

Medical marijuana has been used to treat everything from cancer to cataracts, but in Colorado, it cannot be prescribed to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. That’s the reason behind a lawsuit by some veterans against the state. Among them is Curt Bean, who spent his teenage years in Iraq. The U.S. Army scout and sniper learned a valuable lesson: Kill or be killed. "Talking about taking lives is never easy, especially when you are the person making the decisions," Bean said. "It’s never something that you take lightly." When Bean returned to the U.S., he found himself in a fight with depression and anxiety. “I drank a lot, stayed in bed a lot, avoided people,” he said. Bean was diagnosed with PTSD by the Department of Veterans Affairs and was prescribed a powerful antidepressant that only made things worse.
Then he tried recreational marijuana and felt relief. "I was like, 'Wow, I'm sleeping better, I have less anxiety. I'm able to function day to day,'” Bean said. While medical marijuana is approved to treat PTSD in several states, Colorado is not one of them. Denver attorney Bob Hoban is representing Bean and several other veterans in a lawsuit against the state, asking Colorado to give PTSD sufferers access to medical marijuana, specifically used to treat anxiety. “The medical system and the medical stores should be accessible to PTSD sufferers because they provide different products, carry different products, different potencies than what’s served on the retail or recreational side,” Hoban said. Bean said marijuana has eased his anxiety and opened a whole new world, helping him put the Iraq war behind him as he gets ready for a legal battle. "It’s legal, and it’s moral and it helps me," Bean said. "Veterans’ lives have been saved by this, so why not get the word out about how powerful it is?” The Colorado Attorney General's Office is representing the state in the lawsuit. A spokesman declined comment on the case. [Source: Fox 31 Denver | Heidi Hemmat | March 25, 2016 ++]

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**VA Caregiver Program Update 32**

VA caregiver benefits provide financial, medical, and peer help for family members that support veterans. Roughly 5.5 million people serve as caregivers for veteran family members. The Department of Veterans Affairs has a lesser known benefit for these family members. Known as **Caregiver Support Services**, these benefits aim to help family members who are tasked with the primary care of a disabled veteran. The services available include access to a caregiver support line, support coordinator, peer support for caregivers, adult day health care centers, and home care, among other things. One portion of this benefit — aimed specifically at post-9/11 veterans’ families — is the services for family caregivers of post-9/11 veterans under the “Caregivers and Veterans Omnibus Health Services Act of 2010.”

Those benefits can include access to a monthly stipend, travel expenses, health insurance, mental health services, VA caregiver training provided by Easter Seals, and respite care, and are meant to ease both the physical, mental, and sometimes financial burden of supporting a veteran as a caregiver. If awarded, the stipend amount is based on the weekly number of hours of personal care services that an eligible veteran requires during the month. In order to determine the scope of benefits offered to a caregiver, the VA assigns a patient-aligned care team, which uses a three-tier system to evaluate the eligible veteran. According to the VA, a high-tier veteran equates to a maximum of 40 hours of care per week. the medium tier equates to a maximum of 25 hours of care per week, and the low tier equates to a maximum of 10 hours of care per week.

Task & Purpose spoke with caregiver Emery Popoloski, who is currently receiving aid under the program, about her experience with the VA’s caregiver program. Her husband is a combat disabled veteran who fought in Iraq. “I was about a year and a half into my caregiver journey … I was just 25,” she said. “All my friends were just getting married, nobody had kids, nobody understood what it was like to have a spouse that was 100% dependent on me.” That is the importance of the program, she said. It not only connects caregivers to services like stipends and in-home care, but also provides a network of people who are going through similar experiences. Being well-versed in the program, Popoloski now serves as the caregiver community program coordinator at the Elizabeth Dole Foundation — a group that helps military families and caregivers by strengthening the services afforded to them. She was recently promoted to serve as their fellowship program coordinator.

Her work has also led her to involvement with the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, which is one of a number of advocacy groups that helps to connect veterans and their families to these services. Lynda Davis, executive vice president of the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors, told Task & Purpose in an interview that the 5.5 million caregivers across the country support veterans of all the U.S. wars. Roughly 1.2 million of them are caregivers to post-9/11 veterans. “Our intention is to reach all of the 5.5 million caregivers,” Davis said. “We provide an open, public, resource library on a variety of topics that are key to caregivers.”
If you are not sure where to start, at http://www.va.gov/healthbenefits/resources/caregiver_eligibility_check.asp the VA offers an eligibility checklist at. However, Popoloski suggested that anyone caring for a veteran should consider contacting an advocacy group like Veterans of Foreign Wars, The American Legion, or TAPS for more information. If you need assistance in applying for VA's Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers Program, or have questions about the Program, call them at 1-877-222-VETS (8387). [Source: Task & Purpose | Sarah Sicard | March 22, 2016 ++]

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**VA Care ~ Epilepsy ➤ ECOE YouTube Video /Programs**

In an effort to address the stigma of epilepsy and educate Veterans, their caregivers and the general public about living with epilepsy, VA Epilepsy Centers of Excellence have developed a video series titled “Veterans and Epilepsy: Basic Training.” Now available on YouTube at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R5KIHBCNjhc&feature=youtu.be, the video focuses on the diagnosis of epilepsy. Subsequent videos will include topics such as, epilepsy medications, social issues faced by individuals living with epilepsy, seizure first aid, and traumatic brain injury (TBI). The goal is to promote public awareness of the impact of epilepsy on the lives of Veterans and show that these patients are able to live full, productive and successful lives.

Stephanie Chen, epilepsy nurse practitioner with the San Francisco VA Medical Center, said “There is a culture of stoicism in the military, which prevents Veterans with epilepsy from reaching out to get more information about their epilepsy. Hopefully these videos will show Veterans and all individuals living with epilepsy they are not alone.” Many consider traumatic brain injury, or TBI, to be the signature injury of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. According to the Department of Defense, 333,169 U.S. military Service members have been diagnosed with TBI since 2000, and the number is growing. In addition to symptoms such as memory problems, depression and posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), Servicemembers and Veterans with TBI are at greater risk for seizures and epilepsy. “Veterans present unique challenges because their seizure-related psychosocial difficulties are often amplified by posttraumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury,” said Dr. W. Curt LaFrance Jr., principle investigator for a pilot study of Veterans with epileptic seizures at the Providence VA Medical Center. “Among our goals of caring for Veterans with epilepsy is developing effective treatments for these psychosocial comorbidities.”

- The Providence VAMC has been using a 12-session seizure therapy intervention in Veteran patients with non-epileptic seizures and with epilepsy, which resulted in a reduction in seizures, improvement in anxiety and depression, and improvement in quality of life. The treatment has been used successfully for epilepsy in non-Veterans in prior pilot trials at other facilities.

- A grant from the Matty Fund, a Rhode Island-based nonprofit, in April 2015 is helping bridge treatments, research, training and education by supporting a Brown University student who worked with the study. This support is facilitating the Providence VAMC in providing seizure therapy for 20 Veterans with epilepsy in the pilot study. The Veterans will continue with existing treatment with their current care providers. Some will receive the additional seizure therapy provided as part of the study in order to compare a cognitive behavioral-informed psychotherapy with standard medical care by assessing seizures, co-morbid symptoms, quality of life and functioning.

- To meet the needs of Veteran patients nationwide, VA created Epilepsy Centers of Excellence, or ECOEs, at 16 sites across the VA health care system, which are linked to four regional centers. The ECOEs strive to ensure high-quality care for Veterans with seizures, and conduct outreach, research and education efforts. Veterans with seizures interested in seeking services at one of the ECOEs should speak with their primary care provider or neurologist who can help determine if the individual might benefit from the services provided.
by an ECOE, and assist with scheduling an appointment. For more information, email ECoE@va.gov or visit www.epilepsy.va.gov.

Dr. W. Curt LaFrance Jr., principal investigator for a pilot study of Veterans with epileptic seizures at the Providence VA Medical Center, conducts a finger-tapping exercise with Veteran Ernest J. Avery as part of an exam at the Providence VA Medical Center. Avery served in Operation Enduring Freedom.

[Source: VHA | Winfield S. Danielson III | March 22, 2016 ++]

VA Care Under-Appreciated ➤ Undeserved Negative Image.

Seemingly, there is a public consensus to berate the Veterans Administration Health System. Media reports have sensationalized a few complaints creating and escalating an undeserved negative image. Any system, public or private, that serves 8.7 million people probably has periodic management challenges. Disparaging the entire system because of transgressions at a few sites generates indignation and great political theater while it unfairly damages morale among providers, staff and the veterans it purports to help. To a significant extent, accusations of incompetence and poor quality are unfounded. It is important to differentiate between anecdotes and data and even more important to avoid indictment of all 1,700 facilities because of the few that are poorly managed.

VA health care is a managed health system that out-performs the private sector in quality of care and patient safety. One of the most significant features is electronic health records. A veteran’s medical records are available at any VA health facility to avoid repeating diagnostic testing or prescribing unnecessary or duplicative medication. It helps prevent accidental adverse drug interaction. The volume of data provides opportunities for data mining, resulting in measures implemented for evidence-based health care delivery. For instance, the VA ceased using the arthritis drug VIOXX two years before the private sector because the data showed it lacked efficacy and likely increased the risk of heart attacks.
The VA aggressively pursues medically indicated diagnostics and medically necessary treatment without regard to outside considerations, such as profit or payer source. The provider will spend the time necessary with a patient compared to the for-profit sector’s typical seven minutes. Regular checkups and follow-up diagnostics and treatment are electronically tracked. The veteran’s responsibility is simply to open his mail and show up for scheduled appointments. Ordering pharmaceutical refills is easily done by telephone or computer. Issues in the past few years are primarily limited to waiting lists. Once a veteran is picked up by the system, standard managed care is not compromised. Waiting lists for new patients are a function of increased numbers of veterans seeking services and the resources needed to hire staff. However, a June 2014 audit revealed the Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System scheduled new patients within 30 days and a wait time of two days for established patients. The private sector would struggle to achieve this metric. It is disingenuous for Congress to complain about the VA in general and wait times in particular without first furnishing the necessary resources.

The Eastern Oklahoma VA Health Care System serves 47,000 veterans in 25 counties. Its facilities include the Jack C. Montgomery Medical Center in Muskogee and outpatient clinics in Tulsa, Vinita and Hartshorne. Stipulating that some small percentage of patients have complaints, satisfaction exceeds 99 percent. The providers and staff demonstrate they care for veterans, care about excellence and are virtually always pleasant and professional. Unfounded public disdain is detrimental to quality of care. It diminishes the patient experience by introducing suspicion in the provider-patient relationship. It simply is not fair to veterans. [Source: Tulsa World | Readers Forum Opinion – Jim Wilson | March 16, 2016 ++]

VA Care Privatization

Members of a congressionally appointed Commission on Care (CoC), many of whom are medical industry executives, are reportedly pushing lawmakers in Washington to support long-term plans to accelerate privatization of VA health care. American Legion National Commander Dale Barnett says such a proposal seriously undermines the committee’s purpose – develop a 20-year strategy to provide timely, high-quality care for veterans who use Department of Veterans Affairs services – and raises conflict-of-interest concerns when those promoting privatization stand to gain financially if that becomes VA’s future.

The 15-member commission, which began meeting last September, currently has no representation from any veterans service organization. A portion of that commission has developed what Barnett describes as a “straw man” proposal condemning the current Veterans Health Administration and promoting privatization instead. The commission, according to a provision that created it as part of the 2014 Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, reports to the president through the VA secretary. “I don’t understand how commissioners paid by the federal government are able to break ranks, create an unapproved report and try to advance self-serving agendas while operating as congressional appointees,” Barnett said.

The “straw-man” proposal to shoot down the current system and advance a VA privatization theory “uses highly subjective media sources as evidence and describes Medicare as a business model,” Barnett said. “The proposal lacks any real understanding of the complexities of VA and serves primarily to set up the private industry to benefit. The American Legion does not want privatization of VA health care except in emergency situations and then only temporarily, until a long-term solution is achieved. Veterans believe VA’s problems can be fixed and trust can be restored. The quality of VA health care continues to outperform the private sector in study after study. Veterans do not want a reduction of quality. They just want reasonable access to care.”

The CoC was expected to have finished its work by February 2016 but requested a six-month extension on the basis that more stakeholders needed to be interviewed and consulted before a complete strategy could be revealed. The commission was structured to include at least one representative of a veterans service organization. That seat was given to AMVETS and filled by its former Executive Director Stewart Hickey, a former hospital administrator who
VA Care Privatization Update 01 ➤ HVAC Chairman Meeting w/CoC

HVAC Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), met with the Commission on Care (CoC) on 21 MAR to discuss what the VA health system should look like over the next few decades. The chairman and other congressional leaders championed legislation - the Veterans' Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014, or Choice Act - establishing an independent Commission to make recommendations for needed health system reforms. Those recommendations are to be reported in June.

When a commissioner voiced concern about the possibility of the report falling through the cracks, Miller assured them, “This report will not sit on the shelf.” Though the VA budget has increased nearly 86 percent since 2009, the chairman voiced concern over ongoing problems, seeing little improvement despite the unprecedented investment of money. Problems ranging from poorly managed construction projects to misconduct by VA employees are ongoing. Miller told commissioners the VA budget can’t keep getting bigger, saying, “The VA’s current fiscal path is not sustainable.” He offered commissioners some suggestions on how to frame a new, more sustainable, veterans' health system for the future, addressing system accountability, infrastructure and property management, and “putting veterans in the driver's seat.”

Miller questioned whether health coverage for a service-connected or combat-disabled veteran should be the same as a non-combat, non-service connected disabled veteran who served for a shorter period of time, and may have other health insurance. Regardless, Miller insisted the Veteran Health Administration of the future needs to be veteran-centric, empowering veterans to make their own health care choices. He also talked about the need for more community care so veterans have options, as envisioned in the Choice Program. It's not practical to have a medical facility near every veteran, and bringing new facilities on-line is an extended, expensive process, he noted. He asked the commission to seriously consider whether VA should continue to operate its own hospitals, because VA facilities are aging.

As Miller approaches retirement from Congress at the end of the year, he hopes the next chairman continues to exert the necessary oversight to reduce the bureaucracy between the Secretary and those in the field. “I want to see VA transform into a model of accountability…bold changes will happen if veteran service organizations get behind Congress on these changes,” he said. [Source: MOAA Leg Up | March 25, 2016 +++]

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BD-STEP ➤ Big Data Scientist Training Enhancement Program
Using health data to understand disease and wellness, as well as the best treatment and prevention options for patients, is critical for improving health care. That’s why the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is partnering with the National Cancer Institute’s (NCI) Center for Strategic Scientific Initiatives and others to use “big data” to advance favorable outcomes in patient care. What is “big data”? It’s a health care term used to describe complex and very large data sets that have evolved since the beginning of electronic health records. You may not know, but VA now has over one-billion data points available to assess Veteran health!

All of that information is incredibly useful for researchers and clinicians. But, it takes special training to understand how to use the data to advance health. That’s why VA and NIH are partnering in a pilot initiative called the Big Data Scientist Training Enhancement Program (BD-STEP). Together, they will train a new generation of “hybrid” clinical data scientists. We’ll teach them how to use data sets, algorithms and models — to develop innovative solutions to improve health care. Traditional data scientists are trained in disciplines such as computer science and applications, modeling, statistics, analytics and math. As health care increasingly uses big data, we need to be sure traditional data scientists understand health care operations as they relate to the data they evaluate. BD-STEP hopes to place these “hybrid” clinical data scientists in medical centers to work closely with VA clinicians.

“Potentially, BD-STEP can redefine care delivery by training clinical data scientists to understand and interpret the rapidly increasing amount of data generated in clinical settings and to utilize the data to directly impact decisions in clinical care,” said Under Secretary for Health Dr. David Shulkin. “Our goal is to grow a trainee’s professional capacity to fully understand the mechanics of VA’s health care delivery system and to use data to enhance Veteran care.” Six VA Medical Centers are participating in this pilot program: Boston, Mass.; Buffalo, N.Y.; Durham, N.C; Houston, Tex.; Palo Alto, Calif.; and Seattle, Wash. Each site is matched with one to two trainees from renowned academic institutions in the big data field.

Current projects include partnerships with Stanford University on “Longitudinal Medical Radiation Exposure and Cancer Risk,” Harvard University to look at the “Diversity in Epidemiological and Genetic Predictors of Onset and Progression of Myeloma,” and the University of Southern California on “Hepatocellular carcinoma (HCC) Prediction Models for Hepatitis C Patients.” BD-STEP also supports Precision Medicine Initiative (PMI) – a new research effort by the White House to revolutionize how we improve health and treat disease. It is a first time collaborative between VA’s Employee Education System, Office of Academic Affiliations, and the Office of Research and Development to build a new program with National Cancer Institute. BD-STEP is an exciting new initiative to advance delivery of health care for the Veterans we serve. Visit https://www.va.gov/oaa/specialfellows/programs/sf_bdstep.asp?p=24 for more information on the program. [Source: VAmtage Point Blog | March 16, 2016 ++]

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**VA Overseas Travel Pay ▶ Discontinued**

On January 29, 2016, the Department of Veterans Affairs issued a legal opinion concerning Beneficiary travel outside of the United States. VA’s regulations at 38 C.F.R. § 70.1(a) limit VA’s authority to provide payments for travel expenses incurred outside the U.S. This includes any travel expenses incurred overseas for care provided at or coordinated through the VA Outpatient Clinic in Manila. While this regulation is in place, VA may not provide reimbursement for travel expenses incurred outside the U.S. [including] for C&P exams.

**2016 VA MANILA BENEFITS FACT SHEET**

The eligibility requirements for medical services are different for Veterans outside the United States than for Veterans within the United States. The VA Manila Outpatient Clinic provides medical care for U.S. Veterans only for a VA-rated service-connected disability, or any disability associated with and held to be aggravating a VA-rated, service-connected disability (38 CFR 17.35).
There are some services the VA Manila Outpatient Clinic will provide for non-service connected conditions if those services are within the limits of the clinic.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VA BENEFITS AND SERVICES</th>
<th>UNITED STATES</th>
<th>PHILIPPINES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Service Connected</td>
<td>Non-Service Connected</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary and Specialty Care</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inpatient Hospitalization</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, as available in community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Emergency Care in Community</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Prescription Drugs</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Diagnostic Services</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Laboratory Services</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dental</td>
<td>Yes, based on eligibility</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eye</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, as available in community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ears, Nose, Throat (ENT) and Audiology</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, as available in community</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mental Health</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Physical Therapy</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes, as available in community</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durable Medical Equipment and Prosthetic Items</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beneficiary Travel</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No, effective April 11, 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Domiciliary nursing home and community based residential care</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>No</td>
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<td>Homeless Veterans Program</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Alcohol and drug dependency treatment</td>
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<tr>
<td>Readjustment Counseling</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>Specialized health care for women Veterans</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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<td>Caregivers</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vet Centers</td>
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<td>No</td>
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<td>Specially Adapted Housing Grants</td>
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<td>Yes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Combat Veterans</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>Yes</td>
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</table>

[Source: VA Manila | Announcement | March 18, 2016 ++]
VA Gulf War Claims Update 01  ►  VA Gets 'F' for Claims Approvals

The percent of disability claims approved by the Veterans Affairs Department for Persian Gulf War-related illnesses has declined steadily in the past five years, resulting in record lows, according to a new report from the advocacy group Veterans for Common Sense. In the first two quarters of fiscal 2015, VA denied nearly 82 percent of claims filed by Gulf War veterans for two main conditions presumed to be connected to their military service — chronic multi-symptom illness and undiagnosed illnesses. In 2011, the denial rate was 76 percent, Veterans for Common Sense director Anthony Hardie said.

The low approval rates, which "approach the limited odds of winning a scratch-off lottery," are a "complete contravention of 1998 laws passed to improve Gulf War veterans' ability to have their claims approved," Hardie wrote in testimony to two House Veterans' Affairs subcommittees Tuesday. "If we measure VA's success by how it has approved Gulf War veterans' claims 25 years after the war, VA has failed most ill and suffering Gulf War veterans," said Hardie, an Army veteran who served in the 1991 war as well as in Somalia. Nearly 700,000 U.S. service members deployed to the 1991 Gulf War, and 54,193 have filed disability claims for illnesses related to their service, according to a 2014 VA report. Roughly a fifth of those claims were granted, and of the denied claims 42 percent were approved for another condition other than a presumptive Gulf War-related condition, according to VA.

To qualify for disability compensation for Persian Gulf War-connected conditions, veterans must have developed one of a number of infectious diseases during their service or have undiagnosed chronic symptoms or a chronic disability that began either during service or after. Currently, the conditions must appear before Dec. 31, 2016, to an extent that they are at least 10 percent disabling, existed for at least six months and not be attributable to any other circumstance or cause for consideration. But during a joint hearing of the House Veterans' Affairs oversight and investigations and the disability assistance and memorial affairs subcommittees, veterans advocates pressed for an extension of the year-end deadline as well as improvements to the claims approval process.

Citing a recent report from the Institute of Medicine that found two conditions occurring in Vietnam veterans — bladder cancer and hypothyroidism — likely are linked to exposure to the defoliant Agent Orange more than 40 years ago, advocacy groups and members of Congress said the deadline should be extended for at least five years if not indefinitely. "VA has repeatedly extended the end date ... due to scientific uncertainty regarding the time period in which Persian Gulf War veterans have an increased risk of suffering from chronic illnesses. ... Little has changed with respect to the level of scientific certainty. Due to this continued state, VA should again extend the date of presumptive service connection," said Richard Spataro, director of training and publications for the National Veterans Legal Services Program. A VA official said the department is taking the steps needed to extend the deadline but the process has not been finalized.

Dave McLenachen, acting deputy undersecretary for disability assistance at VA, also said the department is working to improve claims processing for Gulf War veterans but its own internal reviews indicate a 90 percent accuracy rate for claims decisions. McLenachen added that VA has taken steps to improve and accelerate claims processing but he would return to his office to "see whether there was room for improvement." "I intend to look carefully at the testimony of the other witnesses and carefully consider their suggestions," McLenachen said. Rep. Mike Coffman, a Colorado Republican who served in the Persian Gulf War, pointed out that the claims process for Gulf War veterans warrants improvement since VA is failing to expedite claims designated as presumptive, a moniker that is supposed to accelerate the process, not delay it. "I am disappointed that the law was passed that a specific set of conditions is supposed to be presumptive and the VA does not appear to be following the law," Coffman said.

[Source: Military Times | Patricia Kime | March 15, 2016 ++]

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VA Health Care Access Update 33  ➤  Telephone Enrollment

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced 16 MAR that it has amended its enrollment regulations to allow Veterans to complete applications for enrollment in VA health care by telephone without the need for a signed paper application. The change is effective immediately for Combat Veterans and will be effective July 5, 2016, for all Veterans. This phased implementation accelerates VA’s effort to enroll all Combat Veterans with pending applications as part of its ongoing Veterans Enrollment Rework Project. The VA is working to complete the review and rework of all pending health enrollment records for living and deceased Veterans this summer. Veterans can view the amended regulation on the Federal Register website [https://www.federalregister.gov](https://www.federalregister.gov).

“This improvement to our Veterans’ experience is one we can implement now, and it’s the right thing to do for Veterans,” said VA Deputy Secretary Sloan D. Gibson, “Enrolling all 31,000 Combat Veterans with pending applications is the top priority in our effort to fix our enrollment system. Our analysis of our current application process convinced me we could enroll Veterans more quickly using this method, particularly Combat Veterans and those who are transitioning from active duty to Veteran status,” Gibson said. By adding this telephone application option to VA’s regulations, VA will now offer three ways to enroll. This change provides Veterans an even more convenient way to apply for enrollment, in addition to the paper VA Form 10-10 EZ and online enrollment application process. With publication in the Federal Register today, Combat Veterans may now apply by phone. All other Veterans may apply by phone starting on July 5, 2016.

When Veterans choose to enroll, VA offers an enhancement to their enrollment experience through “Welcome to VA” (W2VA). Veterans enrolled since July 1, 2015 have received a personal introduction to VA health care services, programs and resources to help them become more familiar with VA’s services. In addition, VA sends each new enrollee an introductory letter and personalized handbook in the mail. W2VA enhances communication by reaching out to newly enrolled Veterans through personal phone calls upon enrollment, providing assistance with health care inquiries and assisting with their initial appointment at their preferred VA healthcare facility. For more information, Veterans can contact the Health Eligibility Center Enrollment and Eligibility Division toll free at 1-855-488-8440. [Source: VA News Release | March 16, 2016 ++]

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VA Health Care Access Update 34  ➤  Blatant pro-VA propaganda

GOP Rep. Jeff Miller shot a letter 14 MAR to the head of a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reform commission, alerting her a member of the panel is spewing blatant pro-VA propaganda. Phillip Longman, a member of the Commission on Care, recently edited a 8,000-word expose entitled “The VA isn’t Broken Yet” at The Washington Monthly, which hailed the VA as a success and fought off criticisms of the department as a Koch-funded plot. It just so happens Longman is known for his vigorous defense of socialized medicine and advocacy that the VA model be applied more broadly to the entire health care system in the United States. And the apology for the VA was replete with errors. Phillip Longman, was appointed to the VA's Commission of Care in 2015 by Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV).
The report showing Longman’s clear conflict of interest attracted the attention of Miller, chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, who wrote a letter to Chairwoman Nancy M. Schlichting. It warns her of “attempts by Commission on Care member Phillip Longman to spread blatantly false propaganda in an attempt to minimize the wait-time scandal at the Department of Veterans Affairs.” “Longman either believes the article’s false claims, or he—as an editor of the piece—signed off on them knowing they were untrue,” Miller added. “In either case, I would caution you and all other Commission on Care members to take anything Longman says with an extremely large grain of salt.”

There were clear errors in the Longman-edited piece.

- First, the article claimed 40 veterans did not die waiting for care at the Phoenix VA based on selective quotations from an inspector general report. In reality, not only did 40 veterans die, but unofficial and official wait lists showed deaths totaled 293 veterans.

- Second, Alicia Mundy, the author of The Washington Monthly piece, said “there was no fundamental problem at the VA with wait times, in Phoenix or anywhere else.” The Phoenix IG report contradicts her statement entirely. “As a result of using inappropriate scheduling practices, reported wait times were unreliable, and we could not obtain reasonable assurance that all veterans seeking care received the care they needed,” the Phoenix report noted.

- Third, Mundy pointed to VA statistics back from June, 2014, to show that “For the VA system as a whole, 96 percent of patients received appointments within thirty days.” However, an IG report in August 2014 showed reported wait times should be viewed with the utmost skepticism.

“[T]he breakdown of the ethics system within VHA contributed significantly to the questioning of the reliability of VHA’s reported wait time data. VHA’s audit, directed by the former VA Secretary in May 2014 following numerous allegations, also found that inappropriate scheduling practices were a systemic problem nationwide.” Wait times prior to August, 2014, were almost certainly false. “You can’t solve problems by denying they exist. Further, attempts by anyone to minimize the VA scandal are quite simply a slap in the face to the many veterans who suffered from it,” Miller concluded. “It’s unfortunate that some Commission on Care members aren’t familiar with these simple concepts. Please do not allow their ignorance and or bias to influence the important work you are doing.” [Source: The Daily Caller | Jonah Bennett | March 15, 2016 ++]

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**GI Bill Update 200 ➤ DeVry University Suspension**

The Veterans Affairs Department today reprimanded DeVry University, largely over allegations of deceptive marketing made by the Federal Trade Commission, but the institution fired back, saying the move is based on unproven claims still being litigated. VA's action does not prevent students from using the GI Bill or other VA benefits at DeVry, which was the nation's fourth-largest higher education institution for Post-9/11 GI Bill users nationwide in fiscal 2014. But the move will result in warnings to potential students about the school. "Effective the date of this letter, VA is suspending DeVry University's status as a [Principles of Excellence] institution at least until the conclusion of the FTC lawsuit," said a letter dated today and signed by Curtis Coy, the VA deputy under secretary of economic opportunity.
According to a VA spokesman, this is the first time the VA has suspended a university's status with regard to the Principles of Excellence, a series of guidelines for colleges and universities that serve veterans. But it is far from the first time a federal agency has taken action against a for-profit institution. The letter cites three reasons for the suspension:

- A lawsuit filed against DeVry by the Federal Trade Commission
- Limitations imposed on DeVry by the Education Department, in concert with the FTC action
- Complaints lodged against DeVry by students in the VA GI Bill Feedback System

"The FTC findings, [Education Department] conclusions and GI Feedback System complaints indicate that DeVry University has not acted in accordance with ... Principles of Excellence guidelines," the letter said. In a written statement, DeVry rebuked what it called "VA's premature action." "DeVry Group is extremely disappointed by the VA's action taken today," said the statement, sent by DeVry spokesman Ernie Gibble. "The FTC's allegations that the VA cites are just that — allegations — and we believe are without merit." Noting that DeVry filed a motion to dismiss the FTC's case days ago, the statement added: "The VA should withhold judgment on these matters while we seek resolution."

The FTC suit, announced 27 JAN alleged that DeVry advertisements misled prospective students about the likelihood that they would find jobs in their fields of study after graduating and the likelihood that they would earn more in those jobs if they attended DeVry rather than another institution. In a letter also dated 27 JAN the Education Department called for independent reviews of claims it made in DeVry advertisements. "In addition, VA received a significant number of complaints through the GI Bill Feedback System regarding DeVry and its misrepresentation to students and prospective students of post-graduation employment outcomes as well as providing insufficient information on total cost of programs," today's letter from VA's Coy said. While significant numbers of complaints have been lodged against DeVry, the information about these complaints is very limited. The public reporting systems don't say what specifically the complaints were or whether DeVry was found at fault.

In a years-long push against for-profit education, members of Congress, federal agencies and independent groups have charged that many for-profit institutions take advantage of military and veteran students, offering little value in return for sometimes expensive degrees. Advocates for for-profit colleges and some veterans service organizations caution against painting all such institutions with the same broad brush. VA's action follows a similar move by the Defense Department, which placed the University of Phoenix on probation with regards to military tuition assistance on 7 OCT last year. DoD cited FTC action, ongoing investigations by other agencies and problems that Phoenix had already corrected to explain its action in that case. But the Defense Department reinstated University of Phoenix on 19 JAN.

Unlike the VA suspension, DoD's action prevented new tuition assistance students from attending University of Phoenix. The practical impacts of VA's action today appear much more limited. VA's GI Bill Comparison Tool will flag the school to bring the reviews of other agencies to the attention of potential DeVry students. It will also no longer indicate that the school is a good-standing signatory to the Principles of Excellence. "In addition, VA will conduct targeted risk-based program reviews for all DeVry campuses," Coy's letter said. [Source: Military Times | George R. Altman | March 14, 2016 ++]

GI Bill Update 201 ► Defrauded Vets Benefit Restoration Request

Illinois Attorney General Lisa Madigan is pressing the VA to restore the benefits of student veterans who have been defrauded by "deceptive for-profit schools." Madigan, along with the state attorney generals of California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington, sent a letter to U.S. Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald demanding that the VA restore education benefits to vets who attended
expensive and unaccredited schools, like the now-shuttered Everest College, which had six locations in Illinois that were operated by Corinthians Colleges, Inc. For more information on student veteran benefits or for-profit schools, Madigan encourages consumers to contact her Student Loan Helpline at 1 (800) 455-2456 (TTY: 1 (800) 964-3013). The letter signed by Madigan and other attorneys general is available on the Illinois Attorney General website at www.illinoisattorneygeneral.gov/pressroom/2016_02/Veteran%20Affairs%20Multi-State%20Letter.pdf. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update | March 25, 2016 ++]

VA Accountability Update 26 ➤ Survey Reveals Due Process Concerns

A massive veterans reform measure including new employment rules for senior officials and an overhaul of outside care programs could be on the Senate floor early next month, the chair of the chamber’s Veterans' Affairs Committee said 15 MAR. Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA) said progress on the promised omnibus measure has picked up in recent days, and he is hopeful to have the package before House lawmakers with enough time for final passage before Memorial Day. While the legislation will include a host of changes requested by VA officials on program updates and improvements, Isakson called new accountability provisions the centerpiece of the effort. “I’m not someone who likes to fire people, but sometimes you have to,” he told VA Secretary Bob McDonald at a hearing 10 MAR. “I want to give you the ability to hire good people, but I want you also to be able to hold them accountable.”

Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.)

McDonald has requested changing employment rules for a host of department senior executives, allowing more flexible salary options and quicker hiring processes than federal rules allow. But they would also change disciplinary rules, allowing them to be fired more easily and limit appeals options to the secretary’s discretion. Lawmakers have offered support for the idea. Officials from the Senior Executive Association (SEA), which represents federal workers across a host of agencies, have voiced strong concerns. SEA officials released a survey of 236 current and former VA senior executives last week which panned the plans; two-thirds opposed the idea, and more than half thought the plans would scare individuals away from seeking VA jobs. But McDonald said the changes would “treat health care career executives more like their private-sector counterparts,” giving them “accountability policies comparable to those of the physicians and dentists they lead.”

The proposed move comes after a series of high-profile failures by the department to discipline executives. Lawmakers have blamed a culture of corruption within the federal worker ranks for the problems, while workers’ advocates have blamed past congressional efforts at changing disciplinary laws for the difficulties. Members of Congress have also criticized VA for mistakes in standing up the new Choice Card program, designed to expand outside care options for veterans who face long wait times or long travels to see VA physicians. McDonald has asked for consolidation of a host of outside care programs, including the Choice Card efforts, to better coordinate external care for veterans with internal programs. Isakson hinted that lawmakers are supportive of that change.
The issues of accountability and outside care were at the heart of the last major veterans reform measure, passed in summer 2014 at the height of the department’s patient wait time scandal. It was signed into law just days after McDonald was confirmed as head of the department. That measure has met mixed success, with billions set aside for hiring physicians and leases but uneven progress on department firings and coordination with private physicians. House officials have passed a series of more minor department reforms in recent months, and have said they hope to work with the Senate on including them in the larger package. Isakson’s counterpart — House Veterans’ Affairs Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) — last week announced his decision not to run for re-election this fall, but getting the omnibus through his chamber is one of his remaining congressional goals. [Source: Military Times | Leo Shane | March 15, 2016 ++]

VA Accountability Update 27 ► Texas Leaders Urge Firing of VA Executives

In an apparent rejection of the Department of Veterans Affairs’ insistence that its top executives weren’t responsible for a 2014 medical wait time scandal, both of Texas’ U.S. senators and Gov. Greg Abbott on 17 MAR said an internal investigation revealing systemic data manipulation in the state shows “failures of leadership at senior levels.” In a joint letter to VA Secretary Robert McDonald, the Texas leaders urged the firing of any VA executive “whose poor performance or misconduct warrants such removal.” That seems unlikely — so far, at least — in Texas. The American-Statesman reported last week that not a single Texas employee of the VA has been disciplined in the wake of the VA’s Office of Inspector General probe of wait time allegations, according to the U.S. House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

That investigation found data manipulation to be systemic in Austin, San Antonio and Kerrville. Under the scheme uncovered by investigators, scheduling clerks regularly inputted false dates for patients’ appointment requests, matching them to first available appointment dates in a practice called “zeroing out.” Several clerks told investigators that they feared being fired or receiving poor performance reviews if they didn’t participate in the data manipulation. The manipulation helped obscure the problem of lengthy waits for appointments. Yet the report didn’t assign responsibility for the widespread problems, instead pinning them on “improper training” and “lack of supervision.”

The VA’s inspectors have issued similar reports across the country. According to the VA, 29 employees nationwide have been disciplined in connection to data manipulation. The VA, however, has trumpeted the inspectors’ reports as a kind of vindication. “OIG did not substantiate any allegations of a VA senior executive or other senior leader employed by a (Central Texas VA) facility intentionally manipulating scheduling data — nor any individual Central Texas employee,” VA spokeswoman Deborah Meyer said in an email.

It’s unclear though how so many schedulers in so many offices simultaneously misunderstood scheduling instructions in a way that reduced the appearance of wait times. “We cannot explain the actions of the schedulers,” Meyer said. In their letter, Abbott and Sens. John Cornyn and Ted Cruz said the inspectors’ report shows that “Texas veterans were misled by a mismanaged, bureaucratic system intent on providing the appearance of short appointment wait times in order to improve the image and performance statistics of individual VA health facilities.”

VA facilities in South and Central Texas were among dozens nationwide where former and current employees alleged VA officials were hiding the true extent of wait times in a scandal that eventually cost VA Secretary Eric Shinseki his job. In Phoenix, whistleblowers alleged the numerous veterans died while languishing on secret wait lists. In response, Congress approved $16.3 billion to pay for new staff and facilities and to pay for private sector care for veterans facing long waits. In Central Texas, the money helped fund 118 new positions — a mix of medical providers and support staff. Last year, VA numbers showed that the rate of delayed appointments was falling in Austin, but remained higher than the national average. Local VA officials say they have also revamped training for scheduling clerks and their supervisors. [Source: Austin American-Statesman | Jeremy Schwartz | March 17, 2016 ++]
VA Accountability Update 28 ► Acting VBA Chief Suspension

The Department of Veterans Affairs is suspending the head of the Veterans Benefits Administration for allowing two lower-ranking officials to manipulate the agency's hiring system for their own gain. Deputy VA Secretary Sloan Gibson says acting VBA chief Danny Pummill will be suspended without pay for 15 days for his role in a relocation scam that has roiled the agency for months. Pummill failed to exercise proper oversight as Kimberly Graves and Diana Rubens forced lower-ranking managers to accept job transfers and then stepped into the vacant positions themselves, keeping their senior-level pay while reducing their responsibilities, Gibson said 22 MAR. Pummill is one of VA's five highest-ranking officials and leads VBA's employees across 56 regional offices nationwide that provide compensation and pension benefits, life insurance, home loans and other services to millions of veterans. Under VA rules, Pummill can appeal his suspension to an independent arbiter.

Pummill was the VBA's deputy chief when Rubens and Graves implemented the job relocations, which put both of them closer to their families. Pummill replaced former VBA chief Allison Hickey, who retired as allegations against Rubens and Graves were made public. Rubens earns $181,497 as director of the VBA's Philadelphia regional office, while Graves receives $173,949 as head of the St. Paul, Minnesota, benefits office. Graves and Rubens were reprimanded Tuesday and had their pay cut by 10 percent. The two women were reinstated to their positions last month after administrative judges overturned their firings. The judges based their rulings, in part, on the fact that more senior officials such as Pummill had not been disciplined in the case. In a related action, the VA said it has reprimanded Beth McCoy, director of field operations for the VBA. Gibson said McCoy did not exercise proper judgment in taking over for Rubens as heads of field operations.

Gibson said the disciplinary actions were in the best interests of veterans and taxpayers. "Ultimately, that is what these decisions are about: getting back to the work of serving America's veterans," he said. Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, called the actions "a weak slap on the wrist." Accountability at the VA "is almost non-existent," Miller said. "One thing is clear: this dysfunctional status quo will never change until we eliminate arcane civil service rules that put the job security of VA bureaucrats ahead of the veterans they are charged with serving." [Source: Associated Press | Matthew Daly | March 22, 2016 ++]

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VA Accountability Update 30 ► Puerto Rico VAMC Hiring/Firing Policy

A House lawmaker is demanding answers from the Veterans Affairs Department over how an employee fired after being convicted of charges related to a 2015 armed robbery could win her job back. Rep. Jeff Miller, a Republican from Florida and chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, also wants to know if Elizabeth Rivera's termination from the VA hospital in San Juan, Puerto Rico, was challenged "by the fact that the HR [Human Resources] manager responsible [for] imposing her discipline, Mr. Tito Santiago Martinez, is a convicted sex offender."
In a 22 MAR letter to VA Secretary Bob McDonald, Miller said, "The union allegedly asserted that Ms. Rivera should be reinstated in her job since Mr. Santiago was also convicted of a crime and therefore cannot discipline other employees who have been convicted of crimes." Miller sent the letter the same day The Daily Caller reported that Rivera was arrested in connection with an armed robbery last year. According to a 16 JUN online report on the San Juan news site Metro, Rivera was in a car with Rolando River Febus when Febus stepped out of the vehicle armed with a gun and attempted to rob a couple. Local police spotted the incident and Febus fled on foot, leaving Rivera in the car. Although initially charged with armed robbery, she ultimately pled guilty to two misdemeanor charges, according to the Caller report, which did not detail the charges.

Miller said he wants to know exactly why her firing was overturned, who made the call and what role Martinez played. He also wants to know if media reports are accurate in claiming Rivera wore a GPS ankle monitor when she first went back to work, if she was given back-pay for the time she missed while in jail or after she was fired; why she wasn't fired for missing work while in jail; and why someone awaiting trial for armed robbery was assigned to the office responsible for security at the hospital. Miller told McDonald he also wants all paperwork associated with Rivera's dismissal and reinstatement, including an unredacted copy of her personnel file and copies of any paperwork of her grievance process, including a hearing transcript.

Axel Roman, a spokesman for the VA hospital in San Juan, told Military.com that under federal law, criminal prosecution or conviction for off-duty misconduct does not automatically disqualify an individual from federal employment. "The administrative discipline process for poor performance or misconduct on the job operates distinctly from the administrative process associated with off-the-job misconduct," Roman said in an email. "Accordingly one is not necessarily impacted by the other." Roman's response suggests that the disciplinary action taken against Rivera -- and subsequently reversed -- dealt with her job performance or conduct and not the armed robbery, though he did not respond when Military.com asked for clarification. VA officials in Washington, D.C., did not respond to Military.com's request for comment.

Miller first began inquiring about Rivera in September after learning of her arrest. At that time, she was still facing charges but had not gone to trial. The Caller reported that she was detailed to VA police and security so that she did not interact with veterans. In his letter, the congressman said San Juan officials did not tell him in September that she was detailed to facility security. According to news reports, she was subsequently fired and in February pleaded guilty to the two misdemeanor offenses, with the armed robbery charge dropped. But she appealed and earlier this month the firing was overturned and she was returned to her job, Miller told McDonald. 'It defies all logic that a person who allegedly pleads guilty to a serious crime would be allowed to continue to work at an agency with such an important mission,' Miller said. 'I am also concerned that the actions taken by the Department in this case are yet another example of VA's inability to adequately discipline and remove employees who clearly do not share the Department's mission or core values.'

The decision to reinstate Rivera follows the reinstatement of two Senior Executive Service employees who VA demoted and reassigned for allegedly using their authority to manipulate the hiring system to maneuver themselves into particular jobs. The demotions and reassignments of Diana Rubens, director of the VA regional office in Philadelphia, and Kimberly Graves, regional director of the VA office in St. Paul, Minnesota, were overturned only days apart in late January and early February. [Source: Military.com | Bryant Jordan | Mar 23, 2016 ++]

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VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 16 thru 31 MAR 2016

San Diego, Ca — A Judith Paixao and Kevin Lombard, a husband and wife who embezzled federal funds from the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation that were intended to provide job training, benefits and equipment for injured Marines returning from Iraq and Afghanistan were sentenced 10 MAR, following a July 2015 jury trial. Paixao was sentenced to six months’ custody and six months’ home confinement; her husband, Lombard, was sentenced to
three months’ custody followed by three months’ home confinement. In addition to these custodial sentences, the Court ordered the defendants to pay $150,000 in financial penalties and restitution.

At the hearing, Judge Jeffrey T. Miller, the district court judge who presided over the trial and imposed the sentences, denied the defendants motion for a new trial or judgment of acquittal. In doing so, Judge Miller observed that “whatever commendable vision served to launch the Foundation, that idealism spawned theft, embezzlement and worse.” He noted that there were several “tells,” i.e. facts which created the “lens through which the jury viewed the evidence in this case.” These “tells” included their continuous misrepresentations of donating hundreds of thousands of dollars to the Foundation from the sale of their home, which they actually had lost to foreclosure. Another “tell” related to the defendants’ misrepresentations regarding high-end video cameras acquired by the Foundation and billed to the Department of Veterans Affairs (“VA”) at “bogus” inflated costs.

From 2007-2009, Paixao and Lombard were directors of the Wounded Marine Careers Foundation (“the Foundation”), a tax-exempt entity that trained injured veterans for careers in the film industry. They used the Foundation to defraud the VA and submit false claims to the VA in order to get funds for training and equipment they never provided. Adding insult to injury, the defendants also embezzled funds from the Foundation for their own use. As detailed in their trial, the defendants made numerous false and misleading statements to the VA in order to obtain funds for training and equipment, and then did not provide all the training or equipment to the veterans. Although the defendants claimed to have donated over $200,000 to start the Foundation, they ended up taking over $400,000 from the Foundation’s accounts over the course of two years.

Rather than paying the Foundation’s creditors (some of whom were members of the Foundation’s Board of Directors), the defendants transferred funds to their own personal credit cards and bank accounts. Although some of this money went to repay expenses they had fronted to the Foundation, evidence presented at trial showed that the defendants ended up taking over $100,000 for themselves. The defendants then used these funds to pay for a variety of personal expenses, including a family vacation in Bermuda; cell phone bills, car insurance and gifts for their family members; prescription medications and counseling costs; wine and dinners for two; and the costs of a New Year’s Day sailing trip around San Diego Bay.

U.S. Attorney Laura Duffy emphasized that “the fraud committed by these defendants - who used money set aside to help wounded veterans and spent it on themselves - was particularly offensive. These defendants capitalized on the misfortune of wounded marines in their time of vulnerability and took advantage of the VA’s commitment to serving wounded veterans to defraud the VA and enrich themselves. War profiteering which takes advantage of our veterans is not in any way, shape or form acceptable” The defendants routinely commingled the finances of the Foundation with their personal finances, thereby obstructing the ability of the Internal Revenue Service to monitor the Foundation’s tax-exempt status and determine the defendants’ personal income tax liability.

Among the witnesses who testified at trial were three of the injured veterans who used their vocational rehabilitation benefits to participate in the first training class: Gunnery Sergeant Nick Popaditch and Lance Corporal Joshua Frey. Lance Corporal Frey, who had previously been quoted in a favorable New York Times article, testified at trial that after the article was published the defendants did not give him all the equipment he was promised, and failed to provide him with certain training and job placement. The trial evidence also showed that Defendant Paixao defrauded the Bob Woodruff Foundation in connection with a restricted grant of almost $100,000 by concealing the fact that one of the intended recipients – a Marine who had been injured in Fallujah – had left the program. Instead of notifying the Bob Woodruff Foundation and asking for a reallocation of the funds, Ms. Paixao took the grant money and used it for other purposes.

In explaining the reason for imposing custodial sentences well below the advisory sentencing guideline range, Judge Miller identified the unique characteristics of each defendant, including their extraordinary community support (including from many members of the military), the low risk of recidivism, and the court’s assessment that the defendants “began with a vision or goal that was worthy” when they first reached out to wounded Marines. Despite these mitigating factors, the Court observed that the defendants “deserved to be prosecuted,” and this case served as
important deterrent against those who would be tempted to victimize charitable institutions, their donors or their beneficiaries. [Source: DoJ So. Dist of CA | U.S. Attorney’s Office | March 10, 2015 ++]

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**Hayner Hoyt Corporation, NY** — A Syracuse-based Corporation has agreed to pay $5 million, plus interest, to resolve allegations that its Chairman and Chief Executive Officer, Gary Thurston, its President, Jeremy Thurston, employees, Ralph Bennett and Steve Benedict and Hayner Hoyt affiliates LeMoyne Interiors and Doyner Inc., engaged in conduct designed to exploit contracting opportunities reserved for service-disabled veterans. The United States has long used government contracting to promote small businesses in general and specifically small businesses owned by veterans who have service-connected disabilities. Congress has established a targeted procurement program for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), which requires the VA to set annual goals for contracting with service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. To be eligible for these contracts, an applicant must qualify as a “small business.” In addition to being a small business, a service-disabled veteran must own and control the business and handle its strategic decisions and day-to-day management.

The settlement resolves allegations that the defendants orchestrated a scheme designed to take advantage of the service-disabled veteran-owned small business program to secure government contracts for a now-defunct company, 229 Constructors LLC, that Gary and Jeremy Thurston created and controlled and subcontracted for Hayner Hoyt and its affiliates.

- The Thurstons – neither of whom is a veteran – exerted significant influence over 229 Constructors’ decision-making during the bid, award and performance of these contracts in various ways, including by staffing the company entirely with then-current and former Hayner Hoyt employees and their spouses.
- They also provided 229 Constructors with considerable resources, which provided it with a competitive advantage over legitimate service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses neither affiliated with nor controlled by a larger, non-veteran owned corporation.
- Hayner Hoyt officials caused false certifications and statements to be made to the government representing that 229 Constructors met all requirements to be a service-disabled veteran-owned small business when they knew, or should have known, that 229 Constructors did not meet such requirements.
- By diverting contracts and benefits intended for our nation’s service-disabled veterans to Hayner Hoyt and its affiliates, the defendants undercut Congress’s intent of encouraging contract awards to legitimate service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses.

The investigation revealed that Bennett – a service-disabled veteran who allegedly ran 229 Constructors, served as its president and oversaw its $14.4 million government-contracts portfolio – was not involved in making important business decisions for the company. He was instead responsible for overseeing Hayner Hoyt’s tool inventory and plowing snow from Hayner Hoyt’s property. Jeremy Thurston set up an email account in Bennett’s name in such a way that all emails received by the veteran were automatically forwarded to him. After the government began to question 229 Constructors’ affiliation with Hayner Hoyt, Gary Thurston wrote others that he and Jeremy Thurston would likely terminate operations of 229 Constructors. A few months later, service-disabled veteran Bennett and Benedict, who was simultaneously the “co-owner” of 229 Constructors and listed on Hayner Hoyt’s website as one of its five “key” officials, transferred a total of $52,000 to Gary Thurston’s personal bank account allegedly to show their appreciation for the assistance he had provided.

Defendants made various admissions in the settlement agreement, including that their conduct violated federal regulations designed to encourage contract awards to legitimate service-disabled veteran-owned small businesses. They also admit that 229 Constructors provided more than $1.3 million in service-disabled veteran-owned small business subcontracts to Hayner Hoyt, LeMoyne Interiors and Doyner and that those companies generated $296,819 in gross profits as a result. “Those who do business with the federal government must do so honestly,” said U.S. Attorney Richard S. Hartunian for the Northern District of New York “As today’s settlement demonstrates, this office will vigorously pursue those individuals and entities who game programs designed to help our nation’s veterans succeed in starting small businesses.”

The government’s investigation was triggered by a whistleblower lawsuit filed under the qui tam provisions of the False Claims Act, which allows private persons, known as “relators,” to file civil actions on behalf of the United States and share in any recovery. The relator in this case will receive $875,000 of the settlement proceeds. The case is docketed with the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of New York under number 14-cv-830. [Source: DoJ No. Dist NY | U.S. Attorney’s Office | March 14, 2016 ++]

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Greenwood, SC — A 48-year-old Upstate man who ran a fake barber college that he used to defraud the Veterans Administration entered a guilty plea and was sentenced 22 MAR. Charles B. Harris, of Ninety-Six, South Carolina, was sentenced in federal court in Anderson to 20 months imprisonment and ordered to pay over $45,000 in restitution for conspiracy to defraud the United States. Evidence presented at the change of plea hearing established that from 2011-2014, Harris owned and operated the Greenwood Barber College. The school was approved by the VA to teach veterans the skill of barbering. Harris was the certifying official who agreed to accurately monitor and report student attendance and academic progress.

In December 2013, the Department of Veterans Affairs received a complaint that Harris was conspiring with various veterans to steal government funds. Agents interviewed several of Harris’ students, who said as long as they paid Harris $400 per month, he did not require them to attend class. Harris would falsify documents indicating their attendance and progress so the students could continue to receive VA educational benefits. Agents interviewed Harris on Feb. 6, 2014, at the Greenwood Barber College. Harris admitted to helping veterans sign up for the Veteran Retraining Assistance Program and other VA programs offering financial aid for career training. He would then enroll them in the barber school. Harris admitted that he did not require the veterans to attend classes at the school and that he would falsify records documenting the attendance and performance of the veterans. Harris said that he knew what he did was wrong and he was sorry. He is not eligible for parole and will serve the full 20-month sentence. [Source: WYFF News 4 On Demand | March 22, 2016 ++]

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Kenneth City, FL — The veteran, Gary W. Gray, 67, of Kenneth City, suffered a service-related eye injury while serving in the Army between 1968 and 1970. Over the years, he collected Veterans Administration benefits, claiming his disability — hypertensive retinopathy — worsened after a stroke to the point he was almost totally blind. He couldn’t drive, he said, or read to handle his financial matters. He depended on his wife and other people to help him get around. But he was lying about the severity of his condition. And on 28 MAR, Gray pleaded guilty to stealing government money, a charge that carries up to 10 years in federal prison.

Even as Gray continued to receive payments from the VA for his 100 percent disability, he worked at a Clearwater company as a mailroom clerk from around 2006 to 2012, according to his plea agreement. As part of his job, he picked up mail from post offices and drove it to the company. He sorted the mail and delivered it around the company, the plea agreement says. In January 2013, the VA Inspector General began investigating after learning that Gray had a drivers license that indicated he had no vision problems with corrective lenses. He’d gotten the license around 2012. Agents watched Gray using a lawn trimmer outside his house, and obtained surveillance footage at Gray’s credit union showing him conducting financial transactions with no apparent vision problems. The VA called Gray in July 2013, and Gray told the caller he couldn’t see and that his wife took care of money matters. He said he hadn’t driven a car in years. That October, agents installed a pole camera outside Gray’s house, recording footage of him driving his vehicles. Once, he was seen backing his truck up to his boat trailer, backing his wife’s vehicle out of the garage and then riding down the driveway on his motorcycle.

In December 2013, the VA had Gray come in for a compensation and pension exam. Gray told the ophthalmologist he couldn’t see at all with his right eye and very little with his left. He said he’d lost his vision after a stroke in 1998. He told the doctor he couldn’t walk, drive or do anything without help, according to his plea agreement. Even with help walking, he needed to use his cane, he said. The doctor ordered a CT scan, but there was nothing on the test to explain Gray’s claimed vision loss, the plea agreement states. The VA determined Gray had made an “intentional and fraudulent misrepresentation of the level” of his disability. The VA estimates Gray had a 30 percent disability as of December 1998 and 10 percent as of December 2014. The VA estimated it overpaid Gray more than $500,000 in benefits. [Source: The Tampa Tribune | Elaine Silvestrini | March 28, 2016 ++]
**VAMC Tomah WI Update 15 ▶ Former COS Medical License Suspended**

The Wisconsin Medical Examining Board has suspended the medical license of the former chief of staff of the troubled Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center. The board suspended Dr. David Houlihan’s medical license after a hearing 16 MAR. Houlihan was nicknamed "candy man" by some patients for allegedly handing out excess narcotics. An attorney for the Wisconsin Department of Safety and Professional Services called Houlihan's practice of medicine "downright dangerous." Houlihan, a psychiatrist, was fired in November from the VA medical center and his clinical privileges revoked. But he still had a license to practice medicine in Wisconsin. After the hearing, Houlihan told WKOW-TV (http://bit.ly/1M9dfcT) that he finds it difficult "to not have the actual facts come out," and that his record shows he has provided "great care for our veterans.” [Source: Associated Press | March 16, 2016 ++]

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**VAMC Buffalo Update 01 ▶ Whistleblower Reinstated with Back Pay**

Lisa Magin took her job with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs very seriously—so seriously, her co-workers at Buffalo’s VA Medical Center seemed to resent her dedication—and when Magin reported their infractions, they got hostile. Magin was a Medical Supply Technician in the VA’s Sterile Processing Service, which is responsible for cleaning and sterilizing medical tools. Lisa blew the whistle on co-workers she saw taking shortcuts, or skipping basic rules, but when she reported those infractions, she didn’t feel she was taken seriously. “They would just waive me off, tell me that my work standards were too high—not to slack off, but to just back off and relax,” Lisa told us in a Call 4 Action interview back in June, 2014.

But Magin would have to pay a hefty price for trying to do the right thing. Once the work environment became hostile, she took a medical leave, but when Magin was ordered to return to work at the VA, she followed her own doctor’s orders and refused, which led to her termination on March 5, 2013. “They just made it seem like I was the problem, and all I wanted to do was make sure that we were doing the right thing.” Lisa’s case became part of an investigation by the U.S. Office of Special Counsel, which found the VA had actually made a number of corrections, which News 4 also reported two years ago, in an interview with Kathryn Varkonda, the Medical Performance Manager at the Buffalo VA. Varkonda commented, also in the June, 2014 report, “We are dealing with human beings here. I mean, have any of us ever not made a mistake. People make mistakes.”

But an administrative judge has ruled Lisa had engaged in legitimate whistleblower activity, which is protected by law, and she was fired because of it—not necessarily by retaliation but by the VA’s failure to protect Magin from a hostile work environment. The judge ordered Magin’s reinstatement effective to the date she was terminated in 2013, which includes all of Lisa’s back pay—with interest—and benefits. Lisa is obviously pleased with the ruling, and looking forward to going back to the VA. A spokesperson for the Buffalo VA wrote in an email VA officials have not seen the ruling, but they would not comment on it anyway, because it is a personnel matter. The VA has a month to appeal the decision. [Source: WIVB-4 | Al Vaughters | March 18, 2016 ++]

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**VAMC Aurora CO Update 15 ▶ VA Employment Get-Out-Of-Jail-Free Card**

The Veterans Affairs Department has no plans to punish any other employees over massive cost overruns at a VA medical center under construction outside Denver, the agency said 22 MAR. The executives who made the decisions that caused the price to swell to $1.7 billion have already left the department, the VA said in announcing the long-awaited results of an internal review. The VA said last year that three other executives were transferred or demoted. A separate investigation by the VA’s inspector general is still underway. The decision angered members of Congress
who have demanded for months that the executives responsible be fired. "There's going to be a billion dollars wasted on this hospital that could have gone to veterans' health care," said GOP Rep. Mike Coffman, whose district includes the site.

The facility's final cost will be nearly 3 times the $580.2 million amount estimated in 2014. It's expected to be finished in January 2018. When Congress reluctantly approved additional spending in September to complete the hospital, it stripped the VA of the authority to manage large construction projects in the future and turned it over to the Army Corps of Engineers. VA officials have repeatedly said federal personnel rules controlled what action they could take against executives. They also said they had no legal authority to stop employees from retiring amid the internal review. Coffman said the department should have at least tried. "I think they use that system, the personnel system, to hide behind when it's convenient to do so," he said.

Colorado Sens. Michael Bennet, a Democrat, and Cory Gardner, a Republican, also condemned the decision. Bennet called it an abdication of responsibility. "It's incomprehensible that the VA concluded no further personnel action was necessary to hold these individuals accountable," he said. Gardner said the VA's decision makes it appear that "federal employment comes with a get-out-of-jail-free card." The 184-bed medical center in Aurora will replace an old, overcrowded hospital in Denver. The new facility is a collection of a dozen large buildings connected by a long, soaring, glass-walled corridor. It is near the University of Colorado Hospital and Children's Hospital Colorado.

"We know that errors were made in the construction of the Denver replacement facility," said Gibson, who has visited the replacement facility site at least 10 times in the past year and a half. "We have owned those challenges and taken action to get the project back on track. We know that earning back the trust of Veterans in Colorado and across the nation means constructing a facility they will be proud of and making sure that these errors do not occur again. After reviewing thousands of pages of documentation, I determined that the evidence does not support accountability action against any individual still employed by VA. We have made many changes in the way we design, bid and construct facilities. We have appointed a new Principal Executive Director of the Office of Acquisition, Logistics and Construction, Mr. Greg Giddens, and we are working more closely with the Army Corps of Engineers than ever before. All of these process and personnel changes have made major reforms to the way we build, lease and buy space to best serve our Veterans and taxpayers.” [Source: Associated Press | Dan Elliott | March 22, 2016 ++]

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VA HCS Phoenix Update 20 ► Notices of Proposed Removals Issued | 3

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on 15 MAR announced that it has issued notices of proposed removal to three senior officials at the Phoenix VA Health Care System: Lance Robinson, the facility’s Associate Director; Brad Curry, Chief of Health Administration Service; and Dr. Darren Deering, Chief of Staff. “It is vitally important to Veterans in Phoenix and across the nation to understand that we will take appropriate accountability action as warranted by the evidence,” said VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson. “Frankly, I am disappointed that it took as long as it did for proposed actions to be made but I am satisfied that we carefully reviewed a massive amount of evidence to ensure the accountability actions are supported. These cases have served as a distraction to the progress being made
to improve the care we provide in Phoenix and across the nation. Today marks an important step in moving past the events of the past and refocusing solely on caring for our nation’s Veterans.”

In January, Gibson changed VA policy to ensure that employees who were part of administrative investigations would not be placed on paid administrative leave, instead they would be moved into non-patient care functions and continue performing other duties as assigned.

Today’s announced actions follow the appointment of a new medical center director for the Phoenix VA Health Care System (PVAHCS). On 20 NOV, Deborah Amdur was named Health Care System Director after serving as Medical Center Director of the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont. Since 2014, the Phoenix VA Health Care System has expanded its access to care working to effectively and timely treat Veterans with the care they have earned. Specifically, PVAHCS has:

- **Hired needed staff.** Since January 2014, they have hired a net gain of more than 700 full time equivalent employees. These new employees have increased Phoenix’s ability to care for more Veterans in both inpatient and outpatient settings. Through the Veterans Access Accountability and Choice Act, Phoenix has hired 164 medical center staff fully utilizing all funding for hires through that program.
- **Extended clinic hours** into evenings and weekends for primary care and mental health to leverage limited space and increase clinic time preferred by Veterans. Phoenix clinics conducted more than 957,000 outpatient visits in FY15, which is an increase of 6.8 percent over the previous 12 month period.
- **Focused additional staff for urgent and emergency care.** PVAHCS has made a concerted effort to improve care to Veterans in the Emergency Department where patient volume has grown by roughly 80 percent since 2008. Key staff have been added, improved training has become routine and a “Fast Track” process has been implemented so Veterans with less severe needs can be seen more quickly.
- **Significantly increased needed clinical space.** Last May, a new 7,000 square foot Community Based Outpatient Clinic opened in northeast Phoenix. In addition, two leases have been signed – one in west Phoenix and a Primary Care Center located within 5 miles of the main campus – both of which are expected to open this summer. Construction of a dental clinic is underway and the Health Care System has completed a 400-space parking garage addressing a regular complaint of patients.
- **Worked with medical providers in the community.** They have fully implemented the Choice Program and improvements to the program are underway including co-locating TriWest staff with VA employees to improve communication and coordination of care.
- **Increased outreach to Veterans and key stakeholders.** Leadership of the Phoenix VA Health Care System regularly conduct community town halls and all-employee forums to hear needed feedback. Currently, a facility-wide campaign is underway to promote respect and safety for Veterans, visitors and staff.

Since 2014, VA has taken many actions to increase accountability and create a Veteran-centric culture:

- VA was the first cabinet-level agency to secure certification from the U.S. Office of Special Counsel (OSC) under OSC’s 2302(c) Whistleblower Protection Certification Program, which ensures that Federal agencies meet the statutory obligation to inform their workforce about the rights and remedies available to them under the Whistleblower Protection Enhancement Act and related civil service laws.
- As of April 2015, VA has worked closely with OSC to provide relief for VA employees who have filed whistleblower retaliation complaints, including three individuals at the VA Phoenix Health Care System.
- VA has established the Office of Accountability Review (OAR) to ensure leadership accountability for improprieties related to patient scheduling and access to care, whistleblower retaliation, and related matters that impact public trust in VA.
- VA established of a Department-wide program office to implement our Anti-Harassment Policy.
- VA’s goal continues to be strengthening its culture of accountability and putting renewed focus on employee-led, Veteran-centric change. Improvements in workforce culture, with a focus on ICARE values, will allow
VA to address issues as they arise, rather than necessitating employee termination following repeated and/or pervasive poor behavior.

- Over 34,000 staff have completed the VA-developed training “Access and Scheduling Core Concepts and Business Practices” online or face-to-face.
- All VA supervisors are required to take annual “Whistleblower Rights and Protection & Prohibited Personnel Practices” training.

[Source: VA News Release | March 15, 2016 ++]

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**VA OIG Update 05** | Wait Time Reports as of 30 March 2016

The Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General (OIG), conducted extensive work related to allegations of wait time manipulation after the allegations at the Phoenix VA Health Care System in April 2014. Since that event and through fiscal year 2015, they received numerous allegations related to wait time manipulation at VA facilities nationwide from veterans, VA employees, and Members of Congress that were investigated by OIG criminal investigators. As the VA OIG stated at Congressional hearings, at this time they have completed 77 criminal investigations related to wait times and provided information to VA’s Office of Accountability Review for appropriate action.

It has always been their intention to release information regarding the findings of these investigations at a time when doing so would not impede any planned prosecutive or administrative action. OIG began a rolling publication of these administrative summaries of investigation by state so that veterans and Congress have a complete picture of the work completed in their state. Their website [www.va.gov/oig/publications/administrative-summaries-of-investigation.asp](http://www.va.gov/oig/publications/administrative-summaries-of-investigation.asp) lists the titles of all reports in state sequence. A summary of published reports issued as of 30 MAR 2016 can be seen on the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “VA OIG Wait Time Reports”. As additional reviews are completed/reported this attachment will be updated accordingly. [Source: VA OIG Summaries | March 30, 2016 ++]

**Vets**

**PTSD Update 206** | Self-Medication | Vet Marijuana Dependence on the Rise

A growing number of states are weighing whether to legalize marijuana to treat post-traumatic stress disorder. But for many veterans, the debate is already over. They're increasingly using cannabis even though it remains illegal in most states and is unapproved by the Department of Veterans Affairs because major studies have yet to show it is effective against PTSD. While the research has been contradictory and limited, some former members of the military say pot
helps them manage their anxiety, insomnia and nightmares. Prescription drugs such as Klonopin and Zoloft weren't effective or left them feeling like zombies, some say. "I went from being an anxious mess to numbing myself with the pills they were giving me," said Mike Whiter, a 39-year-old former Marine who lives in Philadelphia, where marijuana is illegal. "Cannabis helped me get out of the hole I was in. I started to talk to people and get over my social anxiety."

Former U.S. Marine Mike Whiter smokes marijuana at his home in Philadelphia. He says pot, along with therapy, helped him more than prescription drugs for anxiety and PTSD

Others, though, have seen little benefit from the drug. And the VA has documented a troubling rise in the number of PTSD-afflicted veterans who have been diagnosed with marijuana dependence, which some experts say can hamper recovery from war trauma. Sally Schindel, of Prescott, Arizona, said the VA diagnosed her son Andy Zorn with PTSD after he served in the Army in Iraq. The agency later diagnosed him with marijuana dependence as well as depression and bipolar disorder, she said. Schindel said her son was using marijuana not for recreation but as self-medication, particularly to help him sleep. He killed himself at age 31 in 2014, writing in his suicide note that "marijuana killed my soul & ruined my brain." "He told me he found it much harder to quit than he thought it would be," Schindel said. "He'd buy it and smoke it and then flush the rest of it. The next day he bought it again."

The stories of vets like Zorn and Whiter have helped fuel the debate over whether states and the federal government should legalize the drug for PTSD treatment. Lawmakers are increasingly sympathizing with vets like Whiter, despite the lack of scientific evidence. While some limited studies have shown that marijuana helps people manage PTSD symptoms in the short term, another suggested it may make symptoms worse. Starting with New Mexico in 2009, 10 states have listed PTSD among the ailments for which medical marijuana can be prescribed, according to the Marijuana Policy Project, which seeks to end criminalization of the drug. A few more states give doctors broad enough discretion to recommend pot to PTSD sufferers.

Similar measures have been introduced in Georgia, Illinois, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island and Utah. In November, the U.S. Senate passed an amendment that would allow VA doctors to recommend medical marijuana to vets in states where it's legal. The proposal failed to pass the House. Federal law requires randomized, controlled trials to prove that a drug is effective before VA doctors can recommend it. Such studies are underway, including two funded by Colorado, where the state health board held off on legalizing marijuana for PTSD because of the lack of major studies. "There surely is not enough scientific evidence to say marijuana helps PTSD," said Marcel Bonn-Miller, a University of Pennsylvania professor who is leading the Colorado-backed studies. "But we'll get a heck of a lot closer to getting to know the answer in two to three years."

Since 2002, the percentage of PTSD-afflicted veterans who have been diagnosed with marijuana dependence has climbed from 13 percent to nearly 23 percent, according to VA data released last year. That translates to more than 40,000 veterans. Officially known as "cannabis use disorder," dependence can mean someone is unable to sleep or becomes irritable without the drug. It can also mean marijuana use has diminished someone's personal relationships or ability to hold a job. Dr. Karen Drexler, the VA's deputy national mental health program director for addictive disorders, said the potential for dependency is yet another reason vets should wait for more research. "Marijuana may
initially provide some relief," but for those with PTSD, "it's very hard to stop it once you start it," she said. "It gets into this vicious cycle." She added that the emotion-numbing effects of marijuana can also hinder the most effective treatment for PTSD: talk therapy (http://www.cbsnews.com/news/cant-sleep-cognitive-behavior-therapy-may-help-insomnia) in which veterans try to process the trauma they went through. Some veterans and some doctors disagree.

In Maine, where marijuana can be prescribed for PTSD, Dr. Dustin Sulak, a physician in private practice, said doctors can help vets manage their marijuana use, preventing dependence. Sulak also said pot can help vets engage in talk therapy. Whiter, the vet from Pennsylvania, said that was his experience. During his time in Iraq in the mid-2000s, Whiter said, he saw roadside bombs blow up Humvees and people get shot. After he got home, the smell of hot dogs triggered flashbacks to the smell of burning flesh. The VA eventually diagnosed him with PTSD and prescribed medications including Klonopin and Zoloft. The Klonopin left him nearly unable to function, he said, and he decided to try marijuana after reaching a point "where I didn't care if I lived or died." "I started really engaging in therapy every week and started being really honest with myself and getting over things," said Whiter, who added that he still takes some Zoloft for his anxiety. "I can't push enough that therapy is very key in this. It's not just weed." [Source: Associated Press | March 22, 2016 ++]

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Veteran ID Card Update 05 ➤ Obtainment Options

On July 20, 2015, the president signed into law the Veterans Identification Card Act of 2015. This act allows Veterans to apply for an identification card directly from VA. The VA identification card will allow Veterans to demonstrate proof of service for discounts at private restaurants and businesses. It should be noted that the identification card is different from a Veteran Health Identification card or a DoD Uniformed Services or retiree ID card. As such, the VA identification cards cannot be used as proof of eligibility to any federal benefits and does not grant access to military installations. When available, Veterans will be able to request an ID card from VA for a fee. VA is currently making plans to implement the new law in the most efficient and cost-effective way possible while protecting Veterans’ personal information. We estimate that VA will be able implement the program in 2017. The cost of each card has not yet been determined. In the meantime, Veterans who would like an identification card that displays their military service do not have to wait until VA implements the new law. You have several options:

- You can access and print a free Veterans identification card through the joint VA/DoD web portal, eBenefits. This paper identification card serves as proof of honorable service in the Uniformed Services, as defined in laws about the Department of Defense (DoD). Veterans can get a free eBenefits account by going to https://www.ebenefits.va.gov/ebenefits/homepage.

- Your driver’s license or state identification card can carry a Veteran designation. This option is currently available in 49 states, along with Puerto Rico and the District of Columbia. We expect the 50th state, Washington, to offer this service in August 2017. Veterans wanting more information should contact their state department of motor vehicles or state department of Veterans affairs at http://www.va.gov/statedva.htm

- Veterans who are enrolled in VA health care can obtain a free Veterans Health Identification Card (VHIC). For more information, please go to http://www.va.gov/HEALTHBENEFITS/vhic/index.asp.

- Veterans who have retired from military service can receive an identification card from DoD. For information on obtaining or renewing such a card, please contact your nearest DoD identification card facility. You can find the location of these facilities through this link: https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/rsl/app/site

[Source: VAntage Point | March 24, 2016 ++]

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Three men in orange jumpsuits presented the U.S. and Arizona flags with military precision under the watchful eye and terse commands of a prison guard. The inmates who presented the flags on a recent morning are among 113 veterans at the Arizona State Prison Complex on South Wilmot Road participating in the Arizona Department of Corrections’ new “Regaining Honor” program. The program was launched in December to instill discipline and a sense of camaraderie among veterans at the prison, officials said.

Navy Veteran Tanner Sanders attends classes with other veterans in the “Regaining Honor” program “basically from sunup to sundown” five days each week. “The fear of what to do when I get out has been alleviated somewhat,” Sanders said.

Tanner Sanders, 36, spent 12 years in the Navy boarding ships in the Persian Gulf to catch pirates and contraband traffickers. He was convicted last year of aggravated assault with a deadly weapon for chasing young troublemakers who were breaking windows and turning over trash cans in his neighborhood. Sanders attends classes with other veterans in the Regaining Honor program “basically from sunup to sundown” five days a week. As a result of the program, “I’ve noticed myself hanging my head a little bit higher,” Sanders said. “The fear of what to do when I get out has been alleviated somewhat,” Sanders said, noting many veterans end up homeless after leaving prison. Inmates are eligible for the program if they are classified as minimum custody, received an honorable, general or medical discharge from the military, and are less than two years from being released. The state prison system houses about 2,700 inmates who are veterans, officials said, including 267 inmates who meet the program requirements. Another 1,850 veterans work for the prison system.

The inmates in the program, which is voluntary, do not receive special treatment, said Deputy Warden Dionne Martinez. “If anything, they will be held to the highest standards,” Martinez said. The program includes a strict code of conduct and classes on drug addiction and re-entering society that are tailored for veterans, she said. As the program gets up and running, a physical training regimen and community improvement projects, such as gardening, will be added, she said. All of the program participants live in the Whetstone Unit, a large room where inmates watched “Modern Family” and other television shows from their single beds and chatted with each other. The grouping of the veterans in the unit allows the Department of Corrections to coordinate with veterans services organizations, officials said. The housing unit also is “a reflection of the military pride that is instilled in our veterans,” Martinez said.

The program grew out of a discussion last year between the state prison director and members of the veterans caucus at the Legislature who wanted to help veterans in prison, said Karen Hellman, administrator of counseling and treatment services at state prisons. The goal is to expand the program to prisons throughout the state, including 50 women veterans at the Perryville prison by the end of the year, Hellman said.

Emanuel Whiteside, 66, served in the Army during the war in Vietnam. He fell under the influence of drugs and alcohol, which he said is the underlying reason many of the veterans in the program are in prison. “That is it. That is
why we’re in here,” Whiteside said. He was arrested for a DUI in a car police said was stolen, but which he says was legally bought and registered. Whiteside said he is trying to get as much as possible out of the program. “You’ve got to reach down into yourself and look to a higher power,” he said. His main concern is finding a job after he is released so he can “stop taking and start giving” to his family, who suffer alongside him while he is in prison. “Our families are in prison, too,” Whiteside said.

**Tye Casson**, 37, spent two years as a Navy corpsman working in a hospital. “Once upon a time, my core beliefs were honor, courage and commitment,” he said. But after his medical discharge, “I changed my values from honor to drugs.” “Every day you wake up with the fact, ‘Hey, you know what? I put myself here,’” Casson said. “My core beliefs somehow got flawed along the way.” With the Regaining Honor program, Casson said he can channel his thoughts in a positive way that helps him support those around him. “I am so encouraged by this program,” Casson said, adding the big question for him now is, “How am I going to make the world a better place for my daughter?”

**Nate Dixon**, 34, was a medic in the Army for six years. Like Whiteside, he became addicted to drugs and was convicted of drug trafficking. Through the program, he found out about his eligibility for medical benefits through the VA. He also takes AA classes and picked up “some good tips” from a money management class. “I’m terrified about getting out and not being able to get a job,” Dixon said, noting he will have a hard time finding a job in the health-care industry, where he used to work. The Regaining Honor program is “still in its infancy,” he said. “I’m looking forward to seeing what they have planned.” [Source: Arizona Daily Star | Curt Prendergast | March 13, 2016 ++]

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**Vet Deportations Update 06** ► **Estimated 2000 Living in Northern Mexico**

When they pushed him off the prison bus into the swirling dust of the U.S.-Mexico border, they gave him only one instruction: Run. He watched the other inmates scamper in all directions across the line dividing Laredo, Texas, from Mexico. This is how it ends, he thought to himself, after three honorable years of service in the U.S. Navy and one serious run-in with the law, he was being set adrift, here in a deadly Mexican border town hundreds of miles from home. So he ran. Juan Valadez once embraced the Navy’s ideals: Be your best, serve with honor, protect your country. But because he was born in Mexico and taken to the U.S. as an infant, his pact with America when he joined the military came with a catch: If he ever was convicted of a felony, he would be deported. The only legal way to return would be in a casket — a final mercy the U.S. government grants veterans who die after deportation. “They’ll take you back once it’s not no good to you anymore,” Valadez said.

Former Army Sgt. Valente Valenzuela and former Marine Lance Cpl. Manuel Valenzuela, protest in San Ysidro, Calif. in 2012. Each served three years in the U.S. military before they were ordered deported.
For much of its wartime history, the U.S. has offered naturalization to noncitizens who enlisted in the military and completed boot camp. The practice was halted after the Vietnam War and then resumed a generation later by the Army in 2009, and the Navy after that. Valadez, 33, is one of the thousands who served in those middle years when naturalization wasn’t a part of boot camp graduation. Advocates estimate there are now at least 2,000 veterans living in northern Mexico, many in border towns such as Tijuana and Juarez where English speakers can find decent-paying work in telemarketing and other service-sector jobs. U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement doesn’t track the military history of deportees, so it is difficult to tell exactly how many veterans the government has deported.

In Mexico, Valadez said, his military training and fluent English have drawn the keenest interest from a powerful drug cartel. In a single day, he said, he could make what he earns in a month running the sushi restaurant he now owns in downtown Juarez. But he has a wife and young daughter now, and he resists picking up the phone. Still, when the bills pile up, the job beckons. "They want to talk to you when you [reach Mexico]," said a military veteran in Juarez, who did not want to give his name for fear of reprisal. "They know who’s here, who can do things they need." Valadez believes going to work for the cartel, even for simple jobs like driving a truck or running security, would not only be dangerous, but a betrayal. "I'm still an American, I'm still a sailor," Valadez said.

Valadez admits that he could have done far more to secure a foothold in America. After boot camp, when he was deployed south of Yemen, in the Gulf of Aden, he could have found someone on his ship who could naturalize him, as the law permits immigrants on active duty abroad. But he never did, and eventually forgot about it. The modern path to naturalization is far easier, allowing boot camp graduates to participate in a naturalization ceremony. But naturalization ceremonies were not a part of boot camp when Valadez enlisted. A Pentagon report, issued in 2008 amid two wars, estimated that about 8,000 noncitizens enlist in the military each year. It is unclear whether enlistment numbers have continued at that pace.

After the Vietnam War, military members had to complete one year of honorable service to even begin applying for citizenship. After the September 2001 terrorist attacks, President George W. Bush signed an executive order allowing for a shorter time frame, clearing the way to a quicker path to citizenship. The result was scattershot. Some enterprising service members in the country illegally understood the process after deployment and were diligent in filing their applications through their closest embassy. Some thought the boot camp graduation was itself a citizenship ceremony. "They raised their right hands and swore to defend the Constitution," said Margaret Stock of Cascadia Cross-Border Law in Anchorage, Alaska, who has represented many veterans seeking to avoid deportation. "They thought that made them citizens." Some, like Valadez, were unsure of their options. "Military recruiters mislead people," Stock said. "They tell them that citizenship will be automatic."

Once deported, veterans are no longer are able to get medical coverage, though the Department of Veterans Affairs will continue to mail them medication. Vietnam veteran Manuel de Jesus Castano, for instance, was being treated for Lou Gehrig’s disease and lupus at an El Paso Veterans Affairs hospital when he was deported in 2011. He was rebuffed every time he tried to come back to the U.S. for treatment, and in 2012 died of a heart attack. He was 55. Manuel Valenzuela and other advocates for deported veterans helped arrange to have his body returned to the U.S. He is now interred at Ft. Bliss National Cemetery in El Paso, buried with full military honors.

Immigrations and Customs Enforcement officials say they enforce U.S. immigration law, irrespective of a person's military status. When Valadez returned from duty in the Gulf of Aden, he left the military and went looking for quick cash. He found it in marijuana. He told a friend of a friend he would take a shipment of pot from El Paso to Columbus, Ohio. He said he didn't know it at the time, but he was working for the same cartel that would later ask about his services in Juarez. The entire scheme was a setup, Valadez said, and he was eventually convicted of conspiracy to transport drugs, a felony. He spent three years in prison but said his deportation to Mexico — a country that was all but foreign to him — was essentially a life sentence. Still, it could be far worse.

On a recent afternoon, as the heat began to build, Valadez unhurriedly prepared the restaurant for opening. With his wife behind the register, he arranged cheap wooden circular tables and chairs into a pattern his servers could move around with ease. Here, on a busy commercial street in downtown Juarez, Valadez is a successful businessman. The
restaurant is an achievement, a purchase he made after two years serving sushi from a food truck. Half a dozen people, including dishwashers and waiters, rely on him to come to work every day, all the while resisting the pull of easy, dirty money. "I was lucky. I had an uncle in Juarez," he said. "Some people, they just disappear." [Source: Los Angeles times | Nigel Duara | March 27, 2016 ++]

Vet Gun Control Update 11 ► 257,000 Vets Not Allowed to Own Guns

The Obama administration is facing congressional scrutiny for blocking more than a quarter-million military veterans from owning guns. The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has reported more than 257,000 former members of the military who cannot manage their finances to the FBI’s list of people who are not allowed to own guns, Republicans claim, even though “it has nothing to do with regulating firearms.” “The National Instant Criminal Background Check System (NICS) is effectively a national gun ban list and placement on the list precludes the ownership and possession of firearms,” Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson (R-Ga.) and Sen. Chuck Grassley (R-Iowa) wrote in a recent letter to VA Secretary Robert McDonald.

The VA is responsible for appointing a fiduciary to help veterans who it determines cannot manage their own finances, but the agency is also taking the additional step of reporting these veterans to the “mental defective” category of the FBI’s background check system, even if they do not pose a danger to society, the senators allege. The senators called the practice “highly suspect” and said veterans' ability to manage their own finances is “totally unrelated” to whether they should be prohibited from owning a gun. "Under the current practice, a VA finding that concludes a veteran requires a fiduciary to administer benefit payments effectively voids his Second Amendment rights," the senators wrote. "At no time in the process does the VA determine a veteran to be a danger to himself or others, a key determinant for whether someone is a 'mental defective,' precluding the right to own firearms,” they added.

In a separate letter to Senate appropriators, Grassley requested lawmakers block the VA from continuing this practice in the upcoming budget negotiations. Grassley also complained about the practice in another letter sent last year to the Justice Department. Republicans hope the congressional inquiries will pressure the VA to stop the practice. The VA noted in a statement to The Hill that it is legally required to report veterans who are “mentally incompetent” to the FBI, which then decides whether to prohibit these former soldiers from owning guns. "From time to time, media has reported that VA 'confiscates' veterans' firearms," a VA spokesman said in a statement. "This is simply not true. VA has no authority to confiscate or 'seize' anyone’s firearms." [Source: The Hill | Tim Devaney | March 23, 2016 ++]

Veterans In Government ► Too Few in National Security Roles

Former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel worries that too few veterans are helping shape national security decisions today. On 22 MAR, during comments at a HillVets event across the street from the U.S. Capitol, Hagel said the lack of veterans in key political posts has left a “deficit” in critical military and security discussions, and helped widen the knowledge gap between civilians and those who served in the military. “When you look at the presidential candidates today, not one is a veteran,” Hagel told the crowd of more than 200. “Our current president and vice president are not veterans. The entire senior White House security staff, none are veterans.

“That doesn’t mean they’re bad people, that doesn’t mean they’re not smart, that doesn’t mean they don’t care about this country. But there is something missing here. And at a time when everything is hair-triggered, everything is nitro glycerine, and miscalculations can lead to a lot of trouble, we need veterans input.” Hagel’s remarks were part of a larger event by HillVets to highlight contributions by military, veterans and advocates in politics and wider
cultural efforts. The group honored Shaye Lynne Haver and Kristen Marie Griest, who last August became the first
women to graduate from Army Ranger School, with a new leadership and service award. Hagel praised their
accomplishments and called the entire U.S. military the best trained and most skilled fighting force in the world. But
he also said he worries that too few Americans understand what that means.

Chuck Hagel

“You all know the numbers — less than 1 percent of our society serves,” he said. “That does not mean this country
doesn’t value our military or doesn’t value our veterans. Of course they do. “But there is developing a wider and
deeper gap between civilian society and our military, and our veterans.” The former defense secretary and two-term
senator said he wants to see veterans in government “in all capacities,” including federal staffers and elected offices.
In the late 1970s, more than 70 percent of Congress has military experience in their backgrounds. At the start of the
current Congress, that number dropped below 20 percent. “We’re losing that perspective, and it’s not good for our
country,” he said. “It’s not good for our policy making. We need the input of our veterans.” [Source: Military Times
| Leo Shane | March 23, 2016 ++]

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Vet Unemployment Update 08► Post-9/11 Vet 2015 Rate Lowest Ever

The annual unemployment rate for the latest generation of veterans in 2015 was the lowest ever recorded — by far,
government statistics indicate. Post-9/11 veterans charted an average unemployment rate of 5.8 percent for the year,
according to a Bureau of Labor Statistics report released today, down significantly from the 7.2 percent posted last
year. Not only is the annual rate for 2015 significantly lower than any other annual rate in the group’s history, it’s also
lower than all but a few of the pre-2015 monthly unemployment rates, which are volatile and prone to dramatic
increases and decreases. Veteran employment experts attributed the employment gains to an improving economy,
combined with an intense focus on the issue from public and private sectors alike. Still, they emphasized that there is
work left to do. “That doesn’t mean it’s time for a victory lap or anything like that,” said Ryan Gallucci, Veterans of
Foreign Wars deputy director for national veterans service.

The unemployment rate for post-9/11 veterans has been on a wild ride since the Bureau of Labor Statistics began
to track it in September 2008. Starting with a 7.5 percent average that year, post-9/11 veterans’ unemployment climbed
to double digits in 2009-2011, as the recession deflated the national economy. Several jobs reports for individual
months climbed into the teens over these years, which charted annual unemployment rates of 10.2 percent, 11.6 percent
and 12.0 percent, respectively, for post-9/11 vets. Then 2012 brought the average annual unemployment rate just under
10 percent, followed by a further drop in 2013. The 2014 rate of 7.2 percent — though greatly surpassed by 2015’s
rate — was itself a record low when it came out last year. Indeed, 2015 was a year of records for post-9/11 veteran
unemployment in many ways.

• New record lows were set in the monthly jobs reports three times that year, and six of the eight monthly
reports from May until the end of the year charted either the lowest or the second lowest unemployment rates
ever recorded at the time they came out.
Unemployment rates for post-9/11 veterans remain slightly higher than those of nonveterans, who charted a 5.2 percent rate in 2015, down from 6 percent in 2014.

For veterans of all generations, the unemployment rate fell to 4.6 percent in 2015, down from the 2014 rate of 5.3 percent.

"Some of the improvement in the unemployment rate for veterans across the board has happened somewhat in parallel with the overall reduction in our nation's unemployment numbers over the last five to six years," Jack Norton, a spokesman for the U.S. Chamber of Commerce's Hiring Our Heroes program, said in an emailed statement. "At the same time, though, through much of our effort, businesses of all sizes have been reminded of the value of veterans as employees and have strengthened their veteran hiring programs as a result," Norton's statement added. Hiring Our Heroes and several other vet hiring groups and initiatives, some joining companies that account for wide swaths of the nation's economy, formed in the darker days of vet employment to help vets find jobs. VFW's Gallucci acknowledged the role of such groups in the collapsing vet unemployment rates and also credited some government efforts. "We attribute it to improvements in the transition assistance program and improvement in the job market generally," he said.

Still, he identified TAP as a program that itself has room for improvement, adding that its curriculum should be easily accessible to vets after they leave the military and that the federal government needs to better track how veterans do in the job market. "It needs to be a sustained mission of the military, the way that recruitment and retention is a sustained mission of the military," he said. A written statement from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America similarly expressed caution. "While IAVA is encouraged by progress, there is still much work to be done. Sustainable change will require not just jobs but investments in long-term careers for this next generation of leaders," the statement said. [Source: Military Times | George R. Altman | March 22, 2016 ++]

Florida has launched a new marketing effort aimed at attracting ex-military members nationwide. The effort is geared toward younger veterans as they prepare to leave the military and comes as Florida's retired military population continues to grow older, which has sparked the need for more Veterans Affairs clinics, including the recent opening of an outpatient clinic in Tavares. The agency Veterans Florida started its first marketing campaign in January targeting large military bases. It was created in 2014 by state lawmakers to help promote Florida as veteran friendly.

Using $4.3 million in state funding this year, the agency uses digital and print advertisements to attract veterans at bases across the nation, including in Texas, New York, Kentucky and Washington, by connecting them with employment, training and educational opportunities around the state, along with touting the state's tax breaks, homestead-exemption perks and tuition discounts for military members and their families. "We want to show them Florida's great economy, the high quality of life here and our great schools," said Bobby Carbonell, Veterans Florida executive director. "There are a lot of benefits for veterans in our state, but many people don't know about them." He said the goal for this year is building brand awareness and changing veterans' perspective of Florida. "They come
ready to work and come with skills that will help boost the economy. They are used to working hard and are great employees," he said. "Many of them are looking for a place to start businesses, raise their families and go to school, so it's a smart move attracting them here."

Carbonell said the veteran population nationwide has shrunk 17 percent since 2010 because of deaths among the largest segments of veterans from World War II and the Korean and Vietnam wars, but the number of veterans moving to Florida continues to rise. The increasing population of older veterans has led to a corresponding growth in facilities to meet their medical needs. Earlier this month, Lake County and VA officials celebrated the opening of a new community based outpatient clinic in Tavares. The clinic is a few hundred feet larger than the clinic it replaced in Leesburg. "This facility is not only larger but it also will allow us to reach veterans in a more centralized location in Lake County…," said Orlando VA Medical Center director Timothy Liezert. "Since 2010, we've seen more and more veterans move into the state and those numbers have stayed up, so this clinic will be vital as the influx increases. Along with all the tax benefits for veterans, we also have the sun and sand, so of course our numbers are surging."

Last year, the Orlando VA Medical Center at Lake Nona opened its doors as the hub for Central Florida and has quickly become the third-largest health-care network in the state. The 1.2 million square-foot facility, which cost $620 million, is the largest in the nation and helped serve the more than 106,000 veterans treated by the VA in Central Florida last year. The number treated has gone up 20 percent from 2010 when around 88,000 veterans were treated by the VA in Central Florida. Kalagian is glad he moved here. "There's a great community of veterans here and it seems like there are more moving here every day," Kalagian said. "With all the incentives, I can see the population continuing to grow. It's cheaper [to live], the help is better and you're living where others want to vacation."  Go to www.floridajobs.org/docs/default-source/office-of-workforce-services/fl_vets_benefits_guide_2015.pdf?sfvrsn=5 to review the Florida Veterans Benefits guide. [Source: Orlando Sentinel | Christal Hayes | March 21, 2016 ++]

** Vet Jobs Update 184 ➤ Best For Vets | Employers 2016**

Should you base your civilian career on your military job? Many service members use their transitions out of the military as a chance to start over and ditch the career paths that their military occupations started them on. Doing so comes with advantages and disadvantages, all of which transitioning veterans should weigh carefully. If you have a decade's worth of military experience in a field that translates well into the civilian world, changing course could force you to start at the bottom, with a salary to match, rather than at a higher level that recognizes the technical skills you learned in uniform. "When you work from weakness, it only makes it more challenging," said Evan Guzman, head of military programs and veteran affairs at Verizon, which tops MilitaryTimes' Best for Vets: Employers rankings for the second consecutive year.
On the other hand, if Uncle Sam stuck you with a job you hate, you're likely not doing yourself any favors in the long-term by seeking a similar civilian position. "What I always tell veterans is: Don't go for the job that you fit; go for the job that you want," said Michael Donoghue, a partner at PwC, a professional services firm formerly known as PricewaterhouseCoopers, which landed the fourth spot in our rankings this year. "Happy people work harder — and make more money." In addition to Verizon and PwC, Union Pacific Railroad, USAA and BAE Systems round out the top five companies on our Best for Vets: Employers 2016 rankings.

A record number of companies took part in our survey this year, which included more than 90 questions that explored in detail company culture, recruiting, policies and reservist accommodations. Competition was stiff for companies, but what they told us was largely good news for vets. All but one company that responded to our survey told us that they were actively looking for new employees to hire now. And the other one indicated that it planned to do so within the next year. Veterans accounted for more than 13 percent of the employee populations for responding companies and more than 17 percent of new hires, likely a result of a conscious focus on vet recruiting. On average, the companies dedicated one-fifth of their recruiting budgets to military-connected employees. They attended an average of nearly 39 military/veteran job fairs in the last year. More than three quarters of companies specially track applications for veterans, and about four in 10 give vets either a significant or slight preference in the hiring process. An average of four employees at each company spend most of their time working either to recruit or support military-connected employees. And more than 85 percent offer training on military culture, career paths and related matters. Better than three-quarters have a military affinity group at the company.

These efforts appear to start at the top. A remarkable 95 percent of responding companies reported having at least one service member, veteran or military spouse in the ranks of their senior leadership. And more than one-third have received the Secretary of Defense Employer Support Freedom Award, the highest award given by the federal Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve organization. If you do want to stick with your military job as a civilian, one of the best places to look may be a defense contractor, such as BAE Systems. "They're working on some of the same platforms, some of the same equipment ... that they were using when they were active duty," said Chris Davison, the company's veteran recruiting and warrior integration program manager. "So it's really just a nice transition." As a worldwide company with tens of thousands of employees and lots of projects across a wide variety of areas, BAE has need for many different types of employees, he added. "There's so many things that we do, we can accommodate almost any occupation out of the military," Davison said.

While the banking and insurance work that USAA handles is much further from the battlefield, the company's focus on customers who are current or former service members, or their families, makes vet employees just as crucial to their business. Accordingly, the company has developed several programs to attract veterans to their workforce — some of which enhance vets' existing skills, some of which teach them new skills from scratch. A new program will bring in former officers — from junior military officers and noncommissioned officers to field-grade and company-grade officers — and build on their leadership experience by teaching them finer points of the civilian business world, thus positioning them to quickly climb the ranks at USAA. The Combat to Claims program teaches recently separated veterans to start careers as insurance claims adjusters. And over the course of 22 weeks, the VetFIT program takes veterans with zero information technology knowledge, teaches them Java and shows them how to use it in the business setting while getting paid, then hires them in the USAA IT department.

Former Army Sgt. Andrew Means said he had a "hard fail" in a computer programming class in college. "I felt like I wasn't grasping the concepts," he said. Still, he gave the VetFIT program a try after a former soldier from his
unit recommended the program to him. About halfway through at this point, he describes the program as "fully immersive." "The rate at which we're learning stuff far exceeds anything in the civilian sector outside of this program," Means said. "I'm able to pick it up so much easier here."

Veterans, as well as company leaders behind programs to recruit and support veterans, all recommended that service members leaving the military approach the transition seriously, even as a job in itself, assessing their internal desires and their realistic options in the outside world. "They need to do research," said Ruben Lopez, a former Army captain who now works as a general superintendent for Union Pacific. He added that an infantry soldier who thinks he has no applicable civilian skills shouldn't just assume that's the case. "There are some websites — we have one on Union Pacific — where it takes your military skill and converts it to basically a job skill or a position," Lopez said.

Experts inside and outside of the military recommend that vets start planning their transitions 18 months before separating from the military.

For **Matt Woyton**, that wasn't possible. The Army staff sergeant was medically retired in early 2015 and had only a few months' notice that it was coming. "I have a wife and two kids, so getting out of the military was by far the scariest thing I've ever done," Woyton said. He recalls his wife breaking down crying, worried about how the family would support itself. But Woyton had days earlier posted his résumé on a website used by a variety of companies to find potential vet employees: recruitmilitary.com. The next Monday, he got a call from Verizon. That call turned into a job teaching Verizon employees to climb utility poles, a significant departure for a person who served in the military police. Yet he soon found himself in a management position, leading an installation and maintenance team. "It was never something I thought I'd do," Woyton said. But "I don't regret it at all. It was a great decision, and I'm very happy so far." To view the MilitaryTimes ‘Best For Vet’s listing and/or the methodology by which the survey was conducted refer to:


[Source: Military Times | March 21, 2016 ++]

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### Super Hero Parking ► A Good Idea | Will it Spread

The city of Cocoa Beach, Florida, has found a new way to honor veterans and first responders — by designating “super hero” parking spots. In Nov. 2015, local councilman and veteran Tyler Furbish proposed the idea to fellow veteran and city manager John Titkanich. Just a few days later, three of these spots were opened at City Hall, according to USA Today. “We always need to honor our first responders and our veterans for what they have done and what they continue to do on a daily basis,” said Furbish. “… I thought that’s just a great thing and we should do it.” The spots are denoted by large signs that read “Super Hero Parking Only.” They are intended for use by active-duty service members, veterans, police officers, and firefighters. “I would like to see it spread across the county,” Furbish said. Although use of the space by super heroes exclusively can’t be enforced, the parking spaces have so far been successful, existing on an honor system. [Source: Task & Purpose | Sarah Sicard | March 15, 2016 ++]
Former WASP Second Lt. Elaine Danforth Harmon was denied equal pay during WWII. Now Arlington bars her remains. No exception available. Oh, they’ve made exceptions. The men in charge of approving coveted plots at Arlington National Cemetery have made hundreds of exceptions to the strict military rules about who gets buried there. A chief White House usher was an exception. As were a doctor who developed an oral vaccine against polio, an ambassador and a national security advisor. And don’t forget the retired brigadier general, Charles F. Blair Jr., who didn’t meet the military requirements, but was married to a famous Hollywood actress, Maureen O’Hara. Right here, sir, we have a spot.

But when it comes to a World War II pilot who happens to be a woman? Nope. No space in Arlington for you. This isn’t some long-standing, sexist rule that’s keeping Harmon, who died at 95 a year ago, from being given full military honors at Arlington. This is last year’s reversal of the eligibility that female pilots were granted in 2002. Harmon and her fellow Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs) risked their lives just like their male counterparts did. They ferried planes, tested repaired aircraft, instructed male pilots and towed targets for air combat training. In fact, 38 of them did die while serving their country. And Harmon often told the story of other WASPs passing a hat to cover the cost of sending one of the killed female pilot’s body home. The military wouldn’t pay for that.

For 50 years, the women who stepped forward to serve when so few welcomed their service have been fighting for recognition. Back when they were risking their lives, they fought for equal pay, for flight insurance, they fought to get their room and board paid for. Three decades later, in 1975, Harmon testified before Congress, lobbying for full veteran’s rights. That finally came in 1977. And in 2002, the WASPs were granted eligibility for Arlington honors. But that changed last year when then-Secretary of the Army John McHugh reversed their eligibility for burial or even simple inurnment — to have their ashes placed in the niche wall in the cemetery.

Elaine Harmon (left) at the Congressional Gold Medal ceremony on Capitol Hill in Washington in 2010. During World War II she (right) served with the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASPs). Harmon died at 95 last spring. Her final wish was to be buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

The Army picked the wrong WASP to shut out. Harmon raised a family of fighters. Don’t forget, this was a grandma who continued flying small airplanes most of her life. She went bungee jumping in New Zealand when she turned 80. Her photos and memories are in aviation and war museums across America. So after her family mourned her death last spring and were unable to lay her cremated remains to rest at Arlington without seeking an exception, the fight became a three-generation affair. “This is a family that’s not going to let it go,” said Erin Miller, Harmon’s 39-year-old granddaughter. “My sister was a lobbyist, I’m an attorney, and we grew up watching her talking at conferences, testifying, talking to people about what she did. We’re the family to do this.”
The campaign to get grandma into Arlington began when one of her daughters, Terry Harmon, 69, started writing letters. Miller, one of her 11 grandchildren, knew that tactic wouldn’t work. “Mom, you can write letters,” she said, “but that’s not going to accomplish much.” And that’s when Miller launched her social media campaign. She posted the picture of her grandma’s ashes on the shelf in her mom’s closet. She followed that with photos of grandma in her bomber jacket and by her airplanes. Grandma testified before Congress. Grandma and other WASPs receiving the Congressional Gold Medal in 2009. Miller’s lobbying got two bills into the pipeline to get WASPs back into Arlington. “We don’t want to just make one exception for her. This has to be a change in the law,” Miller said. The House bill, introduced by Rep. Martha McSally (R-AZ), a retired Air Force pilot, has 174 co-sponsors as of this week, Miller said. And last week, Miller visited 31 Senate offices to lobby for support of the Senate bill, introduced by Sen. Barbara Mikulski (D-MD). They have more than 170,000 supporters on a Change.Org petition. Readers can add their names at https://www.change.org/p/patrick-k-hallinan-department-of-army-grant-military-burial-honors-to-women-wwii-pilots.

All of this, really, is a pretty ridiculous for her to have to do. There are lots and lots of women buried in Arlington. Wives, most of them. When you look at all the exception requests, you see wives, ex-wives, first wives. Usually, the military is fine with them. There are also plenty of women buried with their parents on something once called the “spinster policy” — women who were “never married” and “childless”. Those exceptions, in official military documents, are usually explained as “humanitarian.” “The ridiculous thing is that if her husband was buried there, then she could be buried there, too,” Miller said. “There are 15 WASPs there buried with their husbands.” But each of those women deserved to be there on her own merits. Humanitarian? How about moral. And just. And right.

[Source: The Washington Post | Petula Dvorak | March 14, 2016 ++]

Vet Incarceration Update 01 ➤ Mental Health Care | Joshua Eisenhauer

Joshua Eisenhauer is a civilian now, a veteran eligible for health care through the Veterans Affairs Administration. The former Fort Bragg staff sergeant - who shot at police and firefighters from his Fayetteville apartment in January 2012 - was released from the Army in late February on a general discharge under honorable conditions, said his mother, Dawn Erickson. The designation ensures that Eisenhauer, who suffers from post-traumatic stress disorder, is eligible for VA benefits. But Eisenhauer won't receive those benefits while he is in a North Carolina prison. Eisenhauer was sentenced in August to between 10 and 18 years behind bars after pleading guilty in February 2015 to shooting at the police and firefighters from his Austin Creek apartment. Eisenhauer contends that he had a flashback to his days of Army combat duty in Afghanistan and didn't understand what he was doing. No one other than Eisenhauer was seriously injured.

Former Staff Sgt Joshua Eisenhauer Talks to one of his attorneys during a sentencing hearing Jan 13, 2012

Today, he is in the Pender Correctional Institution. Family members say the prison isn't adequately treating his PTSD or a traumatic brain injury, an opinion disputed by the state's prison system. Family members say Eisenhauer
is in an open room with 30 other prisoners and allowed to see a social worker only about once every two months. The 
prison abuts a shooting range, and the continual noise worsens his PTSD, they say. Prisons spokesman Keith Acree 
said the N.C. Division of Prisons evaluated Eisenhauer's placement in Pender and determined that it provides him 
"excellent access to psychological and psychiatric services." "Pender is served by a resident psychology staff and a 
psychiatrist who trained in the VA health care system on PTSD in the veteran population," Acree said in an email. 
Acree said he could not discuss specifics of Eisenhauer's mental health or care. But he said "Eisenhauer is doing very 
well in his placement at Pender. He remains infraction free and works in a maintenance position." Acree acknowledged 
that a firearms training range is outside the prison walls, but he said Eisenhauer has not complained about noise. Many 
of the state's prisons have gun ranges nearby, he said.

Eisenhauer's family, with support from the Fayetteville Quaker House, has scheduled a vigil for 11 APR to bring 
attention to mental health care for incarcerated veterans, who make up about 10 percent of the country’s prison 
population. The vigil is set to begin at 5 p.m. on the sidewalk in front of the Airborne & Special Operations Museum. 
Increasing public awareness of the issue "seems to be a real hard sell," said Jim Springer, Eisenhauer's stepfather. 
"There are a lot of soldiers that have just been thrown under the bus, and that continues when they get into the VA 
system, if they even do." The family wants America's jails and prisons to screen veterans upon entry for mental 
conditions such as PTSD that are related to their military service. "Incarcerated service members and veterans with 
PTSD and TBI must receive the mental health care that they so desperately need," a flier for the vigil reads. "Our 
service members and veterans deserve to have a chance to heal from the wounds of the wars they fought for our 
country. By not receiving adequate mental health care, these wounded warriors too often end up living tortured and 
traumatic lives in prison." Acree said the prison system screens all prisoners for mental health problems upon 
admission.

While the family fights the prison system, Eisenhauer continues to fight his case in court. In October, Cumberland 
County Superior Court Judge Jim Ammons volunteered to let another judge hear a motion for appropriate relief filed 
by Eisenhauer's lawyer, Larry McGlothlin. Among other things, McGlothlin argues that Ammons had not fully briefed 
himself on Eisenhauer's case before it was laid out before him during about four hours of testimony on Aug. 6. 
Ammons denies the accusation. A judge has not yet been appointed to hear the motion, said Ellen Hancox, the county's 
trial court administrator. The family is also upset that Eisenhauer's rank has been reduced from staff sergeant to private 
E-1. Under Army regulations, rank reductions are mandatory for soldiers who serve significant prison time. "We're 
just all sad that military law seems to have rules for length of time imprisoned that include rank reduction," 
Eisenhauer's mother said in an email. "Josh's rank and the Army mean a lot to him. We hope he can get his rank back 
in the future." [Source: The Fayetteville Observer | Greg Barnes | March 16, 2016 ++]

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Veterans Priorities  ►  HVAC/SVAC MOAA Input | 2016

In mid-MAR MOAA Deputy Director of Government Relations Cdr. René Campos, USN (Ret), presented MOAA 
veterans' health and benefits priorities before a joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees. 
The hearing comes on the heels of a letter sent this week to the committees' leadership from several veteran 
organizations, including MOAA, urging lawmakers to work together in a bicameral, bipartisan manner to enact 
legislation this year to give the VA the resources it needs to complete necessary reforms.

In her testimony, Campos focused on improving VA-sponsored community care, women veterans' health care, 
upgrades to the appeals process, and stronger financial protections for military families. Though access to care has 
improved under the Choice Program, implementation has been difficult for the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) 
due to the increased demand for services and the changing demographics of the veteran population. MOAA 
recommended increased focus on reforming and consolidating the seven disparate community care programs into a 
single program. Campos commended the VA for improving medical care and services for women veterans. “But
there's more to do,” she said. “Women veterans look to Congress to press VA to eliminate all barriers preventing women from accessing integrated, comprehensive care across the system.”

The VA claims-management system remains a top priority. MOAA supports a comprehensive, integrated strategy for improving the system, with emphasis on quality decisions at the front end of the claims process. Thanks to Congress and the VA, significant progress has been made in reducing the initial claims backlog. However, it has come at a price. As new claims were processed more quickly, the appealed claims backlog has grown to over 400,000 cases. MOAA continues to work with the committees and the VA to make essential reforms in this area. Other recommendations discussed at the hearing and outlined in MOAA's statement included:

- Improving and expanding mental health care, suicide prevention, homeless, and caregiver support programs;
- Integrating educational assistance programs under a unified GI Bill architecture;
- Authorizing service connection for “Blue Water” Navy Vietnam veterans who have one or more diseases on the Agent Orange presumptive list;
- Making mandatory arbitration agreements in certain financial contracts unenforceable under the Service Members Civil Relief Act; and,
- Completing final passage of a bill to honor certain career Reservists as “veterans of the Armed Forces of the United States.”

Senate Veterans Affairs Committee chair Johnny Isakson (R-GA), said “Our goal is to have an omnibus bill that this committee, Democrat and Republican alike, agrees to… [so we can] let our veterans know that we do want accountability in the VA. We want the Veterans Choice Program to work. We want caregivers providing care to those injured prior to 9/11/2001 to have the same benefits of those afterwards, and all the other things that we've worked on, and we're close to getting there.” The Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee plans to pass an omnibus veterans bill by Memorial Day. [Source: MOAA Leg Up | March 18, 2016++]

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Vet Charity Watch Update 56 ► Can WWP Restore Trust

Wounded Warrior Project said last week's dismissal of two top executives has brought order to the popular veterans charity, but recipients of services are worried, donors are jittery and experts contend it's not going to be that simple to regain the public's trust. "They are on thin ice right now,” said Doug White, a teacher who leads Columbia University's master's program in fundraising. "In the nonprofit world, we don't have assets. We have trust. Once you let that go, it's a long, long climb back." The move by the organization's board last week to dismiss the charity's two top executives followed media reports of lavish spending and mismanagement. Since then, the charity's Chairman Tony Odierno, who is acting CEO until a new chief is found, said the board has spent "a great deal of time" talking directly with donors and alumni worried about Wounded Warrior Project's fate -- and its integrity.

“We certainly understand the concerns that have been raised and we are moving to address those concerns as quickly and decisively as possible to reestablish donor trust,” he wrote in an email. Odierno said he's confident the
board can right the ship now that CEO Steve Nardizzi and chief operating officer Al Giordano are out. And some donors and charity partners have expressed similar sentiments. But Odierno acknowledged in an interview with the New York Times that donations had fallen. The organization can still meet its obligations now, he said late last week, "but I am concerned about our ability to meet our obligations in the future." Fred Kane, who raised $325,000 for Wounded Warrior Project since 2009, told Stars and Stripes this week that his nonprofit voted Saturday to dissolve and other donors were canceling their fundraising events as well. "It's a very sad thing," said Kane, who ran golf tournaments to benefit the charity. "They breached the public trust and there is going to be fallout, even with small charities that do good work."

At stake is more than just donor confidence. With more than $300 million in donations last year, Wounded Warrior Project has become a go-to charity for wounded servicemembers and veterans, counting more than 100,000 servicemembers and their families among its alumni. In addition to its signature adaptive sports and peer mentoring programs, the charity offers critical, long-term services for veterans and families of the most severely wounded that are not available elsewhere. If donations continue to fall, some programs could be threatened.

As the board looks for new leadership, one movement underfoot is to bring back the old guard. John Melia, the founder of Wounded Warrior Project, said he's open to coming back to the organization. Melia said Nardizzi and Giordano pushed him out five years ago over how best to grow the charity. In an interview with Stars and Stripes this week, Melia said he believed in slow and steady growth that would allow WWP to manage its spending more carefully, while Nardizzi's vision was to grow rapidly, using an aggressive public relations approach and broad television advertising that made Wounded Warrior Project a household name. Nardizzi's salary climbed to more than $473,000 in 2014 and fundraisers became huge parties. And reports said the organization also aggressively challenged other charities for using the terms wounded warrior or a silhouetted soldier logo.

Nardizzi has argued in media interviews over the years that the up-front spending on marketing allowed the organization to expand and offer more services throughout the country at a matching pace -- comments he made again 18 MAR. WWP grew its programs to numbering more than 20, including programs as far-reaching as creating hospital networks to better coordinate the treatment and study of post-traumatic stress disorder and brain injuries. But critics said the organization spent irresponsibly and lost its down-to-earth character that appealed to veterans. "The optics are terrible," said Melia, a former Marine who founded the organization in 2003 after he recovered from severe burns across his body from a helicopter crash in Somalia that killed four of his buddies. "This is why veterans lost confidence in Wounded Warrior Project."

Melia said he watched from the outside as he believed the organization lost sight of the difference between programs that help veterans and ones that are used for public relations. "It would continually make me ill to watch wounded veterans paraded around like victims," he said. "I will be damned if any vet will be paraded in that kind of demeaning fashion for the purpose of putting money in the coffers." A petition on Change.org urging Odierno and other members of Wounded Warrior Project to "Reinstate John Melia as CEO of Wounded Warrior Project" has more than 480 supporters and more than 800 people have "liked" a Facebook page entitled "Restore Trust," in which Melia and his brother Jim have been promising to make sweeping changes if WWP is entrusted to them. On the Facebook page https://www.facebook.com/restoretrustwwp/?fref=ts Melia has posted 10 changes he would institute if
he is asked to serve as CEO. Among them, he promised to review all salaries, put an end to bonuses, create a position for an officer of integrity and compliance to serve as an internal auditor and immediately suspend all television marketing.

On both pages, comments from former staff members and alumni supporting Melia welcomed his efforts to repair damage. "When we first started, we had a story to tell," Melia said. "That brand has been damaged to a point I hope is not irreparable. I know I can restore trust with the donors."

Also on Melia’s to-do list, if he is brought back to the charity, is identify how much money WWP has granted to partner charities and which ones. Melia said the organization was not fully transparent about where donor money was going. But charities such as The Elizabeth Dole Foundation and The Mission Continues praised WWP for its work and directors at both organizations said they were not concerned that their donor base would be affected. "It's not a pretty scenario for Wounded Warrior Project but I don't think it spills over to other organizations in the veterans space ," said Spencer Kympton, executive director at the Mission Continues. "Their goal is to empower as many wounded warriors as they can for as long as they can and I think they are making the tough decisions they need to make."

Kympton said WWP staff who work with his organization seemed excited about the opportunities this might bring. "I think they recognize there is an opportunity to do that in a new way or an evolved way and the folks I spoke to are excited about that," he said.

Still, donors are watching carefully. A&W Restaurants, which has raised more than $550,000 for WWP since 2013 with its annual National Root Beer Float Day, said it too is encouraged by the actions WWP has taken since the allegations came to light. But a spokeswoman also acknowledged the company is paying close attention. "We do not anticipate making a change in charity partners for our upcoming National Root Beer Float Day celebration on Aug. 6," Sarah Blasi, A&W's director of marketing, said in a statement to Stars and Stripes. "However, we are, of course, keeping a close eye on public sentiment following this situation." In the small world of veterans charities, everyone is watching -- even organizations without direct ties to WWP. "It's something we take very seriously ," said David Coker, president of the Fisher House Foundation. "Anytime there's bad press about an organization you are of course concerned about how it may impact your operations."

Melia and others have criticized Wounded Warrior Project for not being more explicit about why it chose to remove Nardizzi and Giordano. But White, who wrote a book about donor intent, said it ultimately doesn't matter whether the board believes Nardizzi took the organization in the wrong direction or simply needed to calm spiralling confidence in the brand. Something needed to be done. "There's no way to predict it, but if they don't get out ahead of this ... in some real way, very quickly, they will lose donor support and it will be a death spiral," White said. "It's going to be hard. It's going to take more than homilies to bring it back."  [Source:  Stars and Stripes | Dianna Cahn | March 20, 2016 ++]

WWII Vets 104  ►  George Winters & Gunter Buhrdorf

On his first night in his assisted-living home, Gunter Buhrdorf ate dinner with another World War II soldier. He was, for the second time in his life, a stranger in a new land. The assisted-living facility staff gave him the open seat at George Williams’s four-person table. They hoped the men, veterans only several years apart in age, would get along. But Buhrdorf, now 90, was reluctant to share wartime stories with his new dining companion. Yes, the men were both veterans. But they had fought on opposite sides. Buhrdorf imagined it would be awkward to explain to Williams, who had been a bomb-dropping Allied pilot in Germany, that he had manned antiaircraft guns for the Nazis. So he decided, at first, to say nothing.

Then one evening in spring 2013, several weeks after Buhrdorf’s arrival, a few of the men were sitting in the lobby at Commonwealth Assisted Living Facility at Christiansburg swapping stories, as they tended to do many evenings. Williams began reminiscing about the war and flying under heavy German flak fire. Buhrdorf hesitated. Did he tell
his new friends about his own role in the war fighting for Hitler’s army? Would they still treat him the same? “I was a little bit nervous . . . maybe they don’t know this, and if I open up, then maybe they’ll change their tune,” Buhrdorf said, his German accent faded but still distinct. But the veteran’s desire to tell his story overcame his trepidation. He spoke for almost 45 minutes, divulging details of his wartime experience.

George Williams, left, and Gunter Burhdorf, WWII veterans who fought on opposite sides became friends at their assisted living facility in Virginia.

He was only 14 years old when he joined the German army in 1939, he began. His father was a Republican in local government, and they hadn’t supported Adolf Hitler’s rise. Fighting for Germany was for love of country, not its leader, he said. During the war, the Germans didn’t advertise what was happening to the Jewish people and others in the concentration camps. Buhrdorf remembers the moment, in August 1945 after the war ended, when he first read a newspaper account of the horror that had unfolded. “Why? Why do that?” he recalled thinking then of Hitler. “You turned the whole world against us.” As a teenager, Buhrdorf manned 20 millimeter antiaircraft guns, but life still felt relatively calm until the United States arrived. “When America got into the war, that’s when things changed. The bombings changed, the size of the attacking force was increased from 50 to 500,” Buhrdorf said. Bremen, the northwestern town where his family lived, was leveled.

At 18, Buhrdorf was put in charge of a crew of foreign laborers tasked with building Hitler’s ambitious submarine fleet. They were prisoners, but they were also his men, and Buhrdorf said he saw to it that they were fed. “Hitler wouldn’t have liked that,” he said. “That was not to be advertised during the war.” He also knew that the men were privately organizing in their own native tongues to build the submarines poorly in an attempt to sabotage the German mission. There was little he could do about it. When the raid alarms would sound, Buhrdorf said, they’d sometimes sleep in the torpedo tubes.

In April 1945, the British captured Bremen. Buhrdorf was at that point fighting with the infantry against Russian attacks. He suffered one injury on his retreat back west: A three-inch-long piece of shrapnel, from a mortar shell, clipped him about two inches below his shoulder on his back when he was dodging enemy fire. It’s his only physical battle scar. Buhrdorf was taken to a British internment camp on a small island off the coast of England. His clothes were covered with lice, and the food he was given consisted of watered-down cabbage soup. He found dandelions, sea gull eggs and frog legs to eat instead. There wasn’t much left of Germany after the war, so Buhrdorf joined his
brothers, who were already living in America. On his flight over in 1949, he sat in the back of the DC-6 airliner drinking Canadian Club whisky with a group of Norwegians. They dared him to ask a pretty girl sitting up front to dance with him. So he did, and they slow-waltzed on the plane to music playing over the speakers.

When they deplaned, photographers were waiting by the gate. He waved at them, thinking they were there to greet the foreign visitors. But his brother laughed at him. They were there to capture Hollywood starlet Gloria DeHaven, who was returning from a USO show overseas. Dancing with the actress was his first introduction to America. He was promised accelerated citizenship if he enlisted in the U.S. Army. Less than two years later, not yet a citizen, he was sent to Korea to fight on behalf of the country that less than a decade before he’d fought against. “I came to America after seeing all the misery, all the ruins. It was such a calamity that there was absolutely no hope of being happy, as you might say,” he said. “There was nothing.” In the years after the war, millions of Germans left the country, both forcibly and voluntarily. Tens of thousands of them, like Buhrdorf, came to America.

Thomas Childers, a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania who has written several books about World War II, said Germans were by and large welcomed warmly. Most Americans didn’t know much about the Holocaust yet, nor did many Germans, and Americans’ residual wartime vitriol was directed at the Japanese because of the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Some of the new immigrants, served in Korea, like Buhrdorf, to gain their U.S. citizenship. Those who work with the elderly and veterans said they had never heard of two wartime enemies connecting as seniors living in the same facility. “It’s inspiring to see that two men are able to put aside any past conflicts from their youth to bond and form a friendship that may not have occurred anywhere else,” said Greg Crist, senior vice president public affairs at the National Center for Assisted Living. “It is unique.”

As Buhrdorf told the men his story in 2013, Williams nodded empathetically. “You’ve seen a lot. You have experienced a lot,” he said to Buhrdorf. When Buhrdorf finished, Williams extended his hand. Buhrdorf took it. “Let bygones be bygones,” Buhrdorf recalls saying. It helped that Williams had quickly deduced that he had flown his American B-24 Liberator well above the range of Buhrdorf’s antiaircraft guns. “Over there, the thing was, we were bombing from 25,000 feet, and what I was interested in was how high his artillery pieces would reach,” Williams, now 96, said. “And the ones he was shooting would go to 10,000 feet. He couldn’t reach me. As soon as I found out how high he could reach, I knew he wasn’t the one trying to hit us. But anything we dropped could have hit him.” By October 1944, all-able bodied German soldiers were shifted to the infantry to fight, and Buhrdorf was stationed on the eastern front defending against Russian attacks. So it was unlikely — although not impossible — that he would have come under fire from Williams in those final, bloody battles.

Just before Christmas, Williams and Buhrdorf met in the home’s library one afternoon. Williams came in with his girlfriend, whom he’d met in an elevator a few years ago. He scooted his wheelchair closer to Buhrdorf’s seat. “Come to me, my love,” Buhrdorf sang teasingly. “Ok, that’s close enough,” he said as Williams tapped Buhrdorf affectionately on his inner arm. If they had crossed paths during the war, “he would have lost,” Buhrdorf chided. Williams missed the joke. He is deaf in one ear, likely the result of the explosions during the war, his doctors have told him. He flew 25 missions with a crew of 10 men, he said, and they all survived. When the war ended, he flew them home safely in the same plane they flew over in, which was rare. It’s a fact Williams repeats several times. “I went in after he did, but the thing with me is I didn’t get a scratch,” Williams said. “And I got everything I wanted. I got to fly the plane I wanted, I got to become a pilot. Everything worked for me, and nothing seemed to work for him, because he was really banged up.”

Just outside the library and down a hallway, the assisted-living home features a “Wall of Valor,” adorned with photos of the veterans there in their wartime uniforms. The black-and-white head shots of Williams and Buhrdorf hang beside each other. “I had a wonderful life,” Buhrdorf said. “Now I sit here by the fireplace and exchange what could have happened.” [Source: Washington Post | Colby Itkowitz | January 6, 2016 ++]
Obit: Robert Jones ➤ 16 MAR 2016

Robert Jones, a lifelong Newport News resident who received the Navy Cross for his actions aboard the USS Intrepid in World War II, died 16 MAR at age 90. Mr. Jones died “peacefully in his home,” a family member told the Daily Press. He made news in 1997 when he received the Navy Cross — the military's second-highest award for valor, behind only the Medal of Honor — more than 50 years after the feats that earned it at one of the largest battles in naval history. In an era when African-Americans were mostly relegated to non-combat positions, Mr. Jones was a Steward's Mate Third Class aboard the aircraft carrier Intrepid when it came under Japanese kamikaze attack in the Battle of Leyte Gulf on Oct. 29, 1944. According to the Military Times database, Mr. Jones and the other "brave sailors of Gun Tub 10 maintained their duty stations until the enemy plane crashed into their position killing 10 men and badly burning the others."


Mr. Jones initially received a Bronze Star, but in 1997 was upgraded to the Navy Cross, which was pinned on him by Secretary of the Navy John Dalton, witnessed by U.S. Sens. John Warner and Chuck Robb and U.S. Rep. Bobby Scott. "That meant the world to him," said Debra Knight, one of Mr. Jones' six children. "He was just speechless that he had finally gotten the medal that he was due." Shortly after he received his Navy Cross in 1997, Mr. Jones spoke to a Daily Press reporter about the men who died on the Intrepid, and the possibility of any military member sacrificing his or her life in the line of duty. "Sometimes you have to," Mr. Jones said in 1997. "Sometimes a man will lose his life to save another man. … Sometimes it is 'kill or be killed.' You take an oath to protect your country, and that is an oath you take before God."

His daughter said she and her siblings grew up hearing World War II stories from their father, particularly about the day of the deadly kamikaze attack. "He told that story over and over to us," Debra Knight said. "I think he wanted it to convey respect for his country and duty for his country." Knight said her father, after leaving the Navy, worked as a nurse at the hospital at Fort Monroe and later as an international longshoreman. Mr. Jones was preceded in death by his wife, Minnie Jones; his brothers Joseph and Willie Preston Jones; and a son, Robert Jones Jr. He is survived by five children: Ronald Lee Jones, Shirley Debrew, Barbara Bowser, David Jones and Debra Knight. He had several grandchildren and great-grandchildren. A memorial service is planned at New Hope Baptist Church in Hampton.

[Source: Daily Press | Mike Holtzclaw | March 21, 2016 ++]

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Obit: Santiago Jesus Erevia ➤ 22 Mar 2016

Medal of Honor recipient Santiago Jesus Erevia, a Vietnam veteran described as “a silent hero” of the Vietnam War, died 22 MAR in San Antonio. Erevia, retired from the U.S. Postal Service, received the nation’s highest award for
valor from President Obama in a White House ceremony two years ago. His death at 70 from a heart attack came as a shock to fellow Medal of Honor recipient Patrick Brady, a retired two-star Army general who was expecting to see Erevia at a dinner Tuesday night in New York. “He was a very, very modest, very, very decent person and his wife must be just devastated,” said Brady, 79, of New Braunfels. “He was kind of taken by all the publicity and everything that went on. He was very humble about it. “Like most of them, they don’t believe they really deserve it and then they get all that attention and it just kind of overwhelmed him a little bit.”

Former Spc. 4 Santiago Erevia holds his service medals and awards prior to receiving the Congressional Medal of Honor

Bexar County Veterans Service Officer Queta Marquez announced Erevia’s death, calling him “an American hero from our community and a hero to our country” who “epitomized selfless service and bravery.” Retired Army Maj. Gen. Alfredo Valenzuela, 68, of San Antonio and a former commander of U.S. Army South, called him “a very silent hero.” Erevia was among 77 living Medal of Honor recipients and one of 258 from the Vietnam War. With his death, only two recipients who enlisted in the military from Texas remain alive — Army Sgt. 1st Class Rodela, 78, of San Antonio and Spc. Clarence Sasser, 68 of Rosharon, near Houston. Funeral arrangements are pending.

Born in Corpus Christi, Erevia picked cotton as a kid on a farm near Nordheim. He excelled in math in high school until his father made him quit during his sophomore year. “I wanted to stay in school and he said, ‘No, you can’t,’” Erevia said in the 2014 interview. “And I said, ‘OK, you’re going to have a dumb son for not being a good father.’” In the middle of a divorce, he joined the Army and went to Vietnam. Erevia was a radio operator known as a quiet, low-key GI among soldiers in his 101st Airborne Division’s Company C, 1st Battalion, 501st Infantry Regiment. All that changed on May 21, 1969. At the base of a hill after crossing a rice paddy, soldiers from the company were pinned down, outnumbered by enemy troops manning four “spider holes.” Spc. Patrick Diehl was cut down after telling the men he would clear the bunkers. Stunned, Erevia turned to Diehl and said, “You OK?” “He never answered me,” Erevia told the Express-News in a 2014 interview. Soldiers said Spc. Erevia picked up two M-16 rifles, approached one enemy position and fired into it with both, then reloaded under fire and continued his sweep. No one could believe it was the unassuming soldier they knew as Jesse.

Richard Laraway, 67, of San Antonio, who was then a sergeant, credits Erevia with saving his life, said “He was just a quiet person. When this happened, we all looked at each other and said, ‘Who the hell was that?’ and somebody said, ‘That's Jesse.’” That's Jesse? “If you said hello to him, he said hello back. If not, you never heard from him.” An officer nominated Erevia for the Medal of Honor, but he got the Distinguished Service Cross instead, the nation’s second-highest decoration for valor. The subject of why that happened came up repeatedly at reunions. The story might have ended there, but some in Congress, suspecting prejudice might have caused denial of Medal of Honor requests from World War II, Korea and Vietnam, ordered a review of Jewish and Hispanic veterans’ war records. When a Pentagon panel completed its study, Erevia and Rodela were among 24 men who were selected for the medal.

Erevia’s comrades believed the unpopularity of the war and the fact that he survived the battle played into the decision to award the DSC — not prejudice. Most recipients are awarded the Medal of Honor posthumously. “When you look at his life,” said Valenzuela, “he seems to have been a very modest American from Hispanic heritage that just said, ‘I got something that should have been shared amongst everyone else, but I’ll take what I have,’” and then he
just moved on in life.” Gordon McGowan (a squad leader that day) said of the medal, “He deserved everything he got,” adding that Erevia saved as many as a half-dozen men. “It’s too bad it came so much later.”

Published:  [Source: San Antonio Express-News | Sig Christenson | March 23, 2016 ++]

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Obit: Jimmy Keep ► 20 Mar 2016

Jimmy Keep died 20 MAR. He was 89. He served the United States Marine Corps during WWII and was believed to have one of the longest combat tours on the island of Iwo Jima. He and a fellow Marine were called “rain walkers” by the other Marines in their unit because the two could walk through a hail of bullets and come out without a scratch. The Marines said if they could do that, they could probably walk through the pouring rain without getting wet. Jimmy was a reconnaissance Marine, and recalled several close brushes with death. One such encounter was in a Japanese tunnel where an entire squad of Japanese soldiers was waiting. How he managed to escape unharmed baffled Jimmy, but he kept fighting, saying, “You complete your mission, or you die. There’s nothing more to it.”

According to his son he had really wanted to make it to his 90th birthday on June 13th, but it wasn't meant to be. He was a young seventeen-year-old when his father signed for him to join the marines in June of 1943. He was considered the most combat-experienced marine of WWII living in America. His combat experience was the stuff of movies and legends. Like most WWII vets, he never considered himself a hero; he said the real heroes were the ones who never came back. This past year all of this caught up with him after Diane Hight and the Forever Young organization discovered him and honored him with a return trip to Iwo Jima.

According to his son he was a 60-year retired member of Local 474 IBEW: a skilled electrician who worked on many major projects over the years here in Memphis. Dad was proud of his union membership and boasted that he had never knowingly voted against his union in any election. He was eagerly anticipating voting this November for our first woman President. Too bad they don't take absentee ballots in heaven. Daddy was a generous man. Having grown up poor during the Great Depression and fought the war, he could not tolerate cheap people and bullies. He loved his dogs...always, always had a dog...He wanted to write his own obituary a few years ago but never got around to it. So, here it is.

Although he was born in Orlando, FL on June 13, 1926, he was raised in Memphis and grew up mainly in old South Memphis. He had two sisters—long ago gone— and one brother, John, to whom he was close; he is also deceased. He was raised by his paternal grandmother and her scandalous boyfriend John Walford Lindsey. He has forever considered “Daddy Walford” his father, adored the man. His real father was Benjamin James Keep and his mother, who he never knew and died in his early childhood, was Ruth Bach Keep. He married Helen Patterson and had two children, Mickey Keep and Teresa Ann Keep Harris Reeves, who died thirteen years ago. His first wife also died.
thirteen years ago. His second wife, Audrey, whom he adored, died four years ago. He had 5 grandchildren and many great-grandchildren.

Daddy knew his baseball. He hated the interleague play with a passion and hated the designated hitter rule. He was a true sports fan and knew his three major sports in and out, especially the Memphis Grizzlies, and especially his new-found hero, Zach Randolph. Old Dude also never missed a Memphis Tiger football game, through thick and thin, mostly thin. Daddy's true love, of course, was golf. He had a hole-in-one, finally, when he was in his seventies. Took him long enough. He had the worst swing of anyone you could imagine. He played with the same group of guys, all younger than him, for over forty years. He had faults. And I won't mention them. And shortcomings. But I promised I wouldn't list them here, so I won't. He hated those obituaries that said all the usual flowery stuff about the dearly departed and begged me not to have anything like that written about him...not to worry, Daddy.

A converted Catholic, he never gave up his religion and was grateful for his early relationships with old-time priests like Monsignor Harold Shea at old St. Thomas parish where he was an early member. Daddy was also crazy about my wife, Denise Keep, who loved him dearly. He mostly loved her for her cooking. "Papaw" will also be missed by her two children, Ben and Hannah Purvis, to whom he was so generous and for whom they are so grateful. Our home will not be the same without him. Thanks Brittany and Yolanda of Crossroads Hospice Care for your especially loving tender kindness. We're gonna miss Old Dude. I already do.

[Source: http://www.memorialparkfuneralandcemetery.com/obituaries/Malcolm-Keep/#!/Obituary | March 22, 2016 ++]

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Obit: Gilbert Horn ➤ 27 MAR 2016

Gilbert Horn Sr., a decorated World War II veteran honored for his service as a Native American code talker, died Sunday at the Northern Montana Care Center in Havre. He was 92. Horn was born May 12, 1923, to Melvina and Jesse Iron Horn Sr., on the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation in Montana. At the age of 17, he enlisted in the U.S. Army and became a member of the 163rd Infantry Battalion. Horn received specialized training in communications and encryption, then volunteered for special duty as a code talker, using his native Assiniboine Tribe language skills to disguise U.S. military communications during the war against the Japanese. In 1943, Horn volunteered for assignment with “Merrill’s Marauders,” a deep penetration unit under the command of Maj. Gen. Frank Merrill. During five months of field operations in Burma and western China, Merrill’s Marauders completed an 800-mile trek across the Himalaya Mountains on a mission to cut Japanese communications and supply lines ahead of a planned joint U.S.-China attack.

Gilbert Horn Sr. served with the 5207th Composite Unit, also known as Merrill’s Marauders, during their raids in May 1944
Horn was one of fewer than 1,200 men who survived the campaign, and was wounded in the chest, back and jaw before finally being evacuated. He is a recipient of both the Bronze Star and a Purple Heart, and is recognized along with all the members of Merrill’s Marauders by a Distinguished Unit Citation for “gallantry, determination and esprit de corps in accomplishing its mission under extremely difficult and hazardous conditions.” Following his discharge from the U.S. Army, Horn returned to the Fort Belknap Indian Reservation. In addition to assuming duties on his grandparents’ farm, Horn served as a member on the Fort Belknap Community Council for 19 years, wrote the first regulations for the Fort Belknap Tribal Juvenile Court, lobbied in Washington, D.C., for a new tribal health clinic and served as chairman of the Rocky Mountain Region of the National Congress of American Indians.

In 2013, MSU-Northern awarded Horn an honorary doctorate in humanitarian services. One year later he was named honorary chief of the Fort Belknap Assiniboine Tribe, a title not previously awarded since the 1890s. A new early learning center on the Fort Belknap Reservation has been named in Horn’s honor. Horn, aka Shunk Ta Oba Kni or Returns With A Prisoner Horse, is survived by 11 children, 37 grandchildren and nearly 90 great- and great-great-grandchildren. He was interred at the family cemetery east of Fort Belknap Agency on 30 MAR. [Source: Great Falls (Montana) Tribune | David Murray | March 30, 2016 ++]

Retiree Appreciation Days  ► As of 29 Mar 2016

Retiree Appreciation Days (RADs) are designed with all veterans 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. The current updated schedule for 2016 is available at:

- HTML: http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.html
- PDF: http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.pdf
- Word: http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.doc

Note that this schedule has been expanded to include dates for retiree\veterans related events such as town hall meetings, resource fairs, stand downs, etc. To get more info about a particular event, mouseover or click on the event under Event Location. (NOTE: Attendance at some events may require military ID, VA enrollment or DD214. "@" indicates event requires registration\RSVP.) For more information call the phone numbers indicated on the schedule of the Retirement Services Officer (RSO) sponsoring the RAD.

To quickly locate events in your geographic area just click on the appropriate State\Territory\Country listed at the top of the schedule. They will look like this:

AK  AL  AR  AS  AZ  CA  CO  CT  DC  DE  FL  GA  GU  HI  IA  ID  IL  IN  KS  KY  LA  MA  MD  ME  MI  MN  MO  MS  MT  NC  ND  NE  NH  NJ  NM  NV  NY  OH  OK  OR  PA  PR  RI  SC  SD  TN  TX  UT  VA  VI  VT  WA  WI  WV  WY  Belgium  Germany  Italy  Japan  Korea  Netherlands  Thailand

[Source: RAD List Manager | Milton Bell | March 29, 2015 ++]
Vet Hiring Fairs ► 01 thru 30 Apr 2016

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 you should click on the city next to the date in the below list. To participate, sign up for the workshop in addition to registering (if indicated) for the hiring fairs which are shown below for the six weeks. For more information about the USCC Hiring Our Heroes Program, Military Spouse Program, Transition Assistance, GE Employment Workshops, Resume Engine, etc. visit the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s website at http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes/events.

Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst, NJ - Transition Summit  Details  Register
April 7 - 10:00 am to April 8 - 4:00 pm

McLean, VA - DC Military Spouse Networking Reception  Details  Register
April 12 - 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm

Washington, DC - Hiring Expo with Washington Wizards  Details  Register
April 13 - 10:15 am to 3:00 pm

Patrick Air Force Base, FL - Military Spouse Event  Details  Register
April 14 - 10:30 am to 1:30 pm

Orlando, FL - Orlando Hiring Fair  Details  Register
April 16 - 8:30 am to 1:30 pm

San Diego, CA - San Diego Military Community Transition Summit  Details  Register
April 20 - 4:00 pm to April 21 - 4:00 pm

New York, NY - New York City Hiring Fair  Details  Register
April 21 - 8:30 am to 1:30 pm

Arlington, TX - Arlington Hiring Expo with Texas Rangers  Details  Register
April 25 - 9:30 am to 2:00 pm

Fort Bragg, NC - Fort Bragg Transition Summit  Details  Register
April 27 to April 28

Arlington, VA - Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall Senior Leadership Networking Reception  Details  Register
April 28 - 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm

[Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Assn March 30, 2016 ++]

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Veteran State Benefits & Discounts ► Nebraska 2016

The state of Nebraska 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 – NE” for an overview of the below those benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the following refer to https://veterans.nebraska.gov & http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/nebraska.html.

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


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12 February

* Vet Legislation *

**USFSPA & Divorce Update 24 ► Repeal Public Law 97-252**

It is now estimated that over 200,000 of our Career Military members are currently subject to monthly garnishment under the provision of the Uniformed Services Former Spouses' Protection Act (Public Law 97-252). At the time of marriage, no one ever expects to become divorced. However, the fact of the matter is that over 50 percent of American marriages end in a divorce. The percentage of military members becoming divorced is even higher and still growing. The USFSPA has been a cause of military suicides. In the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “USFSPA | The Great Betrayal” is a non-legal discussion will preponderantly show beyond an iota of a shadow of doubt that military retired pay is NOT any type of divisible “pension”. Each member of the seven (7) Uniformed Services needs to know about the unconstitutional taking of retired military pay by State Divorce Courts as “jointly earned” community property. Knowledge of what they are facing could dissuade those contemplating divorce to explore other avenues to solve their marital problems. In the interim, those who disagree with the Public Law 97-252 are requested to write their Legislators and ask them to submit a bill that would repeal or modify the current law. [Source: TREA New York | Robert Balick March 15, 2016 ++]
Senior executives at the Veterans Affairs Department would not receive bonuses in fiscal 2017 under a major House spending bill unveiled on 22 MAR. A provision in the fiscal 2017 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations bill prohibits the department from using any funds in the legislation for senior executives’ performance awards. It’s the first time the language has been included in the base MilCon-VA spending bill. An amendment banning bonuses for all VA senior executives was successfully added to the fiscal 2016 MilCon-VA legislation, but was not included in the eventual omnibus package Congress had to pass at the end of last year to avoid a government shutdown. There have been other legislative efforts over the past few years to limit or prohibit VA’s senior executive corps from receiving annual performance awards, which they are eligible for under Title 5.

The House Military Construction and VA Appropriations Subcommittee was scheduled to mark up the legislation on 23 MAR. The press release accompanying news of the fiscal 2017 MilCon-VA bill said the legislation included the VA senior executive bonus ban “to stop taxpayer funded rewards to underperforming or poorly performing employees.” But senior executives who receive a “less than fully successful” performance evaluation already cannot receive a performance award under Title 5. Jason Briefel, interim president of the Senior Executives Association, called on House lawmakers to “carefully review SEA's survey of VA executives to learn how their actions are contributing to a toxic atmosphere, and how they ultimately share in the responsibility for VA’s troubles filling executive leadership roles.” Briefel pointed to the more than 70 percent of the survey’s respondents who expressed frustration with, and a fear of, Congress, saying that “draconian and punitive measures that undermine the secretary’s ability to reward exemplary performance is certainly not a solution to this problem.”

The VA is seeking more flexibility in how it hires, pays and fires its senior executives. VA Secretary Bob McDonald and others have talked about the difficulty the department has had in competing for top medical talent. As of late January, nearly 30 percent of the department’s SES slots were vacant, while 70 percent of the current corps is eligible to retire immediately or will become eligible in 2016. A Nov. 11, 2015, USA Today report found that the VA paid out more than $142 million in performance-based bonuses in 2014 to senior executives and other employees despite the department’s wide-ranging management problems. At the time, the newspaper’s editorial board criticized the department for rewarding employees involved in mismanagement with bonuses. “Misbegotten bonuses are not the VA’s most vital concern, but they're a troubling sign of ongoing dysfunction,” the piece stated. “If the agency can’t even stop handing out rewards to employees implicated in scandals, prospects seem poor that it can fix its far more complex problems.”

According to the Office of Personnel Management, VA in fiscal 2014 rated just 19.1 percent of 272 senior executives (career, non-career, and limited term) in the department at the highest level, which determines performance awards. That percentage was the lowest reported government wide. Thirty-six percent of the VA’s career SES received a bonus in fiscal 2014, also the lowest percentage reported among the major agencies, according to the OPM report. The average individual performance award for career senior executives at VA in fiscal 2014 was $9,450 – among the lowest across government. [Source: GovExec.com | By Kellie | March 22, 2016 ++]
Arlington National Cemetery Update 57  ► House Approves H.R. 4337

House lawmakers overwhelmingly approved the WASP Arlington Inurnment Restoration Act on 22 MAR allowing a group of female WWII military pilots to be interred at Arlington National Cemetery, reversing Army officials’ orders. The measure, which passed by a vote of 385 to 0, comes less than a week after lawmakers grilled defense officials over the exclusion of Women Airforce Service Pilots from the well-known cemetery. Bill sponsor Rep. Martha McSally (R-AZ) praised the women as pioneers as heroes who are being unjustly barred from the memorial site.

Almost 1,100 WASPs served from 1942 to 1944, ferrying airplanes, training combat pilots and towing airborne targets. Thirty-eight died during training and support missions. Following the war, the women were denied veterans benefits and services until 1977, when Congress passed legislation retroactively granting active-duty status to WASP pilots. Advocates have blamed that delay on sexist attitudes at the time of their service. But problems have persisted. In 2002, after requests from WASPs’ families, Arlington National Cemetery approved group members for military honors and burial of ashes there. But Army officials ruled in 2015 that under existing rules the women could not be included, and once again barred cemetery space for those individuals. Last week, acting Army Secretary Pat Murphy said that new legislation from Congress would be required to fix the issue. Tuesday’s House vote is the first step in that process. A group of senators has backed similar legislation introduced there by Sens. Joni Ernst (R-IA) and Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) in their chamber, but no timeline for a possible vote has been unveiled. [Source: Military Times | Leo Shane | March 22, 2016 ++]

GI Bill Update 201  ► H.R.3016 Cuts Housing Stipend for Vet Dependents

New legislation would reduce the housing allowance for dependents using the GI Bill. That has some advocates worried. In February 2016, despite strong opposition from Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee successfully pushed the Veterans Employment, Education, and Healthcare Improvement Act through the House. The bill, H.R.3016, includes a provision that would cut the monthly housing stipend for the dependents of veterans attending school on the Post-9/11 GI Bill in half. The cuts “were necessary to offset, or pay for, other aspects of the bill,” a committee spokesman told the Military Times.

Now, just a few years after it went into effect, IAVA’s legislative director Tom Porter and his colleagues fear the Post-9/11 GI Bill is under siege. “It’s a slippery slope,” Porter said. “Once you start cutting into the Post-9/11 GI Bill, once you break this piggy bank open, it’s going to be harder and harder to put it back together again. It’s such a significant benefit. They’re going to keep coming back for it.” According to numbers provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs, the spending estimate for the Post-9/11 GI Bill for FY2016 is just over $12 billion (about 14% of
the overall FY2016 VA spending estimate of $167 billion). If, as in 2015, 100,000 children of veterans attend college on the Post-9/11 GI Bill this year, the VA would save approximately $78.3 million in FY2016 if the monthly housing allowance for dependents were cut in half. That’s roughly .64% of the Post-9/11 GI Bill spending estimate and less than .05% of the VA’s overall budget.

In an emailed statement to Task & Purpose, Republican Rep. Jeff Miller of Florida, the chairman of the House Committee Veterans’ Affairs who announced his retirement in March, argued that the money saved from the cuts would be put to better use elsewhere. “We made a decision that taxpayer dollars would be better invested in expanding benefits for widows and children of deceased troops as well as veterans’ newborn babies than what in many cases are payments that go thousands of dollars above and beyond what the housing stipend was designed to cover,” he wrote. In the same email, a House Veterans Affairs’ Committee staffer further explained the logic behind the proposed legislation. “It’s important to note that the Post-9/11 GI bill housing stipend was designed to cover housing costs—not provide thousands of dollars in extra income per year. But when it comes to post-9/11 GI Bill beneficiaries who are children of service members, in many cases the stipend is doing the latter. HR 3016 adjusts the housing stipend for this group to align the benefit more closely with actual housing costs for the average, single college-age adult.”

The staffer also referred to a 2015 report by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, which recommended that the housing stipend be cut entirely for both the children and spouses of eligible veterans. The report appears to have served as the primary basis for the House Veterans Affairs’ Committee’s assertion that the Post-9/11 GI Bill housing stipend for dependents was too generous. “[According] to the commission, a student receiving this benefit and attending New School University in 2013-2014, which reportedly had the highest room and board costs in the country, would have received more than $13,000 above the actual cost of room and board,” the staffer wrote.

According to the New School University’s website [http://www.newscc.edu](http://www.newscc.edu), the cheapest on-campus housing for the 2013-2014 school year was a triple/quad room in the 20th Street Residence in lower Manhattan, where cost per school year (nine months) was $14,500 plus a mandatory $600 meal plan. In 2013, the Post-9/11 GI Bill housing allowance for lower Manhattan was $3,258 per month for every month the student was in school. In 2014, the monthly stipend was $3,744. That means a dependent would have received roughly $31,752 from the VA for room and board had he or she attended the New School full time as an undergraduate during the 2013-2014 school year. Subtract $15,100 from $31,752 and you arrive at the “thousands of dollars in extra income per year” Miller referred to in his email.

But what if the student in question didn’t live in on-campus housing, as many don’t? In New York City the average monthly rent for a one-bedroom apartment was $2,995 in 2014, according to real estate site Zumper. Now, multiply $2,995 by nine months and what do you get? $26,955. That’s $4,797 less than the $31,752 a dependent would receive for room and board from the VA if he or she was attending the New School — and that $26,955 doesn’t cover other living essentials, like food and subway cards. We must also consider the fact that the Post-9/11 GI Bill’s tuition cap for private schools in New York is just under $22,000 per year — the exact tuition cost for the New School per semester. If the student is awarded the Yellow Ribbon scholarship, the remaining balance on the annual tuition is almost covered. If not, each school year will put the student about $22,000 deeper into debt.

The point of all this is to demonstrate that Miller’s claim that veteran dependents are making “thousands of dollars in extra income per year” off the Post-9/11 GI Bill is, to some extent, misleading, even given their own example of the New School in New York City, which is hardly analogous to the average college experience. Still, one could argue, as Miller does, that the taxpayer money being spent on monthly housing stipends for dependents could be better spent on veterans elsewhere. But that argument seems to overlook the fact that in a situation where a dependent isn’t able to afford full college tuition, room, and board, the financial burden is simply being transferred from the taxpayer back to the veteran, whom, of course, the GI Bill was created to help in the first place. “Some people will say, ‘Oh, this doesn’t impact the service member or the spouse,’ said Porter of IAVA. “But if you ask me, does the education
of my child affect me and my wife? It absolutely does. Although it affects the dollars that go to the child, it affects the entire military family.”

According to numbers provided by IAVA, nearly a million spouses and dependents have used the Post-9/11 GI Bill since 2010. And despite the multibillion dollar price tag, most Americans would probably agree that’s a good thing. After all, that money was earned by people who served our country honorably during a time of war, oftentimes at the expense of pursuing higher education themselves. Of course, there’s also a bigger benefit to society as a whole. When IAVA pushed for the Post-9/11 Veterans Education Assistance Improvements Act of 2010, which made it possible for veterans to transfer benefits, it did so knowing that for many potential and currently serving military personnel, the GI Bill has a powerful appeal. “People join the military for different reasons,” Porter said. “Some to be a patriot. Some to travel. But many join because, hey, this is my way to get an education, or, hey, this is a way to get an education for my child or spouse.”

Right now, a service member is given the option of transferring his or her Post-9/11 GI Bill to a spouse or dependent upon reaching their six year mark, at which point they must extend for an additional four years. Porter said he fears that if the value of that benefit is reduced, as it will be if H.R.3016 is successfully pushed through the Senate, fewer service members will opt to make careers of the military at that crucial six year juncture when many are debating whether to stay in or get out. But as our military footprint overseas continues to dwindle, is Congress beginning to reform and reduce the GI Bill as a ‘wartime’ benefit? “We still have service members in Iraq and Afghanistan right now,” Porter said. “And they’re going to be there for the foreseeable future. We have to be able to keep our promises to them, and not let up, even as those wars end up in the rearview mirror for some people.” [Source: Task & Purpose | Adam Linehan | March 16, 2016 ++]

Servicemember Loans ► Bill To Limit Interest Rates | 3% Cap

A proposal to limit interest rates on all troops' loans to 3 percent would offer unprecedented sweeping new benefits to service members if it became law. Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) introduced the SCRA Enhancement and Improvement Act of 2016 on 17 MAR, proposing stronger and more far-reaching financial legal protections under an amended Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act. Under the current SCRA, service members are supposed to receive a 6 percent interest rate cap on debts incurred before they enter active duty. That applies to loans service members took out either before they joined the military on active duty, or before they are called to active duty as a Guard or Reserve member. Sen. Patty Murray

The legislation proposed 17 MAR would require all loans to service members be capped at a 3 percent interest rate, regardless of when the debt is incurred. For service members who are eligible for hostile fire pay or imminent danger pay, the interest rate would be zero. If this legislation becomes law, it could mean that service members could not be charged more than 3 percent for any loan, including mortgages and credit cards. The proposed legislation would have to move through a number of steps before becoming law and some observers say it is a long shot. “I’m sure this is well-intended, but the rate seems awfully low,” said one representative of an organization that advocates for the military community. While the organization is supportive of benefits for service members, requiring a 3 percent ceiling
on interest rates could lead to military members being unable to obtain loans or credit cards, he said. But that wouldn't be a problem under Murray's bill, contends Murray spokeswoman Kerry Arndt. She said the bill would prohibit lenders from denying credit because of eligibility for SCRA protections, so service members wouldn't see any reduction in access to credit and they would be protected from predatory and unfair practices.

Murray, the top Democrat on the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee and a senior member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, said that businesses haven't always honored Servicemembers' Civil Relief Act protections, and the law needs to be strengthened. The most recent example is student loan servicers who overcharged military borrowers after they were called to active duty. Some servicers did not reduce the rates to 6 percent. “In recent years, we’ve seen our service members subjected to predatory practices and unfair treatment on several fronts, from overcharges on their student loans, to foreclosures on their homes when they’re deployed. That is simply unacceptable,” Murray said in a statement announcing the proposed changes.

The legislation would require student loan servicers of federally guaranteed student loans to automatically apply the interest rate cap, and provide timely responses to inquiries. The servicers would also be required to have a designated service representative or point of contact for service members and ensure that these staff are properly trained. If a service member dies in the line of duty, federal and private student loan debt would be forgiven. The proposed legislation includes some other expanded protections — including prohibiting prepayment penalties if a mortgage is paid off early for reasons related to a permanent change-of-station move. It would also allow service members to cancel contracts on cable TV and Internet services in the event of permanent change-of-station moves. Currently, similar protections are offered for residential and auto leases and cellphone contracts. [Source: Military Times | Karen Jowers | March 18, 2016 ++]

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Gulf War Syndrome Update 39 ➤ Legislative Catch-22 Elimination

A lawmaker on 15 MAR suggested Congress may have to redraft part of the initial legislation authorizing the Veterans Affairs Department to grant claims compensation to Persian Gulf War veterans suffering from multi-symptom ailments that make up Gulf War illness. Responding to testimony showing the VA has denied compensation to more than 90 percent of veterans claiming Gulf War illness, Rep. Ann McLane Kuster (D-NH) said it was not Congress' intent to require VA accept an undiagnosed multi-symptom disorder as a condition. "We created this Catch-22," Kuster said during a joint hearing of the Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs and Oversight and Investigations subcommittee. "It sounds like an unintended consequence of what we were trying to do to help Gulf War veterans … They had multi-symptoms and we didn't have the science and the words” to properly describe what we wanted VA to do.

Gulf War veterans and advocates say that 90 percent or more Gulf War veterans who apply for compensation for Gulf War Illness are turned down. VA officials say veterans filing claims for Gulf War Illness may still be compensated when a particular symptom or symptoms are diagnosed and service-connected. But the compensation would be for the chronic symptom -- sinusitis or gastritis, for example -- but not for Gulf War Illness. Congress in
1994 authorized the VA to compensate Gulf War vets suffering from a chronic disability resulting from an undiagnosed -- or combination of undiagnosed illnesses -- linked to service in the Gulf War. But the result, Kuster suggests, is that VA awards claims for Gulf War Illness when symptoms cannot be diagnosed. She suggested the committee could urge VA Secretary Bob McDonald to move toward a single Disability Benefits Questionnaire (DBQ) tailored for Gulf War Illness claims. There are currently about 70 individual DBQs, according to the VA. "But we may need to also unravel the Catch-22 we created in our attempt to help Gulf War veterans," she said.

Also during the hearing lawmakers said there is a need to extend the deadline by which Gulf War veterans need file claims for benefits for undiagnosed illnesses. The deadline period is currently Dec. 31, 2016, and lawmakers want it extended by five years. David R. McLenachen, VA Deputy Under Secretary for Disability Assistance, told the panels that McDonald has the authority to extend the deadline but was unable to say if that would happen. But Ron Brown, president of the National Gulf War Resource Center, told Military.com on 15 MAR that McDonald already informed him the presumptive date would be pushed back. He said McDonald told him in a letter dated Feb. 9, 2015 that he also was concerned with the "end date" for filing. "We, once again, plan to use our existing regulatory authorities to extend the presumptive date beyond the current December 31, 2016, deadline," McDonald wrote. "This is consistent with our beliefs, our policy and our past actions." In 2011 then-VA Secretary Eric Shinseki used the same authority to extend the date -- then about to lapse -- to the end of 2016.

Rick Weidman, Executive Director for Policy and Governmental Affairs for Vietnam Veterans of America, likened the VA's treatment of Gulf War Veterans to that experienced by Vietnam veterans, who were told for years that chronic health issues were not related to exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. He said VA forces Gulf War veterans to try to link their conditions to the war when "VA knows that you cannot pin down exact cause when you have a multi-toxin environment, which is exactly what you had with the Gulf War." The VA has relied on work from the Institute of Medicine, or IOM, in deciding how to handle Gulf War Illness, and Weidman said IOM appears predisposed to seeing the illness as psychological.

During a meeting last month the IOM Gulf War panel recommended no further research into Gulf War Illness, said Weidman, who attended the meeting. He said half the member panel, along with the chair, is made up of psychologists and psychiatrists and the other by research scientists. Weidman said IOM should be conducting an epidemiology study comparing Gulf War veterans in certain military occupational specialties with troops in the same job who did not deploy to the war, as well as civilians with no military background. Brown said there has been 20 years of studies, though he does not know if one suggested by Weidman has been carried out. [Source: Military.com | Bryant Jordan | Mar 15, 2016 ++]

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PTSD Update 205 ▶ PAWS Act  H.R. 4764 | Service Dogs for Wounded Vets

Veterans with severe post traumatic stress disorder could get a service dog with help from the government under a bill introduced 16 MAR in the House. The bill H.R. 4764, dubbed the Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act, would create a five-year, $10 million pilot program to have the Department of Veterans Affairs help pair veterans suffering from PTSD with a service dog. “The PAWS Act is a simple bill that could have a dramatic – and potentially life-saving – effect on the lives of many,” Rep. Ron DeSantis (R-Fla.) said in a written statement. “As we face an epidemic of veteran suicides, we must make sure that all of our returning servicemembers are honored and taken care of, no matter the wounds they bear.” The bill is meant to help post-9/11 veterans whose previous PTSD treatment hasn’t sufficed. Under the bill, those veterans would be referred to an Assistance Dog International-accredited organization or private provider to be paired with a dog.
The VA would pay the organizations for the dogs, at no more than $27,000 per dog. The VA would also provide the veterans with veterinary health insurance for their dogs. In turn, the veterans would have to see a VA physician or mental health care provider at least quarterly. “Thousands of our post-9/11 veterans carry the invisible burden of post-traumatic stress, and there is an overwhelming need to expand the available treatment options,” DeSantis said. “The VA should use every tool at their disposal to support and treat our veterans, including the specialized care offered by service dogs.” The bill is co-sponsored by Republican Reps. Mike Bishop (MI) Bradley Byrne (AL), Renee Ellmers (NC), Bill Flores (TX), Tom Rooney (FL), Keith Rothfus (PA), Matt Salmon (AZ.), Elise Stefanik (NY), Martha McSally (AZ), Mark Meadows (NC), Richard Nugent (FL) and Randy Weber (TX), and Democratic Reps. Tulsi Gabbard (HI), Hank Johnson (GA) and Kyrsten Sinema (AZ). [Source: The Hill | By Rebecca Kheel | Mrch 16, 2016 ++]

VA Blue Water Claims Update 33   ➤  H.R.969/S.681 | Status

The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2015 (H.R. 969 and S. 681) was introduced by Representative Christopher Gibson and Senator Kristin Gillibrand, respectively. This legislation would expand presumptions for Vietnam Veterans to be awarded service connection for illnesses and diseases associated with exposure to herbicides containing dioxin, including Agent Orange. This legislation would extend eligibility to Vietnam veterans who served in the vicinity of Vietnam, including the inland waterways, ports, harbors, and waters offshore or territorial seas of Vietnam, as well as in the airspace above, during the period of war.

As of March 15, 2016, H.R. 969 has 305 cosponsors and has been referred to the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. S. 681 has 39 cosponsors and is pending before the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. DAV supports these measures, which are is in line with DAV Resolution No. 018, passed at their most recent National Convention. You can assist DAV in their effort by sending the prepared (editable) e-mails at https://www.votervoice.net/BroadcastLinks/M2J2hNjcfqL7FjgaUAOC1g to your legislators to seek their support for this legislation.
Also, the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association has launched a petition drive in support of this bill at https://www.change.org/p/us-house-of-representatives-give-the-vietnam-blue-water-navy-veterans-their-presumptive-rights?recruiter=174924799&utm_source=share_petition&utm_medium=copylink. To date it has been signed by 55,199 supporters. Readers are encouraged to add their names to this petition. [Source: DAV Voter Voice | Operation: Keep The Promise | March 17, 2016 ++]

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Vet Bills Submitted to 114th Congress ► 160316 thru 160331

Refer to this Bulletin’s “House & Senate Veteran Legislation” attachment for a listing of Congressional bills of interest to the veteran community introduced in the 114th Congress. The list contains the bill’s number and name, what it is intended to do, it’s sponsor, any related bills, and the committees it has been assigned to. 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 https://beta.congress.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 by entering the bill number in the site’s search engine. To determine what bills, amendments your representative/senator has sponsored, cosponsored, or dropped sponsorship on go to: https://beta.congress.gov/search?q=%7B%22source%22%3A%5B%22legislation%22%5D%7D. Select the ‘Sponsor’ tab, and click on your congress person’s name. You can also go to http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php.

Grassroots lobbying is the most effective way to let your Congressional representatives know your wants and dislikes. If you are not sure who is your Congressman go to https://beta.congress.gov/members. Members of Congress are 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 their phone number, mailing address, or email/website to communicate with a message or letter of your own making at either:

✔  http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm or
✔  http://www.house.gov/representatives

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

- **H.R.4700 : Merrill's Marauders Congressional Gold Medal Act.** A bill to award a Congressional gold medal to the 5307th Composite Unit (Provisional), commonly known as "Merrill's Marauders", in recognition of their bravery and outstanding service in the jungles of Burma during World War II. Sponsor: Rep King, Peter T. [NY-2] (introduced 3/3/2016)
- **H.R.4757 : Medal of Honor Recipient VA Burial Benefits.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to expand the eligibility for headstones, markers, and medallions furnished by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs for deceased individuals who were awarded the Medal of Honor and are buried in private cemeteries. Sponsor: Rep Miller, Jeff [FL-1] (introduced 3/16/2016)
- **H.R.4758 : Reserve’s Presidential Memorial Certificate Eligibility.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the award of the Presidential Memorial Certificate to certain deceased members of the reserve components of the Armed Forces and certain deceased members of the Reserve Officers’ Training Corps. Sponsor: Rep Miller, Jeff [FL-1] (introduced 3/16/2016)
- **H.R.4759 : VA State/Tribal Cemetery Burial Transportation Costs.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to pay costs relating to the transportation of
certain deceased veterans to veterans' cemeteries owned by a State or tribal organization. Sponsor: Rep Miller, Jeff [FL-1] (introduced 3/16/2016)

- **H.R.4764 : Puppies Assisting Wounded Servicemembers (PAWS) Act of 2016.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a pilot program to provide service dogs to certain veterans with severe post-traumatic stress disorder. Sponsor: Rep DeSantis, Ron [FL-6] (introduced 3/16/2016)

- **H.R.4766 : WWII Servicemen Congressional Gold Medal.** A bill to award a Congressional Gold Medal, collectively, to American military personnel who fought in defense of Bataan, Corregidor, Guam, Wake Island, and the Philippine Archipelago between December 7, 1941, and May 10, 1942, and who died or were imprisoned by the Japanese military in the Philippines, Japan, Korea, Manchuria, Wake Island, and Guam from April 9, 1942, until September 2, 1945, in recognition of their personal sacrifice and service to their country. Sponsor: Rep McKinley, David B. [WV-1] (introduced 3/16/2016)


- **H.R.4837 : S.O.S. Veterans Caregivers Act.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify that caregivers for veterans with serious illnesses are eligible for assistance and support services provided by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Ruiz, Raul [CA-36] (introduced 3/22/2016)


- **H.R.4845 : Disabled Veterans Student Loan Protection Act of 2016.** A bill to amend the student loan forgiveness program in the Higher Education Act of 1965 to include a greater number of disabled veterans and to facilitate the automatic transfer to the Secretary of Education of information regarding veterans eligible for student loan forgiveness, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Maloney, Sean Patrick [NY-18] (introduced 3/23/2016)

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

- **S.2661: ACES Act of 2016.** A bill to clarify the period of eligibility during which certain spouses are entitled to assistance under the Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Brown, Sherrod [OH] (introduced 3/10/2016) Related Bills: H.R.2531, H.R.3016.

- **S.2672 : VA non-Department health care providers Care.** A bill to reauthorize the program of the Department of Veterans Affairs under which the Secretary of Veterans Affairs provides health services to veterans through qualifying non-Department health care providers. Sponsor: Sen Collins, Susan M. [ME] (introduced 3/14/2016)

- **S.2679 : Helping Veterans Exposed to Burn Pits Act.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish within the Department of Veterans Affairs a center of excellence in the prevention, diagnosis, mitigation, treatment, and rehabilitation of health conditions relating to exposure to burn pits. Sponsor: Sen Klobuchar, Amy [MN] (introduced 3/15/2016)

- **S.2683 : Federal Aviation Administration Veteran Transition Improvement Act of 2016.** A bill to include disabled veteran leave in the personnel management system of the Federal Aviation Administration. Sponsor: Sen Hirono, Mazie K. [HI] (introduced 3/15/2016)


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*A Military*

A Marine Corps officer candidate breaks the surface of the Quigley, a murky water obstacle used for training, at the Officer Candidates School on Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., March 15, 2016. The candidate is assigned to Delta Company, Officer Candidates Class 221. Marine Corps

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**TERA Update 05** ➤ **Army | Authorized through FY 2018**

The Army will continue to offer separation pay for soldiers who are being forced out.

**Temporary Early Retirement Authority**

This benefit, also known as the 15-year early retirement plan, has been authorized by Congress for use during the drawdown through fiscal 2018. TERA (Temporary Early Retirement Authority) is not an entitlement, but rather an
option that to date has been limited to soldiers who are being involuntarily separated from active duty because of the drawdown, or in the case of some officers, because of promotion non-selection. Unlike the TERA option that was available during the drawdown of the 1990s, soldiers cannot volunteer for the benefit if they have not been selected for involuntary separation. TERA allows soldiers with at least 15, but fewer than 20 years of active service to receive the same benefits as those who retire with 20 or more years of service, except that their retirement pay is reduced accordingly. Army budget officials estimate that over the next two years, 923 officers will qualify for TERA, and 315 enlisted soldiers as the Army continues to involuntary separate soldiers in over-strength specialties and year groups.

### Involuntary Separation Pay

Soldiers who fail to qualify for TERA, but who have six to 15 years of active service at the time they are separated, generally qualify for involuntary separation pay, provided they are not being forced out for cause, such as a courts-martial conviction. Budget officials estimate that during the next two years, about 11,400 enlisted soldiers and 2,654 officers will receive involuntary separation pay. There are two types of involuntary separation pay:

- **Half Severance Pay** – for soldiers who are not fully qualified for retention, and who have been denied re-enlistment or continuation, such as under the Qualitative Management Program. The payment is calculated by multiplying 5 percent of a soldier’s basic pay at the time of separation by years and partial years of active service.

- **Full Severance Pay** – for enlisted soldiers and officers who are fully qualified for retention, but who are denied re-enlistment or continuation. The payment is calculated by multiplying 10 percent of a soldier’s basic pay at the time of separation by years and partial years of active service.

### Severance Pay for Disability
For officers and enlisted soldiers with less than 20 years of service who are discharged from active duty because of a physical disability rated at less than 30 percent. Payments are based on complex formulas described in the provisions of Title 10 of the U.S. Code. Army budget projections indicated that about 10,600 enlisted soldiers and nearly 200 officers will receive these benefits in 2016 and 2017 combined. On average, enlisted soldiers will receive $35,000, and officers $86,000.

[Source: Army Times | Jim Tice | March 26, 2016 ++]

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### Military OneSource ► Proposed Availability Extension

Troops need a longer safety net of eligibility for Military OneSource’s free benefits after they leave the military, according to a defense official. “We want to extend it from 180 to 365 days to give people that pad of settling into a life, and then when you hit those barriers, circle back to Military OneSource,” said Rosemary Williams, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy. She and others briefed Acting Army Secretary Patrick Murphy, his wife, Jenni, and members of his staff about Military OneSource on Thursday. During the briefing, Williams asked Murphy to spread the word to soldiers and families about the resources available through Military OneSource. In addition, “I would respectfully invite your interest in extending” the benefit to 365 days, she said. Retired or honorably discharged troops and their family members can access the benefit for up to 180 days after separation.

Defense officials are examining if they need to seek changes in law for the expansion, said Defense Department spokesman Matthew Allen. If so, they will work with Congress to seek those changes. Officials are researching support...
Allen said. The Defense Department funds Military OneSource to provide a variety of free services to those eligible, including active duty, Guard and reserve members — regardless of their activation status — their immediate family members, surviving spouses and children, and certain others. It's available through its website or by phone at 800-342-9647.

The programs include access to free tax preparation software and tax consultation, document translation and simultaneous language interpretation services in more than 150 languages. Trained professionals offer specialty consultations by phone or online on wounded warrior issues, adoption, education, special needs, adult and elder care, peer-to-peer support, health and wellness coaching, and spouse relocation and transition. There’s a program for spouse education and employment. Military OneSource also offers free, confidential nonmedical counseling for individuals face-to-face in their community, by telephone and by secure online chat and video conference. Each person can receive up to 12 consultations per problem.

Officials have learned that troops need more time to access Military OneSource after they leave the military because not all issues come up within six months. A number of benefits they had in the military are no longer available. “Time and time again, people are shocked at what happens outside the bubble,” Williams said. For example, they may realize they don’t want to live forever in the place they have chosen, or their initial job may not be as perfect as they thought, and they need help making those adjustments. She said the cost would be small to extend Military OneSource access to 365 days for those leaving the service, but declined to be specific. But the needs for veterans are actually greater, Williams told Murphy. Asked whether there are any gaps in the services that Military OneSource provides, she said, “When a Vietnam veteran calls us and they need something we can’t provide ... that would be the gap.” Those veterans are not eligible for most of the services, although OneSource tries to refer them to other resources.

Murphy said later he plans to talk with Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald about the possible expansion. “We’re looking for ways to partner together,” he said. In 2015, there were 737,384 total contacts through Military OneSource, including calls, counseling types, online registrations, emails and coaching sessions, according to Military OneSource officials. There were about 177,000 nonmedical counseling sessions completed, including about 86,000 sessions for those associated with the Army. Consultants resolved 2,040 wounded warrior cases, including about 1,400 Army cases. More than 22,000 financial counseling sessions were completed, of which about 10,000 were provided to soldiers or their family members. "Having a one-stop source ... to call for counseling, assistance and information is critically important to families," Murphy said, noting the busy nature of military life. "The way these professionals are able to navigate and find solutions on behalf of our military families is second to none. They're really industry leaders and we're proud they're part of the Army team.”

Military OneSource is provided by the Department of Defense at no cost to Active Duty, National Guard, and Army Reserve service members (regardless of activation status), and their families. It is a virtual extension of installation services. For more info refer to http://www.militaryonesource.mil or call 800-342-9647. [Source: Military Times | Karen Jowers | March 14, 2016 ++]

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**Navy Remote Minehunting System** ➤ Acquisition Program Cancelled

The Navy has officially canceled the Remote Minehunting System acquisition program, but the AN/AQS-20A advanced minehunting sonar within the RMS program may live on in another capacity, a senior defense official told reporters 24 MAR. The Navy originally planned to buy 54 RMSs for its Littoral Combat Ship mine countermeasures mission package. It has bought 10 so far and will not award a contract to Lockheed Martin for additional vehicles, the service announced 26 FEB. Service officials said then that the Navy would upgrade most of the 10 Remote Multimission Vehicles – the unmanned vehicle at the center of RMS – and ultimately compete it against the Textron Common Unmanned Surface Vehicle (CUSV), which is already slated to join the LCS mine countermeasures package
as a minesweeping vehicle, and the General Dynamics Knifefish unmanned underwater vehicle, which will join the mission package for buried and high-clutter minehunting.

The littoral combat ship USS Independence (LCS-2) deploys a remote multi-mission vehicle (RMMV) while testing the ship’s mine countermeasures mission package (MCM).

On Thursday the senior defense official said that future Navy budget requests would contain funding lines for an unmanned vehicle to tow minehunting sonar, since the requirement for an unmanned vehicle to search for mines still exists, but decisions haven’t been made yet about what that future vehicle might be. Though the AQS-20A sonar has performed well in testing, the Navy has not formally decided if the future unmanned vehicle will tow the Q-20 or another sensor. Still, the official said it was likely that the sonar could live on. The Navy and Pentagon acquisition chief Frank Kendall are in discussions about whether the sonar would become its own program within the mine countermeasures mission package, be folded in with another existing acquisition program, or something else. There are no immediate plans to buy more sonars, the official said, giving the Navy and Defense Department time to figure out the best path forward.

The official said canceling the RMS program after just 10 vehicles saved the Navy about $750 million, though the Navy will still have to buy more vehicles eventually. The cancelation technically triggered a Nunn-McCurdy breach, since curtailing the program led the per-unit cost to spike – initial development costs were spread over 10 instead of 54 vehicles – though the official said the breach is in name only. Also in the Pentagon’s 2015 Selected Acquisition Reports, which outlined the RMS Nunn-McCurdy breach, are cost updates on several Navy shipbuilding programs. The reports include information on all acquisition costs – research and development, procurement, and program-specific military construction and operations and sustainment.

The Ford-class aircraft carrier program increased in cost by about 2.6 percent, mostly due to the addition of nearly a billion dollars in advance procurement funding for CVN-81 and $161 million in Ford Class Design for Affordability research and development investments. The report notes the increases were offset by about $252 million in efficiencies expected in the future Enterprise (CVN-80) and other cost decreases. For the Arleigh Burke-class guided missile destroyers, program costs increased primarily due to buying four more ships since the previous year. The LCS program increased in cost by about $7 billion, or 32 percent, from buying eight more ships and incorporating survivability and lethality enhancements into the frigate upgrade. On the Virginia-class submarines, cost increased about $5 billion, or 5 percent, due to buying an additional boat, adding additional Virginia Payload Modules into the planned Block V, developing an acoustic superiority program and other research and development efforts.

A second senior defense official told reporters that quantity increases do not count as cost growth – and though technically the research and development additions count as program growth, they are expected to lead to more capability or lower acquisition costs in the future and therefore do not reflect badly on the program. [Source: USNI News | Megan Eckstein | March 24, 2016 ++]
Navy Phased Modernization Program ► 2-4-6 Layup Plan

The Navy is forging ahead with sidelining its newest cruisers, announcing 24 MAR that the cruiser Chosin is shifting home ports from Hawaii to San Diego ahead of its induction into a modernization program. Chosin will depart Friday from its 25-year home in Pearl Harbor for the Golden State. The ship will be considered on deployment until July 1 when control of the boat will shift from Naval Surface Force Pacific to Naval Sea Systems Command, which oversees the construction and maintenance of the fleet, according to a SURFPAC release. Once NAVSEA takes control, the ship will slim down from a 325-person crew led by a captain to a 45-person crew led by a lieutenant commander. The Mayport, Florida.-based cruiser Vicksburg is also slated to go into layup this year. The Vicksburg and Chosin join their sister ships Cowpens and Gettysburg, which went into the so-called “phased modernization” program in 2015.

By law, the Chosin must be back in the fleet by 2021. The plan for the cruiser layups, as mandated by congress, is known as "2-4-6." It calls for two ships at a time to be sidelined for no longer than four years and that no more than six ships will be in this inactive status at one time. While Chosin is laid up, the slimmed down crews will be used for a variety tasks, SURFPAC head Vice Adm. Thomas Rowden told Navy Times in a September interview. “Those individuals can be used in a number of ways, planning for the next portion of the phased modernization,” Rowden said. “Also pursuing their qualifications, and the opportunity to get additional [Navy enlisted classifications] based on that they are working at the regional maintenance centers. They'll also be training and, because they are at the RMCs, they'll be fixing ships.” Chosin’s crew will be composed primarily from engineering and combat systems ratings, second class petty officers and up. But the crew also comprises operations specialists, yeomen and boatswain's mates.

While the Navy moves ahead with the 2-4-6 plan, it’s doubling down on its initial plan to lay up half of its 22 cruisers, bringing one fully modernized cruiser into the fleet for each cruiser it decommissions. Officials say that doing it that way means the Navy can keep the cruisers, the Navy’s primary air-defense platform, in the fleet into the 2040s. It also gives the Navy some time and space to figure out a replacement for the service’s premier surface combatant.

But lawmakers, including Rep. Randy Forbes, R-Virginia, have been skeptical of the plan because of the Navy’s recent efforts to prematurely retire the cruisers to save saving money. Forbes signaled his concern to see the Navy put forward the full plan, which lawmakers have blocked for two years. “I am particularly bothered that it seems that the Navy is being forced once again to lay up half its cruisers, breaking faith with Congress and depriving the fleet of air and missile defense capacity that is going to be in more demand than ever,” Forbes said in a February statement to Navy Times. [Source: Navy Times | David Larter | March 25, 2016 ++]
USS Minnesota (SSN-783) ► Three $2.7 Billion Subs Disabled

When the newest attack submarine returned from sea trials in March 2013, the submarine brass were giddy. The Minnesota had done well and the boat was being delivered well ahead of schedule and on budget: the Holy Grail for big defense acquisitions projects, like the $2.7 billion for each Virginia-class sub. “The tenth ship of the Virginia-class, Minnesota is scheduled to be delivered approximately one year earlier than its contract delivery date,” a Navy release read. “Starting in August of 2008 with USS New Hampshire (SSN 778), the last five boats have been delivered early, and all Virginia-class submarines currently under construction are scheduled to be delivered prior to their contract delivery dates.”

But when inspectors discovered shoddy pipe fittings welded into a hard-to-access part of the steam propulsion system, all the extra time banked from early delivery was wiped out and then some. Suddenly, one of the Navy’s golden-child programs was facing delays and expensive, unplanned repairs because of a quality control problem that is now the focus of Justice Department-led investigation. Experts said even the worst case scenario for these faulty parts — a ruptured pipe — wouldn’t be catastrophic for the crew. What’s more concerning is the lost operational time for at least three brand new attack subs at a time that demand for the m is mounting around the world.

The lousy fittings bedeviling Minnesota were also installed in subs John Warner and North Dakota, and officials say the repairs will “greatly expand” the work and length of time in the yards.

In February, former NATO commander retired Adm. James Stavridis told lawmakers that Russian undersea activity is about 70 percent to 80 percent of Cold War levels, and that more U.S. attack boats are needed to shadow them. Adm. Harry Harris, head of U.S. Pacific Command, also told lawmakers in February that the Navy was only meeting 62 percent of the requests he had made for attack submarine missions. “As far as Virginia-class submarines — it’s the best thing we have,” Harris told members of the Senate Armed Services Committee. “I can’t get enough of them and I can’t get enough of them fast enough.” Spokespeople for General Dynamics Electric Boat and Huntington Ingalls Industries declined to comment for this article, citing the ongoing investigation. Naval Sea Systems Command, which oversees submarine building, was unable to say whether faulty pipe joints have been found on more than three submarines.

From the start, Minnesota’s early delivery seemed auspicious. The brass hailed shipbuilders and the plankowner crew in May 2013, after it completed sea trials. "Minnesota's sea trials are a testament to the success of the Virginia-class program's ability to deliver high-quality and extremely capable boats early and on cost," said then-head of Submarine Group 2 Rear Adm. Ken Perry. Perhaps the foremost impact from the shoddy parts will be the the loss of sophisticated surveillance assets, one defense analyst said. “The attack boat fleet, it’s shrinking, and as a consequence, the Navy has to routinely decline missions for intel gathering and surveillance,” said Loren Thompson, an analyst with the Arlington, Virginia-based think tank Lexington Institute. “It needs to be fixed correctly and fixed fast. The majority of mission days for attack submarines are dedicated to intelligence gathering and any slow-down in the transition of submarines from the yards to the active fleet is going to impact U.S. readiness around the globe.”

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The fact that the issue is impacting what has been the Navy’s banner program is surprising, Thompson added. “The Virginia-class is the Navy's most successful program,” Thompson said. “I’ve followed complex technological systems and the things that can go wrong with them for most of my career. The Virginia-class to this point has been amazingly problem-free. And this may not turn out to be a huge problem in the end but with a program like the Virginia, any problem is going to get a lot of attention.” [Source: Navy Times | David Larter | March 28, 2016 ++]

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Admiral Denied Promotion ► Retaliated Against Whistleblowers.

The Navy has denied promotion to the admiral in charge of its elite SEAL teams, effectively ending his military career, after multiple investigations found that he had retaliated against whistleblowers. Officials said Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, under pressure from Congress, decided this week to reject Rear Adm. Brian L. Losey’s pending promotion to become a two-star admiral. Lawmakers had threatened to hold up nominations of other high-ranking Navy officials if they didn’t take action against the admiral, a prominent figure in the military’s secretive Special Operations forces.

The Washington Post reported in October that the Navy was poised to promote Losey despite findings from Pentagon investigators that he illegally demoted or punished three subordinates during a vengeful but fruitless hunt for an anonymous whistleblower who had reported him for a minor travel-policy infraction.

U.S. Navy Rear Admiral Brian L. Losey speaks at an event at the Hamramba school dedication in Moroni, Comoros,

Navy leaders began reconsidering Losey’s status in December after Sen. Ron Wyden (D-OR) blocked the nomination of Janine Davidson, a former senior Pentagon official, to become the Navy’s second-ranking civilian leader. Wyden said he didn’t have any problem with Davidson herself, but wanted to force the Navy to revisit Losey’s case, adding that promoting him would send a message that retaliating against whistleblowers was acceptable. Several other lawmakers pressured the Navy as well. In January, Sens. John McCain (R-AZ) and Jack Reed (D-RI), the chairman and ranking Democrat on the Senate Armed Services Committee, sent a joint letter to Mabus saying they had “deep reservations” about Losey’s pending promotion.

Rear Adm. Dawn Cutler, the Navy’s chief spokeswoman, confirmed that Losey’s promotion had been nixed “after further consideration” but lauded the SEAL’s long career in the military. “The failure to promote does not diminish the achievements of a lifetime of service,” she said in a statement. “While the full scope of his service may never be known, his brilliant leadership of special operators in the world’s most challenging operational environments…reflected his incredible talent, energy, and devotion to mission. There are few in this country whose contributions to national security have been more significant.” A combat veteran who has served in Iraq, Afghanistan, Panama, Bosnia and Somalia, Losey once commanded SEAL Team 6, the clandestine unit known for killing terrorist targets such as Osama bin Laden. He also once worked as a top military aide in the White House.
Wyden said he had been informed by the Navy this week that Losey will not be promoted. As a result, he said, he would remove his hold on Davidson’s nomination and support her confirmation to become the Navy’s new undersecretary. “One of the pillars of our system of government is the rule of law; a principle that applies no less to our military and to the vital principle of civilian control over the military,” Wyden said in a statement. “It is illegal to retaliate against whistleblowers, whether civilian or military.” Despite the pressure from Congress, a promotion board consisting of Navy admirals recently recommended in a majority vote that Losey be promoted anyway, according to a Pentagon official who spoke on condition of anonymity to discuss internal deliberations. The recommendation was overruled by Mabus, however, and Losey was notified 15 MAR that his promotion had been rejected, the official said.

Losey did not respond to a request for comment placed through the Navy. He has previously denied wrongdoing, telling Pentagon investigators that his staff members were poor performers and that he had acted within his authority as a commander to demote or fire them. The Navy announced on 29 FEB that Losey’s tenure as leader of the Special Warfare Command would end this spring and that he would be replaced by Rear Adm. Timothy Szymanski, the assistant commander for operations at the Joint Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg. Navy officials said at the time that no decision had been made about Losey’s future and held out the possibility that he would receive another assignment. On 18 MAR, Navy officials said Losey would submit an official request to retire.

Losey had originally been selected to become a two-star admiral in 2011 and was confirmed by the Senate. But his promotion was subsequently placed on hold after the whistleblowers filed complaints in 2012. After conducting separate, years-long investigations that involved more than 100 witnesses and 300,000 pages of email, the Defense Department Inspector General upheld complaints from three of five staff members who asserted that Losey had illegally retaliated against them. [Source: Washington Post | Craig Whitlock | March 17, 2016 ++]

Congressional Gold Medal Update 05 ► Sought for WWII Ghost Army

The American GIs who used inflatable tanks and sound effects to dupe the Nazis during World War II could be awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. Two lawmakers say the Ghost Army’s battlefield exploits in the months after D-Day deserve recognition at long last. "It is finally time that the American people recognize their ingenuity and selflessness which saved countless American and Allied lives," Rep. Peter King (R-NY) said. "They deserve their due." King and Rep. Annie Kuster (D-NH) are sponsoring the "The Ghost Army Gold Medal Act" and the bill has already picked up 30 co-sponsors, The Washington Times reported 12 MAR. A companion bill will be introduced soon in the Senate.

![Ghost Army soldier with an inflatable M4 Sherman Tank, September 1944, France](image-url)
On the front lines from Normandy to the Rhine River, the Ghost Army used inflatable tanks and aircraft, sound effects, phony radio transmissions and illusion to carry out their mission, the Times reported. The elite group, known officially as the 23rd Headquarters Special Troops, risked their lives to draw fire away from fellow GIs involved in the actual fighting, it reported. The bill comes after filmmaker Rick Beyer’s 2013 award-winning documentary, “The Ghost Army,” and 2015 book, “The Ghost Army of World War II,” brought attention to the little-known unit. The Times reported that Ghost Army vets are living in 11 states and Washington D.C. The “American Sniper” team, including actor Bradley Cooper, director Todd Phillips and producer Todd Philips, is currently working on a movie about the Ghost Army for Hollywood, the Times reported. Congressional Gold Medals have gone to previous unsung World War II units including The Doolittle Raiders, The Monuments Men, Women Air Service Pilots and the Native American Code talkers, according to The Times. [Source: Fox News | Mar 14, 2016 ++]

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**MSFP ▶ Military Spouse Financial Counseling Certifications**

Military spouses interested in earning financial counseling certification can apply for this year’s Military Spouse Fellowship Program (MSFP). The program covers the cost—normally $1,200 to $1,250—of completing the Accredited Financial Counselor certification. Deadline for applying online is midnight Eastern Time, 22 APR. FINRA Investor Education Foundation administers the Military Spouse Fellowship Program in partnership with the Association for Financial Counseling and Planning Education (AFCPE) and the National Military Family Association. As part of the training, spouses are required to obtain financial counseling experience, either through paid employment or volunteer work, and this is often in the military community. To apply go to [http://www.militaryspouseafcpe.org/application](http://www.militaryspouseafcpe.org/application).

Since the fellowship program was launched in 2006, 1,360 spouses have received fellowships and are in various stages of completing the program. Spouses who’ve earned their certification are working in a variety of jobs, including financial counselor at family, credit counseling and tax centers, financial aid offices and credit unions throughout the U.S. and overseas. “These organizations are in need of well-trained specialists who understand the unique financial needs of military families,” said Rebecca Wiggins, AFCPE executive director, in an announcement about the application process. “AFC certification sets the standard in financial counseling and education. The program allows military spouses to give back to the military community but also supports them in building a portable and rewarding career.” The military spouse fellows “gain expertise and skills, and have credibility with other service members and their spouses because they ‘speak military’ and live the lifestyle,” said Gerri Walsh, president of the FINRA Investor Education Foundation, in the announcement. [Source: Military Times| Karen Jowers | March 15, 2016 ++]

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**USS Conestoga (AT-54) ▶ Missing Tugboat Located after 95 Years**

When the Conestoga failed to arrive at Pearl Harbor as scheduled, the Navy launched what was the greatest search and rescue effort of the 20th century, surpassed only years later by the search for Amelia Earhart. There had been some thought that a garbled communication received near Hawaii might have come from the Conestoga, but nothing was found. There was little expectation that the newly refurbished Conestoga would sink so soon into her voyage. In June 1921, the Navy declared the Conestoga and her crew lost. On 23 MAR, researchers from the National Oceanic
and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the Navy announced they have found the Conestoga in the waters of the Greater Farallones National Marine Sanctuary about 30 miles off the coast.

The waters, home to great white sharks and migrating whales, also serve as the final resting place for more than 300 shipwrecks, which NOAA has been trying to map in recent years. The identification of the Conestoga was a years long effort that featured a mix of research, dangerous work in shark-infested waters and a dash of good luck, researchers said. It began in 2009 when a survey near the Farallon Islands identified a probable shipwreck. In 2014, NOAA sent a research vessel, the Fulmar, outfitted with a Remotely Operated Vehicle about the size of a large piece of luggage that plunged nearly 200 feet to obtain high-quality video and still images of the wreck. The ROV dives revealed "a wreck of some age, festooned with marine life," said James Delgado, a NOAA investigator. Photos show the hull encrusted with colorful sea anemones, teeming with rockfish, eel and even octopus. "The wreck is now a place of life, as well as a memorial," Delgado said.

One image provided what turned out to be a smoking gun in identifying the Conestoga — a well-preserved, 3-inch/50 caliber gun inside the ship's forward hull. The gun was crucial because of a series of photographs taken of the Conestoga and its crew in San Diego, months before it disappeared, while the ship was undergoing repairs. One shows six sailors from the gunnery department posing with the gun, an exact match to what was found in the wreck. Several dozen family members attended Wednesday's announcement, including Diane Gollnitz of Timonium, Maryland, the granddaughter of Conestoga commander Ernest L. Jones. "It brings to closure this big mystery we had in our family," said Gollnitz, who never knew her grandfather. She said he "was raised on a farm in landlocked Kansas, but he read books about the sea and always wanted to join the Navy."

Laurie Clabbers of Meadowbrook, Pennsylvania, Pammer's daughter and the great-great niece of Harvey Reinbold, had been doing genealogical research on Uncle Harvey the day that NOAA officials sent her an email advising her of the discovery. "We always felt bad that he didn't have any descendants," Clabbers said of Reinbold, a square-jawed sailor who had just married months before and was on his last voyage with the Navy. "You see in the pictures, he was this handsome guy; he had like a movie-star presence."

Delgado and the other researchers believe the Conestoga ran into a gale in bad weather shortly after departure and began taking on water. They tried to reach safe harbor at Southeast Farallon Island, but didn't quite make it. Dennis McGinn, an assistant Navy secretary who has sailed in those waters, said "it can get really, really rough" on that stretch of ocean. He said the sea is a fitting resting place for sailors who died as heroes. "Think about the excitement these young men had ... 'Join the Navy and see the world.' They were headed to a tropical paradise with a great stop in Hawaii," McGinn said. "They were on a mission and they were ready to go." [Source: The Associated Press | Matthew Barakat March 23, 2016 ++]
Former Army Air Corps Capt. Jerry Yellin, left, Navy Seabee Jack Lazere, center left, and Marine Carl DeHaven, veterans of the Battle of Iwo Jima, accept a wreath from a member of the Young Marines group during the 71st Reunion of Honor Ceremony at Iwo To, Japan, March 19, 2016. The ceremony gathers surviving veterans.

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Medal of Honor Citations ➤ Bailey, Kenneth D | WWII

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

Kenneth D. Bailey

Rank and organization: Major U.S. Marine Corps, Company C, 1st Marine Raider Battalion
Place and date: Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, 13 September 1942
Entered service: Illinois 1935
Born: Pawnee, Oklahoma, on 21 October 1910

Citation

For extraordinary courage and heroic conduct above and beyond the call of duty as Commanding Officer of Company C, 1st Marine Raider Battalion, during the enemy Japanese attack on Henderson Field, Guadalcanal, Solomon Islands, on 12-13 September 1942. Completely reorganized following the severe engagement of the night before, Maj. Bailey's company, within an hour after taking its assigned position as reserve battalion between the main line and the coveted airport, was threatened on the right flank by the penetration of the enemy into a gap in the main line. In addition to repulsing this threat, while steadily improving his own desperately held position, he used every weapon at his command to cover the forced withdrawal of the main line before a hammering assault by superior enemy forces. After rendering invaluable service to the battalion commander in stemming the retreat, reorganizing the troops and extending the reverse position to the left, Maj. Bailey, despite a severe head wound, repeatedly led his troops in fierce hand-to-
hand combat for a period of 10 hours. His great personal valor while exposed to constant and merciless enemy fire, and his indomitable fighting spirit inspired his troops to heights of heroic endeavor which enabled them to repulse the enemy and hold Henderson Field. He gallantly gave his life in the service of his country.

Major Kenneth D. Bailey was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor on 24 March 1943, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt during a special ceremony at the White House, for heroic conduct during action in the Solomon Islands. The medal was presented to Maj Bailey's wife. He was awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions during an intense battle to repulse the enemy at Henderson Field on Guadalcanal.

Kenneth Dillon Bailey, who also earned the Silver Star Medal during the initial landing on Tulagi in the Solomon Islands, was born in Pawnee, Oklahoma, on 21 October 1910. He later moved to Danville, Illinois, with his parents. Bailey attended the University of Illinois and graduated with a degree in agriculture in 1935. During his time on campus, Bailey played varsity football for the Illini his junior and senior years and was a member of the school’s ROTC program all four years. Upon graduation he joined the Illinoi National Guard.

He spent three years with the 130th Infantry, Illinois National Guard, prior to receiving his second lieutenant's commission in the Marine Corps on 1 July 1935. He was ordered to the Marine Barracks, Philadelphia, where he completed a course of instruction in the Basic School. Joining the 5th Marines in Quantico, Virginia, he participated in maneuvers in San Diego and in the Caribbean. In June 1938, he joined the Marine Detachment, USS Pennsylvania as Detachment and Battery Officer. He was advanced to first lieutenant on 19 January 1939 while serving on board that vessel.

A short tour of duty at Quantico as Range Officer with the Rifle Range Detachment preceded his assignment as Assistant to the Training Officer, Recruit Depot, at Parris Island, South Carolina. 1stLt Bailey was ordered to Guantanamo Bay, Cuba, in December 1940 where he joined the 1st Marine Brigade. He later joined the 7th Marines, then the 1st Marines, which returned to Parris Island not long after he reported for duty. He was promoted to captain in March 1941. At Quantico in June 1941, he joined the 5th Marines as a company commander. In February 1942, his unit was redesignated the 1st Marine Raider Battalion. The unit was ordered to San Diego, California, in April 1942, and on the last day of that month reached Tutuila, Samoa. He was promoted to major on 8 May 1942.

Landing on Tulagi on 7 August 1942, he later moved with his unit to Guadalcanal, where he earned the Medal of Honor. There are countless examples detailing why Bailey was a brave soldier but it was his attitude and demeanor that made him such a revered leader. Bailey was tragically gunned down by sniper machine gun fire as he was leading his men on a patrol mission on September 27, 1942. He was buried on Guadalcanal but his remains were reinterred in Spring Hill Cemetery, Danville, Illinois, in June 1948.
In addition to the Medal of Honor and Silver Star Medal, Maj Bailey was posthumously awarded the Purple Heart; Presidential Unit Citation; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal; American Defense Service Medal with Fleet Clasp; and the World War II Victory Medal. The United States Navy destroyer escort USS Kenneth D. Bailey (DE-552) was named for Major Bailey. Her construction was cancelled in 1944. In 1945, the U.S. Navy destroyer USS Kenneth D. Bailey (DD-713), in commission from 1945 to 1970, was named in his honor.


Former Army Air Corps Capt. Jerry Yellin, left, Navy Seabee Jack Lazere, center left, and Marine Carl DeHaven, veterans of the Battle of Iwo Jima, accept a wreath from a member of the Young Marines group during the 71st Reunion of Honor Ceremony at Iwo To, Japan, March 19, 2016. The ceremony gathers surviving veterans.

* Military History *

**French WWII Archives** ▶ Secret Services' Archives Unveiled

French historians on 16 MAR unveiled secret services' archives from World War II that offer a unique insight into underground operations led by both the Nazis and the French resistance — along with the individual paths taken by thousands of agents, including celebrities like French designer Coco Chanel. Most of the letters, reports, cables and photos from the rival intelligence agencies of the French Resistance, the collaborationist Vichy regime and the German authorities remain unpublished. The documents, stored for years in the archives at the medieval castle of Vincennes, east of Paris, have not been explored by historians until recently. They include details of operations led by German spies hunting members of the French resistance, the secret activities of London-based Gen. Charles De Gaulle’s government and efforts to track war criminals.
The French secret services also had files on celebrities they deemed suspicious. Designer Coco Chanel's file includes a note written in Paris in November 1944. "A source in Madrid informed us that Madam Chanel was in 1942-43 the mistress and agent of Baron Guenter von Dinklage. Dinklage used to be an attache at the German embassy in 1935. He worked as a propagandist and we suspect him of being a (German) agent," the document says. According to Frederic Queguineur, in charge of the secret services' archives, the file shows that Coco Chanel was documented as an agent by the Nazi intelligence organization, the Abwehr. "From the German point of view, they registered her, so it means she potentially could be a source of information, fulfill a mission, work for them. But from her point of view, we don't know if she was really aware of that," he told the AP.

Following a government decision in 1999, hundreds of boxes were given to the defense ministry's archives with no classification system — an intelligence technique so no foreign country would get easy access to secret documents. Only half of the archives have now been inventoried. "We have been captivated by the importance ... and the richness of these archives, the feeling, in some way, to find documents that had never been seen for 70 years," Queguineur said. Once the archives have been identified, the public can get access to them but as they are not digitized, people need to go to the Chateau de Vincennes. The secret services' archives include German documents seized by the French at the end of the war and thousands of individual files of members of the French resistance and investigation files of suspected collaborators. Historian Thomas Fontaine stressed that history is more complex than a complete division between the ones who resisted and the ones who betrayed, giving the example of a regional Resistance group leader who later served the Germans. "It's very clear in the files of the Gestapo that they detain his wife and daughter in order to make him talk," he said.

Lots of notes provide personal details on people involved in French or German operations. De Gaulle's intelligence services in 1943 wrote a note on American-born singer and dancer Josephine Baker, who helped his Free French effort. "She demonstrates a tremendous devotion, she is totally unselfish. Keen and vibrant spirit, she is able to render us great services," it said. Many Resistance members told their stories to the French intelligence services at the end of the war. Historian Sebastien Albertelli is starting research on some 600 women who served in uniform in De Gaulle's army. "I can hear their voices, I can let them talk (with these documents)," he said. The archives also include private documents, such as a moving handwritten letter from De Gaulle's niece Genevieve to her "dear uncle Charles" in which she seeks advice on the better way to serve in May 1943. Yet historians noted that some files are incomplete, with some documents having probably been purged to keep some details secret. Those appear to include the file of former French President Francois Mitterrand, who served under the Vichy regime before joining the Resistance. [Source: Associated Press | Sylvie Corbet | March 16, 2016 ++]

Military History ► B-25 Bomber Collides with Empire State Building

On July 28, 1945, Lt. Col. William Franklin Smith Jr. flew a B-25 bomber into the 78th floor of the Empire State Building, which was then the tallest building in the world. It was just before 10:00 on a Saturday morning at the tail end of World War II, and Smith was flying a routine transport mission—giving a handful of servicemen a ride home, according to NPR. He himself was a decorated pilot, fresh from logging 1,000 combat hours in the war, per TIME. He’d earned the Air Medal, the Distinguished Flying Cross and the Croix de Guerre as a member of the 457th Bomb Group, where he “hammered at targets in central Germany,” per his obituary in the West Point alumni magazine.

“When Bill entered the Academy in July of 1938 he stood on the threshold of a brief but brilliant career as a soldier. To look back on that career we wonder if he knew that his time was short,” his obit concludes. “He wanted to do everything in a military manner, but fast and well.” That sense of urgency may explain why the 27-year-old pilot ignored an air traffic controller’s warning of low visibility en route from LaGuardia to Newark. “We’re unable to see the top of the Empire State Building,” the controller told him, according to TIME’s 1945 report. Smith flew anyway.
In the dense fog, he maneuvered through Manhattan at about 225 m.p.h., narrowly missing a skyscraper on the corner of Fifth Avenue and 42nd Street before he pulled up and banked slightly left—and collided head-on with the Empire State Building. “The bomber gored through the thick steel and stone of the building as if they were papier-mâché,” TIME reported. “Then, in a flash of flame, the gasoline tanks exploded. In another instant flames leaped and seeped inside & outside the building.” Smith and his two passengers were killed instantly; 11 people in the building also died. Most of the victims, per TIME, were “women employed by the National Catholic Welfare Conference, which has offices on the 79th floor. Many were burned beyond recognition.”

Some survived against the odds—including a 19-year-old elevator operator who broke her pelvis, back and neck when the plane sliced through the elevator’s cables and she plummeted from the 79th floor to the subbasement, per NPR. Decades later, it’s hard not to read about this history without thinking of the attacks of Sept. 11, 2001—but the skyscraper and the plane weren’t the only components these two events shared. The disaster also prompted adrenaline-fueled acts of heroism reminiscent, on a smaller scale, of those that prevailed after 9/11. To free the badly-injured young woman from the basement elevator, first responders battered a hole through the wreckage. One courageous volunteer tunneled through it to reach her. Per TIME: “Donald Malony, 17, a Coast Guard hospital apprentice, squeezed through it, brought her out, gave her morphine. Passing the building at the moment of the crash, he had run into a drug store, talked a clerk into giving him hypodermic needles, drugs, other supplies. He gave first aid to many. [Source: Time | Jennifer Latson | July 28, 2015 ++]

Tuskegee Airmen ➤ 10 Return to Moton Field

Ten of the original Tuskegee Airmen returned to where they made history 75 years ago. On 22 MAR the men were honored during anniversary events at the Tuskegee Airmen National Historic site at Moton Field, as well as in Montgomery. Those honored include George Hardy, Leslie Edwards, Eugene Richardson, Ted Lumpkin, Levi Thornhill, James Shipley, James H. Harvey III, George Boyd, Val Archer and Samuel Sams. Tuesday marked the date the legendary group was initiated on March 22, 1941, in what would be dubbed the “Tuskegee Experiment.” They were the first group of black fighter pilots and personnel to fight during World War II.

The day began in Moton Field where staff from the National Park Service and the Tuskegee Airmen Foundation along with military cadets, officers and government officials welcomed the airmen, their family and friends and public to visit the Tuskegee Airmen museums, sit in the cockpit of a replica aircraft and take pictures with the guests of honor. A historic flyover kicked off the occasion with aircraft from the 99th Flying Training Squadron, the 100th
Fighter Squadron, the 301st Fighter Squadron and the 302nd Fighter Squadron, all of which represent the original fighter squadrons belonging to the Tuskegee Airmen's 332nd Fighter Group, which are still active today. The museum's auditorium was filled with students and educators from the Macon County School System and Georgia.

The sacrifices the Tuskegee Airmen made should inspire youth, said Brigadier Gen. Leon Johnson, the National President of Tuskegee Airmen Incorporated and board chair of the Tuskegee Airmen Foundation. "We're here to talk about the young people in the room and I'm going to leave you with three words that symbolize what the Tuskegee Airmen: progress, demand sacrifice," Johnson said "Nothing in life happens without someone making a sacrifice ... someone sacrificed for you to be here today." Aisha Williams, 14, an eighth grader at Tuskegee Institute Middle School, said the Tuskegee Airmen were an inspiration. Because of their drive to succeed, she wants to pursue Junior ROTC in high school. "I look up to their bravery and their courage," Williams said. "It's an honor to be here with them today."

Fighter pilot George Hardy, 90, of Sarasota, Fla. stressed education when offering advice to the youth. "The main thing is you must have a goal. You must want to do something and you strive for it, and you must have some determination to get there," Hardy said. "You may have an obstacle, but you must overcome them." Hardy retired as a lieutenant colonel and first flew with the 99th Fighter Squadron, flying 21 combat missions over Germany. He continued to serve in the Korean and Vietnam War. Camellia Floyd brought her 5-year-old daughter, Chloe, and her 9-year-old son, Christopher, from Lee County to meet with the airmen. She said her grandfather was a Tuskegee Airman and that it was important for her children to witness living history. "It's important as a parent, because we have so few still living to tell the story and for children of any age to have this experience to speak with them and to hear their stories first-hand is a blessing," Floyd said.

In 2007, President George W. Bush awarded the group the Congressional Gold Medal, the nation's highest honor, because of their exemplary combat record. It was that record, which inspired Harry Truman to eliminate racial divides in the military services. By the end of the war, the Tuskegee Airmen only lost 27 ships against enemy fighters during their 179 bomber-escort missions, compared to other 15th Air Force P-51 groups that lost an average of 46 ships. The Tuskegee Airmen would complete 1,578 total combat missions for the Fifteenth and Twelve Air Forces, destroying 150 enemy aircraft on the ground and 112 in air-to-air combat.

At the time when he served as a Tuskegee Airmen fighter pilot, 2nd Lt. Eugene Richardson, 90, of Philadelphia, wasn't concerned about making history. He wanted to fly. "I was a cadet here and a student flyer. I finished flight school in order to be a fighter pilot for single engine fighters in March of '45," Richardson said. However, he never had a chance to see combat. "I went to combat training, and (German dictator Adolf) Hitler heard I was coming over seas and he surrendered," Richardson joked. "My dream was just to fly an airplane, I didn't know about history or any of that famous stuff. I got to fly an airplane and that was my dream come true."

Famously known as "Red Tails" because of the red color on their P-47 and P-51 tails to distinguish them from other escort ships, Tuskegee Airmen quickly became legendary for their superior flying performance as bomber escorts. For intelligence officer Ted Lumpkin, 96, of Los Angeles, it is almost unimaginable to believe what he and
other Tuskegee Airmen helped achieve. He served with the 100th Fighter Squadron in Italy. "To represent what it does today to people is probably the most satisfying thing, because when we came back from the service, it was not as nice as it is now. People then, didn't realize what we had done and what it meant to this country and to ourselves," Lumpkin said. [Source: Montgomery Advertiser | Rebecca Burylo | Greg Norman | March 23, 2016 ++]

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Rosie The Riveters ➤ Honored With a Trip to Washington

Seven decades after their "we can do it" attitude proved invaluable to the Allied victory, about 30 "Rosie the Riveters" were honored 22 MAR with a trip to Washington that included visits to the National World War II Memorial. Wearing honor flight red cardigans, the women — now in their 80s and 90s — whose work helped the war effort posed for group photos with the U.S. Capitol as a backdrop, had lunch at a Library of Congress building and visited Arlington National Cemetery. At every stop, people approach them, shook their hands, and said, 'Thank you.' "They have those signs: 'We can do it.' They should say: 'We did it,'" said Helen Kushnir of Dearborn, part of Tuesday's group, which traveled from Michigan.

As women worked during the war at jobs traditionally done by men, such as churning out bombers at Ford Motor Co.'s Willow Run plant in Michigan, one of them was the inspiration for the Rosie character that came to symbolize female empowerment and the "we're-in-this-together" spirit of the American home front. "You incredible women are such an inspiration," U.S. Rep. Debbie Dingell of Michigan told the women during the luncheon. "You opened the doors wider for (women)," said Dingell, who co-hosted the event with fellow Michigan U.S. Rep. Candice Miller.

When the four-bus convoy ferrying the women around town arrived at the WWII Memorial, they were met by throngs of supporters, drawing cheers and applause. Sylvia Tanis of Holland, Michigan, was one of the first ones through, waving to the crowd, grasping people's hands, posing for snapshots and stopping to embrace a Girl Scout who had come out to greet the women. "This is great. I can't imagine it being any better," Virginia Basler of Ypsilanti said while looking out at the memorial. Afterward, the women were ushered into a prime viewing location in a cordoned-off area for the Changing of the Guard ceremony at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier at Arlington National Cemetery. They also visited the Women in Military Service for America Memorial.

Laura Eglinsdoerfer of Milan, Michigan, said she met her future husband when both worked on the assembly line at Willow Run. Her husband later served in the Marines, and was wounded fighting on Iwo Jima — a battle honored at the Marine Corps War Memorial, not far from where Eglinsdoerfer saw the guard change at Arlington National Cemetery. The honor flights provide one-day trips for veterans to visit Washington's monuments and memorials. The Ford Motor Company Fund has sponsored 10 such flights, but Tuesday's was the first designed specifically for Rosies,
said Jim Vella, the fund's president. He said the women, who traveled around town with a police escort, were rightly being afforded "rock-star" treatment.

Mallie Mellon, 96, said she couldn't sleep the night before their flight. "I was so excited thinking about my trip," said Mellon, who now lives in Belleville, but during the war worked as a riveter making B-29s at a plant in Detroit. When their plane landed, dozens of flag-waving, sign-toting well-wishers greeted the women. A children's choir sang and onlookers cheered as each woman emerged. "This is soooo overwhelming!" Tanis exclaimed, while Kushnir cried as she took in the adulation.  [Source: Associated Press | Mike Householder | March 22, 2016 ++]

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**Battle of Pork Chop Hill** ► Korea | April & July 1953

On Sunday, June 25, 1950, just before as sunrise, South Korean soldiers and their American advisors awakened to what they expected to be just another routine day guarding the demarcation line separating South Korea from Communist North Korea. Instead, they woke up to North Korean artillery blowing apart their positions, followed by heavy tanks and thousands of screaming North Korean soldiers. Outnumbered and outgunned, the UN forces were powerless to rout the invaders, forcing them into a disorderly withdrawal south. Never able to get their footing, UN forces continued moving south down the Korean peninsula, fighting delaying actions in Seoul, Osan, Taegu, Masan, Pohang, and the Naktong River. Their withdrawal took nine days, ending at the southeastern-most tip of South Korea near the port city of Pusan on the Sea of Japan. Exhausted and on the brink of defeat, they hurriedly setup the Pusan Perimeter’ to make their final stand against the determined North Korean army.

Fighting was fierce and bloody all along the entire perimeter from August 4 to September 18, 1950. North Korean troops, although hampered by supply shortages and massive losses, continually staged attacks on UN forces in an
attempt to penetrate the perimeter and collapse the line. UN forces held on while using the port to amass an overwhelming advantage in troops, equipment, and logistics from numerous UN combatants. After six weeks and fighting small skirmishes and large battles, North Korean force collapsed and retreated back north in chaos with UN forces in pursuit. Many historians considered the Battle of the Pusan Perimeter one of the most brutal fights of the Korean War where both sides endured major losses: U.S. forces suffered 4,599 dead, 12,058 wounded, 401 captured and 2,700 missing in action. North Korea had a total of 63,590 casualties and 3,380 captured.

In September 1950, an amphibious UN counter-offensive was launched at Inchon, cutting off many of the North Koreans soldiers retreating north. Those that escaped envelopment and capture were rapidly forced back north all the way to the border with China at the Yalu River, or into the mountainous interior. At this point, in October 1950, Chinese forces crossed the Yalu and entered the war. Chinese intervention triggered a retreat of UN forces which continued until mid-1951. During this time, the front lines constantly changed as each side gained the upper hand over the other. Realizing that neither side would be able to overcome the other, the combatants met in July 1951 at the village of Kaesong to begin armistice negotiations. In October 1951, the meeting were moved to Panmunjom.

By 1953, while the leaders of the People's Republic of Korea and Communist China continued deliberating with UN delegates in peace talks at Panmunjom, their soldiers continued to fight in several costly stalemate battles along a series of hills running west to east just north of the 38th parallel were several small but intense and bloody battles took place. One of the better-known battles fought at this time was the Battle of Pork Chop Hill, so named for the hill's topographical appearance. Pork Chop Hill, or Hill 255, was a 300-meter high exposed hill outpost in front of the main line of resistance and was rather insignificant in terms of military or tactical importance. However, U.S. media attention to the event gave it great propaganda value since it was an ongoing struggle that lasted longer than any other single battle going on at the time.

The Battle of Pork Chop Hill was actually two skirmishes during the spring and summer of 1953. The first skirmish (Apr. 16-18) was victorious for the UN when the Communists broke contact and retreated after two days of battle. In the second skirmish, beginning on July 6 and ending on July 10, both sides committed many more troops and the conflict lasted for five days. On the morning of July 11, the commander of the U.S. I Corps decided to abandon Pork Chop Hill to the Chinese and the 7th Infantry Division withdrew under fire.

UN forces first occupied Pork Chop Hill in October 1951 when the U.S. 8th Cavalry Regiment took over the hill. The hill was again occupied in May 1952 by Company I of the U.S. 180th Infantry Regiment. By November 1952, Pork Chop Hill was occupied and defended by the 21st Thai Battalion of the U.S. 2nd Infantry Division, which successfully repulsed an attack by the Chinese People's Volunteers. Beginning on December 29, 1952, the outpost became part of the U.S. 7th Infantry Division's defensive sector. Pork Chop Hill, itself, was one of several exposed hill outposts was defended by a single company or platoon positioned in sand-bagged bunkers connected with trenches. Opposing the 7th Infantry Division were two divisions of the Chinese Communist Forces: the 141st Division of the 47th Army, and the 67th Division of the 23rd Army. These were veteran, well-trained units, expert in night infantry assaults, patrolling, ambushes, and mountain warfare. Both armies were part of the 13th Field Army.
In a surprise night attack on March 23, 1953, a battalion of the Chinese 423rd regiment 141st Division attacked a hilltop outpost known as Old Baldy not far from Pork Chop Hill. Defending the hill was B Company from the 31st Regiment's Colombian Battalion, commanded by Lt. Col. Alberto Ruiz Novoa. To relieve the beleaguered defenders, the regimental commander, Col. William B. Kern, ordered C Company of the Colombian Battalion to relieve overwhelmed B Company, despite the Colombian commander's protest. The movement began at 3:00 PM under heavy fire, making it difficult for C Company to advance toward their new position. B Company had been under constant artillery fire since their arrival and were eager to rotate. During the relief process, the enemy caught both companies exposed, enabling them to seize many of the defensive positions. For two days of stiff resistance, the badly beaten B and C Companies failed in retaking the hill since the 31st Regiment Command failed to send reinforcements. Rather than suffer more losses, the UN Command ordered Old Baldy abandonment. This preliminary fight exposed Pork Chop to three-sided attack, and, for the next three weeks, Chinese patrols probed it nightly.

On the night of April 16, 1953, Company E, 31st Infantry commanded by 1st Lt. Thomas V. Harrold manned Pork Chop Hill. Shortly before midnight, an artillery barrage foreshadowed a sudden infantry assault by a battalion of the Chinese 201st regiment; Pork Chop Hill was quickly overrun, although pockets of U.S. soldiers defended isolated bunkers. A counterattack to retake the hill was ordered by Maj. Gen. Arthur Trudeau, command general of the 7th Infantry Division. The two rifle companies selected for the counterattack were Company's K and L, 31st Infantry. The tactical commander of the assault was 1st Lt. Joseph G. Clemons, Jr., company commander of K Company. L Company's commander was 1st Lt. Forrest J. Crittendon. At 04:30 AM on April 17, the two rifles companies began systematically maneuvering up the hillsides under the cover of a heavy preparatory artillery barrage on enemy positions.

Although the Chinese defenders fought hard with everything they had, Company K and half of Company L (the other half had not been able to leave the trenches of an adjacent outpost) pushed forward to the top of the hill and into the main enemy trenches, often engaging in hand-to-hand combat. By dawn Pork Chop Hill belonged to the UN forces which had suffered almost 50 percent casualties. Concerned he did not have enough men to hold the hill should the Chinese return, Clemons called back for reinforcement. Since 2nd Battalion 17th Infantry was already attached to the 31st Infantry, G Company, commanded by 1st Lt. Walter B. Russell - Clemons's brother-in-law - was immediately sent forward, linking up with Company K at 08:30 AM. All three companies were subjected to almost continuous shelling by Chinese forces (CCF) artillery as they cleared bunkers and dug in again.

Through a series of miscommunications between command echelons, Division headquarters ordered Russell's company to withdraw at 3:00 PM after they too had suffered heavy losses, and did not realize the extent of casualties among the other two companies. By the time the situation was clarified, the companies of the 31st Infantry were down to a combined 25 survivors. Maj. Gen. Arthur Trudeau, by then on scene, authorized Col. Kern to send in a fresh company to relieve all elements on Hill 255 and placed him in tactical command with both the 1st and 2nd Battalions of the 17th Infantry attached and at his direction. Kern sent forward Capt. Monroe D. King's Company F, 17th Infantry which started up the hill at 9:30 PM under heavy artillery fire but reached the trenches at 10 PM suffering 19 killed in the process. At 11 PM, Col. Kern then ordered 1st Lt. Gorman C. Smith's E Company, 17th infantry, to move up to reinforce F Company. To avoid the bulk of the artillery fire, Smith moved his rifle company around the right flank of the hill and up the side facing the Chinese positions.

Clemons' Company K, had incurred 125 casualties, including 18 killed, of its original 135 men. After twenty hours of steady combat the remaining seven members started off the hill singly just after midnight of April 17-18 and withdrew without further losses. During the early morning of April 18, the Chinese 201st Regiment renewed its attack at 1:30 AM and again inflicted heavy losses on the defenders, nearly overcoming F Company. The timely counterattack by Lt. Smith's E Company caught the Chinese by surprise on their flank and ended the organized assault. The Chinese 141st Division renewed attacks in company strength at 03:20 and 04:20 but did not gain further ground. At dawn on April 18, an additional U.S. rifle company (A Company, 17th Infantry) climbed the hill to reinforce the 2nd battalion companies. Together the three companies spent the bulk of the day clearing the trenches and bunkers of all hiding Chinese and securing the hilltop. The battle ended that afternoon.
UN artillery had fired over 77,000 rounds in support of the three outposts attacked, including nearly 40,000 on Pork Chop Hill alone on April 18; the Chinese expended a similar amount. Both the Chinese and U.S. infantry assaulted the hill initially under cover of a moonless night. Each used a heavy preparatory artillery barrage to force the defenders to take cover in bunkers and to screen the approach of the attacking troops. Chinese forces used rapid movement and infiltration tactics to close quickly on the trenches and surprise the defenders, while the US forces used small arms fire placed approximately 1 - 2 feet above the ground surface to limit defensive small arms fire, then maneuvered systematically up the hillsides under shellfire. Neither side employed supporting fire from tanks or armored personnel carriers (APC) to protect attacking troops.

Once inside the trench line, troops of both forces were forced to eliminate bunkers individually, using hand grenades, explosive charges, and occasionally flame throwers, resulting in heavy casualties to the attackers. For the UN forces, infiltration of cleared bunkers by bypassed Chinese was a problem throughout the battle and hand-to-hand combat was a frequent occurrence. Evacuation of casualties was made hazardous by almost continuous artillery fires from both sides. The 7th Infantry Division made extensive use of tracked M-39 APCs to evacuate casualties and to protect troops involved in the resupply of water, rations, and ammunition, losing one during the battle. In addition, the UN forces employed on-call, pre-registered defensive fires called flash fire to defend its outposts, in which artillery laid down an almost continuous box barrage in a horseshoe-shaped pattern around the outpost to cover all approaches from the Chinese side of the main line of resistance.

The 7th Infantry Division rebuilt its defenses on Pork Chop Hill in May and June 1953, during a lull in major combat. Final agreements for an armistice were being hammered out and the UN continued its defensive posture all along the MLR, anticipating a cease-fire in place. On the night of July 6, in the second skirmish, using tactics identical to those in the April assault, the Chinese again attacked Pork Chop. The hill was now held by Company A, 17th Infantry, under the temporary command of 1st Lt. Alton Jr. McElfresh, its executive officer. B Company of the same regiment, in ready reserve behind the adjacent Hill 200, was immediately ordered to assist, but within an hour, A Company reported hand-to-hand combat in the trenches. A major battle was brewing and division headquarters ordered a third company to move up. The battle was fought in a persistent monsoon rain for the first three days, making both resupply and evacuation of casualties difficult. The battle is notable for its extensive use of armored personnel carriers in both these missions.

On the second night, the Chinese made a new push to take the hill, forcing the 7th Division to again reinforce. Parts of four companies defended Pork Chop under a storm of artillery fire from both sides. At dawn of July 8, the rain temporarily ended and the initial defenders were withdrawn. A fresh battalion, the 2nd Battalion of the 17th, counter-attacked and re-took the hill, setting up a night defensive perimeter. On both July 9 and July 10, the two sides attacked and counter-attacked. A large part of both Chinese divisions were committed to the battle, and ultimately five battalions of the 17th and 32nd Infantry Regiments were engaged, making nine counter-attacks over four days. On the morning of July 11, the commander of the U.S. I Corps decided to abandon Pork Chop Hill to the Chinese and the 7th Infantry Division withdrew under fire.

Four of the thirteen U.S. company commanders were killed. Total U.S. casualties were 243 killed, 916 wounded, and nine captured. 163 of the dead were never recovered. Of the Republic of Korea troops ("KATUSA") attached to the 7th, approximately 15 were killed and 120 wounded. Chinese casualties were estimated at 1,500 dead and 4,000 wounded. Less than three weeks after the Battle of Pork Chop Hill, the Korean Armistice Agreement was signed by the United Nations Command (Korea), Chinese Peoples' Liberation Army, and North Korean Peoples' Army, ending the hostilities.

Military History Anniversaries ► 01 thru 15 Apr

Significant events in U.S. Military History over the next 15 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “Military History Anniversaries 01 thru 15 Apr”. [Source: This Day In History http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history | March 2016 ++]

* Health Care *

MouthMobile ► Free Vet Dental Care | Got Your 6

Veterans who can’t afford to make regular trips to the dentist may now have an alternative — the dentists are coming to them. Aspen Dental, a nationwide network of locally owned and operated dental practices, and Got Your 6, a nonprofit dedicated to empowering veterans to strengthen communities, have teamed up for the Healthy Mouth Movement, which includes a wheelchair accessible “MouthMobile” that will stop at more than 30 cities across the country over the next several months. The dental clinic on wheels offers care ranging from a regular cleaning to a set of dentures. “When you think about empowering veterans and strengthening communities, oftentimes veterans don’t have the basic services, including dental care,” said Bill Rausch, an Army veteran and executive director of Got Your 6.

Not all veterans qualify for dental care at the VA, Rausch said, so this provides an opportunity for them to receive the care they need. Aspen Dental created the Healthy Mouth Movement in 2014, which started as a broad outreach effort to anyone who needed dental care but typically who normally couldn’t get it. “The following year, we decided to hone it to our nation’s veterans,” said Dr. Jere Gillan, a dentist with Aspen Dental and an Air Force veteran. “We see a huge disparity in dental care in a lot of Americans but really in the veteran community.” The MouthMobile stops in cities where local dentists and hygienists will volunteer their time and services to treat veterans for a day. Care is provided on an appointment basis only. See your local veteran’s organization to arrange one. No proof of income is required.

Since the Healthy Mouth Movement was initiated, Aspen Dental has helped almost 7,000 people across the country, resulting in nearly $4 million in free dental care and education. The MouthMobile has seen 164 patients since the 2016 tour began in February, with more than $76,000 in dental care and assistance donated. One veteran who visited the rolling dental clinic didn’t feel comfortable or confident enough to leave his house, Rausch said, but after
receiving a set of dentures, he’s pursuing a career and volunteering. “[Got Your 6] wants veterans to come back from war or service and be great, effective pillars of the community,” Gillan said. “It can be tough for people. Got Your 6 is there to help support them, and Aspen Dental is there to support in an indirect way by helping them out with a smile.”

Air Force veteran Randall Murray said he received free dental care through the Healthy Mouth Movement in June 2015. After taking X-rays of Murray’s teeth, the clinic determined that he needed 10 crowns, which normally would have cost Murray $16,000. “Many veterans who have served our great country find themselves struggling to address the most basic needs in life,” Murray said. “The Healthy Mouth Movement program helps address the gap in services and resources available to the veteran population.” For those who aren’t dentists but still want to contribute to the program, all they have to do is smile ... then take a selfie and Share your smile selfie on Twitter and Instagram with #Smile4Vets #Sweepstakes as a salute to veterans nationwide, or visit www.Smile4Vets.com. “For every selfie shared, Aspen Dental donates $1 to Got Your 6,” Rausch said. Anyone who shares a selfie will be entered to win a year of free dental care, plus a meeting with NASCAR driver and Healthy Mouth Movement ambassador Danica Patrick. “Giving them a new smile … a whole new world opens up for them,” Gillan said.

Upcoming stops:
- April 5: Fort Wayne, Indiana
- April 7: Milwaukee, Wisconsin
- April 11: Flint, Michigan
- April 12: Detroit, Michigan
- April 14: Cleveland, Ohio

Appointments for the MouthMobile are filled in advance with support from local veterans organizations. To learn more about the MouthMobile tour, visit www.HealthyMouthMovement.com. [Source: Military Times | Charlsy Panzino | March 28, 2016 ++]

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Military Surgeon Clinical Skills ▶ Sustaining thru MTFs

The welcome reduction of casualties from major conflict brings a new challenge for military surgeons at home: ensuring they have enough time with patients to maintain their clinical skills. Military Health System (MHS) leaders are evaluating a wide-ranging set of options so that medical personnel can practice their skills to maintain what is known as clinical currency. “Recapturing care” from the civilian sector – convincing beneficiaries who are located within driving distance of a military treatment facility (MTF) to seek care there first – is first among those solutions. “Recapturing care into MTFs is a strategic priority,” said Navy Vice Adm. Raquel Bono, director of the Defense Health Agency. Bono explained that the recapture efforts help provide military surgeons with an active clinical practice to sustain skills, offers superb care to patients, and lowers costs for the entire system by more efficiently using military hospitals and clinics.

Vice Admiral Raquel C. Bono, Director, Defense Health Agency -- MHS must ‘recapture’ care from civilian health providers

Page 105 of 134
Bono spoke at the Society of American Gastrointestinal and Endoscopic Surgeons (SAGES) annual conference in Boston, 17 MAR. Her address took place at the Military Surgical Symposium, a forum within the conference for the discussion of current military research and educational topics important to the military surgical community. Speaking to an audience of military surgeons and residents, as well as civilian attendees, Bono explained that in addition to recapture, she and other MHS leaders are looking at a variety of options to help ensure surgeons have access to clinically complex care. Options include greater sharing of patients between Department of Defense and Department of Veterans Affairs’ facilities, as well as increased partnerships between military and civilian hospitals.

Bono also discussed the MHS journey toward a high reliability organization, emphasizing the need for greater internal and external transparency – where patients and providers can more easily access information already available – to drive improvement systemwide. She added that transparency is also a critical piece of ongoing efforts to modernize TRICARE. “Transparency isn’t just a nice buzzword,” she said. “The Secretary of Defense demanded it, our patients expect it, and there’s a reason why leading high reliability organizations embody it. It fosters a culture of continuous improvement.” [Source: Health.mil | March 29, 2016 ++]

Military Reserve/Guard ► Proposed Coverage Under FEHB Plan

Sen. Lindsey Graham, chairman of the Senate armed services subcommittee on military personnel, signaled 15 MAR that he will support a plan to allow drilling Reserve and Guard members to have access to the menu of health insurance plans offered to federal civilian employees. "We're actually thinking about taking the Guard and Reserve and basically putting (them) into the federal employees health system, right?" Graham (R-SC) asked Scott Bousum, legislative director of The Enlisted Association of the National Guard (EANGUS), who acknowledged the plan. "To me that's pretty exciting," Graham said. "I mean Guard and Reservists, generally speaking, are not (residing) next to military treatment facilities. And it basically would give you the same access to providers as members of Congress and our staffs have."

If allowed insurance coverage under the Federal Employees Health Benefit (FEHB) Plan, reserve component members would have to pay monthly premiums like federal civilian employees do, Graham said. But opening the plan would address a common complaint of Reserve and Guard personnel that continuity of care for their families often is interrupted when they are called to active duty. That's because they either lose their employer-paid health insurance or they face significantly higher health costs by electing to continue coverage and paying the employer's share too. About 24,000 Reserve and Guard members are satisfied with more limited Tricare Reserve Select coverage despite its own continuity of care issues.
Graham's backing of benefit access appears to align with the goal of a proposal from Reserve Officers Association (ROA) to create a new **Tricare Reserve Choice** program. That would allow Reserve and Guard members to choose their own health care providers, paying premiums equal to 25 percent of plan costs. The full armed services committee, followed by majorities of the Senate and the House, would need to rally behind one of these ideas before reserve component personnel would see health care coverage improve. Tuesday's hearing, which began with testimony from personnel chiefs of the Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps and then advocates for military families, focused on proposed Tricare "reforms" and higher fees; a shift to more businesslike commissary operations and product pricing, and needed changes to the "blended" retirement plan due for launch in 2018.

Senators also returned again and again to the need for colleagues to end budget-driven cuts to U.S. ground forces, by acknowledging worldwide threats that have arisen since passage of the Budget Control Act of 2011. Graham opened the hearing promising to oppose the administration's call for a 1.6 percent military pay cap next January, a fourth consecutive raise that would fail to keep pace with private-sector wage growth. On Tricare, the personnel chiefs endorsed the Defense Department's push to care for as many patients as possible in military treatment facilities versus sending them into civilian provider networks. The aim is to hold down costs while enhancing medical staff proficiency and readiness. If health care can become more efficient, more money would be available to train and equip the force, said Lt. Gen. James C. McConville, Army's deputy chief of staff for personnel. "There is not enough money to go around, so we need to look every place and Tricare is one," McConville said. [Source: The Gazette | Tom Philpott | March 13, 2016 ++]

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**Cholesterol Update 02 ► Know Your Number**

Since the number one killer of men and women in the U.S. is heart disease, it’s important to know your cholesterol numbers. Cholesterol, an important substance made by your liver, forms cell structures, produces hormones, and helps with digestion. Here are the cholesterol numbers to know:

- Good, or high-density lipoprotein (HDL), cholesterol helps prevent fat and cholesterol from clogging your arteries. Know your HDL: Think H for healthy! A healthy number is greater than 60 mg/dL.
- Bad, or low-density lipoprotein (LDL), cholesterol can cause cholesterol buildup and block your arteries. Know your LDL: Think L for lousy! A healthy number is less than 100 mg/dL.
- Your total cholesterol score should be less than 200 mg/dL.

Starting at age 20, get your cholesterol checked every 5 years. Doctors use these numbers along with your age, blood pressure, and weight to help you manage your cardiac health. Smoking, diabetes, and heredity play important roles too. There are ways to manage your cholesterol and heart health! Regular physical activity can lower LDL and raise HDL. A diet low in saturated fats can help as well, so make sure to check out the New Dietary Guidelines for Americans at [http://hprc-online.org/nutrition/abcs-of-nutrition/general-information/new-dietary-guidelines-for-americans](http://hprc-online.org/nutrition/abcs-of-nutrition/general-information/new-dietary-guidelines-for-americans).
To help with cholesterol numbers choose vegetables from all 5 groups – dark green, red/orange, dried beans and peas, starchy, and others (light green, purple, yellow, and tan). To ease shopping and storage, purchase all forms: fresh, frozen, canned, and dried. Try vegetables in new ways: grilled, roasted, and raw. Add spinach to a breakfast omelet, munch on carrot sticks at lunch, and toss several veggies into your pasta dinner. [Source: Health.mil | March 25, 2016 ++]

PTSD Update 207 ➤ MI and Stroke Risk

PTSD may affect endothelial function, increasing the risk for MI and stroke in veterans, researchers reported in the Journal of the American Heart Association. “Traditional risk factors such as high [BP], diabetes, high cholesterol and smoking have not fully explained why people with PTSD seem to be at higher heart disease risk. Our study suggests that chronic stress may directly impact the health of the blood vessels,” Marlene Grenon, MD, MMSc, FRCSC, associate professor of surgery at the University of California, San Francisco, and vascular surgeon at the Veterans Affairs Medical Center San Francisco/Veterans Affairs Medical Center-Surgical Services, said in a press release.

The researchers enrolled 67 veterans with PTSD and 147 veterans without PTSD from the Veterans Affairs Medical Center in San Francisco and compared their brachial artery flow-mediated dilation scores, which test endothelial function. PTSD was measured as a score of 40 or higher on the PTSD Symptom Checklist. The average age of the veterans with PTSD was 68 years, and 99% of them were men. The average age of the veterans without PTSD was 69 years, and 91% of them were men. Veterans with PTSD were more likely be diagnosed with depression (58% vs. 8%; P < .0001) and less likely to be on BP medication (ACE inhibitors, 17% vs. 36%; P = .007; beta-blockers, 25% vs. 41%; P = .03). According to quartiles of the PTSD Symptom Checklist scores, most of the veterans with PTSD were at lower risk levels.

Grenon and colleagues found that the blood vessels of veterans with PTSD could only dilate 5.8% in reaction to stimuli while the blood vessels of veterans without PTSD could expand 7.5% (P = .003). Lower flow-mediated scores also were associated with increasing age (P = .008), decreasing estimated glomerular filtration rate (P = .003), hypertension (P = .002), aspirin use (P = .03) and beta-blocker treatments (P = .01). Even after adjustments, an independent association remained between PTSD and lower flow-mediated vasodilation (P = .0005).

According to the researchers, there was a 2.4% adjusted difference in flow-mediated dilation scores between the two groups, which is significant because a recent meta-analysis found that just a 1% decrease is associated with a 10% increase in future CV events and mortality. “We need to determine better ways we can help people manage PTSD and other types of stress to reduce the negative impact of chronic stress on blood vessels. [Source: Healio Cardiology Today | Marlene Grenon | March 24, 2016 ++]

Military Health Care Reform Update 03 ➤ Subcommittee Hearing | MOAA

The Chairman of the House Armed Services Military Personnel Subcommittee invited MOAA and a small handful of stakeholders to Capitol Hill on 17 MAR to discuss Pentagon proposals to reform the military’s health care system (MHS). MOAA Government Relations Director Col. Steve Strobridge, USAF (Ret) told the panel in the year of TRICARE reform, DoD’s plan contained only vague statements on needed program improvements, and focused mainly on adding several new beneficiary fees and raising a wide range of others, especially for the retired community. He noted the proposed fee schedules were designed to push more care to military hospitals and clinics, which have been the primary sources of access problems. “Our [MOAA] preference would be to ensure access is improved in the [military facilities] before implementing a fee structure intended to drive more care there,” Strobridge said.
He also expressed MOAA's hope the system would establish positive “carrots” to incentivize beneficiary choices rather than financial penalty “sticks.” “Particularly for retirees, we believe the proposed fee increases - in the range of $500 to $1,200 a year - are disproportional,” Strobridge said. “Further, the incentives seem structured as different-sized sticks, with the biggest sticks proposed for the TRICARE Standard group that, ironically, costs DoD the least money.” Retirees in TRICARE Prime who use military facilities, as DoD wants, would see a 24 percent enrollment fee increase plus other increases in cost-shares and pharmacy copays. Families who elect to stay with TRICARE Standard - which costs DoD less than Prime - would incur a new $900 annual enrollment fee, plus a $600 deductible for using out-of-network care, in addition to their existing 25 percent cost share for all services. If a military family has a choice, a higher deductible for using out-of-network care might make sense. But DoD acknowledges the network system will only cover 85 percent of the population. Stromberg told the committee MOAA:

- Believes the 15 percent of beneficiaries who have no choice other than using out-of-network providers shouldn't be charged an extra $1,200 in enrollment fees and extra deductible for having no other option Strobridge told the panel.
- Believes there should be no enrollment fee for TRICARE Standard or TFL, as neither plan guarantees access to a network of providers, as TRICARE Prime does.
- Particularly disagrees with the proposal to means-test the TFL enrollment fee by making it a percentage of retired pay. No other federal or civilian employer means-tests its retirees' service-earned health coverage, since it would penalize longer and more successful service.
- Urges against any enrollment fee for TFL for three additional reasons: First, these older retirees already pay more for their health care than any other military beneficiaries. Second, DoD only pays 20 percent of their health costs, because Medicare is first payer. Finally, DoD costs for TFL have dropped 40 percent over the last several years.

All of the witnesses expressed concern DoD's budget proposal does nothing to address the serious continuity of care and consistency of coverage issues faced by the Guard and Reserve communities. Lawmakers were receptive to
MOAA’s and other witnesses’ inputs, and agreed the focus of military health reform must be on improving timely access to quality care rather than simply raising beneficiary fees. [Source: MOAA Leg Up | March 18, 2016 ++]

TRICARE Allergy Coverage Update 02  ►  Season Is Here | 2016

The weather is finally warming and we can spend more time outdoors. Unfortunately for some, warm weather brings suffering from seasonal allergies. However, there is hope. TRICARE covers proven services and supplies needed to diagnose and treat allergies. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, allergies are the 6th leading cause of chronic illness in the U.S. with an annual cost in excess of $18 billion. More than 50 million Americans suffer from allergies each year. There are several types of allergic diseases or diseases worsened by allergies, but the most common are:

- Hay fever
- Asthma
- Conjunctivitis (pink eye)
- Allergic skin conditions (hives, eczema, dermatitis)
- Sinusitis (sinus infections)

If you think you have seasonal allergies, talk to your health care provider. Your provider can provide you with tips on how to reduce or eliminate your exposure in addition to explaining the range of possible test and treatment if recommended. They can use skin and blood tests to diagnose you and treatments can include medications or allergy shots. You should also try to avoid the substance(s) that cause a reaction, also known as allergens. Common allergens are pollens, plants and animal dander. When exposed to allergens individual reactions can vary from person to person. First time exposure may only produce a mild reaction while repeat exposures may result in more symptoms and in some instances more serious reactions. This season, don’t suffer in silence, get help. Talk to your regional contactor for more information about how you can get treatment for your allergies. [Source: TRICARE Communications | March 23, 2016 ++]

TRICARE Help  ►  Q&A 160401

(Q) I just turned 60, and I’m drawing reserve retirement pay. My question is this: I am already enrolled in Medicare Part A and B and am on Social Security. Can I be eligible for Tricare for Life, or do I still have to wait until I turn 65?

A. Since you are eligible for and enrolled in Medicare, you cannot use Tricare Prime. Your only option, in fact, is Tricare for Life. The TFL program consists of Medicare Part A (in-patient hospitalization coverage) and Part B (premium-based outpatient coverage) as the primary payer, with Tricare Standard as second payer. You must be enrolled in Medicare Part B and pay the required premiums to use Tricare for Life as your wrap-around coverage.

If your disabilities are related to service-connected health conditions, you also can be treated at any Veterans Affairs health facility for free. Be aware, however, that if you are seen at a VA facility for care not related to a service-connected disability, you may incur out-of-pocket costs since VA cannot accept payment from Medicare, and Tricare
for Life cannot serve as primary insurer. Thus, if you are seen by a VA provider for a nonservice-connected condition, Tricare will pay only up to 20 percent of the Tricare “allowable charge” for these health visits, and the beneficiary would be required to pay the other 80 percent of the bill.

If you see a Medicare-certified physician, you typically will have zero out-of-pocket costs for health care services because the provider should be covered by both Medicare and Tricare.

*o-o-O-o-*

Have a question for the TRICARE Help column. Send it to tricarehelp@militarytimes.com and include the word “Tricare” in the subject line. Do not attach files. [Source: MilitaryTimes | 1 thru 15 MAR 2016 ++]

* Finances *


IRS Unclaimed Refunds ➤ One Million 2012 Non-Filers | $950 Million

The IRS has $950 million in unclaimed refunds it wants to give to the rightful owners. The cash is waiting for taxpayers who didn't file a 2012 tax return. If you're one of the approximately 1 million folks who didn't send in a Form 1040 back then, all you have to do is fill out a tax return by this year's April 18 deadline. The deadline is 19 APR for taxpayers in Maine and Massachusetts because of the Patriot's Day holiday in those 2 states. Whatever due date applies, don't miss this last-chance deadline for a tax refund. If you do, then the U.S. Treasury gets to keep your money. Forever.

The IRS estimates that the median unclaimed refund check from 2012 is $718. That means half of the checks are less than that, but half are more. Taxpayers eligible for the unpaid refunds live in every state and the District of Columbia. The state with the most unclaimed refunds is Texas. The 96,400 Lone Star State residents who didn't file in 2012 are due a total of almost $94 million. The 6 states with the most unclaimed refund money are:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Unclaimed refunds</th>
<th>Median refund amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Texas</td>
<td>96,400</td>
<td>$771</td>
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<tr>
<td>California</td>
<td>94,900</td>
<td>$656</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida</td>
<td>64,700</td>
<td>$721</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York</td>
<td>57,600</td>
<td>$796</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Illinois</td>
<td>40,300</td>
<td>$782</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Pennsylvania  40,200  $796

Vermont taxpayers, on the other hand, appear to be quite tax-conscious. Only 2,000 residents in that New England state didn’t file in 2012. And Wyoming’s 2,700 nonfilers have the chance to hit the biggest individual 2012 tax-refund jackpot. The median check in that western state is $851. Tax law says a taxpayer has 3 years to file a return and get the associated refund. Since the 2012 tax year returns were due by the April 2013 deadline, that 3-year window allows these forms to be filed by the April 2016 filing due date. The time-shift tax filing is not unusual. Unclaimed tax refund money piles up every year.

Some people may not have made enough money in 2012 to require them to file a tax return. Others simply didn't get around to filing and because there's no penalty for not sending in a return when no tax is owed, they didn't get notices from the IRS. Whatever the reason, individuals who don't file risk losing tax money that is theirs and possibly even more. And remember that if you didn't make much money in 2012, you might be eligible to claim the earned income tax credit, or EITC, for that tax year when you finally send in the return. For 2012, the credit is worth as much as $5,891. The EITC is available to individuals and families whose incomes are below certain thresholds.

### Earned income limits by filing status for tax year 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number of qualifying children claimed</th>
<th>Single or head of household</th>
<th>Married, filing jointly</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>$13,980</td>
<td>$19,190</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>$36,920</td>
<td>$42,130</td>
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<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>$41,952</td>
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<tr>
<td>3 or more</td>
<td>$45,060</td>
<td>$50,270</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Don't forget 2013, 2014. But just getting up to date with your 2012 return might not be enough. The IRS says 2012 refund checks might be held if the taxpayers who finally file that year's return also failed to file tax returns for 2013 and 2014. Check your records. If you missed those subsequent years, too, get those forms to the IRS as soon as possible. You can download prior year tax returns at the IRS website. [Source: Bankrate | Kay Bel | March 15, 2016 ++]

### my Social Security Update 02  ➤ Go Green

Social Security sends a SSA-1099/1042S each January to everyone who receives Social Security benefits. It shows the total amount of benefits paid in the previous year and is used for tax purposes. Previously, people who lost their SSA-1099 had to call or visit a Social Security office to get a replacement or request one be mailed to them. With this new online service, people now only need to create a ‘my Social Security account’, or log into their existing one. Once there you can obtain many of the things you formerly had to call or go to a SSA office to accomplish. If you currently receive Social Security benefits or have Medicare, you can use the online account to:

- Get your benefit verification letter
- Check your benefit and payment information and your earnings record
- Change your address and phone number
- Start or change direct deposit of your benefit payment

If you are not currently receiving Social Security benefits, you can use your online account to:

- View and/or print Your Social Security Statement
- Get Estimates of your retirement, disability, and survivors benefits
- Check your earnings record
- Review the estimated Social Security and Medicare taxes you've paid
In order to create a "my Social Security" account, you must be able to verify some information about yourself and have a valid E-mail address, a Social Security number, a U.S. mailing address, and be at least 18 years of age. To get started, go to [http://www.ssa.gov/myaccount](http://www.ssa.gov/myaccount), click on the "SIGN IN OR CREATE AN ACCOUNT" button and follow the prompts. When you create a ‘my Social Security’ account, you will no longer receive a paper Social Security Statement in the mail. You will, however, receive an email reminder — which contains no personal information — approximately three months before your birthday, to remind you to review your Statement online. Subsequently, If you would like to receive your Social Security Statement by mail, print and complete a "Request For Social Security Statement" (Form SSA-7004) available at [https://www.ssa.gov/myaccount/materials/pdfs/SSA-7004.pdf](https://www.ssa.gov/myaccount/materials/pdfs/SSA-7004.pdf) and mail it to the address provided on the form. You should receive your paper Social Security Statement in the mail in four to six weeks.

**NOTES:**
1. To create a "my Social Security" account, you must provide some personal information about yourself and give answers to some questions that only you are likely to know. Next, you create a username and password that you will use to access your online account. This process protects you and keeps your personal Social Security information private.
2. You can create a "my Social Security" account only to gain access to your own personal information. Even with a person's written consent, you cannot use this online service to access the records of a person with whom you have a business relationship; or for whom you are an appointed representative. Unauthorized use of this service may subject you to criminal or civil penalties, or both.
3. You may be unable or unwilling to create an online account if you:
   - Blocked electronic access to your personal Social Security information.
   - Recently moved or changed your name.
   - Placed a freeze on your credit report. To create a my Social Security account in person without removing the security freeze or fraud alert, visit your local Social Security office
   - Have been the victim of domestic violence or identity theft.
   - Are uncomfortable with or unable to use the online process for some other reason

[Source: SSA | 26 Mar 2016 ++]

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**Elder Financial Abuse & Exploitation Update 01**

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1 in 5
Older Americans need more help from their banks and credit unions to protect them from being ripped off by strangers and relatives, the Consumer Finance Protection Bureau says. Nearly 1 in 5 seniors report being a victim of financial exploitation, the government bureau says. The illegal or improper use of a senior’s money, property or assets is the most common form of elder abuse and costs seniors billions of dollars per year, said CFPB Director Richard Cordray. Abuse may be perpetrated by family members, caregivers, scam artists, financial advisers, home repair contractors or fiduciaries, the bureau said. The bureau this week issued an advisory and a 62-page report with recommendations for banks and credit unions to prevent, recognize, report and respond to financial exploitation of older Americans


“When seniors fall prey to a scam by a stranger or to theft by a family member, they may be too embarrassed or too frail to report it,” Cordray said. Banks and credit unions are uniquely positioned to look out for older Americans and take action to protect them.” There are 57 million Americans now age 62 or older, and 10,000 more join them every day, the bureau said. And seniors can be attractive targets for financial abuse: They may own significant assets, have equity in their homes and regular income such as Social Security or a pension. Also, isolation, cognitive decline, physical disability or other health problems make older Americans especially vulnerable. Studies indicate that 22 percent of Americans over age 70 have mild cognitive impairment and about one-third of Americans age 85 and over have Alzheimer’s disease, the bureau said. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Jim Gold | March 24, 2016 ++]

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**SSA Red Book ➤ Free Guide to Employment**

The Social Security Administration’s SSA Publication No. 64-030 (Red Book) is a free guide to employment supports for people who receive Social Security disability benefits, Supplemental Security Income, or both. It explains SSA’s work incentives, how working can affect benefits, where to find local services, and more. Educators, rehabilitation specialists, and counselors rely on this publication every year. Whether their clients are thinking about working now or may want to work in the future, the Red Book can help them consider the possibilities. The 2016 edition of the Publication is available on the Social Security Administration’s website [https://www.ssa.gov/redbook](https://www.ssa.gov/redbook). For a free printed copy of the 2016 Red Book, contact:

- By Mail: Social Security Administration, Office of Supply and Warehouse Management, Requisition and Quality Control Team, 6401 Security Boulevard, 2508 Robert M. Ball Building, Baltimore, MD 21235-6301.
- By Email, Phone, or Fax: ofsm.oswm.rqct.orders@ssa.gov or (410) 965-2039/2037F.

Some of the benefits addressed for 2016 are:

- Increased the Substantial Gainful Activity (SGA) amount for individuals with disabilities, other than blindness, from $1,090 to $1,130 for 2016.
- The SGA amount for individuals who are blind is $1,820. The amount is unchanged from 2015.
• The monthly earnings amount used to determine if a month counts for the Trial Work Period month is $810 per month in 2016.
• For 2016, the Supplemental Security Income (SSI) Federal Benefit Rate (FBR) is $733 per month for an eligible individual and $1,100 per month for an eligible couple. The amounts are unchanged from 2015.
• For 2016, the amount of earnings that will have no effect on eligibility or benefits for SSI beneficiaries who are students is unchanged from 2015. For 2016, the monthly amount is $1,780, and the yearly maximum is $7,180.
• For 2016, the monthly Medicare Part A Hospital Insurance Base Premium is $411 and the 45 percent Reduced Premium is $226. The Part B Supplemental Medical Insurance monthly Base Premium is $104.90, the same as it was in 2015.

[Source: VAMC Detroit | John D. Dingell | March 23, 2016 ++]

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Saving Money ► 27 Ways to do It

General
• Save your loose change. Putting aside fifty cents a day over the course of a year will allow you to save nearly 40% of a $500 emergency fund.
• Keep track of your spending. At least once a month, use credit card, checking, and other records to review what you've purchased. Then, ask yourself if it makes sense to reallocate some of this spending to an emergency savings account.
• Never purchase expensive items on impulse. Think over each expensive purchase for at least 24 hours. Acting on this principle will mean you have far fewer regrets about impulse purchases, and far more money for emergency savings.
• Use debit and credit cards prudently. To minimize interest charges, try to limit credit card purchases to those you can pay off in full at the end of the month. If you use a debit card, don't rely on an overdraft feature to spend money you don't have. With either approach, you'll have more money available for emergency savings.
• Are you looking for an effective way to establish a budget? Beginning on the first day of a new month, get a receipt for everything you purchase. Stack and review receipts at the end of the month, and you will clearly be able to see where your money is going.
• It pays to practice preventative dental care, since a good cleaning routine helps prevent fillings, root canals, and dental crowns, which are expensive and no fun.
• Most people don’t track what they spend and may not realize when expenses add up to more than their budget can handle. To keep track of what you spend, put what you think you should spend for the month on transportation, food, entertainment, etc., into envelopes. This will help you avoid buying things you don’t need, and what’s left over can go into saving.
• Take advantage of discounts and/or incentive programs provided through your employer. For example, if the company you work for offers discounted rates for computers, fitness center memberships, movie tickets and passes to summer festivals, take advantage! Check your corporate intranet or talk to your human resources representative. And don’t forget the best deal of all – investing in your 401(k)!

Page 115 of 134
• One way to establish a savings discipline is to “save” an amount equal to whatever is spent on nonessential indulgences. Put a matching amount in a cookie jar for expenditures for beer, wine, cigarettes, designer coffee, etc. If you can’t afford to save the matching amount, you can’t afford the $4 super almond low-fat latte.

• Take the amount the item costs and divide it into your hourly wage. If it’s a $50 pair of shoes and you make $10 an hour, ask yourself, are those shoes really worth five long hours of work? It helps keep things in perspective.

• Aim for short-term savings goals, such as setting aside $20 a week or month rather than long term savings goals, such as $200 over a year. People save more successfully when they keep the short-term goal in sight.

• Save money by buying items online, in bulk. Some companies even offer free shipping on large orders. Clearance items are sometimes available, and good savings can be found on non-perishable groceries and diapers. This saves time and money!

Food
• Substitute coffee for expensive coffee drinks. The $2 a day you could well save by buying a coffee rather than a cappuccino or latte would allow you, over the course of a year, to completely fund a $500 emergency fund.

• Bring lunch to work. If buying lunch at work costs $5, but making lunch at home costs only $2.50, then in a year, you could afford to create a $500 emergency fund and still have money left over.

• Eat out one fewer time each month. If it costs you $25 to eat out, but only $5 to eat in, then the $20 you save each month allows you to almost completely fund a $500 emergency savings account.

• Shop for food with a list and stick to it. People who do food shopping with a list, and buy little else, spend much less money than those who decide what to buy when they get to the food market. The annual savings could easily be hundreds of dollars.

Prescription and Over-the-Counter Drugs
• Ask your physician to consider prescribing generic drugs. Generic drugs can cost several hundred dollars less to purchase annually than brand-name drugs.

• Find the lowest-cost place to purchase prescription drugs. Make sure to check out not only your local pharmacist but also local supermarkets, area discount centers, and mail-order pharmacies.

• Purchase storebrand over-the-counter medications. Storebrand medications often cost 20-40 percent less than nationally advertised brands. The savings could easily exceed $100 a year.

Banking
• Avoid bouncing checks or overdraft fees each month. The $20-30 you save by not bouncing a check each month would save you enough money to nearly fully fund a $500 emergency savings account.

• Reduce credit card debt by $1,000. That $1,000 debt reduction will probably save you $150-200 a year, and much more if you're paying penalty rates of 20-30%.

• Make your monthly credit card payment on time. The $30-35 you save by not being charged a late fee each month on one card would save you most of the money you need for $500 in emergency savings.

• Use only the ATMs of your bank or credit union. Using the ATM of another financial institution once a week could well cost you $3 a withdrawal, or more than $150 over the course of a year.

Insurance
• Shop around for auto and homeowners' insurance: Before renewing your existing policies each year, check out the rates of competing companies (see the website of your state insurance department). Their annual premiums may well be several hundred dollars lower.

• Raise the deductibles on auto and homeowners' insurance: Being willing to pay $500-1,000 on a claim, rather than only $100-250, can reduce annual premiums by as much as several hundred dollars.
• Assess your need for life insurance coverage. If your children are now on their own, or if your spouse works, you may not need as much life insurance protection. The annual premiums on a term life policy would typically fully fund an emergency savings account.

• Consider dropping credit insurance coverage on installment loans. Many consumers don't need credit insurance because they have sufficient assets to protect themselves in the event of death, disability, or unemployment. Terminating this coverage often reduces financing costs by three percentage points, a savings of about $1,000 on a four-year $20,000 installment loan.

[Source: CFA | America Save$ | March 25, 2016 ++]

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**Job Scam X 4 ➤ How it Works**

The scammers are at it again, preying on people looking for legitimate jobs. They’ve got at least four new schemes to part you from your money under the guise of offering legitimate employment or business opportunities. “The best protection against job scams is to equip job seekers with information about the latest techniques scammers are using to trap their victims,” says Sara Sutton Fell, CEO and founder of FlexJobs, a subscriber-based online job search service. “Many people believe that job scams are always very obvious and easy to avoid, but unfortunately there are an increasing number of sophisticated job scams.” A FlexJobs survey of 2,600 job seekers revealed nearly 1 in 5 respondents had been a job-scam victim at least once. There are 60 to 70 scams for every one legitimate work-from-home job position, Sutton Fell says. The Federal Trade Commission agrees. “Many work-at-home ads that promise you can earn a great living, even in your spare time, are scams,” the FTC warns. But scammers target more than work-from-home job seekers. Check out these four latest job scams, and how to avoid them, according to FlexJobs, the FTC, the Better Business Bureau and other sources:

1. **Online interview with a “real” company:** A scammer poses as a recruiter who claims to be from a firm you know, or one you can find on the Web. Looks legit! After you send in your resume, a supposed hiring manager invites you to an interview, but not in person. Instead, the manager says you need to use instant messages or download a program to answer questions about your qualifications. “You’re hired!” you’re told afterward. Once “hired,” scammers steal money and personal information from you by requesting your Social Security and bank account numbers. To avoid the scam:
   • Contact the real company to ensure that a job posting is legitimate. Instead of using a number provided by the recruiter, search online to find the company’s real website and verify that the company actually has a job opening for the position you’re applying for.
   • Search for the job online. If the same post comes up in other cities, it is likely a scam.
   • No matter how talented you are, be very skeptical if they say you are hired on the spot.

2. **Reshipping scam:** You may get an email from a generic sounding HR Department asking you to apply for a shipping manager’s job: “Our Agents receive, check, consolidate and reship different packages and ensure that our company continues to deliver packages to our customers on time and with care.” You would receive at home packages usually containing devices such as laptops or iPhones. After testing the products, you ship them overseas. The items, however, are purchased with stolen credit cards and suddenly you’re a smuggler. You could be prosecuted for robbery and mail fraud, especially since postage labels for reshipping can also be fraudulent. To avoid the scam:
   • Know job titles scammers will use. “Reshipper” has become synonymous with job scams, so beware of that job description, and new ones, such as “merchandising manager” or “package processing assistant.”
   • Familiarize yourself with the duties. They might include receiving, processing, and mailing packages to a foreign address using pre-paid postage mailing labels that are provided to you via email.
3. **Post office job scam:** In online or print ads, scam artists offer to help job seekers find and apply for federal or post office jobs in exchange for a fee. They might even offer to sell you study materials for the postal exams and offer money-back guarantees should you fail to pass. Scam artists would like you to believe that there are hidden postal and federal jobs that only they can access. To avoid the scam:

- “When it comes to federal and postal jobs, the word to remember is free,” says the FTC. “Information about job openings with the U.S. government or U.S. Postal Service is free and available to everyone. Applying for a federal or postal job also is free.”
- Know where to apply. U.S. Postal Service openings can be found by visiting usps.com/careers or by clicking the careers link at the bottom of the usps.com home page. Don’t be fooled by oft-used, official-sounding names or titles such as the “U.S. Agency for Career Advancement” or the “Postal Employment Service,” neither of which exist, the FTC warns.

4. **All that glitters:** Oro Marketing, the FTC says, was a telemarketer that targeted Spanish-speaking women with the “opportunity” to sell brand-name products such as Gucci and Ralph Lauren. The packages of goods, costing up to $490 each and arriving COD, were full of unusable junk instead of brand-name goods. When people tried to refuse shipments or return the goods, the company harassed and threatened them. FTC action shut down Oro, and its owner is forever banned from doing business. But other telemarketers may try to rope you in. To avoid the scam:

- Be skeptical and do some research. Query the street address or phone number in an online search to make sure the company actually exists at the location it claims.
- Resist high-pressure tactics. Don’t let a telemarketing scammer entice you into paying money without giving you time to think it through.
- Don’t play along: Requiring COD or money order payments could be signs of scams. Another red flag is being told you can’t open a box to inspect merchandise before you pay for it.

**Here are more ways to avoid job scams:**

- Watch where you post your resume online: Not only can scammers determine you are job hunting, but they also can often find your personal contact information. Include only your email address in online resumes.
- Don’t pay to play: Legitimate jobs don’t require application fees. Also, no jobs ask job seekers to receive money, keep a portion and forward the rest. They may require training, computer equipment, or programs, which should be detailed up front so that you are aware of any investments you may need to make. Don’t fall for “work-from-home kits” that promise to show you how to make money from home.
- Don’t give out personal banking info: If a job requires you to click a specific link or asks for detailed personal and financial information, scammers likely are trying to collect sensitive information for malicious reasons. A potential employer won’t need access to your bank account while you are a job candidate.
- You don’t say: Communications riddled with typos and bad grammar are a sign they’re very likely from scammers.


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**Craigslist Rental Scam ► How it Works**

Planning to move this spring? If you are hunting for an apartment on Craigslist, watch out for rental cons. A new report from New York University explores just how common these scams are. Spoiler alert: they are everywhere.
How the Scam Works:

- You are looking at Craigslist apartment listings for a new place to live. You know that scams are common on the site, but just how prevalent are they? Very, according to the NYU researchers. Craigslist fails to identify more than half of rental scam listings, and suspicious posts linger for as long as 20 hours before being taken down.

- Researchers reviewed more than 2 million for-rent posts and found 29,000 fake listings in 20 major cities. Of those, there were three key types of scams. In the first, a fake post instructs a would-be tenant to purchase a credit report. The scammer gets a commission from the credit reporting site, even though there is no property for rent.

- In another scheme, con artists duplicate rental listings from other sites and post on Craigslist at a lower price. Prospective renters pay a deposit via wire transfer. Another pervasive scam is "realtor service" companies. Targets are asked to pay fees to access listings of pre-foreclosure rentals or rent-to-own properties. In the majority of cases, the companies leading the scams have no connection to the properties listed.

How to Spot a Rental Scam:

- Don't wire money or use a prepaid debit card: You should never pay a security deposit or first month's rent by prepaid debit card or wire transfer. These payments are the same as sending cash - once you send it, you have no way to get it back.

- Watch out for deals that sound too good: Scammers lure in targets by promising low rents, great amenities and other perks. If the price seems much better than offered elsewhere, it may be a scam.

- See the property in person: Don't send money to someone you've never met for an apartment you haven't seen. If you can't visit an apartment or house yourself, ask someone you trust to go and confirm that it is what was advertised.

- Don't fall for the overseas landlord story: Scammers often claim to be out of the country and instruct targets to send money overseas.

- Search for the same ad in other cities: Search for the listing online. If you find the same ad listed in other cities, that's a huge red flag.


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Scam Filter Update Scam ➤ How it Works

This scam has an ironic twist. It's a phishing email that claims to be an update to your email service to protect against scam emails. Who says scammers don't have a sense of humor?

How the Scam Works:

- You are at work, and you get an email that appears to be an update from your office's IT department. The message, with the subject line "Mailbox Helpdesk" (or something similar) informs you that "new security
updates need to be performed on our servers, due to the rate of phishing." To get the update and protect yourself against these phishing emails, just click the link and log into the IT help desk.

- Don't do it! The "software" to protect your inbox from phishing emails is actually a phishing scam itself. Clicking on the link will download malware to your computer or mobile device.
- This scam is targeting business and college email addresses. Like many phishing scams that pose as office updates, such as emails from the scanner or voicemail, scammers are hoping busy employees or students will click without thinking.

**How to Spot a Phishing Scam:**

- Be wary of unexpected emails that contain links or attachments. Do not click on links or open files in unfamiliar emails.
- Consider how the company normally contacts you. If a company usually contacts you by phone, be suspicious if you suddenly start receiving emails or text messages without ever opting in to the new communications.
- Don't believe what you see. Just because an email looks real, doesn't mean it is. Scammers can fake anything from a company logo to the "Sent" email address.
- Check your company's IT department or Internet service provider. If something sounds suspicious, confirm it by checking with authorities at your company or ISP. Contact them directly from a number you know is accurate. DON'T click on any links in the message you suspect is a scam.
- Be cautious of generic emails. Scammers try to cast a wide net by including little or no specific information in their fake emails. Always be wary of messages that don't contain your name, last digits of your account number or other personalizing information. Pay attention to the ways in which your IT department normally addresses concerns and be cautious of any new method.

Read more about phishing on the FTC website [http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0003-phishing](http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0003-phishing) and see examples of common phishing messages. To find out more about other scams, check out BBB Scam Stopper ([www.bbb.org/scam](http://www.bbb.org/scam)). To report a scam, go to BBB Scam Tracker ([www.bbb.org/scamtracker](http://www.bbb.org/scamtracker)).

[Source: BBB Scam Alert | December 21, 2015 ++]

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**VA Care Overseas ► U.S. | Overseas Comparison**

The eligibility requirements for medical services are different for Veterans outside the United States than for Veterans inside the United States. The VA Manila Outpatient Clinic provides medical care for U.S. Veterans only for a VA-rated service connected disability, or any disability associated with and held to be aggravating a VA-rated service connected disability. For a comparison on VA benefits in the U.S. vs. Overseas refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “VA Manila Benefits Fact Sheet 2016”. [Source: 38 CFR 17.35 | March 21, 2016 ++]

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**Tax Burden for Delaware Retired Vets ► As of Mar 2016**

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 Delaware:

**Sales Taxes**
State Sales Tax: None - Delaware does not impose a state or local sales tax, but does impose a Gross Receipts Tax on the seller of goods (tangible or otherwise) or provider of services in the state. Business and occupational gross receipts tax rates range from 0.1037% to 2.0736%, depending on the business activity.
Gasoline Tax: 41.4 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)
Diesel Fuel Tax: Tax 46.4 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)
Cigarette Tax: $1.60 cents/pack of 20

**Personal Income Taxes**
Tax Rate Range: Low – 2.2%; High – 6.6%
Income Brackets: Six. Lowest – $2,000; Highest – $60,000 +
Tax Credits: Single – $110; Married – $220; Dependents – $110; Over 60 – take an additional $110
Standard Deduction: $3,250 if single and not itemizing; $6,500 if married filing jointly and not itemizing.
Medical/Dental Deduction: None
Federal Income Tax Deduction: None
Retirement Income Taxes: Social Security and Railroad Retirement benefits are exempt. Taxpayers 60 and older can exclude $12,500 of investment and qualified pension income. They may qualify for an additional tax credit of $110. Out-of-state government pensions qualify for the pension and retirement exemption. Under age 60, $2,000 is exempt. If you are 65 or older on December 31, you are eligible for an additional standard deduction of $2,500 (if you do not itemize). Go to [http://revenue.delaware.gov/information/faqs_pit.shtml#RI](http://revenue.delaware.gov/information/faqs_pit.shtml#RI) for more information on tax rates and exemptions,
Retired Military Pay: Up to $2,000 of military retirement pay excluded for individuals under age 60; $12,500 if 60 or older.
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.

**Property Taxes**
All real property in the state is subject to tax unless specifically exempt. Personal property, tangible and intangible property is exempt. Real estate is subject to county, school district, vocational school district and municipal property taxes. The state offers various property tax relief programs for residents age 65 and older and for residents with disabilities. Homeowners 65 and older can get a credit equal to half of the school property taxes, up to $500. For information on the senior school property tax credit, [click here](http://dedo.delaware.gov/dedo_pdf/NewsEvents_pdf/publications/2010-2011_Property_Tax_Report.pdf). For property tax rates refer to [http://dedo.delaware.gov/dedo_pdf/NewsEvents_pdf/publications/2010-2011_Property_Tax_Report.pdf](http://dedo.delaware.gov/dedo_pdf/NewsEvents_pdf/publications/2010-2011_Property_Tax_Report.pdf) For property tax rates,

**Inheritance and Estate Taxes**
Delaware brought back its state estate tax effective for deaths occurring between July 1, 2009 and July 1, 2013. For deaths in 2012, estates with a total value of more than $5.12 million may be subject to the Delaware estate tax.

For further information, visit the Delaware Division of Revenue site [http://revenue.delaware.gov](http://revenue.delaware.gov) or call 302-577-8200. [Source: www.retirementliving.com Mar 2016 ++]
Notes of Interest ➤ 16 thru 31 Mar 2016

- **Sea-level Rise.** Up to 13.1 million people could be displaced from their homes due to sea-level rise by 2100, according to a study published 14 MAR in Nature Climate Change. Almost half of those people would be in Florida. The study's projection is based on the sea level rising about six feet due to climate change, with relocation costing about $14 trillion.

- **USCG.** The Coast Guard is scheduled to retire the $115M Hamilton-class high endurance USCGC Boutwell (WHEC-719) on 16 MAR and will subsequently transfer the retired ship to the Philippines. The USCG has retired six Hamilton-class cutters since 2011. The ships have been transferred to Bangladesh, the Philippines, and Nigeria, with each country receiving two vessels respectively.

- **FVAP.** DoD Instruction Federal Voting Assistance Program (FVAP) NUMBER 1000.04 September 13, 2012 (http://www.dtic.mil/whs/directives/corres/pdf/100004p.pdf) is applicable to the NOV elections.

- **50's TV.** Go to http://biggeekdad.com/2016/01/1950s-tv-programs and see how many of these shows you used to view when you were a kid.

- **Lets Dance 1958.** Do you remember dancing to Chuck Beery’s ‘Johnny Be Good’ tune like they are doing at https://www.youtube.com/byecey/videos/1084726844905255/?!ref=nf.

- **Hello China.** The Army plans to stockpile equipment in Vietnam, Cambodia, and other Pacific countries yet unnamed that will allow US forces to deploy there more rapidly, because key supplies and gear will already be in place. The new caches will be well inside what China considers its sphere of influence.

- **National Anthem.** For an Amazing Rendition go to http://www.chonday.com/Videos/anthofius3 to listen to 500 high school choir students sing the U.S. National anthem in a high-rise hotel. Each night before curfew, they gather on their balconies to sing the Star-Spangled Banner from the balconies of the 18-story atrium at Louisville's downtown Hyatt Regency as part of the Kentucky Music Educators convention.

- **DoD.** A law in effect since 1992 requires annual audits of all federal agencies—and the Pentagon alone has never complied.” All $585 billion and more, e.g., for the Afghanistan and Iraq conflicts, of your money—not just unaudited, but, in the sober judgement of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) of the Congress, this vast military budget is year after year UNAUDITABLE. In the last dozen years, the Pentagon has broken every promise to Congress about when DOD would pass an audit. Meanwhile, Congress doubled Pentagon spending.

- **COLA.** The February CPI is 230.972, and remains at 1.4 percent below the FY 2014 COLA baseline. Because there was not a positive COLA in FY 2015, the FY 2014 baseline is used.

- **Puzzle.** Go to https://www.youtube-nocookie.com/embed/3PszMaZ5Ipk?rel=0 Are there 63 or 66 tiles?

- **Cuba Travel.** Carnival Corp., the company behind the Carnival Cruise Line brand, announced that its new Fathom Travel brand received approval from Cuban authorities to set sail for Cuba starting 1 MAY. To learn more, visit www.Fathom.org. Fathom’s ship Adonia will leave Miami on its inaugural trip to Cuba on 1 May.

- **O.K.** In 1839 the initials “O.K.” were first published in The Boston Morning Post. Meant as an abbreviation for “oll korrekt,” a popular slang misspelling of “all correct” at the time, OK steadily made its way into the
everyday speech of Americans. During the late 1830s, it was a favorite practice among younger, educated circles to misspell words intentionally, then abbreviate them and use them as slang when talking to one another. Just as teenagers today have their own slang based on distortions of common words, such as “kewl” for “cool” or “DZ” for “these. Popular 1930’s abbreviations included “KY” for “No use” (“know yuse”), “KG” for “No go” (“Know go”), and “OW” for all right (“oll wright”).

- **VA Facilities.** Fifty-eight percent of the 6,300 VA facilities are more than 50 years old, including more than 400 that date to the 1800s.

- **DoD Hiring Freeze.** The Defense Department has instituted a hiring freeze in the office of the secretary of Defense and the component agencies reporting directly to it. Civilian positions in individual branches or in the commands of the Joint Chiefs of Staff are not affected by the freeze. The hiring suspension comes as the Pentagon follows through on an initiative to reduce headquarters staff by 25 percent, codified by Congress in the 2016 defense authorization bill.

- **Debt.** Members of the military submit debt collector complaints at twice the rate of civilians, according to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). The agency is charged with monitoring complaints from those in the military. Debt collection, mortgages and credit reporting were subject of most complaints.


- **Pledge of Allegiance.** In 1969, Red Skelton performed a self-written monologue on his TV show about the Pledge. It was not only inspirational but makes a point of what could happen to the practice of requiring our kids to say it in school. At [https://www.facebook.com/DAV/videos/10155706300375387](https://www.facebook.com/DAV/videos/10155706300375387) you can view his salute to Old Glory.

- **Boeing 787-9.** To see this Giant Dreamliner Passenger jet built in 4 minutes through time lapse photography go to [http://safeyoutube.net/w/ZMo](http://safeyoutube.net/w/ZMo).

- **Car Buying.** Before you buy a new/used car check out [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcKU4uPCrTM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pcKU4uPCrTM) to hear what secrets car dealers don’t want you to know. For some tips on negotiating a deal see what [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekmXPOkzzUc](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ekmXPOkzzUc) has to say.

- **Drug Deaths.** Nearly half a million Americans died as a result of drug overdose between 2000 and 2014. Opioids such as heroin, along with prescription painkillers, caused 28,000 deaths in 2014, breaking an all-time record, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

- **Gallup Healthcare Survey.** A recent Gallup survey found the most popular proposal to emerge out of the 2016 presidential election was allowing veterans to receive healthcare from providers outside of the VA. Enabling U.S. veterans the ability to access healthcare through any provider that accepts Medicare received a resounding 89% net agreement. It may be the most popular idea of the entire election cycle. Using federal money to modernize the VA, which was less popular -- with a 67 percent net agreement -- but remains one of the most uncontroversial ideas of the season.

- **Autism.** Beginning in 2017, all insurance carriers participating in FEHBP must cover ABA, a popular treatment for children with some form of autism. ABA has been clinically proven to help increase an autistic child’s I.Q., language abilities and coping skills.

[Source: Various | March 31, 2016 ++]

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**Cellphones**  ► **Smartphone Refuseniks Switch to Dumb Phones**

In January, British actor Eddie Redmayne made headlines around the world as he became the latest in a growing band of smartphone refuseniks. “It was a reaction against being glued permanently to my iPhone during waking hours,” he explained, turning instead to an old-fashioned “dumb phone” handset that could only make and take calls. He is not
alone. There is a small but busy market for phones that are simple and cheap at a time when smartphones are becoming ever more complex and expensive. Feature phones — handsets with some basic functions such as playing music and accessing the internet — are gradually being replaced by low cost smartphones, according to Francisco Jeronimo, research director for European mobile devices at IDC, the research group. But there is still a significant demand for older-style phones.

Strategy Analytics, a research group, estimates that 44m basic phones were sold in 2015, accounting for 2 per cent of the global market. Some phonemakers, such as Sony and LG, have already turned their back on the market. But others like Microsoft and Samsung are still producing devices every year aimed at the feature market. Many smartphone users bemoan having to buy devices that are easily broken, require daily recharging and which will be superseded by a new, better version within a year. Even basic smartphones offer computing power that not many people need.

Some users buy phones with limited or no internet connections in a conscious attempt to decouple from the modern digital world. Light Phone founder Joe Hollier falls into this camp. The 25-year-old former skater has developed a credit card-sized phone without a data connection and no extra functions other than to make calls. He describes a feeling of huge relief when the ability to check emails or status updates is removed. Analysts say that there is a growing number of “second phoneys” who use an expensive smartphone or “phablet” during the day, but turn to cheaper, pocket-sized devices when they go out in the evening. The Light Phone functions as a companion device to a smartphone but Mr Hollier hopes it will also encourage people to unplug from the modern internet world.

There are also practical reasons why some are turning their backs on smartphones. The short battery life of devices is a source of constant complaint and many travellers are still attracted to the reliability and long battery life of older phones. This market is still being served by Microsoft, which now owns the Nokia brand. The US group last year launched the Nokia 215, for example, a simple, robust device that has a standby battery life of 29 days. The Nokia 515 has a massive 38 days standby time. The phone has a simple layer of apps and basic data connectivity, but the main attraction is the $30 price tag. As Microsoft boasts: “Exceptional battery life and impressive durability are standard features. When you own a Nokia, you own a phone that’s built to last.”

Dumb phones have more specific uses, however, for example being given to children for calling home. They are simple, robust and cheap if lost. Likewise, there are simple phones for the elderly, such as those made by Doro, which prioritise large buttons and the amplification of volume rather than how quickly they can access the internet. Mr Jeronimo says that such products are becoming a niche opportunity for companies. Doro has grown to become the third-largest feature phonemake in western Europe after Microsoft and Samsung, he adds. Feature phones are also more popular in developing markets because of the combination of low prices and long battery life.

“Using a smartphone in some countries in Africa, for instance, is not an option for many users, as it would require to charge it on a daily basis,” says Mr Jeronimo. “On the other hand using a smartphone means little for users who cannot connect to a 3G network, either because they are not available or because the connectivity is extremely expensive.” And, for those that find even basic phones are too much, there is a solution: the $5 NoPhone Zero. It claims to be the least advanced phone ever created, has no buttons or components and is just a plastic rectangle. It is
a joke, but one that says much about our modern anxiety about technology. [Source: Mobile Technology | Daniel Thomas | February 16, 2016 ++]

Note: I became a “Refusenik” three years ago. Bought a $40 LG that T-Mobile charges me $3 a month plus $0.10 a call/minute to use on a month-to-month contract. Best thing I ever did -- Editor/Publisher RAO Bulletin

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Cellphone Rescue ► What to Do When it Gets Wet

It fell in the toilet. The clumsy waitress knocked a glass of water onto it. You forgot it was in your pocket when you jumped into the pool. That’s just a few of the hundreds of ways your phone could come into life-threatening contact with liquid. According to TekDry, more than 22 million Americans give their phone an accidental bath each year. When it happens to you (and it will), as soon as you’re done freaking out, you’ll probably begin frantically tapping all the buttons, blowing on it, or blasting it with a hair dryer to quickly get rid of all that water. While those are all well-meaning actions, guess what? Totally the wrong approach. Here’s what you should do.

- **First, retrieve it as quickly as possible.** If your phone is still in the bottom of the jacuzzi or the toilet, get it out ASAP. The longer it’s in the liquid, the greater the likelihood damage will be.
- **Once the device is no longer submerged, if you can, take that battery out.** Don’t even bother powering it off, don’t press any other buttons, just open up the phone and pull the battery out. If you can’t do that though — if you own an iPhone or another device that’s impossible to quickly pry apart — you’ll have to settle for just carefully powering the device off. You want to cut off power in the device as quickly as possible to prevent the possibility of a short circuit.
- **Do not blow-dry it or stick it in the oven.** The heat can damage the delicate electronics inside. What you should do is give it a quick wipe with a clean towel, making sure no water accidentally ends up draining into its ports or other openings. If there are traces of water trapped inside cracks or indentations in the case, try carefully and conservatively using compressed air to blow it out. Just be careful not to blow the water further inside the phone.
- **Rice Option.** Many folks swear by stuffing your phone in a bag of dry rice, and letting it sit for 24 to 36 hours or more. This is cheap, easy, and can be done in a pinch. But this method could have some negatives: If the rice absorbs the water well, you may be left with a mushy rice mess stuck in its creases and I/O ports. Those with skin in the game (as you’ll see below) also say that the starch from the surface of the rice can get inside your phone and muck it up. To be safe, wrap the phone loosely in a paper towel before dropping it into the rice.
- **Synthetic Desiccants.** The smartest option is to keep synthetic desiccants on-hand. They are far less messy, and they work more quickly and efficiently than rice. The trick is that for the desiccant to do its magic, it
needs to be in a sealed container so that it can absorb water only from your phone, and not from the outside air. Also, you need to have enough of the desiccant present to absorb all the water.

✓ The $20 Bheestie Bag is one option you can order and keep on the shelf at home. You can drop your phone in the airtight plastic pouch periodically (like after your jeans get soaked in a rainstorm) to make sure no lingering moisture starts doing damage inside your handset, or just use it if your phone encounters a full-on liquid emergency.

✓ Dry-All is another product you can buy and keep with you just in case. Same deal as the Bheestie Bag: you just seal up your phone inside the pouch, which is filled with desiccant, and then wait the specified amount of time (24 to 48 hours) to let your phone dry out. You can grab a pouch for as cheap as $6 on Amazon.

✓ Drybox is another option. You can use its website to find retailers in your city that have a Drybox you can use on-site. After you’ve powered down your phone post-plunge, you just head to one of these Drybox locations and within minutes, your gadget should be bone dry and restored. While San Francisco had many to choose from, other cities like Houston, TX, and Santa Barbara, CA did not have any Dryboxes nearby, so do your research.

✓ Of course, the smartest thing you can do is begin hoarding the desiccant packets you’re already getting for free. Start now: Every time you see a loose desiccant packet in a box with a new pair of shoes, a hard drive, a shipment of spices, or whatever, pull it out and save it. Dump them all into a plastic or glass container you’re certain has an air-tight seal. After you’ve collected a bunch of them, you have an emergency phone-rescue pod ready to go. Just drop the dunked phone into the container, seal it up, and you’ll get the same results as any of those other commercial options.

Following these tips, there’s a good chance your phone could survive its untimely spill. But if it takes an especially big plunge, you could be SOL. In which case, it’s time to either use a professional cellphone drying service or buy a new handset. Two of these are:

- **TekDry.** A Denver-based company accessible through Staples [http://www.tekdry.com/home/staples-carmel-mountain-ranch-ca/?gclid=ClmNwK-n3csCFUWTfgr0d8XMIIfA](http://www.tekdry.com/home/staples-carmel-mountain-ranch-ca/?gclid=ClmNwK-n3csCFUWTfgr0d8XMIIfA) that says it can fix wet cellphones and many other electronic devices (including laptops and tablets) in just 20 minutes – no rice required. TekDry’s co-founder Craig Beinecke doesn’t have much regard for that old standby. The problem is, putting your phone in rice is even less effective than just leaving it on the counter to air-dry, according to a recent test commissioned by Beinecke and his co-founders. And because the drying is slow and usually incomplete, the water inside has more time to cause corrosion and other damage. Their patented TekDry process uses a combination of negative pressure (a vacuum) and low heat to draw water out of a device. Sensors on the machine keep track of the humidity in the drying chamber. The company’s service outlets charges $69.99 to repair a wet cellphone, tablet, or computer. If they can’t fix it, you won’t be charged anything.

- **DryBox Rescue.** This company’s technique is to rapidly extract water from your phone. According to its website [http://dryboxrescue.com](http://dryboxrescue.com), DryBox is available in several locations across the U.S. The service usually costs between $20 and $50 and works in 30 minutes. DryBox is available in several locations across the U.S. The service usually costs between $20 and $50 and works in 30 minutes.


Plumbers ▶ Dodgy Tricks to Overcharge You

Many of us hate calling a plumber for help. Most plumbers are honest professionals, but we worry that a few might try dodgy tricks to overcharge us. So just placing the phone call makes us uncomfortable. The only way to feel good about calling the plumber is to learn:
- What tricks you may run into.
- How to spot those tricks.
- How to find good plumbers and get value for your money.

Following are 10 sneaky plumber tricks of the trade. Learn to recognize them, and you should be much better equipped to find an honest pro.

1. **Working unlicensed and uninsured.** Unlicensed and uninsured tradespeople usually charge less. But you’re taking a big risk hiring them. Most cities require homeowners to use licensed and insured contractors, even when you don’t need a permit. Of course, do-it-yourselfers legally can do a lot of renovation work on their own homes — but only within limits. For example, you must use licensed professionals for structural, electrical and plumbing work. With unlicensed tradespeople, there’s nowhere to turn if the work is poorly done. A building inspector can require you to tear out the job and do it again. When hiring a plumber, ask to see identification, a state license and proof of current insurance. To check licensing and insurance credentials, call your state’s licensing department and state insurance commissioner.

2. **Estimating a job sight unseen.** How can a plumber realistically estimate a price for a job he or she hasn’t seen? Don’t accept a quote without an in-person inspection. And get it in writing. While plumbers can’t quote a price without seeing the job, they can tell you their hourly rate and if they have a minimum charge. They can also give you a ballpark idea of the time involved on certain small, predictable jobs — installing a new shower head or clearing a plugged kitchen sink, for example. But remember that even small jobs can be more complicated than you realize.

3. **Lowballing the bid.** A surprisingly cheap bid should make your antennae perk up. Something’s probably wrong. Plumbing is notoriously expensive and fees can vary widely, so this is something that’s hard to judge. “In Southern California, the cost of (fixing) a drain clog ranges from $75 to $250 depending on who you call,” writes plumber Aaron Stickley at [http://plumbing.about.com/od/basics/a/Top-5-Tips-For-Pricing-Plumbers.htm](http://plumbing.about.com/od/basics/a/Top-5-Tips-For-Pricing-Plumbers.htm). You’ll get an idea of what’s a reasonable cost for your job by collecting several competing bids. Angie’s List, which charges a fee to access reviews of local businesses and professionals, says: A common plumbing scam is to give a low estimate that doesn’t account for all of the labor needed. You will then need to pay for the additional labor before the plumber finishes the job, putting you in a tough situation.

4. **Padding the estimate.** Another approach is to pump up the bid with inflated prices and unnecessary items. You can spot jacked-up prices by getting several competing estimates.

5. **Showing up uninvited.** Call the police if a “plumber” knocks on your door and tries to persuade you to hire him or her. This is often a tipoff to fraud or to a burglar checking out your home’s vulnerabilities. Plenty of people — elderly homeowners in particular — are targeted by con artists with a good line of patter. Don’t invite anyone into your home whom you have not first checked out. Find trustworthy plumbers by collecting recommendations from:

- **Friends and colleagues.** They’re best, since you know them and can trust their judgment.
- **Plumbers supply or plumbing fixture store.** These businesses are likely to work with reputable plumbers.

• A Web search. Search a company’s name (look up the correct name and spelling) in quotes and add words like “fraud,” “review” or “complaint” to the search.

6. Using bait-and-switch tactics. Bait-and-switch is a deceptive marketing practice: A company advertises one product or service and then tries substituting something else, or an inferior version. When you obtain bids, get the make and model of parts or equipment included, to compare with the final product.

7. Pushing you for cash. A plumber may ask you to pay under the table in cash and forgo a receipt, maybe with the offer of a discounted price. It’s a sign he’s cheating on his taxes. It’s your decision, of course, but how fair is this to the rest of the taxpayers? Also, a worker who is dishonest in one area may well be dishonest in others. Whatever you do, get a written receipt for the work done in case something goes wrong and also for possibly deducting the work at tax time. If a plumber won’t provide a receipt, find another plumber.

8. Bringing in extra workers. Occasionally, a plumbing company may send out more workers than are needed for your job. It’s a way of charging extra for a one-person job. If your job is a complex one, a second plumber may truly be justified. So when you order the work, ask how many plumbers will be coming, how long the work should take, the hourly rate charged and any other fees.

9. Charging high rates for the first hour. Many service providers have a minimum charge for the first hour on the job. Nothing wrong with that. It takes them time and money to get out the door. But if your job is a small one and the plumber finishes before the hour is up, ask him or her to take care of other small jobs to fill out the hour. “Ask him to replace washers, gaskets or O-rings, tighten faucet stems or other small tasks around the home, or ask him for a quick inspection so you’ll be able to identify where wear and tear might indicate future problems will develop,” Care2.com suggests. Another solution: Rather than paying by the hour, ask a plumber to charge you by the job.

10. Pushing you to pay before the work is done. It’s reasonable for a plumber to ask for a down payment of up to half of the estimate to cover parts and give assurance that you’ll pay up. It’s not reasonable to ask you to pay the full bill before the job is finished and you are satisfied.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Marilyn Lewis | March 25, 2016 ++]

Sleeping Naked ► Reasons You Should

If you regularly sleep sans pajamas, you’re in the minority. The vast majority of us sleep swaddled in some sort of clothing, be it shorts, a tee shirt, or a full-on onesie. According to a national sleep survey from 2012, only 8 percent admit to sleeping naked. But did you know that sleeping naked is actually great for you? Here are 6 ways nixing your pajamas will improve your health and happiness.

Reduce insomnia. As you sleep, your body naturally dips in temperature. It’s beneficial for the body to cool down, and it encourages deeper, more restful sleep. If your body is overheated, wrapped in thick socks and pants, you may
not be able to release excess heat, which could rob you of a solid night’s sleep. Studies have shown that insomnia and body temperature are closely related, so take off those clothes if you’re tossing and turning.

**Improve metabolism.** Reduce excess belly fat by balancing cortisol levels, your stress hormone. Cortisol levels drop between 10pm and 2am, so if you’re not getting enough sleep, you may have excess amounts of stress hormones in the body upon waking that could encourage excess belly fat. Sleeping in the nude/in cooler temperatures has also been shown to lower blood sugar levels with the potential of preventing type II diabetes. Sleeping in a cooler environment encourages the body to transform regular fat into metabolism-boosting brown fat, which is responsible for temperature regulation and improved insulin sensitivity. Participants in the study saw their health improve under these conditions in a matter of weeks — so get out of those ‘jammies already!

**Age more slowly.** When you sleep well, your body produces melatonin and growth hormone, both of which act as anti-aging agents in the body. Since sleeping in a cool (ahem, nude) environment encourages better, deeper sleep, it isn’t a far stretch to consider that sleeping pajama-less can stave off premature aging. It also encourages healthier skin, since there are no seams or waistbands pushing in and encouraging dryness or wrinkles.

**Improve relationships.** Skin on skin contact with your significant other increases the amount of oxytocin your body produces. Oxytocin is a powerful hormone that increases bonding and feelings of attachment. Plus, you’re more likely to get frisky if there are no clothes standing in your way, which is also great for relationships!

**Your sex organs will be happier.** Exposing vaginas, naturally damp and warm places, to unobstructed air flow every night can help to reduce the growth of yeast and unwelcome bacteria. On the other hand, testes are meant to be cooler than the rest of the body. Testicles that are kept cooler by sleeping in the nude are apt to produce healthier sperm.

**Improve self-esteem.** We have a tendency to hide our bodies from ourselves. But, the more you acknowledge and inhabit your beautiful body, the more likely you will be to accept it for what it truly is. In this way, sleeping in the nude can actually improve your self-esteem over time. Embrace yourself, and slide your bare skin in between those crisp sheets. It will feel so good!

[Source: Care2 | Jordyn Cormier | December 20, 2015 ++]

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**Election Year One Liners ➤ Did You Hear**

- If God wanted us to vote, he would have given us candidates. (Jay Leno)
- The problem with political jokes is they get elected. (Henry Cate, VII)
- We hang the petty thieves and appoint the great ones to public office (Aesop)
- If we got one-tenth of what was promised to us in these State of the Union speeches, there wouldn't be any inducement to go to heaven. (Will Rogers)
- Politicians are the same all over. They promise to build a bridge even where there is no river. (Nikita Khrushchev)
- When I was a boy I was told that anybody could become President; I'm beginning to believe it. (Clarence Darrow)
- Politicians are people who, when they see light at the end of the tunnel, go out and buy some more tunnel. (John Quinton)
- Why pay money to have your family tree traced; go into politics and your opponents will do it for you. (Author unknown)
- Politics is the gentle art of getting votes from the poor and campaign funds from the rich, by promising to protect each from the other. (Oscar Ameringer)
- I offer my opponents a bargain: if they will stop telling lies about us, I will stop telling the truth about them. (Adlai Stevenson, 1952)
- A politician is a fellow who will lay down your life for his country. (Tex Guinan)
- I have come to the conclusion that politics is too serious a matter to be left to the politicians. (Charles de Gaulle)
- Instead of giving a politician the keys to the city, it might be better to change the locks. (Doug Larson)
- There ought to be one day -- just one -- when there is open season on Congressmen. (Will Rogers)

[Source: PEM | March 21, 2016 ++]

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Remember When ➤ Nostalgia (3)
Do you remember this candy?
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Brain Teaser ➤ He Gave Me Smelly Money | Riddle
I am a word of meanings three.
Three ways of spelling me there be.
The first is an odour, a smell if you will.
The second some money, but not in a bill.
The third is past tense, a method of passing things on or around.
Can you tell me now, what these words are, that have the same sound?

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Have You Heard? ➤ Marriage
A man brings his best buddy home for dinner. His wife screams at him. “My hair and makeup are not done, the house is a mess, the dishes are not done, I’m still in my pajamas and I can’t he bothered with cooking tonight. What the hell did you bring him home for?

“Because he’s thinking of getting married....”
A man walks into his crowded local bar, waving a revolver around and yelled, “Who in here has been screwing my wife?”

A voice from the back of the bar yelled back “You’re gonna need more ammo!”

At St Peter’s Catholic Church in Adelaide, they have weekly husbands’ marriage seminars. At a session last week, the priest asked Giuseppe, who said he was approaching his 50th wedding anniversary, to take a few minutes and share some insight into how he managed to stay married to the same woman all these years.

Giuseppe replied to the assembled husbands, “Well, I’ve tried to treat her nice, spenda lot of money on her, but besta of all is, I tooka her to Italy for the 25th anniversary.

The priest responded, “Giuseppe, you are an amazing inspiration to all the husbands here. Please tell us what you are planning for your wife for your 50th anniversary? Giuseppe proudly replied, “I gonna go pick her up

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Brain Teaser Answer  ►  He Gave Me Smelly Money | Riddle

Scent, cent and sent.

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How Times Have Changed
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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 were choking the airways interfering with other internet user’s capability to send email. SPAMHAUS told us to stop sending the Bulletin in its entirety to individual subscribers and to validate the subscriber base with the threat of removing all our outgoing email capability if we did not. To avoid this we have notified all subscribers of the action required to continue their subscription. This Bulletin notice was sent to the 20,257 subscribers who responded to that notice. All others are in the process of being deleted from the active mailing list.

2. Anyone who no longer wants to receive the Bulletin can use the automatic “UNSUBSCRIBE” tab at the bottom of this message or send a message to raoemo@sbcglobal.net with the word “DELETE” in the subject line.

3. Bulletin recipients with interest in the Philippines, whether or not they live there, 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 addree you provided. Anyone who cannot reach me by email can call (858) 432-1214 to ask questions or confirm info needed to add them to the directory.

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6. Past Bulletin articles are available by title on request to raoemo@sbcglobal.net. Refer to the RAO Bulletin Index alphabetically listing of article and attachment titles previously published in the Bulletin. The Index is available at http://www.nhc-ul.com/BullSentMasterIndex-150101.pdf. Bear in mind that the articles listed on this index were valid at the time they were written and may have since been updated or become outdated.

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 addree raoemo@sbcglobal.net into your address book. If you do not receive a Bulletin check either http://www.nhc-ul.com/rao.html (PDF Edition), http://www.veteransresources.org (PDF & HTML Editions), http://veteraninformationlinksasa.com/retiree-assistance-office.html (HTML Edition), or http://frabr245.org (PDF & HTML Editions) before sending me an email asking if one was published. If you can access the Bulletin at any of the aforementioned sites it indicates that something is preventing you from receiving my email. Either your server considers it to be spam or I have somehow incorrectly entered or removed your addree from the mailing list. Send me an email so I can verify your entry on the validated mailing list. If you are unable to access the Bulletin at any of these sites let me know.

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