# RAO BULLETIN

1 February 2018

**PDF Edition**

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Government Shutdown 101  ➤  Impact On Active Duty Personnel & Vets

Military members worldwide will continue to report to work if the government shuts down, but they won’t be paid for that work until it reopens, barring a change in law. As the government moved toward shutdown Defense Department officials have issued guidance that includes which military facilities, benefits and programs stay open and which won’t if the deadline passes. The short version: Operations “essential” to national security will continue, as will all preparations for troops getting ready for deployment. But except for certain other operations that are necessary for safety and protection of property, other activities will be shut down.

Civilian personnel who work in operations that are considered essential will stay on the job, but like troops, they won’t be paid until Congress makes the funds available. Reservists in Active Guard Reserve jobs would continue to report for duty, but reserve-component personnel would not perform inactive duty requiring obligation of funds, except where the duty supports an activity deemed essential. Mortuary affairs and other services to care for the fallen and their families also are considered essential, but the $100,000 death gratuity paid to survivors of the fallen may not be paid during the shutdown. Some examples of essential activities, per the guidance:

- Recruiting activities.
- Military Entrance Processing Stations.
- Basic training.
- Law enforcement/counterterrorism operations, and other safety-related operations such as fire protection, nuclear safety, air traffic control, search and rescue, and explosive ordnance disposal.
- Many counseling services, including substance-abuse assistance, emergency counseling and religious services.
- Basics such as utilities, housing and food services, including trash removal.

Preparations to discontinue nonessential activities proceeded in an “orderly and deliberate fashion” at DoD. Here are some of the ways the shutdown will affect military members and their families:

Pay. Military personnel wouldn’t be paid until the shutdown ends. This could change if Congress passes a law that requires the military to be paid during the shutdown, as they it in 2013. Personnel are paid on the 1st
and 15th of each month. In the past, a number of financial institutions that serve the military community have stepped up to fill the gap, in some cases offering to advance the active-duty pay, then recouping it later, when retroactive pay caught up. Military relief societies also have helped service members and families fill financial gaps during shutdowns.

**Retired pay.** Not affected. It comes from a different pot of money.

**PCS and TDY.** Military moves and temporary duty travel are generally canceled except for service members traveling to activities and operations determined to be essential to national security. Any TDY travel or conference participation scheduled before the shutdown is to stop as quickly as possible.

**Health care.** Military treatment facilities will continue to provide inpatient care as well as acute and emergency outpatient medical and dental facilities. Private sector care under Tricare isn’t affected.

**Commissaries.** Only overseas commissaries and those in remote U.S. locations where there are no other reasonable sources of food available for military personnel would remain open. Information was not immediately available about which stores would be closed; during the 2013 shutdown, stateside commissaries, including those in Alaska and Hawaii, were closed. If there is a shutdown, the commissaries forced to close will follow an orderly procedure to allow store staffs to reduce stocks of perishables, safeguard equipment and facilities, and make other necessary preparations, said Kevin Robinson, spokesman for the Defense Commissary Agency. In 2013, commissaries were open an extra day after the shutdown took effect. They were packed with customers. “In the event of a shutdown, we will do our best to support our military communities whenever and wherever possible,” Robinson said.

**Exchanges.** They won’t close, because they don’t rely on taxpayer dollars. But they will try to ease some of the strain on the customers affected by commissary closures. For example, Army and Air Force Exchange Service officials already are working up emergency orders for key items such as diapers, bread, milk and frozen food, and working with distributors to speed up those deliveries for early next week, AAFES spokesman Chris Ward said.

**DoD schools.** The 166 DoD schools overseas and stateside will remain open. It’s not clear whether the eight district offices around the world, would be allowed to continue to operate; a shutdown likely would curtail operations at regional offices and at headquarters, a DoDEA spokesman said.

**Death gratuities.** These $100,000 payments may not be made immediately to the designated survivor of a service member who dies on active duty. When those payments went unmade in 2013, the Fisher House Foundation stepped in to fill the gap. After the government reached a deal to reimburse the charity, Congress eventually passed a law that restarted the payments.

**Child care.** This might be a mixed bag: In 2013, each installation determined whether child development centers continued to operate. As in the past, the new DoD guidance allows morale, welfare and recreation activities that receive any taxpayer funding to operate during a shutdown if they are deemed necessary to support essential operations, such as mess halls, physical training and child care activities required for readiness.

**More MWR.** MWR activities that are funded entirely by nonappropriated funds, not by taxpayer dollars, wouldn’t be affected by the shutdown. A bowling center or golf course funded by customers likely would remain open, for example.

**DoD civilians.** DoD civilians who aren’t required to carry out or support activities deemed essential will be furloughed. In 2013, about 400,000 DoD civilians — including military spouses, veterans and retirees — were furloughed.

**Military academies.** Students can continue to attend classes only if the instructor is military or is a contractor paid with prior-year funds,
Unfortunately, Congress could not come to an agreement by midnight of the 20th forcing a shutdown. However the government was set to fully reopen on 23 JAN, after congressional leaders finalized a new budget extension on 22 JAN. The new deal gives lawmakers three more weeks to sort lingering disagreements over immigration and federal fiscal policies. The budget legislation also includes a provision to provide back pay for troops and other federal workers for the time they missed because of the lapse in operations. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | January 19, 2018 ++]

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**DOPMA ► Facing Scrutiny in 2018**

The Senate Armed Services Committee (SASC), Subcommittee on Personnel, held a hearing this week to consider potential changes to the Defense Officer Personnel Management Act (DOPMA). DOPMA was signed into law in December 1980 and has been the guideline for officer personnel management for the services ever since. The SASC panel, led by Sens. Thom Tillis (R-NC) and Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) heard testimony regarding DOPMA from experts - including two former Undersecretaries of Defense for Personnel and Readiness - as well as the current personnel chiefs of each service.

In the late 1970s, congressional leadership passed the legislation that brought DOPMA into existence to help modernize management practices and to correct problems and challenges with officer management that emerged in the post-World War II era. Over DOPMA’s 38 years of existence, Congress has achieved most of its stated goals: creating uniform promotion rates, standardizing career lengths across the services, and regulating the number of senior officers as a proportion of the force. DOPMA also created reasonable and predictable expectations regarding when an officer would be eligible for promotion.

However, DOPMA has been criticized for creating a system that has resulted in high turnover rates, frequent moves, and relatively shorter military careers. As the law currently is written, DOPMA does not allow new officers to immediately enter career fields (that aren’t related to medical or legal specialties), and it greatly restricts certain types of compensation such as retention bonuses for the officer corps. Such bonuses are prevalent in the enlisted career fields and the private sector.

In view of future personnel needs and requirements, including some stated most recently in DoD's 2018 national defense strategy, Congress is considering making some adjustments to DOPMA over the course of the next year. Changes and adjustments to DOPMA will not come without challenges; they will require Congress to make some tough choices. But as Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis stated upon the release of the new national defense strategy, “Adapting to face tomorrow's challenges doesn't come without tough choices.” [Source: MOAA Leg Up | January 26, 2018 ++]

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**Climate Change Update 02 ► Rising Sea Levels A Priority for Navy Facilities Nominee**

President Trump’s nominee to oversee Navy facilities said 19 SEP she would make handling threats from climate change and rising sea levels a top priority for the service if confirmed. Phyllis Bayer testified to the Senate Armed Services Committee that climate change is already causing issues for the Navy and she would delve even deeper into the issue than required by Congress, which has ordered a report on the 10 military facilities most threatened by changing climates. “I commit to you, senator, that in the effort that the Department of the Navy will be contributing to that study for the Department of Defense I will look even further into those issues,” Bayer told Sen. Angus King (I-ME), a committee member.
The report was part of Congress’ annual National Defense Authorization Act, which also deems climate change a “direct threat” to U.S. national security that is endangering 128 military bases. Trump signed the NDAA but the law is at odds with his new National Security Strategy, which dropped the past administration’s references to climate change in favor of focuses on the U.S. business and economic climate. Climate change and sea level rise “is one of my top priorities if confirmed in the job,” said Bayer, who is nominated to be assistant Navy secretary for installations, energy, and the environment. “It’s affecting the infrastructure and it’s adding to the expense of the department’s infrastructure costs and maintenance.”

Bayer, whose nomination was announced in November, said measurements at Navy facilities in Norfolk, Va. — the largest in the world — have shown a sea level rise of 8-10 inches over the past century. She is a graduate of the National Defense University and has held several management positions at the Pentagon and was most recently chief of staff for the assistant secretary of defense for readiness.

King had asked Bayer to commit to doing a study on naval assets around the world and how they would be affected by sea rise. “We can talk about climate change in a variety of ways but one is sea level rise and it’s happening, it’s visible and it seems to be accelerating,” King said. “I think we need to know where our problems are.” A Navy study would identify the most serious threats and allow the public to understand rising sea levels are a “practical, dollars-and-cents problem” and not an abstract problem, he said. “Exactly, senator, it’s a real problem,” Bayer replied. [Source: Washington Examiner | Travis J. Tritten | January 18, 2018 ++]

SSIA Update 03 ► Funding Needed to End Widow’s Tax

The Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) is calling on lawmakers to end the widows tax on 67,000 military survivors. Compared to the last session of Congress, there appears to be more momentum to address the issue. Currently, the number of House cosponsors to end the widows tax is up from 175 to 207; in the Senate, the number of lawmakers supporting repeal has increased to 37 from 30.

Widows Tax Explained

Current federal law requires survivors of deceased military members to forfeit part or all of their Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuity when they are awarded VA Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). This loss of any portion of the SBP annuity is known as the “widows tax.” Congress recognizes the inequity and has worked hard over the years to address the issue. Starting in 2008, Congress established the Special Survivor Indemnity Allowance (SSIA) to help military survivors affected by the widows tax. SSIA began as a 10-year temporary benefit. Thanks to the hard work of House Armed Services Committee chair Mac Thornberry (R-Texas), a provision in the FY 2018 National Defense Authorization Act makes SSIA permanent at its current level of $310 a month. Future increases will be indexed to inflation.

State of Play

“Last year's work by Chairman Thornberry was a strong good faith effort showing how seriously he takes this issue. There's concern in the survivors' community that lawmakers may consider the issue fixed and they can move on to other priorities,” said Jamie Naughton, Associate Director of Government Relations at MOAA. Raising awareness of the issue is important. According to DoD's Office of the Actuary, over 40 percent of military survivors affected by the widows tax live in five states: Texas, Florida, California, Virginia, and North Carolina.
The increased support is deeply appreciated, but we know lawmakers won’t be able to do much unless they’re given the budget authority necessary to pay for ending the tax. The first step in the process is to get the House and Senate Budget Committees to give their counterparts on the Armed Services Committees - who have jurisdiction over military survivor issues - necessary funding to provide relief. Readers are requested to send their elected officials a MOAA-suggested message asking them to end the widows tax for military survivors. Refer to http://takeaction.moaa.org/app/write-a-letter?0&engagementId=352553.

[Source: MOAA Leg Up | January 19, 2018 ++]

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National Defense Strategy ► Good Fences Make Good Neighbors

The National Defense Strategy (NDS), released 19 JAN, is the second of three interlocking documents that will drive America’s strategic posture. In December, President Donald Trump unveiled his National Security Strategy (NSS), which drives the administration’s overall national security posture. The NDS focuses on the Pentagon’s goals within the NSS and is driven by Defense Secretary Jim Mattis. That will be followed later this year by the National Military Strategy (NMS), written by Gen. Joe Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, which explains how the Pentagon will operationalize the NDS.

At Johns Hopkins University on Friday, Mattis said the document represents a “clear-eyed appraisal” of America’s spot in the world, “This required tough choices — and we made them based upon a fundamental precept: namely, that America can afford survival,” the secretary said in prepared remarks. Speaking ahead of the document’s release, Elbridge Colby, deputy assistant secretary of defense for strategy and force development, said the document was thematically driven by the idea that the “central challenge facing the department of defense and the joint force [is] the erosion of U.S. military advantage vis a vis China and Russia.” But while great-power competitors are very much front of mind, Colby added that “this is not a strategy of confrontation, but it is a strategy that recognizes the reality of competition and the importance of ‘good fences make good neighbors.’ ”

And despite the statement in the document, Colby stressed that this does not represent a shift away from fighting terrorism, but rather a realistic acknowledgement that counterterrorism operations are not likely to end anytime soon. “One of the things the strategy is trying to do is say is that we know we are going to be dealing with terrorism in one way or another for the long haul — so let’s figure out ways of doing it that are more cost effective, that are more tailored — that allow us to walk and chew gum at the same time,” he said, adding that there is no assumption of a withdrawal from antiterrorism operations involved in this strategy. Overall, the document bears a clear thumbprint from Mattis, broken down by his stated trio of priorities: strengthening allies and partners, increasing lethality for the war fighter and reforming the business practices of the Pentagon. “The department will do more than just listen to other nations’ ideas — we will be willing
to be persuaded by them,” Mattis said. “Not all good ideas come from the country with the most aircraft carriers.”

The document identifies three key theaters of focus — the “Indo-Pacific,” Europe and the Middle East. However, Colby denied that means the U.S. is abandoning areas such as Africa or South America; instead, he described it as realistically focusing resources where they are most needed. He also said the classified version of the document is about five times the size of the unclassified version, which, if accurate, would put the document at around 50 pages — much thinner than previous strategy products.

**Resource Constraints** --  The strategy release came the same day Congress was scrambling to avert a government shutdown, with the best case scenario likely to be extending the continuing resolution — which locks in budget numbers at fiscal 2017 levels — into a fifth month. Pentagon officials have consistently harped on what damage occurs with both a shutdown and under a CR. Speaking ahead of the document release, Todd Harrison, a defense budget expert with the Center for Strategic and International Studies, warned that “a strategy that is set without regard for resource constraint is a strategy that risks being unexecutable” in practice. “If it’s just a lot of words on a page and it doesn’t have numbers, saying ‘this is what it will cost and this is what we’re able to do,’ and ‘this is how we will pay for it,’ it will leave a lot wanting,” he added.

The document released to the public did not include any hard numbers. Asked how much budget realities factored into the strategy, Colby said the document was “not obtuse to resource requirements” but that the focus was on developing the strategy first. The leadership was actually conscious to say, look, we should have a strategy that is really a strategy that will then drive the budget. But we’re not saying we are going to have an $8 trillion defense budget,” Colby said. “I would say it’s been a realistic look at the environment – of course not just our own funding requirements but also the reality of China as an economy having the same order of magnitude as our own.”

Those economic realities extend to allies, with the strategy calling for allies to “pool resources and share responsibility for common defense.” That includes the goal, stated by several DoD officials in recent weeks, of getting equipment to partners more quickly, with the document pledging to “prioritize request for U.S. military equipment sales, accelerating foreign partner modernization and ability to integrate with U.S. forces.”

**Developing Technology Faster** --  The strategy contains a section focused on reforming the department’s business structures and getting technology to the warfighter in a more timely fashion. “Success does not go to the country that develops a new technology first, but rather to the one that better integrates it and swiftly adapts its way of fighting,” Mattis said in his remarks. To do so, the document urges a focus shift from developing a perfect system to getting things into the field and then upgrading them. “The department is over-optimized for exceptional performance at the expense of providing timely decisions, policies and capabilities to the warfighter. Our response will be to prioritize speed of delivery, continuous adaptation and frequent modular updates,” the strategy reads.

The strategy also warns that it is “expected” that the service and agency heads will look to “consolidate, eliminate or restructure” offices as needed to speed up processes. A request for another round of base closure and realignment is also promised, although that remains a tough sell with Congress. Another notable statement is the pledge of a “major departure from previous practices and culture” in the acquisition realm. “The Department will realign the incentive and reporting structure to increase speed of delivery, enable design tradeoffs in the requirements process, expand the role of warfighters and intelligence analysts throughout the acquisitions process, and utilize non-traditional suppliers,” the document reads. “Prototyping and experimentation should be used prior to defining requirements and commercial off-the-shelf systems.
Platform electronics and software must be designed for routine replacement instead of static configurations that last more than a decade.”

Along with that, the document pledges to “streamline processes” so that new companies can enter the defense industrial base with ease, and seek to “cultivate international partnerships to leverage and protect partner investments in military capabilities” — perhaps welcome news to partner nations who have long complained the Pentagon would rather reinvent the wheel than buy one made abroad.

Among technologies prioritized in the document: developing “resilient, survivable, federated networks and information ecosystems” that can “gain and exploit information” and provide attribution to cyberattacks; transitioning to “smaller, dispersed, resilient adaptive basing” over traditional centralized infrastructures; prepositioning stocks and munitions to ensure the logistics tail never breaks down; and investing “broadly” in artificial intelligence, something outlined in the National Security Strategy. [Source: DefenseNews | Aaron Mehta | January 19, 2018 ++]

Transgender Troops Update 14 ➤ Paperwork Signed for 8 USAF Volunteers

Eight transgender volunteers have signed paperwork to join the active-duty ranks of the Air Force, the Pentagon acknowledged on 16 JAN.. The eight are among the first known transgender applicants to the military since the Pentagon opened recruiting to them on 1 JAN. Federal courts late last year compelled the military to begin accepting their applications, following a series of delays in recruiting transgender volunteers that Defense Secretary Jim Mattis had ordered while the issue of their service was under review.

In July, President Trump tweeted that he wanted to ban the service of transgender troops. On 16 JAN, the Air Force confirmed that eight applicants who identified as transgender have filled out paperwork since 1 JAN to become airmen, which is the generic term for anyone in the Air Force. A group that advocates for transgender troops, the National Center for Lesbian Rights, estimates that dozens of transgender people have met with recruiters to inquire about joining the military since the first of the year.

"It's important to recognize that the eight includes applicants who filled out some kind of paperwork at their respective recruiting stations, not necessarily all transgender applicants who have called or walked into recruiting stations, or inquired about joining the service,” Capt. Kathleen Atanasoff, an Air Force spokeswoman, said 16 JAN in an email.

Signing paperwork is the first official step in what can be a months-long process before an applicant officially becomes a recruit. Volunteers must also pass physical and mental tests. Potential transgender recruits must also be certified as stable in their gender for 18 months to qualify for military service. It is uncertain that transgender applicants will be able to meet all the requirements before late February when Mattis is scheduled to introduce a new policy regarding transgender troops now serving and those wishing to join the military. Mattis has placed a premium on military readiness and troops’ ability to fight, citing those issues in his decision last summer to delay recruiting transgender troops.

Brad Carson, the Pentagon's former top personnel official who helped draft the Obama-era policy repealing the ban on transgender troops, told USA TODAY last week that he expects recruiters will proceed slowly, knowing that a new policy will be forthcoming. A Pentagon-commissioned study in 2016 estimated that there are several thousand transgender troops in the ranks. The RAND Corp. found that their effect on military readiness was negligible. [Source: USA TODAY | Tom Vanden Brook | January. 16, 2018 ++]
Airman Second Class Helen Grace James wanted to follow in the footsteps of her father and her great-grandfather and serve in her country’s military. But her service was cut short after she was investigated, interrogated and then given an “undesirable” discharge from the Air Force because she was a lesbian. Now, more than 60 years later, she is suing the Air Force.

James, now 90, joined the military in 1952 as a radio operator. She was 25, and she planned to make it her career, according to the Post. Instead, on a Friday night in 1955, James and another female service member were followed by police from the base as they went to dinner, the Post reported. Within days, James was arrested, and, after a lengthy interrogation described by the Post as “humiliating,” she received an “undesirable discharge” on March 3, 1955. James was subjected to the investigation during the time of the “Lavender Scare,” a Cold War-era persecution of gays and lesbians working for the federal government.

While she went on to become a successful physical therapist, the undesirable discharge continued to haunt her, according to the Post. Even though she was able to have her discharge upgraded to a “general under honorable conditions” in the 1960s, she cannot receive benefits such as the GI Bill or insurance coverage. So last year, she applied to the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records for an upgrade to an honorable discharge. She has faced her fair share of bureaucratic hurdles: her records were destroyed in a fire in the 1970s, leaving her claim in limbo. Then, she was informed that they had reached a decision but were waiting for the board’s executive director to sign it. That was in November, according to the Post. Last week, James filed her lawsuit. “It has crippled her throughout her life,” her attorney, J. Cacilia Kim, told The Post. “This is really so she’s not treated as a second-class citizen anymore.” [Source: AirForceTimes | Nicole Bauke | January 13, 2018 ++]
2017 in Overland Park, Kansas, for overstaying her visa. [Source: The Associated Press | January 14, 2018 ++]

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**College Park, MD --** A researcher and historian from Maryland pleaded guilty to stealing military records and artifacts from the National Archives and Records Administration. Antonin DeHays, 33, said in his plea agreement that he stole and knowingly converted service members’ dog tags and records from the public research room at the National Archives in College Park, Maryland, according to a news release from the Department of Justice. From December 2012 through about June 2017, DeHays stole at least 291 dog tags and at least 134 records, including identification cards, personal letters, photos, a bible and pieces of downed U.S. aircraft.

In December 2016, the historian visited the archives and stole two dog tags — one silver and one brass — that had been issued to a Tuskegee airman who died when his fighter plane crashed in Germany in 1944, according to the news release. DeHays gave the brass dog tag to a military aviation museum in exchange for sitting inside a World War II-era Spitfire aircraft. He sold most of the stolen items on eBay, but he kept some of the dog tags and records either for himself or as gifts to others, the DoJ said. Before he sold the dog tags, he sometimes removed markings made in pencil that could be used to identify the tags as property of the National Archives.

Last year, the archives staff and the Office of Inspector General found that these artifacts and documents had been stolen from World War II records, according to the National Archives website. In June, investigators used a warrant to search DeHays’ home, where they recovered the dog tags and documents. A sentencing date has been set for 4 APR at the United States District Court in Greenbelt, Maryland, according to the DoJ. If convicted of stealing government records, DeHays faces up to 10 years in prison. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Charlsy Panzino | January 12, 2018 ++]

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**Fort Hood, TX --** A Mexican man living in the U.S. illegally has pleaded guilty to helping other immigrants be smuggled by American soldiers through a border checkpoint in Texas. Victoriano Zamora-Jasso, 51, pleaded guilty Monday to conspiracy to transport and harbor immigrants and illegal re-entry after deportation, according to federal prosecutors. The 2014 case involved four active-duty soldiers at Fort Hood, the sprawling Army post in Central Texas. The soldiers were paid at least $1,200 per smuggled immigrant, Angela Dodge, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Attorney’s Office, said 30 JAN. The individual soldiers, making trips between March and September 2014, showed Army identification and hid immigrants under military gear while going through the Sarita checkpoint. Some immigrants were eventually detected and investigators then linked the human smuggling cases to the Fort Hood personnel.

The soldiers were convicted of immigrant smuggling-related counts and sentenced in 2015 and 2016. **Brandon Troy Robbins**, 23, of San Antonio, was sentenced to 20 months in federal prison. **Eric Alexander Rodriguez**, 24, of Odem, was sentenced to a year in prison. **Christopher David Wix**, 23, of Abilene, was sentenced to a year and a day in prison. Yashira Perez-Morales, 27, from Watertown, New York, was sentenced to five years of probation, according to prosecutors. Zamora-Jasso was deported in 2013, then lived in Houston after slipping back into Texas. He was indicted in 2016. He remains in custody and faces up to 10 years in prison when sentenced. Another civilian, Arnold Gracia, 47, from Harlingen, was also convicted of smuggling related counts and was sentenced to six years in prison in the case. Gracia recruited the soldiers, according to prosecutors, and Zamora-Jasso provided the immigrants. [Source: The Associated Press | January 30, 2018 ++]
“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 73,025, Korean War 7730, Vietnam War 1604, Cold War (126), Iraq and other conflicts (5). 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 missing or unaccounted for personnel to date refer to [http://www.dpaa.mil](http://www.dpaa.mil) and click on ‘Our Missing’. Refer to [http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Year/2017](http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Year/2017) for a listing and details of those accounted for in 2017. 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
- U.S. Department of State (202) 647-5470

The names, photos, and details of the below listed MIA/POW’s which have been recovered, identified, and/or scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin are listed on the following sites:

- [https://www.vfw.org/actioncorpsweekly](https://www.vfw.org/actioncorpsweekly)
- [http://www.thepatriotspage.com/Recovered.htm](http://www.thepatriotspage.com/Recovered.htm)
- [http://www.pow-miafamilies.org](http://www.pow-miafamilies.org)
- [https://www.pownetwork.org/bios/b/b012.htm](https://www.pownetwork.org/bios/b/b012.htm)
- [http://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces](http://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces)

**LOOK FOR**

- **Air Force Col. Edgar F. Davis** was a navigator aboard an RF-4C Phantom fighter-bomber aircraft, assigned to the 11th Tactical Reconnaissance Squadron, 432nd Tactical Reconnaissance Wing in Sept 1968. Read about Davis.
- **Army Air Forces 1st Lt. Ewart T. Sconiers**, 27, of DeFuniak Springs, Fla was a bombardier on the B-17F Flying Fortress with the 414th Bombardment Squadron, 97th Bombardment Group in Oct. 1942. Read about Sconiers.
VA Secretary Update 62 ★ Facing First Major Republican Opposition on Capitol Hill

Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin had arguably the most successful year of anyone in President Donald Trump’s Cabinet, with frequent praise from lawmakers, veterans groups and the West Wing. So it was a jarring moment this week at a routine Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee hearing when a Republican senator called him a habitual liar. “I think you tell me one thing and you tell others something else,” said Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) adding that he blamed “your ability to speak out of both sides of your mouth, double-talk” for recent disagreements on veterans policy in the chamber. “That’s incompatible with our ability to reach agreements and work together. I intend to be a member of Congress who holds you accountable for what you tell me.”

The moment caught Shulkin and several members of the audience off guard, but not other panel members. Several offered their own complaints about unfulfilled promises in recent months. The committee
also took the unusual step of swearing in Shulkin as a witness, a move that seemed unimportant at the time but loomed large after Moran’s accusations. The secretary downplayed the incident afterwards, insisting he wasn’t blindsided by the criticism. “The job of the Senate is to provide oversight, and if there are concerns, I want them to share them,” he said.

But the conflict underscored a message from committee chairman Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA) at the start of the hearing. After lauding Shulkin’s successes in his first year on the job and complimenting him as a “forthright leader,” he also hinted that goodwill won’t guarantee an easy year two. “We are at the time where there are no excuses for the problems we have had with hiring, there are no excuses for the problems we had with information technology, there are no excuses for the problems with appeals and all those other issues,” he said. “It’s all about looking at the past and what we did, and looking for results in the future.”

**Trump’s go-to guy**

Among Trump’s inner circle of executive branch appointees, Shulkin is the lone holdover from former President Barack Obama’s administration. And yet despite Trump’s stated animosity towards all things Obama, Shulkin also appears to be one of Trump’s most trusted Cabinet members. Shulkin has been much more of a fixture at the White House than his predecessors, attending a host of military and health care meetings beyond the expected veteran policy events. Trump smiles whenever he mentions that Shulkin was confirmed 100-0 by the Senate (a replica of that Senate vote hangs on his VA office wall next to pictures of him with Trump). Three times the VA secretary has briefed reporters in the press room, a duty normally reserved for more prominent Cabinet posts. At Shulkin’s suggestion, Trump hosted an August briefing on VA telehealth — an issue that in the past may not have warranted even a White House press release — just a few feet away from the Oval Office.

And Shulkin’s VA has been a steady stream of good news for a Trump administration besieged by controversy. Nine major pieces of veterans legislation passed through Congress last year, including new firing authorities for department workers that Republican supporters have coveted for years. Shulkin has made aggressive moves to align VA electronic medical records with Defense Department systems, to publicly post more information on VA operations, and to extend some emergency care services to veterans previously barred from department medical centers. He also spearheaded Trump’s promised veterans complaints line, taking the campaign promise even further by working to have it staffed entirely by veterans.

At an event earlier this month focusing on preventing veteran suicide, Trump hailed Shulkin’s “tremendous strides” in reforming a department he has often called broken and hopeless. In an interview with Military Times, Shulkin credited Trump as the impetus for change. “The president has clearly set the tone, and that VA as it currently exists is not meeting its potential, is not fulfilling the mission to the people that it should in the way that it should,” he said. “That’s something that frankly I want to hear from a leader: a direct, objective assessment of where the problems are.”

Shulkin said he has tried to copy his own leadership practices after Trump’s. “(The president) has made clear what his objective are, and he’s going to allow you to accomplish them,” Shulkin said. “But there are limits to that. The objectives have to be accomplished with real, meaningful metrics, and within quick time frames. And if not, I know I’ll hear from him, and get feedback that that’s not acceptable.” But while hailing the work so far, Shulkin only gave himself a grade of incomplete for the progress of the past year. “I generally tend to be impatient,” he said, echoing another trait he shares with the commander in chief. “And I really want to make major changes for this organization because I believe it is essential we get this system right and we get it right quickly …”

**Unfinished business**

The biggest unfinished piece of business for Shulkin is also the one that he was hired specifically to tackle: overhauling the VA’s health care system. Shulkin, who is still a practicing physician, managed a series of private-sector health systems before being named as the department’s top health official in 2015. When
Trump announced he wanted to promote him to the secretary spot a year ago, it came with the charge that the doctor “straighten out the whole situation for veterans.” The Veterans Health Administration currently boasts more than 1,700 medical facilities and about 8 million patients nationwide, yet for years has been attacked by critics for being inadequate to cover the medical needs of veterans.

In 2014, after a scandal over patient wait times lead to the resignation of then VA Secretary Eric Shinseki, Republican lawmakers stepped up efforts to solve access problems at the department by allowing more care outside those federal medical centers. That brought the formation of the controversial VA Choice program, which conservatives have decried as still too restrictive for patients and Democrats have labeled the first step towards privatizing government responsibilities in veterans health care. Trump was in the former group, declaring on the campaign trail in 2016 that veterans should have a freer hand in choosing which doctors they want to see.

Shulkin’s job has been to bring that idea to reality. VA in recent months has proposed an expanding network of federal facilities and private-sector practices with easier eligibility criteria, easier payments for outside physicians and easier funding lines to keep the program operational. Lawmakers from both parties have signed on to parts of the plan in recent months, but it remains stalled in both chambers.

“Everything I am doing is trying to strengthen the VA system,” Shulkin said, repeating his promise that the steps are not designed to privatize VA. “I think the way to do strengthen the system and fulfill your mission is by working closely with the private sector. “I never had an expectation that things were going to move quickly. But as long as they are moving in the right direction, and I believe they are moving in the right direction, it’s OK. I wish they would move faster.”

Growing tensions?
Moran believes the health care overhaul would move quicker, if Shulkin would be more honest about his positions on the reforms. Last year, Moran objected to Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee legislation to create a new community care program over concerns that the new rules left too much power with VA, and not with patients. He insists that behind closed doors Shulkin agreed with him. Committee leadership said Shulkin told them he was comfortable with the eligibility limits that Democratic members had endorsed. The confusion prompted Isakson over the winter break to reach out to the White House for clarification on administration positions. A formal response — one that Shulkin will have a role in crafting — is expected in coming weeks.

While the tension is the most jarring to date between the VA Secretary and Congress, it’s not the first. Last summer, when White House officials suggested cutting an unemployment benefit for elderly veterans to save money, lawmakers complained they were blindsided by the suggestion. Shuklin withdrew the plan, acknowledging it as a mistake. Veterans groups have publicly praised the secretary for his openness but also quietly complained that his closed-room promises don’t always match up with public testimony answers. A recent change on marijuana policy, allowing doctors to discuss drug use with patients, was hailed as a major shift in private meetings with advocates but dismissed as non-news by VA spokespeople afterwards.

Even the suicide prevention event at the White House earlier this month caused minor controversy in the community. VA officials knew Trump was planning on addressing the issue with a new executive action. Lawmakers and key veterans leaders found out about it from the press a few hours in advance, and questioned why they were kept in the dark. When asked about the conflicts, Shulkin blamed the problems on ambition, not apathy towards other stakeholders. He said:

- “When you are moving quickly, and you’re trying to create change and transformation … you often are moving quickly and make some mistakes. I think anyone who has done a start up company or been involved in a major turn-around understands that risk.”
- "You sometimes need to fail at some things in order to accomplish your goal. There is no doubt that where we have done that, where we have moved fast and made potential mistakes, and our colleagues at the veterans service organizations have pointed it out."
- "I hope they'll also recognize I have acknowledged those mistakes and corrected them."

The path ahead
Those mostly hidden conflicts haven’t stopped Shulkin from getting legislative wins. Even with all the problems and unanswered questions surrounding community care for veterans, Shulkin twice convinced lawmakers to approve big extensions of the existing Choice program, totaling more than $4.2 billion. And after this week’s tense hearing, Iskason downplayed potential problems with Shulkin’s leadership style. “He does what he says what he’s going to do,” the committee chairman said. “I have a lot of confidence in the secretary. I think this meeting served a great purpose, to get him on the right record to defend what he has done and what he says he is going to do.”

But Shulkin noted that for all the successes of the past year, his department still has a host of unfinished work. He knows he’ll be judged on whether those promises are fulfilled moving ahead. “I think you’re going to continue to see regular progress on what we have talked about,” he said when asked about his upcoming priorities:
- You’re going to see increased efforts to be transparent about our problems and solutions.
- You’re going to see increased announcements related to modernization of the VA system.
- A department report on implementation of sweeping new education reforms is due in early March.
- Nominees for a pair of top department leadership positions should be announced in early February.
- New reforms to benefits appeals cases won’t be fully implemented until 2019, but Shulkin this week promised veterans should start seeing improvements well before then. And, Shulkin added
- You’re going to see our major legislative focus on the Choice program. That’s essential for us to get right. As I’ve said, I don’t think status quo is the right answer.”

Money for the current community care program is expected to run out sometime this spring. Shulkin and lawmakers are hopeful they’ll have a replacement by then. But they were also hopeful last fall, before talks stalled and they had to pass emergency funding just before Christmas. Shulkin insists that he’s not frustrated by that. Just impatient. “I don’t think you can enter this job and have a lot of expectations,” he said. “It’s all uncharted territory. I think we see that every day.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | January 20, 2018 ++]

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VA ID Card Update 15 ► Online Card Applications Reopen

Veterans are once again able to apply for the free Department of Veterans Affairs ID card after technical problems late last year forced a delay to the program. The free ID card, originally rolled-out in late November, was ordered by Congress in 2015 as a way to give veterans proof of service at businesses without carrying a copy of their DD-214 forms. It is available for all honorably discharged veterans, regardless of era or time in service

But the application appeared to face major technical problems immediately after opening, and tests by at least two Military.com reporters accessing the site with their own VA logins and military service credentials encountered repeated errors. The VA in early December suspended new applications, and posted a message asking veterans to submit their email address to receive updates. "Thank you for your interest in the Veteran Identification Card! Currently, we are experiencing a high volume of traffic. We apologize, and want you to know we're working to fix the problem," the notice said. "In the meantime, please enter your email address
and we'll send an update when the Veteran Identification Card application is back online." Several weeks later, veterans who were logged-in to the VA's system before visiting the ID card application page were able to apply for the card, while others were still prompted for an email address.

The link for the application is found at the bottom of the Vets.gov homepage under the words "Apply for Printed Veteran ID Card." Now the system is available for all users, and those who requested email updates have been contacted, said Curtis Cashour, a VA spokesman. "To help overcome initial rollout challenges, VA asked some Veterans needing additional assistance to leave their email address," he said in a statement to Military.com. "VA is now working with those Veterans to help them complete the application." About 14,600 ID card applications had been received as of 29 JAN, he said.

Millions of veterans qualify for the card. Veterans will begin receiving their printed cards in early March, Cashour said. In the meantime, those with approved applications can download an image of their card directly from the VA website to print or use via their mobile phone, he said. Some veterans, such as those who receive health benefits from the VA and military retirees, already have IDs that can provide proof of service. The new IDs will not qualify as official government-issued identification for air travel or other uses. The ID card program is voluntary. [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | January 29, 2018 ++]

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Fisher House Update 06 ▶ New Charleston VAMC House Called A 'Blessing'

A place to call home when your loved ones are sick can make a world of difference. Between hotel stays, eating out and travel, the expenses beyond medical bills can add up just as quickly. That's where the Fisher House at the Ralph Johnson VA Medical Center is making a difference, and the first family to stay there says it was more than just a place to stay; it was a blessing. With one phone call, Mark Davis says he started packing. His father, Isaac, is a Vietnam War veteran, and a patient at the VA in Charleston. "They said they had to do emergency surgery, we can tell you more once you get here," said Davis. "I threw some clothes in the car and bee lined it straight here."

Davis made the two hour drive from Savannah to Charleston to find out his father was suffering from prostate cancer complications. "I was almost in tears, I was thinking I couldn't afford to stay in a hotel room, especially not the length of times he's been in the hospital," said Davis. Davis says Vicki Johnson, the manager at the Fisher House, met him at the door with a hug. "When families come here to stay with us they are already going through difficult times, we want to make sure it feels like home," said Johnson.

Davis stayed at the Fisher House for two weeks. His father is still in the hospital recovering, and Davis says they are taking it day by day. Davis was the first of 21 families, so far, who have stayed at the Fisher House, since it opened in early January. It's free for veterans and their families travelling at least 50 miles for care at the VA. From the outside, it's a brick building. But on the inside, Davis says the Fisher House is much more. "One night I was having some trouble, my father wasn't doing well. One of the guys pulled me to the side and said i'm a vet as well. We shared some tears. I couldn't get that at a hotel," said Davis. [Source: ABC 4 News | Erica Scripa | January 25, 2018 ++]

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Liver Flukes Update 01 ▶ 25% Vietnam Vets Test Positive in Small Study

Nearly one in four Vietnam War combat veterans who participated in a small study at the Northport VA to detect past infestations of the cancer-causing liver fluke parasite tested positive, according to a paper penned by researchers at the VA Medical Center. The pilot study, titled “Screening US Vietnam Veterans for Liver
Fluke Exposure 5 Decades After the End of the War,” is in the current edition of the periodical Infectious Diseases in Clinical Practice. The Department of Veterans Affairs Medical Center at Northport conducted the study last spring, after Vietnam combat veteran Jerry Chiano of Valley Stream was diagnosed with bile-duct cancer in 2013. Chiano died in November.

Northport examined 97 Vietnam War veterans and selected 50 who met the inclusion criteria of having eaten undercooked freshwater fish while serving in Vietnam. Blood samples collected at Northport were subjected to serological examinations performed by researchers at Seoul National University College of Medicine in South Korea because no facility in the United States is equipped to identify the antigen marker that shows the parasite was once present.

Two members of Congress — Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) and Rep. Tom Suozzi (D-Glen Cove) — released statements calling for a broader study to determine whether wartime exposure to liver fluke should be considered service-related. “The Northport Medical VA Center’s groundbreaking study confirms what many vets have asserted: some of our brave Vietnam veterans were, in fact, exposed to cancer-causing parasites when serving overseas,” Schumer said in a release. “I am urging the VA to move forward with developing a treatment, screening and awareness program to help our Vietnam veterans who may be at risk to developing bile duct cancer in the future,” Schumer said. Suozzi said the VA should move quickly to address the study’s findings. “There must be a lot of anxiety in the Vietnam veterans community and we should try to alleviate that anxiety by actually getting firm answers,” Suozzi said.

Liver flukes are parasitic worms that spend part of their life cycle in freshwater snails that inhabit rivers throughout parts of the Far East, including Southeast Asia, China and the Korean Peninsula. The snails release larvae that burrow into the flesh of fish and can infest the bile ducts of humans who eat the fish. They can reside symptomless in a victim’s body for decades. The adult worm is believed to release an irritant during its quarter-century life span — an irritant that can lead to cancerous lesions in the bile duct decades after the parasitic infestation has died out. In some south Asian villages where raw fish consumption is part of the culture, more than one in two people harbor liver fluke infestations, according to parasitologists.

Some activists have likened the seriousness of fluke exposure in Vietnam veterans to Agent Orange, a class of dioxin-contaminated herbicides believed to have tainted hundreds of thousands of U.S. troops. The VA pays disability claims to Vietnam veterans who suffer from any of a host of maladies linked to Agent Orange exposure, from heart disease to bladder cancer. Since 2013, the VA has received 240 disability claims related to bile-duct cancers associated with liver fluke, the agency said. It had rejected more than 76 percent of those claims. [Source: Newsday | Martin C. Evans | January 25, 2018 ++]

VA Stand Downs ❯ Relief For Homeless Veterans

It’s hard to imagine what it must be like to be homeless and on the street in January. Regardless of the circumstances that bring Veterans and their families to living in cars and over the heating vents of the subway, it’s a fate that none of us would wish on anyone. And a problem that we all wish we could fix. But there isn’t one easy solution. So we help when and where we can. That’s what Stand Downs are all about. Stand Down at Armory Park City of North Charleston

What is a Stand Down? In times of war, exhausted combat units requiring time to rest and recover were removed from the battlefields to a place of relative security and safety. At secure base camp areas, troops were able to take care of personal hygiene, get clean uniforms, enjoy warm meals, receive medical and dental care, mail and receive letters, and enjoy the camaraderie of friends in a safe environment. Today,
Stand Down refers to a grassroots, community-based intervention program designed to help the nation’s homeless Veterans on any given night “combat” life on the streets. Homeless Veterans are brought together in a single location for one to three days and are provided access to the community resources needed to begin addressing their individual problems and rebuilding their lives.

In the military, Stand Down afforded battle-weary soldiers the opportunity to renew their spirit, health and overall sense of well-being. Today’s Stand Down affords the same opportunity to homeless Veterans. Stand Downs are typically one- to three-day events providing supplies and services to homeless Veterans, such as food, shelter, clothing, health screenings and VA Social Security benefits counseling. Veterans can also receive referrals to other assistance such as health care, housing solutions, employment, substance use treatment and mental health counseling. They are collaborative events, coordinated between local VA Medical Centers, other government agencies and community-based homeless service providers.

**What You Can Do --** The VA website [https://www.va.gov/homeless/stakeholders.asp](https://www.va.gov/homeless/stakeholders.asp) is a great place to start to learn what you can do to help. At [https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/Crrc.asp](https://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/Crrc.asp) is a list of Community Resource and Referral Centers which provide Veterans who are homeless and at risk of homelessness with one-stop access to community-based, multi-agency services to promote permanent housing, health and mental health care, career development and access to VA and non-VA benefits. You could go to the website of your area VA medical center to see if they are holding a Stand Down. You could print out the information about the event and hand it out to homeless Veterans you see on the street or sleeping under the bridge. Just ask: Are you a Veteran?

Hundreds of caring volunteers and professionals give of their time and expertise to address the unique needs of homeless veterans. Committees formed specifically to put on the event stage most Stand Downs. Veteran service organizations, National Guard and Reserve units, homeless shelter programs, health care providers, U.S. Departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor staffs, Veteran-helping-Veteran programs, and concerned citizens from the community organize and stage the events. [Source: VAntage Point | January 25, 2018 ++]

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**VA Mental Health Care Update 37 ➤ 1,000 Mental Health Providers Needed**

At VA hospitals throughout the nation, opportunities are available for psychologists, psychiatrists and other professionals, as VA looks [hire 1,000 mental health providers this year](https://www.va.gov/mentalhealthcare). Consider a career with VA if you’re interested in improving the lives of America’s Veterans. As an integral part of an interdisciplinary team, you’ll treat several of today’s most urgent mental health issues (e.g., PTSD) using best practices, groundbreaking research and more. You will also have the chance to work virtually anywhere in the country, as you only need one active state license to practice at any VA facility.

No matter where you are, you’ll receive [outstanding benefits](https://www.va.gov/mentalhealthcare) such as generous paid time off and other perks that will help you keep a healthy work-life balance. It’s all part of serving patients who’ve proudly served America. Positions are available nationwide, including the following cities:

- Dallas, Texas
- Fayetteville, North Carolina
- Hampton, Virginia
- Houston, Texas
- Jackson, Mississippi
- Las Vegas, Nevada
- Richmond, Virginia
Pursue a career with VA today by emailing your résumé to our Virtual Recruiting Center at VACareers@va.gov. [Source: VAntage Point | January 25, 2018 ++]

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**VA Benefits Eligibility Update 07  ► Top 10 Reasons Vets do Not Apply**

1. **I don’t trust the Government.**
   Many veterans have indicated that they don’t trust their Government in matters of confidentiality and privacy, and therefore, have no interest in pursuing benefits. Veterans from the Vietnam era are particularly sensitive regarding their distrust of the Government. Many veterans from that era have indicated that they had a very bad experience while in uniform, and felt as though the Government is not really inclined to assist or help them. One veteran said, “The Government did me wrong while I was in Vietnam, and I am sure they’ll do me wrong again.”

2. **I didn’t know I was eligible.**
   Far too many veterans are unaware of their eligibility status. Many veterans assume that since they aren’t registered to use VA services, they are automatically ineligible for benefits. One veteran said, “I never retired from the military so I always believed I was ineligible for benefits.”

3. **I am not eligible.**
   Military discharge status plays in big role in determining if a veteran is potentially eligible for benefits. Honorably discharged veterans are 100% eligible for benefits if they meet the criteria. Veterans with a Bad Conduct Discharge are not eligible for benefits. However, some veterans fall some place between an Honorable Discharge and a Bad Conduct Discharge. For instance, a veteran with a General Discharge is oftentimes eligible for benefits. Best to visit with a Veterans Service Officer to find out if you qualify. One veteran said, “My discharge papers show that I was forced out of the military due to the needs of the Government and my bad foot. I have a General Discharge with medical stipulations. I always thought that made me ineligible for future benefits.”

4. **I don’t want to go through the “red tape.”**
   Many veterans are of the belief that pursuing benefits from the VA is a matter of navigating a very complex and confusing system that involves mounds of documentation. While it may be true that there is a lot of paperwork, most, if not all is handled by a competent VSO and not the veteran. The VSO is trained to work with the bureaucracy, not the veteran, and takes much the complexity away from the veteran. One veteran said, “It’s just too confusing to get started.”

5. **I don’t know how.**
While there are many veterans service organizations in existence, many veterans do not understand how
those organizations can truly help them apply for benefits. Also, many veterans don’t know where to begin.
One veteran said, “I always thought a VFW was a bar for veterans, and they sit around and swap war stories.
I never knew they had staff on board that could help me apply for benefits.”

6. I make too much money.
There are many veterans who make over one hundred thousand dollars annually, and are receiving
compensation for a service-connected disability. A veterans’ disability is independent from their income
from other sources, and is not a factor to determine eligibility. There are a few millionaire politicians who
are service-connected and receive monthly compensation from a service-connected disability. One veteran
said, “I never applied for benefits because I always believed I made too much money to be eligible for
compensation.”

7. I was denied after the war.
Sure, many veterans are denied after first applying for benefits, whether a few months after serving in a war
zone or years later. Bottom line, sometimes it takes a few tries to get it right. One veteran said, “I applied
for compensation after being diagnosed with PTSD and was quickly denied. I decided it wasn't worth my
time to try again.”

8. Don’t know what to apply for.
Some veterans have many post war ailments and aren’t sure which ones to submit for service-connected
compensation, while other veterans appear healthy, except for a few nagging conditions, and aren’t sure if
their condition would be considered for compensation. Discussing your issue with a respected and
competent VSO is very important. They often know what is potentially eligible for compensation and what
is not and most importantly, how to get your benefits package started. One veteran said, “I have so many
things wrong with me I don’t know where to start. If I submit claims for all of my conditions the VA will
reject them all thinking I am not telling the truth.”

9. I can’t prove my health problems are related to my time in the military.
Finding a good VSO is very important in securing disability compensation for a service-connected
condition. The VSO will help you connect the dots. Some VSOs are very innovative in helping veterans
find the appropriate proof needed for their claims. While other VSOs have great “inside connections” that
may be able to locate documents needed to show proof for a veteran. One veteran said, “The VA can’t find
my medical records so I can’t prove I was injured in Vietnam.”

10. Other veterans are more deserving.
Too many veterans take this stance to keep themselves from attempting to apply for benefits they may be
eligible to receive. The forces and influences that kept many soldiers alive by watching each others’ back
live with them forever. One veteran said, “It took guys in my group one year to convince me that I should
apply for compensation. I did, and six months later I was 80% service-connected for PTSD, depression, and
diabetes. I never would have put in for benefits if they didn’t talk me into it.”

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | January 25, 2018 ++]

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PTSD Update 238 ► Women Vets Urged to Donate Brains for Research

On 24 JAN, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced a collaboration between its National
Center for PTSD and the nonprofit organization PINK Concussions, encouraging women to donate their
brains for the purpose of research of the effects of traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress
disorder (PTSD). “In the past, the focus of TBI and PTSD brain research has primarily been based on male
brains — without any active recruitment for women,” said Dr. Carolyn Clancy, executive in charge of VA’s Veterans Health Administration. “We have a lot to learn about how the female brain deals with TBI and PTSD, which makes this effort long overdue.”

Katherine Snedaker, founder and executive director of PINK Concussions, and a brain injury survivor, also applauded the collaboration. “We are so grateful to partner with VA to launch the first active recruitment of female Veterans, as well as active-duty members and civilian women to be a part of brain injury and PTSD research,” Snedaker said. “VA continues year after year to be one of our most valued partners in our ongoing mission to improve pre-injury education and post-injury care for women with brain injury.” While there is postmortem brain tissue available for study of injury in men, there has been almost none for women. There is also a lack of research on Chronic Traumatic Encephalopathy, also known as CTE, in women. In all published literature on CTE, only two peer-reviewed journal articles (both published in the early 1990s) have focused on women.

Women Veterans interested in participating in the brain bank may take the PINK Concussions pledge. Though tissue donation may occur many years or decades from now, enrollment will allow researchers to learn as much as possible about the health of an enrolled female participant and how things may change over the years. For more information about the effort, visit www.pinkconcussions.com. Call 800-762-6609 or visit www.research.va.gov/programs/tissue_banking/PTSD/default.cfm for more information about the VA’s National PTSD Brain Bank. [Source: VA Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs News Release | January 24, 2018 ++]

PTSD Update 239 ► Fort Hood Study Results | 2-Week Recovery

A recent Fort Hood-based study holds hope for a speedy recovery from post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms — in as little as two weeks — for service members returning from combat. Researchers say the study, which involved 370 active-duty service members seeking PTSD treatment, has already led to a Defense Department directive to make the treatment more available at its clinics on military installations across the country. At Fort Hood’s Carl R. Darnall Army Medical Center, researchers studied the effect of prolonged exposure therapy, in which patients repeatedly recounted and discussed their most traumatic memories to process the trauma they experienced and reduce the anxiety caused by the memories. Service members listened to recordings of those episodes, practiced confronting real-life situations that spark anxiety and did controlled breathing exercises.

The therapy previously had shown success among civilians, but the length of the treatment — eight to 15 weeks — can make it difficult for service members to complete it. But the Texas study found that two weeks of intensive daily treatment were as effective as a traditional eight-week course. Almost half of the study participants no longer tested positive for PTSD after the treatment, gains that researchers said largely held up over time. “The shorter treatment is an optimal intervention for military personnel with PTSD, as it minimizes the time and inconvenience entailed by a longer treatment before continuing their military career or returning to civilian life,” said Edna Foa, a University of Pennsylvania clinical psychology and psychiatry professor, who developed prolonged exposure therapy and led the study.

The study, the first-ever randomized clinical trial of prolonged exposure therapy with active-duty military personnel and the largest study yet of prolonged exposure therapy, was carried out by researchers affiliated with the STRONG STAR consortium, a multi-institutional research network funded by the Defense Department aimed at researching combat-related PTSD treatments. In 2016, STRONG STAR announced the results of another Fort Hood study that found 12 sessions of therapy led to PTSD recovery in 40 to 50
percent of soldiers. Instead of confronting traumatic memories directly as in prolonged exposure therapy, cognitive processing therapy helps patients learn to think about their traumatic experiences in a clearer way, without “distorted thoughts” that perpetuate feelings of guilt, blame and anger, researchers said. To watch a video describing these therapies go to https://www.ptsd.va.gov/public/materials/videos/whiteboards.asp.

STRONG STAR researchers are slated to train Defense Department clinicians who treat special operations forces troops on the two-week prolonged exposure therapy. Alan Peterson, a psychiatry professor at the University of Texas Health Science Center at San Antonio who directs the STRONG STAR consortium, said a short, intensive treatment would be more feasible given the schedules of elite troops.

Despite the promising results, combat-related PTSD remains more difficult to treat than other forms of PTSD. Recovery rates among civilians using prolonged exposure therapy are up to 80 percent, compared with about 50 percent for military veterans. “Our findings are good news — about half of those treated can be treated into remission,” Peterson said. “This is critical for the hundreds of thousands of post-9/11 combat veterans affected by PTSD and can do so much to improve lives and assist with military readiness. Still, we need to identify the specific factors with combat PTSD — the things that make it more difficult to treat — and then enhance the treatments to tackle those challenges.”

Looking for help with PTSD after a post-9/11 military deployment? The STRONG STAR consortium is currently recruiting service members and veterans in the Austin, Killeen, San Antonio and Waco areas to be part of treatment studies. Visit www.strongstar.org/treatment or call 210-562-6726. [Source: My Statesman | Jeremy Schwartz | January 26, 2018 ++]

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**VA DRC Program Update 02 ➤ Use to Expedite Disability Claims**

Thinking of filing another VA disability compensation claim? Make sure you file it through the new Decision Ready Claim (DRC) Program. With DRC, you can get a decision on your claim in 30 days or less. Work with an accredited Veterans Service Organization (VSO) to determine if the DRC Program is right for you and your claim. Your VSO can then help you gather and submit all relevant and required evidence so your claim is ready for VA to make a decision when you submit it. If you plan to file any of the following types of claims, work with your VSO to file them as a DRC:

- Direct Service Connection Claims: Claims for a disability that was caused by or during your service.
- Presumptive Service Connection Claims: Claims for a disability that VA automatically presumes to be service-connected based on unique conditions or situations you experienced during your service.
- Secondary Service Connection Claims: Claims for a disability that you have as a result of another service-connected disability.
- Increased Disability Claims: Claims for a disability you have a VA rating for that has gotten worse.

Not planning to file a claim soon? Spread the word to your fellow Veterans, Service members and their families about the DRC Program to help them get faster decisions on their claims too. The DRC Program also now accepts Pre-Discharge claims for Service members about to transition to civilian life, and Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) claims for surviving spouses. Learn more about the DRC Program, including eligibility requirements, what medical evidence you need to submit, and how to find an accredited VSO at https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/drc.asp. [Source: Veterans Benefits Administration | January 25, 2018 ++]  

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With an assist from the White House, senators are expected to restart negotiations about how to overhaul the flawed program veterans use to receive medical care in the private sector. Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA), chairman of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, said President Donald Trump and White House officials would soon send guidance to the committee on what they wanted in a reform bill — information Isakson thinks could spur agreement among senators divided on the issue.

Isakson requested the information after legislation his committee approved more than two months ago failed to make it to the Senate floor for a vote. “I hope what comes from the White House will be a catalyst,” Isakson said last week during a committee hearing. “We’ll begin work on it and try to find a bill we can unanimously get to the floor.” Congress has been negotiating reform to the Veterans Choice program for about a year, and Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin urged lawmakers to agree on changes by the end of 2017 — a deadline that came and went without consensus.

The Choice program was created following the VA wait-time scandal in 2014, in order to get veterans quicker health care by sending them to private sector doctors. But lawmakers, veterans and VA officials have criticized the program as bureaucratic and complex, with arbitrary rules governing which veterans are eligible to receive non-VA health care. It’s also faced numerous funding shortfalls. In August, Congress passed $2.1 billion in emergency funding for the program just before its bank account was to run empty. The same thing happened in December, and Congress authorized another $2.1 billion.

Shulkin attributed the funding shortfalls to the growing popularity of the program and the unpredictability of month-to-month expenses. According to the latest VA data, 36 percent of VA appointments in fiscal 2017 were made through the Choice program. More than 1 million veterans used the program, an increase of 35,000 from fiscal 2016. Shulkin said last week that the committee should prioritize Choice reform. “We’ve extended our current system but still have all the inefficiencies that we all know exist in Choice,” he said. “If we want to do the very best thing for veterans, we should pass new legislation that implements a better system.” One committee member, Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) blamed Shulkin for disagreements among senators that led to an impasse on reform efforts.

The Senate committee voted in November to send a bipartisan bill, the Caring for Our Veterans Act of 2017, to the Senate floor. The approximately $50 billion legislation offered more flexibility concerning veterans’ eligibility for private-sector care and included other provisions, such as a popular one to expand VA caregiver benefits to veterans injured before 9/11. The committee voted 14-1 on the bill, with Moran as the lone holdout. He later introduced his own legislation with Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) that he said better lays out in what instances veterans can seek private-sector health care, instead of leaving those specifics up to the VA to decide.

“In my view, too often commitments and pledges are made to this committee and to individual members regarding legislative efforts on behalf of our veterans,” Moran said during a Thursday committee hearing where Shulkin testified. “This is typical of what I’ve found with congressionally passed legislation — the VA changes course and thwarts the intent of Congress.” Moran said during the hearing that he thought Shulkin supported his bill over the one passed out of committee. He accused Shulkin of “double talk” that led to a rift between senators. “In every instance, you led me to believe that you and I were on the same page,” Moran told Shulkin. “I learned, though, you have said something different to the chairman and ranking member, and I’m of the opinion that our inability to reach an agreement is, in significant part, related to your ability to speak out of both sides of your mouth.”
Shulkin responded to Moran that he was making “unfair characterizations.” “Everyone in public service takes the job to make a difference. There is no reason to turn things personal,” Shulkin told reporters later. “I know Senator Moran wants the best thing for veterans and wants the Choice bill to be the best it can. That’s exactly what I want.” Sen. Jon Tester, D-Mont., the ranking Democrat on the committee, pushed for Shulkin to issue clear support for the Caring for Our Veterans Act to help build consensus. “There’s a certain amount of frustration from Senator Moran, the chairman, myself and other members of this committee that you’ve been silent,” Tester said.

Criticism from Congress has been scarce for Shulkin during his first year in office, particularly from Republicans. Lawmakers often mention Shulkin’s 100-0 Senate confirmation vote and laud the VA as an area of bipartisan agreement, and Trump touts it as an agency that’s made significant progress. Congress has passed several major reform bills for the VA in the past year, including implementing new accountability measures and expanding the GI Bill. But Choice reform – a priority for Shulkin since his Senate confirmation hearing – is an area of contention.

Isakson said he expected to receive guidance from the White House in the next few days and start negotiations soon after that. In the House, a Choice reform bill was passed along party lines. Democratic members voted against it, saying they were concerned about the government having the ability to fund an overhaul of VA community care programs because the long-term cuts created by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act. It’s uncertain whether the bill will be taken up by the full House. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | January 22, 2018 +++]

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**VA Vet Choice Update 68** ► Eligibility Guidelines/Expansion Concerns

White House officials want Senate lawmakers to set clearer eligibility guidelines for veterans considering private-sector care and to drop their current plans for an expansion of veteran caregiver benefits, according to a memos sent to congressional leaders in JAN. They also want a plan to pay for the massive health care overhaul. The comments come as legislation to overhaul the Department of Veterans Affairs health care offerings sits stalled in the House and Senate due to a series of budget and eligibility concerns. Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson (R-GA) had asked for the feedback from the White House in hopes it would serve as “a catalyst” to restart talks.

The administration memo appears to more closely back a legislative proposal from Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) than bills advanced by the Senate committee or its House counterpart. It calls for clearer eligibility standards for veterans to seek care outside the VA system, which has become the center of the fight between the dueling proposals. The White House is backing direct standards for when veterans would be able to see private doctors at VA’s expense, which Moran has said will establish clear rules on who can and who can’t use community care programs. Other plans would allow VA officials more flexibility to interpret broad guidelines based on what they believe is best for patient care, which critics say amounts to limiting veterans’ choices. But in the memo, White House officials warned that inexact eligibility rules “could inadvertently expand eligibility” and program costs.

President Donald Trump has repeatedly promised to make private-health care more accessible to veterans currently dependent on VA medical centers, arguing that the federal program is too flawed to adequately meet their needs. VA Secretary David Shulkin has repeatedly pushed back against accusations that those policies amount to privatization of his department’s responsibilities, insisting that the responsible future of veterans health care is a mix of federal and civilian systems. But the cost of the Senate committee’s Caring for Our Veterans Act — which give veterans in the VA system two walk-in visits at any private-sector practice without co-pay, among other community care options — is estimated at $54 billion over five years.
The White House memo requests offsets for those costs, something the House draft hasn’t dealt with yet either (that plan is expected to cost $39 billion over five years).

One of the ways to lessen the cost of the Senate bill would be to drop a provision to extend benefits to caregivers of veterans from earlier wars, instead of the current policy of limiting them to those who served after Sept. 11, 2001. Committee members approved expanding monthly stipends and other support services to all caregivers of veterans, to be phased in over time, at a cost of $3.4 billion over the next five years. The White House memo states the administration “cannot support such a costly expansion” without broader debate among appropriators. The memo also notes concerns about language in the Senate bill that would require more information on opioid prescriptions to veterans (and “the burdens it would impose on community providers) and calls for limits on grandfathering current users of the VA Choice program (those in the system who live 40 miles from a VA facility could stay on).

It’s unclear whether those changes, particularly the potentially expanded pool of veterans eligible for outside care programs, will upset Democrats who had already signed on to the measure. Several have said they worry about an expansion of outside care programs draining needed funds from other parts of VA. The office of Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee ranking member Jon Tester, D-Mont., released a statement said they are reviewing the White House memos. “He believes there is a lot of common ground and is encouraged by the open lines of communication.” Moran in a statement said he was encouraged by the White House memo. “Too many past examples to count have demonstrated that when Congress passes legislation that leaves any room for interpretation by the VA bureaucracy, our veterans are the ones who lose,” he said. “The feedback from the White House makes it clear that the administration supports standards, not guidelines — standards that VA must comply with to allow veterans access to community care.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | January 24, 2018 ++]

VA Telehealth Update 14 ► Anywhere to Anywhere Care Initiative Progress

With Congressional approval in hand, the Department of Veterans Affairs is moving forward with plans for a national telehealth network for veterans. The VA recently awarded a $260 million contract to 1Vision LLC, a subsidiary of HMS Technologies, to deliver home-based telehealth solutions to veterans. Following that announcement, AMC Health was selected to deploy its CareConsole virtual care and remote monitoring platform, which will enable veterans to communicate with VA practitioners and transmit mHealth data from Bluetooth-enabled devices in their homes.

The service is expected to improve healthcare access and outcomes for the more than 22 million veterans in the US, many of whom have difficulties getting to the network of VA health facilities or who don’t seek help for ongoing issues. “Telemedicine is an important vehicle that can help address barriers preventing rural and veteran populations from accessing quality care,” Sabrina Smith, the American Telemedicine Association’s interim CEO, said in a September 2017 blog posted on the VA website. “Telehealth changes the location where health care services are routinely provided, improving the health of and facilitating access to the care that those who have served their country deserve.”

The platform will enable VA Secretary David Shulkin to follow through on his “Anywhere to Anywhere Health Care Initiative,” unveiled last year, which enabled VA doctors to treat patients in their homes via telehealth, no matter where either the doctor or the patient are located. Shulkin’s plan was reinforced by Congressional passage of the Veterans E-Health & Telemedicine Support (VETS) Act of 2017 (S.925 and H.R. 2123), which gives VA practitioners the authority to treat veterans via telehealth in any state, thereby bypassing state licensing laws. The bill is expected to be signed into law shortly by the President.
“In an effort to furnish care to all beneficiaries and use its resources most efficiently, VA needs to operate its telehealth program with healthcare providers who will provide services via telehealth to beneficiaries in states in which they are not licensed, registered, certified, or located, or where they are not authorized to furnish care using telehealth,” Shulkin stated in his proposed order, which has been supported by the Justice Department. “Currently, doing so may jeopardize these providers’ credentials, including fines and imprisonment for unauthorized practice of medicine, because of conflicts between VA’s need to provide telehealth across the VA system and some states’ laws or licensure, registration, certification, or other requirements that restrict or limit the practice of telehealth. A number of states have already enacted legislation or regulations that restrict the practice of interstate telehealth, as discussed below in the Administrative Procedure Act section.”

According to the VA, some 702,000 veterans, or 12 percent of the country’s veteran population, used telehealth or telemedicine in FY 2016, accounting for 2.17 million telehealth episodes. Of that group, 45 percent were living in rural communities. Those encounters led to a 31 percent decrease in hospitalizations for veterans over the previous year, as well as a 39 percent reduction in acute psychiatric VA bed days, Shulkin pointed out in his order. “What we’re really doing is, we’re removing regulations that have prevented us from doing this,” he said when unveiling the program last year. “We’re removing geography as a barrier so that we can speed up access to Veterans and really honor our commitment to them.”

The VETS Act also received widespread support, though some had voiced concerns about giving VA doctors telehealth privileges that supersede state rights. Veterans aren’t the only members of the nation’s military to get new telehealth services. Earlier this month, the U.S Army Regional Health Command-Pacific (RHC-P) announced an expansion of its digital health platform at three facilities. The $2.8 million project with Vocera Communications extends the mobile platform to Brian Allgood Army Hospital in Korea and Tripler Army Medical Center and Schofield Barracks Health Clinic in Hawaii. Also this month, the Department of Defense gave telehealth vendor GlobalMed – also a VA telehealth provider – the authority to launch its telehealth and telemedicine services to the DoD’s network of 57 hospitals, 400 clinics and military bases around the globe.

The DoD provides healthcare services for some 9.4 active duty personnel and family members. Yet according to a November 2017 report to the Government Accountability Office, only 1 percent of the nation’s active duty service members actually used telehealth in 2016, concentrated in seven facilities. That led some to question whether the DoD was putting the platform to use correctly. The GlobalMed contract may help boost that number.

“This is a key milestone in the Defense Health Agency (DHA) and military medicine’s goal of developing a robust virtual healthcare solution throughout the entire military enterprise,” James J. Jones, PhD, PA-CLTC, SP, USA, Director of the White House Medical Evaluation & Treatment Unit and PA/Physician to the President, said in a press release issued by GlobalMed. “As this type of hardware and software is deployed throughout the DoD, I believe we will see improved access to healthcare specialists, improved patient outcomes, improved patient and provider education in outlying clinics, and improved patient access to their primary care manager (PCM). It will drastically improve our ability to help pre-hospital combat medics, corpsmen, and providers in austere environments.” [Source mHealth Intelligence | Eric Wicklund | January 12, 2018 ++]

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**VA Medical Marijuana Update 41 ► VA Can Study The Drug, But Won’t**

Proponents for research into using medical marijuana to treat post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic pain were dealt another blow this week, after comments from Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary David
Shulkin made it clear the agency will not explore how the drug could help veterans. Shulkin wrote in a letter to House lawmakers that the VA was restricted from marijuana research because of federal law. Later in the week, he acknowledged while testifying before the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee that the law does allow the VA to study the use of marijuana, but it makes research difficult.

Marijuana is on the list of Schedule I drugs, which are designated as having no medical use and have the most regulatory hurdles to overcome in order to access and research them. “We have to go through multiple agencies, and it is very challenging to work our way through that process,” Shulkin told senators 17 JAN. Shulkin also told the committee if they wanted research to happen, they’d have to change the law. “If Congress made it easier to go through the process, it would probably happen faster,” he said. But Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN), who recently took on the issue of marijuana research, said he interpreted Shulkin’s comments this week as “dismissive.” “Just because it’s hard, doesn’t mean you shouldn’t do it,” Walz said.

A growing number of veterans have gone to lawmakers and veterans organizations, such as The American Legion, claiming marijuana eased their symptoms of PTSD and chronic pain. Advocates for research believe legitimate studies into marijuana could determine whether those claims are plausible, and if they are, that the results could lend more credibility to the medical marijuana movement for all Americans. Supporters of increased access to medical marijuana haven’t yet had success getting Congress to rewrite federal drug policy. Walz and some veterans organizations hoped Shulkin’s involvement would spur progress.

In a letter to Shulkin in October, Walz asked him to support research into the efficacy of marijuana to treat PTSD and chronic pain, which would help Congress remove barriers to that research. Shulkin sent a response back, stating only that there were restrictions. “He has not asked for help to remove those barriers. If so, we would start building a coalition to do what he needed,” Walz said. “He hasn’t asked. If you read his letter, there was no desire to pursue this.”

Shulkin also wrote in the letter to Walz that laws restricted the VA from referring patients to non-VA research projects on medical marijuana. Researchers with the Scottsdale Research Institute in Arizona have already begun to study marijuana, using only veterans as subjects. During the past seven years, they gained approvals from the U.S. Food and Drug Administration and Drug Enforcement Agency. When their study is completed, researchers aim to have a definitive answer of whether marijuana effectively treats PTSD.

But now they’re struggling to find enough veterans to enroll in the study, and the Phoenix VA is barred from referring their patients. If the VA won’t do its own research, they could support the research already underway, said Sue Sisley, the study’s principal investigator. “Although qualifying participants continue to be enrolled in the trial at a slow rate, the rate of enrollment, and the study’s overall progress, would be enhanced significantly if the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs would agree to order the Phoenix VA to refer veteran patients to the trial,” she said.

Veterans were at the forefront of attempts in Washington last year to remove marijuana from the list of Schedule I drugs. They argued the VA should allow its doctors to recommend medical marijuana to patients in cannabis-friendly states, and they insisted marijuana was a possible solution to combat the epidemic of opioid overdoses in the United States. The American Legion reached out directly to Shulkin with requests to study marijuana or allow the Phoenix VA to refer patients to the Scottsdale Research Institute, but received no substantive response, Legion officials said. The organization is still pushing for marijuana to be taken off the list of Schedule I drugs.

“We want America’s veterans to have the best care possible,” said Louis Celli, a national director with the Legion. “This requires the VA to research therapies that show potential for improving veterans’ health care outcomes.” Nick Etten, a former Navy SEAL and founder of the Veterans Cannabis Project, said the VA – and everyone else – needed to treat the situation as a health policy issue. “This will be tough, but it
doesn’t have to be,” Etten said of loosening federal restrictions on marijuana. “It’s time for this country’s leadership to acknowledge our voices on this issue.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | January 19, 2018 ++]

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**VA Medical Marijuana Update 42 ► VA’s Tendency To Manipulate Science | Opinion**

In a recent critique of the Department of Veterans Affairs policy on conducting research into the effects of medical marijuana on PTSD and/or chronic pain, John Hudak of the Brookings Institute states that “old-fashioned biases, incomplete evaluations of existing literature, and a mischaracterization of policy has, to this point, won the day at VA.” Hudak’s description of VA’s research program as lacking complete information, its response as an unfortunate combination of false information, and its rationale as incomprehensible logic, all hit the nail on the head.

Unfortunately for veterans, this statement does not just apply to the VA’s position on medical marijuana research. It also applies to the VA’s continued use of dogs in unnecessary “maximum pain” experiments that, as noted by Hudak in reference to medical marijuana “do not advance health care for our veterans.” By law, any research conducted by the VA must be “in connection with the provision of medical care and treatment to veterans” and, more specifically, should focus on “research into injuries and illnesses particularly related to service.” VA’s current research priorities do not accomplish either of these statutory objectives.

**First**, with regard to both research into medical marijuana and research on dogs, the VA’s response to its critics has been to rely on misleading information to support its position. With regard to dog research, VA took credit for medical advancements such as insulin and the recently FDA-approved artificial pancreas. However, the discovery of insulin took place in 1921, a full two years before VA’s research program was created. Medtronic, the company that created the artificial pancreas, recently denied that VA’s dog research had any involvement in the device. Similarly, with regard to dog research, VA stated that side effects associated with its usage, including an increase in suicide, development of psychotic symptoms, and an increase in traffic accidents, outweighed any benefits to the research.

However, upon further review, the VA’s stated reasons are easily refuted, including by a report from the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine, which found that “there is conclusive or substantial evidence that cannabis or cannabinoids are effective for the treatment of chronic pain in adults.” Moreover, as also noted by Hudak, if impaired driving were a bar to medical research, the entire pharmaceutical industry would go out of business.

**Second**, VA’s reliance on support from veterans service organizations and other outside authorities has been inconsistent at best. To this end, VA has stated that animal models are unreliable in the context of granting presumptive benefits to veterans subject to toxic exposures during service, but defends dog research as “necessary” to save human lives when faced with a possible defund of the program. Likewise, in defense of its canine research program, VA relied heavily on the support of veterans service organizations, such as the American Legion, as a justification for continuing the research. Nonetheless, despite the support of the same veterans service organizations, again including the American Legion, of medical marijuana research, VA once again chooses only to rely on this support when it corroborates the Department’s pre-determined conclusion. Many veterans groups also happen to oppose the VA’s dog research, a fact VA has conveniently ignored.

**Next**, in conversations about both medical research and benefits, VA has a tendency to manipulate scientific and legal standards to its own benefit, and not the benefit of veterans. In the context of cannabis
research, VA has stated that, based on its own review on research and literature, entitled Benefits and Harms of Cannabis in Chronic Pain or PTSD, that there was “insufficient evidence to demonstrate benefits of cannabis use for patients with PTSD or chronic pain.” The term “insufficient evidence” is again one that the VA likes to rely on in denying presumptive benefit claims. However, VA has been reprimanded by the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims on numerous occasions for relying on insufficient evidence as substantive negative evidence. Similarly, VA Secretary David Shulkin’s claim that dog research is “necessary” is based on outdated information that is taken out of context.

Finally, VA’s research program is an example of why rigorous oversight of the agency from Congress and other stakeholders must remain a top priority. As noted above with regard to medical marijuana research, VA stated it conducted its own internal study which proved not to be systemic or thorough, and thus, ultimately misleading. Similarly, with regard to the canine research program, although VA stated after a scathing report by USA Today that it would review any research on canines more rigorously, to date, VA has failed to release any findings or reports as to what its more rigorous oversight would entail, leading many to believe that it has not actually changed any of its research protocols. In the conclusion of his analysis, Hudak states that “Shulkin has an obligation to do better.”

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Indeed, Shulkin has an obligation to review the priorities of the entire VA research program, and to encourage the Department to refocus its limited funding on medical research that complies with its statutory obligation to treat veterans’ illnesses and injuries related to service, rather than reinforcing the status quo that puts the interest of entrenched researchers over that of veterans. [Source: The Hill | Rory E. Riley-Topping | January 18, 2018 ++]

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GI Bill Update 247 ➤ Government Shutdown Impact

A government shutdown could have major repercussions for active-duty service members and their families — but it likely wouldn’t be as dire for veterans who rely on education benefits to pay their bills. At least for now. In the event that Congress doesn’t agree on a budget by the stroke of midnight 19 JAN, the Veterans Affairs Department has a contingency plan in place for student veterans. “What that looks like for GI Bill users — there will potentially be no customer service, but that doesn’t mean they won’t get paid, at least in the short term,” said Will Hubbard, vice president of government affairs for Student Veterans of America. “Certainly for a couple weeks they’ll be in the clear.”

According to information on the VA’s website, the federal agency will continue to process GI Bill benefits, including monthly housing stipends, in the event of a shutdown. However, the administrative branch of the VA that processes the benefits would be understaffed by the thousands, and education call centers and counseling services would be suspended. “If you’re a GI Bill user, and you have a question — which happens frequently — if you call in, essentially you’re going to get a busy signal,” Hubbard said. Hubbard said if the shutdown happens, GI Bill payments could continue for another two to three weeks. He doubts the shutdown would last beyond that, but if it does, veterans could find themselves in a tricky spot. In 2013, the government shut down for 16 days.

Navy veteran Alyssa Myner told Military Times she is relieved that the shutdown should not have an immediate impact on her GI Bill benefits, which she uses to attend Liberty University. And she has already received this month’s housing stipend. “However, I’m worried that if it does extend further than three weeks, I will not be able to continue school because of the lack of funds,” she said, also expressing concern
that if the government shuts down, she wouldn’t know whom to contact about the issue with VA call centers down.

Vacant VA counseling and call centers may not matter to veterans who have been in school for a while, said a Marine Corps veteran who attends George Washington University, just miles from where budget discussions have come to a standstill on Capitol Hill. But new student veterans may have questions about their benefits and need VA support, he said. “If that’s not happening, or if that’s not able to happen, that’s a crisis,” said the veteran, who spoke to Military Times on the condition of anonymity. He said that if the shutdown happens, its timing at the start of a new semester would be especially problematic.

Myner and the George Washington University student said they have not received information from their schools or the VA on what to do in case of a shutdown. “I think my school’s administration is just waiting to see exactly what happens,” the George Washington student said “I think even just pulling it out of the student veterans perspective, just as an American citizen, it’s just quite concerning at how partisan these sorts of issues have become,” he said. When asked for comment on this story, the VA did not provide information relevant to education benefits by press time.

Unfortunately, Congress could not come to an agreement by midnight of the 20th forcing a shutdown. However the government was set to fully reopen on 23 JAN, after congressional leaders finalized a new budget extension on 22 JAN. The new deal gives lawmakers three more weeks to sort lingering disagreements over immigration and federal fiscal policies. The budget legislation also includes a provision to provide back pay for troops and other federal workers for the time they missed because of the lapse in operations. [Source: ArmyTimes | Natalie Gross | January 19, 2018 ++]

VA Firing Authority Update 02  ➤  Now Takes 15 Days

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary David Shulkin said 17 JAN that he has fired thousands of underperforming workers under a special personnel authority granted to him by Congress. Appearing on “The Laura Ingraham Show” with guest host John Hinderaker, Shulkin said it used to take a year or more to fire unsatisfactory VA employees — and then only if their supervisors had the time and persistence to navigate the federal civil service law’s incredibly complex hiring and firing protections for government workers. The department also has a collective bargaining agreement with the American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) that frequently complicates the process even more. With more than 300,000 workers, VA is the second largest federal department.

Under a law passed with bipartisan support, Shulkin said the process now takes 15 days. “I’ve been given new authorities by Congress and the president to remove employees that have lost their way and aren’t adhering to professional standards,” he said. “So we’ve been able to remove thousands of employees from VA’s roll and set a standard for accountability so that those employees that are continuing to do an excellent job in serving are surrounded by other employees that have the same commitment.”

Shulkin told Hinderaker that employees still have due process rights. But they cannot drag out the process. The secretary’s ability to remove bad employees must make him the envy of his peers in the Cabinet. “They’ve actually been decades of problems. And my approach as secretary has been to talk about what those issues are and to be transparent with the problems.” “VA has unique authorities because we went to Congress and we said, ‘This is essential for us to fix the problems of the VA,’” he said. “If you don’t have the right people working and serving your veterans, you’re not going to be able to achieve the results that you want.”
Shulkin inherited a troubled, scandal-ridden agency after President Donald Trump took office. Media reports of dozens of veterans dying on waiting lists for care sparked bipartisan outrage. Shulkin said he has taken multiple steps to improve the department’s performance. “The department has had a lot of problems over the years,” he said. “They’ve actually been decades of problems. And my approach as secretary has been to talk about what those issues are and to be transparent with the problems.” Shulkin said Congress passed nine major veterans-related bills last year.

- One of them addresses a backlog of 470,000 veterans appealing benefit application denials. Such appeals can take up to six years to resolve. “That’s because our laws prior to this year had been written in 1930 and not updated since,” he said. Shulkin said Congress updated those laws and streamlined the appeals process, allowing for decisions within 30 days. “So that now we can begin to start moving those decisions faster and getting the right decisions for veterans,” he said.

- Shulkin touted the VA Choice and Quality Employment Act of 2017, which Trump signed into law in August. It guarantees that veterans can obtain medical treatments and procedures from private health care providers in the community if the VA does not provide them directly. “Well, if you’re going to fix health care and you’re gonna deliver on the promise of the best health care to our veterans, you have to give them choice,” he said. “And all of us know in our own lives that whenever you have choice that that’s ultimately gonna end up with a better result for you.”

- Veterans now can use benefits under the GI Bill for education at any time during their lives, thanks to changes made by Congress. Previously, there was a time limit.

Going forward, Shulkin said, mental health will be a top priority. Trump signed an executive order last week ensuring that every member of the military leaving service will have access to mental health services. Previously, only 40 percent of exiting service members qualified. The change is important because of the “national tragedy” of veterans’ committing suicide at a rate of 20 per day, Shulkin said. “So we’re dramatically expanding to make sure any veteran in need has access to good mental health services,” he said.

Shulkin said he will continue working to modernize the VA system, including information technology that was innovative 30 or 35 years ago but now is obsolete. “We need to continue to make sure that facilities that were built 50, 60 years ago and no longer meeting the needs of veterans, that they can be disposed of and reinvest money in modern facilities to make sure that veterans are getting the very best care possible,” he said. [Source: Polizette | Brendan Kirby | January 17, 2018 ++]

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VA FMP Update 01 ➤ Medical Claims | Thailand

As of last October, the VA for all medical intent ceased to exist in Philippines and most other foreign countries. All Medical is now sent to the VA Foreign Medical Program (FMP) in Denver. ALL US Veterans with service connected conditions now fall under the FMP jurisdiction. Simply stated, if you are NOT service connected for a condition that you are seeking treatment, THE VETERAN MUST PAY FOR THAT TREATMENT. The FMP will only pay for service-connected conditions outside the U.S., Puerto Rico and Guam. ALL Veterans with service connected conditions need to register with the FMP. The registration form can be downloaded at https://www.va.gov/vaforms/medical/pdf/vha-10-7959f-1%20-fill_012317.pdf. The VA OPC in Manila will be phasing out operations and you will have no alternative unless you are also on Tricare.

Any veteran seeking treatment in Thailand for ANY condition, must be a service connected condition. A referral letter from a doctor in the Philippines for a NON-service-connected issue is not valid and will not be honored. While there are several hospitals in Thailand participating in the FMP Direct billing program, the
payment of the bill is ultimately the Veteran's responsibility. The hospital agreeing to send the bill to the VA is at its discretion and may insist on payment from anyone at the time services are rendered. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the Independent FMP Advisor Jim Gilmore at utapao1@gmail.com or +66 8 2396 9995 from 0800 to 2000 daily in Bangkok. [Source: U-Tapao | Jim Gilmore | January 17, 2018 ++]

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**VA Lawsuit | Turner~Glenford ➤ Scalpel Left in Patient's Body**

An Army veteran who says someone left a scalpel inside him after surgery is suing a veterans affairs hospital. Bridgeport resident Glenford Turner says the scalpel was only discovered years later, after he suffered from long-term abdominal pain. Doctors attempted to perform an MRI, which uses a strong magnetic field to produce an image from inside the body, on Turner, but it was "abruptly halted" after he complained of severe abdominal pain, according to the press release. A subsequent X-ray showed the scalpel inside Turner's body, the press release states.

He sued the VA in U.S. District Court last week, seeking unspecified compensatory damages. Court papers say Turner had surgery at the VA hospital in West Haven in 2013. Nearly four years later, he went back to the VA with dizziness and severe abdominal pain. An X-Ray showed there was a scalpel inside his body. Turner had to undergo surgery in APR 2017 to remove the scalpel. His lawyer, Joel Faxon, said doctors confirmed it was the same one. Faxon called it "an incomprehensible level of incompetence."

The VA said 15 JAN it doesn't typically comment on pending litigation. U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, a Connecticut Democrat, said he was appalled and stunned by the egregious medical malpractice case. "I have asked for a detailed explanation from VA of this deeply troubling report," he said in a statement. "I am demanding also full accountability so this kind of horrific negligence never happens again."

VA Secretary David Shulkin said 17 JAN that the department is working to address the claim and prevent future mistakes. "It's an event that should never happen, and I am deeply sorry that any veteran should have to undergo this," Shulkin said. "It's an event that should never happen, and I am deeply sorry that any veteran should have to undergo this," Shulkin said, adding that the incident was "inadvertent on the surgeon's part." Shulkin also said that surgical materials are left inside patients far less frequently in the VA's hospitals than in non-VA institutions. [Source: Associated Press | January 15, 2018 ++]

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VA Lawsuit | Walker~Eric ► Cocaine Misdiagnosis

A U.S. Navy veteran is suing a hospital that he says misdiagnosed him as being a cocaine addict instead of suffering from gallbladder and pancreas disease. The State newspaper in Columbia reports Eric Walker has sued Dorn Veterans Hospital in Columbia for its treatment of him when he went to the emergency room in May 2015 with severe abdominal pain. The lawsuit filed in December says Walker's urine sample was switched with that of another patient. It says Dorn discharged Walker and offered him pamphlets about treatment of substance abuse. Attorney Todd Lyle says the 47-year-old Walker was treated several days later at Lexington Medical Center Hospital. Walker is seeking unspecified damages. The U.S. Attorney's office in Columbia likely will represent Dorn and the Veterans Administration. It declined comment. [Source: Associated Press | January 13, 2018 ++]

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VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 16 thru 31 JAN 2018

Upper Marlboro MD -- A former Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) official pleaded guilty today to charges of wire fraud and bribery for orchestrating a scheme to steal more than $66,000 in benefit money from the VA for veterans in need. Acting Assistant Attorney General John P. Cronan of the Justice Department’s Criminal Division made the announcement. Russel M. Ware, 39, of Upper Marlboro, Maryland, pleaded guilty to one count of wire fraud and one count of bribery before U.S. District Judge Amit P. Mehta in the District of Columbia. Sentencing has been scheduled for May 8, before Judge Mehta.

According to the plea documents, between September 2013 and May 2014, Ware devised a scheme to steal more than $21,000 in VA disability benefit money by wiring payments in the names of legitimate VA beneficiaries to his own bank account. Between October 2014 and February 2015, Ware directed additional disability benefits totaling almost $46,000 to a friend, Jacqueline Crawford of Gulfport, Mississippi. Ware and Crawford were not entitled to receive the money. Ware also admitted that, at his direction, Crawford then kicked back more than $13,000 to Ware, usually through the use of Walmart2Walmart money transfers. Crawford pleaded guilty in February 2017, to an information charging her with a single count of theft of government property related to the scheme, and is awaiting sentencing. [Source: DoJ Office of Public Affairs | January 23, 2018 ++]

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Bradenton FL -- United States District Judge Susan C. Bucklew on 24 JAN sentenced Doyle Mullins, Jr. (71, Bradenton) to nine months of home detention and five years of probation for theft of government funds. As part of his sentence, the Court also entered a money judgment against him in the amount of $583,485.74, which constitutes the proceeds of the theft from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Mullins pleaded guilty on October 16, 2017.

According to court documents, from approximately 1995 through 2017, Mullins, a veteran of the Vietnam War, repeatedly lied to the Department of Veterans Affairs by falsely claiming that he was totally and permanently blind and that he was unable to drive, work, or perform household tasks. As a result, for more than 20 years, Mullins has obtained thousands of dollars per month in recurring disability payments from the government, grants from the VA for a car and adaptive housing, and medical benefits payments for his wife. During the course of their investigation, law enforcement agents observed Mullins regularly driving, mowing his lawn, running errands, and banking. [Source: DoJ Middle District of FL | January 24, 2018 ++]

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Salem OR -- A man said to be a military veteran seeking mental health care was shot by a security officer at a Veterans Affairs clinic in southern Oregon on 25 JAN after an admissions area altercation in which authorities said the man became combative. The man was flown to a hospital after the shooting in the southwestern community of White City with injuries that did not appear to be life-threatening, the Jackson County sheriff's office said in a statement.

Shawn Quall, an Army veteran of the first Gulf War who is from Bend, Oregon, said he heard the man shouting before the situation escalated. "I was walking down the main hallway when I overheard a veteran yelling at intake people that he was here for the fifth time trying to get health care, and was upset at what he thought was a runaround," Quall told The Associated Press in a telephone interview. Quall kept walking down the hall, but when the yelling got louder, he started running back and heard someone yell: "He's got a knife!" "Then boom, a loud shot. I saw the guy holding his stomach and then fall to the ground," Quall said. An officer told onlookers to leave, saying there was nothing to see.

Sgt. Julie Denney of the sheriff's office said she could not confirm that a knife was involved. "The details of the events leading to the shooting are still under investigation," she said in a text message. VA police responded "after reports of a combative patient in the admissions area. An altercation ensued between the man and VA Police officers, resulting in the discharge of a firearm," the sheriff's office statement said. The man and the officers involved were not identified. Veterans at the clinic receiving treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder and other issues expressed shock about the shooting. Outpatient Joel Setzer, a U.S. Army veteran who also served in Operation Desert Storm in the Gulf, said "this is the type of incident that should have never happened out there."

The VA Southern Oregon Rehabilitation Center & Clinics says on its website that it "offers a variety of health services to meet the needs of our nation's Veterans." Quall said it's not unusual to hear veterans arguing with the center's staff. "Often you hear guys yelling," he said. "It's dealing with the federal government, and it is frustrating at times." A spokeswoman for the clinic did not return telephone messages seeking comment. [Source: The Associated Press | Andrew Selsky | 25 Jan 2018 ++]

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**VA Compensation & Benefits ► Problem Solving Program Q&A -- 28 & 29**

**Question #28:** I was on active duty Navy from 1957 thru 1961, can I get more social security pay for the Quarters I was on active duty?

**A1:** The Social Security Administration states that it has completed updating the record of everyone that was on active duty. There is no more pay available.  (AP) 4/6/2016

**A2:** The Social Security Administration should also give you a print-out of the annual amounts that you contributed toward your Social Security. I would check with Social Security and if the print-outs show that you had contributions credited for the period you were in the service they have already credited it to you and you have been getting paid monthly for that contribution. Call Social Security and have them look it up. (CP) 4/11/2016

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**Question #29:** In 1989 my husband was hospitalized for a serious breakdown and spent a month confined in the psychiatric ward at a VA Hospital. He was released and sent back out into his environment with prescriptions that are no longer prescribed. His hospitalization made him very cautious about being on prescribed drugs that made his condition worse than helping him to find some healthy mental and emotional outcomes and coping skills. Since then he locks these military issues away until he went to a VA Hospital
last year and had episodes that brought on mental and emotional events. Since then his memory skills, his coping skills, etc. have diminished. He is now part of a VA sponsored group therapy program and only able to see a VA psychiatrist once a month due to the overload of patients. Last year he did receive some compensation along with some other issues but I fear he will lose his bearings because of all the uprooting of things buried from Viet Nam service. He appears to be losing ground in this regard. He deserves more compensation and has not been able to work at all for many years due to these conditions. How does a family approach the compensation rules to allow my husband more compensation and more therapy opportunities? This area VA system is overloaded with veterans seeking therapy and therefore getting an appointment more than 1 time a month is not possible.

A1: If your husband is service connected for a mental disorder, you have these options:

1. Request an increase in treatment where current treatment takes place.
2. If you have a Vet Center near you he can go there.
3. If you live beyond 40 miles from your VAMC he can opt through the Choice Program to be seen by a private provider in the community and the VA pays for it.
4. If you have a Community Based Outreach Clinic (CBOC) in your area, they provide counseling and psychiatrist services.
5. If your husband feels his condition is getting worse, he can file for an increase in compensation. This increase must be filed with current treatment records and opinions from his doctor if they were done. A veteran cannot present evidence that was used to grant the initial rating. It must be new and current. (CP)

4/10/2016

A2: CP is correct on some of the advice, but I would also apply to the VA for Individual Unemployability. The only thing wrong with that is that you husband would have to be rated with one disability at 60% or with a combined rating of 70% or more. I would also go to a County Veteran Service Officer and seek their assistance. (CP) 4/11/2016

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**Problem Solving Program (PSP)**

Have a question about the VA? Need help with benefit questions? Need answers to your compensation questions? The USVCP Problem Solving Program (PSP) is available to get answers. Submit your question at http://www.veteranprograms.com/compensation.html and allow an experienced veteran(s) or VSO to answer your question. Your question will be sent to over 125,000+ registered USVCP veterans, government employees, veteran organizations, and military supporters. Note that USVCP does NOT represent or warrant, and makes no claims, promises or guarantees about, the usefulness, completeness, adequacy or accuracy of any information in the answers.


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**VAMC Aurora CO Update 22 ▶ Progress Report | Opening Soon**

In a matter of weeks, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is expected to announce that it has all but completed construction of a new hospital in Aurora — a major milestone for a project that drew national outrage in 2015 when the agency admitted it was $1 billion over budget. But according to a congressional document obtained by The Denver Post, the 23 JAN target will be little more than an illusion as the team
building the $1.7 billion facility expects to spend several more months finishing hundreds of items on its to-do list.

Officials at the VA are “pessimistic” about filling all the jobs at the new hospital in time for its planned summer opening, which “may reduce services initially offered,” according to the latest findings. Also, because of the way the new hospital campus was built, there won’t be enough space for facilities such as a rehabilitation center for veterans who have post-traumatic stress disorder. The shortcoming means it’s likely the VA will keep open for at least three years the Denver hospital that the Aurora campus is supposed to replace. The timeline could stretch even longer if Congress doesn’t approve the VA’s request to spend millions of additional dollars to construct another building at the new campus, although the whole situation is going to cost taxpayers either way — since keeping open the old facility is also expensive. “Operating both (VA medical centers) will also generate excess security, logistics, facilities management, food service, and administrative staffing costs in the low tens of millions” of dollars, according to a draft document prepared for the U.S. House Committee on Veterans Affairs.

The new list of problems is sure to draw renewed attention to the project, which largely has gone unnoticed since 2015, when the VA revealed the project was $1 billion over budget and years behind schedule. The admission briefly put the project’s funding in jeopardy — as several members of Congress questioned whether it should give the VA more money to finish it. Ultimately, they relented, but the episode prompted the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers to take charge of the project and compel the VA to change how it undertakes large-scale construction. On 12 JAN, three members of Congress toured the construction site: Colorado lawmakers Mike Coffman and Ed Perlmutter, and Phil Roe, the Tennessee Republican who chairs the House veterans committee. His panel had a hearing planned for 17 JAN that will examine the project’s progress. Said Coffman, a longtime critic of the VA’s management of the new hospital: “I certainly remain very frustrated in terms of where we are right now.”

In response to questions about the project’s progress, VA spokesman Curt Cashour said the agency “continues to work closely with its project partners to resolve issues as they arise.” In a separate document obtained by The Denver Post, a top VA official acknowledges many of the issues outlined in the congressional document. But Stella Fiotes, acting principal executive director of the VA’s Office of Acquisition, Logistics and Construction, said they were being managed correctly — including the add-on items on the construction to-do list. “It is common on complex projects like this one, to defer items that can be more cost effectively and efficiently handled through a follow-on contractor,” she wrote. One piece of good news from the federal document is that the VA probably will not need more money to either finish construction of the new facility or outfit the campus with furniture and medical equipment — costs that are expected to run $1.7 billion and about $340 million respectively. But plenty of work remains.

Although the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers and contractor Kiewit-Turner anticipate most construction work will be done this month, that milestone is “misleading,” according to the congressional findings, because “many design-error corrections, renovations and final completion items that are necessary before activation have been excluded from the definition of ‘construction completion.’” Those include replacing dozens of power outlets and upgrading the facility’s psychiatric offices because “dozens of fixtures” there pose a suicide risk because of features such as sharp edges. Kiewit-Turner plans to finish some of this work — about 75 items — by May, but an additional 300 items are left on the construction to-do list that must be completed by a contractor that has yet to be selected. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers had “planned to depart the construction site (in January) but now will continue managing construction through at least June,” according to the four-page congressional document. “Activation activities are ongoing and the facility will open to serve our local veterans in August 2018,” Fiotes wrote.

Another worry outlined in the congressional document is the ability of the VA to find employees to staff the new Aurora facility. The existing hospital has 653 vacancies out of a staff of 2,787 — about 23 percent —
and that of the “421 positions that need to be hired during activation, VA has onboarded 199 people, with 222 remaining,” according to the congressional document. The tight Denver labor market, they continued, has made VA officials pessimistic about their ability to fill all the slots by the time the campus is ready. While the lack of staffing won’t delay the hospital’s opening, it probably will lead to holes in what services are offered.

Coffman (R-Aurora) said his biggest worry was that the VA plans to continue operating the Denver facility after the new Aurora campus opens. “I think the VA really needs to get out of there,” he said. Notably, a PTSD rehabilitation facility and seven patient-care teams will remain at the Denver hospital for at least three years, according to the congressional document. That’s for two reasons: A planned PTSD building at the new campus was nixed earlier because of the project’s escalating cost, and there’s not enough space at the new hospital to house the seven primary-care teams. “The new (VA medical center) has 34 primary care exam rooms compared to 60 at the existing (VA medical center), and it cannot accommodate seven existing (patient care) teams serving 8,500 veterans,” according to the House document.

The three-year timeline comes from the expectation that the VA ultimately will build another building on the new campus. Fiotes, of the VA, acknowledged as much. “VA plans to keep the existing hospital in service until the PTSD building can be completed at the new campus,” she wrote. “Additionally, seven Patient Aligned Care Teams (PACT) will remain at the current facility to serve veterans until VA conducts further analysis on how to optimize their impact for local area care based on where those PACT teams can continue to function.” Even so, she remained upbeat about the nearly complete medical campus — despite its long history of problems. “The new facility will provide a much more up-to-date and positive veteran and family experience,” she wrote. [Source: Denver Post | Mark K. Matthews | January 15, 2018 ++]

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VAMC Rosenberg OR Update 01 ▶ Patients Are Not at Risk

The Roseburg Veterans Affairs hospital is calling a New York Times report claiming it puts patients at risk “false.” The report, published 1 JAN, claims the hospital limits the number of patients it admits so it can boost its quality of care rating. The idea is that the fewer patients admitted to the hospital, the fewer the chances for bad outcomes, according to the newspaper. That in turn would lead to better ratings, and more bonus money that officials make.

KEZI 9 News reached out to the Roseburg VA for a response to this report. A spokesperson called the story “false.” “The Roseburg VA HCS is a one-star facility according to SAIL data,” said spokesperson Shanon Goodwin. “On its face, this shows there is no manipulation of data because, if the facility were manipulating data to boost its rating, wouldn’t it be getting a higher score?” Goodwin said they are admitting patients based off the capabilities of the hospital, not to manipulate ratings. She said there are some conditions the hospital can’t treat, so they do turn some veterans away so they can get better care at other hospitals. “The New York Times story is false.

The answer is that it’s not manipulating data, but rather basing admissions decisions on the actual clinical capabilities of the facility. Roseburg VA Health Care System admits patients based on InterQual criteria, which is the industry standard for U.S. health care. All admission decisions are based on the hospital’s ability to provide the care patients require and are made by clinicians, including the facility chief of staff and her clinical chiefs of service - non-clinical administrators have nothing to do with these decisions. At its core, the Roseburg VA HCS is primarily an outpatient center, and that’s why the hospital’s clinical leadership has made clear to its physicians that the facility has limited capabilities to care for patients with certain clinical conditions that are far better treated in nearby community hospitals.
This is precisely why we're being transparent with our doctors about the conditions that the facility is unable to treat, because it's in Veterans' best interests for them to be seen at other hospitals in the community with greater capabilities to deliver them the best care for those conditions. Secretary Shulkin has made clear that, under his leadership, VA is going to leverage the best of the private sector with the best of VA's own clinical capabilities. And, in the case of Roseburg, which has no intensive care unit and limited surgical capabilities, we are ensuring that Veterans receive the best care, whether from VA or in the community. In doing so, VA works closely with Veterans and community providers to coordinate such care. Just as the Manchester, New Hampshire VA Medical Center is doing, Roseburg VA HCS is partnering deliberately with nearby community hospitals to deliver Veterans the best possible care based on the facility's actual clinical care capabilities.

In the second of three consecutive rallies, the Vietnam Veterans of America Umpqua Valley Chapter 805 gathered in downtown Roseburg on 23 JAN to show their support for the staff at the Roseburg VA Hospital. Veterans said with everything the VA has been going through, they wanted to show support and put out something positive instead of all the negative they said they've been seeing. "This all is based on veterans, so we're just hoping that we can get the word out that, hey, there’s two sides of every story. And we need to get some more positive in there instead of negative," said Terry Mooney, president of the Umpqua Valley Chapter 805.

Mooney said they support every employee at the VA and especially support director Doug Paxton. They feel he's doing a great job and they're happy with the way the VA has been running. Mooney said they're frustrated that more veterans weren't involved in the processes during both investigation of the VA and elimination of some of the staff. He said that doesn't seem just since veterans are the ones most affected by the hospital. He said there gathering was not a protest, and shouldn't be viewed as such, but just a show of support and a bit of positivity among negativity. [Source: ABC 9 KEZI News | Martha Quillin | January 23, 2018 ++]

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VAMC Manchester NH Update 06  ► Substandard Care Complaints

The Manchester VA Medical Center failed to take seriously whistleblower complaints of substandard care at the facility, including that a number of patients developed serious spinal cord diseases as a result of clinical neglect, according to a report from a federal whistleblower agency. The findings announced 25 JAN from the Office of the Special Counsel follow reports last summer from The Boston Globe that 11 physicians and medical employees alleged the Manchester facility was endangering patients. They described a fly-infested operating room, surgical instruments that weren't always sterilized and patients whose conditions were ignored or weren't treated properly.

In response to the Globe report, Secretary of Veterans Affairs David Shulkin immediately removed three top officials and ordered an investigation. Shulkin visited the hospital in August, and said a task force would explore bringing a full-service veterans hospital to New Hampshire, teaming up with other hospitals in the state or forming a public-private partnership to improve care. "The VA did not initiate substantive changes to resolve identified issues until over seven months had elapsed, and only did so after widespread public attention focused on these matters," Special Counsel Henry J. Kerner wrote to President Donald Trump. "It is critical that whistleblowers be able to have confidence that the VA will address public health and safety issues immediately, regardless of what news coverage an issue receives."

Veterans Affairs spokesman Curt Cashour disputed allegations that the VA failed to take the complaints seriously and insisted the medical center was well on its way to addressing those shortcomings. He said several members of the Manchester leadership team have been replaced. Cashour said the VA had launched
an independent clinical review of every case that whistleblowers identified. The investigation is ongoing. "I hope ongoing investigations and studies related to care at the Manchester VA will shed more light," New Hampshire Democratic Sen. Jeanne Shaheen said in a statement. "Our veterans deserve nothing less than high quality, convenient, accessible health care, and I will not accept anything less."

Democratic Sen. Maggie Hassan, also from New Hampshire, said the report raises serious concerns about the VA system and whether it adequately addresses whistleblower concerns. Hassan said the VA "must take additional steps" to hold accountable members of the VA leadership, both in Washington and in New England, "for their completely inadequate response to the concerns expressed by the whistleblowers and other providers."

Much of the Globe's report focused on accounts from Dr. William "Ed" Kois, head of Manchester VA's spinal cord clinic, who compiled a list of at least 80 patients at the hospital over five years suffering from advanced and potentially crippling nerve compression in the neck, and using canes, wheelchairs and walkers, instead of getting surgery. He said the condition is easy to diagnose and treat with surgery before it progresses too far. The Office of the Special Counsel report called the Manchester VA's response to the Kois' concern's "sluggish" and allege that it only started to look into the allegations of substandard care after they were published by the Globe. But even then, the report criticized the agency for choosing not to "review certain serious allegations."

It found that its office had referred the whistleblower allegations to the VA in January 2017 but that the VA waited until after the newspaper's story was published in July to take action against any VA personnel or initiate a comprehensive review of the facility. "This is an unacceptable message to VA whistleblowers that only the glaring spotlight of public scrutiny will move the action to action, not disclosures made through statutorily established channels," Kerner wrote. Despite the Manchester VA's failure to immediately act on the whistleblower complaints, the OSC said it was unable to substantiate that patient care suffered. It said it couldn't substantiate whistleblower claims that spinal care patients received improper medical care nor could it conclude that the rate of worsening neurological function related to the spinal cord condition myelopathy at the Manchester facility is "indicative of clinical neglect resulting from delayed referrals and surgical intervention."

It did, however, substantiate that a physician inappropriately copied and pasted portions of patient progress notes for several years — a violation of VA policy. It also substantiated that facility's operating room was repeatedly infested with flies but couldn't substantiate that the infestation delayed care. Kois dismissed the OSC findings on patient care, contending it was hamstrung by the fact it was basing its findings on an Office of the Medical Inspector investigation. He claims it reviewed only a handful of the 97 patients that he spotlighted. "If the OMI wanted to look, there was documentation that these patients are damaged," Kois said. [Source: Associated Press | Michael Casey | January 25, 2018 ++]

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VAMC Fayetteville NC Update 04 ► Visitor Restrictions | Flu Concerns

The Fayetteville VA Medical Center announced visitor restrictions due to concerns over flu outbreaks. Visitors under the age of 18 are asked to not come to the VA’s facilities. Also, anyone suffering from fever, cough, headache, fatigue, runny or stuffy nose, or body aches should not come to the hospital unless they are a patient. The restrictions will be in place until further notice. North Carolina health officials have reported more than 40 flu-related deaths this season. Some basic precautions everyone can use to help prevent the spread of the flu include:

- Get a flu shot. These are available for all medical center and CBOC patients on a walk-in basis;
• Wash hands with warm water and soap, or use hand sanitizer when soap and water are not available;
• Cover coughs and sneezes. Use a tissue or your upper sleeve, and put the used tissue in the wastebasket; and
• Limit your contact with the public if you are sick.

[Source: CBS WNCN News | January 24, 2018 ++]

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**Vet Alcohol/Drug Abuse ► No Gender Difference in Prevalence**

In the civilian world, fewer women than men have drug or alcohol issues, but that’s not the case when it comes to veterans. "Veterans are different in that there is no gender difference in the prevalence of these problems," according to University of Massachusetts public health scientist Elizabeth Evans. She, along with other researchers at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the University of California, Los Angeles, conducted a national study to look at the role childhood adversity played in drug and alcohol abuse in both the civilian and military populations.

"As the role of women in our nation's military expands, we need to better understand the gender-specific patterns of alcohol and drug use and whether patterns by gender are different for veterans and if so, why," she said in a news release. "Provision of health and social services can be improved to better meet the needs of all veterans, and in particular for women," she said. Evans is an assistant professor of health promotion and policy at the UMass Amherst School of Public Health and Health Sciences. According to her group's findings, with veterans as opposed to the general population, "a similar proportion of women and men - about 37 percent - have ever had an alcohol or drug use disorder." "This finding that women veterans are similar to men veterans and are so different from civilian women, is unexpected," she said.

Evans said she was surprised at the "high rates of childhood adversity among veterans, especially among women; 68 percent of women veterans report some childhood adversity, and they have the highest rates of childhood sexual abuse." Study results appear in a recent early online edition of "Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology" and will be in print this year. "One of the implications of this study is the need to assess for childhood adversity, to help people recognize its relationship with substance use and cope with its health impacts," Evan said. "When people join the military or when veterans access healthcare at the VA or in the community would be good times to assess and treat childhood adversity, and we're often missing those opportunities now."

Researchers looked at data from 379 female and 2,740 male veterans and 20,066 female and 13,116 male civilians from the 2012-13 National Epidemiologic Survey on Alcohol and Related Conditions. [Source: The Republican | Diane Lederman | January 12, 2018 ++]
Military Discharge Upgrade Update 01 ► VA New Online Help

Veterans Affairs and Defense officials this week released new online help for veterans applying for a discharge upgrade, the latest in a series of outreach efforts to so-called “bad paper” veterans who may have been unfairly deprived of federal benefits. The new tools, available through the VA’s web site, provide veterans with downloadable forms for the appropriate VA or military officials and detailed instructions on the upgrade request process. Veterans cannot submit forms through the site, but officials said the goal is to give clearer directions on how to navigate the complex requirements for upgrade petitions VA officials said they launched the tool after fielding more than 5,000 calls related to upgrade procedures in 2017, most complaining the instructions available were too confusing or complicated to be useful.

Robert Wilkie, undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, in a statement praised the joint collaboration and said it will help “individualize the guidance” in an effort to simplify the process. Military officials estimate that tens of thousands of veterans with less than honorable discharges could be eligible for upgrades. Vietnam Veterans of America has put the number at over 300,000. While most individuals with criminal charges and court-martial dismissals aren’t eligible, veterans discharged because of incidents relating to undiagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder, traumatic brain injury, sexual assault or their sexual orientation may be. An upgrade to a higher discharge status can also bring with it eligibility for a host of veterans health and education benefits.

Last year, VA officials expanded their emergency medical care policies to include 90 days of mental health care for veterans with other-than-honorable discharges. That period includes a review of veterans records to determine if they should be eligible for additional medical services. Military officials in 2016 changed the rules surrounding upgrade applications to allow for more “liberal consideration” of undiagnosed health claims by veterans.

Kris Goldsmith, assistant director for policy and government relations at VVA, called the work done so far “heartening” but said more work needs to be done. “The tool helps veterans understand what needs to be done to be brought back into the fold, but discharge upgrade requests and characterization of discharge reviews historically have negative outcomes for the overwhelming majority of applicants,” he said. “The denial of an appeal is in itself traumatic for a veteran with PTSD. I know this because I’ve experienced it personally three times in the last decade. Congress and the Administration need to make fixing bad-paper a top priority, and take more proactive measures to helping our most vulnerable population of veterans.”

VVA is pushing legislation on Capitol Hill dubbed the “Leave No Veteran Behind Act” that would provide more services to bad-paper veterans, and has been working towards public hearings on the issue to raise awareness. [Source: MilitaryTimes | January 26, 2018 ++]

Vietnam Veterans Memorial Update 21 ► No More Cremated Remains

As more Vietnam veterans die, the National Park Service says, it can’t keep storing the ashes, and the agency is telling people to stop bringing them. When Vietnam veteran Gordon J. Castro died six years ago, his older brother, Leon, had him cremated and placed his remains in a specially inscribed, stainless-steel box. He glued on Gordon’s Purple Heart medal, his silver and blue Combat Infantryman Badge and a 1st Cavalry Division insignia. Then he got into his Ford pickup, put the box on the passenger seat and drove from Corpus Christi, Tex., to the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington to fulfill his brother’s wish...
that he be laid to rest at the Wall. It was hard to leave him so far from home, Leon Castro said, but Gordon had said he “left the better part of himself” in Vietnam.

Gordon Castro’s remains are among scores that have been left at the Wall over the years, in gestures of devotion, but in a practice the National Park Service is now trying to stop. With an aging population of Vietnam veterans, the 50th anniversary of the worst year of fighting and Ken Burns’ powerful Vietnam War documentary, the Park Service said, there has been an increase in remains being left. “It’s been happening for years and years,” said Janet Folkerts, a Park Service curator. “But it’s becoming more and more of an issue . . . It’s something that we have to definitely deal with.” This past fall, signs were erected at the Wall telling visitors that human remains “and associated objects” should not be left or scattered there, or anywhere on the Mall.

Leaving mementos at the Wall has been a tradition since the polished stone memorial bearing the names of the 58,000 Vietnam War dead was dedicated in 1982. Hundreds of thousands of letters, photographs, jungle boots, stuffed animals, sculptures, dog tags, college rings, a motorcycle, cigars, a piece of a helicopter rotor blade and human remains have been left. The artifacts are gathered and stored in the Park Service’s large Museum Resource Center in suburban Maryland. The human cremains are kept in a locked metal cabinet with the windows papered over. About 70 cremains — some in containers, some scattered — have been left at the Wall over the years, said Folkerts, a curator at the resource center. The first were left in 1990, she said. The most recent appeared several weeks ago. Thirty-one have been left in the past five years, including five in 2017. Dick Lundskow’s family and friends left two small manila packets there this past Memorial Day. He wasn’t a veteran but was devoted to veterans’ causes, his daughter Angela Childers said, and would have wanted part of him left there.

- Some cremains are in wooden, glass or metal urns.
- Some are in small pill-style boxes.
- Some are in plastic bags or Tupperware containers, according to a Park Service list.
- A 155-mm artillery shell casing said to contain the cremains of a Daniel Dhee Hughes was left in 2006.
- An elegant wooden box labeled “Master Gunnery Sergeant Ronald William Looney” was left after he died in 2008. It is adorned with the Marine Corps globe-and-anchor insignia and has an ornate metal clasp. A silver container labeled “Martin Ranko,” still bears the logo of the Long Island Cremation Co. of West Babylon, N.Y. It was left Veterans Day weekend, 1990.
- A small gold cylinder left in May 2011 has a taped-on label, reading: SFC William R Shales |174th assault helicopter company |Retired 20 years of service |3 tours of Viet Nam |1937 - 2011 Rest in peace.
- An envelope containing the cremains of Roger B. Probst Sr. was left June 21, 1991. Someone had written on the envelope: “You finally made it. Enjoy your reunion . . . ”

Many of the containers are not marked with a name, said Laura Anderson, curator for the Mall and Memorial Parks. “We don’t have a way of knowing if it’s even a Vietnam vet,” she said. “Some of them could be other family members. They could be veterans from other wars . . . We don’t know.” Spokesman Mike Litterst said the remains can’t be added to the Park Service’s official collections. “We’re not
permitted,” he said. “And right now, we don’t have an answer for what to do with these remains. But we do know that they won’t become part of the collections.”

Anderson, in an interview at the resource center this month, said: “We’ve been talking for a long time now about what to do about it . . . trying to come up with a policy for how we want to handle this. “Because we’re not really equipped,” she said. “I imagine it’s a big decision — what do you do with your loved one — especially if somebody is asking to be left here. You want to honor those wishes. But we’re not allowed to accept them.” Most parks do allow the scattering of remains under certain circumstances and with a permit. But rules vary from park to park, according to regulations provided by Litterst.

- Shenandoah National Park allows scattering but does not allow urns.
- At Pearl Harbor, cremains of survivors of the World War II attack on the USS Arizona can be placed in urns aboard the sunken wreck. And the ashes of Pearl Harbor attack survivors can be spread in the harbor.
- Yosemite National Park prohibits scattering from the air. It requires remains to be further “pulverized” after cremation and prohibits any publicity of the scattering event.
- Colonial National Historical Park, in Virginia, allows scattering by air but from a minimum altitude of 2,000 feet and not over developed areas or bodies of water.

The Wall is unique. “A lot of Vietnam veterans feel very connected to the memorial,” Folkerts said. “It speaks to them in a way that many other places in the country don’t. So they would like to become part of it.” Jan Scruggs, founder of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund, which built the Wall, said in an email: “Many veterans and their families want ashes spread at THE WALL and will do as they please. The vets want to be reunited with those who they remember as ‘forever young’ who laid down their lives in Vietnam, and to ease their pain that time cannot heal.”

Leon Castro, 70, said that in the final months of his brother’s life, Gordon abruptly announced he wanted his cremains left at the Wall. Both men had served in Vietnam but had rarely talked about their experiences, he said in a telephone interview from Corpus Christi. The men and their sister, Linda, had been raised there by a single mother who worked as a secretary. Leon, a retired carpenter, had gone to Vietnam first, serving in 1966 and 1967.

Gordon entered the Army and served in the infantry with the 1st Air Cavalry Division in 1970 and ’71. He was once wounded by shrapnel in a mortar attack, Leon said. He lived in Victoria, Tex., and worked at a nearby Alcoa plant. His sister said he was a gentle person who played the violin and did fine woodworking. He had been married and divorced twice and had no children. But the brothers were very close. “We didn’t have a father and grew up fairly poor,” Leon said. Later, “we’d go ride motorcycles all over.” When Gordon got sick, he asked to be cremated, Leon said. And “one day, out of the blue, said he wanted me to take his . . . remains and leave them on the Wall.” “I didn’t quite understand it,” he said. “Trying to figure out why he wanted that, I asked him, and he just said he felt he left the better part of himself” in Vietnam. “He kind of felt he died there, sort of.” His sister said he had made an emotional visit to the Wall several years ago and took rubbings of the names of friends. Gordon died April 20, 2012, age 61.

Leon had the box specially fabricated and engraved. He drove the 1,600 miles from Corpus Christi to Washington in his red pickup. It was a two-day drive. He said he didn’t feel alone: “My brother was with me.” He said he stayed in a hotel in Virginia and took a cab to the Wall. “It was hard to leave him there,” he said, his voice breaking. “I preferred to keep him close, but that’s what he wanted.” Leon put the box down near the center of the Wall and walked away. Feeling a pang, he went back and picked it up, but then put it down again and left. “I look at this as a homecoming,” he wrote in a note he put with the box. Leon Castro said he had called someone in the Park Service, he believes at the resource center, before he made the trip from Texas. He said he was told that it was okay to leave the remains. Litterst, the Park Service spokesman, said that person was mistaken or misinformed. Asked about the agency’s new effort to halt the practice,
Leon Castro said in an email: “It is understandable. Caring for the cremains of those Vets left at the Wall is an eternal responsibility.” [Source: The Washington Post | Michael Robinson Chavez | January 28, 2018 ++]

Vet Commercial Drivers License Update 01 ➤ DMV Waiver Program

**FAST Act** - The Federal Motor Carrier Safety Administration's (FMCSA) is committed is to serving our veterans and assisting efforts to attract and retain skilled commercial motor vehicle (CMV) drivers/ This commitment is bolstered by several FAST Act provisions.

- An FMCSA rule will provide military personnel with a time extension to apply for a skills test waiver and also permit active duty military personnel to apply and be tested for their commercial learner’s permits and commercial driver’s license in the State where they are stationed.
- FMCSA will establish a process that allows veteran operators to obtain their DOT medical certification exams from their Department of Veterans Affairs physician.
- The CMV Operator Safety Training grant program will provide grant funds to commercial driver training schools that train veterans to transition into civilian motor carrier careers.
- The FAST Act military pilot program will allow select military personnel ages 18, 19 and 20 years of age to operate a commercial motor vehicle in interstate commerce.

**DMV Troops to Trucks** - Through this program, the Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) is making it easier for personnel trained by the military in the operation of heavy vehicles to obtain a civilian commercial driver license (CDL). A CDL is required in California to operate large trucks and buses. The Troops to Trucks program allows the DMV to waive the CDL driving test for qualified military service members who are, or were employed within the last year, in a military position requiring the operation of a military motor vehicle equivalent to a commercial motor vehicle on public roads and highways.

Waiving the driving test requirement streamlines the CDL application process for service men and women and eliminates the need to provide a commercial motor vehicle (CMV). The driving test will not be waived for a school bus and/or passenger endorsement. To meet the requirements as detailed in federal regulation an applicant must certify that, during the two-year period immediately prior to applying for a CDL, he/she:

1. Has not had more than one license (except for a military license)
2. Has not had any license suspended, revoked, or cancelled
3. Has not had any convictions for any type of motor vehicle for the disqualifying offenses:
   - Any alcohol or drug related offenses,
   - Leaving the scene of an accident,
   - Commission of a felony involving the use of a motor vehicle,
   - Driving a commercial motor vehicle while your commercial license is suspended, revoked, disqualified, or cancelled,
   - Causing a fatality through the negligent operation of a commercial motor vehicle, including , but not limited to, manslaughter, homicide by motor vehicle, and negligent homicide,
   - Use of a motor vehicle in a felony involving manufacturing, distribution, or dispensing of a controlled substance,
   - Violation of state or local law relating to motor vehicle traffic control (other than a parking violation) arising in connection with any traffic accident and has no record of an accident in which he/she was at fault; and
(4) Has not had more than one conviction for any type of motor vehicle for serious traffic violations:
  - Speeding in excess of 15 mph,
  - Reckless driving,
  - Making improper or erratic lane changes,
  - Following the vehicle ahead to closely,
  - A violation arising in connection with a fatal accident,
  - Driving a commercial motor vehicle without obtaining a commercial driver license,
  - Driving a commercial motor vehicle without a commercial driver license in possession,
  - Driving a commercial motor vehicle without the proper class or endorsement,
  - Violating a state or local law or ordinance prohibiting texting while driving,
  - Violating a state or local law or ordinance prohibiting the use of a hand held telephone while driving.

An applicant must provide evidence and certify that he/she:

1. Is regularly employed or was regularly employed within the last year in a military position requiring operation of a CMV.
2. Was exempted from the CDL requirements in §383.3(c); and
3. While serving in the military, was operating a CMV equivalent to a civilian commercial vehicle, for at least 2 years immediately preceding discharge from the military. The certifications may be made using the following forms:
   - CDL Certification for Military Waiver of CDL Driving Test (DL 963) (PDF)
   - Commanding Officer's Certification of Driving Experience (DL 964) (PDF)

Submit the following documents to a DMV Field Office:
- Commercial Driver License Application (DL 44C)
- CDL Certification for Military Waiver of CDL Driving Test (DL 963) (PDF)
- Commanding Officer's Certification of Driving Experience (DL 964) (PDF)
- Acceptable birth date / legal presence document.
- Social Security Card, Medicare Card, or U.S. Armed Forces ID card.
- DD 214 - Certificate of Release or Discharge from Active Duty (Veterans)


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**Veteran Driver's Licenses Update 12 ➤ California Real ID Card**

The California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) recently announced changes to state driver licenses in adherence with federal mandates. Starting 22 JAN, the DMV will roll out a new REAL ID compliant driver license, which not only sports a new look, but also can be used by travelers at airport security. Your current California driver license can be used at airport security through October 1, 2020, but after that, passengers will need to use a REAL ID compliant card or two forms of identification to pass through security. Features of the new REAL ID license include:
• A golden bear with a white star has been inserted in the upper right corner of the ID – all REAL ID licenses must have this white star to show they are compliant.

• The card includes a vicinity Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) chip that will signal a secure system to pull up your biographic and biometric data for the customs and border patrol officers to inspect as you approach the border inspection booth.

• The card also includes a Machine Readable Zone (MRZ) or barcode that officers can read electronically if RFID isn’t available.

• Added graphics include a forty-niner miner, golden poppies (California state flower) orchards, and a large image of the state of California running down the middle of the card.

• Visible only under ultraviolet “UV” light will be images of the Golden Gate Bridge and Coit tower.

For veterans, there’s a slight difference to the service designation on the new cards. There are two new stripes – red and blue – that outline the veteran designation and the text is bigger than previous cards. The new REAL ID driver license cards will still double as a veteran ID card, and when adding that designation you may discover some unknown benefits due to you in the process. Beyond a free meal offered on Veterans Day, a visit to your local County Veteran Service Office (CVSO) could lead to assistance with preparing claims for disability, pension, compensation, education benefits, medical care and death benefits, such as burial allowances.

So before you head out to get a new REAL ID card, apply for the designation and start earning benefits today. To apply, follow these steps:

• Begin by taking your DD-214 to a CVSO to obtain a Veteran Status Verification Form. To find a local CVSO, call 844-737-8838 or check our web listing. While you’re there, be sure to ask about other benefits you might be eligible for.

• Make an appointment to visit the DMV by scheduling online or calling 1-800-777-0133. You must bring the completed and stamped Veteran Status Verification Form and driver license application to your appointment at a DMV field office.

• Pay your one-time $5 designation fee, in addition to any other application fees associated with a renewal, duplicate or original driver license and/or ID card.
In the two years since Governor Edmund G. Brown, Jr. signed legislation authorizing a veteran designation on California driver licenses and identification cards, more than 64,000 veterans have applied and the California Department of Motor Vehicles (DMV) has issued more than 55,000. Learn more about the READ ID cards at http://REALID.dmv.ca.gov. [Source: CalVet Connect | Steven Wilson | January 22, 2018 ++]

Vet Benefits Publications ► Understanding Your Disability Rights

To learn more about your disability rights and benefits as veterans & dependents click on the following to download these free documents and handbooks:

1. 2017 Federal Benefits for Veterans, Dependents and Survivors
2. VHA Handbook 1601B.05, Beneficiary Travel - Veterans Affairs
3. VHA Handbook 1330 01 Health Care Services For Women Veterans.PDF
4. Trauma Recovery Program (TRP) National Directory
5. 2018 Directory of Federal Medical Facilities
7. 2018 United States Military Retired Handbook
8. 2018 Military Childrens' Scholarship Book
10. 2018 Getting Uncle Sam to Pay for Your College
11. 2018 Benefits for Veterans and Dependents
12. 2018 After the Military
13. Disability Rights
14. VARO Fax Cover Sheet
15. Veterans Exposed to Radiation Eligible for Compensation

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | January 2018 ++]

Homeless Vets Update 84 ► Socks for Homeless Vets

Knitted inside every pair of Bombas socks, there’s a message that reads, “Bee better.” Bombas’ slogan serves as a reminder to the company’s customers that for every purchase they make, another pair of socks is donated to someone in need. Since 2013, Bombas has donated more than 5 million pairs. In 2016, VA and Bombas partnered to provide homeless Veterans nationwide with socks. The partnership made sense because homeless Veterans tend to move around a lot, often on foot, and at times in the bitter cold — and of all items delivered by homeless shelters, the most requested is a pair of socks.

In the first year of the partnership, Bombas delivered over 700 pairs of socks to the VA New York Harbor Health Care System that were then distributed to homeless Veterans throughout New York City by way of homeless shelters, VA community-based outpatient clinics and VA medical centers. Also, on Veterans Day
that same year, VHA senior staff and Bombas employees gave out socks to 225 Veterans at the Borden Avenue Veterans Residence in Long Island City, New York. This year, Bombas has continued to provide socks to homeless Veterans in New York, growing its list of donation locations that cater specifically to Veterans. One such location is the Outpatient Mental Health Clubhouse in New York City.

Dave Heath, the CEO and co-founder of Bombas, looks forward to seeing the partnership continue to grow. “We initially started Bombas to make an impact and help support those in need, after learning that socks are the most requested clothing item at shelters. We are honored to continue our partnership with the VA to ensure that every homeless Veteran receives a clean pair of socks each year, in an effort to make their transition out of homelessness more comfortable,” Heath said. Partnerships like this one are important because they allow VA to reach more Veterans with services and supplies through groups that are already serving Veterans well. As we move into 2018, I look forward to seeing where this and other partnerships take us as we work to accomplish our ultimate goal of ending Veteran homelessness across the nation.

[Source: VAntage Point | Gary Hicks | January 18, 2018 ++]

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**Vet Suicide Update 19 ➤ Trump Executive Order**

President Donald Trump was expected to sign an executive order on 18 JAN that will expand mental health coverage options for transitioning veterans, Veteran Affairs officials confirmed to Task & Purpose. The order, “Supporting Our Veterans During Their Transition from Uniformed Service to Civilian Life,” is specifically geared toward combating veteran suicide, Military Times’ Leo Shane first reported. An estimated 20 U.S. veterans die by suicide each day, and President Trump last year tasked incoming VA Secretary David Shulkin with getting that number to zero. “That is just an unacceptable number and we are focused on doing everything we can to try to prevent these veteran suicides,” Shulkin said during a phone conference with reporters 9 JAN.

The new executive order would focus on veterans who are at the highest suicide risk: those who recently separated from the service. The order gives the Departments of Veterans Affairs, Defense, and Homeland Security 60 days to create a “Joint Action Plan” for “seamless mental health care” to service members exiting the military, according to Military Times. “Transition from the military to the civilian workforce is a challenge for any veteran,” Lou Celli, the American Legion’s national director of veterans affairs and rehabilitation, told Task & Purpose via email. “Some veterans have more difficulty with this than others, and we see this expansion of mental health care and suicide prevention programs to be part of an important safety net.”

Just half of transitioning service members who need mental health treatment seek it - and only half who seek help actually receive adequate care, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. The numbers for veterans in their first year out of uniform are stark, compared with their active duty peers: Recent vets are nearly three times more likely to commit suicide than those still in uniform, according to a study from the Naval Postgraduate School. And close to one-fifth of veterans returning from in Iraq and Afghanistan suffer from post-traumatic stress disorder or depression, according to the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. Veterans who leave the service with “bad paper” - disciplinary separations that can bar recipients from collecting VA education, disability, and medical benefits - wouldn't qualify for new benefits under the executive order. However, they do have access to emergency care mental health services through the VA, under a program Shulkin launched last year.

When the executive order's proposed safeguards kick in, service members will have the ability to opt out, according to senior administration officials. Veterans enrolled in the 12-month program will have access to
mental health care through the Veterans Health Administration, as well as private providers through the VA's CHOICE program. The plan is expected to cost “a couple hundred million dollars a year,” paid with existing funds from the VA and Defense Department's budgets, the Washington Post reports. The Department of Homeland security's involvement serves to ensure transitioning members of the Coast Guard have access to the program, Military Times reports. [Source: Task & Purpose | James Clark | January 9, 2018 ++]

Arkansas Vet Home Update 02  ►  Nursing Shortage

The Arkansas Department of Veterans Affairs is on pace this year to triple its spending on overtime pay and contract labor at its two veterans homes. The department has struggled to fill jobs, especially licensed practical nurse positions, at the state Veterans Home in North Little Rock since it opened a year ago. To maintain adequate staffing levels, the agency resorted to hiring contract workers and having employees work overtime. Through six months of fiscal 2018, the state VA spent $209,414 in overtime pay compared with $278,587 for all of fiscal 2017. On contract labor, the agency spent $428,227 in the past six months, up from $124,721 for the entire previous year.

The state VA is working to reduce contract labor and overtime, but those costs will continue unless staff hiring and retention improve, said Karen Watkins, the department's chief fiscal officer. “ADVA has found it difficult to compete for LPNs in the current market and is working with [the Department of Finance and Administration]Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to explore ways to improve the ADVA's ability to compete for nursing staff,” Watkins said in an email Wednesday.

The new state-of-the-art facility in North Little Rock has filled 55 of its 96 beds since opening, and department officials hope to reach capacity between June and August. State leaders decided to build the facility to address the increasing population of aging veterans, which a University of Arkansas at Little Rock study found would steadily increase until peaking in 2034. The other state Veterans Home is in Fayetteville and has a maximum capacity of 108 beds.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs has faced similar staffing shortfalls locally and nationally. The Central Arkansas Veterans Healthcare System in July started an aggressive recruitment campaign to address nursing shortfalls at its pair of hospitals in Pulaski County. Veterans homes in other states have encountered the same problem. In a New Mexico veterans home, a new $26 million unit for veterans who have memory loss has remained vacant since it was completed in November because of a lack of staff, according to The Associated Press. The Illinois Department of Veterans Affairs has battled staffing shortages at its homes for the past decade, and it has explored a variety of remedies, including recruitment campaigns and contract labor. Still, worker shortfalls have persisted.

In addition to a nursing shortage, long-term-care facilities face an uphill battle attracting nurses, who usually prefer working in clinics or hospitals. Nursing industry experts estimated last year that Arkansas had a nursing shortfall of about 700. Several local hospitals are partnering with colleges to increase the number of nursing students. Starting pay for LPNs at Arkansas’ veterans home ranges from $36,155 a year to $44,290, according to the agency. Registered nurses start at between $63,830 and $75,944 annually. Several Little Rock hospitals declined 17 JAN to provide nursing pay schedules.

The state VA on 17 JAN asked lawmakers for permission to spend an additional $210,000 for overtime for the rest of fiscal 2018. The agency pays for overtime and contract labor out of its own cash funds, which come from revenue generated from the veterans homes' operations. A legislative panel -- the Performance Evaluation and Expenditure Review Subcommittee -- recommended that the Arkansas Legislative Council
approve the request when it meets Friday. At the committee hearing Wednesday, Rep. Kim Hammer (R-Benton) questioned whether the agency would continue to ask for additional appropriations in the future.

In response, Duncan Baird, the state's budget administrator, noted that the North Little Rock home only recently opened. "They're really, in essence, entering into a business there, and I think that every step along the way they've had to adjust as they've gone along," Baird said. Watkins said the agency would adjust its budget accordingly for fiscal 2019, which begins 1 JUL. The department expects to soon begin billing the federal VA for the care of veterans that have federal benefits. The state will be able to bill the federal VA for back pay to August, when federal surveyors inspected the facility. Watkins said the agency will bill the federal VA for more than $1.3 million for the final four months of 2017. [Source: Arkansas Online | Hunter Field | January 18, 2018 ++]

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Honor Flight Update 13 ➤ 24 SEP | For Women Only

Less than a year after vowing they were done organizing Honor Flights for military veterans, Bill and Evonne Williams of Omaha are planning one more. This trip to the war memorials in Washington, D.C., is different. It’s for women only. The Nebraska Female Veterans Flight is for women who served in the European or Pacific theaters during World War II, in Korea, Vietnam, the Persian Gulf War or in Afghanistan or Iraq. The tentative date is Sept. 24. Plans call for 135 veterans to fly on one Sun Country charter aircraft from Omaha’s Eppley Airfield to a Washington airport. Everyone aboard will be female, including pilots, flight attendants, volunteer assistants and news reporters and photographers, Bill Williams said. “Even I’m not going,” he said.

Evonne Williams, president of the couple’s Patriotic Productions, said female veterans deserve recognition and appreciation for their roles, whether on the battlefield or somewhere far behind the lines. “I would venture that none received an actual homecoming celebration — like most of the men, especially from Vietnam,” she said. “Whether they can go or not, to see their fellow veterans honored, they’ll feel it, too. It should have been done earlier.” Since 2008 the Williamses have organized 11 Honor Flights to take nearly 3,400 Nebraska veterans on emotional one-day trips to visit monuments in Washington. Seven were for WWII veterans and two each for Korea and Vietnam. Bill Williams said no more than two dozen of the veterans on those trips were women. Veterans who served in combat were given preference on most trips.

Most participants on the new Honor Flight will be veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. The Nebraska National Guard estimates 200 women from the state served with the Guard in Afghanistan and Iraq, Bill Williams said. More than 100 women are included in Patriotic Productions’ Remembering Our Fallen traveling photographic exhibits. The displays feature men and women from 19 states who have given their lives in the nation’s wars following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. The Williamses said they hope Nebraska women who served in the WWII theaters and the Korea and Vietnam combat zones would apply for the trip. They expect many from these 20th century wars would have served as nurses in field hospitals or enlisted in the women’s branches of the military.

The couple’s last Honor Flight — the avowed final flight — took 653 Vietnam veterans on four airplanes last May. Among them was one woman. There were no female veterans on the Korea flights. “It’s imperative we find at least one woman from World War II — and Korea, too,” Bill Williams said. “They’re somewhere in this state.” The Williamses raised more than $3.3 million to pay for the previous Honor Flights, which included dinners the night before and welcome-home celebrations at the airport. The couple promised big donors for those trips that they would not ask them for more money. Bill Williams initially is raising the expected $175,000 cost of the all-female trip by contacting companies and other organizations
led by women. One of the first donations was $10,000 from Jane Miller, chief operating officer of the Gallup Group in Omaha, he said.

In addition to their Honor Flight and Remembering Our Fallen work, the Williamses last summer launched a new, touring memorial — the Remember Our Fallen Tribute Towers — to honor those who died in the post-9/11 wars. There are 30 towers. When complete, there will be 40 towers with photos of nearly 7,000 men and women. The Williamses are not veterans. They have four sons who have served in the military. An application for the flight and more information will be available at www.patrioticproductions.org, or contact Bill Williams at 402-612-0210. [Source: / Omaha World-Herald | David Hendee | January 17, 2018 +]

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Military Death Benefits Update 02 ► Helping Families of the Fallen

Online fundraising sites let well-wishers provide financial support for grieving families, both in and out of uniform. But as more requests on behalf of active-duty military dependents show up on these sites, sometimes offering emotional pleas for survivors who are destitute or “left with nothing,” donors should consider what programs are in place to assist these families, and whether online generosity may overlap with existing benefits. Most civilians, and even some in the military, “are generally unaware of the robust benefits the government provides,” said Jen Harlow, director of casework support services for the nonprofit Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), “and also what organizations like ours provide.”

Among other things, TAPS offers information about benefits and helps connect survivors with those benefits, government and otherwise. It provides grief counseling, staffs a 24-hour help line, and works with other organizations to help fill gaps, such as supplementing a family’s finances until monthly payments from various government sources begin. Usually, Harlow said, the person who starts a fundraising campaign for a survivor on a site such as GoFundMe is a friend or family member. TAPS may reach out to let them know about the nonprofit and to make sure they know about benefits available to the survivors.

If you’re considering a donation, you may want to contact the campaign organizer to learn how the money will be used. An example: A campaign seeking money for education costs for children of a fallen service member may have been started by a friend who is unaware of the federal and nonprofit-program offerings that will cover such expenses. Donors also should consider the costs associated with online giving. Sites have different methods of covering their costs; GoFundMe, for example, takes 2.9 percent plus 30 cents per donation. On a $100 donation, $3.20 goes to the administrator. Use these factors to inform your giving, but don’t let them dissuade you from acting on your charitable instincts. “If people want to give, that’s wonderful, and they should support the military family as much as they can, because people sacrifice so much,” said Bonnie Carroll, president and founder of TAPS.

DEATH BENEFIT BASICS

Immediate benefits to survivors of those who die on active duty:

SGLI: Servicemembers’ Group Life Insurance will pay up to $400,000 to beneficiaries selected by the service member. Service members who wish to reduce that amount must do so in writing.

Death gratuity: This $100,000 payment also goes to beneficiaries of the service member’s choice. Note: The service member is not obligated to choose those dependent on his income when selecting SGLI or death-gratuity beneficiaries.
CAO: The service member’s primary next of kin is assigned a casualty assistance officer, who will provide information about benefits and help family members apply for those benefits, among other need-dependent duties.

Burial benefits: A grave site at a Veterans Affairs Department cemetery, with a headstone or marker; a burial flag; and transportation to the burial site for immediate family members, or the reimbursement of transportation costs.

Ongoing monthly payments include:

- DIC: Dependency and Indemnity Compensation pays a monthly, nontaxable allowance of $1,283.11 to the spouse and another $317.87 per child under 18, along with another $270 per month for two years if there is at least one child. Rates adjust each year for cost-of-living increases. Some surviving parents may receive DIC, with the amount based on their income.
- SBP: The Survivor Benefit Plan pays a monthly benefit equal to 55 percent of the service member’s retirement pay had the member been retired at 100 percent disability at time of death. However, the amount of the SBP is offset, dollar for dollar, by the amount of Dependency and Indemnity Compensation the surviving spouse receives.
- Social Security: Monthly benefits are paid to the surviving spouse with children, based on the earnings of the service member.

Education benefits:

- Fry Scholarship: The Marine Gunnery Sergeant John David Fry Scholarship provides Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits (full tuition and fees, a monthly housing allowance, and a stipend for books and supplies) for public school, in-state students who are dependents of fallen service members. Up to 36 months of benefits are paid at the 100 percent level. A surviving spouse is generally eligible for 15 years after the service member’s death; a child’s eligibility ends on the child’s 33rd birthday.
- DEA: Children and spouses also may be eligible for the VA-run Survivors’ and Dependents’ Educational Assistance program, though there are some limitations.
- Other scholarships: Spouses and children may be eligible for a number of scholarship programs funded by charities and other service groups. A good starting point is the Fisher House Foundation’s scholarship search tool.

Other continuing benefits:

- Tricare health benefits continue at the rates for active-duty dependents for three years; after that, co-pays and cost shares are the same as retirees pay. Spouses and children are eligible for Tricare Dental Program benefits for three years and may be eligible for the Tricare Retiree Dental Program afterward.
- Commissary and exchange shopping privileges continue.
- Eligibility for VA-backed home loans continues.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | January 17, 2018 ++]

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Vet Tobacco Use ➤ Higher Than General Adult Population

Tobacco use among veterans of the U.S. military remains higher than among the general adult population, with three in 10 veterans using some form of tobacco product, according to CDC researchers. In an analysis of National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) data from 2010-2015, 29.2% of military veterans reported current tobacco use, Satomi Odani, MPH, of the CDC, and colleagues reported in Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report. A total of 21.6% reported smoking cigarettes, compared to about 15% of the
Tobacco use was higher among veterans than among non-veterans for both males and females across all age groups, with the exception of males age 50 and older.

In 2015, approximately 18.8 million U.S. adults were classified as military veterans. Historically, tobacco use has been higher among military veterans than non-veterans, but the report noted that there has previously been little data on use of tobacco products other than cigarettes in this population. The analysis revealed that:

- Current tobacco use was highest for cigarettes (21.6%), followed by cigars (6.2%), smokeless tobacco (5.2%), roll-your-own tobacco (3%), and pipes (1.5%)
- Current use of two or more tobacco products was reported by 7% of veterans
- Current tobacco use was high among veterans who reported no health insurance (60.1%), living in poverty (53.7%), serious psychological distress (48.2%), and having less than a high school education (37.9%)
- More than half (56.8%) of younger veterans between the ages of 18 and 25 reported being current smokers.
- Tobacco use was lowest among veterans who were age 50 and older (23.8%), non-Hispanic white (28.3%), had a college degree or higher (17.2%), or had a family income of $75,000 or more.

The report highlighted the significant financial impact of tobacco use, given the high prevalence of cigarette smoking and use of other tobacco products among military personnel and veterans. "During 2010, the Veterans Health Administration (VHA) spent an estimated $2.7 billion on smoking-related ambulatory care, prescription drugs, hospitalization, and home care for the segment of the veteran population receiving VHA services," the report noted. That $2.7 billion represents 7.6% of the VHA expenditures on health services for which the cost of smoking could be attributed.

The report concluded that interventions that impact both current and former military members are important to reduce tobacco use among veterans. Potential interventions highlighted in the report include implementing tobacco-free policies at military installations and Veterans Affairs medical centers and clinics, increasing the age requirement to buy tobacco on military bases to 21 years, and eliminating tobacco product discounts through military retailers.

"Progress has been made in recent years in promoting tobacco cessation and de-normalizing smoking among military personnel and veterans," the report noted. "This includes VHA's efforts to increase access to tobacco use treatment options as well as the U.S. Department of Defense's (DOD) prohibition of tobacco use on DOD medical campuses and medical treatment facilities, with a goal to achieve tobacco-free installations by 2020. Continued implementation of these and other evidence-based tobacco control interventions on military and veteran facilities can help reduce tobacco use and tobacco-attributable disease and death among veterans." [Source: MedPage Today | Salynn Boyles | January 12, 2018 ++]

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Obit: Ngoc Truong ► 17 Dec 2017

A Navy veteran who died from leukemia at the age of 22 was buried without his mother at his side after she was twice denied a visa to attend his funeral. Ngoc Truong, who was born in Vietnam but lived in Arkansas and was a US citizen, served four years as a machinist's mate aboard the USS John McCain before leaving the service in October last year. He moved to Florida to study graphic design but shortly afterward was diagnosed with leukemia before passing away on 17 DEC.

While father Hung Truong made preparations for his funeral, his mother - who is divorced and still lives in Vietnam - was trying to get a visa. She applied twice for permission to attend her son's funeral, and was
turned down both times according to WREG. Eventually Truong was buried on 26 DEC without his mother present. On his grave were the words of John F. Kennedy: 'Ask not what your country can do for you, ask what you can do for your country.' Hung said: 'He's already done for this country, but what has this country done for him? What did this country do for him?' The episode left the jewelry store owner, who lives in Blytheville, 'fuming mad'. Hung added that he has no idea why the visa was denied, and the State Department has refused to shed any light on it, saying all visa documents are confidential. [Source: MailOnline | Chris Pleasance | January 15, 2018 ++]

Obit: Catherine G. Murray ► 20 DEC 2017

The first enlisted woman to retire from the Marine Corps, who was also the first woman to join the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve, was buried in Arlington National Cemetery 23 JAN. Master Sgt. Catherine G. Murray, who turned 100 years old in April, enlisted in the Reserves in 1943 as a truck driver. “She is a piece of Marine Corps history,” Eileen Skahill, chaplain of the Women Marines Association, told Marine Corps Times. “She was my friend.” Murray died Dec. 20 at her home in Fort Lauderdale, Florida.

She was about 45 at the time she decided to enlist, she said in a heartwarming 2015 video taken by her caretaker, and had just heard that the U.S. was at war with Japan. She enlisted in the Marine Corps Reserve, and transferred to active duty in 1948. She retired from active-duty in 1962. She stayed in the Corps, and became the first enlisted woman to join the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve, which was announced on-air by Walter Cronkite, Murray said in the video. “I joined the Marine Corps, because I thought it was the best, after 20 years I know it.” Murray said in a news article posted on an obituary tribute page. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | Andrea Scott | January 24, 2018 ++]

Obit: Mort Walker ► 27 JAN 2018

Mort Walker, the artist and creator of the decades-long running comic strip "Beetle Bailey" about the antics of a work-shirking Army private, died at his home 27 JAN, his family said. He was 94. His son Greg Walker, who co-wrote the strip with his father in his later years, said his dad died at his home in Stamford, Connecticut, of pneumonia while recovering from a broken hip. Mort Walker drew his daily award-winning comic strip for 68 years, longer than any other comic strip artist, his son said. "He was drawing up to the end," Greg Walker said. "He holds the record. I don't think anyone will beat him."
His strip debuted in 1950 with Beetle as a college student, but Mort Walker had Beetle enlist in the Army in the first year of the cartoon and it was a hit. Picked up by King Features Syndicate, it went from a 12-newspaper run to eventually reaching 200 million readers in 1,800 newspapers worldwide, King Features' website says. The lanky slacker Pvt. Beetle, along with his foils Sgt. Snorkle and Gen. Halftrack, inhabit the fictional Camp Swampy inspired loosely on Mort Walker's experience of Army life in World War II. But Beetle and his friends never saw battle in the strip and he seemed to be in perpetual training. They have been featured in a television cartoon series, games, books and postage stamps.

Born in 1923 in El Dorado, Kan., Walker published his first comic when he was 11. He sold his first cartoon at 12, and at 14 he was selling gag cartoons regularly to Child Life, Inside Detective and Flying Aces magazines. At 15, he was comic-strip artist for a weekly metropolitan newspaper. At 18, he became chief editorial designer at Hall Bros., ushering in a light, playful style for the company's Hallmark Cards line. The following year, 1943, Walker was drafted into the Army. "Little did I know," he wrote decades later in the pictorial memoir "Mort Walker's Private Scrapbook," "that I was going to get almost four years of free research." He served in Italy as an intelligence and investigating officer and was also in charge of a German POW camp. He was discharged as a first lieutenant four years later, and graduated from the University of Missouri in 1948. While at M.U., he was editor of the school magazine.

He then went to New York City to pursue his cartooning career. In order to survive he worked as editor of three magazines for Dell Publishing Company. His first 200 cartoons were rejected, but he persisted, and editors started to recognize his talent and in two years he was the top-selling magazine cartoonist. His first big break came in 1950, when King Features picked up "Beetle Bailey" for syndication. Beetle, who was originally called "Spider," began as a college cutup. When he stumbled into an Army recruiting post in 1951 during the Korean War, circulation began to climb. The comic strip experienced two other notable jumps in circulation. In 1954, when the Tokyo edition of Stars & Stripes dropped the strip because it supposedly engendered lack of respect for officers, the U.S. press had a field day attacking the maneuver, and 100 more newspapers enlisted "Beetle Bailey." Then in 1970, when Lt. Jack Flap first marched into Sarge's office, "Beetle Bailey" became the first established strip to integrate a black character into a white cast. Stars & Stripes and some Southern newspapers quickly discharged the strip, but 100 other newspapers joined up.

In 1990, the Pentagon recognized Mr. Walker (if not Camp Swampy) with the Certificate of Appreciation for Patriotic Civilian Service. "As hard as it is to find anything at the Pentagon," the veteran gagman quipped, "they finally found a sense of humor." [Source: The Washington Post | Ali Bahrampour | January 27, 2018 ++]

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**WWII VETS 155** ► Walter Lepinski | Battle of the Bulge

Before the Battle of the Bulge, Walter Lepinski took a shower. Though it happened more than 70 years ago, he remembers that shower well. It was a moment of sheer joy in what had been a hard several months. As
World War II raged on, Lepinski, who grew up in Winchester, found himself in southern Germany. He had been drafted into the U.S. Army on Nov. 4, 1942, and assigned to the 10th Armored Division. After some training, the division headed to Europe — a 20-day journey at sea. They landed in Europe in September 1944. That December, Lepinski, a staff sergeant who oversaw mechanics and other personnel, stood in front of that shower outside a little town whose name and location he no longer remembers. “We had been in combat 67 days without having our clothes changed or not even taking our combat boots off or nothing outside of our helmets,” the 95-year-old says.

He remembers how great it felt to finally shower, with the promise of a full-night’s sleep for him and his men in the relative safety of the town, far away from the front line. But Lepinski never got that sleep. When he and the other men headed back to town, there was “an awful lot of commotion,” he says. “Everybody was on the move, hustling around and so forth.” A runner had come to Lepinski, telling him to report to his company commander, who told him to prepare his men to move. Lepinski didn’t know it then, but he and his men were about to fight in the Battle of the Bulge, the last major German offensive on World War II’s Western Front. It was a surprise attack that caught the Allied forces off-guard.

The battle was fought in eastern Belgium, northeast France and Luxembourg from Dec. 16, 1944, to Jan. 25, 1945. Some 75,000 American soldiers died, according to the U.S. Army Center of Military History, but the Allies ultimately won the battle, significantly weakening the German military, which lost an estimated 80,000 to 100,000 soldiers. Today marks the 73rd anniversary of the beginning of the offensive, a time that Lepinski remembers vividly. When he talks about the battlefield, Lepinski speaks with urgency, the memories engulfing him like a fog.

On 15 DEC, he sat in a cozy conference room in the Applewood Rehabilitation Center in Winchester. Outside, trees with snowy trunks glisten in the late morning sun, but Lepinski didn't see them. His gaze was trained on the wooden table, but his mind was far away. For that moment, he’s in his 20s, headed for battle. Lepinski remembers traveling north, passing small towns and large cities, arriving at Noville, Belgium — an abandoned town near the border with Luxembourg that had an eerie silence that remains with him still. When arriving at a new town, Army procedure had been to find an escape route in case troops had to withdraw. But when Lepinski asked his captain about an alternate route, he got a response that made his heart drop. “We are here to fight to the last man,” he recalls the captain telling him. “It felt like it was the end of me,” Lepinski says.

The troops were getting ready to defend the hilly town, according to Lepinski. He and his men positioned themselves inside a one-room schoolhouse atop a hill. They slept on the floor until just before daylight. “The next thing I knew, all hell broke loose,” he says, recalling the fusillade of bullets and artillery shells and the thick blanket of smoke and fog around him. Lepinski manned a .50-caliber machine gun, instructing the men to shoot from the ground. At some point, he got separated from the others. He doesn’t know what happened to them. The fight continued all day. Every so often, Lepinski’s words trail off, and he’s silent. It’s as though
the memory has ended, and for a moment, he’s back in the warm conference room, his hands resting on the wooden table. And then, the memories rush in again.

Lepinski had been firing at a German tank on a hill when a soldier ran to him, telling him the company commander, Capt. Gordon Geiger, wanted Lepinski to deliver a half-track — an armored vehicle with two front wheels and a pair of tank treads in the rear — that was stuck in a sloped street to the command center. Lepinski crawled to the vehicle as the battle roared around him. The half-track was parked near a stucco building whose insides Lepinski could hear snapping and popping — something inside was burning. He came across the driver, who was in a foxhole nearby, suffering from “battle fatigue,” Lepinski says. Battle fatigue was an early name for what’s now known as post-traumatic stress disorder — a reaction to the stress of war. “Sergeant, don’t go,” Lepinski remembers the driver asking him.

Lepinski pressed on, arriving at the vehicle. He tried to drive the half-track away, but it wouldn’t start. Gas spouted from under the hood, and Lepinski, who had worked as a mechanic in civilian life, got a bar of soap and used it to make a crude fitting that would stem the gas leak; all the while, bullets whizzed by. “It was right in battle; you were right in the thick of fire,” he recalls. He eventually delivered the half-track to the command center, only to get yelled at by 1st Lt. Schaneke, a man whose first name Lepinski doesn’t remember. “His face was redder than a beet, and he was real angry,” Lepinski says. “He said ‘Sergeant, why didn’t you tell anyone that you was going to go down there, trying to get that half-track?’” Schaneke told Lepinski he’d had to stop a gunner from firing at him. “He really saved my life,” Lepinski says. He lets out a long sob.

Lepinski continued to fight in Europe until the end of the war. He returned to the United States, came home and was discharged from the military. He went back to the job he had before the war at A.C. Lawrence Leather Co. in Winchester. Having returned home from a war that killed so many fellow soldiers, Lepinski thinks about those who didn’t come back. “I (felt) very thankful for God that I did (survive). I’m very thankful to God or (a) supreme being, or whichever one wants to take it, whatever they are,” he says. “I was very thankful to God.” [Source: Keene Sentinel | Liora Engel-Smith | December 16, 2017 ++]

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AFL Q&A 17 ► Monthly Compensation Benefit Reduced

Q. Why was my monthly compensation benefit payment reduced? I have not received anything from the VA Waco office as to why.

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A1: You should contact the VA. There is always a letter sent out that outlines the proposed reduction. You have 60 days to answer this letter and request a hearing. Maybe the letter was lost in the mail. (AP) 12/3/16

A2: Unless your disability is considered permanent and total, the VA will review your medical status and if it finds improvement in your status, it will consider a reduction. It is up to you to get a medical reevaluation to establish your continued status. (LC) 12/5/16

A3: Pay close attention to what the VA does to reduce your benefits. The VA put me in on ebenevit for an increase on my hypertension and of course I was denied. A month later they sent me a reduction letter saying I was getting better. I take 4 pills a day. The VA cannot put you in for an increase (That's falsifying documents) I file a complaint and requested a hearing. I got a one on one hearing told them what they had done. He looked in ebenevits and was shocked left the room came back and said I was right. I never got a reduction, I never got anything back in writing on the complaint or appeal. I feel sorry for the older veterans that could not challenge this situation because I know I was not the first. (DW) 1/1/17
A4: In part your condition was not static. The VA will pay temporary compensation at 100% for certain conditions if they are service connected. Let's assume you are service connected for a heart problem and condition worsens. By exam and medical records the VA can grant temporary 100%. If the condition become untenable then it can be moved to P and T. However, let's say you need open heart surgery, you will receive temporary 100% for a period of time until the condition is deemed significantly improve. The VA will reduce this rating to the appropriate %, or to 0%. The VA will not pay 100% forever when the condition has been returned to normal functioning or cured. (PW) 3/1/17

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If you have a question you want answered you can submit it at http://www.armedforceslocator.com/ask-a-question.html. Armed Forces Locator was developed to help veterans, active duty, servicemembers, Reservists, National Guard members and ROTC members locate old friends, current colleagues, and family members who serve or have served in the armed forces. Their mission is to provide an opportunity for those who served to reconnect again with war buddies. Also, locate many topics that are of interest to veterans, active duty servicemembers, and veterans organizations. [Source: http://www.armedforceslocator.com | January 31, 2018 ++]

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Retiree Appreciation Days ▶ Scheduled As of 1 FEB 2018

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 2017 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

This schedule has been expanded to include dates for retiree\veterans activity related events such as Seminars, Veterans Town Hall Meetings, Stand Downs, Resource\Career Fairs and Other Military Retiree & Veterans Related Events for all military services. To get more info about a particular event, mouse over or click on the event under Event Location. Please report comments, changes, corrections, new RADs and other military retiree\veterans related events to the Events Schedule Manager at milton.bell126@gmail.com.

(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:

Click On Following State\Territory Code Or Country To Select Location:
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
**Vet Hiring Fairs ► Scheduled As of 1 FEB 2018**

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 next month. For more information about the USCC Hiring Our Heroes Program, Military Spouse Program, Transition Assistance, GE Employment Workshops, Resume Engine, etc. refer to the Hiring Our Heroes website [http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes/events](http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes/events). Listings of upcoming Vet Job Fairs nationwide providing location, times, events, and registration info if required can be found at the following websites.

- [https://events.recruitmilitary.com](https://events.recruitmilitary.com)
- [https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/events/hiringfairs](https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/events/hiringfairs)
- [https://www.legion.org/careers/jobfairs](https://www.legion.org/careers/jobfairs)

[Source: Recruit Military, USCC, and American Legion | January 31, 2018 ++]

**State Veteran's Benefits & Discounts ► Oregon | FEB 2018**

The state of Oklahoma 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 – OR” for an overview of the below benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the following refer to [http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/oklahoma.html](http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/oklahoma.html) and [http://www.oregon.gov/odva/Pages/index.aspx](http://www.oregon.gov/odva/Pages/index.aspx):

- Housing Benefits
- Financial Benefits
- Employment Benefits
- Education Benefits
- Recreation Benefits
- Other State Veteran Benefits

[Source: RAD List Manager & Army Echoes | Milton Bell | January 31, 2018 ++]
• Discounts

refinance loan if the loan has a fixed rate 50 basis points lower than the earlier fixed-rate loan — or 200 basis points lower if the new refinanced loan is an adjustable rate mortgage. [Source: Associated Press | Steve LeBlanc | January 11, 2018 ++]

Veterans' Treatment Court Update 26 ➤ H.R.4345 | VTC Coordination Act

The Enlisted Association (TREA) is strongly supporting HR 4345, the Veteran Treatment Court Coordination Act of 2017. Congressman Charlie Crist (D-FL) and Congressman Jeff Denham (R-CA) are the original cosponsors. It currently has 51 other cosponsors. The legislation would direct the Attorney General to establish and carry out a Veteran Treatment Court Program to provide grants and technical assistance to the State circuit court systems that have adopted a Veterans Treatment Court Program or have filed a notice of intent to establish a Veterans Treatment Court Program with the Secretary of Veterans' Affairs. This ensures that the Department of Justice has a single office to coordinate the provision of grants, training, and technical assistance to help State, local, and Tribal governments to develop and maintain veteran treatment courts.

It is The Enlisted Association's opinion that veteran treatment courts are an effective way to help veterans charged with non-violent crimes receive the help and the benefits to which they are entitled, and to prevent recidivism that clogs up the judicial system. If we can identify veterans who are likely to not re-offend by making sure they get needed treatment and counseling, we can save money, keep veterans out of the legal system by keeping them healthy and productive, and we can lessen the burden on judicial resources - a win-win-win for all involved. Unfortunately, only 300-350 of the roughly 30,000 counties in the United States have veteran treatment courts. This legislation is aimed at coordinating and easing the development of more of these vital judicial resources. [Source: TREA Washington Update | January 24, 2018 ++]

VA Cemeteries Update 17 ➤ Lao & Hmong-American Burials | H.R.4716

More than 40 years after the end of the “secret war” in Laos against North Vietnamese forces, Hmong and Laotians who fought alongside the U.S. and their advocates are pushing for a bill that would allow the veterans to be buried in U.S. national cemeteries. The Hmong Veterans’ Service Recognition Act was introduced in Congress in December 2017 by Democrat Rep. Jim Costa, who has previously sponsored four similar measures. It would allow some Hmong- and Laotian-American veterans to be buried in U.S. national cemeteries, excluding Arlington National Cemetery. It is cosponsored by Democrat Rep. Raul Ruiz and Republican Reps. Don Young and Paul Cook.

“The purpose of the legislation is to provide the appropriate honor to these aging veterans, these soldiers, who fought for their own independence and freedom and aligned themselves with the United States in the 1960s and early 1970s,” said Costa, whose district includes Fresno, California, which is home to more than 20,000 people of Hmong descent, according to the 2010 Census. During the Laotian Civil War, the CIA recruited Hmong and Lao soldiers to fight against communist forces. At the end of the war, those who came to the U.S. as refugees were provided an expedited pathway to citizenship through naturalization.

Philip Smith — Washington, D.C., director and national liaison of Lao Veterans of America, a Laotian- and Hmong-American nonprofit veterans organization — called the bill a historic piece of legislation that would provide long overdue honor and recognition to Lao- and Hmong-American veterans who served during the Vietnam War. Peter Vang, the executive director of Lao Veterans of America and the son of a
veteran, said the bill would substantially help veterans' families, as many who live in the United States struggle financially.

Between 6,900 and 9,700 veterans would qualify, according to a 2015 estimate, Smith said. The bill states that the benefit would only apply to veterans who pass away after its enactment. “Sadly, the Laotian and Hmong veterans are increasingly growing older in the United States, and many are passing away in greater numbers each year that passes,” Smith wrote in an email. “It would mean so very much to the Hmong and Lao veterans and their families, who came to the United States as political refugees after the Communist invasion of Laos, to be allowed to be officially buried or cremated and lay in honor alongside their fellow American soldiers, who they served with during the Vietnam War, in U.S. national veterans cemeteries.”

Advocates of Hmong- and Laotian-American veterans, including veterans themselves, have been fighting for decades for benefits and recognition. Efforts have included the Lao Veterans of America monument, which was dedicated at Arlington in 1997, and the Hmong Veterans' Naturalization Act of 2000, which exempted the veterans from certain requirements in the naturalization process. “Many people don't know about the Hmong veterans … and I think they deserve to have some recognition, and we urge Congress to support this bill,” Vang said. [Source: NBC News | Agnes Constante | January 12, 2018 ++]

Vet Fraud ★ H.R.506 | Preventing Crimes Against Veterans Act of 2017

Rep. Thomas J Rooney (R-FL-17) Introduced the Preventing Crimes Against Veterans Act of 2017, H.R.506 on 12 JAN 17. This bill amends the federal criminal code to declare that any person who knowingly engages in any scheme or artifice to defraud an individual of veterans' benefits, or in connection with obtaining veteran's benefits for that individual, shall be fined, imprisoned not more than five years, or both.

The bill would establish a new federal crime against defrauding individuals of veterans’ benefits. As a result, the government might be able to pursue cases that it otherwise would not be able to prosecute. CBO expects that the bill would apply to a relatively small number of offenders, however, so any increase in costs for law enforcement, court proceedings, or prison operations would not be significant. Any such spending would be subject to the availability of appropriated funds.

Because those prosecuted and convicted under H.R. 506 could be subject to criminal fines, the federal government might collect additional fines under the bill. Criminal fines are recorded as revenues, deposited in the Crime Victims Fund, and later spent without further appropriation action. CBO expects that any additional revenues and direct spending would not be significant because the legislation would probably affect only a small number of cases.

Because enacting H.R. 506 would affect direct spending and revenues, pay-as-you-go procedures apply. However, CBO estimates that any such effects would be insignificant in any year and that enacting H.R. 506 would not increase net direct spending or on-budget deficits in any of the four consecutive 10-year periods beginning in 2028. H.R. 506 contains no intergovernmental or private-sector mandates as defined in the Unfunded Mandates Reform Act. [Source: https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/506 | January 19, 2018 ++]
Afghanistan War Update 02 ► Insurgents Open Fire After False Meeting

Insurgents posing as friendly militia members lured a U.S. and Afghan team to a meeting in eastern Afghanistan, triggering a shootout and a coalition airstrike on the compound, the U.S. military said 12 JAN. U.S. Navy Capt. Tom Gresback said the insurgents baited the team, inviting an Afghan militia leader, a U.S. service member and an interpreter to a security shura meeting 11 JAN. Once the meeting was over, the Taliban-linked insurgents opened fire, killing the militia leader and wounding the American service member and the interpreter. The Taliban quickly claimed credit for the attack but overstated the casualties, the U.S. military said. The Taliban said the attack was carried out by two insurgents disguised as local militiamen. Taliban spokesman Zabiullah Mujahid told The Associated Press the attackers had infiltrated the local force months earlier.

In Afghanistan, local militias are often paid by the U.S. and are partnered with them in operations in remote regions. Gresback said that after the wounded were moved to safety, a coalition airstrike targeted the compound, killing 10 insurgents. The mission was in Mohmand Valley, in Afghanistan’s remote Achin district of Nangarhar province. According to Gresback, local Afghans began moving back to Mohmand Valley earlier last summer after being forced from their homes in 2015 when the Islamic State group affiliate began to take hold in the southeastern portion of Nangarhar. The U.S.-led coalition, working with the Afghan forces, has waged a persistent campaign against the ISIS group. [Source: The Associated Press | Stephen Losey | January 13, 2018 ++]

Afghanistan War Update 03 ► Taliban Red Units

Taliban insurgents using sophisticated night vision and laser targeting equipment overran Afghan Army positions near the northern city of Kunduz on 16 JAN, killing at least eight people and wounding five more, Afghan officials said. The officials blamed what they said was a Taliban Red Unit, an insurgent formation that has increasingly featured in attacks on government positions, especially at night. “The unit is equipped with American weapons and night vision,” said Imamuddin Rahmani, a spokesman for the police in Kunduz. “The Red Unit carried out several attacks on check posts in Kunduz, captured the check posts and killed several soldiers. The Red Unit is a headache for security forces in Kunduz.”

The attack on Tuesday was centered on an Afghan National Army post in the village of Gholam Sakhi, about three miles from Kunduz city, said Nangyalay, an Afghan police commander who was stationed in the area. Commander Nangyalay, who like many Afghans uses only one name, said the attack started at 2:30 a.m. and fighting continued for two hours, leaving at least six soldiers and two police officers dead. In addition, the militants briefly occupied the base, destroying a Humvee vehicle and looting mortars and other weapons before fleeing, Commander Nangyalay said. The Taliban’s spokesman, Zabiullah Mujahid, said that the group was responsible. He added that the insurgents had used a “special forces” unit to carry out the attack, which he claimed had killed 20 soldiers. Such casualty claims are often inflated. Mr. Mujahid said the insurgents did not suffer any casualties, which government officials did not dispute.
The insurgents’ Red Units have been active in several parts of the country. In November, they carried out a series of five attacks in less than two days, killing dozens of Afghan police officers with the aid of night-vision goggles and weapons with infrared sights. Afghan officials have described the weaponry as American-made, suggesting it was either captured, stolen or bought from Afghan forces. Kunduz has been the scene of heavy fighting for more than two years, with the city twice falling to the insurgents for brief periods. Intervention by American Special Operations troops and heavy United States bombing has repeatedly fended off Taliban advances there.

In an unrelated event on 16 JAN, at least five civilians were killed when mortar shells struck a bazaar area in the Khwaja Sabz Posh district of the province of Faryab, according to Abdullah Masoomi, the governor of the district. He said five or six mortar rounds had struck the bazaar around 11 a.m. Two women and a child were among the dead; an additional 25 people were wounded. Mr. Masoomi blamed the Taliban, and said the shelling was unprovoked, with no fighting reported in the area before the attack. There was no immediate response from the Taliban regarding the attack. [Source: The New York Times | Najim Rahim & Rod Nordlandjan | January 16, 2018 ++]

Navy Death Reporting ► Social Media Guidelines Set

When someone in the Navy dies of unnatural causes, it often attracts international attention. Grieving family members and friends typically take to social media to post memories about their loved ones, express anguish and seek support on their personal pages. But Defense Department policy prohibits the Navy from releasing the identities of casualties until 24 hours after next of kin is informed. In cases of multiple deaths, the 24-hour clock doesn't start until the last family member is told. "It is vitally important that all Sailors, DoN civilians, family members and friends know that the identity of a casualty should not be discussed on social media until it has been released," a Navy handbook on social media [http://www.navy.mil/strategic/2018-NavySocialMediaHandbook.pdf] released on 11 JAN, stated.

But while sailors' social media posts are subject to Navy regulations and the Uniform Code of Military Justice, the Navy can't stop or punish civilians who don't work for the Defense Department from posting about a loved one's death or speaking to news media about it if they choose to. This often causes confusion among victims' family members, who sometimes say the Navy won't let them speak to reporters and fear their loved one could be punished for something they say. "This instruction applies to members of the Department of the Navy, and by extension, members of the Department of Defense," Cmdr. Bill Speaks, a Navy spokesman, said in an email 26 JAN to The Virginian-Pilot. "With respect to family members, it is only intended to serve as a guide, nothing more."

Speaks said there are no provisions in any regulation that would hold a service member or Navy employee accountable for actions taken by anyone other than themselves. The Navy released 40 pages of social media guidelines as part of its handbook that are designed to help sailors, public affairs staff, Navy leaders, family members and others in an era where information and disinformation quickly spread. The handbook comes out as social media continue to grow. The service is active on hundreds of social media accounts. Its main Facebook account is followed by about 3 million people while its primary Twitter account has at least 1 million followers.

The Navy usually identifies, in news releases and on social media, sailors who died in combat or in an accident. But the official notification can sometimes come days after identities already are confirmed to news media from other sources, including other government officials, family members and friends. After the destroyer USS John McCain collided with an oil tanker east of Singapore in August, one of the ship's crew
members who attended Deep Creek High School in Chesapeake was identified on Facebook by his mother in Michigan as one of the 10 missing sailors. "I'd like to ask my town, if you pray, pray," April Brandon wrote of her son, Petty Officer 3rd Class Kenneth Smith. "If you don't pray, hope with me. With my family. I can't barely think and there isn't a damn other thing I can do. The USA and every country surrounding Singapore is on search and rescue for 100 square nautical miles from the collision site. My heart is there."

Brandon also gave interviews with local news outlets in Michigan while her son was missing and later confirmed his death on Facebook before the Navy released his identity. The Navy's social media handbook makes it clear the Navy doesn't prefer that. It specifically says that when there is an "adverse incident," family members who are approached by someone about it should "explain that you do not know and they should not speculate." But Speaks notes that the "Navy would never encourage family members to be less than fully truthful."

The guidebook also tells family members, if they're contacted by news media, to "simply refer them to your command's public affairs officer." The Navy can't stop family members or friends from speaking with media without first contacting a public affairs officer, but some family members choose to contact a public affairs officer in order to help streamline responses. During the McCain collision, the public affairs office for Navy Region Mid-Atlantic in Norfolk coordinated with victims' families in the eastern U.S. to provide photographs and family statements to news outlets on behalf of families. [Source: The Virginian-Pilot | Brock Vergakis | January 27, 2018 ++]

Military Up Or Out ► Possible Rule Changes for Officer Promotions

Lawmakers are taking another look at possible changes to the military’s “up-or-out” rules for officer promotions. The idea has been widely discussed in the Pentagon and Congress in recent years, but likely would not amount to a full overhaul of promotions process, according to lawmakers who discussed the policy during a Senate hearing on 24 JAN. Instead, military officials and congressional staffers are looking at targeted changes to the system — things like increased waiver authorities or exemptions for certain career paths — in an effort to modernize aspects of military recruiting and retention. “Today’s system largely serves its intended purpose,” said Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC) and chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee’s personnel panel. “But a personnel system is not an end to itself. It must achieve desired objectives to increase the lethality and effectiveness of the force.”

Any changes to the nearly 40-year-old Defense Officer Personnel Management Act could have dramatic effects on military culture and careers, where promotions are mainly based on seniority and general experience instead of specific subject-matter expertise. Individuals who aren’t selected for career advancement on a rigid timeline are pushed out of the ranks completely. Pentagon leaders have lamented that the rules hurt retention of some valuable mid-career officers whose specific skill sets make them ineligible for promotion but invaluable for specific missions. They also prevent bringing in experts to tackle specific challenges — issues like cybersecurity — because individuals don’t have the requisite time in service to step into senior leadership roles.

“Today’s force is constantly engaged in ways never predicted during the Cold War,” Tillis said. “Repeated overseas combat deployments strengthened more traditional warfighting career fields, while at the same time new military domains require entirely different officer skill sets.” Still, proposals from the Pentagon for reforms to the current system have stalled out on Capitol Hill in recent years. Former Defense Secretary Ash Carter’s “Force of the Future” proposals, which included changes to how promotions and recruiting authorities, were mostly rejected by lawmakers. Military officials at Wednesday’s hearing said
they are open to more flexibility with the promotion rules, but warned against a wholesale overhaul of the current system.

Lt. Gen. Gina Grosso, deputy chief of manpower for the Air Force, said service officials have already implemented a new officer performance management system designed to produce a more “thoughtful” promotions process. Navy officials created a new Office of Talent Optimization last year with a similar goal of better linking officer skills with job assignments. Army Deputy Chief of Staff Lt. Gen. Thomas Seamands called the current system “a framework that is effective for an Army of interchangeable parts,” but said he would like to see more opportunities managing key skills within officer grades. Lt. Gen. Michael Rocco, deputy commandant for Marine Corps manpower and reserve affairs, said any changes must keep in mind the fundamental cultural needs of the services. “The Marine Corps depends on our foundational schools, training and (tours) to increase skills and infuse our ethos and warrior culture,” he told the panel. “Any guidance to bypass these … would be a significant change in Marine Corps officer management philosophy and should be approached carefully.”

Lawmakers have not offered any specific changes yet. But the hearing was designed to revive debate on the topic again ahead of the committee’s upcoming work on the fiscal 2019 defense authorization bill, which annually includes a host of budget and policy priorities. [Source: NavyTimes | Leo Shane III | January 25, 2018 ++]

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**Bunker Buster Bomb**  ►  **Massive Ordnance Penetrator  GBU-57 Upgraded**

The Air Force has upgraded the United States’ largest non-nuclear bomb, a 30,000-pound “bunker-buster” capable of attacking hard and buried targets, according to Bloomberg Politics. Also known as the Massive Ordnance Penetrator, the GBU-57 has just completed its fourth upgrade, and its inventory is being retrofitted, Air Force officials told Bloomberg. The bunker-buster, which is manufactured by Boeing, can only be carried by the B-2 stealth bomber, and it can be used to hit nuclear or missile factories up to 200 feet underground.

![Bunker Buster Bomb](image_url)

Three B-2 bombers were deployed to Guam this month, which the Air Force says was a planned rotation. When asked by Bloomberg, Capt. Emily Grabowski, an Air Force spokeswoman, declined to say if the GBU-57 was aboard. This comes less than a month from the Winter Olympics in Pyeongchang, South Korea, and amid negotiations between North and South Korea, noted Stars and Stripes. The GBU-57 is six times bigger than the 5,000-pound bombs that have been used by the Air Force for years, and it carries more than 5,300 pounds of explosives, according to Bloomberg. It is 20.5 feet long, encased in hardened steel, and guided by Global Positioning System satellites, according to a description on the website of the Pentagon’s Defense Threat Reduction Agency. [Source: ArmyTimes | Nicole Bauke | January 25, 2018 ++]

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**Night Vision ► Scientist Discover New Way to Make It Better & Cheaper**

Army scientists have discovered a new way to create night vision that could be cheaper and provide better vision than current methods. Scientists at Stony Brook University, who partnered with the U.S. Army Research Laboratory, have found ways to reconfigure materials that previous researchers considered incapable of use in night vision devices, officials said in an Army press release.

This discovery and method of altering the compounds could produce a less expensive way to fabricate the key materials used to build night vision. And scientists say the new configuration could give soldiers better vision as well. “The more sensitive such a camera is, or in other words, the smaller the color temperature differences are that it can see, the more details that can be discerned on a battlefield, and enemies can be detected at longer ranges,” said Wendy Sarney, who, along with Stefan Svensson, developed the new method for using the materials.

The pair pioneered a way to use a semiconductor material that had not been used before in infrared cameras known as InAsSb. It is a common material, found in DVD players and smartphones. By manipulating the spacing between the atoms of the material, the two scientists have been able to make InAsSb work in camera sensors. The spacing change allows manufacturers to make multiple camera sensors at once, reducing the cost of producing the sensor materials for cameras. [Source: ArmyTimes | Todd South | January 21, 2018 ++]

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**Trump Military Accomplishments ► Top Ten List Includes Four**

Included with President Donald Trump’s “fake news awards” announcement this week was a separate top ten list of what Republican leaders see as his biggest accomplishments of the last year, including several items related to the military and veterans. “While the media spent 90 percent of the time focused on negative coverage or fake news, the President has been getting results,” the release stated. It highlighted cuts in federal regulations, appointing Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court, and the new tax cuts legislation as issues party officials claim are under reported.

On the military side, the list touts progress in the fight against Islamic State militants in the Middle east — “ISIS is in retreat, having been crushed in Iraq and Syria” — and Trump’s “encouragement” of allies to pay more into NATO defense accounts. Both of those issues were campaign promises for Trump in 2016. Last summer, NATO officials announced that 25 nations would boost their contributions to the alliance. In addition, Romania became the sixth country (with the United States, Greece, England, Estonia and Poland) to spend 2 percent of their country’s gross domestic product on defense, a spending target set by NATO.

Democrats and Republicans have sparred over who deserves credit for the success of American military missions against ISIS (operations began before Trump became president) but Pentagon officials have been clear about the rapid decline in the extremist group’s power in the last year. The group has lost nearly all the territory it once held in the Middle East, and military officials say their current missions are focused on rooting out small pockets of enemy fighters in remote areas or hiding in urban centers.

One veterans issue was listed among the top ten accomplishments: signing new Veterans Affairs accountability legislation, “to allow senior officials in the VA to fire failing employees and establishes safeguards to protect whistleblowers.” That proposal — which was strongly opposed by former President Barack Obama — has drawn criticism from federal union officials for unfairly targeting lower-level VA workers, but drew bipartisan support when it passed Congress. The full list is available at the Republican
AIMLOCK ► A Computer-Controlled, Stabilized System Rifle

Army developers have entered the second phase of testing a computer-controlled, stabilized system that can auto-correct a rifle’s aim for pinpoint accuracy and identify and recommend targets. The active stabilization or AIMLOCK system still requires a human to squeeze the trigger, but everything else about marksmanship — azimuth, target movement, airspeed, velocity, range, vehicle motion and even shooter instability — is corrected by the built-in computer system, according to an Army release.

Army officials with the Joint Service Small Arms Program office first began looking at the program in its conceptual phase in 2012, dubbing it the Future Integral Targeting Engagement System (FITES). The program’s aim is to “create a technology that would translate a shooter’s intent into perfect execution every time, on any firearm, in any situation,” according to the release. That first phase identified the Colorado-based AIMLOCK company as a provider of the systems researchers would develop. “The technology was originally conceived for hunting applications but was soon adapted and modified and led to AIMLOCK, providing a solution that allows the weapon and shooter to fire from a variety of unsupported positions,” said Terence Rice, project management engineer with the small arms program.

The system can be fired from stationary, supported or unsupported positions, or while walking and on or inside a vehicle or aircraft, officials said. “The platform was not tied to any specific weapon,” Rice said. For demonstration purposes, researchers used the M4. The system includes “active target detection” that searches the shooter’s field of view for target profiles and highlights them for shooter evaluation. The FITES technology being developed is slated for inclusion in the Army’s Future Vertical Lift program, that looks to develop five different-sized aircraft but will share common features such as avionics, engines, countermeasures and sensors, according to the release.

Phase two is a three-year “roadmap” to develop the AIMLOCK technology across other types of small arms and begin field testing and evaluation. The Air Force is evaluating AIMLOCK for use as base security and the Coast Guard is researching options for use on boats. [Source: ArmyTimes | Todd South | January 18, 2018 ++]
USMC Recruitment Update 02  ➤  2017 A Banner Year

The Marines were looking for a few good men — and women — and got more than they wanted last year. That was part of the report Marine Brig. Gen. William “Bill” Jurney gave to the San Diego Military Advisory Council on 17 JAN at Naval Base Point Loma. Competing with higher education, the other services and private industry in an improving economy, the Corps not only met recruiting goals but surpassed them in both numbers and quality of entry-level Marines, he said.

“This past year we had historical success, which exceeded the last 10 years, since 2008, in finding and selecting above and beyond what we were actually looking for,” said Jurney, a career infantryman whose command includes San Diego’s boot camp — where about 500 recruits graduate weekly -- and 750 recruiting offices peppering the continental United States mostly west of the Mississippi River, plus Alaska, Guam and Hawaii. “Almost 100 percent are high school graduates. Over three-fourths are in the upper mental categories for testing and we started the year off with having already selected over 55 percent of what I knew I needed to enlist for this coming year.”

Brig. Gen. William M. Jurney, commander of Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego, gives his opening remarks during the 16th annual MCRD Boot Camp Challenge on 14 OCT

The Marine Corps annually brings about 38,000 recruits into the fleet but regulations guide enlistment standards. Nine out of every 10 candidates for service must have a high school diploma and all entrants must pass a battery of mental aptitude and physical fitness tests, plus criminal background checks. But competition is fierce for an all-volunteer force. Army researchers estimate that only about 5.7 million youngsters are qualified to serve — about one out of every six people in the age of young Americans — and far fewer express a propensity to enlist because of the lure of college or civilian sector employment. About 68 percent of the Marine Corps is aged 25 years or younger, putting a premium on finding and retaining physically fit and mentally sharp young men and women, Jurney said. The boot camp attrition rate stands at 7 percent, Jurney said, a testament to finding qualified candidates and ensuring they show up in good physical shape for rigorous combat training. Last year, 70 percent of recruits also qualified “expert” on the rifle, the highest of the three qualifications, he added.

Jurney’s strong recruiting and training numbers come during a period of change in the Corps. Much of the heavy counter-insurgency fighting in Iraq and Afghanistan that defined the Marines over the past two decades is behind them and the Corps has lurched toward traditional missions, like assaulting enemy-held territory from the beach. Capitol Hill spared the Marines deep troops cuts in recent budgets, capping the Corps at 185,000 personnel for 2018. The service has struggled to replace its aging aircraft, however, and commanders continue to crack down on bad behavior in the ranks. High profile black eyes last year included a Parris Island drill instructor convicted for abusing Muslim recruits, the Marines United scandal that featured male service members humiliating female troops online with risque images and course language and a hazing epidemic that has swept units worldwide.
That prompted the Corps to carve out a fourth phase in its 13-week boot camp program for enlisted recruits. The idea is for drill instructors at the end of the training cycle to mentor new Marines before they transition to the fleet, cutting down on problems that often bedevil the ranks like financial mismanagement and sexual harassment. “You start out by transitioning an individual from being a civilian to a recruit and then over time transitioning from a recruit to a Marine and now instead of doing that in three phases we’re doing it in four,” Jurney said. [Source: The San Diego Union Tribune | Carl Prine | January 17, 2018 ++]

Military Recruiting Update 09 ➤ Looking for The Best Way

Military leaders are looking for the best ways to recruit the next generation of troops amid a growing divide between the military and civilians. About 80 percent of new military recruits come from families with a history of service, but that number is shrinking. According to the Defense Department, 15 percent of young adults have a parent who served, a drop from 40 percent in 1995. There’s also a declining rate of family members who served who are recommending joining the military to their children.

In the late 1990s, more than 80 percent of service members recommended serving, according to research by Booz Allen Hamilton and Blue Star Families, a nonprofit organization that serves those in the military community. In 2017, only 40 percent of those serving recommended that path to their children. A panel of experts discussed these setbacks and how to address them at the Bipartisan Policy Center on 18 JAN. Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, the event’s keynote speaker, said there’s not a lot of focus on how to develop and attract the next generation of great leaders. “Are we becoming a warrior caste where those who serve are in families with long traditions of service?” Wilson said, adding that nothing is wrong with that in and of itself. “But does it raise the civilian-military divide?”

This also means, she said, that the burden of continuous combat operations has fallen on a relatively small number of people and families. A new commission created by Congress also launched on 18 JAN, which will focus on ways to increase military and civic service among American. The 11-member National Commission on Military, National and Public Service will travel the country in 2018 and 2019 to “ignite a national conversation around service and develop recommendations that will encourage and inspire all Americans, particularly young people, to serve,” according to a news release.

The Defense Department and various organization are also working on ways to educate people who don’t have ties to the military and to get them excited about signing up to serve. On 1 FEB the Defense Department is launching the “This Is Your Military” initiative to inform the public on what military is doing today and how it affects civilians. “We want to showcase how the military is relevant to Americans’ lives on a daily basis,” said Amber Smith, the DoD’s deputy assistant to the secretary of defense for outreach. The initiative includes a video series to highlight service members’ stories and dispel myths about the military.

Smith said most of Hollywood’s stories about the military focus on two extremes: larger-than-life individuals and veterans who are broken and can’t adjust to society. “You have everyone else who exists as veterans,” said Smith, a former combat helicopter pilot in the Army. “They don’t have to be these heroes who will have a movie made about them, but they still contributed a lot.” Smith said the initiative wants to share these stories so America can get to know this side of troops. “We want to articulate the message of what the military’s doing to a non-military audience and create interest for people who don’t necessarily care,” she said.

To reach that broader audience, the Defense Department will work with media, nonprofits, educators, Hollywood, sports leagues and other organizations. “We want to give Americans the opportunity to get to know who is serving,” Smith said. “A lot of people think, you join the military you’re going to combat. We
want people to see we’re more than that.” Starting in February, each month will feature fresh content to show civilians what serving in the military is actually like. You can follow @DoDOutreach and #KnowYourMil on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram to find out more about the initiative. Kathy Roth-Douquet, CEO of Blue Star Families and a military spouse, said civic education has somehow petered out in the United States. “People respect the military because they know they’re supposed to, but they have no idea what we do,” she said. “It’s hard to encourage someone to do the job when they don’t know what the job is.” It’s up to those in the military community to tell their stories, she added.

Air Force Secretary Wilson said the Air Force will continue to recruit from states that have a large pool of 18-year-olds, including California, Texas and Florida, but the service wants to attract people from other areas, too. “About 1 in 10 recruits come from New England,” she said. “We intend to increase focus in geographic areas where we think there are young people who can be inspired to serve but may not have a family connection.” Wilson said the Air Force added about 600 recruiters and will put them in regions that are underrepresented, including the northeastern part of the United States.

Blue Star Families’ Roth-Douquet said one of her favorite recommendations is to have all 18-year-olds register for selective service. They would take the Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery to see what they would be good at in the military, and “it would tell them about jobs they probably didn’t know existed,” she said. “And it would allow recruiters to see certain talents,” Roth-Douquet said. “We only need 5 percent of 18- to 24-year-olds, and [this plan] wouldn’t be very expensive.” It also would give the potential recruits a moment to picture themselves in the military, which could be enough to encourage them to join, she said.

Even though there’s a higher percentage of women serving in the military than in previous years, the military wants that number to grow. “We’re trying to make clear how natural a fit women are in the Air Force,” Wilson said, adding that 20 percent of those serving in the Air Force are female. Wilson asked the audience to think about the most protective person in their lives. “My guess is half the people in this room are thinking of their moms,” she said. “We need to tap into that desire to be one of the protectors of the innocent.” Wilson said there are all kinds of protectors in the Air Force, and the service needs to attract and develop them. “We also need to change some of the ways we do things,” she said, adding that some equipment still is designed for men. “It’s hard to be what you can’t see,” Wilson said. “By being role models and making sure our role models are out there with women and minorities so they can see what possibilities there are for them.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Charlsy Panzino | January 18, 2018 ++]

USS North Dakota (SSN-784) Update 01 ► Heroic Effort to Save Shipmate

The crew of the submarine North Dakota raced through bad weather to save a shipmate’s life after an unidentified petty officer shot himself in the chest with his military-issued rifle while the vessel was underway, according to Navy officials and a post on the boat’s Facebook page. Cmdr. Mark Robinson, the boat’s captain, praised his crew in the post for their feverish efforts on 12 JAN to get the sailor back to land. Corpsmen leapt into action to treat and stabilize the man’s injuries, while radiomen kept communications open in bad weather, allowing trauma doctors to remotely lend assistance, according to the post. The boat’s navigation and driving teams charted the fastest way back to port and cut through heavy seas on their way to the mouth of the Thames River in New London, Connecticut, where they transferred the sailor to a waiting tug.

“From gunshot to ambulance took about 7 hours,” Robinson said in the post. “We drove up the river in dense fog, in the dark of night, with intense rain and wind. It was the worst weather I’ve ever seen for something like this.” Other crew members helped in other ways.
• Some lashed themselves to the boat’s deck in “Pea Soup” fog around midnight to form a human safety net, blocking the weather for paramedics conducting the transfer, he said.
• “Sailors dissembled parts of the ship to set up ways to get the sailor off in a stretcher more comfortably,” Robinson said. “When the sailor was lucid, other crew members held a phone in front of his face to let him watch music videos.”
• Some stood exposed in the storm to flash lights and help lead the tugs.

“I can’t truly express the amount of heroism I saw in the last 48 hours,” Robinson said in Tuesday’s post. “As a result, the Sailor is recovering from surgery in a hospital in New Haven with his parents by his side.”
“It was a terrible event,” he said, “but the sailors of (North Dakota) are heroes.” [Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | January 16, 2018 ++]

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**USS Blue Ridge (LCC-19) ► Navy’s Oldest Warship Given 20 More Years Life**

The Navy’s oldest warship has completed a 19-month dry dock period designed to extend its life another 20 years. The USS Blue Ridge, which serves as the flagship of the Yokosuka-based 7th Fleet, returned pier side this week at Yokosuka after an extended dry-dock selected restricted availability maintenance period, a Navy statement said.

It “received numerous upgrades, including installation of the Consolidated Afloat Networks and Enterprise Services computer system, modernization of the ship’s engineering plant, and refurbishment of the main condenser and ventilation systems,” the statement said. Installing CANES on a ship will “consolidate and modernize communications, computers and intelligence network systems,” according to Northrop Gruman. The Blue Ridge still needs additional repair work before returning to service, the Navy said. It is slated to receive engineering and electrical plant upgrades and living-quarters improvements. Engineeering plant issues will require the amphibious-command ship to undergo additional repairs for the next several months, 7th Fleet Spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Adam Cole told Stars and Stripes.

“While modernization of Blue Ridge’s communications suite has gone very well, additional maintenance is required to address issues with the ship’s engineering plant which is nearing 50 years in service,” he said. “Once these repairs are finished, Blue Ridge will resume its role as Seventh Fleet’s command ship and play a critical role as our forces operate forward on a daily basis.” The ship entered dry dock in June 2016 for what was scheduled to be a 14-month period.

Commissioned in 1970, the Blue Ridge is the oldest deployable warship in the Navy and the second oldest still-active ship. Only the USS Constitution, which is primarily a ceremonial ship, is older. In 2011, the chief of naval operations extended the Blue Ridge’s service life into 2039. The Blue Ridge is one of only two amphibious-command ships still in service. The other, the USS Mount Whitney, is the flagship of the Navy’s 6th Fleet out of Naples, Italy.

Before the Blue Ridge becomes operational, the Navy said the crew will undergo extensive training in search-and-rescue operations, navigation, seamanship, engineering proficiency and damage-control efforts. “After about two years in the yards spent on crucial repairs and improvements, it’s the crew’s turn to get ready to get back on patrol and return to our mission once again,” Blue Ridge commander Capt. Brett Crozier in the statement. “I would like to especially thank the crew, family members, ship’s repair force workers, and others who have had a hand in modernizing Blue Ridge.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tyler Hlavac | January 23, 2018 ++]

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Leasing Jail Ships Under Consideration

After a year in which the Coast Guard made a record number of maritime drug interdictions and sent unprecedented numbers of drug smugglers to the United States to stand trial, the service is considering the possibility of investing in a platform that would do nothing but hold detainees until they can be transported to the mainland. Last November, The New York Times published an investigative story decrying the conditions under which suspected smugglers are held aboard Coast Guard vessels, sometimes for weeks or months at a time. It quoted a former Coast Guard attorney who called the ships "floating Guantanamos" and detailed conditions that are often cramped and sometimes frigid aboard the service’s cutters.

For the record, the commandant of the Coast Guard, Adm. Paul Zukunft, has little sympathy to spare for these detainees. "We can't lose sight of the fact that these individuals who were detained, they're peddling poison. They are responsible for 64,000 deaths in the U.S.,” Zukunft told Military.com during an exclusive interview in December. "These aren't just down-on-their-luck fishermen; they have a choice. You can either fish, or you can be a criminal." The Times story was told sympathetically from the perspective of one of these detainees, who described scant meals and fear due to being separated from family. Zukunft called it slanted and without an appreciation for the conditions under which the Coast Guard crews themselves work and live below decks. "Go below deck and look at where my crew is berthing," Zukunft said. "The living conditions in any prison system in the United States [are] better than the berthing areas in my 52-year-old ships. We are operating out of prisons."

While detainees were in the open air above deck, Zukunft said temperate climates in and around the U.S. Southern Command area of operations mitigate some of the hardship of exposure to the elements. But while Zukunft said he isn't too concerned about the conditions these suspected smugglers have to contend with, he has other reasons for wanting to get out of the floating jail business. "We're spending about a third of our ship time right now moving these detainees from one ship to another to provide them the best creature comforts at sea until we can land them in Panama, which is the only country right now that will accept detainees for further transport back to the United States,” he said. There's just one other option available to Coast Guard cutters: to transit through the Panama Canal and reach Guantanamo Bay, Cuba.

In light of these challenging logistics, which contribute to the length of time detainees can spend on a Coast Guard vessel, Zukunft said the service is exploring the possibility of leasing a dedicated commercial vessel that would do nothing but hold suspects until they can be transferred to the United States. The ship might actually be leased through the Department of Defense or SouthCom. It might be something like a commercial offshore supply vessel -- a platform abundantly available given limited offshore drilling activity. While it would be a civilian ship, Zukunft said it would be staffed with Coast Guard law enforcement augmentees to supervise the detained population. Though not the primary goal, he added that one outcome of acquiring such a vessel might be improved conditions for prisoners. "That might have better accommodations than we have on ships with flight decks and helicopter hangars to at least get people out of the elements," Zukunft said. [Source: Military.com | Hope Hodge Seck | January 16, 2018 ++]

Enlistment Update 17 ➤ Why Don't More People Serve Commission

The U.S. will launch a two-year effort in JAN 2017 to find ways to increase military and civic service among its citizenry, especially U.S. youth. The effort will be spearheaded by an 11-member commission that will travel the country in 2018 and 2019 “to ignite a national conversation around service and develop recommendations that will encourage and inspire all Americans, particularly young people, to serve.
Ultimately, the goal is for every American to be inspired and eager to serve,” the National Commission on Military, National, and Public Service said in a press release 12 JAN. The commission is also charged with reviewing current selective service registration requirements. Its members are tasked with issuing a final report and recommendations on how to increase civic and military participation by March 2020.

One idea tossed out last summer to increase the number of volunteers was to bring back the draft. The overall quality of troops would grow, but costs would also increase. The 11 members of the commission are: Rep. Joseph Heck (R-NV), Mark Gearan, former director of the Peace Corps; Debra Wada, former assistant secretary of the Army for Manpower and Reserve Affairs; Edward T. Allard III; Steve Barney, former general counsel to the Senate Armed Service Committee; Janine Davidson, former undersecretary of the Navy; Avril Haines, former principal deputy national security advisor; Jeanette James, former staff member of the House Armed Services Committee; Alan Khazei, CEO of Be the Change, Inc.; Thomas Kilgannon, president of Freedom Alliance; and Shawn Skelly, former director, executive secretariat, U.S. Department of Transportation. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Tara Copp | January 12, 2018 ++]

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Freeze-Dried Plasma Update 01 ► DoD/FDA Partnership to Speed Up Approval

The Defense Department has partnered with the Food and Drug Administration to speed up the process of approving medical products that can help save lives on the battlefield. The DoD’s Office of Health Affairs and the FDA announced on 16 JAN the joint program that will prioritize the availability of these products, including freeze-dried plasma. Freeze-dried plasma, which doesn’t need to be kept cold and is more stable than frozen plasma, helps stop bleeding with its clotting properties. Controlling blood loss is one of the most critical tasks facing medics on the battlefield. Since the FDA hasn’t approved a U.S.-sourced product yet, the military is using French-manufactured freeze-dried plasma until a U.S. option is available.

Through this partnership, the FDA has committed to getting a freeze-dried plasma product licensed for use by the end of 2018, said Peter Marks, director of the FDA’s Center for Biologics Evaluation and Research, during a conference call with reporters on Tuesday. Right now, only special operations units are using the French-sourced product, but Marks said the hope is to have U.S.-sourced freeze-dried plasma available to a broader range of service members and units. Language in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act would have given the DoD — not the FDA — the power to approve medical products for emergency use. However, the FDA and its supporters in Congress pushed back on the language, saying a less-strict approval process could put troops in danger if the products weren’t deemed safe.

That language was removed from the NDAA, and a separate bill was passed as a compromise. This bill authorizes the DoD to request assistance to expedite the development and the FDA’s review of medical products. “Although we have had successful collaborations with the Defense Department, some pressing areas have clearly not received attention from the FDA that they’ve needed,” FDA spokeswoman Tara Rabin said. Rabin said the NDAA spurred meaningful dialogue, and the new bill will help the FDA better prioritize the DoD’s work while still ensuring the products are safe and effective.

Expediting the approval process doesn’t mean there will be relaxed standards, Marks said. “We don’t intend to take a dramatically different approach to these products that we do to any other product,” he said, adding that more consideration will be given to what the DoD deems top priorities. The DoD’s current high-priority product programs include freeze-dried plasma, cold-stored platelets and cryopreserved platelets — platelets are blood cells that help the body form clots to stop bleeding. Tom McCaffery, the DoD’s acting assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said the partnership will “equip troops with the best possible medical support.” “The FDA’s expertise and guidance will help us put the best, most effective products in the hands of battlefield personnel,” McCaffery said.
Frozen plasma must be thawed and warmed before it can be injected into a patient, but the freeze-dried approach removes the water from the product, turning it into a powder. This powder is reconstituted with sterile water and injected into the patient either intravenously or via intraosseous infusion — directly into the bone. U.S. troops used this method in World War II, but they stopped after it was linked to hepatitis outbreaks. Since then, the safety testing improved and other militaries — including the French, Germans, Norwegians and Israelis — have used it. Special operations units in the U.S. Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps have received about 1,000 kits of the French product, according to the Associated Press. The French freeze-dried plasma is contained in glass bottles, but the U.S. plans to hold its product in IV bags to make transporting them easier and safer. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Charlsy Panzino | January 16, 2018 ++]

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Destroyer Collisions ► Fitzgerald/McCain DDG Skippers Face Criminal Charges

The commanders of the two guided-missile destroyers that were involved in fatal collisions with merchant ships in 2017 will face military criminal charges that include dereliction of duty, hazarding a vessel and negligent homicide, USNI News has learned.

- Cmdr. Bryce Benson, former commander of USS Fitzgerald (DDG-62), along with three Fitzgerald junior officers, face a mix charges that include dereliction of duty, hazarding a vessel and negligent homicide related to the June 17 collision between the ship and ACX Crystal that resulted in the death of seven sailors, according to a statement from the U.S. Navy provided to USNI News.

- Cmdr. Alfredo J. Sanchez, former commander of USS John S. McCain (DDG-56), faces similar dereliction of duty, hazarding a vessel and negligent homicide charges for the Aug. 21 collision between the guided-missile destroyer and a chemical tanker off the coast of Singapore that resulted in the death of 10 sailors.

The individuals will have the charges preferred via Article 32 preliminary hearings soon, the statement said. “The announcement of an Article 32 preliminary hearing and referral to a court-martial is not intended to and does not reflect a determination of guilt or innocence related to any offenses. All individuals alleged to have committed misconduct are entitled to a presumption of innocence,” the statement said. “Additional administrative actions are being conducted for members of both crews including non-judicial punishment for four Fitzgerald and four John S. McCain crewmembers.” A chief petty officer also faces a dereliction of duty charge that has already been preferred related to the McCain incident.

The charges are part of accountability actions recommended by an independent investigation tasked with reviewing further disciplinary actions by Navy leadership. Director of Naval Reactors Adm. James F. Caldwell was appointed as the Consolidated Disposition Authority (CDA) for administrative and disciplinary actions related to the Fitzgerald and McCain collisions by Vice Chief of Naval Operations Adm.
Bill Moran in late October. Other actions include removing Vice Adm. Tom Rowden from his position as the head of naval surface forces earlier than his planned 2 FEB retirement date.

Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson and Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer were set to appear before the House Armed Services readiness and seapower and projection forces subcommittees on 18 JAN to testify on the two reviews conducted following the Western Pacific collisions. Richardson tasked U.S. Fleet Forces Command with leading a Comprehensive Review of Recent Surface Force Incidents, and Spencer directed a panel to lead a Strategic Readiness Review. To date, the Navy has removed the commanding officers and executive officers of both McCain and Fitzgerald; Capt. Jeffery Bennett, commodore of the Japan-based Destroyer Squadron 15 to which both ships belonged; the Japan-based task force commander, Rear Adm. Charles Williams; and the commander of U.S. 7th Fleet, Vice Adm. Joseph Aucoin. U.S. Pacific Fleet commander Adm. Scott Swift announced his earlier-than-expected retirement in late September. Following is the complete statement from the service on the CDA recommendations.

**On 30 October 2017, Admiral William Moran, Vice Chief of Naval Operations, designated Admiral Frank Caldwell as the Consolidated Disposition Authority to review the accountability actions taken to date in relation to USS Fitzgerald (DDG 62) and USS John S. McCain (DDG 56) collisions and to take additional administrative or disciplinary actions as appropriate. After careful deliberation, today Admiral Frank Caldwell announced that Uniform Code of Military Justice (UCMJ) charges are being preferred against individual service members in relation to the collisions.**

**USS Fitzgerald:** Courts-martial proceedings/Article 32 hearings are being convened to review evidence supporting possible criminal charges against Fitzgerald members. The members’ ranks include one Commander (the Commanding Officer), two Lieutenants, and one Lieutenant Junior Grade. The charges include dereliction of duty, hazarding a vessel, and negligent homicide.

**USS John S. McCain:** Additionally, for John S. McCain, one court-martial proceeding/Article 32 hearing is being convened to review evidence supporting possible criminal charges against one Commander (the Commanding Officer). The charges include dereliction of duty, hazarding a vessel, and negligent homicide. Also, one charge of dereliction of duty was preferred and is pending referral to a forum for a Chief Petty Officer.

The announcement of an Article 32 hearing and referral to a court-martial is not intended to and does not reflect a determination of guilt or innocence related to any offenses. All individuals alleged to have committed misconduct are entitled to a presumption of innocence.

Additional administrative actions are being conducted for members of both crews including non-judicial punishment for four Fitzgerald and four John S. McCain crewmembers.

Information regarding further actions, if warranted, will be discussed at the appropriate time.

[Source: USNI News | Sam LaGrone | January 16, 2018 +++]

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**Destroyer Collisions Update 01 ► How Homicide Charges Will Shake Up Entire Navy**

The Navy’s decision to level criminal charges against the commanding officers of the destroyers Fitzgerald and John S. McCain is forcing the surface warfare world into a grim reckoning on how it operates, and the consequences of sailors dying on a leader’s watch. The Navy announced on 16 JAN that negligent homicide charges will be sought against Fitz CO Cmdr. Bryce Benson, and McCain CO Cmdr. Alfredo Sanchez, for their roles in the deaths of 17 sailors in the Pacific last summer. The unprecedented move sets in motion a
military justice proceeding that will begin with a preliminary hearing known as an Article 32, which will evaluate the evidence and determine whether to send the officers to court-martial.

But even the prospect of the homicide charges will have an impact on the broader Navy community. Some in the surface world wonder if the Navy’s decision will freeze skippers into indecisiveness, for fear that something going wrong will send them toward the same fate. Others think that same fear may spur officers to push back against superiors when a ship or crew is not ready to get underway, altering traditional relationships between commanders and senior leaders. Still, others contend that such big risks and potential liability have always been part of the job of being a commanding officer, and that the prospect of negligent homicide charges doesn’t change that.

Rick Hoffman, a retired warship captain who led the frigate DeWert and the cruiser Hue City in his career, said he favors going down this road to better investigate and dissect what happened. The criminal case needs to play out to find where ultimate culpability lies for the deaths of those sailors, he said. “They died in their racks,” said Hoffman. “That is what haunts me and makes me so angry.” Hoffman faulted the commanders and their crews for failing to sound an alarm when the ship was in imminent danger. “They were so unaware of the hazard the ship was in that they at no time gave the crew a chance to live,” Hoffman said. “They didn’t sound five short blasts, a collision alarm, go to general quarters or even just make an announcement on the IMC that would permit the crew to get out of their racks and try to save themselves.”

Navy leadership has come under the scrutiny of congressional overseers since the collisions, with lawmakers questioning the Navy’s readiness, pressing top officials about how things got so bad and demanding accountability. Some lawmakers support the Navy’s decision to pursue charges against Benson, Sanchez and others, saying it properly reflects the severity of the disasters. “These instances are not acceptable,” said Virginia Republican Rob Wittman, chair of the House Armed Services Committee’s subcommittee on seapower and projection forces. “It sends a very strong signal to everyone.”

SAYING NO

Since the Fitz and McCain collisions last summer, Navy leaders, including Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson, have hammered the point that skippers need to be able to feel comfortable telling their bosses that a ship and its crew are not ready for a mission. The potential charges against Benson and Sanchez could help embolden other COs to push back against this can-do culture, according to Kirk Lippold, a retired commander who was in charge of the destroyer Cole when it was attacked by terrorists in a Yemen port in 2000, killing 17 sailors. “One of the positives that could come out of this is starting to see commanding officers telling their bosses that they don’t feel they’re adequately manned to a level where they can safely take their ships to sea,” Lippold said. “This will test the integrity of the COs who now need to stand up to the Navy’s leadership and tell them they’re tired of years of being undermanned and under funded by Big Navy, who is turning around now and blaming the fleet for the problems of the Navy.”

In congressional testimony on 18 JAN, Navy Secretary Richard Spencer said he prefers to say “not yet” versus saying “no.” Such an attitude may extend down to the senior enlisted ranks, Lippold said. “You’re going to see a lot of push back, especially from chief petty officers who have had to live under these conditions that officers have imposed on them,” Lippold said. “You will see them telling their commanding officers that they can’t properly do the jobs they’ve been given because they haven’t been given the people and training and spare parts they need.”

If Benson or Sanchez are taken to court-martial, Lippold suggested their defense could turn the spotlight back on the Navy leadership that allowed conditions to deteriorate. That would raise questions about the decisions — and culpability — of senior admirals. “If this is the road the Navy wants to go down, I think those officers should say, ‘Fine, bring it on. And be prepared for the witnesses I’m going to call, including the [chief of naval operations] to explain why they allowed the Navy to be inadequately manned, trained and equipped,’ as he is required by law to do,” Lippold said.
Capt. Michael Junge, a Naval War College professor and former surface fleet commander, said emboldening commanding officers to push back against superiors if a ship is not ready can have other effects “That can be twisted into, ‘He’s afraid to get underway,’” Junge said. “The historical thing is, we’re going to get underway and figure it out.” Either way, Junge said the potential charges pose a slippery slope for the surface Navy. COs “are going to recalibrate what risks they’re willing to take,” he said. “Some are going to become very risk averse. Some are going to go in the other direction.”

PART OF THE JOB
Jan van Tol, a retired warship captain who commanded the destroyer O’Brien and the amphibious assault ship Essex as part of 7th Fleet, said a good CO shouldn’t have to shock his boss by saying no to getting underway due to material shortfalls. “A smart CO will have been keeping his [superiors] apprised of his [growing] concerns,” van Tol said. “Thus ‘saying no’ should normally be a reflection of keeping the chain of command informed of a deteriorating situation and then making a decision to ‘say no’ with all concerned parties being aware of the rationale.” Such potential culpability is a part of the job, Hoffman said.

“During both of my commands, I was fully aware that in the event of a disaster, even if I was in my rack, that this was a possible outcome,” Hoffman said. “It in no way frightened me or made me hesitant in command. Rather, it made me more diligent in the qualifications of my watch standers and kept me on the sidelines, as a safety observer, using command by negation, and my (officers of the deck) did what they were trained to do.” Van Tol was skeptical that the criminal charges will change the dynamic of command at sea.

“When you take command, you know (or should know) that you accept complete responsibility and accountability for anything that happens while you’re in command,” he said. “One accepts that there are certain professional risks that go with command, including inescapable responsibility if something goes wrong on your watch. That’s an inherent part of the business. Sometimes things will go bad.”

FREEZE UP OR TIGHTEN UP
A fear of action and a need to be even more squared away were concerns echoed by some enlisted leaders. Such charges could make sailors even more risk averse, said a master chief who requested anonymity. “Many will see this as yet another reason not to take a risk, and that’s bad for a warfighting outfit,” the master chief said. “I personally don’t mind a challenge, but what this means to me is that I need to take a look at my stuff and how I’m doing business and make sure it’s tight and I won’t be afraid to tell the higher up if I don’t have what I need to do my job. “I’d rather go down for telling the truth and digging in my heels than for contributing to someone’s death,” he said.

One petty officer third class said negligent homicide charges may spook junior sailors, making them fearful of messing up. “If we see that the captain is getting charged with negligent homicide, what will they do to us?” the petty officer said. In addition to the two skippers, the Navy is also leveling criminal charges against three junior officers from the Fitzgerald and a chief petty officer from the McCain. One second-class petty officer said he hopes to see more accountability sought among the chiefs mess. “A captain is the easy fall guy. What you’ve really got to do is take a deep dive and look at who was specifically training those individuals, specifically the senior enlisted,” said the second-class. “I always hear chiefs say, ‘Chiefs run the Navy, chiefs are integral to the Navy.’ Well, if that is true, then chiefs were integral to the deaths of 17 sailors,” the petty officer said. “If chiefs are so important, then they have to say that this was on us, and it’s on us to change. You can’t have your cake and eat it too.”

UNCHARTED LEGAL WATERS
While the grave charges send a message to the rest of the surface fleet, Eugene R. Fidell, a civilian attorney specializing in military law, cautioned against thinking the charges are only meant to send a message. “Navy
management knows a lot more about what happened than you and I do,” he said. “It’s an expensive message, and it would be reckless and very unfair to subject anybody to the rigors and expense and embarrassment of an Article 32 hearing and possibly a trial simply to send a message.” The circumstances of the Fitz and McCain collisions differ in significant ways, including where their COs were at the time, according to information the Navy has made public. The full investigations into the incidents have yet to be released.

Benson was asleep in his quarters in the early morning of 178 JUN when the Fitz collided with a merchant vessel off Japan. Sanchez was on the McCain’s bridge as the destroyer maneuvered into the busy sea lanes of the Strait of Malacca and collided with a tanker. Junge criticized the Navy for announcing the potential Fitz and McCain charges together. “You have to separate every individual out, and the worst thing the Navy has done is link these two cases,” he said. “The only things these have similar are two collisions in the Pacific. After that, everything is different.”

Such potential charges against the skippers are largely uncharted waters, as the military rarely charges troops with negligent homicide, Fidel said. All such an incident would have to call for is simple negligence, he said. “It’s like having a fender bender, except that somebody dies,” said Fidel, who recently represented Bowe Bergdahl, the soldier who left his Afghanistan outpost, was held hostage for years by the Taliban and dishonorably discharged last year.

Despite the rarity of the charges, Fidel said he was not surprised, given the deaths and high-profile nature of the disasters. “Seventeen people have died and two ships have been put out of commission,” he said. “If they didn’t do something serious, people would say you’re sweeping it under the carpet.”

But proving that command negligence was directly responsible for the Fitz and McCain sailors’ deaths could be challenging, he noted. “You need that connection,” Fidel said. “You could say, well, they ran a sloppy bridge watch, or they permitted people on the bridge who weren’t properly trained. The questions is, can you connect the shin bone to the thigh bone, so that that connects to the fact that particular people died? And that might be a challenge.” Recent naval disasters where a CO was found to be at fault have not led to charges of negligent homicide.

- The commanding officer of the frigate Stark, Capt. Glenn Brindel, saw his ship hit by two Iraqi missiles in 1987, resulting in the deaths of 37 sailors. A Navy board of inquiry recommended a court-martial, but he instead went to admiral’s mast and received a reprimand, forcing him to retire as an O-5.
- Cmdr. Scott Waddle was in charge of the submarine Greenville in 2001, when it surfaced under a Japanese fishing vessel off Hawaii, killing nine people in the vessel. A court of inquiry recommended against court-martialing Waddle, who later went to admiral’s mast for dereliction of duty and improper hazarding of a vessel.

The newest cases will likely hinge on technical details of ship operations and will challenge the Navy’s Judge Advocate Corps in assembling the prosecution and defense teams for the case, according to Fidel. “People are going to have to learn the ship’s plans, literally construction, communications systems, standard operating procedures, standing orders, so there’s going to be some real effort made,” he said. “You’re going to need people who are really conversant with the operation of a naval vessel,” Fidel said. “That was probably easier in an earlier age, when many JAG Corps officers had been line officers.”

Junge criticized the Navy’s opacity regarding the Fitz and McCain investigations regarding who received non-judicial punishment, and why. He also said he wished the service would release the full investigations into the collisions, instead of the piecemeal information that has come to public light thus far. “I really wish the Navy had released the real report,” Junge said. “Right now it looks like there must be something else that’s not been released to make these charges stick.” Fidel also questioned what else the Navy knows about the collisions. “I don’t think you can write this off as either a gesture or something casually done without a
foundation,” he said. “They certainly wouldn’t want to send a case that they were reasonably confident was going to blow up on them.”

[Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz & Mark D. Faram | January 21, 2018 ++]

Destroyer Collisions Update 02 ▶ Secrecy and Uncertainty Surrounds Navy Discipline

More than five months after 17 sailors were crushed and drowned aboard the destroyers Fitzgerald and John S. McCain, the Navy is declining to make public the number and nature of disciplinary actions taken against crew members. At the same time, uncertainty exists regarding the status of past disciplinary actions. Navy officials confirmed this week that the service is reviewing an unknown number of disciplinary measures that were meted out last year. That review “is both considering all previous actions and reviewing cases in which no action was taken to ensure fairness, consistency, and appropriate accountability,” Navy spokesman Lt. Cdr. Daniel Day said in an email.

Day cited that ongoing review as the reason for not providing a current tally of sailors who have received nonjudicial punishment, or NJP, in connection to the collisions. Officials also declined to say which prior disciplinary actions are being reconsidered, and why. Since those historic mishaps, Navy leadership has pushed accountability as the order of the day. Commanders at all levels of the surface fleet have been relieved of command. The Navy announced this month that it will seek criminal charges against five officers and one chief. But the number of sailors who have faced administrative discipline remains unclear.

This official silence represents an about-face from the initial response last year. On 17 AUG, the Navy’s second in command, Adm. Bill Moran, announced that the Navy planned to take up to a dozen Fitz sailors to NJP. But the Navy’s entire process for dealing with the Fitzgerald’s aftermath would be upended a few days later, when the McCain suffered a similar collision on Aug. 21.

The sea service created a so-called “Consolidated Disposition Authority,” or CDA, in November, roughly five months after the June 17 Fitz collision and three months after the McCain catastrophe. “The CDA was appointed to ensure consistency across the class of affected cases, including reviewing all previous accountability actions from a fresh, independent perspective,” Day said. Whatever the reason, failing to release even a basic number of sailors who have received NJP “speaks to a complete lack of transparency,” said Capt. Michael Junge, a surface warfare officer and Naval War College professor. He noted that he spoke for himself and not the Navy. Like a court-martial, NJP charges troops with violations of the Uniform Code of Military Justice and can end a service members military career. Yet unlike courts-martial, NJP proceedings occur largely out of the public eye, and critics say the process offers less rights for the accused. “I fear for those folks,” Junge said. “They have virtually no rights.”

Moran said on 17 AUG the Fitz sailors facing NJP would include Cmdr. Bryce Benson, the captain of the ship at the time of the collision off Japan, where seven sailors died. Last week, the Navy announced it would pursue courts-martial on charges of negligent homicide, dereliction of duty and hazarding a vessel against Benson and three unidentified junior officers. Cmdr. Alfredo Sanchez, who led the McCain at the time of its fatal collision, faces the same charges. That Navy’s public statement added that four Fitz sailors and four McCain sailors would also face NJP in connection to the collisions. Yet Navy officials declined to say whether any additional sailors have faced NJP or will in the future. “Information regarding further actions, if warranted, will be discussed at the appropriate time,” the Navy said in the statement.

Critics say the Navy’s silence on Fitz and McCain is the latest example of longstanding problems with the Navy’s use of NJP, a disciplinary mechanism they say is overused and opaque, while offering far less rights to the accused than a court-martial. The rights of the accused during NJP versus a court-martial are
“worlds apart,” according to Patrick McLain, a former Marine Corps judge now in private practice. Because NJP is administrative, the accused does not have the right to an attorney, McLain said. The standards for proving guilt in an NJP proceeding are lower than for a court-martial, he said, and NJP involves less-stringent evidence standards.

A court-martial provides “greater rights, constitutional rights and rights provided under the Uniform Code of Military Justice,” McLain said. The courts-martial process is typically open to the public, including the Article 32 proceeding held beforehand to decide whether the evidence is sufficient to support the charges. But NJP proceedings are not open to the public and the Navy generally does not publicize the results. “A case that doesn’t go to court-martial...is a case the public may never learn much about,” said Eugene R. Fidell, an attorney who specializes in military law. NJPs are supposed to be used for minor infractions, he said, and the law offers the services latitude regarding what they publicize about such cases.

The two commanders and others now facing a possible court-martial in connection to the Fitz and McCain disasters are almost better off than their shipmates undergoing NJP, Junge said, because the Navy’s efforts to court-martial them will be public. “You go to NJP and your reputation is lost because the Navy won’t release any information,” Junge said. “The standard of proof is ridiculously low.” Troops generally have the option to ask for a court-martial instead of NJP when accused of UCMJ violations. But Fitz and McCain sailors hit with NJP are likely subject to the so-called “vessel exception,” a uniquely Navy regulation that prohibits defendants assigned to a ship from rejecting NJP and opting to face their charges at a court-martial instead. Day, the Navy spokesman, declined to comment about whether the vessel exception was invoked in any disciplinary matters related to the disasters.

“At this time, we cannot comment on particular cases, including whether the vessel exception would apply to any of those individuals who might face nonjudicial punishment,” he said. Fidell called the vessel exception “an unfortunate practice” in the Navy that has in the past been used on sailors who are still assigned to a ship only on paper. “The Navy continues to take a far more expansive view of the vessel exception than it ought to,” Fidell said. McLain, the former Marine Corps judge, said details on prior Fitz and McCain disciplinary actions will likely emerge when the government makes its case for why the destroyers’ former skippers should be court-martialed. He also said that attempting to try them on negligent homicide was a “pretty wild” route to take. “To talk about causation of death for whatever negligence these skippers committed is a real stretch,” McLain said. “As a military judge, I’ve seen where the government reaches and loses a case.” [Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | January 26, 2018 ++

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USS Fitzgerald (DDG-62) Update 10 ▶ Repairs to Take 2 Years

The Arleigh Burke-class destroyer that was damaged last year during a collision that cost the lives of seven sailors, has arrived at Pascagoula, Mississippi, for repairs. The massive destroyer was transported from Yokosuka, Japan, onboard a heavy lift vessel called MV Transshelf. The vessel arrived in Pascagoula on Jan. 19. “Fitzgerald is expected to spend several days in the Port of Pascagoula as the heavy lift ship will commence the reverse operation of unfastening, lowering and guiding the ship off the platform,” the Naval Sea Systems Command said in a statement. “The ship will then be taken to its designated pier space at Huntington Ingalls Industries shipyard.”

Because the ship will be in repair for a lengthy period, the Navy will also modernize the vessel while it is in drydock. “Due to the extent and complexity of the restoration, both repair and new construction procedures will be used to accomplish the restoration and modernization efforts. Various Hull Mechanical and Electrical (HM&E); Command, Control, Communications, Computers and Intelligence; and Combat
System equipment, including the electronic warfare suite, radar, switchboard, gas turbine generator and air condition plant, require repair and/or replacement,” NAVSEA states. “Fitzgerald will also receive HM&E; Combat System; and Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Collaboration and Intelligence; upgrades that were originally planned for installation during a fiscal year 2019 availability.”

It will take roughly two year to repair and modernize Fitzgerald and her systems. “Work on the ship is expected to occur on a land level facility throughout 2018 and one to two quarters of 2019, followed by an extensive test and trials period to ensure all systems and spaces are restored to full functionality and operational capability,” NAVSEA said. “The entire restoration and modernization effort is expected to complete approximately 24-months post work commencement on the ship.”

It will take that long to repair the ship because of the extensive damage inflicted on the vessel during a June 17, 2017, collision with the Philippine-flagged ACX Crystal off the coast of Japan. Seven Navy sailors were killed and many others were injured during the accident, which caused extensive damage to Fitzgerald’s starboard side side above and below the waterline. The accident was traced back to an overworked and tired Navy crew and significant training issues onboard—and the vessel’s skipper is currently facing charges. The Navy is making course corrections to improve training and to take some of the workload off its crews. However, this was a problem decades in the making and it will take a while to fix.

[Source: The National Interest | Dave Majumdar | January 24, 2018 ++]

Warships That Will Change the Future ► USS Independence (LCS)

From aircraft carriers to missile cruisers to landing ships, these naval future weapons are changing the face of global warfare. Ships such as the USS Independence.

Just as her name implies, the USS Independence (LCS-2) is the sixth ship that was built for the US Navy that was named in relation to the independence concept. You may have guessed it, the ship is multitasking as it could hunt down submarines, destroy mines, battle smaller boats and more all at the same time. She was launched on April 26, 2008 and was first used six months later in October of that same year. Its homeport is San Diego.

Gun Salutes ► Origin & Use

The use of gun salutes for military occasions is traced to early warriors who demonstrated their peaceful intentions by placing their weapons in a position that rendered them ineffective. Apparently this custom was
universal, with the specific act varying with time and place, depending on the weapons being used. A North African tribe, for example, trailed the points of their spears on the ground to indicate that they did not mean to be hostile.

The tradition of rendering a salute by cannon originated in the 14th century as firearms and cannons came into use. Since these early devices contained only one projectile, discharging them once rendered them ineffective. Originally warships fired seven-gun salutes—the number seven probably selected because of its astrological and Biblical significance. Seven planets had been identified and the phases of the moon changed every seven days. The Bible states that God rested on the seventh day after Creation, that every seventh year was sabbatical and that the seven times seventh year ushered in the Jubilee year.

Land batteries, having a greater supply of gunpowder, were able to fire three guns for every shot fired afloat, hence the salute by shore batteries was 21 guns. The multiple of three probably was chosen because of the mystical significance of the number three in many ancient civilizations. Early gunpowder, composed mainly of sodium nitrate, spoiled easily at sea, but could be kept cooler and drier in land magazines. When potassium nitrate improved the quality of gunpowder, ships at sea adopted the salute of 21 guns.

The 21-gun salute became the highest honor a nation rendered. Varying customs among the maritime powers led to confusion in saluting and return of salutes. Great Britain, the world's preeminent seapower in the 18th and 19th centuries, compelled weaker nations to salute first, and for a time monarchies received more guns than did republics. Eventually, by agreement, the international salute was established at 21 guns, although the United States did not agree on this procedure until August 1875. The gun salute system of the United States has changed considerably over the years.

- **In 1810**, the "national salute" was defined by the War Department as equal to the number of states in the Union—at that time 17. This salute was fired by all U.S. military installations at 1:00 p.m. (later at noon) on Independence Day. The President also received a salute equal to the number of states whenever he visited a military installation.

- **In 1842**, the Presidential salute was formally established at 21 guns. In 1890, regulations designated the "national salute" as 21 guns and redesignated the traditional Independence Day salute, the "Salute to the Union," equal to the number of states. Fifty guns are also fired on all military installations equipped to do so at the close of the day of the funeral of a President, ex-President, or President-elect.

- **Today** the national salute of 21 guns is fired in honor of a national flag, the sovereign or chief of state of a foreign nation, a member of a reigning royal family, and the President, ex-President and President-elect of the United States. It is also fired at noon of the day of the funeral of a President, ex-President, or President-elect. Gun salutes are also rendered to other military and civilian leaders of this and other nations. The number of guns is based on their protocol rank. These salutes are always in odd numbers.

**Gun Salutes at Military Funerals**

At military funerals, one often sees three volleys of shots fired in honor of the deceased veteran. This is often mistaken by the laymen as a 21-gun salute, although it is entirely different (in the military, a "gun" is a large-caliber weapon. The three volleys are fired from "rifles," not "guns." Therefore, the three volleys aren't any kind of "gun salute," at all).

Anyone who is entitled to a military funeral (generally anyone who dies on active duty, honorably discharged veterans, and military retirees) are to the three rifle volleys, subject to availability of honor guard teams. As stated, this is not a 21-gun salute, nor any other type of "gun salute." They are simply three rifle volleys fired. The firing team can consist of any number, but one usually sees a team of eight, with a
noncommissioned officer in charge of the firing detail. Whether the team consists of three or eight, or ten, each member fires three times (three volleys).

The three volleys come from an old battlefield custom. The two warring sides would cease hostilities to clear their dead from the battlefield, and the firing of three volleys meant that the dead had been properly cared for and the side was ready to resume the battle. The flag detail often slips three shell casings into the folded flag before presenting the flag to the family. Each casing represents one volley.

[Source: U.S. Army Center of Military History & The Balance | January 20, 2018 ++]

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Overseas Troops ► Cpl. Joshua Montgomery

Infantry team leader assigned to Lima Co., 3rd Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, poses at Camp Beuhring, Kuwait. "I didn’t want to go to school. I wanted to travel the world and shoot big guns ... I got all my wishes," he said with a laugh.

* Military History *

Tet Offensive Update 01 ► How It Undermined Americas' Faith in Government

When Americans wince upon hearing presidents make proclamations about foreign policy, the legacy of the 1968 Tet Offensive looms large. On January 30, at the start of the sacred Vietnamese holiday of Tet, which celebrated the start of the new lunar year, the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong launched a massive military offensive that proved the battle raging in Southeast Asia was far from over, and that President Lyndon B. Johnson's administration had grossly oversold American progress to the public. Although U.S. troops ultimately ended the offensive successfully, and the North Vietnamese and the Vietcong suffered
brutal loses, these bloody weeks triggered a series of events that continue to undermine Americans’ confidence in their government.

The Tet offensive came after several months of the North Vietnamese modifying their strategy. Rather than a battle of attrition, the leadership planned to launch a massive assault that aimed to undermine the morale of the South Vietnamese as well as the American public. Since December, the North Vietnamese had been conducting a series of attacks meant to send U.S. forces in the wrong direction. Johnson and his military advisors fell for the trick. The president and General William Westmoreland had focused on potential attacks against a U.S. Marine base in Khe Sanh. Johnson kept asking military leaders if they were prepared to defend the base and he kept promising congressional Democrats and Republicans that he had received their assurances everything would be fine.

Meanwhile, Johnson had conducted a massive public relations blitz in the end of 1967 to convince the public that the war was nearing a conclusion and that the United States was winning. The Progress Campaign, as it was sometimes called, deployed large volumes of data to convince the media that the communists were losing on the battlefield and that their numbers were diminishing.

Westmoreland told Meet the Press on November 19, 1967 that the U.S could win the war within two years and then proclaimed at the National Press Club on 21 NOV that “the end begins to come into view.” In November 1967, according to the Harris poll, confidence in the president’s Vietnam policies rose by 11 points (from 23 to 34 percent). In his State of the Union Address on 17 JAN, Johnson sounded downright optimistic, even though he acknowledged that the U.S. faced major challenges overseas and that victory in Vietnam would take some time. As he asked Congress to pass a tax surcharge to help pay for the escalating costs of the war, while continuing to fund the Great Society, the president declared that the enemy was testing the “will” of the nation to “meet the trials that these times impose.”

In resolute fashion, Johnson went on to promise that “America will persevere. Our patience and our perseverance will match our power. Aggression will never prevail.” Max Frankel of The New York Times reported, “Whereas a year ago he promised ‘more cost, more loss and more agony’ in the war, this year he emphasized the positive, what he called the ‘marks of progress,’ and dwelt less on the whole issue of the war than in the previous two speeches.”

Then the situation took a bad turn a few weeks later. The crisis of Tet began in the early morning of 30 JAN, the start of the year of the Monkey. In Saigon, NLF fighters attacked the American embassy. A 20-year-old soldier, Chuck Searcy, recalled waking up after an evening of drinking and movies, that when the sirens went off he assumed it was a drill and they would be able to go back to sleep. “But then a captain came around the perimeter in a jeep with a loudspeaker announcing that this was not a practice alert … It was the moment when the war became a reality for us, because up to then, Saigon had been considered a very safe area and quite secure and basically an area that would never be attacked.” The fighting continued until 9:15 the next morning. Nineteen enemy soldiers would lose their lives in the battle for the embassy; five Americans were killed. This was just one of many onslaughts that took place as the communists conducted their offensive in five major cities, 36 provincial capitals and smaller hamlets across the country.

Desperate to stop the public fallout, on 31 JAN, Johnson ordered Westmoreland to hold daily press briefings to “convey to the American public your confidence in our capability to blunt these enemy moves, and to reassure the public here that you have the situation under control.” Johnson warned legislators that the anti-war protests in the U.S. were being triggered by allies of the communists. Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara privately told Johnson, “I think it shows two things, Mr. President. First, that they have more power than some credit them with … My guess is that we will inflict very heavy losses on them, both in terms of personnel and materiel and this will set them back some, but after they absorb the losses, they will remain a substantial force.”
After the initial shock and awe, U.S. troops mounted a fierce and effective counter-attack, one of the most successful military operations of the war. When it was all over in late February, the communists suffered over 40,000 deaths, including some of their most skilled troops. The fighting ended when the U.S. and South Vietnamese recaptured the city of Hue. Yet the military victory turned into a political disaster for the administration. Johnson tried to stop the political bleeding from the realization that the Vietnam War was not ending any time soon. The Tet Offensive showed that Johnson and Westmoreland were lying about having “reached an important point where the end begins to come into view,” as Westmoreland famously had said.

The media coverage of Tet provided reporters with unprecedented access to the images of the conflict as the battles moved into the cities, and they delivered. One of the most famous images from the period was that of a South Vietnamese brigadier general Nguyen Ngoc Loan, the chief of the national police, putting a bullet in the head of Nguyen Van Lem, a captain in the Vietcong. The photograph, taken by Associated Press photographer Eddie Adams on 1 FEB, confirmed the brutality of this conflict to many Americans. Life magazine’s cover on 16 FEB featured a photograph of two North Vietnamese soldiers with Chinese AK-47 automatic rifles, guarding Hue, with an article by Catherine Leroy called, “The Enemy Lets Me Take His Picture.”

The images on television were just as bad. The coverage shifted from smoke and helicopters to soldiers fighting to recapture ground in a brutal war. “There, on color screens,” one observer noted, “dead bodies lay amidst the rubble and the rattle of automatic gunfire as dazed American soldiers and civilians ran back and forth trying to flush out the assailants.” Walter Cronkite famously signed off his broadcast challenging the president and joining journalists who had increasingly been saying that the government was not telling the full truth. “Who won and lost in the great Tet Offensive against the cities? I’m not sure. The Vietcong did not win by a knockout but neither did we … For it seems now more certain than ever, that the bloody experience in Vietnam is to end in a stalemate. To say that we are closer to victory today is to believe in the face of the evidence, the optimists who have been wrong in the past.” ABC anchor Frank McGee followed up a few days later telling viewers “The war is being lost” while his colleague Frank Reynolds said it put the president’s credibility “under fire.”

Inside the White House, the historian Robert Dallek found that Johnson’s advisors were shaken. Following one meeting of foreign policy advisors, Joseph Califano reported that they were “beyond pessimistic.” The new secretary of defense, Clark Clifford, recalled that “It is hard to imagine or recreate the atmosphere in the sixty days after Tet. The pressure grew so intense that at times I felt the government might come apart at its seams. Leadership was fraying at its very center—something very rare in a nation with so stable a government structure.” Clifford said that in early March he made his “overwhelming priority” as Secretary “to extricate our nation from an endless war.”

“The element of hope has been taken away by the Tet Offensive,” noted Secretary of State Dean Rusk, “People don’t think there is likely to be an end.” Newsweek ran a cover story on February 19, with Westmoreland on the cover, entitled “Man on the Spot.”

By the time that Tet ended, Johnson was left with a massive credibility gap that overshadowed everything he had done on domestic policy. By March, when anti-war Democrat Senator Eugene McCarthy performed unexpectedly well in the New Hampshire primary, the polls had really turned on the president and the war. An initial spike in public support from Tet in February, with a notable increase in hawkish sentiment about Vietnam, turned hard against the administration in March. 49 percent of Americans thought the war was a mistake; only 41 percent thought it was the right decision. Only 35 percent believed that it would end within the next two years. His overall approval ratings for handling the war fell to a meager 26 percent. On the last day of the month, with his support plummeting, Johnson shocked the nation by going on television to announce that he would not run for reelection.
When rumors circulated that Westmoreland had asked for 206,000 more troops in response to Tet, Americans were outraged and the apparent blindness of the people in power. The Democratic Convention in 1968 was a disaster, as liberal Democrats and the anti-war movement opened up a civil war. Ironically, the person to reap the most benefits from the war was Richard Nixon, the next president of the United States, who lied and deceived the public about Vietnam in ways that even Johnson could not have imagined. Besides the damage that Tet imposed on Johnson, the surprise attack and the revelation that the administration had vastly oversold the prospects for success were a severe blow to public confidence in American government leaders to tell the truth and to do the right thing.

The right also took its own lessons from Tet and other parts of the increasingly critical wartime coverage, namely that the media could not be trusted. As reporters focused on Tet as evidence of failure, hawkish Democrats and Republicans were quick to note, rightly so, that the U.S. counter-offensive had been successful. Johnson felt this way and tried to hammer away on the point that the media was misrepresenting what happened. For decades, coverage of Tet would remain to conservatives a symbol of why the “liberal establishment” could not be trusted to give the public a realistic assessment of national security issues.

For much of the nation, however, the specifics of Tet were beside the points. The real story was the context of the disastrous policies in Vietnam that cost thousands of American lives every month, undermined the nation’s moral authority in the Cold War, and didn’t seem to be working. As the historian Fred Logevall has argued, Tet is not the sole culprit behind the shattered faith from Vietnam, as opposition to the war and the realization of government falsehood had been growing for several years. But Tet still packed an extraordinarily powerful punch on a nation primed to be disillusioned. Based on what they were seeing in the winter of 1968, the communists in North Vietnam remained strong and determined, and promises that the war was ending were simply not true.

Tet shaped the world within which we live today: In an era when Americans still don’t fully trust government officials to tell them the truth about situations overseas, and don’t have confidence that leaders, for all their bluster, will do the right thing. Tet is an important reminder that for liberals and conservatives sometimes a little distrust is a good thing. Tet showed that blind confidence in leaders can easily lead down dangerous paths. [Source: The Atlantic | Julian E. Zelizer | January 15, 2018 ++]

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B-52 Greenland 1968 Crash ► 4 Nuclear Bombs On Board

Fifty years ago, on Jan. 21, 1968, the Cold War grew significantly colder. It was on this day that an American B-52G Stratofortress bomber, carrying four nuclear bombs, crashed onto the sea ice of Wolstenholme Fjord in the northwest corner of Greenland, one of the coldest places on Earth. Greenland is part of the Kingdom of Denmark, and the Danes were not pleased. The bomber – call sign HOBO 28 – had crashed due to human error. One of the crew members had stuffed some seat cushions in front of a heating vent, and they subsequently caught fire. The smoke quickly became so thick that the crew needed to eject. Six of the 7 crew members parachuted out safely before the plane crashed onto the frozen fjord 7 miles west of Thule Air Base – America’s most northern military base, 700 miles north of the Arctic Circle.

The island of Greenland, situated about halfway between Washington D.C. and Moscow, has strategic importance to the American military – so much so that the United States had, in 1946, made an unsuccessful bid to buy it from Denmark. Nevertheless, Denmark, a strong ally of the United States, did allow the American military to operate an air base at Thule. The crash severely strained the United States’ relationship with Denmark, since Denmark’s 1957 nuclear-free zone policy had prohibited the presence of any nuclear weapons in Denmark or its territories. The Thule crash revealed that the United States had actually been
routinely flying planes carrying nuclear bombs over Greenland, and one of those illicit flights had now resulted in the radioactive contamination of a fjord.

The radioactivity was released because the nuclear warheads had been compromised. The impact from the crash and the subsequent fire had broken open the weapons and released their radioactive contents, but luckily, there was no nuclear detonation. After the crash, the United States and Denmark had very different ideas about how to deal with HOBO 28’s wreckage and radioactivity. The U.S. wanted to just let the bomber wreckage sink into the fjord and remain there, but Denmark wouldn’t allow that. Denmark wanted all the wreckage gathered up immediately and moved, along with all of the radioactively contaminated ice, to the United States. Since the fate of the Thule Air Base hung in the balance, the U.S. agreed to Denmark’s demands.

The clock was ticking on the cleanup, code named operation “Crested Ice,” because, as winter turned into spring, the fjord would begin to melt and any remaining debris would sink 800 feet to the seafloor. Initial weather conditions were horrible, with temperatures as low as minus 75 degrees Fahrenheit, and wind speeds as high as 80 miles per hour. In addition, there was little sunlight, because the sun was not due to rise again over the Arctic horizon until mid-February. Groups of American airmen, walking 50 abreast, swept the frozen fjord looking for all the pieces of wreckage – some as large as plane wings and some as small as flashlight batteries. Patches of ice with radioactive contamination were identified with Geiger counters and other types of radiation survey meters. All wreckage pieces were picked up, and ice showing any contamination was loaded into sealed tanks.

Most every piece of the plane was accounted for except, most notably, a secondary stage cylinder of uranium and lithium deuteride – the nuclear fuel components of one of the bombs. It was not found on the ice and a sweep of the seafloor with a minisub also found nothing. Its current location remains a mystery. Although the loss of the fuel cylinder was perplexing and disturbing, it is a relatively small item (about the size and shape of a beer keg) and it emits very little radioactivity detectable by radiation survey meters, making it very hard to find at the bottom of a fjord. Fortunately, it is not possible for this secondary “fusion” unit to detonate on its own without first being induced through detonation of the primary “fission” unit (plutonium). So there is no chance of a spontaneous nuclear explosion occurring in the fjord in the future, no matter how long it remains there.

The successful cleanup helped to heal United States-Denmark relations. But nearly 30 years later, the Thule incident spawned a new political controversy in Denmark. In 1995, a Danish review of internal government documents revealed that Danish Prime Minister H.C. Hansen had actually given the United
States tacit approval to fly nuclear weapons into Thule. Thus, the Danish government had to share some complicity in the Thule incident.

As recently as 2003, environmental scientists from Denmark revisited the fjord to see if they could detect any residual radioactivity from the crash. Was bottom sediment, seawater or seaweed radioactive, after nearly 40 years? Yes, but the levels were extremely low. Thule Air Base survived all of the controversies over the decades but became increasingly neglected as nuclear weaponry moved away from bomber-based weapon delivery and more toward land-based and submarine-based intercontinental ballistic missiles. Nevertheless, as Thule’s bomber role waned, its importance for radar detection of incoming ICBMs grew, since a trans-Arctic trajectory is a direct route for Russian nuclear missiles targeted at the United States.

In 2017, Thule got a US$40,000,000 upgrade for its radar systems due, in part, to increased concern about Russia as a nuclear threat, and also because of worries about recent Russian military forays into the Arctic. Thule Air Base thus remains indispensable to American defense, and the United States remains very interested in Greenland – and committed to maintaining good relations with Denmark. [Source: AP/The Conversation | Timothy J. Jorgensen | January 23, 2018 ++]

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**USS Pueblo Seizure ► How It Nearly Sparked Nuclear War**

The seizure of the Pueblo remains one of the most embarrassing incidents in US military history, the first hijacking of a naval vessel since the Civil War, 153 years earlier. The incident raised tensions in the region to near breaking point. Fifty years on, it remains the closest the world came to a second Korean War, one that cables show US generals were prepared to use nuclear weapons to fight, and could have sucked in both the Soviet Union and China. That the Pueblo’s seizure did not result in war was the result of months of careful diplomatic negotiations between North Korea and the US, held in near secret at Panmunjom, the so-called "truce village" on the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea. As those negotiations dragged on, the crew of the Pueblo were beaten, tortured, and forced to sign increasingly ludicrous confessions, even as they fretted they would face further punishment on return to the US. If they ever got back. To learn more of what happened refer to the attachment to this [Bulletin titled, "USS Pueblo Seizure". [Source: CNN | James Griffiths | January 21, 2018 ++]

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**USS Astoria (CA-34) ► Personal Responsibility**

The USS Astoria (CA-34) was the first U.S. cruiser to engage the Japanese during the Battle of Savo Island, a night action fought the 8th to 9th of August 1942. Although she scored two hits on the Imperial flagship Chokai, the Astoria was badly damaged and sank shortly after noon, on 9th of August.

About 0200 hours a young Midwesterner, Signalman 3rd Class, Elgin Staples, was swept overboard by the blast when the Astoria’s number one eight-inch gun turret exploded. Wounded in both legs by shrapnel and in semi-shock, he was kept afloat by a narrow life belt that he managed to activate with a simple trigger mechanism.

At around 0600 hours, Staples was rescued by a passing destroyer and returned to the Astoria, whose captain was attempting to save the cruiser by beaching her. The effort failed, and Staples, still wearing the same life belt, found himself back in the water. It was lunchtime. Picked up again, this time by the USS President Jackson (AP-37), he was one of 500 survivors of the battle who were evacuated to Noumea.
On board the transport, Staples for the first time closely examined the lifebelt that had served him so well. It had been manufactured by Firestone Tire and Rubber Company of Akron, Ohio, and bore a registration number.

Given home leave, Staples told his story and asked his mother, who worked for Firestone, about the purpose of the number on the belt. She replied that the company insisted on personal responsibility for the war effort and that the number was unique and assigned to only one inspector. Staples remembered everything about the lifebelt and quoted the number.

It was his mother's personal code and affixed to every item she was responsible for approving.

USS ASTORIA, "Nasty Asty" to her crew, was originally lead ship of her class of heavy cruiser. She saw service in the United States Navy from April 1934 through August 1942, when she was lost in night action off Guadalcanal.


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**Battle of the Somme ► One Of WWI's Bloodiest**

On December 6-8, 1915, the Allies met in France for the Second Chantilly Conference, which would lay the groundwork for World War I's Battle of the Somme, a four and a half month-long battle in France that would prove to be one of the war's bloodiest. At the Conference, the Allies agreed to coordinate simultaneous offensives to exhaust German resources and manpower. As part of this, the British and French agreed to a joint French-led offensive on the Somme River for the summer of 1916. But the Germans attacked the French at Verdun in February, forcing the British to shoulder the bulk of the planned Somme offensive, which developed the subsidiary purpose of relieving pressure on the French at Verdun.

The Somme offensive, stretching along a front 25 miles long, began with artillery barrages on June 24th that lasted a week. The plan was to so overwhelm the Germans with the bombardment that the infantry would have a relatively easy time. However, the bombardment was largely ineffective, which meant that when the infantry climbed out of the trenches on July 1 and crossed into No Man's Land, they were cut down by German machine guns and artillery. It was the single bloodiest day in British army history, with nearly 60,000 British casualties, a third of them killed.
While there was some success in breaking through the German front line along the southern part of the front on that first day of the battle, there was no real progress along the majority of the line. The Battle of the Somme would last for 4 1/2 months, with periods of renewed fighting. One of the most notable of these was the Battle of Flers-Courcelette, the first time tanks were used in battle. By the time the Battle of the Somme finally ended in November with inconclusive results, both sides had sustained high casualties, with more than a million total killed, wounded, captured, or missing, making it one of the bloodiest battles of the war. [Source: Together We Served | January 2018 ++]

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Great Escape Myths ▶ Five Revealed

More than likely, many of us have seen the 1963 American World War II epic film "The Great Escape" based on a real escape by British Commonwealth prisoners of war from a German POW Camp during World War II, starring Steve McQueen, James Garner, and Sir Richard Attenborough. The film is based on Paul Brickhill's 1950 book of the same name, a non-fiction first-hand account of the real mass escape from Stalag Luft III in Sagan (now Zagan, Poland), in the province of Lower Silesia, Nazi Germany. The characters are based on real men, and in some cases are composites of several men. As in any films depicting real events, many details of the actual escape attempt were changed for the film, and the role of American personnel in both the planning and the escape was largely fabricated.

The actual escape attempt took place one night in late March 1944 when 76 Allied Airmen escape through a tunnel from their Prisoner of War Camp deep in occupied Poland. Their aim was not only to get back to Britain and rejoin the war but also to cause as much inconvenience for the German war machine as possible. Within a few days, all but three of the escapees were recaptured, having been hampered by incorrect papers, bad weather, and bad luck. The escape so infuriated Hitler that he ordered 50 of them to be shot. They were executed singly or in pairs. The breakout from Stalag Luft III has become an iconic event of the Second World War, enshrining both Allied bravery and Nazi evil. But how much of what we know is true?

Myth 1: Airmen had a duty to escape from their POW Camps

One of the most enduring myths about the Great Escape is that the POWs had a duty to escape. Indeed, the myth is so persistent that even some former prisoners maintain they had an obligation to break out of their
The short answer is that there was none. When they were shot down, Allied Airmen were indeed expected to avoid being captured, but once they were in the hands of the enemy, there was no formal expectation that they should try to escape. Instead, as one former POW has said: "There was a kind of corporate policy of intent that it was part of our duty to play a part in escape arrangements."

In other words, the duty to escape was an expectation of how Airmen should behave - rather like the expectation that they should be brave - and there was nothing in the King's Regulations that stipulated that the men had to escape. Indeed, surprisingly, two-thirds of POWs had little or no interest in breaking out, and regarded escape activities with wariness - an attitude that is certainly at odds with the common celluloid depiction of Allied POWs all being desperate to escape. Many were glad not to have to fight anymore and felt that they had 'done their bit', and had no wish to risk their lives once more. Others felt that they lacked the necessary escape skills - such as languages or simple physical ability and that their time could be better spent studying or improving themselves. In fact, there was often hostility between the 'stayers' and the 'goers'. In one camp, it grew so bad that one POW threw over the wire a tin containing a note which informed the Germans that there was a tunnel being built.

**Myth 2: The Great Escape took place in beautiful weather**

In the movie The Great Escape, the action is played out in glorious spring sunshine that really shows off the use of colored film stock. However, in reality, the escape took place in unseasonably bad conditions, with the temperature hovering around zero, and a thick layer of snow on the ground. According to one POW, it was the coldest winter that that part of Poland had suffered for 30 years, and it was these conditions that did more to hamper the efforts of the escapees than anything else. Many were equipped with totally unsuitable clothes, such as lightweight trousers that would normally only be issued in the desert, and boots quickly became waterlogged as the escapees tramped through woods and streams. Many came close to suffering from frostbite and were forced to sleep in obvious shelters such as barns, which only increased the likelihood of them being captured.

**Myth 3: The escape opened up a new front inside Germany**

One of the supposed objects of the Great Escape was that it would help the war effort by wasting German time and manpower - resources that would otherwise be used on the frontline. Unfortunately, such thinking was misguided. When the Germans searched for the escapees, they only used whatever existing capacity they had within the Reich. They certainly did not requisition fighting men for the hunt. The escape actually helped the German war effort, as, during the large-scale hunts, thousands of other escaping POWs, regular prisoners, and absent foreign workers were rounded up in the dragnet. In fact, as a result of the Great Escape, the Nazis tightened the Reich's internal security and thus made it harder for other Allied Prisoners of War also trying to escape. Therefore, the idea that the Great Escape somehow 'opened a front' inside Germany is simply wishful thinking.

**Myth 4: The Great Escape was unique**

It wasn't. Throughout the war, there were plenty of mass escapes organized by Allied POWs. There were some 11 'great escapes' carried out by British prisoners alone before March 1944. One example is the March 1943 escape from the POW camp at Szubin, Poland, in which 43 Allied Airmen tunneled out. All the men were recaptured, apart from one, who sadly drowned. The Germans ridiculed mass breakouts, dismissing them as futile acts of bravado - and the resulting increase in security made mass escapes less likely to succeed. In fact, in Stalag Luft III, one German advised POWs to escape in twos and threes to improve their chances of getting home!

**Myth 5: There was a motorbike chase**

Of all the scenes in The Great Escape, that of Virgil Hilts, played by Steve McQueen, trying to jump over the border wire on his motorbike while being chased by hundreds of Schmeisser-toting Germans is the most memorable. It's certainly a thrilling sequence, but it has no basis in truth. None of those who escaped from
Stalag Luft III even used so much as a bicycle to get away. The motorbike scene is so gross a misrepresentation of the true escape that former POWs booed it when they were shown the movie! Hilts's nationality also flags up another myth about the escape - that Americans were part of the breakout. Although US Airmen watched out for patrolling Germans during the tunnel's construction, the commandant moved them to a different compound a few months before the escape. As The Great Escape is an American film, it is unsurprising that the hero is an all-American boy complete with baseball glove and ball. But, in reality, there was no Virgil Hilts.

[Source: Together We Served News | January 2018 ++]

Military History ➤ WWII | Exercise Tiger Tragedy

Exercise Tiger is one of Britain's most harrowing wartime secrets. It involved the slaughter of young American soldiers on the shores of a Devon beach. At the time the incident was hastily covered up, and the bodies of the GIs who were killed were buried in complete secrecy. If Allied high command wanted to use Exercise Tiger to give their soldiers a taste of what they would experience during the D-Day landings, they cut far too close to the core. The sea ran red with their blood as corpses bobbed in the surf. Officially, the deaths were attributed to a surprise attack launched by German E-boats the day after the exercises. The authorities have never acknowledged what happened on Slapton Sands on April 27, 1944, although as time has passed information about the tragedy has become more widespread.

The whole point of the exercise was to make the dress rehearsal as realistic as possible. Dummy enemy positions were built alongside concrete pillboxes. There were 30 men in each assault team armed with flamethrowers, bazookas, machine guns, and mortars. Slapton was the perfect place to carry out the exercise. The beach consists of coarse gravel and is similarly shaped to the one in Normandy where the real assault would take place.

To make the exercise as realistic as possible, Supreme Allied Commander General Dwight D. Eisenhower ordered that live ammunition was to be used. He wanted it to smell, look and feel like a real battle. He wanted the men to experience seasickness, wet clothes, and the pressure that comes with performing under fire. Instead of giving the soldiers a taste of what would be waiting for them in Normandy, the mock German defenders cut down their comrades in droves. The Guardian newspaper at the time reported how Lieutenant-Colonel Edwin Wolf heard shots zinging past his ear and saw infantrymen hit the beach and remain there motionless. Royal Engineer Jim Cory recalled that men were 'mown down like ninepins' before counting 150 fatalities.

An error in communication was also responsible for further friendly fire deaths. During the landing, a naval bombardment was supposed to fire rounds over the top of the assaulting troops. However, American Admiral Don P. Moon delayed the exercise by an hour. When the second wave of GIs hit the beach, they came under fire from artillery, suffering an unknown number of casualties. The official death toll of
Exercise Tiger was 749 men, which is more than perished at the hands of the real enemy during the Utah beach landings. It was the worst loss of life since the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor.

Officially, many of the deaths were assigned to the Battle of Lyme Bay. It occurred the morning after the training when a Convoy T-4, which consisted of eight landing craft carrying men from the 1st Engineer Special Brigade, was attacked by German E-boats in Lyme Bay. Two ships had been assigned to protect the convoy, but only one was present. Because of a typographical error, the British and Americans were on different radio frequencies and could not properly coordinate. As a result, they were in the dark about the danger lurking below the depths. The Germans ruthlessly attacked the landing craft, sending men overboard and sinking others. 496 servicemen were on board; 424 died. After the Nazis had launched torpedoes, Allied commanders ordered boats to scatter to avoid more casualties.

It was a death sentence to those still bobbing in the sea. Men died from exposure to the elements but more died because they put their life jackets on around their waists instead of under their armpits. Doing so turned them onto their fronts and forced their faces under water. As a result of the Battle of Lyme Bay, the Normandy invasion was nearly called off. Ten officers with BIGOT-level clearance were missing. That level of clearance meant they knew about the invasion plans and subsequently their capture would have compromised the Allies.

In the aftermath of the disaster, there were multiple reports of mass graves being dug in the Devon countryside to hide the shameful carnage that had been carried out that day. The Guardian reported anecdotal evidence that supported the claim, although it was fiercely disputed. There were some lessons gained from the grim episode - albeit ones that would seem like common sense now. Radio frequencies were standardized. Better life jacket training was also put in place for soldiers, and guidance was provided for small craft to pick up survivors who were floating in the water on D-Day. All that cannot hide the fact that the death toll was completely unacceptable and the cover-up was shameful. Those men should never have met their death in a training exercise on friendly soil and the lessons learned from the exercise can never mitigate that. [Source: Together We Served | Russell Hughes | January 2018 ++]

Military History Anniversaries ➤ 1 thru 14 FEB

Significant events in U.S. Military History over the next 15 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “Military History Anniversaries 1 thru 14 February. [Source: This Day in History http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history | January 2018 ++]

Medal of Honor Citations ➤ Marcario Garcia | WWII

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

MARCARIO GARCIA

Rank and organization: Staff Sergeant, U.S. Army, Company B, 22d Infantry, 4th Infantry Division
Place and date: Near Grosshau, Germany, 27 November 1944
Entered service: Sugarland, Tex. in February 1942
Born: Villa de Castaño, Mexico January 20, 1920

Citation

While an acting squad leader of Company B, 22d Infantry, on 27 November 1944, near Grosshau, Germany, he single-handedly assaulted 2 enemy machinegun emplacements. Attacking prepared positions on a wooded hill, which could be approached only through meager cover, his company was pinned down by intense machinegun fire and subjected to a concentrated artillery and mortar barrage. Although painfully wounded, he refused to be evacuated and on his own initiative crawled forward alone until he reached a position near an enemy emplacement. Hurling grenades, he boldly assaulted the position, destroyed the gun, and with his rifle killed 3 of the enemy who attempted to escape. When he rejoined his company, a second machinegun opened fire and again the intrepid soldier went forward, utterly disregarding his own safety. He stormed the position and destroyed the gun, killed 3 more Germans, and captured 4 prisoners. He fought on with his unit until the objective was taken and only then did he permit himself to be removed for medical care. S/Sgt. (then private) García's conspicuous heroism, his inspiring, courageous conduct, and his complete disregard for his personal safety wiped out 2 enemy emplacements and enabled his company to advance and secure its objective.

García was born in Villa de Castaños, Mexico in the state of Coahuila. In 1924, García's family immigrated to the United States in search of a better way of life. He lived in Sugar Land, Texas where he worked as a cotton farmer. Upon the outbreak of World War II, García joined the United States Army at a recruiting station in his adopted hometown in November 1942. He was assigned to Company B, 22nd Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division.

On August 23, 1945, the President of the United States, Harry S. Truman presented Staff Sergeant Macario García with the Medal of Honor at a ceremony in the White House. A month after he was awarded the
Medal of Honor, Garcia was denied service at a restaurant located in a town just a few miles south of Houston because he was Hispanic. Garcia was beaten with a bat by the owner. No one was arrested and no charges were initially filed. It was only after national columnist Walter Winchell reported the incident and labeled Sugar Land the most racist city in America that charges were filed-- against Garcia. Then the incident was covered by the news media, and caused an uproar amongst the Hispanic community who rallied to his aid. The nation was made aware as to the discriminatory policies that Hispanics were subject to, as the case against Garcia was repeatedly postponed before being dropped.

García became an American citizen on June 25, 1947 and earned a high school diploma in 1951. On May 18, 1952, he married Alicia Reyes with whom he had three children. For twenty-five years he worked as a counselor in the Veterans' Administration.

On the evening of November 21, 1963, Marcario García greeted President John F. Kennedy at the door of the Rice Ballroom in Houston Texas. The ballroom was filled with a diverse crowd of attendees that included Hispanic World War II veterans, Civil Rights advocates and future political activists. The president spoke of U.S. and Latin American Foreign Policy and the importance of recognition and acknowledgement of Hispanic organizations like the League of United Latin American Citizens (LULAC). Speaking in fluent Spanish, Mrs. Kennedy offered words of inspiration and encouragement. The day after this meeting Kennedy was dead.

García died on December 24, 1972, from the injuries which he received as a result of a car accident. He was buried with full military honors in the Houston National Cemetery in Houston, Texas. The local government of Houston honored his memory by naming a middle school after him as well as renaming part of 69th Street in Houston "S/SGT Marcario García Street". In 1983 Vice President George Bush dedicated Houston's new Macario García Army Reserve Center, and in 1994 a Sugar Land middle school was named in García's honor.

[Source:  https://history.army.mil/moh/wwII-g-l.html | January 2017 ++]

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### Medicare Health Care Services

Few senior discounts are worth as much as the savings you get through Medicare health insurance. The Social Security Administration subsidizes Medicare. So, having a Medicare insurance plan typically is cheaper than buying a health insurance plan on your own. Medicare is not free — there are premiums, deductibles and copays. But it does entitle policyholders to various “freebies.” By our count, there are at least 22. These freebies are preventive services ranging from annual wellness visits to flu shots and cancer screenings. So, redeeming them will save you money — and possibly protect you from future medical conditions and costs. They could even save your life.

**Under Original Medicare, the following services are free to all beneficiaries:**

- “Welcome to Medicare” preventive visit (includes a review of your medical and social history related to your health and education, and counseling about various preventive services)
- Annual “Wellness” visits (includes developing or updating a personalized prevention help plan)
- Annual behavioral therapy visit for cardiovascular disease, which is to help you lower your risk for cardiovascular disease (heart-related conditions)
- Screening for cardiovascular disease (includes blood tests for cholesterol, lipid and triglyceride levels)
- Screening for depression
- Vaccination for the flu
- Vaccination for pneumococcal infections, which include certain types of pneumonia

**Under Original Medicare, the following services are free to eligible beneficiaries.** Eligibility varies by test but often involves being within a certain age range or having a higher risk for a medical condition.

- Vaccination for hepatitis B
- Bone density test
- Screening for diabetes
- Screening for hepatitis C
- Screening for HIV
- Screening for lung cancer
- Screening for colorectal cancer (can include a colonoscopy or other types of tests)
- Screening for prostate cancer (includes a prostate specific antigen, or PSA, blood test)
- Screening mammograms
- Screening and counseling for alcohol misuse
- Screening for abdominal aortic aneurysm (includes an ultrasound)
- Screening for cervical and vaginal cancers (includes Pap test, pelvic exam and breast exam)
- Screening and counseling for sexually transmitted infections
- Medical nutrition therapy
- Screening for obesity and counseling

Patients do not owe copays or other out-of-pocket costs for these services. However, before redeeming these freebies, know that they are free:

- For folks with what’s known as Original Medicare. Costs might differ for people with Medicare Advantage plans, which are offered by private health insurers.
- When obtained from a health care provider who “accepts assignment.” This is jargon that basically means the provider has signed an agreement accepting Medicare’s payment conditions.
- When obtained at a certain frequency, which varies. For example, Medicare beneficiaries can get a free flu shot once every flu season but can only get a free screening for heart disease once every five years.
- For folks who are eligible for them. Some Medicare freebies are available to all beneficiaries, but most freebies are available to folks in certain situations.

**Using Medicare’s websites** — Note that you can use Medicare.gov’s “Your Medicare Coverage” search tool to determine whether services or supplies are covered by Medicare and get an idea of what they would cost you — including whether they are free. Logging into your MyMedicare.gov account will give you access to more personalized information, including a calendar of the free tests and screenings for which you are eligible. You’ll find this in the “My Health” section. Medicare.gov and MyMedicare.gov are official Medicare websites operated by the federal government. Using these websites is free, as is signing up for an account.  

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | January 15, 2018 ++]
In late JAN, the Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) had an exclusive preview of TRICARE's widely anticipated new dental and vision plans. This new insurance option for certain beneficiaries is set to be offered starting Jan. 1, 2019. The newly designed option was included in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act with the legislated start date of 2019. The later starting time is meant to allow for better planning and communication for this new plan, as it will be offered and administered through the Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP).

Here's the rundown on who is eligible for what. All TRICARE retirees and their families are eligible for both the dental insurance and the vision coverage. Active duty military families are only eligible for the vision coverage. The FEDVIP dental program of offerings will replace the existing TRICARE Retiree Dental Plan, which is currently provided through Delta Dental. That program will sunset Dec. 31, 2018.

The retiree dental plan and the new addition of a vision plan will allow for beneficiaries to make a selection from among several dental and vision carriers with a variety of benefit options. For example, in 2018 the FEDVIP program lists 10 dental carriers and four vision carriers (Delta Dental is included) with comprehensive dental and vision insurance at competitive group rates. Key facts:

- Eligible beneficiaries must choose their plan during **TRICARE's open season, which is scheduled to be Nov. 12 - Dec. 10, 2018.**
- **There will be no automatic transition for those beneficiaries currently enrolled in the TRICARE Retiree Dental Program.** Beneficiaries will be required to enroll for coverage.
- Enrollment and plan changes can only occur during the open season with the exceptions for those beneficiaries with qualifying life events (usually anything that necessitates a change in the DEERS system).

Here's the kind of coverage TRICARE beneficiaries will get with FEDVIP (besides more choices):

- No wait period for most dental services;
- No annual maximum benefit for some dental plans;
- Regional and national dental networks;
- No deductible for some vision plans;
- No limit on brands for frames or contacts for some vision plans; and
- Discounts on Lasik (laser vision correction) offered by some vision plans.

Beneficiaries are encouraged to start getting information and pre-enrollment communications through the website set up just for this program. The website, [www.TRICARE.benefeds.com](http://www.TRICARE.benefeds.com), will be up and running 1 FEB. MOAA is working with the Office of Personnel Management, which oversees the administration of the federal employees benefit programs, to provide input on communication and feedback on the website, anticipate challenges, and brainstorm solutions for this newly available program for TRICARE beneficiaries.

[Source: MOAA Leg Up | January 26, 2018 ++]

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**USFHP Update 04 ► 13,000 Users Sent Misprinted ID Cards**

Nearly 13,000 Tricare users enrolled in the U.S. Family Health Plan (USFHP) in the northeast U.S. were mailed new insurance ID cards incorrectly printed without beneficiary names, officials confirmed. "We're aware of the issue. We're sending replacement ID cards. We're advising members that we are aware of the issue and new cards are on the way," said Mario Amaya, director of operations for St. Vincent Catholic Medical Centers, which manages the plan for that region.
The U.S. Family Health Plan is a civilian case-based Tricare Prime offshoot program available in six regions nationwide and managed by six not-for-profit health care systems. St. Vincent administers the program for 12,800 Tricare beneficiaries in New York City; Long Island; southern Connecticut; New Jersey; Philadelphia, and that city's surrounding suburbs. A third-party contractor prints and mails out the system's ID cards, St. Vincent officials said. Unlike other Tricare programs, which utilize military ID cards as proof of coverage, USFHP users are given insurance ID cards printed with their name, a series of other identification numbers and details about co-pay levels. The misprinted cards impact only USFHP users in the St. Vincent system. The issue does not affect Tricare for Life users.

A series of major Tricare changes rolled out 1 JAN came with a significant increase in out-of-pocket costs for many users, including military retirees on USFHP. Like those on Tricare Prime, USFHP active-duty families have no co-pays or enrollment fees, while retirees pay an annual enrollment fee, as well as co-pays, until they hit their $3,000 annual out-of-pocket cap. But while Tricare Prime retirees may be seen on base, which carries no co-pay, USFHP users cannot receive free on-base care. As of 1 JAN, co-pays for both Tricare Prime retirees seen off base and all USFHP retiree users increased from $12 for any outpatient visit, to $20 for primary care visits and $30 for specialty care visits. Emergency room fees for those users increased from $30 to $60, while fees for Urgent Care visits increased from $12 to $30. Because of those changes, officials with St. Vincent hired a third-party printer to send all of their enrollees new cards displaying the updated fees.

But the cards were accidentally printed without names, and the error was discovered only after users received the cards, said Jeff Bloom, St. Vincent's executive director. "Within a week, the phone started ringing here with the members saying, 'I got a card and my name is not on it, and in the past cards have had my name on them,' " he said. "We called our third-party printer and said ... 'That's not acceptable, I want them reprinted at your expense and we want them expedited.' " The new cards with names were mailed this week; users should receive them within the next several days, Bloom said. In the meantime, users can continue to utilize their old cards, or call St. Vincent to receive a correct temporary card by email, Amaya said. [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | January 25, 2018 ++]

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**Dental Cleaning ► Can Save Time, Money and Even Your Life**

Chances are you know someone that only gets their teeth cleaned every few years. You may even be that person. But, frequent and regular cleanings are more important than most people think. Beyond helping to maintain a bright and clean smile, regular cleanings help your overall health in many ways. If you’re enrolled in the TRICARE Dental Program (TDP), TDP covers yearly diagnostic and preventive services, giving you even more reasons to visit the dentist.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 30 percent of all adults in America live with untreated tooth decay. “When tooth decay isn’t treated, it can lead to cavities and even tooth loss,” said U.S. Army Col. James Honey, chief of the TRICARE Dental Care Section at the Defense Health Agency. During a 12-month period, the TDP covers two routine teeth cleanings. If noted on the claim form that you’re pregnant or have a registered, covered chronic medical condition, then a third routine teeth cleaning is covered during a 12-month period.

Normal dental cleaning visits generally follow a similar format. First, a dentist or hygienist reviews your medical history with you. If you’re due for X-rays, these images will help detect decay or changes in your mouth. Next, the dentist or hygienist will remove plaque, tartar and stains from your teeth. Polishing the teeth and applying fluoride are the final steps. If you’re age 18 or younger, the dentist may consider placing
sealants onto the back teeth to help prevent cavities on the chewing surfaces. The TDP covers sealants for permanent molars through age 18.

A healthy mouth may lower your risk for some serious medical issues, including stroke and heart disease. Early signs of certain medical conditions may be visible in the mouth, including oral cancers. For these reasons, the dentist inspects your mouth, lips, jaw and throat. The dentist will also look for signs of gum disease, also called periodontal disease. Gum disease is an infection in the tissues that hold teeth in place. Nearly half of all adults age 30 or older show signs of gum disease, which is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults. Finally, the dentist checks for proper tooth alignment and biting, chewing and swallowing patterns.

Don’t let another year pass. Make an appointment for your next cleaning now. Do it for your teeth, your wallet and your health. For more information about the TDP, download the TRICARE Dental Program Handbook. For information about all dental plans, visit Dental Plans on the TRICARE website. [Source: 

Colds & Flu ► Your Sick, What Should You Do?

It's that time of year, when colds and influenza spread across the country, bringing discomfort to many. And the flu is peaking earlier this year than usual, with widespread cases reported in every state across the continental U.S., according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

First, let's talk about colds. Then we'll talk about flu.

There is no cure for the common cold, which is caused by a virus. Antibiotics won't help; they don't work against viruses. Taking unnecessary antibiotics can also make it harder for your body to fight future bacterial infections. To feel better when you have a cold, get lots of rest and drink plenty of fluids. (Yep, just like your mom told you.) Over-the-counter medicines might help ease your symptoms. But they won't make the cold go away any faster. Always read the label and use as directed. Be especially careful with children and cold medicine. Some medicines have ingredients not recommended for children.

Cold symptoms include sore throat, runny nose, coughing, sneezing, headaches, and body aches. Most people recover within about seven to 10 days. But people with weakened immune systems, asthma, or respiratory conditions might develop serious illness, such as pneumonia. To reduce your risk of getting a cold:

- Wash your hands often with soap and water. Wash for 20 seconds. Help young children do the same. If soap and water aren't available, use an alcohol-based hand sanitizer. Viruses that cause colds can live on your hands.
- Avoid touching your eyes, nose, and mouth with unwashed hands.
- Stay away from people who are sick.

To protect others, if you have a cold:

- Stay at home while you're sick.
- Avoid close contact with others, such as hugging, kissing, or shaking hands.
- Cough and sneeze into a tissue, and then throw it away. Or cough and sneeze into your upper shirt sleeve. Either way, completely cover your mouth and nose.
- Wash your hands after coughing, sneezing, or blowing your nose.
- Disinfect surfaces and objects that you touch often (such as toys, doorknobs, light switches, faucet handles, keyboards, and cell phones).

Call your doctor, if you or your child has one or more of these:

- Temperature above 100.4 degrees Fahrenheit
- Symptoms that are severe or unusual.
- If your child is younger than three months of age and has a fever, always call your doctor right away. Your doctor can determine if you or your child has a cold, and can recommend therapy to relieve symptoms.

Now, on to influenza.

You might have the flu, if you have some or all of these symptoms: fever, cough, sore throat, runny or stuffy nose, body aches, headache, chills, fatigue, and sometimes diarrhea and vomiting. Most people with the flu have mild illness, and don't need medical care or antiviral drugs. If you get sick with flu symptoms, in most cases, you should stay home and avoid contact with other people except to get medical care. Stay home for at least 24 hours after your fever is gone, except to get medical care or other necessities. Your fever should be gone without the use of fever medicine (like Tylenol). Stay home from work, school, travel, shopping, social events, and public gatherings.

While you're sick with flu: stay away from others, wash your hands often, and cover coughs and sneezes with a tissue. If you must leave home, wear a facemask if you have one. People who are only mildly ill shouldn't go to the emergency room. If you go to the ER and you don't have the flu, you might catch it from people who do have it. If you have flu symptoms and are in a high-risk group, or are very sick or worried about your illness, contact your doctor. High-risk groups include: young children (age younger than five, and especially younger than age two), people age 65 and older, pregnant women, and people with certain medical conditions (such as asthma, diabetes, or heart disease). High-risk patients should contact your doctor early in your illness. Remind them of your high-risk status for flu, and ask about antiviral treatment. If anyone has any of these emergency warning signs of flu sickness, go to the ER:

* Children:
  - Fast breathing or trouble breathing, Bluish skin color, or Not drinking enough fluids.
  - Not waking up, not interacting, or Fever with a rash
  - Being so irritable that the child doesn't want to be held
  - Flu-like symptoms improve, but then return with fever and worse cough

* Infants: in addition to the signs above, get medical help right away for any infant who has any of these signs:
  - Unable to eat, Trouble breathing, or No tears when crying
  - Significantly fewer wet diapers than normal

* Adults:
  - Difficulty breathing, shortness of breath, Sudden dizziness, or Confusion
  - Pain or pressure in the chest or abdomen
  - Severe or persistent vomiting
  - Flu-like symptoms that improve, but then return with fever and worse cough

For 24/7 clinical advice, call the Nurse Advice Line at 800-TRICARE (800-874-2273).

It's not too late to get your flu shot. You can also email your doctor for non-urgent issues, using RelayHealth secure email messaging. Go to the TRICARE Online Patient Portal at [www.TRICAREonline.com](http://www.TRICAREonline.com) or [https://mil RelayHealth.com](https://mil RelayHealth.com). To find out more, visit CDC at [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu). For more information, visit [www.navy.mil](http://www.navy.mil), [www.facebook.com/usnavy](http://www.facebook.com/usnavy), or [www.twitter.com](http://www.twitter.com). [Source: Naval Hospital Jacksonville Public Affairs | January 22, 2018 ++]

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Prescription Drug Costs Update 01 ► Vermont Reduction Proposal

The Vermont Senate is considering a proposal to save money on prescription drugs by importing them from Canada, where many are sold for a fraction of the cost in the United States. The cost of prescription drugs is a factor driving the increase in state health care costs and the state budget, said Democratic and Progressive Sen. Tim Ashe. He supports the proposal that was discussed Thursday during a meeting of the Senate Health and Welfare Committee. Two main sections of the proposal include drug importation and authorizing the state to buy prescription drugs in bulk, including working with other states to create buying pools. "We need to do something to bring down prices," Ashe said. "It is eating everyone's lunch."

Under the proposal, any imported drugs must meet all U.S. safety requirements. It draws on efforts from other states, Ashe said. In Utah, a drug importation proposal that failed last year is being expanded and will be introduced on the first day of that state's Legislature next week. The Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, a trade group for drugmakers, claimed in a statement that Vermont's proposal would allow sales from online Canadian pharmacies, which it said would threaten the health of Vermonters. But the proposed Vermont legislation does not mention online pharmacies. "Patient safety must be our top priority, and our public policies should reinforce — not undermine — that commitment," the group said.

The concept of saving money on prescription drugs by importing them has been around for years. In 1999, Vermont's then-U.S. Rep. Bernie Sanders famously took busloads of people to Canada, where they met with doctors who then wrote them prescriptions for drugs that cost a fraction of what the same drugs would have cost them in the United States. Last year, Sanders, now an independent U.S. senator, introduced another proposal in Congress to allow for the importation of drugs from Canada. In 2003, federal law was changed to allow the secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services to authorize the importation of prescription drugs, but such permission has never been granted.

Many drugs are sold in Canada, some of which were manufactured in the United States, for a fraction of the cost of the same in the United States. A chart by the National Academy for State Health Policy distributed at the meeting included a number of examples, including the cost of a single popular arthritis drug, which costs $6.44 in the U.S. and 13 cents in Canada; a cholesterol drug that sells for $8.74 in the U.S. and 19 cents in Canada; or a respiratory inhaler that sells for $392.40 in the U.S. or $38.44 in Canada.

Prescription drugs account for 10 percent of the $3.2 trillion in overall health care spending, outpacing all other health care services, according to government statistics. Consumers with diabetes, cancer and leukemia are some of the most likely to feel pain at the pharmacy due to recent drug price hikes. The cost of two common types of insulin, for instance, increased 300 percent in the past decade.

Other governments bargain on behalf of their citizens, which helps to keep costs down. The biggest U.S. buyer of medication, Medicare, is barred by law from negotiating pricing. That means Americans are largely without the type of bargaining power available to other countries. In the U.S., no single entity can bargain on consumers' behalf, given the country's patchwork of insurers, employers, and federal and state programs. Domestic prices are more expensive for 93 percent of 40 popular branded drugs than what is charged in Norway, a 2015 Wall Street Journal investigation found. The analysis found similar results for medications in England and in Ontario, Canada.

The lawmakers involved in the Vermont proposal recognize enacting it into law will be difficult, but they're committed to trying. "There will be a lot of pushback on this," said Vermont's Democratic U.S. Rep. Peter Welch, who spoke to the committee by phone. [Source: CBS/AP | January 19, 2018 ++]
A misunderstanding by Tricare's pharmacy contractor caused about 35,000 beneficiaries to be overcharged for medications early this month, officials told Military.com on 19 JAN. "Express Scripts misinterpreted a plan design rule in Defense Health Agency manuals, which resulted in some beneficiaries paying a deductible on prescriptions filled at an in-network pharmacy when they should not have been," Jennifer Luddy, a spokesperson for Express Scripts, said in a statement. "About 35,000 beneficiaries were impacted." The error occurred on 1 & 2 JAN officials said. It was "identified and resolved" on 2 JAN, Luddy said. Any Tricare beneficiary who used an in-network retail pharmacy on those dates, including Tricare for Life users and military retirees, may have been affected by the error.

Tricare users early this month reported on social media suddenly being charged hundreds of dollars at in-network retail pharmacies for prescriptions that had previously carried only a small co-payment. A series of major network changes was implemented by Tricare on 1 JAN, included a shift in regions, new network contractors and a new price structure for care -- but no changes were made on that date to prescription drug prices or coverages. Tricare officials did not respond at the time to Military.com requests for information on the problem.

Prescription drugs purchased by Tricare users at retail pharmacies always carry co-pays, depending on type of medication and supply purchased. Currently, those prices are $10 for a 30-day supply of a generic drug, $24 for a 30-day supply of a brand-name drug, and $50 for non-formulary drugs. On 1 FEB, those prices will increase to $11 for generics, $28 for brand-name drugs, and $53 for non-formulary drugs.

Beneficiaries who were overcharged on the specified dates do not need to take any action and will be reimbursed by Express Scripts for the overcharge, Luddy said in her statement. "We have been working with beneficiaries and pharmacies to either re-submit the claims, or to provide a refund of the deductible amount that was paid by the beneficiary," she said. "There is no action required of beneficiaries at this time; if they paid a deductible on an in-network claim when they should not have, they will receive a refund from us."

[Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | January 19, 2018 ++]
Dementia ► When Thinking & Behavior Decline

Forgetfulness, temporary confusion, or having trouble remembering a name or word can be a normal part of life. But when thinking problems or unusual behavior starts to interfere with everyday activities—such as working, preparing meals, or handling finances—it’s time to see a doctor. These could be signs of a condition known as dementia.

Dementia is a brain disorder that most often affects the elderly. It’s caused by the failure or death of nerve cells in the brain. Alzheimer’s disease is the most common cause. By some estimates, about one-third of people ages 85 and older may have Alzheimer’s. Although age is the greatest risk factor for dementia, it isn’t a normal part of aging. Some people live into their 90s and beyond with no signs of dementia at all. “Dementia really isn’t a disease itself. Instead, dementia is a group of symptoms that can be caused by many different diseases,” says Dr. Sanjay Asthana, who heads an NIH-supported Alzheimer’s disease center at the University of Wisconsin. “Symptoms of dementia can include problems with memory, thinking, and language, along with impairments to social skills and some behavioral symptoms.”

Several factors can raise your risk for developing dementia. These include aging, smoking, uncontrolled diabetes, high blood pressure, and drinking too much alcohol. Risk also increases if close family members have had dementia. Symptoms of dementia might be reversed when they’re caused by dehydration or other treatable conditions. But most forms of dementia worsen gradually over time, and there is no treatment. Scientists are searching for ways to slow down this process or prevent it from starting in the first place. The two most common causes of dementia in older people are Alzheimer’s disease and vascular dementia, a condition that involves changes to the brain’s blood supply. Vascular dementia often arises from stroke or arteriosclerosis (hardening of the arteries) in the brain. Other causes of dementia include Parkinson’s disease, HIV, head injury, and Lewy body disease. (Lewy bodies are a type of abnormal protein clump in brain cells.)

Dementia in people under age 60 is often caused by a group of brain diseases called frontotemporal disorders. These conditions begin in the front or sides of the brain and gradually spread. A rare, inherited form of Alzheimer’s disease can also occur in people in their 30s, 40s, and 50s. The symptoms of dementia can vary, depending on which brain regions are damaged. “In general, the left side of the brain is involved in language, and the right side is very involved in social behavior,” says Dr. Bruce L. Miller, who directs an NIH-funded dementia center at the University of California, San Francisco. In the case of a frontotemporal disorder, “if it begins in the left side of the brain, you tend to have worsening language problems; if it starts on the right, it affects behavior and might be mistaken for a psychiatric condition,” Miller explains. Damage to specific brain regions can cause people to become apathetic, lose their inhibitions, or show no consideration for the feelings of others. With Alzheimer’s disease, memory-related areas in the lower and back parts of the brain tend to be affected first. Other types of dementia can affect regions that control movement.

“The treatment for all of these disorders is slightly different,” Miller says. That’s why it’s important to get an accurate diagnosis. Because different types of dementia can have overlapping symptoms, and some people have more than one underlying condition, it’s best to see a clinician who has expertise in diagnosing dementia. “NIH has specialized centers across the country that have clinics that can diagnose and evaluate patients with Alzheimer’s disease and dementia,” Asthana says. (See NIH’s Alzheimer’s Disease Research Centers for more information at www.nia.nih.gov/health/almzheimers-disease-research-centers.)
To make a diagnosis, physicians usually ask about a person’s medical history and do a physical exam including blood tests. They also check for thinking, memory and language abilities, and sometimes order brain scans. This evaluation will determine if the symptoms are related to a treatable condition—such as depression, an infection, or medication side effects. With some types of dementia, a clear diagnosis can’t be made until the brain is examined after death. “There’s no single blood test or brain scan that can diagnose Alzheimer’s disease or some other types of dementia with certainty,” Asthana says. “In these cases, a definite diagnosis can be made only at autopsy.”

More than a decade ago, NIH-supported scientists found a way to detect signs of Alzheimer’s disease in the brains of living people. All people with Alzheimer’s disease have abnormal protein clumps known as amyloid plaques. These plaques can be seen in Positron Emission Tomography (PET) scans using special tracers that bind specifically to amyloid. But extensive plaque buildup can also be found in some people who have no signs of dementia. Because of this uncertainty, amyloid imaging isn’t considered a definitive tool for diagnosing Alzheimer’s disease. NIH supported researchers have been working on other techniques, but none of these have proven definitive. “Right now, a lot of research is focusing on the pre-symptomatic stages of the disease, where we can see evidence of amyloid protein before a person has any symptoms. We can test to see if medications can slow or prevent buildup of this amyloid protein,” Asthana says. “So far, no studies have shown that clearing the brain of amyloid protein can actually translate into significantly improved symptoms.”

Different approaches are now being studied as treatments for Alzheimer’s disease, Parkinson’s dementia, and certain other forms of dementia. Currently approved medications may improve symptoms, but none can halt or reverse progressive damage to the brain. “In contrast, if the dementia is due to vascular disease, there are many things we can do to prevent it from progressing. It’s the same things we do to prevent cardiovascular disease,” says Dr. Helena Chui, director of an NIH-funded Alzheimer’s center at the University of Southern California. “Some people with vascular dementia are given anticlotting medications. Others are given medications to keep blood pressure, cholesterol, and diabetes under control.”

Chui notes that a healthy lifestyle can help protect the aging brain. “Regular exercise, a heart-healthy diet, and avoiding smoking can reduce your risk for heart disease as well as dementia,” she says. Engaging in social and intellectually stimulating activities might also help to protect brain function. “You can change your trajectory toward a healthier brain by making healthy choices,” Chui says. [Source: NIH News in Health | January 16, 2018 ++]

Government Shutdown TRICARE Impact ► Minimal

The Military Health System will continue to provide health care to its beneficiaries during a government shutdown. While we can’t predict the exact consequences of a shutdown on every part of our MHS, we may see some impacts on the delivery of health care services within our military hospitals and clinics. Inpatient, acute and emergency outpatient care in our medical and dental facilities will continue, as will private sector care under TRICARE. We anticipate most medical and dental providers, along with most retail pharmacies, will honor TRICARE copays and cost shares. If for some reason a TRICARE network provider or pharmacy requires you to pay up front for care, call your regional contractor to discuss it with the provider. If the contractor can’t immediately resolve the issue, you can still choose to get care with that provider and save your receipts to file for reimbursement.

As more details are received updates will be provided to those who are signed up to receive TRICARE messages at https://public.govdelivery.com/accounts/USMHSTMA/subscribers/qualify.
Impacts of government shutdown on MHS beneficiary services

MHS Government Services

- Nurse Advice Line -- The Nurse Advice Lines will continue to operate for now.
- Prime travel benefits -- The TRICARE Regional Offices will be unable to process travel benefits for Prime patients who need care from network providers outside the local area. If you must travel for that care, save all your receipts and you can file for reimbursement later when the government shutdown ends.
- Appeals/government customer service -- Government administrative actions like appeals, line of duty determinations, grievances, or other government customer service functions may be delayed or paused during a shutdown due to staffing levels.
- Online services -- Secure online services like Beneficiary Web Enrollment, MilConnect, TRICARE Online, MHS GENESIS patient portal, Blue Button, Secure Messaging, etc., will continue to operate

Impacts on Military Hospitals and Clinics (health and dental)

- Inpatient Services, including surgeries -- Will continue for now, but contact your local facility to confirm any procedures you have scheduled.
- Emergency Services -- Will continue in hospitals that have emergency departments.
- Urgent Care -- Will continue in hospitals that have urgent care departments.
- Outpatient Care, including lab work -- Will continue in hospitals and clinics, but there may be changes in hours or services. Your hospital or clinic will contact you if an appointment must be canceled as they usually do. If you need acute care, contact the hospital to ensure any sick call or walk-in clinic hours are unchanged.
- Pharmacy -- Pharmacies will continue to operate, but hours and medications available may be impacted.
- Referrals and authorizations -- Your facility will continue to work with the network managed care support contractors to obtain referrals and authorizations for care in the network.
- Enrollment/new patient services -- There should be no impact on new enrollments

Impacts on TRICARE Network Providers

- Inpatient Services, including surgeries -- Will continue for now, but contact your provider to confirm any procedures you have scheduled.
- Emergency Services -- You can go to any TRICARE authorized emergency provider without referral when you have a medical emergency. Using a network provider will cost you less in copays and cost shares.
- Urgent Care -- You can go to any TRICARE authorized urgent care provider. Prime enrollees (except for active duty service members not enrolled in Prime Remote) no longer require referrals for urgent care. Using a network provider will cost you less in copays and cost shares.
- Outpatient Care, including lab work -- Will continue.
- Dental program -- Will continue for those using the TRICARE Dental Program and TRICARE Retiree Dental Program.
- Pharmacy -- Network pharmacies will still be operating, as will the mail order program.
- Call Centers -- Call centers will operate on their usual hours to assist you. Visit www.TRICARE.mil/contactus for ways to reach your regional contractor.
- Enrollment and PCM changes -- MCSCs will continue to process enrollment changes, including PCM changes.
- Claims -- Claims will continue to process for the time being. There may be delays in processing claims if a government shutdown continues for an extended period of time.
• **Referrals/Authorizations** -- MCSCs will continue to process referrals and authorizations

**For Immediate Help**

If you have a medical emergency, go to the nearest TRICARE authorized emergency room. The hospital department that provides emergency services to patients who need immediate medical attention. For immediate assistance with network care, contact the managed care support contractor for your region. For immediate assistance with care in a military hospital or clinic, call the facility.

Unfortunately, Congress could not come to an agreement by midnight of the 20th forcing a shutdown. However the government was set to fully reopen on 23 JAN, after congressional leaders finalized a new budget extension on 22 JAN. The new deal gives lawmakers three more weeks to sort lingering disagreements over immigration and federal fiscal policies. The budget legislation also includes a provision to provide back pay for troops and other federal workers for the time they missed because of the lapse in operations. [Source: [https://www.tricare.mil/shutdown](https://www.tricare.mil/shutdown) | January 21, 2018 ++]

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**TRICARE Podcast 433** ➤ **Flu Shots - Right of First Refusal - Staying Informed**

**Flu Shots** -- The holiday season is a wrap, but cold and influenza season is well underway. These viral illnesses can be picked up anywhere, anytime. The flu is really nothing to shake off. Flu season typically runs from October to March in North America, and peaks between December and February. In other words, now. The infection can be severe and, if you are compromised in any way, it has the potential for being life threatening.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, a cold can cause a stuffy or runny nose, cough, scratchy throat, and watery eyes. Over-the-counter medications can help alleviate symptoms, but colds generally run their course without severe complications. The flu can also cause a runny or stuffy nose and cough; however, flu symptoms tend to be more intense. According to the CDC, most people with the flu will recover within several days or less than two weeks, but some can develop complications. Young children, adults 65 years and older, pregnant women, and people with chronic medical conditions have a higher risk for complications. If you wake up with sudden-onset fever, fatigue, chills, muscle pain, joint pain, and body aches it can be an indication that you’re facing more than just a cold. It could be influenza. If these symptoms continue for more than 24 to 48 hours, you should see a physician.

Practicing good health habits, such as washing hands frequently and getting plenty of sleep, can help all ages stay strong and healthy throughout the season. Eating a balanced diet, reducing stress, drinking plenty of fluids, and exercising daily builds strong immune systems. However, the best way to prevent the flu is by getting the flu vaccine. It’s never too late to get vaccinated for seasonal flu! The CDC recommends anyone six months and older get vaccinated. For more information about the flu, visit [www.cdc.gov/flu](http://www.cdc.gov/flu).

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**Right of First Refusal** -- Military hospitals and clinics have the right of first refusal in providing specialty care to TRICARE Prime beneficiaries. This means that when you’re referred for specialty care or treatment, your local military hospital or clinic must first be considered if the services are available there. If they have the capability to provide your specialty care, you’ll get treatment there and not from a civilian provider.

Right of first refusal is cost-effective for both you and TRICARE. By using military hospitals or clinics, there isn’t an added cost of involving civilian providers and you may avoid a copayment. Your regional contractor will send the referral request for specialty care to your local military hospital or clinic. If they can accommodate your specialty care need, it will notify your regional contractor. If accepted, you may receive a
call from them to schedule an appointment. You might also hear from your regional contractor with information on how to schedule an appointment with the military hospital or clinic. You must be offered an appointment with a specialist within 28 calendar days, or sooner, and within a one-hour travel time from your home. If you have any questions, contact your regional contractor at www.TRICARE.mil/contactus.

-Staying Informed-- Did you know you can get the most recent news and information about your TRICARE benefit delivered directly to your email inbox? Sign up to get email updates about health, dental and pharmacy benefit changes; special topics and disaster alerts; and healthy-living tools such as tobacco-cessation resources. Visit www.tricare.mil/subscriptions and provide your email address, then select the topics for which you would like to get updates. Additionally, you can get benefit alerts from the Defense Manpower Data Center, or DMDC, by email instead of postal mail. When you have a benefit change, you will get an email directing you to log in to http://milconnect.dmde.osd.mil. After you log in you can quickly, conveniently and securely read your benefit update. Once you are registered to get eCorrespondence, you will get an email from milConnect each time you have a letter or other information available to read online. In some cases, you will be able to view eCorrespondence through milConnect using your DS Logon for up to six months after losing TRICARE eligibility if, for example, your sponsor separates from active duty.

The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: http://www.tricare.mil/podcast | January 18, 2018 ++]

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TRICARE Podcast 434 ► Urgent Care - Publications Feedback - Dental Cleanings

-Urgent Care-- As of January 1st, 2018, most TRICARE Prime enrollees can seek urgent care without a referral. They can seek care from any TRICARE-authorized urgent care center but to avoid point-of-service cost-shares, they must receive care from an urgent care center in the TRICARE network. Active duty service members should continue to visit military hospitals and clinics for care. Those service members enrolled in TRICARE Prime Remote don’t need a referral when seeking an urgent care visit. If you use TRICARE Select or any other TRICARE plan, you may visit any TRICARE-authorized provider, network or non-network, for urgent care.

If you’re unsure whether to seek urgent care, call the 24/7 Nurse Advice Line at 1-800-TRICARE, and press option 1. You’ll speak with a registered nurse who can answer your questions and give advice. The nurse can also assist you with finding a provider and scheduling an appointment. If you need care after hours, while traveling or if your primary care manager is unavailable, urgent care is a great option. Contact your regional contractor to help you find an appropriate urgent care facility or provider. You may also use the TRICARE provider search tool.

Overseas active duty family members enrolled in TRICARE Overseas Program Prime or Prime Remote plans still need to contact the TRICARE overseas contractor for authorization before seeking urgent care, or they may have to pay at the time of service and file a claim for reimbursement. Any TOP Prime enrollees requiring urgent care while TDY or on leave status in the 50 United States and the District of Columbia, may access urgent care without a referral or an authorization, but active duty service members must follow-up with their PCM in accordance with applicable DoD and Service regulations concerning their care outside MTFs. For more information, visit www.TRICARE.mil/urgent.

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Publications Feedback -- TRICARE wants your feedback! Got comments or suggestions about a TRICARE newsletter, fact sheet or handbook you read recently? Take a brief survey about our TRICARE publications at www.TRICARE.mil/publications. Our TRICARE publications are your resources for questions about your TRICARE medical, dental and pharmacy benefits. A new search feature now on the TRICARE Publications page allows you to quickly find the information you need to make informed decisions about your health care. If you have ideas for new resources or topics covered in future publications, share your feedback here. This is your benefit, and we want to hear from you. Learn more about the recent TRICARE changes and how to take command of your health, by visiting www.tricare.mil/changes. Also, we’ll continue to add new TRICARE publications to reflect these changes to the website, so visit the TRICARE Publications page often.

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Dental Cleanings -- Chances are you know someone that only gets their teeth cleaned every few years. You may even be that person. But, frequent and regular cleanings are more important than most people think. Beyond helping to maintain a bright and clean smile, regular cleanings help your overall health in many ways. If you're enrolled in the TRICARE Dental Program, it covers yearly diagnostic and preventive services, giving you even more reasons to visit the dentist. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, nearly 30 percent of all adults in America live with untreated tooth decay. During a 12-month period, the TDP covers two routine teeth cleanings. If noted on the claim form that you're pregnant or have a registered, covered chronic medical condition, then a third routine teeth cleaning is covered during a 12-month period.

Normal dental cleaning visits generally follow a similar format. First, a dentist or hygienist reviews your medical history with you. If you're due for X-rays, these images will help detect decay or changes in your mouth. Next, the dentist or hygienist will remove plaque, tartar and stains from your teeth. Polishing the teeth and applying fluoride are the final steps. If you're age 18 or younger, the dentist may consider placing sealants onto the back teeth to help prevent cavities on the chewing surfaces. The TDP covers sealants for permanent molars through age 18.

The dentist will also look for signs of gum disease, also called periodontal disease. Gum disease is an infection in the tissues that hold teeth in place. Nearly half of all adults age 30 or older show signs of gum disease, which is the leading cause of tooth loss in adults. Finally, the dentist checks for proper tooth alignment and biting, chewing and swallowing patterns. For more information about the TDP, visit www.TRICARE.mil/tdp.

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The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: http://www.tricare.mil/podcast | January 25, 2018 ++]

* Finances *
Tax Audits Update 01 ▶ Missteps That Will Get You Audited

Nobody wants an IRS tax agent knocking at the door and asking for a shoebox full of receipts. Unfortunately, there’s no surefire way to avoid an audit. However, you can sharply reduce the odds of an IRS inquiry by avoiding some common mistakes when filing your taxes. Here are seven that should be on your radar.

1. Hiring the wrong tax preparer -- This mistake might occur before you even get your name on the tax return. Select a tax preparer who is incompetent or unethical, and he or she could spell big trouble for you. If the IRS audits one of the returns the tax preparer filed and finds significant problems, the agency might decide to audit all the returns that person prepared for the year, or for the past several years.

2. Saying your hobby is a business -- Let’s say you breed and sell dogs, or sell blankets on Etsy, or resell garage sale purchases on eBay. At the end of the year, you realize expenses exceeded what you made and decide to deduct a tax loss from your “business.” However, if you do that for several years, the IRS is going to get suspicious. A business is something that makes money. If you haven’t made money in at least three of the past five years, what you have might actually be a hobby. The IRS doesn’t allow business deductions for hobbies.

3. Filing certain schedules or forms -- You might say the third item on our list isn’t a mistake because, in many cases, there is no way to avoid it. For example, if you have a business, you need to file a Schedule C. And yet filing a Schedule C increases your chances of an audit. However, it would be a mistake to file a Schedule C if you have an unprofitable business that is more like a hobby. Ask your accountant if it’s also a mistake to file a Form 5213. Form 5213 prevents the IRS from auditing you for the first five years of your business, and it is typically used when transitioning a hobby into a business. This form allows you to claim losses from your hobby-turned-business, no questions asked. That is, until the five years are up, and the IRS comes calling to see what you’ve been up to.

4. Taking questionable deductions or credits -- Experts generally agree that claiming excessive charitable contributions and claiming a home office are two of the deductions most likely to raise red flags with the IRS. If you donate a large percentage of your income to charity, be sure to keep careful records. Too many contributions relative to your income can be a problem. So, think twice about inflating the value of those items you dropped off at the thrift store. Keep careful records of all donations and get a written acknowledgement from any charity to which you donate $250 or more per year.

As for the home office, take the deduction to which you’re entitled, but be ready to defend it if needed. The most important thing to remember is that you can only deduct a home office if you use that space exclusively for business. Under the category of credits, abusing the Earned Income Tax Credit is likely to get you in trouble, according to experts. Back in 2013, the IRS came under fire for not taking enough action to curtail improperly awarded Earned Income Tax Credits. In a statement reported by multiple news outlets, the agency fired back by saying EITC claims were twice as likely to be audited as other returns. If you claim the EITC, consider yourself warned.

5. Claiming a loss from a rental -- When housing prices were depressed, some people converted homes into rentals rather than sell them. Those who found the rent didn’t cover the mortgage and taxes might have assumed they were entitled to take a deduction for the losses. Not so fast. You must either be an active participant in the management of your rental or a real estate professional to do that. The IRS has a long and confusing page with the details, but Nolo.com has a much clearer explanation. Make sure you’re eligible to
Deduct the losses before doing so. Also check out “10 Keys to Finding and Owning the Perfect Rental Property.”

6. Failing to claim all your income -- Thinking you can keep secrets from the IRS is a mistake:
   - You might think the government won’t know about the money you earned freelancing on the side. But if the company you worked for files a 1099 form, the IRS knows.
   - You might think you can keep your alimony checks a secret. But if your spouse is reporting those payments on his or her return, the IRS knows.
   - You might think the interest you earn from foreign bank accounts is between you and that country’s bankers. But if those nice bankers are sharing information with the U.S., the IRS knows.

Don’t take the chance of getting caught in a lie. Claim all your income. Then, the IRS won’t have any discrepancies to note, giving it one less reason to flag your return for an audit.

7. Making math errors -- The last mistake on our list is also the simplest misstep to avoid: math errors. If you can’t add and subtract correctly, the IRS might start wondering what else you got wrong in preparing your return. Avoid this audit trigger by using tax software or an online program that will virtually ensure the calculations are correct. If you earn less than $66,000, you can find free online tax prep through the IRS Free File program.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Maryalene LaPonsie | January 18, 2018 ++]

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VA Home Loan Update 54  ➤  Eyeing a Foreclosed Property

Foreclosed properties may save home-shoppers tens of thousands of dollars compared with similar real estate in their area. They may also cause some severe headaches. If you’re looking for a deal and willing to put in the extra work (and down the extra aspirin), here are four factors to consider.

1. VA is OK. There are no rules that forbid the use of VA-guaranteed loans to purchase foreclosed property. You can even search an online database of VA-acquired properties that the agency’s attempting to sell.

2. Appraisers sometimes aren’t. Foreclosed properties may have been abandoned by their owners, may show signs of stress caused by a lack of upkeep, and may have be on the market “as-is.” These aren’t good signs entering a VA-certified appraisal, which will look closely at roof condition, electrical and plumbing systems, and other home basics that may suffer during or after a foreclosure. Click here for full VA appraisal guidelines (see Chapters 11 and 12).

3. Value issues. Appraisers use comparable nearby properties to set a value on your new purchase; if the value is set below the sale price, complications can arise. This could present a problem if your foreclosure is in an area with few bank-owned properties or short sales, as it may be compared with similar properties that have been sold under circumstances more favorable to the seller, driving up property values. If you feel that your appraisal isn’t in touch with market realities, ask your lender or agent to make a Reconsideration of Value request. Get some more ROV details here.

4. Foreclosed, but not for sale? Some online listings may include foreclosed properties that appear in local government records. These loans have gone bad, but just because you’ve stumbled upon the listings doesn’t mean the listings are ... well, listed. “Yes, these homes are probably foreclosures, but it does not mean that they are on the market, and there's no timeline for when they will be,” said Cassandra Rowley, a Navy
veteran and Realtor in the Seattle area. “I have buyers regularly ask me to research these, but I don't know anything more than what they can find on the county website.”

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Kevin Lilley | January 26, 2018 ++]

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IRS 2018 Filing Season ➤ DVA Tips & Filing Help Options

The Internal Revenue Service announced recently that the nation’s 2018 tax season is underway and reminds taxpayers claiming certain tax credits that refunds won’t be available before late February. The IRS will begin accepting tax returns for 2017 on 29 JAN, with nearly 155 million individual tax returns expected to be filed in 2018. The nation’s tax deadline will be 17 APR this year – so taxpayers will have two additional days to file beyond 15 APR.

Although the IRS will begin accepting both electronic and paper tax returns 29 JAN, paper returns will begin processing later in mid-February as system updates continue. The IRS strongly encourages people to file their tax returns electronically for faster refunds. Choosing e-file and direct deposit for refunds remains the fastest and safest way to file an accurate income tax return and receive a refund. The IRS anticipates issuing more than nine out of 10 refunds in less than 21 days from the time returns are received.

A dozen brand-name Free File partners, acting through the Free File Alliance, offer their software free to eligible taxpayers. Each partner sets its own criteria, but any taxpayer earning $66,000 or less will find one or more software products available. Some providers offer both free federal and free state tax preparation, a seamless way to file taxes. Active duty military personnel with incomes of $66,000 or less may use any Free File software product of their choice without regard to the criteria. For taxpayers who earned more than $66,000, there are Free File Fillable Forms, which will be available 29 JAN. Free File Fillable Forms, provided by the Free File Alliance, is best for those taxpayers experienced in preparing returns by hand and with limited assistance.

Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) offer free tax help to people who qualify. VITA and TCE sites can be found using the VITA/TCE Locator and entering your ZIP Code or download the IRS2Go smartphone app to find a free tax prep provider. Military OneSource is a Department of Defense-funded program that provides a range of free resources for Veterans and their immediate family up to 180 days after separation or retirement from the military. MilTax, Military OneSource’s tax services, provides online software for eligible individuals to electronically file a federal and up to three state returns for free through the Military OneSource website. The service also includes tax consultants available by phone to answer tax questions related to deployment, multi-state filing, combat pay, plus share information on military-specific and civilian tax deductions and credits.

Veterans may be eligible to claim a federal tax refund based on:

- An increase in the Veteran’s percentage of disability from VA (which may include a retroactive determination) or
- The combat-disabled Veteran applying for, and being granted, Combat-Related Special Compensation, after an award for Concurrent Retirement and Disability.

Special tax considerations for disabled Veterans occasionally result in a need for amended returns. Disability benefits received from the VA should not be included in your gross income. Some of the payments which are considered disability benefits include:

- Disability compensation and pension payments for disabilities paid either to Veterans or their families,
- Grants for homes designed for wheelchair living,
• Grants for motor vehicles for Veterans who lost their sight or the use of their limbs, or
• Benefits under a dependent-care assistance program.

If you are a military retiree and receive your disability benefits from the VA, see IRS Publication 525 for more information. The Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB), Office of Servicemember Affairs has a Financial Coaching Initiative, focusing on Veterans to help them with their financial goals. This program places certified financial coaches in organizations around the country to provide individualized financial support services. The program is managed through the Armed Forces Services Corporation (AFSC) at various locations for Veterans in the United States.

The phone number to talk to a financial coach is 1-844-90-GOALS. More information about this free program for Veterans can be found at the Financial Coaching for Veterans website. For more information about Veterans, please go to the “Information for Veterans” website on IRS.gov. The IRS also reminds taxpayers that a trusted tax professional can provide helpful information and advice. Tips for choosing a return preparer and details about national tax professional groups are available on IRS.gov.

Please note that VA does not endorse any of these sites, but brings your attention to them as they have free tax services available specifically for Veterans and their families.

[Source: VAntage Point | January 29, 2018 ++]

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IRS Garnishment ► Military Retirement Pay

A year into a program that allows the Internal Revenue Service to take 15 percent of a military retiree’s pay to cover back taxes, the agency will apply a formula to be sure that garnishment won’t cause economic hardship. The move comes in response to concerns raised by Sens. Thom Tillis (R-NC) and Elizabeth Warren (D-MA). Acting IRS commissioner David Kautter informed the senators of the change in a 12 JAN. letter.

The Federal Payment Levy Program lets the IRS garnish the pay of federal employees and retirees when those taxpayers neglect or refuse to pay a balance due on taxes, after a process that includes sending the taxpayer a series of notices. Last year, the IRS expanded that program to include military retired pay. However, unlike the way it applies that process to other federal benefits — Social Security payouts, for instance — the IRS didn’t use a low-income filter to determine whether levying the military retirement pay would cause that military retiree economic hardship.

But data provided to the senators show more than 10 percent of military retirees subjected to the levy in recent months would’ve had retirement payments protected if the low-income filter applied to them. “Based on a re-analysis of our data, the number of military retirees who would qualify to be excluded from the FPLP based on the low-income filter is high enough that we will move to apply the low-income filter to all military retiree payments,” Kautter wrote in the letter. The change likely won’t be made until early fall, Kautter noted, once officials can make the changes to their information technology systems and procedures. If a collection is causing hardship for a military retiree in the interim, “the IRS will work with the taxpayer to make that determination and release the levy,” he wrote.

The IRS already excludes all Medal of Honor military retirees, and those with disability payments, from FPLP levies. “Most military retirees have spent 20 years or more serving their country — the IRS shouldn’t be withholding the retirement benefits they’ve earned and need just to get by,” Warren said in a statement. “I’m glad the IRS agreed to protect these veterans in response to our bipartisan letter.” Taxpayers who are delinquent receive a series of notices requesting payment and offering options for resolving the balance due,
such as an installment agreement, Kautter stated. Taxpayers usually have more than six months to make payment arrangements before the levy is put in place. [Source: NavyTimes | Karen Jowers | January 25, 2018 ++

Fisher House Update 05 ➤ Death Benefits During Government Shutdown

The families of two soldiers killed in a California helicopter accident 20 JAN will not be getting government death benefits during the shutdown, but the non-profit Fisher House has pledged to step up again to make the payments. Pentagon officials made clear before the shutdown began at midnight Friday that death gratuity payments of $100,000 to the families of troops killed in the line of duty would be suspended for the duration of the shutdown.

A Pentagon spokesman confirmed to ABC News that the suspension of death benefits would apply to families of the pilot and co-pilot of an AH-64 Apache helicopter gunship who were killed Saturday in an accident at the at the National Training Center at Fort Irwin, California. The cause of the accident was under investigation. Both soldiers were serving with the 4th Infantry Division, based in Fort Carson, Colorado. To get around the suspension of government death benefits, the Fisher House Foundation has again agreed to step up to aid families during the shutdown. During the last shutdown that lasted 16 days in 2013, Fisher House provided $750,000 in grants to 30 families.

In a statement first reported by Stars & Stripes, Ken Fisher, chairman and CEO of Fisher House, said, "Families like the ones we helped in 2013 are very deserving. They are deeply dedicated to overcoming the challenges they confront." He added, "Helping them isn't charity but rather this nation's solemn duty. In these very tough situations, they don't quit. Neither should we."

On 19 JAN, as the shutdown loomed, Sen. Joe Manchin, D-West Virginia, contacted Fisher House and the non-profit agreed to compensate the families until government reimbursements can be made. "I applaud Ken and the Fisher House for their dedication to serving our soldiers and their families during their time of need and especially as this senseless shutdown looms," Manchin said. The two soldiers killed at Fort Irwin have yet to be identified. In a statement, Maj. Gen. Randy George, commander of the 4th Infantry Division at Fort Carson, said, "Our heartfelt prayers and condolences go out to their families and friends during this difficult and painful time." “The loss of any soldier truly saddens everyone here at the Mountain Post and it is a tremendous loss to the team,” George said. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | January 22 2018 ++]

Auto/House Insurance ➤ Expect 5%+ Reduction

In falsely bragging about the alleged benefits to the middle class from the tax law enacted by the Republicans last month, the Trumpsters neglected to give high visibility to the state regulators who must require utility and insurance companies to pass savings from the tax cuts on to their consumers. While some regulated utility companies (gas, electric and telephone) did announce that they would be reducing rates for consumers, others seem to be waiting for state regulators to push them. The insurance companies in particular seem to be in need of a nudge.

The indefatigable actuary and consumer advocate for the Consumer Federation of America, J. Robert Hunter is pleased to provide the necessary push. In his usual tightly argued style, he has sent letters to every state insurance commissioner, as well as those officials representing the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Hunter calculates that insurance rates that you, the consumer, are paying, should be reduced by about
5%, “without including the impact of investment income due to lower taxes on that income. So it could be more than 5%.” Hunter continues: “On a property-casualty industry wide basis, the windfall to insurers from the tax changes are massive. 5% of the $539 billion in premiums collected is over $25 billion. For longer-tailed lines, like medical professional liability, the increase in investment income on reserves and surplus will be much greater than average because of the reduction in tax rates.”

Taking no chances, Hunter asks the mostly passive state insurance regulators two questions that resolve any possible ambiguities about what you the policyholder-consumers are owed:

- “What is your evaluation of the recent changes in tax laws on insurer profitability by line and what is the basis for your conclusions?”
- “What actions are you taking in the next month to cause insurers to reduce rates to reflect the windfall from tax changes and to ensure rates return to not excessive levels?”

Over $25 billion in savings coming back to consumers’ proverbial pocketbooks is not chump change. You can surely use it, and it belongs to you under existing law. If you call or email your state insurance commissioner and ask “where’s my money?”, you’ll get a pretty good idea of how fast and decisive your commissioner is likely to be. California’s elected Insurance Commissioner Dave Jones has already acted to assure these reductions in rates.

Further questions may be directed to Mr. Hunter’s organization here. He’ll want to hear about any responses, or lack of responses, from your commissioner’s office. These commissioners, and every insurance company, know Bob Hunter very well. This consumer champion has been a leading consumer watchdog for over forty years. He has saved consumers billions of dollars in auto, homeowner and other property-casualty policies with his testimony before legislatures, especially defending the civil justice system from erosion, his expert witness role in successful litigation, and his many public reports revealing insurance industry abuses. [Source: In The Public Interest | Ralph Nadar | January 25, 2018 ++]

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**Government Shutdown ► Some Banks Will Provide Troop Support**

Some financial institutions with large numbers of military customers plan to help ease troops’ financial stress in the event a government shutdown interferes with their 1 FEB paychecks ... or beyond. During a shutdown, by Defense Department guidelines, all active-duty military personnel would still report to work, but wouldn’t be paid until Congress makes funding available. During the last shutdown in 2013, Congress passed a law that required military members to be paid. An unknown number of federal civilian employees could be furloughed, with no back pay. Those employees include military spouses, retirees and other veterans.

Here are some early shutdown announcements from financial institutions. As 1 FEB approaches, check with your financial institution to see if similar plans are in place. During the 2013 shutdown, a number of banks and credit unions stepped up to help their customers.

- **USAA** is prepared to offer a no-interest payroll advance loan to its military members. If the shutdown derails 1 FEB paychecks, USAA will email eligible members with instructions on how to sign up. The company also plans to make special payment arrangements available for members having financial difficulty because of the disruption.
- **First Command Bank** will offer no-interest payroll advances to its clients affected by a shutdown. The bank also plans to work with clients who may have trouble making loan payments, will waive early withdrawal penalties for those who need to redeem a certificate of deposit before its maturity...
date, and may offer deferments of monthly credit card payments, as well as waiving cash advance fees on credit cards.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | January 19, 2018 ++]

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Credit Card Balance Transfers  ► Seven Myths Debunked

A balance transfer can help you get a handle on debt by allowing you to transfer high-interest-rate debt to a card with a lower interest rate, consolidate multiple payments into one and take advantage of better card terms and lower fees. However, not all balance transfer offers are the same—so if you’re in the market for a balance transfer, be sure to review the details of each offer carefully before selecting the best one for you. To help you make the most informed decision, let’s look at some of the common myths about balance transfers.

Myth 1: All credit cards have balance transfer fees.
Fact: The amount charged to transfer a balance varies, and some financial institutions don’t charge any balance transfer fees at all. Be sure to read the fine print and learn how much, if anything, it would cost to transfer balances.

Myth 2: A balance transfer reduces the principal you need to pay back.
Fact: Though it can help you save money in the long run, a balance transfer isn’t the same as repayment. The principal you owe stays the same, meaning you’ll still have to pay back the amount you transfer—but you’ll pay less in future interest if you transfer to a card with a lower rate.

Myth 3: Closing an old credit card after a balance transfer will boost your credit score.
Fact: Since closing a card may reduce your available credit and shorten your credit history, it can actually negatively impact your score. However, if you’re concerned about racking up more debt on the card, or if you no longer use the card but it has an annual fee, then closing the card may still be the right move for you. Alternatively, you can keep the old card open, but store it somewhere safe in your home where you can still access it in an emergency.

Myth 4: Balance transfers are for credit card balances only, not other debts.
Fact: Depending on the lender, you may be able to transfer debts for appliances, furniture and other personal loans. If this option is available, the credit card issuer will provide checks that can be used to transfer other debts to your credit card.

Myth 5: Anyone can qualify for a low- or zero-rate balance transfer.
Fact: Lenders will check your credit before approving a balance transfer—those with good or excellent credit are more likely to qualify for the best promotional and regular card rates.

Myth 6: Balance transfers don’t affect your credit score.
Fact: How a balance transfer affects your score depends on a number of factors, including the total amount transferred and how many times you’ve transferred your balance in the past. If you’re continually moving debt from card to card without making any progress on repayment, your score could be negatively impacted. On the other hand, if this is your first time making a balance transfer and you use the money saved on interest to pay off your debt faster, then the overall effect on your score may be positive.

Myth 7: You can stop making payments to your old card as soon as you apply for a balance transfer.
Fact: Continue making payments on your old card until you get confirmation that the transfer has been approved and the balance has been transferred. Transfers can take up to two weeks to complete, and you don’t want to incur any missed payment fees or late fees in the meantime.
SSA Monetary Benefit Update 02 ► Government Shutdown Impact

There's a lot of talk in Washington and on the news about the impacts this shutdown could have on the public. But The Senior Citizens League (TSCL) wants you to know that unless Congress allows a shutdown to go on for several weeks or months, older Americans SHOULD NOT see any major impacts on their Social Security or Medicare benefits. Here's how your benefits should be affected if the federal government were to shut down:

- Since Social Security is a "mandatory" program, your benefits should go out in full and as scheduled.
- Since Medicare and other federal health programs are "mandatory" as well, your benefits should not be affected.
- Some doctors who treat Medicare patients could see delays in their payments from Medicare, but they will be paid in full and patients should not be affected.
- Since many federal government employees won't be reporting to work during the shutdown, it could take longer for Social Security or Medicare to process requests or applications for new beneficiaries.
- Older Americans who receive food assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) should continue to receive their benefits as scheduled.

While a shutdown may not directly impact your Social Security or Medicare benefits, the bigger issue is the fact that since the potential exists, Congress is failing to govern because of the toxic political environment in DC. Your elected officials are failing you by grandstanding on their party politics. It’s time for their game of chicken to end! The deficit is growing even before the new tax reform kicks. The public needs to let lawmakers know their opinion about a shut down. Call your Senators today – before it’s too late – demand they act responsibly and fund the federal government as needed. [Source: TSCL | Chairman Art Cooper | January 19, 2018 ++]

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Mortgage Update 08 ► Rates Rise As More People Apply

Mortgage rates rose in JAN as the improving economy drove more people to apply for a mortgage. The benchmark 30-year fixed-rate mortgage rose 2 basis points, or 0.02 percent, to 4.20 percent, according to Bankrate’s weekly survey of large lenders. It’s the highest rate since mid-May and will likely climb further throughout this year, so it’s important to make sure you can afford a new home under a higher rate. “Most people expect generally that rates will reach 4.25 percent to 4.5 percent by the end of the year,” says Rick Sharga, executive vice president of Ten-X, an online real estate marketplace. “That does have an implication to how much of a home you can afford.”

Higher rates won’t stop homebuyers
Despite higher rates, more people are applying for a mortgage. Applications to finance a home purchase jumped 3 percent last week compared with a week earlier, according to the Mortgage Bankers Association’s latest survey of lenders. People refinancing a mortgage also jumped 4 percent during this period. “These increases were partly due to an upswing following the holiday season lull and potentially more borrowers
trying to **refinance** before mortgage rates increase further,” MBA economist Joel Kan said in the press release.

**Here’s the catch**
The improved economy is helping drive more people to buy homes, but there remains a major sticking point for housing: a lack of affordable inventory. Because of this, residential real estate remains “constrained,” according to the Federal Reserve in its latest Beige Book on the economy, released Wednesday. However, inventory is expected to gradually loosen as homebuilders remain fairly confident about the housing market. The National Association of Home Builders’ **monthly index** was 72 in January, just two points down from a month earlier, when the index reached an 18-year high.

Homebuilder confidence “has remained in the 70s, a sign that housing demand should continue to grow in 2018,” said Robert Dietz, chief economist at the National Association of Home Builders, in a press release. “We can expect the single-family housing market to make further gains this year.” Over the past 52 weeks, the 30-year fixed rate has averaged 4.14 percent. This week’s rate is 0.06 percentage points higher than the 52-week average.

- The 15-year fixed-rate mortgage rose to 3.62 percent from 3.57 percent.
- The 5/1 adjustable-rate mortgage rose to 3.80 percent from 3.77 percent.
- The 30-year fixed-rate jumbo mortgage rose to 4.25 percent from 4.21 percent.

The results of Bankrate.com’s weekly national survey of large lenders conducted January 17, 2018 and the effect on monthly payments for a $165,000 loan:

- At the current 30-year fixed rate, you’ll pay $489.02 each month for every $100,000 you borrow, up from $487.85 last week.
- At the current 15-year fixed rate, you’ll pay $720.79 each month for every $100,000 you borrow, up from $718.33 last week.
- At the current 5/1 ARM rate, you’ll pay $465.96 each month for every $100,000 you borrow, up from $464.25 last week.

[Source: Bankrate | Rachel Witkowski | January 17, 2018 ++]

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**Tax Plan 2017 Update 05  ➤  Spousal Support**

Men paying Spousal Support to their ex-wives just took a big hit in the recently-passed tax reform bill. A little-discussed section of the tax reform bill passed by Congress and signed into law by President Trump last December changed the 75 year old tax code that allowed the person (97% men) who pays alimony (spousal support) to deduct those payments from their gross taxable income, and required the person (97% women) who receives the alimony to report those payments as taxable income. Under the new tax code, beginning in 2019, alimony payments will be tax-free to the recipients, and no longer deductible by those paying the alimony. A heavy financial blow to the men paying all of that alimony!

Why did Congress revoke the tax deduction for men who dutifully pay Spousal Support? Congress identified 2 problems with the very fair and reasonable old rule. First, nearly one-half of the women receiving alimony failed to report that taxable income. Nearly 360,000 men claimed $9.6 billion in tax deductions for the alimony payments that they had made in 2015, but only 178,000 women reported receiving those alimony payments. Nearly $5,000,000,000.00 of taxable income went unreported by alimony recipients. Second, the majority of men paying the alimony were in a 33% or higher tax bracket, while the majority of women receiving alimony were in a 15-25% tax bracket. Congress went after the taxpayer with the higher tax bracket, rather than going after the tax dodgers.
Congress chose to tax the men that are paying the alimony. The decision to go after the alimony payer will effectively increase that guy’s alimony cost by a full one-third. Alimony will be paid with “after-tax” dollars, but the person receiving alimony will not have to pay a dime of tax on that income. Nice tax-free income for the ex-wife, but a real rip for the guys that just keep paying. In some cases the additional reportable income could trigger additional SS taxation. Bend over!!! [Source: RAO Subic | Jack Walker | January 17, 2017 ++]

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Navy Paternity Leave ► Paid Leave Increase From 10 to 21

Officials with the U.S. Navy announced 16 JAN that the service branch will more than double the amount of paid leave provided to sailors whose spouses have given birth, according to a news report. As early as next month, the Navy will increase the number of days a sailor can receive in paid time off for paternity leave from 10 to 21, Federal News Radio reported. Vice Adm. Robert Burke, who is in charge of the Navy’s personnel issues, announced the new policy speaking to sailors and their families in Japan. The new policy was enabled by the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act, which allowed branches of the military to adopt up to 21 days of paid leave for service members, although it did not require it. The Navy is the first branch to implement the new authority laid out in the NDAA. [Source: GovExec.com | Erich Wagner | January 17, 2018 ++]

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Tax Season Scam ► Ploy To Download Malware Into Your Computer

With W2s due out by the end of the month, scammers are taking advantage of tax season to fool people into downloading malware.

How the Scam Works

- You receive an email from someone you don't know personally, but it looks like an official company message. The email may have a subject line similar to this: "Document Received (Scanned_1040_W2.pdf)." The email contains a link to a "secure file" that appears to be shared via a reputable file sharing service. The message asks you to click the link and make sure your personal information is correct.
- Whatever you do, don't click! Unsolicited emails like these are simply attempts to steal your personal information. The link leads to third-party website, which may infect your computer with malware.

How to Avoid Tax Season Scams

- Be extremely cautious when sharing your personal information. Never give your personal information, such as bank account, credit card, or Social Security number, to someone you don't know personally.
- Don't click on links in unsolicited emails. If you didn't ask to be contacted or you don't know who sent you the email, don't click the link. You can also reveal a link’s true destination by hovering over it.
- Get tips from BBB. Stay informed by learning more about scams and how to avoid them by reading up on BBB Scam Tips (BBB.org/scamtips).

For More Information
This time of year, tax scams abound. Stay current on the latest cons and get tips to prevent fraud with these resources on IRS.gov. To find out more about email scams, check the tips found at BBB.org/phishingscam. To report a scam, go to BBB Scam Tracker (BBB.org/scamtracker).

[Source: BBB Scam Alert | January 19, 2018 ++]

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**Airbnb URL Spoofing Scam** ▶ **How To Avoid**

The winter weather has many people across the US and Canada dreaming of a vacation. But before you book a getaway on Airbnb, be sure it's the real deal. This new scam spoofs the website and has fooled people out of thousands of dollars.

**How the Scam Works**

- You visit the Airbnb website www.airbnb.com and find an apartment or house you want to rent. The host instructs you to email them outside the platform. You do so and get a reply that the property is not available on your desired dates. Instead, the host sends a link to a similar property.
- The link points to a spoofed Airbnb website that looks almost identical to the real one. The "About" page even links to the real site's "About us" page. If you decide to book the property, you are prompted to wire money. Once you do, you are never contacted again and the money is gone.

**How to Avoid Airbnb Scams:**

- Never wire money outside of Airbnb. The host might offer a special discount if you pay off the platform. Don't take it.
- Watch out for lookalike URLs. Carefully check the web address before paying.
- Look for a superhost. Being a superhost means that they have consistently received high reviews from previous renters.

For more details about the scam, check out the full article on BBB.org. To report a scam, go to BBB Scam Tracker (BBB.org/scamtracker). To protect yourself from all kinds of scams, visit the BBB Scam Tips page (BBB.org/scamtips). [Source: BBB Scam Alert | January 26, 2018 ++]

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**Tax Burden for Alaska Retired Vets** ▶ **As of JAN 2018**

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. States raise revenue in many ways including sales taxes, excise taxes, license taxes, income taxes, intangible taxes, property taxes, estate taxes and inheritance taxes. Depending on where you live, you may end up paying all of them or just a few. Following are the taxes you can expect to pay if you retire in Alaska.

**Sales Taxes**

**State Sales Tax:** The state currently does not have a sales or use tax. However, 62 municipalities impose local sales taxes that range up to 7.5%. Typical sales tax rates are from 2% – 5%.

**Gasoline Tax:** 30.65 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)
Diesel Fuel Tax: 37.15 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)
Cigarette Tax: $2.00/pack of 20 (Anchorage – add $3.45)

**Personal Income Taxes**
No state income tax

**Retirement Income:** Not taxed.

**Property Taxes**
Alaska is the only state in the United States where a large part of the land mass is not subject to a property tax. Although property tax is the primary method of raising revenues for most of the larger municipalities in the state, smaller municipalities favor a sales tax. This is due primarily to the fact that the smaller incorporated areas lack a tax base large enough to support the property tax. The unincorporated areas of the state do not have the legal authority to levy a tax. Of the 18 Boroughs, only 14 levy a property tax. Only 11 Cities located outside of Boroughs levy a property tax. Therefore, only 25 municipalities in Alaska (either cities or boroughs) levy a property tax. These 25 municipalities can be found [here](#).

Alaska taxes both real and personal property. There are several municipalities that have chosen to exempt some or all categories of personal property. For a listing of those municipalities and categories, see the [Alaska Taxable](#) information. Homeowners 65 and older (or surviving spouses 60 and older) are exempt from municipal taxes on the first $150,000 of the assessed value of their property. This also applies to disabled veterans. The average assessed value exempted from taxes for senior citizens and disabled veterans is $134,520 which equated to a tax exemption of $1,839 for 2010. In 2010, the total full value for all municipalities (over 750 in population) was $98.1 billion (including TAPS — Trans-Alaska Pipeline). With a statewide population of 692,314 the per capita full value was $141,644. Intangible personal property is exempt from taxation. Call 907-269-6620 (Anchorage) or 907-465-2320 (Juneau) for details.

For more information, [click here](#).

**Inheritance and Estate Taxes**
There is no inheritance tax and the estate tax is limited to federal estate tax collection.

**Other State Tax Rates**
To compare the above sales, income, and property tax rates to those accessed in other states go to:


For further information, visit the [Alaska Department of Revenue](#) site or call 907-465-2300. Check out [https://www.topretirements.com/state/alaska.html](https://www.topretirements.com/state/alaska.html) if you are thinking about retiring to Alabama.

• **Medical Marijuana.** The Department of Veterans Affairs will not conduct research into the effects of medical cannabis on post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic pain — some of the very ailments veteran patients rely on the drug to treat. In a Dec. 21 letter to Minnesota Democrat Rep. Tim Walz, VA Secretary David Shulkin said that the department is unable to research medical cannabis due to federal restrictions.

• **21 Gun Salute.** One of the best-known military tradition is the 21-gun salute, but few know the meaning behind it and the traditions that sparked it. A long-standing military tradition was to honor the dead by showing their weapons were no longer hostile. Whereas naval fleets traditionally discharge seven rounds in commemoration, their on-land counterparts were able to shoot three times as many for a total of 21. However, at most military funerals what many mistake for a 21-gun salute is actually an honor guard team firing three volleys from rifles. This tradition comes from traditional battle ceasefires where each side would clear the dead. The firing of three volleys indicated the dead were cleared and properly cared for.

• **Syria.** SecState Tillerson committed the United States to an indefinite military presence in Syria. The purpose for the enduring commitment: "to ensure that neither Iran nor President Bashar al-Assad of Syria take over areas that have been newly liberated with help from the United States".

• **Agent Orange.** At [http://www.veteranprograms.com/id1966.html](http://www.veteranprograms.com/id1966.html) can be found spraying Missions from May 15, 1960 - May 4,1971. Use the database to research towns, villages, and cities in Vietnam that were sprayed with herbicides. Look up dates, agents used, even the amount of herbicide used.

• **Mortgages.** Should You pay it off? Go to [https://youtu.be/99c3BHVTtoWY](https://youtu.be/99c3BHVTtoWY) and listen to the pros and cons of doing so.

• **COLA.** The December CPI is 240.526, 0.4 percent above the FY 2018 COLA baseline. The CPI for January, 2018 is scheduled to be released on February 14th, 2018.

• **Aircraft Carriers.** Check out [https://youtu.be/QcoFsc2Le1o](https://youtu.be/QcoFsc2Le1o) to view some high speed maneuvers through the ocean like a speedboat.

• **MARS.** NASA has teamed up with the Los Alamos National Laboratory and the Energy Department to develop a system that could generate power on Mars. The system, known as **Kilopower**, is a small nuclear reactor that can generate a reliable power supply for astronauts. It can generate different amounts of power, from 1 kilowatt, which is enough to power a toaster, to 10 kilowatts, which would be enough to power an entire habitat.

• **Airplanes.** Check out [http://www.doyletics.com/tidbits/militaryadvice.pdf](http://www.doyletics.com/tidbits/militaryadvice.pdf) for some pictures which are great, but the words of military with each one are even better.

• **Beer.** Canned beer made its debut on 24 JAN 1935. In partnership with the American Can Company, the Gottfried Krueger Brewing Company delivered 2,000 cans of Krueger's Finest Beer and Krueger's Cream Ale to faithful Krueger drinkers in Richmond, Virginia.

• **Sen. Tammy Duckworth.** The Illinois senator is pregnant with her second child. She will be the first U.S. senator to give birth while in office. The 49-year-old Democrat, a veteran who lost her legs in the Iraq War, announced her pregnancy in a news release 23 JAN.

• **Clotilda.** Check out [https://youtu.be/_C8-WINcGPg](https://youtu.be/_C8-WINcGPg) to learn about the discovery of what is believed to be the last U.S. slave ship which delivered 110 African captives to Mobile in 1860.

• **Salute.** Check out [https://www.youtube.com/embed/uoABty_zE00?rel=0](https://www.youtube.com/embed/uoABty_zE00?rel=0). A little reminder of our feelings towards those who served before us.
- **Super Bowl.** The NFL will salute 15 recipients of the Medal of Honor, the United States’ most prestigious military decoration, when they participate in the coin toss before the Super Bowl on 4 FEB.

- **Foot Control.** While sitting at your desk in front of your computer, lift your right foot off the floor and make clockwise circles... Now, while doing this, draw the number '6' in the air with your right hand. Your foot will change direction.

- **Stunts.** Go to [https://www.chonday.com/25830](https://www.chonday.com/25830) to view some of Buster Keaton's most amazing ones.

[Source: Various | January 31, 2018 ++]

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**Air Force One Update 04  ►  $24 Million Dollars for Refrigerators**

Air Force One needs new refrigerators, an upgrade that will cost taxpayers nearly $24 million. Their high cost is the latest example of just how expensive it is to build the heavily modified 747 jumbo jets that fly the president of the United States. Experts say the reason isn’t price gouging by Boeing, which makes the jets and handles the presidential modifications, but instead the result of bespoke equipment requirements put in place by the White House Military Office and the Air Force. “It’s not a contractor issue, it is a requirements issue,” said Richard Aboulafia, vice president of analysis at the Teal Group consulting firm. “It’s not getting people rich.”

The new refrigerators aren’t your kitchen Frigidaires, or even a typical jetliner’s cabin-feeding coolboxes. The requirement for Air Force One is the ability to feed passengers and crew for weeks without resupplying. That means storing about 3,000 meals in massive refrigerators and freezers below the passenger cabin. Five “chillers” cool a total of 26 climate-controlled compartments, according to the Air Force.

In December, the Air Force awarded Boeing a $23.7 million contract to replace two of the chillers, which cool eight compartments. Boeing declined to comment on the deal, referring all questions to the Air Force. The refrigerators on the plane date to 1990, when the Air Force received the customized 747 from Boeing. “Although serviced on a regular basis, reliability has decreased with failures increasing, especially in hot/humid environments,” Air Force spokesman Ann Stefanek said in an email. “The units are unable to effectively support mission requirements for food storage.” [Source: DefenseOne | Marcus Weisgerber | January 24, 2018 ++]

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**Travel Advisory  ►  Philippines Alert Level 2**

The Department of State has launched new Travel Advisories and Alerts to make it easier for U.S. citizens to access clear, timely, and reliable safety and security information about every country in the world. For more details and FAQs about our Travel Advisories and Alerts, please see [www.travel.state.gov/travelsafely](http://www.travel.state.gov/travelsafely). Before any travel abroad, you are encouraged to check the U.S Department of State safety and security information for your destination at [www.travel.state.gov/destination](http://www.travel.state.gov/destination).

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Exercise increased caution in the Philippines due to crime, terrorism, and civil unrest. Terrorist and armed groups continue plotting possible kidnappings, bombings, and other attacks in the Philippines. Terrorist and armed groups may attack with little or no warning, targeting tourist locations,
The Philippine government has declared a "State of National Emergency on Account of Lawless Violence in Mindanao."

Do not travel to:

- The Sulu Archipelago, including the southern Sulu Sea, due to crime, terrorism, and civil unrest.
- Marawi City in Mindanao due to terrorism and civil unrest.

Reconsider travel to:

- Other areas of Mindanao due to crime, terrorism, and civil unrest.
- The vicinity of Mayon Volcano in Albay Province, Luzon due to volcanic activity.

Go to https://travel.state.gov/content/passports/en/country.html and read the Safety and Security section on the country information page.

If you decide to travel to the Philippines:

- Monitor local media for breaking events and adjust your plans based on new information.
- Avoid demonstrations.
- Enroll in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) to receive Alerts and make it easier to locate you in an emergency.
- Follow the Department of State on Facebook and Twitter.
- U.S. citizens who travel abroad should always have a contingency plan for emergency situations.

Review the Traveler's Checklist.

The Sulu Archipelago and Sulu Sea -- Terrorist and armed groups kidnap U.S. citizens on land and at sea for ransom. The U.S. government has limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens in the Sulu Archipelago and Sulu Sea as U.S. government employees must obtain special authorization to travel to those areas. Visit our website for Travel to High-Risk Areas.

Marawi City in Mindanao -- The Philippine government has declared martial law throughout the Mindanao region. Civilians are at risk of death or injury due to conflict between remnants of terrorist groups and Philippine security forces in Marawi. The U.S. government has limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens in Mindanao as U.S. government employees must obtain special authorization to travel there. Visit our website for Travel to High-Risk Areas.

Mindanao -- The Philippine government has declared martial law throughout the Mindanao region. The Philippine government also maintains a state of emergency and greater police presence in the Cotabato City area, and in the Maguindanao, North Cotabato, and Sultan Kudarat provinces. Terrorist and armed groups continue to conduct kidnappings, bombings, and other attacks targeting U.S. citizens, foreigners, civilians, local government institutions, and security forces. The U.S. government has limited ability to provide emergency services to U.S. citizens in Mindanao as U.S. government employees must obtain special authorization to travel there. Visit our website for Travel to High-Risk Areas.

Mayon Volcano -- Philippine authorities have warned that an eruption is imminent and may cause rock falls, landslides, sudden explosions, and hazardous volcanic flows. Monitor local media as well as the Philippine authority website http://www.phivolcs.dost.gov.ph. Visit our website for Travel to High-Risk Areas.

Note: The Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP) is a free service to allow U.S. citizens and nationals traveling and living abroad to enroll their trip with the nearest U.S. Embassy or Consulate. To enroll go to https://step.state.gov.

[Source: STEP Notifications | January 22, 2017 ++]
Flag Protests ► AMVETS Decrying NFL Corporate Censorship | #PleaseStand

AMVETS officials are decrying “corporate censorship” from the National Football League for their decision not to run an ad in their Super Bowl program which responds to league players’ decision to kneel for the national anthem in protest of national equality issues. The ad, which would have cost the veterans organization $30,000, features the tag “#PleaseStand” with a picture of service members saluting the American flag and information on how to donate to the congressionally-chartered organization.

Group leaders said NFL officials refused to include the ad in their Super Bowl publication, but did not issue a reason why. In a statement, AMVETS National Commander Marion Polk said the issue is one of fairness and respect. “Freedom of speech works both ways,” he said. “We respect the rights of those who choose to protest, as these rights are precisely what our members have fought — and in many cases died — for. “But imposing corporate censorship to deny that same right to those veterans who have secured it for us all is reprehensible and totally beyond the pale.”

In a statement, NFL Vice President of Communications Brian McCarthy said the Super Bowl game program “is designed for fans to commemorate and celebrate the game, players, teams and the Super Bowl. It’s never been a place for advertising that could be considered by some as a political statement.” They noted that the program will include a similar ad from the Veterans of Foreign Wars that states simply “We Stand for Veterans.” McCarthy said AMVETS was asked to consider changing their ad to read “Please Stand for Our Veterans” but did not reply in time for production deadlines.

Numerous veterans groups have criticized the flag protests before football games as “disrespectful” to current and former military members, although players involved in the actions have repeatedly said they are not related to service members in any way. The anthem protests began in 2016 when then San Francisco quarterback Colin Kaepernick opted to sit during the anthem singing as a protest against racial inequality and police brutality. At the suggestion of former Staff Sgt. Nate Boyer, who played football in college, Kaepernick opted to change his protest to kneeling during the anthem, echoing troops “taking a knee” during a mission.

But the change did little to quell the controversy. In September, President Donald Trump publicly blasted players who followed Kaepernick’s lead, calling any player involved a “son of a bitch” and suggesting that teams fire them for the actions. The visibility of the protests have ebbed in recent months, after NFL executives met with player representatives to discuss ways the league can better support activism among employees. AMVETS officials said the same #PleaseStand ad was accepted by the National Hockey League and Major League Baseball for inclusion in their all-star games’ programs. The organization sees the advertisement as an extension of their role as a “nonpartisan advocate for veterans and their families.” The Super Bowl, set for Feb. 4, will feature the Philadelphia Eagles and New England Patriots. [Source: ArmyTimes | Leo Shane III | January 22, 2018 ++]

Border Wall Update 02 ► Models Thwart US Commandos In Tests

Recent assaults by tactical teams on prototypes of President Donald Trump’s proposed wall with Mexico indicate their imposing heights should stop border crossers, a U.S. official with direct knowledge of the rigorous assessment told The Associated Press. Military special forces based in Florida and U.S. Customs and Border Protection special units spent three weeks trying to breach and scale the eight models in San
Diego, using jackhammers, saws, torches and other tools and climbing devices, said the official, who spoke on condition of anonymity because the information was not authorized for public release.

A Customs and Border Protection report on the tests identifies strengths and flaws of each design but does not pick an overall winner or rank them, though it does point to see-through steel barriers topped by concrete as the best overall design, the official said. The report recommends combining elements of each, depending on the terrain. The official likened it to a Lego design, pulling pieces from different prototypes.

Carlos Diaz, a spokesman for Customs and Border Protection, said the agency is still in “the testing phase” and that results are being evaluated. He said combining elements of different prototypes instead of picking a winner is consistent with previous statements by officials. He noted that the agency said in its bidding guidelines that a minimum height of 18 feet (5.4 meters) would be a key characteristic. He said he did not have additional details on test results.

Contractors were awarded between $300,000 and $500,000 for each prototype. Prototypes were built last fall to guide future construction of one of Trump’s signature campaign pledges. Four were concrete and four were made of other materials. Ronald Vitiello, the agency's acting deputy commissioner, said after visiting the prototypes in October that he was struck most by the 30-foot (9.1-meter) heights, which are significantly higher than existing barriers. Taller barriers are undoubtedly more effective, but whether the cost is justified will be up for debate.

The highly trained testers scaled 16 to 20 feet (4.9 to 6.1 meters) unassisted but needed help after that, said the official who described the assaults on the wall prototypes to the AP. Testers also expressed safety concerns about getting down from 30 feet. Only once did a tester manage to land a hook on top of the wall without help, the official said. Tubes atop some models repelled climbing devices but wouldn't work in more mountainous areas because the terrain is too jagged. The report favors steel at ground level because agents can see what is happening on the other side and holes can more easily be patched, the official said. With concrete, large slabs have to be replaced for even small breaches, which is time-consuming and expensive. Topping the steel with smooth concrete surfaces helps prevent climbing.

Customs and Border Protection leaders were scheduled to be briefed on the findings this week amid intensifying discussions between the White House and Congress on immigration legislation to avert a government shutdown and renew protection for about 800,000 young immigrants who were temporarily shielded from deportation under an Obama-era program, Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, which is
scheduled to end in March. The administration has insisted wall funding be part of any immigration deal but Trump has been unclear about how long the wall would be and how it should be designed. The administration has asked for $1.6 billion this year to build or replace 74 miles (118.4 kilometers) of barriers in Texas’ Rio Grande Valley and San Diego and plans to request another $1.6 billion next year.

A proposal by Customs and Border Protection calls for spending $18 billion over 10 years to extend barriers to cover nearly half the border, though it is unclear if Trump supports that plan. The agency proposes 316 miles (505 kilometers) of additional barrier by September 2027, bringing total coverage to 970 miles (1,552 kilometers). It also seeks 407 miles (651 kilometers) of replacement or secondary fencing. Mexico has steadfastly rejected Trump’s demand that it pay for the wall. Contracts to do work on that scale would be hugely lucrative, and the prototypes, spaced tightly together in a remote part of San Diego, have captured widespread attention, including from architecture critics. W.G. Yates & Sons Construction Co. of Philadelphia, Mississippi, and Caddell Construction Co. of Montgomery, Alabama, built one concrete model and one of other materials.

Texas Sterling Construction Co., a unit of Sterling Construction Co., and Fisher Sand & Gravel Co. of Tempe, Arizona, did concrete designs. ELTA North America Inc., part of state-run Israel Aerospace Industries, and KWR Construction Inc. of Sierra Vista, Arizona, built models from other materials. Vitiello said in October that the testing could last up to two months and lead to officials to conclude that elements of several designs should be merged to create effective walls, raising the possibility of no winner or winners.

[Source: The Associated Press | Elliot Spagat | January 19, 2018 ++]

DPRK Missile Program Update 03  ►  Moving Closer to Putting US at Risk

CIA Director Mike Pompeo said Tuesday that North Korea is moving “ever closer” to putting Americans at risk and that he believes leader Kim Jong Un won’t rest until he’s able to threaten multiple nuclear attacks against the U.S. at the same time. Pompeo made the statement at the American Enterprise Institute, a conservative-leaning think tank in Washington. “I want everyone to understand that we are working diligently to make sure that a year from now I can still tell you that they are several months away from having that capacity.”

CIA Director Mike Pompeo speaks on intelligence issues at the American Enterprise Institute in Washington

Speaking after one year on the job, Pompeo also said the CIA believes Kim would not only use nuclear weapons to stay in power, but to threaten to reunify the divided Korean Peninsula under his totalitarian
regime. The quest for reunification is disputed by some North Korean experts who see Kim’s nuclear program as primarily a means of retaining power and don’t think he would threaten or forcibly try to take over South Korea. Pompeo said North Korea’s nuclear weapons program has developed at a “very rapid clip,” but that Kim is hoping for an arsenal of nuclear weapons — “not one, not a showpiece, not something to drive on a parade route.” He wants the ability to deliver nuclear weapons from multiple missiles fired simultaneously. “That increases the risk to America,” Pompeo said. It’s unclear how well the United States could defend against multiple missiles fired from North Korea at the same time.

Despite his warning, Pompeo doesn’t think a North Korean attack on the United States is imminent. He said the Trump administration is “laser-focused” on achieving a diplomatic solution to the nuclear standoff. Americans should know that it is working to prepare a series of options so the president has the “full range of possibilities” to address the threat. He wouldn’t address the question of whether there are military options available to the U.S. that don’t risk an escalation into nuclear war with North Korea.

“There is much effort all across the U.S. government to ensure that Americans don’t have to feel at risk,” Pompeo said. “We saw what happened in Hawaii. It is an imperative — an American, national imperative — that we as an intelligence agency deliver the information to our senior leaders such that they can resolve this issue in a way that works for the American people.” [Source: The Associated Press | Deb Riechman | January 23, 2018 ++]

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Nuclear Attack Update 01  ➤  What It would Look Like On Hawaii

Minutes after the people of Hawaii received an emergency alert on their phones in mid-JAN, they began calling loved ones to issue tearful goodbyes and putting their children in storm drains. This tells you that the government has a long way to go to better educate people about the realities of nuclear attack. Hawaii, for all its beauty, is a relatively poor location to experience a nuclear strike. Its isolation offers little chance for swift evacuation and would likely complicate government efforts to provide medicine and food relief. Its prevailing high winds could have an unpredictable effect on the dispersal of radiation. Yet there is much that government officials could do that might reduce panic before a strike and hardship afterwards.

First, how big of a warhead would it be? Jeffrey Lewis, Middlebury professor and noted arms control watcher, says the North Koreans would probably use the largest warhead that they’ve tested, “which exploded with a force equivalent to a few hundred kilotons of TNT. Basically an order of magnitude bigger than the bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki.” Last year, North Korea demonstrated a weapon whose yield was roughly estimated at 200 kilotons, and a missile with enough range to fly the 7,350 miles from Pyongyang to Honolulu. Plug those variables into Nukemap, a tool from Alex Wellerstein for approximating the devastation of nuclear events, and a terrible picture emerges: such a strike would kill nearly 158,000 people and injure 173,000 more.

These calculations assume a Hiroshima-style blast that occurs some 2,000 feet above the surface, which would increase the amount of pressure and immediate explosive destruction but would also limit fallout. Other factors could intensify the effects. “The mountains will reflect the blast back onto the target. Most homes in Honolulu are wood-frame construction, so there is a significant chance of a firestorm following the blast which was what really devastated Hiroshima, much more so than the blast,” said Lewis.

The question then becomes: what’s the best way to prepare? Seeking shelter is a good start, says Timothy J. Jorgensen, who leads the Health Physics and Radiation Protection Program at Georgetown University. But unless you have something like an underground, air-filtered bomb shelter, your leading concern might be staying someplace where you have access to food or water. You will likely be there for an extended period
of time. “The fallout can be worse in terms radioactive exposure than the blast itself because it can come from hundreds of miles away,” Jorgensen said.

The primary fallout radioisotopes would be iodine-131, followed by cesium-137. Radioactive iodine can cause thyroid cancer, especially in children. But it has a short half-life, just a few days. “Wait a few weeks, and it’s all gone,” says Jorgensen. And be prepared to wait it out entirely indoors. In this sense, the emergency alert sent out by the local Hawaiian government, which advised people to seek “immediate” shelter, offered potentially very bad advice. Depending on your location and your proximity to a major target like Pearl Harbor, it may make more sense to take shelter where you might be confined for a few days or longer. A nuclear blast would all but certainly contaminate local food and water sources. This would present a particular hardship for Hawaii, given its isolation. Still, the danger would wane after six to eight weeks for most food and slightly longer for milk. (Fallout can contaminate large areas of grazing pasture and then concentrate in the milk of the cows that ingest it.)

Here’s where the specifics of the detonation make the most difference. If the bomb explodes at an altitude similar to that of the Hiroshima attack, the fallout will be limited. If detonation occurs at the surface, the fallout for the surrounding area will be far greater, Jorgensen said. “Not only will people be sheltering in place, it will be nearly impossible to get rescue workers in there for a couple of days. That’s a huge problem. First responders all have survey meters to check the dosage as they go in, and if it’s above a certain level, they just don’t go any further,” he said.

Which kind of explosion is it more likely to be? Says Lewis: “it would be an airburst. If the warhead hits the ground, it’s going to splatter. The only question is what the optimal height would be given the sort of damage you want to maximize. For a 200-kiloton device, the optimal height to maximize blast would be between 1 and 2 kilometers.” Jorgensen disagrees. “I would imagine that North Korea is not worried about detonating at altitude, which was a huge endeavor [when the United States achieved it in WWII ] involving barometric switches,” he says, which we don’t know if the North Koreans have, or would use.

If you’re in government, you may be tempted to call for an evacuation of people in areas where elevated radiation is present. Jorgensen cautions that while that may seem like a good way to reassure the public, it can cause more harm than good. Once public health officials push the evacuation button, it can be nearly impossible to unpress it and convince people that it’s safe to return to their homes, especially if radiation
levels are still high, regardless of whether or not those elevated levels are actually safe, something that the
government of Japan is currently wrestling with. “The limit for additional radiation above background was
one millisieverts per year,” says Jorgensen. “They realized that they could not use that as the standard for
moving back and Now they’re talking about 20 millisieverts as the standard. That’s 20 fold higher. People
are saying, ‘Well, before you told us one millisieverts was the safe level!’”

One of the most important lessons from last week’s false alarm is this: “Civil defense will only make a
difference for a small number of people at the margin. But you might be one of those people!” says Lewis.
“And so I would recommend being prepared in the same way that one prepares for other natural disasters —
you should shelter much as you would in a tornado or hurricane; you should have water and food much as
you do for an earthquake. But we need to keep in mind that the most important thing is not to have a nuclear
war in the first place.” [Source: DefenseOne | Patrick Tucker | January 19, 2018 ++]

DPRK Nuclear Weapons Update 21 ► Denuclearization Must Be Objective

Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger warned that if America and China let North Korea keep its
nuclear weapons, it will spur other countries to seek them. “If North Korea still possesses a military nuclear
capability in some finite time, the impact on the proliferation of nuclear weapons might be fundamental,”
Kissinger said in testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee on Thursday. “Because if North
Korea could keep its capability in the face of opposition by China and the United States, and the disapproval
of the rest of the … world, other countries will also feel this is the way for achieving international
prominence and the upper hand.” South Korea and Japan will want nuclear weapons too, “and then we are
living in a new world … that will require new thinking,” Kissinger said.

That sort of proliferation would represent a new pattern, effecting America’s ability to deter other
countries’ use of nuclear weapons. Pyongyang poses the “most immediate challenge to international peace
and security,” Kissinger warned in written testimony. The denuclearization of North Korea, “must be a
fundamental objective.” He cautioned against a unilateral, preemptive U.S. war with North Korea on the
doorstep of Russia and China, but said America will, “soon hit that fork in the road” which will require,
“some prayerful thinking.” “The temptation to deal with it with a preemptive attack is strong, and the
argument is rational,” Kissinger said. “I would be very concerned by a unilateral American war at the
borders of China and Russia in which we are unsupported by a significant part of the world.”

The goal, he said, should be to enlist China in using sanctions to pressure North Korea into giving up its
nuclear weapons. The idea of halting North Korean missile tests in exchange for abandoning allied military
exercises would encourage further demands to dismantle alliances in the region, Kissinger said. “That would
equate legitimate security operations with activities which have been condemned by the U.N. Security
Council for decades,” Kissinger said, adding: . Kissinger testified with fellow luminaries, Reagan
administration Secretary of State George Schultz and Richard Armitage, a former deputy secretary of state
under President George W. Bush. [Source: DefenseNews | Joe Gould | January 26, 2018 ++]

Philippine Mayon Volcano Update 01 ► Back To Life

Last weekend, the Philippines’ most active—and attractive—volcano, Mount Mayon, roared back to life. The 8,070-foot volcano began releasing spurts of incandescent molten rock and spewing clouds of smoke
and ash into the sky, causing over 30,000 local residents to evacuate the region. By the morning of 18 JAN the gooey streams of lava had traveled almost two miles from the summit.

![Lava cascades down the slopes of the erupting Mayon volcano in January 2018. Seen from Busay Village in Albay province, 210 miles southeast of Manila, Philippines.](image)

Though the images of Mount Mayon are startling, the volcano isn’t truly explosive—yet. The Philippine Institute of Volcanology and Seismology (PHIVolcs), which monitors the numerous volcanoes of the island chain, has set the current warning level at a 3 out of 5, which means that there is ”relatively high unrest.” At this point, explosive eruption is not imminent, says Janine Krippner, a volcanologist and postdoctoral researcher at Concord University. If the trend continues, however, an eruption is possible in the next few weeks.

Located on the large island of Luzon, Mount Mayon is known for its dramatically sloped edges and picturesque symmetry, which makes it a popular tourist attraction; some climbers even attempt to the venture to its smouldering rim. “It’s gorgeous, isn’t it?” marvels Krippner. But that beauty isn’t entirely innocuous. In fact, Krippner explains, the structure’s symmetrical form is partly due to the frequency of the volcano’s eruptions. “Mayon is one of the most active volcanoes—if not the most active volcano—in the Philippines, so it has the chance to keep building its profile up without eroding away,” she says. Since its first recorded eruption in 1616, there have been roughly 58 known events—four in just the last decade—which have ranged from small sputters to full-on disasters. Its most explosive eruption took place in 1814, when columns of ash rose miles high, devastated nearby towns and killed 1200 people.

Many of these eruptions are strombolian, which means the cone emits a stuttering spray of molten rock that collects around its upper rim. (Strombolian eruptions are among the less-explosive types of blasts, but Mayon is capable of much more violent eruptions as well.) Over time, these volcanic rocks “stack up, and up, and up,” says Krippner, creating extremely steep slope. That’s why, near the top of the volcano, its sides veer at angles up to 40 degrees—roughly twice the angle of the famous Baldwin street in New Zealand, one of the steepest roads in the world.

So why, exactly, does Mayon have so many fiery fits? It’s all about location. The islands of the Philippines are situated along the Ring of Fire, a curving chain of volcanism that hugs the boundary of the Pacific Ocean and contains three-fourths of all the world’s volcanoes. What drives this region of fiery activity are slow-motion collisions between the shifting blocks of Earth’s crust, or tectonic plates, which have been taking place over millions of years. The situation in the Philippines is in particularly complex, explains Ben Andrews, director of Smithsonian’s Global Volcanism Program. “It’s a place where we have a whole bunch of different subduction zones of different ages that are sort of piling together and crashing together,” he says. “It gets pretty hairy.”
As one plate thrusts beneath another, the rocks begin to melt, fueling the volcanic eruption above. Depending on the composition of the melting rock, the lava can be thin and runny, or thick and viscous. This viscosity paired with the speed at which the magma rises determines the volcano’s explosivity, says Andrews: The thicker and quicker the lava, the more explosive the blast. Mayon produces magma of intermediate composition and viscosity, but it differs from eruption to eruption. Think of a volcanic eruption like opening a shaken bottle of soda, says Andrews. If you pop off the cap immediately, you’re in for a spray of sugary carbonated liquid to the face, just like the sudden release of gas and molten rock that builds under a plug of viscous magma. But if you slow down and let a little air out first—like the gases that can escape from liquid-y magma—a violent explosion is less likely.

News outlets have been reporting on an “imminent explosion,” warning that Mayon will erupt within days. But given its activity so far, it’s not yet clear if, or when, Mayon will erupt. Volcanoes are extremely hard to predict as the magma is constantly changing, says Krippner. Since the volcano began belching, small pyroclastic flows—avalanches of hot rocks, ash and gas—have also tumbled down its flanks. Though dangerous, these pyroclastic flows have the potential to be much more devastating. Previously at Mayon, says Krippner, these flows have been clocked in at over 60 meters per second. “They’re extremely fast and they’re extremely hot,” she says. “They destroy pretty much everything in their path.”

If the eruption continues, one of the biggest dangers is an explosive blast, which could produce a column of volcanic ash miles high. The collapse of this column can send massive, deadly pyroclastic flows racing down the volcano’s flanks. The last time Mayon burst in an explosive eruption was in 2001. With a roar like a jet plane, the volcano shot clouds of ash and molten rock just over six miles into the sky.

Also of concern is the potential for what are known as lahars, or flows of debris. The volcanic rumblings have been actively producing volcanic ash, a material that’s more like sand than the kind of ash you see when you burn wood or paper, notes Krippner. A strong rain—as is frequent on these tropical islands—is all that’s needed to turn these layers of debris into a slurry and send it careening down the volcano’s slopes, sweeping with it anything that gets in its way. Mayon’s steep sides make it particularly susceptible to these mudflows. Residents suffered the full potential for destruction of Mayon’s lahars in November of 2006 when a typhoon swept the region, bringing with it heavy rain that saturated built up material. A massive lahar formed, destroying nearby towns and killing 1,266 people.

Both Krippner and Andrews stress that local residents are in good hands under PHIVolcs’ careful watch. The researchers have installed a complex network of sensors that monitor Mayon’s every tremble and burp and are using their vast amounts of knowledge garnered from past events to interpret the volcano’s every shiver. And as Krippner notes, “it’s still got two more levels to go.” If PHIVoics raises the alert level to a 4 or 5, she says, “that could mean something bigger is coming.” [Source: www.smithsonian.com | Maya Wei-Haas | January 19, 2018 ++]

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South China Sea Update 01  ►  China’s Ambitions in Philippine Eastern Waters

After consolidating control over Philippine-claimed features in the South China Sea, China is now casting its gaze on the island nation’s eastern waters opening onto the Pacific Ocean. Last week, Filipino Congressman Gary Alejano revealed in a privilege speech that the Department of Foreign Affairs’ (DFA) had approved a Chinese state-funded think tank’s request to conduct a scientific survey of the Benham Rise, a seismically active 13 million hectare underwater plateau. As part of the agreement, China’s Institute of Oceanology of Chinese Academy of Sciences (IO-CAS) will work with a team from the University of the Philippines’
Marine Science Institute. Largely undeveloped, the marine feature is believed to be rich in natural gas, heavy metals, fisheries and other resources.

In 2012, the UN Commission on the Limits of the Continental Shelf granted the Philippine government’s petition that the Benham Rise be considered part of the country’s continental shelf, thus giving it sovereign rights over the vast maritime territory. The designation means that although the maritime feature is not part of its national territory, the Philippines enjoys exclusive rights to the exploitation of its natural resources. Filipino fishermen have long sailed in Benham Rise’s waters.

Alejano and other critics have questioned the wisdom of allowing China access to the area, particularly considering recent developments in the South China Sea. “We should be careful and prudent in granting any access to our waters, especially with China who is known to claim 80 percent of our [exclusive economic zone] in the South China Sea through its expansive nine-dash line [map],” he said.

Alejano questioned why a similar request by a French nongovernmental organization, Tara Expeditions Foundation, was refused, arguing that allowing the French group access to Benham Rise would be safer since France and the Philippines have no maritime dispute. Foreign Affairs Secretary Alan Peter Cayetano has defended the decision, saying it is based on existing laws which allow for foreign ships to conduct research in Philippine waters as long as there is a Filipino national aboard.

That didn’t satisfy critics who feel President Rodrigo Duterte’s government has frequently sacrificed national interests for economic benefits from China. “Allowing a Chinese national think tank to conduct a so-called scientific research over Philippine waters, even with the participation of Filipinos, is careless and absurd,” Alejano said, particularly as China has recently shown “alarming interest” in Benham Rise. In March 2017, the Philippine government announced that it sent a note verbale to the Chinese government asking why there were Chinese survey ships in Benham Rise from July to December 2016. China’s foreign ministry said the ships’ were in “innocent passage”, a claim rebutted at the time by Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana. He countered that “innocent passage” means crossing from point A to point B and not crisscrossing an area for several months. In response, Lorenzana announced that he would increase military patrols in the area and move to construct territorial markers.

In May 2017, the Philippine government rechristened Benham Rise, named after a US Navy officer who likely discovered the feature, as the “Philippine Rise” and designated the area as a “protected food supply
exclusive zone.” It also prohibited mining and oil exploration in the underwater plateau. Supreme Court Associate Justice Antonio Carpio, a noted expert in the Philippines’ maritime claims in the South China Sea, described the Duterte government’s decision to allow survey ships to Benham Rise as “dumb.” “China has squatted in the West Philippine Sea (South China Sea) and refuses to leave despite the ruling of the UNCLOS tribunal. The Philippines would be dumb to grant China’s request,” he said.

The development comes as China tightens its grip over the South China Sea, including over Philippine-claimed features such as the Scarborough Shoal and Fiery Cross Reef. As of December 2017, China had built structures on a total of 28 hectares in the Spratlys and Paracel Islands in a rapid militarization of the contested maritime area, strategic think tanks said. The Asian Maritime Transparency Initiative of the Center for Strategic and International Studies, a US-based think tank, said that these structures included hangars, missile shelters, radar arrays, and others have been built on the artificial islands. Security analysts see the build-up leading to the possible imposition of an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) that would consolidate China’s control of the South China Sea, comprising the so-called ‘First Island Chain.’ Some US$3 trillion worth of global trade passes through the waterway every year.

But Benham Rise’s potential importance to China is likely more strategic than economic. Astride the strait between northern Luzon and southern Taiwan, it is one of the main passageways for naval ships out of the South China Sea to the Pacific Ocean. Benham Rise is also situated in the center of the so-called ‘Second Island Chain’ that runs from the shores of Yokohama, Japan, down to the northeastern shores of Indonesia’s islands and bypassing the US military base at Okinawa that allows ships to potentially reach crucial US air and naval bases at Guam.

Filipino critics say surveying the features of Benham Rise could give China a new strategic advantage, as the waters of the Second Island Chain would give its ships and submarines ample space to maneuver, unlike in the cramped, contested and highly surveilled waters of the South China Sea. With a government in Manila increasingly viewed as subservient to Beijing’s interests, the survey could not only open the Philippines’ eastern maritime area’s marine resources to possible Chinese mapping and exploitation, but also create a possible new great power flash-point close to home. [Source: Asia Times | George Amurao | January 18, 2018 ++]

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**South China Sea Update 02 ► RP Will Not Get Embroiled in U.S.-China Spat**

The Philippines said 21 JAN that it won't get embroiled in a fresh spat between the U.S. and China involving Beijing's protest of an American warship passing near a Chinese-controlled shoal also claimed by the Philippines. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque Jr. said that "the United States can take care of its own interest" and added "we do not wish to be part of a U.S.-China intramural" in the disputed South China Sea. The Chinese government on 20 JAN accused the U.S. of trespassing in its territorial waters when a U.S. guided missile destroyer sailed near Scarborough Shoal to promote freedom of navigation in the disputed waters.

Scarborough is a tiny, uninhabited reef that China seized from the Philippines in 2012. Known in Chinese as Huangyan Island, it lies about 200 kilometers (120 miles) west of the main Philippine island of Luzon, and about 600 kilometers (370 miles) southeast of China.
The Philippines also claims the shoal, which is a tiny, uninhabited reef that China seized from the Philippines in 2012 after a tense maritime standoff. Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte has revived once-frosty relations with China since taking power in 2016 and often criticizes U.S. security policies. He has rejected planned joint patrols by the U.S. and Philippine navies in disputed South China Sea waters along with joint combat exercises that could offend China. His predecessor, Benigno Aquino III, backed a continued U.S. presence in the region to serve as a counterweight to China. Under Aquino, the Philippines brought its disputes with China in the South China Sea to international arbitration in 2013 and overwhelmingly won the case three years later. China refused to participate and ignored the decision.

Duterte has refused to demand immediate Chinese compliance with the 2016 arbitration ruling, which invalidated China's vast territorial claims to the South China Sea on historical grounds. He has promised, however, to take up the arbitration ruling with China at a still-unspecified time during his six-year presidency. China claims virtually the entire South China Sea and has carried out extensive land reclamation work on many of the islands and reefs it claims, equipping some with air strips and military installations that have alarmed rival claimant countries and Western governments led by the United States.

Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Lu Kang said 20 JAN that China would take "necessary measures" to protect its sovereignty after the USS Hopper sailed within 12 nautical miles of Scarborough Shoal on 17 JAN without China's permission. Philippine Defense Secretary Delfin Lorenzana said the U.S., Manila's treaty ally, did not notify the Philippines of its naval operation near Scarborough. "We have no say over whatever the Americans do in the South China Sea. They do not inform us beforehand of their activities there," Lorenzana said. Asked if the passage of the U.S. warship in Philippine-claimed waters was a concern, Lorenzana said: "No, for as long as they are on innocent passage. International law allows innocent passage even in territorial waters."

The United States does not claim territory in the South China Sea but has declared it has a national interest in ensuring that the territorial disputes there are resolved peacefully in accordance with international law. The U.S. Navy regularly sails through the area to assert freedom of navigation (FONOP). FONOP is the military's term for freedom of navigation operations. Lt. Cmdr. Nicole Schwegman, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet, said Saturday that such operations are "not about any one country, nor are they about making political statements." Instead they aim to "demonstrate our commitment to uphold the rights, freedoms and lawful uses of the sea and airspace guaranteed to all nations under international law." Scarborough is known in Chinese as Huangyan Island and called Panatag or Bajo de Masinloc by the
Philippines. It lies about 120 miles west of the main Philippine island of Luzon, and about 370 miles southeast of China. [Source: Associated Press | Jim Gomez | January 21, 2018 ++]

Fallout Shelters ► Where Would You Go in A Nuclear Attack?

A generation of Americans knew just what to do in the event of a nuclear attack — or during a major false alarm, like the one over the weekend in Hawaii. Take cover in a building bearing a yellow fallout shelter symbol. But these days, that might not be the best option, or even an option at all.

Relics from the Cold War, the aging shelters that once numbered in the thousands in schools, courthouses and churches haven't been maintained. And conventional wisdom has changed about whether such a shelter system is necessary in an age when an attack is more likely to come from a weak rogue state or terrorist group rather than a superpower.

"We're not in a Cold War scenario. We are in 2018," said Dr. Irwin Redlener, head of the National Center for Disaster Preparedness at Columbia University's Earth Institute. "We're not facing what we were facing 50 years ago, when the Soviet Union and the U.S. had nuclear warheads pointed at each other that would devastate the world. There's a threat, but it's a different type of threat today."

People weren't sure what to do 13 JAN when Hawaii mistakenly sent a cellphone alert warning of an incoming ballistic missile and didn't retract it for 38 minutes. The state had set up the missile warning infrastructure after North Korea demonstrated its missiles had the range to reach the islands. Drivers abandoned cars on a highway and took shelter in a tunnel. Parents huddled in bathtubs with their children. Students bolted across the University of Hawaii campus to take cover in buildings.

The false alarm is the perfect time to talk about what to do in such an emergency, Redlener said, because most of the time people don't want to talk about it. At all. "But it's a real possibility," he said. "City officials should be talking about what their citizens should do if an attack happened. And it's a necessity for individuals and families to talk about and develop their own plan of what they would do." New Yorkers who were asked this week about where they would seek shelter during a missile attack said they had no idea. "The only thing I can think is, I would run," said Sabrina Shephard, 45, of Manhattan. "Where we would run, I don't know, because I don't know if New York has any bomb shelters or anything."

In these Sept. 26, 2017 New Orleans photos, water storage containers (left) rust away inside a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker, old office equipment (center) stands in a room near the entryway of a Cold War era Civil Defense bunker located in the neutral ground of West End Boulevard near Robert E. Lee Boulevard, and an infirmary complete with a medical bed and medical instruments

The fallout shelters, marked with metal signs featuring the symbol for radiation — three joined triangles inside a circle — were set up in tens of thousands of buildings nationwide in the early 1960s amid the nuclear arms race. In New York City alone there were believed to be about 18,000. The locations were
chosen because they could best block radioactive material. Anything could be a shelter as long as it was built with concrete, cinder blocks or brick, had no windows, and could be retrofitted quickly with supplies, an air filtration system and potable water. But the idea was controversial from the start, especially since one of the scenarios at the time, a full-scale nuclear war between the U.S. and the Soviet Union, would have left few survivors. By the 1970s, the concept was abandoned. A FEMA spokeswoman said the agency doesn't even have current information on where the shelters are located.

New York City education officials announced last month they are taking down the fallout shelter signs at schools. In Minot, North Dakota, just a few miles from the base where dozens of U.S. missiles are at ready, a few fallout shelter signs remain, but their status as viable refuges isn't known. So what should you do if there is a nuclear attack now? The good news: You may actually survive, because a nuclear attack today is more likely to be just one bomb — perhaps a small device, smuggled into a city inside a truck, or a single missile lobbed by North Korea that actually makes it across the water. The bad news: You have between 15 and 20 minutes to get to a safe space.

Eliot Calhoun, a disaster planner for New York's Emergency Management Department, said the smartest thing to do is stay put in a spot with as few windows and as many walls as possible. "Don't go outside unless you absolutely must," he said. Subterranean subway stations might be a good place to shelter if you happen to be in one when an attack happens, but experts say tunnels could also be dangerous if they are structurally compromised by a blast.

New Yorker Joe Carpenter emerged from a post office with a faded fallout shelter sign this week and admitted that he had never thought about what to do in the event of an incoming missile. "I probably would just huddle with the masses and go along with the crowd, because I've never really considered it," he said. "It's like everything else: Do we really ponder what's at the end of the road?" [Source: Associated Press | Colleen Long | January 17, 2018 ++]

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**Trump Health** ► CINC Declared to be in Excellent Health

President Donald Trump’s White House physician declared him in “excellent health” after the president received his first medical checkup at Walter Reed military hospital on Friday, undergoing a physical examination amid suggestions in a recent book and by his detractors that he’s mentally unfit. Dr. Ronny Jackson, in a statement released by the White House, said the examination “went exceptionally well. The President is in excellent health and I look forward to briefing some of the details on 16 JAN.”

Trump spent about three hours at the medical facility in Bethesda, Maryland, outside Washington, for the 12 JAN afternoon checkup, his first as president, before departing for Florida for the weekend. The fairly routine exam for previous presidents has taken on outsized importance in the age of Trump, given the tone of some of his tweets, comments attributed to some of his close advisers and Trump’s recent slurring of words on national TV. Some of the comments were published in a new book about Trump’s first year, “Fire and Fury: Inside the Trump White House” by Michael Wolff, which White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders has denounced as “complete fantasy” for portraying her 71-year-old boss as undisciplined and in over his head as president.

Trump himself has pushed back hard against any suggestion that he’s mentally unfit, declaring himself “a very stable genius.” He told reporters on 11 JAN that he expected the exam “to go very well. I’ll be very surprised if it doesn’t.” The examination lasted several hours and measured things like Trump’s blood pressure, cholesterol, blood sugar, heart rate and weight. The White House did not provide specific results of those tests. Jackson, who also provided care for President Barack Obama and became a White House
physician in 2006, was expected to provide a detailed readout of the exam on 16 JAN and answer questions from reporters.

But conclusions about Trump’s mental acuity were not expected. The White House said Trump would not undergo a psychiatric exam. Officials did not address a different type of screening: assessments of cognitive status that examine neurologic functions including memory. Cognitive assessments aren’t routine in standard physicals, though they recently became covered in Medicare’s annual wellness visits for seniors. While the exams are not mandatory, modern presidents typically undergo them regularly and release a doctor’s report declaring they are “fit for duty.” Two months before the November 2016 election, Trump released a five-paragraph letter from his longtime physician, Dr. Harold Bornstein, who concluded that Trump “is in excellent physical health.” A year earlier, Bornstein said in a December 2015 letter: “If elected, Mr. Trump, I can state unequivocally, will be the healthiest individual ever elected to the presidency.”

The 2016 letter put Trump’s blood pressure and cholesterol measurements in the healthy range, though he uses a cholesterol-lowering statin medication. His EKG, chest X-ray, echocardiogram and blood sugar were normal.

The 6-foot-3 Trump weighed 236 pounds (107 kilograms), and his body mass index, or BMI, of 29.5 put him in the category of being overweight for his height. Trump takes Crestor for his cholesterol, a low-dose aspirin for heart attack prevention, Propecia to treat male-pattern baldness and antibiotics for rosacea. The doctor’s 2016 letter stated that Trump’s testosterone level, 441.6, was in the normal range, as were his PSA reading for prostate abnormalities and tests of his liver and thyroid. Trump was 70 when he took office on Jan. 20, 2017, making him the oldest person ever elected to the nation’s highest office. How much of Trump’s health information is released to the public is up to the president, but Sanders said she expects the White House to release the same kind of details past presidents have made public.

Obama’s three medical reports included sections on vital statistics; physical exam by system, such as eyes, pulmonary and gastrointestinal; lab results; his past medical and surgical history; his social history; and medications, among others. Trump has said he gets most of his exercise playing golf. The American Heart Association has said the best types of exercise increase the heart rate and make a person breathe heavily, but that activities like golf don’t provide as much cardiovascular benefit since they don’t require much extra effort. The association suggests players walk the golf course instead of renting a golf cart. Trump drives a cart from hole to hole. Obama played basketball, lifted weights, worked out on an elliptical machine or treadmill and played golf. George W. Bush traded running for mountain biking to preserve his knees. Bill Clinton was a runner who installed a jogging track at the White House. He also played golf and indulged in Big Macs.

Trump likes fast food, too, along with well-done steaks, chocolate cake and double scoops of vanilla ice cream. He reportedly downs 12 Diet Cokes a day. In their recent book, “Let Trump Be Trump,” former top campaign aides Corey Lewandowski and David Bossie described the four major food groups on Trump’s campaign plane as “McDonald’s, Kentucky Fried Chicken, pizza and Diet Coke.” [Source: The Associated Press | Darlene Superville & Ken Thomas, | January 13, 2018 ++]

Brain Teaser ➤ Do You Know 3

1. A man is pushing his car along the road when he comes to a hotel. He shouts, "I'm bankrupt!" Why?
2. How many of each species did Moses take on the ark with him?
3. Forward I am heavy, but backward I am not. What am I?
4. He has married many women, but has never been married. Who is he?
5. Take off my skin - I won’t cry, but you will! What am I?
6. Imagine you are in a dark room. How do you get out?
7. What invention lets you look right through a wall?
8. What can you catch but not throw?
9. What is at the end of a rainbow?
10. What is as light as a feather, but even the world’s strongest man couldn’t hold it for more than a minute?
11. What has one eye but cannot see?
12. What is always coming but never arrives?
13. Which weighs more, a pound of feathers or a pound of bricks?

[Source: https://www.braingle.com/brainteasers January 5, 2018 ++]

Where There's a Will, There's a Way ► 09

Brain Teaser Answers ► Do You Know 3

1. He was playing Monopoly.
2. None, Moses wasn’t on the ark Noah was.
3. Forward I am ton, backwards I am not.
4. A preacher.
5. An onion.
6. Stop imagining.
7. A window.
8. A cold.
9. The letter W.
10. His breath.
11. A needle.
12. Tomorrow.
13. Neither, they both weigh one pound.
Have You Heard?  ► Husband and Wife (1)

Shopping
A wife asks her husband, "Could you please go shopping for me and buy one carton of milk and if they have
avocados, get 6.
A short time later the husband comes back with 6 cartons of milk. The wife asks him, "Why did you buy 6
cartons of milk?"
He replied, "They had avocados."
If you're a woman, I'm sure you're going back to read it again! Men will get it the first time.

WATER IN THE CARBURETOR
WIFE: "There is trouble with the car. It has water in the carburettor."
HUSBAND: "Water in the carburettor? That's ridiculous"
WIFE: "I tell you the car has water in the carburetor."
HUSBAND: "You don't even know what a carburetor is. I'll check it out.
Where's the car?
WIFE: "In the pool".

STATISTIC
THIS IS A FRIGHTENING STATISTIC, PROBABLY ONE OF THE MOST WORRISOME IN RECENT YEARS.
25% of the women in this country are on medication for mental illness.
That's scary. It means 75% are running around untreated...

THE PHONE
A young man wanted to get his beautiful blonde wife something nice for their first wedding anniversary. So
he decided to buy her a cell phone. He showed her the phone and explained to her all of its features.
Meg was excited to receive the gift and simply adored her new phone.
The next day Meg went shopping. Her phone rang and, to her astonishment, it was her husband on the other
end.
"Hi Meg," he said, "how do you like your new phone?"
Meg replied, "I just love it! It's so small and your voice is clear as a bell, but there's one thing I don't
understand though..."
"What's that, sweetie?" asked her husband.
“How did you know I was at Woolies?”

HE MUST PAY
Husband and wife had a tiff. Wife called up her mom and said, "He fought with me again, I am coming to
live with you."
Mom said, "No darling, he must pay for his mistake. I am coming to live with you.

REMEMBER
An army first sergeant and his wife were in a busy shopping center getting things for their youngest child’s
upcoming engagement announcement. The wife suddenly noticed that her husband was missing and as they
had a lot to do, she called him on his cell and said "Where are you, you know we have lots to do."
He said "You remember the jewelers we went into when we were stationed here about 10 years ago, and you
fell in love with that diamond necklace? I could not afford it at the time, and I said that one day I would get
it for you?"
Little tears started to flow down her cheek and she got all choked up… "Yes, I do remember that shop." she replied.
"Well, I’m in the gun shop next door to that."

**TODAY’S SHORT READING FROM THE BIBLE**
From Genesis: "And God promised men that good and obedient wives would be found in all corners of the earth."
Then he made the earth round… and He laughed and laughed and laughed!

**ARGUING**
A woman goes to her Priest and says, “Father, I don’t know what to do. Every day my husband seems to lose his temper for no reason at all. It scares me.”
The Priest says, “I have a cure for that. When it seems your husband is getting angry, pick up a glass of water, take a mouthful, and swish it around in your mouth – but don’t swallow. Keep swishing it around until he calms down.”
Two weeks later a very happy young woman meets the Priest after Mass.
She says, “Father that was a Brilliant idea. Every time my husband started losing it, I filled my mouth with water. I swished and swished and amazingly he calmed right down. How does an ordinary glass of water do that?”
The Priest replied, “The water itself does nothing, my child. It’s keeping your sweet mouth closed that does the trick!”

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