

RAO

BULLETIN

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PDF Edition

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*** DoD ***



DoD-VA Pharmacy Update 01 ► HASC Wants Pharmacies to Match Meds

The House Armed Services Committee wants the Defense and Veterans Affairs departments' pharmacies to offer the same medications, at least for some prescriptions. Legislation introduced this week calls for the formularies of both departments to match medications for pain management, sleep disorders, psychiatric conditions and other illnesses "determined appropriate" by the DoD and VA secretaries. Committee aides said lawmakers are looking to ensure continuity of care and treatment when troops move from active duty to veterans status. Concerns over the two departments' discordant formularies have been raised by veterans and advocacy groups.

Few stories demonstrate the importance of the issue for service members like the death of former Marine Clay Hunt, who became a veterans advocate after leaving military service in 2009 but died shortly after moving to Houston in 2011. According to his mother, Susan Selke, Hunt suffered from depression, anxiety and post-traumatic stress disorder, but when he went to the VA medical center in his new location, he had trouble getting an appointment and could not get his brand-name prescription filled at the facility's pharmacy. He was told he would have to wait for it to be mailed to him, since the pharmacy stocked only generics. Hunt shot himself March 31, 2011. "If you know about antidepressant, anti-anxiety medications, you can't ... stop them cold. You can't wait for it to come in the mail and then expect that it's going to work quickly," Selke told House lawmakers last year.

The House proposal follows a recommendation from the Military Modernization and Retirement Compensation Commission that DoD and VA align their formularies. According to the Government Accountability Office, just 43 percent of the medications in DoD's formulary also are in VA's system, excluding many pain medications, antidepressants and antipsychotics taken by injured service members for physical pain and mental health conditions. Commission member retired Army Gen. Peter Chiarelli said the gap leaves troops vulnerable. "If we have found a medication that works, it should be available wherever (the veteran) goes," Chiarelli said. "We should not put our service men and women in this situation." The House Armed Services Committee will review its full version of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill on Thursday. The Senate will work on its own version of the legislation over the next few weeks. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | April 23, 2015 ++]

DoD/VA Seamless Transition Update 28 ► USDS' New Mission

A team of high-tech experts who helped fix the White House's healthcare.gov website after its botched rollout in 2013 is working at the Pentagon with a new mission: fixing the broken system for transferring military health records over to the Veterans Affairs Department. The team of 16 people from the U.S. Digital Service (USDS), a recently created division of top software engineers, set up an office inside the Defense Department on Monday, said Navy Cmdr. Bill Urban, a Pentagon spokesman. It's part of a broader effort to step up the military's computer literacy and cyber skills, and the first task will be "working on seamlessly transferring health care records" between the two agencies.

The USDS was created last year and included many of the same software engineers who did the triage work and saved the healthcare.gov website. The White House said it is an effort to apply the same type of technology skills to other government agencies. "Bringing the U.S. Digital Service to the Pentagon will help us surge on some of the most vexing problems and give DoD access to some of the best engineers in the world," said one senior defense official. For years veterans have complained about the government's inability to share basic health care information that is required for former service members to get timely access to their benefits. That can result in gaps in health care and flawed decision making by health care professionals. An

effort to create a joint Defense Department-VA system for electronic health records cost more than \$1 billion before it was abandoned in favor of a plan that would create separate systems that could communicate with each other. That system has not yet been developed.

The ill-fated effort continues. The latest defense bill from the House of Representatives includes \$233 million for electronic health records modernization. The healthcare.gov website was the centerpiece of the health care reform law that President Obama signed in 2010. The site's launch in October 2013 was marred by technological problems that made it impossible for many people to sign up for health insurance and fueled criticism of the controversial law. The healthcare.gov site now functions well and has helped millions of people sign up for health insurance, federal officials say. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | April 23, 2015 ++]

DECA Budget Cuts Update 14 ► Committee Rejects DoD's Cut Proposal

A key House panel is backing plans to restore funding to the Defense Commissary Agency — heading off, for now, potential reductions in store hours and days of operation. Congressional aides said language in House Armed Services Committee's version of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill that is now taking shape would set agency spending at \$1.3 billion next year, despite a proposal from defense officials to cut the budget to \$1.15 billion. That reduction would have required most commissaries to reduce operating days and hours. Although DeCA would have the funding available to avoid reducing the store hours as a cost-cutting measure, the Defense Department still has authority to cut hours and days of operation without lawmakers' approval, congressional aides noted. Committee members rejected DoD's request for legislation that would have allowed commissary officials to raise prices in order to pay for some operating costs. Items currently are sold at cost, with taxpayer dollars paying for overhead and employee wages and benefits.

Marking up commissary prices on some items, as well as consolidation of commissary and exchanges' back-office functions, are recent recommendations from the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission. But lawmakers are not yet ready to address those issues, said Rep. Joe Heck (R-NV), chairman of the armed services committee's personnel panel. Lawmakers are awaiting results from a congressionally-mandated study on the effects of price markups in commissaries, as well as a number of other issues, that is due to Congress in September. The panel were scheduled to formally vote on the commissary budget plan 23 APR, but members so far have offered no objections to it. The full House will consider the measure next week, followed by the Senate Armed Services Committee, and by both the House and Senate appropriations committees, before becoming law. [Source: MilitaryTimes | By Karen Jowers & Leo Shane | April 23, 2015 ++]

Military Allotments Update 01 ► MAC Must Pay \$3.1M for Hidden Fees

A Kentucky company that processed allotment payments will pay about \$3.1 million to troops who were allegedly charged hidden fees. Military Assistance Company (MAC), a subsidiary of Kentucky-based Fort Knox National Company, allegedly charged the fees to "tens of thousands" of active-duty and retired military members and federal civilian employees, according to the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau (CFPB). Officials of CFPB announced 20 APR they have taken action against the Fort Knox National Company and Military Assistance Company. Some creditors, such as auto lenders, used third-party processors of military allotments in order to receive payments from troops. Allotments are a portion of a service member's pay and allowances that are designated to go to a particular person or institution.

The allotments in question were put into place before a Defense Department policy change that prohibits active-duty troops from using new allotments to purchase, lease or rent consumer items, as of 1 JAN. While the agreements with Military Assistance Company directed service members to add a payment processing charge to the allotment amount, other charges also were added, CFPB alleged. In many cases, extra allotment money accumulated in service members' allotment accounts — for example, when a member did not stop an allotment after the debt was paid off. That resulted in what is called a residual balance. The company allegedly routinely charged fees against these residual balances, which affected about 30 percent of the troops who used the company's service. CFPB alleged that MAC "slowly drained" the money from account balances without notifying service members. For example, an account that maintained a positive balance for more than six months was charged a recurring fee of \$12 to \$20.

Company officials could not immediately be reached for comment. But the company agreed to the consent order without admitting or denying any of CFPB's findings of fact — except for the facts necessary to establish CFPB's jurisdiction over the company, documents show. The agreement was signed by Robert J. Roberts Jr., president and CEO of Fort Knox National Company and Military Assistance Company. According to the consent order, MAC stopped offering this particular allotment processing service in March 2014, and since then has "expended substantial resources to return residual balances to service members." In 2013, CFPB announced an enforcement action against the Military Installment Loans and Educational Services auto loan program, alleging that MILES had used the military allotment system to its advantage. The consent order in that case noted that the MILES program was effectively requiring service members to use Military Assistance Company — the MILES "allotment partner" — for processing allotments. Among other things, CFPB alleged that when US Bank financed MILES loans, they charged troops a \$3 monthly processing fee for their automatic allotments that was not disclosed up front.

DoD formed an interagency team to review the allotment system in 2013, and the new policy was announced Nov. 21, 2014. It applies to all "tangible and movable" personal property such as cars, boats, motorcycles, washers, dryers, furniture, laptops, tables, televisions and cellphones. It does not apply to such allotments that were already in place before 1 JAN. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 20, 2015 ++]

SBP After Retirement Update 01 ► New Survivor Benefit Policy

Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Harold Brown, one of World War II's famed Tuskegee Airmen, survived being shot down over Austria near the end of the war. He also survived a stint as a prisoner of war, including time at the notorious Moosburg POW camp. Shortly after the war, as a flight instructor, he survived a midair crash. "All this before I was 21," said Brown, now 90, who retired from the Air Force a half-century ago and from his second career as an educator about 29 years ago.. He named his first wife as his SBP beneficiary when they divorced in 1991. "It seemed to me the only honorable thing to do," he said. "I would have done it even if it hadn't been for the court order. She was the mother of my two children. How was I to know cancer would catch up with her and she would die before me?" Now, because he did, he finds himself in yet another battle — this time with the Defense Finance and Accounting Service.

After his former wife died from cancer in 2013, Brown asked DFAS to transfer his military Survivor Benefit Plan benefits to his current wife, whom he married in 2010. But though Brown has paid tens of thousands of dollars in premiums for the benefits, DFAS refused. He — and an unknown number of other retirees — have discovered that in 2013 DFAS, with no public notice, changed the way it interprets the law governing SBP. For decades, DFAS had allowed the transfer of SBP benefits to a new spouse if a former spouse died before the retiree. But with the change in 2013, retirees no longer are automatically allowed to

do that. There are ways to make it happen, but such transfers must be made before the former spouse's death if the original designation was made as part of a court order or a written agreement.



Retired Air Force Lt. Col. Harold Brown and his wife, Marsha Bordner Left | Brown at age 26.

Brown cannot say just how much he has paid in SBP premiums overall. But he knows that each month, for 36 years, he paid 6.5 percent of his retirement check for the benefit. (In 2008, the law was changed so that retirees 70 and older who have paid premiums for at least 30 years are considered fully paid up and no longer have to pay premiums.) At Brown's death, the basic SBP would have made a monthly annuity payment to his designated beneficiary equal to 55 percent of his monthly retirement pay. The premiums Brown paid over the years will stay in the broad Defense Department trust fund that pays retirees and annuitants, to include SBP beneficiaries, said DFAS spokesman Steve Burghardt. The SBP program is partially funded by the government, which underwrites at least 40 percent of the costs. Brown noted that the DFAS website states that SBP is a form of insurance for part of retired pay. "They're selling this as insurance, but it's not," he said. "Or it is— with technicalities."

Brown is not alone. The Military Officers Association of America has heard from other retirees over the last two years since DFAS altered its interpretation of the law, said Phil Odom, the group's deputy director of government relations. "This verbal legal interpretation means that a military retiree cannot transfer SBP coverage to a current or future spouse as has been the policy in the past", wrote retired Vice Adm. Norbert Ryan, MOAA's president, in a September letter to Jessica Wright, then-undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness. Moreover, Ryan noted, the DFAS change also creates an inconsistency because retired federal employees who have purchased Office of Personnel Management-sponsored survivor benefits are authorized to make such transfers after the death of an ex-spouse. SBP experts are reviewing these situations and associated policies, but no decisions have been made, said Defense Department spokesman Lt. Cmdr. Nate Christensen.

DFAS officials have recommended that if service officials want to take a different approach in situations like Brown's, they should seek formal legislation from Congress. According to DFAS, its general counsel actually has drafted potential legislation, and has provided a copy to DoD personnel officials. The DFAS interpretation "seems harsh," said David Snell, director of the federal benefits services department at the National Active and Retired Federal Employees Association. "Events in life happen. I can't imagine the rationale."

In general, Burghardt said, in a scenario in which the member selects spouse SBP coverage at the time he or she becomes eligible to participate, the couple divorces, and former spouse coverage is selected, then all previous coverage under the plan ends. "In that instance, if the former spouse dies, then SBP coverage has terminated" and coverage for a subsequent spouse cannot be elected, Burghardt said.

It is unclear what case or cases precipitated DFAS to change its view. But only three such cases were referred for legal review before May 2013, and in just one did the legal advice support the previous, more lenient interpretation. As of March 4, a total of 1,141 retirees had benefited from that previous interpretation, according to DFAS data. DFAS has determined that the new, more stringent rules will not apply retroactively to retirees and their current spouses who transferred beneficiary designations before DFAS changed its perspective. Because there has been no published legal opinion or any announcement of the change, MOAA is concerned that retirees are unaware they will be unable to transfer the benefit if their former spouse dies before they do unless they follow procedures to make the change before the former spouse dies.

DFAS officials said opinions provided by their general counsel office “are particularized to the specific case under review and are not published,” though officials have made changes to the Financial Management Regulation governing SBP and have advised SBP managers for all the services of the change. In other documentation, DFAS officials have opined that because transfer requests such as Brown’s are not expressly permitted by the SBP statute, such a change is not permitted. “I believe this was an unintended consequence,” Brown said. “The law doesn’t say you can, but it doesn’t say you can’t. So I’m in a dilemma.”

Brown said that a few years before his former wife died, he called DFAS to ask how to transfer his SBP benefit if his former wife died before him. He said he was told to simply submit copies of the former spouse’s death certificate and his current marriage certificate. So he was quite surprised, he said, when he sought a transfer after his ex-wife’s death in 2013 and was denied. The change in policy appears to have happened about five months before her death. Mark Sullivan, a family law attorney representing Brown, said he is working with two other clients in the same situation, one whose former spouse is terminally ill. “Our client is going to have to approach her about giving him [back] the SBP,” said Sullivan, a retired Army Reserve colonel. “It’s a very awkward situation.” Brown has appealed his case to the Air Force Board for Correction of Military Records. That appeal is still pending. For now, he can only wait. “We can afford a lawyer ... many guys can’t,” Brown said. “We’re fighting this for other people out there, so their spouses can live out their days more comfortably.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 20, 2015 ++]

MCRMC Update 14 ► 5 of 6 Vet Groups Endorse Retirement System

Military advocates in favor of retirement reform are pushing lawmakers to move ahead on the issue, saying the change could help strengthen the fighting force and the financial lives of troops. In a letter to House Armed Services Committee leaders this week, five advocacy groups jointly gave strong support for a 401(k)-style retirement plan proposed by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission earlier this year. “By not establishing a retirement plan when they begin working, service members are several years, if not a decade, behind financial planning for retirement guidelines,” the letter states. “We believe that the (commission’s) recommendation enhances the current retirement system and is a valuable recruiting tool for a new generation of warfighters.” The five groups — Veterans of Foreign Wars, Air Force Association, Enlisted Association of the National Guard, National Guard Association and Reserve Officers Association — boast more than 3 million members collectively.

They are in direct opposition with the Military Officers Association of America, another high-profile advocacy group that has lobbied heavily against the potential retirement change. MOAA officials have said the changes could be a disincentive for midcareer service members to stay in the ranks. The compensation commission’s proposal features government contributions to investment accounts, matching up to 5 percent of troops’ base pay, and would allow troops who serve at least 12 years to see some financial bonuses to their retirement accounts. But it would also scale back retirement pay by up to 20 percent, alarming supporters of

the current system. VFW and the other groups have argued the current 20-years-or-nothing system is unfair to the 83 percent of troops who don't reach that retirement mark, including many driven out by difficult deployments or force cuts. The letter also offers support for a separate recommendation to promote troops' financial literacy through new benefits training classes, so they will better understand changes to the Thrift Savings Plan. Lawmakers on the committee so far have not weighed in on whether they'll back the retirement changes, but said that a quick legislative change on the issue is unlikely. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 17, 2015 ++]

NDA for 2016 Update 01 ► The Proposals Begin

One lawmaker wants safer cockpit door locks for the civilian planes that transport troops. Another wants to let service members carry private weapons on base. Several others want easier regulations on small-business owners bidding on defense contracts. And they all want their proposals included in the upcoming 2016 National Defense Authorization Act, the massive annual budget legislation that is just starting to come into focus. Each year, the bill sets spending guidelines for thousands of critical Pentagon priorities, but also includes a host of smaller, sometimes controversial policy changes.

The House Armed Services Committee will unveil its first drafts of the expected \$600 billion-plus measure next week, outlining goals for annual endeavors such as setting the military basic pay raise, retiring and preserving various aircraft, and reforming the defense acquisition process. But each year, the legislation also contains hundreds of provisions on lower-profile issues such as transferring unused base land to local communities, awarding overdue medals to battlefield heroes and protecting pet projects at hometown bases. For some lawmakers and lobbyists, those lesser-heralded provisions can be more influential politically than helping pass a plan to adequately fund the military. This year, among the provisions under consideration is a request from Rep. Don Young (R-AK) to include language supporting Air Force proposals to station F-35 Joint Strike Fighters at bases in his state. Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) pushed for millions more for Army flight training, highlighting its potential impact on Fort Campbell, which sits in her district.

Several lawmakers petitioned the committee 14 APR to include the small-business reforms, noting the impact that freeing up billions in potential contracts could have on the national economy (not to mention their own districts). Other requests were less parochial but still potentially influential. Rep. Earl (D-OR) argued for more emergency visas for foreign nationals who worked with U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan. Rep. Mike Fitzpatrick (R-PA) wants second barrier doors on civil air reserve fleet planes, to prevent possible in-flight attacks. The 2015 National Defense Authorization Act approved last year included language awarding Purple Hearts to victims of the 2009 shooting at Fort Hood in Texas, a controversial step that took five years to shepherd through Congress.

This year's bill likely will include similarly problematic and previously unsuccessful provisions, including two championed by Rep. Louie Gohmert (R-TX) on Tuesday. The first would allow military chaplains to "pray in Jesus' name," a provision that has rankled Pentagon officials who have pushed for nondenominational, inclusive prayers in some public, nonreligious settings. The other would allow troops to carry privately-owned firearms on base, in light of incidents like the 2014 shootings at Fort Hood, Texas. Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX), chairman of the armed services committee, said he expects plenty of sparring over those and other heated measures in the days to come, but added: "We'll work through it." The committee is expected to finalize its work by the end of the month, and the full House is scheduled to debate the measure in mid-May. Those moves will set the stage for negotiations with the Senate, which is expected to submit its own draft — complete with even more undercard policy changes — early this summer. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 14, 2015 ++]

NDAA for 2016 Update 02 ► HASC Acts on MCRMC Recommendations

House lawmakers will back a dramatic overhaul to the military retirement system as part of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill, including a 401k-style investment plan and an end to the 20-year, all-or-nothing retirement model. They come despite concerns of some veterans groups that the commission recommendations won't entice enough troops to stay to or past the 20-year mark. House Armed Services Committee leaders also will mandate better financial literacy training for troops, improved access to child care on military bases and consolidate the current 30 Reserve component duty statuses to six. Those moves are all aspects of recommendations made earlier this year by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission. But for now, the lawmakers are not backing potential Tricare and commissary system changes, two other controversial measures in the commission report.

Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX), chairman of the House Armed Services Committee, said he believes the moves as a whole will strengthen the fighting force. "This is the sort of change that isn't going to save a lot of money, but it's designed to attract and keep up the quality of talent in the military," he said. He also indicated there is support for similar moves in the Senate, which will have to sign off on all of the proposed House changes. The retirement changes would affect only future enlisting troops. Those currently serving would have the choice to opt into the system, but would not be required to do so.



Rep. Mac Thornberry

The 20-year retirement plan has served as a major military recruiting tool for decades, offering service members a sizable pension while still in the prime of their working years. But critics have noted that few troops are able to take advantage of the system. Commission members noted that 83 percent of troops don't stay for 20 years, and leave the service with no real retirement plan. The new proposal would solve that, offering a 401k-style investment account with government contributions and matches that troops could take with them whenever they leave the military. Plans call for:

- An automatic federal contribution of 1 percent of troops' basic pay to their Thrift Savings Plan accounts, with matching contributions up to 5 percent of basic pay — offerings that mirror private sector employee benefits.
- Lump-sum "continuation pay" for members who stay beyond 12 years of service and the traditional pension plan for those who reach 20 years. However, payouts at the 20-year mark would be reduced from the current 50 percent of basic pay to 40 percent, which raised concerns among critics.
- Government matches to TSP accounts to continue past 20 years, a wrinkle not included in the compensation commission's plan.
- Dumping complex lump-sum retirement payout options recommended by the commission in favor of a simpler plan.

- Mandating Pentagon officials offer a path within six months to implement the new retirement plan and setting October 2017 as a firm target to have the new system in place. Rep. Joe Heck (R-NV) Heck, chairman of the committee's personnel panel, and HASC chairman Thornberry both said they think that will give all sides enough time to work through any potential problems, and calm outside fears about unexpected downsides.

The Republican leaders also said that will give military officials enough time to put in place new financial literacy training for troops, so they better understand how the investment savings accounts will work and the risks involved. The White House is scheduled to offer its own analysis of the commission recommendations April 30, after the full House armed services committee marks up its version of the authorization bill. Chairman Thornberry said he is confident that the rest of his congressional colleagues will see the benefits of the plan. Rep. Heck said members of his panel already have voiced strong support for a change. "For too long, if you didn't serve 20 you left with nothing," Heck said. "This plan recognizes the service of everyone."

Senate Armed Services Committee leaders say they are ready to move ahead on military retirement reform this year, following the lead of their House counterparts. Committee chairman Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) said he expects some version of a new 401(k)-style military retirement system to be included in his panel's draft of the annual defense authorization bill later this spring. "We've been working closely" with the House, McCain said. "We're basing our plan on the recommendations of the (Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization) Commission, and we feel comfortable with that." Both proposals still must survive full chamber debate and White House scrutiny before becoming law, but the dual-chamber support for the plan makes it increasingly likely that the military retirement system this year will see its biggest changes in decades. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 21 & 22, 2015 ++]

NDA for 2016 Update 03 ► HASC Adopts a \$612 Billion Bill

The House Armed Services Committee on 30 APR adopted a \$612 billion defense authorization bill which would radically reform military retirement but reject changes to a host of other benefit trims proposed by the Pentagon. By a 60-2 vote, the panel approved the annual budget legislation after almost 19 hours of debate, setting the stage for a full House vote in mid-May. The bill is one of the most-followed measures among the defense community, because of the hundreds of policy renewals and revisions involved. This year, that includes provisions again rejecting Defense Department pleas for another base closure round, full funding for commissary operations despite Pentagon plans for trims, and passive support for a 2.3 percent pay raise despite White House insistence that a lower, 1.3 percent hike would better help control personnel costs.

The measure also outlines plans to plus up temporary war spending to more than \$89 billion in fiscal 2016 in an effort to get around spending caps mandated under the 2011 Budget Control Act. White House officials have threatened to veto any budget bills that fail to repeal those spending caps, but Republicans in Congress have instead opted to use the contingency funding as a way to boost military spending without providing budget relief for other, non-defense agencies. The retirement reforms -- which follow recommendations from a two-year independent commission review -- would update the current 20-years, all-or-nothing system with a blended benefits package featuring 401(k) style investments for all troops. Supporters have praised that move as finally giving some retirement benefits to the 83 percent of troops who serve less than 20 years, but opponents worry that plans to cut pension-style payouts by one-fifth could hurt retention of senior service members.

The measure includes a number of new provisions for handling of sexual assault cases, including expanded access to legal resources for victims and improved services for male victims. But the House panel again rejected efforts to separate those prosecutions from the military chain of command, a priority of some

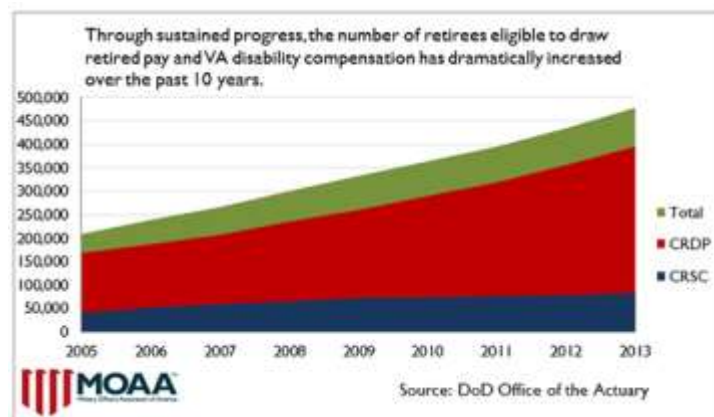
advocates who argue the military justice system has proven inadequate to handle such cases. The pay raise issue is likely only a temporary victory for supporters of a biggest boost to troops wallets. Although panel members said they support the larger raise, they did not include any specific language in the measure mandating the 2.3 percent target. That would allow the president to easily substitute his lower, 1.3 percent hike later this year. Unlike last year, the authorization bill draft does not include a freeze on basic pay for general and flag officers in paygrades O-7 through O-10. Lawmakers also dismissed Pentagon plans to further trim back housing allowances, another personnel cost-savings move made in last year's bill.

The full House is expected to consider the authorization bill draft in mid-May, and the Senate Armed Services Committee expected to offer its own version around the same time. Lawmakers will spend much of the summer reconciling the competing provisions in the hopes of sending the measure to the president's desk before the start of the new fiscal year in October. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 30, 2015 ++]

Concurrent Receipt Status Update 01 ► Sen. Reid Departure Impact

Senate Minority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) announced he would not seek reelection in 2016, setting off a flurry of speculation as to who his successor will be. Many expect Sen. Chuck Schumer (D-NY) to take the post. While leadership changes always have an effect on the veteran's legislative agenda, the question most frequently asked by from Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) members has been, "What does this mean for concurrent receipt?" For decades, MOAA has sought legislation providing full relief from the 19th-century law that required a dollar-for-dollar offset of military retired pay for VA disability compensation. MOAA's position is that career servicemembers earn their retired pay by service alone and those unfortunate enough to suffer a service-caused disability in the process should have any VA disability compensation from the VA added to, not subtracted from, their service-earned military retired pay.

For 14 years, Reid has sponsored legislation in the Senate to eliminate the offset. Since 2003, several advances have helped eliminate the offset. With the advent of Combat-Related Special Compensation (CRSC) and Concurrent Retirement and Disability Pay (CRDP), almost half a million disabled retirees now receive some or all of their VA compensation and retired pay. In 2003, Reid helped broker a deal that established a 10-year phase-in for retirees with at least a 50-percent rating. That breakthrough deal helped tens of thousands of retirees gain a form of recourse against the offset: In the FY 2008 defense bill, Reid championed provisions that ended the 10-year phase in to those with a 100 percent disability due to unemployability and expanded CRSC to all retirees regardless of their years of service. Unfortunately, over 500,000 disabled retirees still suffer from the offset.



Reid consistently has sponsored legislation that guarantees every disabled retiree their compensation earned by length of service, independent of disability. For servicemembers forced into disability retirement before 20 years, commonly referred to as Chapter 61 retirees, his bill vests service-earned retired pay for the length of time served — an acknowledgement that service-caused disability denied the option to complete a full career. Reid's Retired Pay Restoration Act, S.271, encompasses all MOAA has been advocating on concurrent receipt and completely eliminates the offset for all service-connected disabled retirees, including Chapter 61s.

Regardless of your party affiliation or views of his leadership style, Reid has been a long-time supporter of the military community, especially for retirees who have service-connected disabilities. With Reid's departure, we lose one of the most prominent supporters of concurrent receipt. It will be difficult for us to find a legislator as prominent as Reid to become the face of our issue. That's not partisanship; that's political reality. Fortunately, when previous champions have left Congress, others have stepped up. When Rep. Mike Bilirakis (R-FL) retired from office in 2007, his son, Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL), followed in his footsteps by introducing concurrent receipt legislation. When Rep. Jim Marshall (D-GA) left office in 2011, Rep. Sanford Bishop (D-GA) stepped up to become our House champion for full concurrent receipt. We're already surveying the landscape to find the next concurrent receipt champion in the Senate.

The bottom line: Let's not lose sight that over 500,000 disabled retirees still are affected by the offset. Contact your legislators today and ask them to support Reid's S. 271 and Bishop's H.R. 333. MOAA has provided editable preformatted messages which you can auto-forward to your legislators on each bill at:

- S.271 | <http://capwiz.com/moaa/issues/bills/?bill=64047461>
- H.R.333 | <http://capwiz.com/moaa/issues/bills/?bill=64031286>

[Source: MOAA Leg Up | April 17, 2015 ++]

Commissary Funding Update 01 ► Coalition Letter to HASC | Reject Cuts

A coalition of organizations advocating to protect military shopping benefits has sent a letter to leaders of the House and Senate Armed Services committees urging them to reject the Pentagon's proposed cuts to commissary funding. They also asked the committees to reject the legislative changes the Pentagon has requested, which would allow the commissaries to raise prices in order to pay for some operating costs. "The Pentagon's budget cuts will destroy the commissary benefit," the Coalition to Save Our Military Shopping Benefits wrote in an 16 APR letter. "Based on the high value placed on the benefit by service members, retirees, and their families, no commissary cuts or legislative changes should be approved by Congress that would reduce the benefit," the coalition wrote. "The hours and days of operation at commissaries should not be decreased nor should the prices for groceries in commissaries be increased."

The Defense Department's fiscal 2016 budget proposal would cut \$322 million in funding, reducing the commissary subsidy to about \$1.15 billion. A cut of that size would force reduced operating days and hours in most commissaries. DoD officials also have asked for authority to allow "variable pricing" — markups — in commissaries. Items in commissaries now are sold at cost plus a 5 percent surcharge added at the register. The House Armed Services Committee begins its markup of the annual defense authorization bill next week. Among the coalition groups signing onto the letter are the National Military Family Association, Military Officers' Association of America, Association of the United States Army, and Military Partners and Families Coalition. The American Logistics Association and Armed Forces Marketing Council, which represent members of industry doing business with the commissaries, exchanges and morale, welfare and recreation programs, also signed.

Although studies have recognized the value of the commissary benefits, "DoD continues to target the annual commissary appropriation as a cost saving measure," the coalition wrote. Last year, Congress rejected DoD's proposed cut of \$200 million in Defense Commissary Agency funding. DoD had floated a three-year plan to slash the DeCA budget by \$1 billion. The department's fiscal 2016 budget request proposes bigger plans for reducing the commissary budget and for raising prices, starting in fiscal 2017. Accompanying the letter was a document from the National Military Family Association outlining some of the comments received from military families in the wake of the discussions on raising prices. Repeatedly, families noted that they wouldn't shop at commissaries if prices rise, which would, in effect end the benefit. A sampling:

- "The reason I do shop there is because my overall bill is always cheaper compared to when I shop at other stores. I wouldn't shop there if they raised prices, there's no benefit to it."
- "Our family needs the commissary. We have one option when it comes to shopping off post, and we wouldn't be able to afford a decent amount of groceries for our family if we had to shop off post. Too tight of a budget. The commissary prices allow us to feed our families without struggling."
- "Raise prices and many will go elsewhere and jobs will be lost. ... Military families should be given kudos for managing to make ends meet — don't take away another benefit and put more families on welfare."
- "There are way fewer options especially with healthier choices. It saves us hundreds every month and we don't live on post. There's no point in going out there if it's not saving us money."
- "As we move from town to town the commissaries are always familiar, even in a new-to-me commissary. I always shop at the commissary, but if it is no longer the least expensive place to get groceries I would not shop there. We work hard for our \$ so we try to spend it wisely."
- "The REASON I shop there is because of the PRICES. It helps me stretch our dollar, enables us to use funds towards our children's needs & entertainment. I don't see me making the 8-mile trip anymore if the prices change to the same price as my grocer three blocks away."

[Source: NWS Seal Beach Retired Military Newsletter | Air Force's SBP Manager | April 2015 ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, and Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 30 Apr 2015

Military Firearms. for Two East County California National Guardsmen were arrested 15 APR, accused of selling a cache of military firearms for thousands of dollars to an undercover agent posing as a Mexican drug cartel operative. **Jaime Casillas**, 22, of El Cajon, and **Andrew Reyes**, 34, of La Mesa, were arrested after search warrants were served at their homes, according to federal authorities. Both worked at the National Guard Armory in La Mesa, the U.S. Attorney's Office said. Reyes is accused of traveling several times to Texas to obtain numerous weapons, including assault rifles, magazines and ballistic plates for protective vests, which he then sold in San Diego.

The alleged scheme began in August, when an undercover agent working with a U.S. Drug Enforcement Administration task force met with Casillas, who boasted of his ability to acquire firearms, body armor and ammunition for sale, according to an affidavit filed by an agent with the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Firearms, Tobacco and Explosives. The agent told Casillas he was working to procure weaponry for drug traffickers in Mexico. Soon after, Casillas sold the supposed cartel man 1,600 rounds of .223-caliber ammunition – later identified as U.S. military inventory – for \$700, the affidavit states. In a second buy, Casillas sold the agent a .40-caliber pistol for \$800 from his El Cajon mobile home, saying the gun had already been used to “do a job” in Tijuana, the document says. About a month later, Reyes sold the agent an AK-47 for \$1,700, authorities say.

Several similar firearms sales followed over the next several months, including an AR-15 with a fake serial number, an expensive AR-15 with a mounted scope, hundreds of AR-15 ammunition magazines, and a .45 caliber pistol described as “hot,” meaning it had been used in a crime or was stolen. In December, Reyes sold the agent 20 ceramic trauma (bullet-resistant) plates that are inserted into ballistic vests for \$2,000, telling the agent that the gear was from the military, court records say. A tracking device hidden under Reyes’ vehicle mapped his drives to and from Texas, authorities said. In one of the last transactions, Reyes text messaged the agent a short video of him firing an AR-15 with a scope at what appeared to be an outdoor shooting range, saying he wanted to make sure it “fired smoothly” because it was “just built,” the affidavit says. On March 16, both Casillas, dressed in a military camouflage uniform, and Reyes, wearing military gym clothing, met with the purported cartel man to sell that gun for \$2,150.

The last deal was for a \$15,000 .50-caliber rifle, but that sale never completed, authorities said. In all, they are accused of selling six rifles, a pistol, and the plates, ammunition and magazines, for a total of \$15,450, according to the complaint. After his arrest, Casillas admitted selling weaponry but said he merely coordinated the sales for Reyes and did not personally profit from the business, the affidavit says. Casillas was arrested during a traffic stop in El Cajon, and Reyes was taken into custody at his home, federal officials said. [Source: U~T San Diego | Kristina Davis | April 15, 2015 ++]

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Military Uniforms. Although it’s hard to believe, in recent years the number of camouflage patterns used by the four combat services – Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marines – increased to ten. U.S. Congresswoman **Tammy Duckworth** contends there is no need to have taxpayer dollars wasted developing new and unnecessary camouflage patterns when one can do the job in a given environment. To remedy this, she has offered an amendment to the 2014 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) that requires the Department of Defense to establish a joint combat uniform pattern by 2018. A Government Accountability Office Report on duplication in government spending found that the amendment would save taxpayers approximately \$4.2 billion dollars over 5 years. The GAO report also states that the amendment contributed to the Army’s recent decision not to introduce a new family of camouflage uniforms in the immediate future saving significant taxpayer dollars. You can watch Rep. Duckworth’s discussion of the camouflage amendment during a recent hearing at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OCAXFvrhDT0>. These are the kinds of common sense reforms we need to stop waste in government spending and effectively allocate taxpayer dollars. [Source: Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth message | April 27, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Update 57 ► New Disinterment Policy

The destruction of the USS Oklahoma came quickly. On Dec. 7, 1941, it was hit with numerous torpedoes and bombs during Japan’s fierce and shocking bombardment of Pearl Harbor, capsizing within minutes with hundreds of Marines and sailors inside. Some 429 service members were killed, and others survived to fight back from the nearby USS Maryland, which also was under attack. More than 70 years later, the USS Oklahoma remained at the center of a battle. On one side was the Navy, which last year told the families of some of those killed that it was flatly against DNA testing on the commingled remains of 330 unidentified service members. On the other side were families that wanted to know when the military would return the remains of their loved ones.

The Pentagon has now decided to exhume unidentified remains held at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, Hawaii, do DNA testing, and return any identified remains to families that want them. Some families could decide to keep their loved ones at the national cemetery in Hawaii, but in individual plots with their own marker. Deputy Defense Secretary Robert O. Work said in a new

memorandum issued 14 APR that the Pentagon has been “considering the complexities of a decision to disinter unknowns buried as groups where the remains are commingled. The decision is sensitive, but Work made the case that recent advances in forensic science and technology and the help of families providing genealogical information has tipped the scales in favor of exhuming the commingled remains of those who died on the Oklahoma. “Analysis of all available evidence indicates that most Oklahoma crew members could be identified individually if the caskets associated with the ship were disinterred,” Work wrote. “I thereby direct [the Defense Department] to coordinate with the Department of Veterans Affairs for the disinterment and individual identification, to the extent practical, of all unknown associated with the Oklahoma in the next five years.”



Gravestones at the National Cemetery of the Pacific at Punchbowl are decorated with American flags and Hawaiian lei during a Memorial Day ceremony in 2012.

Work’s decision extends beyond the Oklahoma. He is establishing a broader directive that applies to all unknown military remains buried in national cemeteries from which exhumations are done to identify fallen service members. When remains are commingled, evidence must suggest that at least 60 percent of those disinterred may be identified, Work said. For unknown individuals exhumed, there must be at least a 50 percent chance that an identity can be found. The Pentagon must do the research and collect DNA samples from family members to determine whether those possibilities exist. The new policy does not apply to those whose remains are entombed in Navy vessels like the USS Arizona, which exploded and sank during the attack on Pearl Harbor, killing 1,177 officers and crewmen. The ship is the final resting place for 1,102 of them. [Source: The Washington Post | Dan Lamothe | April 15, 2015 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries ► Reported 150416 thru 150430

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515)

Korean War (7,855), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,656), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> and click on 'Our Missing'. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

- Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs
- Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420
- Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>



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

Vietnam

Army Maj. **Dale W. Richardson**, 28, of Cashton, Wis., was assigned to 2nd Battalion, 34th Armor Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. He was lost when the UH-1H helicopter he was a passenger in was shot down near the Vietnamese/Cambodian border on May 2, 1970.



Korea

Sergeant **John McLaughlin** was a member of Company D, 32nd Battalion, 5th Marines, 1st Marine Division. He was killed in action while fighting the enemy at the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea on December 2, 1950. His body was not initially recovered. For his leadership and valor, Sergeant McLaughlin was awarded the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart with Gold Star, the Combat Action Ribbon, the Korean Service Medal, the United Nations Service Medal, the National Defense Service Medal, the Korean Presidential Unit Citation and the Republic of Korea War Service Medal. His remains were identified April 08, 2015.

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Army Cpl. **Elmer P. Richard**, 20, of Exeter, N.H., was assigned to Battery D, 15th Antiaircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion, 31st Regimental Combat Team. He was reported missing while fighting in North Korea on Dec. 2, 1950. His remains were identified April 11, 2015.

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Army Pfc. **Eugene L. Erickson**, 21, of Crow Wing, Minn., was assigned to Company B, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. He died in a North Korean POW Camp on Aug. 31, 1951. His remains were identified April 13, 2015

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Cpl. **Ben L. Brown** U.S. Army was assigned to Company I, 3rd Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. He was lost February 21, 1951 in North Korea His remains were identified April 10, 2015

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The remains of Army Sgt. **Arnold Pitman**, 22, of Nebo, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors, the Defense POW/Missing Accounting Agency said. Pitman was assigned to the 31st Regiment Combat Team, 7th Infantry Division. The unit, known as Task Force Faith, fought against enemy assaults east of the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea. On Dec. 12, 1950, the unit reported "tremendous losses" after a battle in that area. Afterward, Pitman was reported missing. Four years later, the United Nations and Chinese forces exchanged remains of war dead, including some from the area where Pitman was lost. Remains from that exchange were recently identified as belonging to Pitman using "circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including radiography which matched his records," officials said. Pitman will be buried April 26 in Dysartville, a small community in McDowell County near Nebo, North Carolina.



World War II – None

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | April 29, 2015 ++]

* VA *



VA Secretary Update 37 ► MacDonald Speaks on Agency's Difficulties

The struggles veterans face in accessing healthcare are a harbinger for all American medicine, and the problem won't be resolved without adequate funding, said Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald. "VA is the canary in the coal mine. We learn about the problems in American medicine before American medicine," McDonald told a roomful of reporters at the annual conference of the Association of Health Care Journalists here on Friday. McDonald joined the VA last summer in the wake of an exploding controversy. Earlier in 2014, staff at a Phoenix VA hospital were found to have falsified scheduling records in order to mask extended delays in appointments. Hundreds of veterans were waiting months for appointments and some deaths were blamed on the delays.



VA Chief McDonald: Aging Vietnam Vets Straining System —blames crisis on demographics, budgets, and legislative mandates.

Since his confirmation, McDonald has tried to turn around the agency's image as mired in bureaucracy and being more responsive to administrative edicts than veterans' economic and healthcare needs. McDonald blamed last year's failures in access primarily on the growth of the aging veteran population, specifically Vietnam veterans. He also cautioned that the agency hasn't yet seen "peak demand" from the veterans of Middle Eastern wars. "If we don't get ready today for what could happen many years from now with Iraq and Afghanistan veterans, we're going to have another crisis." The key to avoiding future problems is adequate funding now, said McDonald. "That's why we're requesting such a large budget increase." The VA has asked Congress for a 7.5% increase in discretionary funding for its 2016 budget. In recent markups, the House Appropriations Committee cut \$1.4 billion from the budget. This frustrated McDonald. "I don't create the demand. I don't pass the laws to decide what benefits to give veterans, all I do is execute the laws," he said. This puts him in a difficult place, as the department must provide legislatively mandated benefits to all eligible veterans on a budget that isn't necessarily tied to their numbers or needs.

The number of veterans is declining but that population is also getting older, said McDonald. Since older people have more health issues, the number of claims and issues per claim has dramatically increased. From 2009 to 2017, the number of claims is rising from 1 million to a projected 1.5 million, with the number of issues per claim doubling, he said. Other factors creating strain on veterans health centers include: the number of veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan; new requirements to assess and treat exposure to Agent Orange during the Vietnam War; the lack of limits on the appeals process; and increased survival on the battlefield that leaves more veterans with severe disabilities. The other major factor contributing to access problems is the lack of providers, McDonald said. Since he was hired, the agency has signed on 970 doctors and 2,000 nurses. "But we need more," he said. Finding providers who want to work in rural areas can be

difficult, he said. "I get beat up for not getting a primary care physician in the northwest corner of Montana but it's hard to get primary care physicians in the northwest corner of Montana."

Roscoe Butler, MD, deputy director for healthcare for the Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation, who spoke on an afternoon panel at the conference, noted that salary differences and the rigidity of the system sometimes impeded providers who might choose to work for the VA. Even when pay isn't a disincentive, "[t]hey still have to have a lifestyle and they still have to be able to take care of patients the way they want," Butler said. Responding to the assertion that some providers applying for VA jobs faced delays getting hired, Butler was frank. "It's absolutely true. Our hiring process is way too slow," he said. A primary care physician in good standing could get hired in a few days. So if the VA takes 8 months to hire a provider, as some reporters suggested, he or she would certainly be swept up by other competitors.

McDonald said the agency also needs more money for construction, a budget he says has been underfunded for years. A majority of VA facilities are more than 50 years old, he noted; some only have bathrooms for men, even though more than 10% of veterans today are female. In his visit to Phoenix just after being hired, McDonald found that, in addition to hospitals there being short 1,000 providers, doctors lacked space to care for patients. While the common standard for adequate clinical space is three clinical rooms per doctor, physicians in Phoenix had only one room each. While supporting building new sites and expanding current centers, McDonald stressed that he believes in the Veterans Choice Act -- a law which allows veterans who are more than 40 miles from a VA facility to receive care at a community health center. He's working to ensure that the legislation reinterprets the definition of 40 miles to miles in driving distance. He estimates this change would double the number of veterans able to access care in community centers. "Despite what you may have heard, we're very much in favor of community care. We think the system of the future will be a VA system with a VA nucleus and a community care system that surrounds it."

In addition to trying to explain the agency's difficulties, McDonald lauded its improvements: now 97% of appointments happen within 30 days of the veteran's preferred date, and 20% have been walk-ins. He noted that there have been 2.6 million new authorizations for veterans to access care in the private sector from May 2014 through March 2015 -- a 44% increase from the previous year. McDonald said the agency become more transparent, posting updates of their access on a bi-weekly basis. It is also seeking advice from companies like Starbucks and the Ritz Carlton to build better relations with veterans. At the journalists' conference, McDonald also announced formation of a special medical advisory group consisting of physicians, other providers, and former health system executives to create a "Blueprint for Excellence" for improving VA performance. "Just like any good business, we have to reinvent ourselves," said McDonald. [Source: MedPage TODAY | Shannon Firth | April 25, 2015 ++]

VA OIG Update 03 ► OIG Releases 140 Previously Unreleased Reports

Almost 140 investigative reports newly released by the inspector general at the Veterans Affairs Department offer a litany of instances of dysfunction or mistreatment of veterans at VA facilities across the country and show that in many cases, the department's chief watchdog trusted the VA to correct problems on its own rather than make findings public. The cases range from missed diagnoses to failures during surgery — one veteran's face was set on fire during an operation in Lebanon, Pa. — and from misuse of funds to personnel issues — an intensive care unit at the Tucson VA was beset by a "cauldron of interpersonal tensions and management difficulties," the inspector general found. They also included reports involving concerns about providers prescribing potentially questionable amounts or combinations of narcotics to veterans in Tampa, Fla., Valdosta, Ga., and Lexington, Ky. Five months after the inspector general reached similar findings about

providers in Tomah, Wis., but did not release a public report last year, a 35-year-old Marine Corps veteran died from mixed drug toxicity as an inpatient at the facility.

The range of outcomes in the newly released reports indicate the inspector general may have lacked a uniform standard for deciding when to issue public findings. Roughly 50 reports dismissed allegations of wrongdoing, but more of them — 59 — contained substantiated claims. Joanne Moffett, a spokeswoman for Richard Griffin, the interim VA inspector general, maintained 29 APR that there was a standard — public reports were not released when a potential lawsuit was pending, when complaints were unfounded or when inspection officials decided VA officials had or would take care of the problems. Since USA TODAY first reported last month that his office did not publicly release the findings of the 140 health care probes since 2006, Griffin did direct that in the future, only he or his immediate staff would be able to make such decisions.

But some members of Congress say that's not good enough. And they don't want issues to fester within the VA without congressional or public oversight. Trusting the VA will fix itself is illogical, they say. "The only way you have any hope of fixing a bureaucracy is for public disclosure," said Sen. Ron Johnson (R-WI) who co-sponsored legislation with Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) that would require public release in the future of inspection reports at the VA and across the federal government. There are roughly 75 inspectors general tasked under a 1978 law to be independent watchdogs within agencies rooting out waste, fraud, and abuse and mismanagement. Among their duties is keeping Congress — and hence the public — "fully and currently informed" of problems they find, according to the law. They can initiate investigations based on requests from Congress, on tips they get from employees or the public or upon learning separately of potential wrongdoing.

Almost all the investigations in the newly released reports were generated by tips from VA employees, veteran patients, their family members or the public. They involved allegations at VA facilities in 42 states that ranged from the unsubstantiated and seemingly inane — one complainant alleged a nurse abused an elderly veteran patient by feeding him a doughnut covered in hot sauce — to substantiated complaints of serious harm or death.

- A veteran dependent on a ventilator was checked into a unit with staff not competent to deal with such patients in West Palm Beach, Fla. He was later found unresponsive, disconnected from the ventilator and in cardiac arrest, but was revived.
- Staff at the Wichita, Kan., VA medical center did not resuscitate a veteran after his advance directive to be resuscitated was not scanned into his chart.
- A veteran contracted Legionnaire's disease in an intensive care unit at the VA in Albany, N.Y., and died.
- In Asheville, N.C., a veteran's leg was broken during surgery and not initially treated.
- In the Lebanon, Pa., case, a veteran was having surgery to remove a cancerous lesion on his nose when his face was set on fire in the operating room.
- In Lexington, Ky., two chest X-rays showed a veteran had tumors in his lungs, but he wasn't told until more than eight months later, after providers at a private facility diagnosed his lung cancer, which he later died from.
- A veteran went to a VA emergency room in San Diego with chest pain and was diagnosed with acid reflux. He died the next day from a heart attack.
- In Pittsburgh, providers had implanted potentially defective aortic stents in 31 veterans, and two subsequently developed leaks that required surgery to remove the stents. Manufacturer Guidant provided a sample patient notification letter to health care providers, but the Pittsburgh VA did not inform its veteran patients.

- With allegations of inappropriate narcotic prescription practices, inspectors found a primary care physician in Lexington, Ky., was prescribing opiates to disproportionately more patients than most other physicians at the facility. In Tampa, Fla., another primary care doctor also was prescribing controlled substances at a "significantly higher rate" than his peers. A psychiatrist in Valdosta, Ga., was counseled about prescribing antidepressants in combination with other potentially sedating agents. As with what happened in Tomah, Wis., inspectors did not find evidence of wrongdoing or patient harm in those cases, and closed them without public reports.

Moffett, the spokeswoman for interim Inspector General Griffin, defended the inspector's initial decisions not to publicly release the reports and said she believes that now that they are released, people will see those decisions were warranted. "We made the decision to publish our reports of administrative closures to lay out the basis for our decision-making and to show that we had sound reasons in closing these inspections," she said. Moffett said that even though the reports were not initially released, they were technically available if the public or members of Congress submitted a Freedom of Information Act request. Such requests, however, would require knowledge of the reports' existence. [Source: USA TODAY | Donovan Slack | April 29, 2015 ++]

VA Vet Choice Program Update 13 ► 40 Mile Eligibility Rule

In order to expand eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that it will determine eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program based on the distance between a Veteran's place of residence and the nearest VA medical facility using driving distance rather than straight-line distance. This change has been published in the Federal Register and is effective immediately. "VA is pleased to announce the distance calculation change from straight-line to driving distance for the Veterans Choice Program," said Secretary Robert McDonald. "This update to the program will allow more Veterans to access care when and where they want it. We look forward to continued dialogue with Veterans and our partners to help us ensure continued improvements for Veterans' to access care."

The change from straight-line to driving distance roughly doubles the number of eligible Veterans. Letters are being sent to the newly eligible Veterans to let them know they are now eligible for the Veterans Choice Program under this expansion. If a Veteran does not remember receiving a Veterans Choice Card or has other questions about the Choice Program, they can call (866) 606-8198. Effective immediately, VA is also changing the mileage calculation for beneficiary travel. The change will ensure consistency in VA's mileage calculations across the two programs. The beneficiary travel calculation will now be made using the fastest route instead of the shortest route. For more details about the department's progress and related information, see http://www.va.gov/opa/choiceact/factsheets_and_details.asp. [Source: VA News Release | April 24, 2015 ++]

Agent Orange | C-123 Aircraft Update 11 ► VA | Reserves Not Veterans

In April, Veterans Affairs lawyers rejected the longstanding disability claims of at least 2,100 American military Reserves who were exposed to Agent Orange during their training on old C-123 planes after the Vietnam War. The aircraft had been used to carry the highly toxic herbicide during the war. The VA took the very restrictive position that despite their exposure to Agent Orange, these Reserves do not qualify as veterans and have not earned presumptive service-connection status required for them to collect disability benefits.

“You’re not veterans,” the VA Office of General Counsel reportedly stated. “Even if you were veterans before or after Reserve duty or even veterans in both situations, you’re not veterans for purposes of Agent Orange exposure unless you qualify as such during your Reserve tour.”

In February, the prestigious Institute of Medicine (IOM) concluded that these Reserves were exposed to Agent Orange while on these aircraft and placed at greater risk of serious health consequences. But VA’s attorneys, who have the legal authority to grant the disability claims for these long-suffering men and women who served their country, said it would take congressional action to get these veterans the compensation they seek. John Rowan, National President of Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), the only national veterans organization congressionally chartered and exclusively dedicated to Vietnam-era veterans and their families, called VA’s position “unconscionable.” Rowan said in a statement that these Reserves “worked, slept, and ate in toxic planes for years. Waiting for congressional action on this issue is an affront to these elderly, dying reservists.” Rowan called upon VA Secretary Robert McDonald to immediately overturn the “erroneous legal opinions” of VA’s attorneys and grant these veterans their benefits, effective from the date they filed their first claim. “Since we have defeated the VA on its claim of junk science, now they are throwing junk law at us to prevent justice to those harmed by their exposure on these contaminated aircraft,” Rowan said.

Veteran Journal was unsuccessful in its search to find anyone in the military, politics or on the street who agrees with VA’s decision that members of our Reserves who were ordered to train in these military aircraft and subsequently exposed to Agent Orange should be denied disability benefits. Rick Weidman, executive director for policy and governmental affairs at VVA, told Veteran Journal that if the government doesn’t take care of these veterans, his organization will file a lawsuit. “But these Reserves will die before that lawsuit is resolved,” Weidman lamented, adding that it is not just the decent thing to do but that it is a matter of national security that these men and women be treated properly. “There will be a reluctance for many to join or re-up with the guard or the Reserves if they know they will not be taken care of,” Weidman said. “The point is, these men and women become ‘veterans’ immediately if they are injured while in training. And toxic wounds are no different than a gunshot wound. The decision here simply makes no legal sense. This is like an argument a mom has with a kid. The VA is offering no reason for this other than basically saying ‘I said so.’ The VA is not our mom.”

In February, a bipartisan group of senators including Richard Blumenthal (D-CN), the highest-ranking Democrat on the Senate Affairs Committee, sent a letter to new VA Secretary Robert McDonald urging him to give these reservists the compensation they deserve. But McDonald was evidently unmoved. The fight for veterans to receive disability benefits as a result of Agent Orange exposure seemingly never ends. As Veteran Journal reported in January, a lawsuit filed jointly by VVA, the American Legion and other veteran service organizations declared that American veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange while serving in Korea’s demilitarized zone (DMZ) during and after the Vietnam War were also being wrongfully denied their disability benefits. Veterans groups said that lawsuit, which is still making its way through the courts, represented the *first test of McDonald’s commitment to helping veterans* receive the disability benefits they’ve been denied after being exposed to a variety of toxins while on active duty.

The decision by VA lawyers to block coverage for Reserves who trained on C-123 planes is an even greater opportunity for McDonald to show his commitment to veterans, say several veteran advocates. Former Marine Rory Minnis, a law student and intern at Veterans Legal Services Clinic at Yale Law School, which represents the Vietnam Veterans of America, said in a statement that McDonald has the statutory authority, supported by agency-binding legal opinions issued by the VA Office of General Counsel, to immediately grant these reservists service-connected disability as a result of their exposure to the deadly herbicide. “The Secretary is hiding behind his lawyers, who are blocking relief to these deserving veterans because they themselves disapprove of the binding legal opinions issued by their office,” Minnis said in a statement. [Source: VVA Web Weekly | April 24, 201 ++]

Agent Orange | C-123 Aircraft Update 12 ► Senators Send Letter to VA

Seven senators are pushing Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary Bob McDonald to grant benefits for Agent Orange exposure to a group of post-Vietnam veterans. Sens. Richard Burr (R-NC), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Ron Wyden (D-OR) and Michael Bennet (D-CO) said that justice "is long overdue" for veterans who crewed C-123 aircraft after the Vietnam War. "We write to urge you to utilize the Department of Veterans Affairs' existing statutory authority to quickly begin providing care and benefits to veterans who were exposed to toxic herbicide residue while serving on Fairchild UC-123 Provider (C-123) aircraft after the era when those aircraft were used to transport Agent Orange in Vietnam," they wrote in the letter Friday, which was released Monday. "Justice for these veterans is long overdue and you have the authority and the ability to finally right this wrong."

C-123 veterans have struggled for decades to get the VA to grant benefits for their illnesses, which they believe are tied to Agent Orange exposure. An Institute of Medicine report earlier this year found that at least some of the post-Vietnam veterans who served on the C-123 aircraft were exposed to the toxin, and were at risk for developing illnesses. Agent Orange exposure has been tied a range of diseases including cancer. But the senators said they have heard that "a question has arisen" since the report was released about whether or not C-123 crew members -- typically Air Force reservists and National Guard members -- qualify as veterans under the VA's guidelines for benefits. "We fundamentally disagree and believe VA's precedential interpretations of the relevant statute and the policy principle and legal precedent of construing statutes in favor of veterans requires VA to find these reservists eligible for benefits," they said. "We ask that you stand by those interpretations, which we outline in this letter, and which show that no additional statutory authority is necessary for you to immediately begin providing care and benefits to the C-123 veterans."

The senators said the VA was requiring that a C-123 veteran must have injured themselves and that his or her injury must manifest itself into a disability during the period of training. "This not only contradicts VA's previous interpretations of the same statutory language, but also leads to absurd results," they said. "For instance, a reservist who contracted Ebola while flying patients during training but shows no symptoms until they are in civilian life would not satisfy VA's newfound interpretation." The senators added that Congress has told the VA to act "in the best interest" of veterans seeking benefits "whenever possible," and they believe the VA currently has the needed statutory authority to grant benefits to the C-123 group.

"The reserve airmen who served aboard C-123 aircraft are entitled to veteran status and the resulting care and benefits necessary to address their health conditions," they said. "As Secretary, you have the authority to make the decision that would provide these veterans the care and benefits they have earned. We ask that you do so without delay." The senators gave McDonald two weeks to respond to their letter. [Source: The Hill | Jordain Carney | April 27, 2015 ++]

VA SWAG ► Special Medical Advisory Group Members

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced a new 11-member Special Medical Advisory Group (SMAG) composed of leading medical experts to assist the Department in delivering health care to the 9 million Veterans enrolled in the Veterans Health Administration. The SMAG is a reconstituted federally-chartered committee that advises the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, through the Under Secretary for Health, on matters related to health care delivery, research, education, training of health care staff and

planning on shared care issues facing VA and the Department of Defense. “We want the best of the best to work on behalf of our nation’s Veterans,” said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. “We are honored these respected leaders from the private, non-profit and government sectors have agreed to join in our mission improve how we provide the quality health care our nation’s Veterans need and deserve.”

The appointment of the new members of the SMAG comes at a time when VA is experiencing increased demand for its health care services. Nationally, VA completed more than 51 million appointments between May 1, 2014, and March 31, 2015. This represents an increase of 2.4 million more completed appointments than during the same time period in 2013-2014. In March 2015, VA completed 97 percent of appointments within 30 days of the Veteran’s preferred date. Serving as SMAG Committee Chair is Dr. Jonathan Perlin, who previously served as VA Under Secretary for Health from 2004-2006. Dr. Perlin is currently Chief Medical Officer and President of Clinical Services for the Nashville, Tennessee-based Hospital Corporation of America (HCA). In this capacity, Dr. Perlin provides leadership for clinical services and improving performance for HCA’s 166 hospitals and more than 800 outpatient centers and physician practices. Recognized perennially as one of the most influential physician executives in the United States by Modern Healthcare, Dr. Perlin is a recipient of numerous awards. Other Committee members:

- **Karen S. Guice, MD, M.P.P.** - Dr. Guice serves as Principal Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs and Principal Deputy Director, TRICARE Management Activity. In these two roles, Dr. Guice assists in the development of strategies and priorities to achieve the health mission of the Military Health System (MHS), and participates fully in formulating, developing, overseeing and advocating the policies of the Secretary of Defense. The Office of Health Affairs is responsible for providing a cost effective, quality health benefit to 9.6 million active duty uniformed Service Members, retirees, survivors and their families. The MHS has a \$50 billion annual budget and consists of a worldwide network of 59 military hospitals, 360 health clinics, private-sector health business partners, and the Uniformed Services University.
- **Joy Ilem**, Deputy National Legislative Director, DAV - Ms. Ilem, a U.S. Army service-connected disabled Veteran, was named Deputy National Legislative Director of the of the 1.2 million-member Disabled American Veterans (DAV), in June 2009. In this capacity, Ms. Ilem directs the advancement of DAV’s public policy objectives.
- **Thomas Lee, MD** - Dr. Lee serves as Chief Medical Officer for Press Ganey, which advises and consults with healthcare businesses to help identify the best practices for the organization and the patient. Dr. Lee joined Press Ganey in 2013, bringing more than three decades of experience in health care performance improvement as a practicing physician, a leader in provider organizations, researcher and health policy expert. As Chief Medical Officer, Dr. Lee is responsible for developing clinical and operational strategies to help providers across the nation measure and improve the patient experience, with an overarching goal of reducing the suffering of patients as they undergo care and improving the value of that care. In addition to his role with Press Ganey, Dr. Lee is an internist and cardiologist, and continues to practice primary care at Brigham and Women’s Hospital in Boston.
- **Ralph Snyderman, MD** - Dr. Snyderman is former president and CEO of the Duke University Health System and director of Duke’s Center for Research on Personalized Health Care. He currently serves as Chancellor Emeritus for the Duke University Department of Medicine. He is former Chair of the Association of American Medical Colleges (AAMC).
- **Jennifer Daley, MD** - Dr. Daley is a Senior Adviser for the consulting firm, Cambridge Management Group. She is nationally recognized for her expertise in operational improvement, patient safety, quality and service excellence. Dr. Daley is a past recipient of a U.S. Naval Academy-Harvard Business Review Ethical Leadership Award in July 2007.

- **James Henry Martin, MD** - Dr. Martin has been practicing emergency medicine and primary care medicine in the Chicago area since 1978 and is currently on the medical staffs of Captain James A. Lovell Federal Health Care Center, North Chicago; and Metro South Medical Center, Blue Island, IL. He has extensive clinical research experience in the area of nasal insulin studies. Dr. Martin is currently developing a nasal mupirocin spray foam to eradicate nasal MRSA, and a nasal foam medication formulation. He has had 14 US patents issued and over 40 foreign patents issued, including a patent in 2014 covering the formulation above.
- **Melvin Shipp, OD, MPH, DrPH** - Dr. Shipp serves as Dean Emeritus, College of Optometry for The Ohio State University. He has served as a consultant, panelist and reviewer for several federal institutions –notably, the Food and Drug Administration, the Health Resources and Services Administration and in several capacities with the National Eye Institute (NEI) of the National Institutes of Health. Dr. Shipp also has assumed leadership and membership roles within a variety of non-federal, national health-related organizations. He is a Fellow of the American Academy of Optometry, and a Diplomate and former Chair of the Public Health and Environmental Optometry Section. Dr. Shipp is only the second optometrist to receive the DrPH degree; he is the first to do so through the highly competitive Pew Health Policy Doctoral Fellowship Program at the University of Michigan.
- **James Weinstein, DO, MD** - Dr. Weinstein serves as Chief Executive Officer and President of Dartmouth Hitchcock, a nonprofit academic health system that serves a patient population of 1.2 million in New England. Anchored by Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in Lebanon, NH, the system includes the Norris Cotton Cancer Center; the Children's Hospital at Dartmouth-Hitchcock; affiliate hospitals in New London, NH, and Windsor, VT; and 24 Dartmouth-Hitchcock clinics that provide ambulatory services across New Hampshire and Vermont. Under Dr. Weinstein's leadership, Dartmouth-Hitchcock is working to create a "sustainable health system" for patients, providers, payers and communities. Dr. Weinstein also is a member of the Institute of Medicine (IOM) of the National Academy of Sciences. He serves on the IOM Committee on advising the Social Security Administration on Disability. Most recently, Dr. Weinstein was one of four members appointed to the IOM Board on Population Health and Public Health Practice.
- **Deborah Trautman, PhD, RN** - Ms. Trautman is Chief Executive Officer for the American Association of Colleges of Nursing (AACN), a role she assumed in 2014. At AACN, she oversees strategic initiatives, signature programming and advocacy efforts led by the organization known as the national voice for baccalaureate and graduate nursing education. She has authored and coauthored publications on health policy, intimate partner violence, pain management, clinical competency, change management, cardiopulmonary bypass, the use of music in the emergency department and consolidating emergency services.
- **Bruce Siegel, MD, MPH, President and CEO, America's Essential Hospitals** - Dr. Siegel serves as President and Chief Executive Officer of America's Essential Hospitals (formerly the National Association of Public Hospitals and Health Systems). Dr. Siegel has an extensive background in health care management, policy and public health. Before joining NAPH, he served as Director of the Center for Health Care Quality and Professor of Health Policy at the George Washington University School of Public Health and Health Services. He also previously served as President and CEO of two NAPH members: Tampa General Healthcare and the New York City Health and Hospitals Corporation. In addition, Dr. Siegel has served as Commissioner of Health of the State of New Jersey. Among many accomplishments, Dr. Siegel has led groundbreaking work on quality and equity for the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, as well as projects for the Commonwealth Fund, the California Endowment and the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality. He also was ranked as one of the "50 Most Influential Physician Executives" and one of the "100 Most Influential

People in Healthcare" in 2011 by Modern Healthcare. Currently, he chairs the National Advisory Council for Healthcare Research and Quality.

The announcement of the Special Medical Advisory Group follows the introduction of the Veterans Health Administration's "Blueprint for Excellence," which lays out strategies for transformation to improve the performance of VA health care now —making it more Veteran-centric by putting Veterans in control of their VA experience. The SMAG Committee is scheduled to conduct its first meeting on May 13, 2015. More information about SMAG may be found at <http://www.va.gov/ADVISORY/SMAG.asp>. [Source: VA New Release | April 24, 2015 ++]

MVAC Update 01 ► Advisory Council Inaugural Meeting

The Department of Veterans Affairs hosted the first meeting of its MyVA Advisory Committee on April 14-15 in Washington. The committee's job is to help VA improve service to veterans, boost the performance of VA workers and set a course for long-term reform. Committee members will work with VA Secretary Robert McDonald and his staff to achieve the MyVA program's goals: improve veterans' experiences, deliver exceptional customer service, empower the employees, and make VA's internal structure more veteran-centric. "I've been asking for the past seven months what VA's best practices are," McDonald told the group, "and I haven't made any progress.... If we don't improve employee experience, we won't improve veterans' experience. If we don't fix facilities and providers to help women veterans, we're going to lose many customers."

While committee members have impressive experience in business and medicine, very few have any background in veterans issues and only one seat on the committee has been allotted – on a rotating basis - to veterans service organizations (VSOs). McDonald said that many VSOs wanted to be represented on the committee, which still has several vacant positions. He explained the group had no union representative and minimal VSO participation because "this is a committee for internal purposes." The American Legion's national commander, Michael D. Helm, has been pushing hard for Legion representation on the committee, but VA has yet to grant that request. [Source: American Legion Online Update | April 23, 2015 ++]

VA Relocation Program ► HASC Blasts VA Payments as 'Scheme'

On 21 APR the chairman of a House committee called for the Department of Veterans Affairs to end its "outrageous scheme" for relocating highly paid executives after learning of the agency's itemized breakdown of its \$288,000 "relocation" payment for the new director of the VA's beleaguered Philadelphia office. Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), chairman of the Committee on Veterans Affairs, said the government's "appraised value offer program" to relocate certain bureaucrats who are transferring jobs is "a scheme in which everyone but the taxpayer wins." Mr. Miller was responding to a letter from Allison Hickey, the VA's undersecretary for benefits, itemizing the huge payment for Diana Rubens to transfer from the Washington office to Philadelphia last year. The expenses included more than \$80,000 paid to Ms. Rubens and \$211,000 to a federal contractor that was given the job of selling her home in Alexandria.

"For VA to pay such an outrageous amount in relocation expenses at a time when the department is continually telling Congress and taxpayers it needs more money raises questions about VA's commitment to fiscal responsibility, transparency and true reform," Mr. Miller said in a statement. "VA's top leaders were ushered into their positions based on the logic that their business sense would bring private-sector efficiency

and accountability to VA's reform efforts. But the Appraised Value Offer program doesn't make any business sense and is the opposite of efficient."

The VA said it paid Ms. Rubens "subsistence and temporary expenses" of \$15,812; real-estate expenses of \$29,966; a "relocation income tax allowance" of \$15,291; \$11,678 to ship her household goods and personal effects; and \$11,768 to store her household items for 30 days. The agency paid a vendor \$211,750 for "relocation services" involved in the sale of her home, which eventually was sold for less than the vendor paid Ms. Rubens; and paid \$12,705 for a "VA Financial Services Center service charge." Ms. Hickey said the VA was required to pay the vendor a 28 percent fee because Ms. Rubens' house in Alexandria did not sell within 60 days. She told Mr. Miller that the relocation program is important because the VA faces "unique recruiting and retention challenges" and that Ms. Rubens has a "proven record as a successful leader" at the agency.

The committee is holding a hearing 22 APR on chronic problems in the VA's Philadelphia and Oakland offices, and on the payments for Ms. Rubens' transfer to Philadelphia. Mr. Miller said the relocation program "has become an entitlement" at the VA. "VA claims the program is a tool to incentivize qualified candidates to move to critical locations, but the fact that the department offers AVO to every single executive accepting reassignment as a regional office director negates that argument completely," he said. "I am calling on VA leaders to put forth a plan to end the department's use of the program. If no plan is forthcoming, we'll explore legislative remedies to do the same." [Source: The Washington Times | Dave Boyer | April 21, 2015 ++]

VA Health Care Eligibility Update 01 ► Treat Service Caused Only

In his 16 APR letter, veteran Jack Belck wrote that the Department of Veterans Affairs is paying for treatment it has no business doing.

I am a veteran of three wars and at one time was a machine gunner sitting between two 50-caliber machine guns in a confined space. When discharged for disability, my hearing was very bad.

The VA provided me with hearing aids, which were justified as "service caused" and not "service connected." This is the only thing I have asked of the VA, although I have had three major surgeries. Belck is correct in saying the VA is classifying too many veterans as "service connected" and treating them.

I know veterans who had received extensive treatment from the VA who never saw a day in combat or served during a period of war time. This should be a requirement to receive service.

Drop the "service connected" classification and you will save millions needed for treating "service caused" veterans! I know I will be persona non grata with many veterans, but I feel I must voice my opinion. It should cut the waiting time in half for those who urgently need care.

— George Stafford, Scottsdale

[Source: The Arizona Republic | George Stafford | April 20, 2015 ++]

VA Budget 2016 Update 02 ► \$163.2B First Draft Proposal

House appropriators appear poised to give Veterans Affairs Department officials almost everything they want in next year's budget, but lingering concerns about administrative mismanagement could trim a few billion dollars from the bottom line. The subcommittee charged with overseeing VA's fiscal 2016 budget released

its first draft, a \$163.2 billion plan that would boost department spending by about 2.5 percent above current levels. The plan — which still must wind through the House and Senate in coming months before becoming law — represents another in a steady line of VA budget hikes since the start of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. In 2004, the total VA budget was just under \$64 billion, almost \$100 billion less than what the department could spend in fiscal 2016.

Subcommittee chairman Rep. Charlie Dent (R-PA) at its 15 APR hearing touted the outline as a bipartisan agreement “to ensure that our promise to care for those who have sacrificed in defense of this great nation continues as those men and women return home.” It contains \$68.7 billion in discretionary funding, a small increase from fiscal 2015 but several billion less than the White House requested. Most of the difference comes from a steep cut in VA’s plan for its construction budget, where appropriators are supporting only about two-thirds of the department’s \$1.5 billion request. Dent cited ongoing problems with the Denver VA hospital construction project — slated to cost \$1 billion more than originally estimated — as the reason for that withholding, saying department leaders will have to correct problems with “gross mismanagement” before lawmakers are comfortable adding money to those accounts.

Democrats on the panel expressed concerns about the move, but still supported the overall plan. The legislation also includes language limiting fund transfers between construction projects and limiting changes in the scope of those projects, to prevent similar cost overruns in the future. The appropriations plan includes \$7.5 billion in mental health care services, \$6.7 billion in homeless vets programs, \$144 million for suicide prevention activities and \$233 million for electronic health records modernization. It also includes \$455 million to help end the disability claims backlog, with several million set aside to hire 770 new staff to address that ongoing problem. VA officials have cut the backlog from more than 600,000 cases to fewer than 200,000 over the last two years, but appear behind schedule on their public pledge to reach zero by the end of this year.

VA Secretary Bob McDonald on 21 APR blasted a \$1.4 billion shortfall in the House’s budget proposal for fiscal 2016 as “inadequate” to maintain his department’s reform and outreach efforts. “It will cause veterans to suffer,” he told members of the Senate Appropriations Committee. “It means fewer veterans will get care.” He said the health care cuts represent “the equivalent of over 70,000 fewer veterans receiving care,” while the construction cuts will stop four major medical center projects and six other cemetery expansion efforts. McDonald was on Capitol Hill to lobby not only for that extra fiscal 2016 money but also for permission to shift another \$1 billion from emergency funds approved last summer to finish the controversial VA medical center construction project in Denver, which has seen its price tag balloon in recent years.

Along with the budget request, McDonald also petitioned lawmakers to consider closing old and outdated VA properties as a long-term cost savings measure. Lawmakers have balked at a similar Pentagon-backed plan for military sites, but generally have been receptive to the idea of a VA closure round. House and Senate appropriators are expected continue work on the VA budget bills for several more weeks. In the interim, in a White house statement, President Barack Obama on 28 APR said he would veto the above proposed bill as it does not adequately fund veterans’ medical care or construction for the military and the VA. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 15 & 21, 2015 ++]

VA Cemeteries Update 12 ► Movie Filming Policy

A group of veterans and their families contacted Channel 2 Action News to express their disapproval of a decision to allow a production company to shoot a movie scene at the Georgia National Cemetery in Canton. “The love of your life is put in the ground, and a Hollywood movie is allowed in here to make money off his death, off the other ones deaths? That is almost unforgivable.” said Vietnam War veteran widow Peggy Ray

Simpson. In April, two sections of the cemetery were taken over by film crews shooting scenes from "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk." The film about Iraq War veterans returning home features actors Vin Diesel, Kristin Stewart and Steve Martin.



Shirley Bryan kneels beside the Georgia National Cemetery grave of her late husband, a Korean War veteran

Air Force veteran Frank Cotter, who has lung disease, said the congestion was so bad he was unable to park close enough to walk to his wife's gravesite. "It was like a circus atmosphere at the gravesite," he said. "This is hallowed ground. I don't think they should be doing something like that. With all the problems the Veterans Administration is having, this is one more they don't need." The widow of a Korean War veteran said to see the cemetery turned into a movie set was heartbreaking. "This isn't Las Vegas, or California. This is a veterans' cemetery. It's sacred to us," Shirley Bryan said. A spokesman for the Veteran's Affairs in Washington, D.C. said the decision to allow filming in national cemeteries is made on a "case by case" basis. He added that "dignified" filming brings recognition to the sacrifices and service of veterans. Refer to <http://www.wsbtv.com/photo/news/local/shirley-bryan-kneels-beside-grave-her-late-husband/pCcrGx/> for WSB-2's video report. [Source: Atlanta WSB-TV 2 | Tom Regan | April 17, 2015 ++]

VA History ► DVA Origin

Seventy-five years ago on July 21, 1930, President Herbert Hoover signed Executive Order 5398 to officially establish the Veterans Administration and initiated the second consolidation of federal veterans programs in American history. The executive order was ordered by Congress three weeks earlier, on July 3, 1930 in Public Law 71-536, to consolidate the U.S. Pension Bureau and National Home for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers (the first system of federal hospitals-homes for Civil War volunteer soldiers) with the Veterans Bureau. The Veterans Administration went into full effect on July 1, 1931.



July 21, 1930 post-signing photo, Left to right: Col. George E. Ijam, acting Veterans Bureau Administrator, later VA Assistant Administrator; Brig. Gen. Frank T. Hines, Administrator of

Veterans Affairs; President Herbert Hoover; Col. Louis H. Tripp, Director of Construction; Charles M. Griffith, M.D., Chief Medical Director

The Veterans Bureau, VA's immediate predecessor, was created nine years earlier, on August 9, 1921, as result of the first consolidation of veterans programs which combined World War I veterans programs - the Bureau of War Risk Insurance (largest insurance "company" in the world at the time), Public Health Service veterans' hospitals, and the Federal Board of Vocational Education's rehabilitation division. General Frank T. Hines, director of the Veterans Bureau since 1922, continued at the helm of the Veterans Administration when he was sworn in on July 23, 1930; however, his title was changed to Administrator of Veterans Affairs. The 1930 consolidation that created the Veterans Administration was just one of several mergers of U.S. veterans benefits that took place over the course of American history, for economic or efficiency reasons. Although the 1930 consolidation intended to bring ALL federal veterans' program together under one agency, but did not.

Four months later, on November 4, 1930, Executive Order 5476 transferred veterans' prosthetics and the administration of certain annuities authorized for the discoverers of Yellow Fever's origins and etiology from the War Department to the Veterans Administration. During the 1930s Civil War battlefield national cemeteries were transferred from the Army to the Department of Interior and remain under their jurisdiction today. American cemeteries abroad (i.e., Mexico City, France, etc.) have been administered by the American Battle Monuments Commission since 1923 and remain under their jurisdiction today. In 1973, the third consolidation took place when all but two of Army's national cemeteries (Arlington National Cemetery and the former U.S. Soldiers Home cemetery) were transferred to the VA.

After 58 years in operation, the Veterans Administration was officially abolished in 1988 when President Ronald Reagan elevated the administration to a Cabinet-level Executive Branch department and re-designated it as the Department of Veterans Affairs. The new department went into full effect on March 15, 1989. A major reorganization of functions and expansion of leadership took years to complete and resulted in three primary operational administrations for veterans benefits: the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), with origins dating to 1776; National Cemetery Administration, dating to 1862; and the Veterans Health Administration (VHA), origins dating to 1865. The Veterans Administration was located at the same building as its immediate predecessors - the Bureau of War Risk Insurance and Veterans Bureau - and is the same building now occupied by the Department of Veterans Affairs. The base of operations for a majority of Federal veterans benefits have been administered from the same building for nearly 100 years (since 1918). [Source: www.westpalmbeach.va.gov/WESTPALMBEACH/features/VAest.asp#sthash.yL4Lia4A.dpuF Apr 2015 ++]

VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 30 Apr 2015

Manhattan NY. Any of us tempted to cheat on our taxes should consider the example of the well-to-do physician and his lawyer wife who appeared in Manhattan federal court on 14 APR. The couple will soon be departing their luxury Upper East Side apartment for his-and-hers federal prisons. Neither **Dr. Jeffrey Stein** nor his spouse **Marla Stein** looked at all prepared for incarceration as they arrived on the 15th floor of the courthouse just before 2 p.m. on the day before Tax Day. They were there to plead guilty to evading more than \$500,000 in taxes. The husband filed in excess of \$125,000 in phony invoices using the names of disabled veterans, one of whom was dead.

Dr. Stein admitted to allegations set forth in court papers that he completely invented expenses such as transcription that was never done and wages supposedly paid to nonexistent employees. He also had pumped

up various tax cheat favorites, including “travel and auto expenses, deductible meals and entertainment.” His wife admitted to inflating expenses as well as inventing what court papers term “labor and advertising expenses purportedly incurred by her law practice but which were in truth and fact never incurred or paid.” In February 2013, the IRS had notified the Steins that their tax returns for 2010 and 2011 had been “selected for audit.” The IRS indicated that it was particularly interested in the expenses that the couple had claimed. The accountant who had submitted the returns agreed to represent the Steins at the audit. He asked for them to provide documentation to back up their expenses.

As a well-regarded vascular surgeon, Jeffrey Stein had done some work for the Veterans Administration and thereby had access to the agency’s databases. He used the names of four disabled veterans—two of them former patients—in creating bogus hospital invoices from nonexistent medical personnel such as a “vascular technologist” and an “ultrasound technologist.” The invoices totaled \$125,525. “One of the veterans whose name was placed on a bogus invoice...was not even alive,” the court papers report. Marla Stein had altered genuine invoices from photographers and a videographer hired for family celebrations. The court papers note, “Among the invoices fraudulently created by Marla Stein and later provided to the accountant was one that falsely recited that a ‘day in the life’ video had been prepared for and paid for by Marla Stein in connection with the purported mediation of a law suit on behalf of a personal injury client.”

Marla Stein also had joined her husband in completely fabricating some invoices, though at least she had not used the names of veterans. She instead had appropriated the names of two individuals with whom she had dealings. One was a person who had provided medical care to a family member. The other was the Steins’s babysitter/housekeeper. Neither had done anything for her law practice, as she claimed in the tax return. The use of the housekeeper’s name was particularly unwise, as the Steins were paying her \$75 a day, four days a week, for a range of domestic duties. And this led to the IRS hitting the Steins with an added violation that many of their friends likely commit with no fear of being charged. “[The Steins] failed to pay to the IRS various employment taxes due and owing to the IRS,” court papers say. “The cash wages paid to [the] domestic employee also aids the domestic employee in avoiding detection by the IRS of the domestic employee’s fraudulent failure to report her cash wages.” The Steins clearly underestimated the ability of the IRS in this digital age to find reported names and sums that do not match what is on record.

Together, the fake and altered invoices constituted real and incontestable evidence that convinced the Steins to enter guilty pleas. Written agreements that preceded the guilty pleas call for Jeffrey to get between 18 and 24 months and Marla to get between 12 and 18 months. Sentencing is scheduled for 10 a.m. on Tuesday, July 28. [Source: The Daily Beast | Michael Daly | April 15, 2015++]

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VA Hudson Valley HCS. A Yonkers man who worked on the VA Hudson Valley Montrose campus has been arrested on charges he went on a spending spree with a dead veteran's debit and credit cards. **Tory Washington**, 41, was arrested 17 APR by state police investigators from the Cortlandt barracks after an investigation. He was charged with first-degree identity theft, a felony. State police said the investigation began after someone used debit and credit cards from a former service member who had lived at the VA facility and died in October 2014. State police said Washington made multiple fraudulent charges in the Westchester County area using the veteran's cards. He also had the veteran's Social Security number, state police said. The tally so far, state police said, was more than \$13,000. The investigation into how Washington obtained the cards and Social Security number is continuing with assistance from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Police in Montrose.



Tory Washington

Trooper Melissa McMorris, public information officer for Troop K, said the service member's family notified the VA police about the purchases. That agency notified state police. Washington was arraigned in the Town of Cortlandt Justice Court. He was being held in the Westchester County jail without bail and is to appear again in court April 27. Jason Tudor, a public affairs officer for the VA Hudson Valley Health Care System, said that Washington was employed by Common Ground, which has a facility on the VA's Montrose campus. Common Ground helps veterans with housing issues. Tudor said that agency's employees are not managed or paid by the VA. [Source: The Journal News | Thane Grauel | April 21, 2015 ++]

CAVC ► U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims Judge Numbers

Within the next two years, the number of judges on the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) could drop to five – four less than its current authorized level – through a series of retirements. Given the fact that claims appeals have risen by more than 55 percent in the last five years, the reduced number of judges could spell disaster for thousands of veterans seeking their benefits. “VA routinely states that with increased adjudications, you should expect increased appeals,” said Zachary Hearn of The American Legion in his prepared remarks at a 14APR congressional hearing. “Using that logic, it would stand to reason that the CAVC should also expect an increased number of claims appealed to the Court.” Testifying before the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Hearn said Congress needs to act now to expand the number of judges on the court, “instead of waiting to see this impact and watch veterans continue to suffer.” A House bill supported by The American Legion, H.R. 1067, would extend the temporary expansion of judges for the court, helping to ensure its ability to handle the increased rate of appeals in a timely manner.



Zachary Hearn, deputy director of the Legion's Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Division, testifies before the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs on April 14.

[Source: American Legion Leg Up April 14, 2015 ++]

VA COLA for 2016 Checks ► H.R.677 Impact

The American Legion opposes the pending American Heroes COLA Act of 2015 (H.R.677). Like a previous bill floated in 2012, it would link the cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for veterans' disability compensation to the Chained-Consumer Price Index (C-CPI). As a result, COLA adjustments would be automatically indexed to those authorized for Social Security recipients and nonservice-connected disability recipients. Testifying before the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Zachary Hearn of The American Legion told the subcommittee, "The American Legion remains steadfast against the bill. We are not the only organization with significant concerns surrounding linking veterans' benefits to the chained-CPI. Two years ago, AARP reported that 'a 30-year old veteran of the Iraq or Afghanistan war who has no children and is 100 percent disabled would likely lose about \$100,000 in compensation by age 75' in today's dollars."

While The American Legion understands the intention of Congress to remove veterans from the annual political debate over COLA increases, hundreds of thousands of dollars potentially lost to some of the country's most vulnerable veterans is a serious concern. The Legion stated in its written testimony that the reason behind its opposition to H.R.677 "is that veterans sometimes have needs and expenses, which should be considered on their own merits, rather than being simply lumped in with Social Security for simple expediency." [Source: American Legion Leg Up April 14, 2015 ++]

VA Claim Payment Update 01 ► H.R.1414 Impact

In testimony before the House Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, Zachary Hearn of The American Legion addressed the **Pay As You Rate Act** (H.R. 1414). The pending bill, strongly supported by the Legion, would direct VA to pay disability benefits to veterans as soon as documentation determines they are eligible, regardless of other issues that may be pending in their claims. "VA already has the capability to do what this bill intends," Hearn testified. "Unfortunately, it has been our experience that veterans' claims are not adjudicated as they become available for benefits. Instead, VA often waits to adjudicate all issues en masse. This practice can be costly to veterans." Not only can veterans lose compensation by waiting for their claims to be fully adjudicated, they may also be denied the ability to seek VA treatment for their conditions. In December 2012, NBC News reported that 45 percent of veterans serving in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars filed for disability benefits. On average, they claimed service connection for about nine medical conditions, twice the rate of claims filed by Vietnam War veterans. [Source: American Legion Leg Up April 14, 2015 ++]

VA Lawsuit | George Ball + 6 ► Medical Record Delivery Delays

Seven disabled veterans who say they have waited hundreds of days to see their medical files are suing the Veterans Affairs Department over the delay, saying it already has potentially cost them thousands of dollars in payouts. The lawsuit, filed Monday in the U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia, is the latest in a series of legal actions against VA leaders over how disability claims are handled. Earlier this month, a Marine Corps veteran sued VA to force "prompt" resolution of a disability appeals claim that has been

pending for more than a year. In March, a coalition of veterans groups led by the American Legion sued to block new paperwork changes in how benefits claims are filed, arguing the move could cheat thousands of veterans out of payouts they deserve.



Monday's lawsuit deals with problems emerging even before those steps take place. The seven veterans, represented by Public Citizen and the National Veterans Legal Services Program, charge that VA has "unreasonably delayed" delivery of their medical records, which are needed to apply for military disability benefits or request a disability rating change. All seven of the men have had medical records requests pending for at least 300 days, despite VA rules that state the department must provide an explanation if the records can't be supplied within 20 days. One plaintiff — Army veteran George Ball, who returned from tours in Iraq with post-concussion syndrome and post-traumatic stress disorder — has been waiting for his files for more than 800 days, without explanation, the lawsuit states. "Forcing a combat-wounded veteran to wait hundreds of days for records to apply for disability compensation is unacceptable," Rachel Clattenburg, a Public Citizen attorney handling the case, said in a statement.

"This lawsuit is not just about records; it is about ensuring that our country keeps its promise to its service men and women, and their families." Lawyers associated with the lawsuit said they're requesting immediate release of records for the seven veterans involved, and "appropriate relief" for other veterans facing similar problems. VA officials have reduced the first-time disability claim backlog from around 612,000 cases two years ago to about 177,000 cases now, but lawmakers and outside advocates have expressed concerns that those improvements may not be fixing underlying difficulties with the process. A copy of the complaint be read at <http://www.citizen.org/documents/ball-v-department-of-veterans-affairs-complaint.pdf>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 20, 2015 ++]

VAMC Tampa FL Update 04 ► Nurse Staffing Shortage

Nurses at the James A. Haley VA Medical Center are overworked and overloaded because of a critical staffing shortage that is endangering veterans and staff, according to a grievance by a nursing union. The union, National Nurses United, filed the grievance against the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital this week. It says Haley needs to hire at least 100 registered nurses, in addition to an unspecified number of support staff, to meet minimum staffing levels mandated by the agency's own rules. Officials at Haley, which the union says admits 12,000 patients a year and sees an additional 1.2 million in outpatient clinics, declined comment. The grievance said Haley is plagued by budget-tightening, delays as long as nine months in hiring new nurses, and increased complaints by veterans and family members about the hospital's quality of care.

In a letter to Laureen Doloresco, Haley's associate director for patient care/nursing services, the union said it had, during the past two years, "repeatedly" brought the insufficient staffing levels to the attention of Haley

leaders. "In spite of our repeated attempts at discussing this dangerous situation, nothing meaningful has been done by management to remedy this problem," said the letter by Susan de Leon, the union's national labor representative. Haley spokeswoman Karen Collins said 23 APR that the hospital could not comment. But she noted the hospital continually reviews staffing levels "to ensure the safety and comfort of our patients." Union officials did not return calls for comment. The grievance said Haley leaders in a fall 2014 budget review boasted about saving \$1.5 million in "staffing costs" and had managed to give the VA's regional office a \$4 million loan. "These same officials are now saying there is no budget to hire the required number of clinical staff to care for veterans," the grievance said.

The union criticized Haley for having too many nurse managers and noted that these supervisors rarely conducted direct patient care. Haley has a ratio of one nurse manager for every 18 "bedside" nurses, while the VA as a whole has a ratio of 30 to 1 and the private sector's ratio is 50 to 1. The union said there is never a nurse manager on duty at Haley after 4:30 p.m. Haley doctors in identical management positions, however, "all participate actively in the direct care of veterans," the grievance said. "This lack of direct patient care ... by nurse management at this facility distances the managers from understanding the issues that staff nurses face in providing care for veterans." And that refusal to work in direct patient care, the union said, places an additional burden on RNs.

The grievance also said Haley leaders are seeking to have the hospital accredited as a magnet facility providing outstanding patient care, a costly certification that is not justified given staffing problems. The certification will cost the facility \$2 million over a four-year period, it said. That money, the union said, can better be spent elsewhere. "The magnet certification process has no place in a facility that is understaffed, overworked and lacks the resources to accomplish its stated goal: providing 5-star care to veterans," the union said. Staffing shortages are made worse by the six- to nine-month process to hire new nurses, the union said, a delay that leads many to take jobs elsewhere. The grievance said Haley "is behind national benchmarks on every single category of patient satisfaction, including pain control and response times. This was not the case in years when staffing was at safe levels." Haley officials have 14 days to respond to the grievance under terms of the union contract. [Source: Tampa Bay Times | William R. Levesque | April 23, 2015 ++]



VAMC Beckley WV Update 01 ► Substitution of Older Drugs to Cut Costs

The Department of Veterans Affairs Beckley medical center in West Virginia put patients at risk by substituting prescribed mental-health medications with older drugs to cut costs, according to a federal investigation. The practice, exposed by an agency whistleblower, violated VA policy and created a "substantial and specific danger to public health and safety," the department's Office of Medical Inspector

found. The U.S. Office of Special Counsel, which investigates and prosecutes whistleblower cases, informed Congress and the White House of the findings in a letter 22 APR (<https://osc.gov/PublicFiles/FY2015/15-21%20DI-14-3389/15-21%20DI-14-3389%20-%20Letter%20to%20the%20President.pdf>). “At a time when many veterans are grappling with mental-health issues, this VA facility was cutting corners on needed drug therapy to save money,” U.S. Special Counsel Carolyn Lerner said in a statement Wednesday. “We only know this was happening because an employee had the courage to blow the whistle on this dangerous practice.”

VA rules bar the agency from basing drug restrictions on economics alone and require the agency to provide specific medications when necessary for a patient’s health needs. The investigation confirmed that a VA clinic in Beckley, W.Va., implemented a blanket restriction on administering two antipsychotic drugs, aripiprazole and ziprasidone, to help meet its cost-saving goals for fiscal 2013. The facility’s pharmacy committee, responsible for making such decisions, made the change without a clinical determination about the possible health impacts, according to the Office of Special Counsel. The chair of the panel at the time was not a physician. The Office of Medical Inspector recommended that the clinic determine whether the drug substitutions affected patients’ health, in addition to disciplining the pharmacy committee’s leadership and appointing a physician to head the panel.

Lerner said the clinic took “immediate and appropriate measures” to resolve the drug-substitution issue. But she added that the whistleblower has made claims of continued wrongdoing may be occurring at the clinic. The VA said it has begun an investigation based on the findings and recommendations of the Office of Medical Inspector report. “We will immediately take action where it is warranted to ensure the most current medical standards are strictly followed,” the department said in a statement. “We applaud the VA employee who contacted the OSC on this matter. Secretary McDonald has made clear that employees who step forward to raise concerns have a direct bearing on the veteran outcomes we deliver, and this is an example of why that is important.” Lerner said she closed the case “conditionally,” pending a follow-up report to address the allegations of continued wrongdoing. The analysis is due to be completed by 11 MAY. [Source: The Washington Post | Josh Hicks | April 23, 2015 ++]



VAMC Aurora CO Update 07 ► VA Panel Lacks Construction Expert

The Veterans Affairs Department has no outside construction expert helping with its investigation into massive cost overruns at its new Denver hospital, according to congressional testimony and internal emails obtained by The Associated Press. The disclosure prompted new questions from Congress about how thoroughly the VA will investigate why the price tag ballooned from \$630 million to \$1.73 billion. "What value will this construction investigation have if the investigators don't know about construction?" Rep. Jeff Miller, chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, asked in a written statement 21 APR. "The fact

that the investigative panel VA created to get to the root of the Denver construction disaster doesn't include a single construction expert is absolutely indefensible," the Florida Republican added.

Rep. Mike Coffman, a Colorado Republican, said he has no confidence in the VA's ability to investigate itself. "The fact that they don't have a single construction expert confirmed on their investigative board demonstrates a complete lack of commitment to accountability," Coffman said in an email to the AP. The VA is committed to determining the facts and "holding individuals accountable when appropriate," department spokesman Paul Sherbo said. Sherbo declined to reveal anything about the backgrounds of the three current members of the investigating panel, including whether they have construction expertise. Internal VA emails obtained by the AP identified the other members as the deputy director of the VA Office of Accountability Review, an employee relations specialist with the Office of Accountability Review and the VA's regional counsel in Denver. None are from outside the agency. An official not authorized to speak publicly but with access to the emails provided them to the AP on condition of anonymity.



The VA convened the investigating panel and launched the probe amid growing congressional anger over the hospital's cost. A federal appeals panel ruled the VA had breached the construction contract because the project couldn't be built as designed for the contract price. The VA had to negotiate an interim contract with builder Kiewit-Turner to keep the project moving. Talks are underway on a new, long-term contract with Kiewit-Turner to complete the hospital. The VA has promised to discipline those whom the investigation finds were responsible, but Coffman and other members of Congress are calling for firings. Coffman also wants to strip the VA of the authority to manage large construction projects. VA Deputy Secretary Sloan Gibson told the House Veterans Affairs Committee last week that the department was trying to get approval for a construction expert from another federal agency for the panel. "We have been unable to secure that at this point. In the meantime, we moved ahead with the (investigating board) based upon the resources that we had at our disposal," he said.

Sherbo said the board has interviewed many witnesses under oath and will interview many more, but he declined to say how many because the investigation is still underway. The internal emails obtained by the AP show the department asked the Navy in February to assign Joanna Krause, director of the Navy's Medical Facilities Design Office, to join the investigation panel. Sherbo declined to say why the VA asked the Navy for Krause's help, instead of seeking someone from the Army Corps of Engineers, which has taken over day-to-day management of the Denver project. As of last week, the VA was still awaiting a decision from the Navy, the emails said. Navy officials had no immediate comment Tuesday.

The Veterans Affairs Department expects to spend about \$340 million to buy medical equipment and train staff for its new Denver hospital, on top of the estimated \$1.73 billion to build the facility. The \$340 million also includes patient beds and furniture, VA spokeswoman Elaine Buehler said. The facility boasts state-of-the-art treatment rooms and more than double the parking spaces of the current VA Hospital in Denver. Some believe the features like a 1.5 million gallon water tank, multiple generators and a towering concourse that

connects most buildings in the hospital put the project well over budget. [Source: The Associated Press | April 21, 2015 ++]

VAMC Aurora CO Update 08 ► Peter to Paul Plan Riles Congress

The renovation of scores of Veterans Affairs Department projects — from improvements to a woman’s center in Buffalo, N.Y., to the modernization of an oncology unit in Baltimore, to upgrades to a mental health services facility in Dayton, Ohio — will be put on hold in order to fund an extra \$830 million needed to finish construction of the vastly over-budget and still unfinished VA hospital in suburban Denver, according to VA internal documents. The VA’s proposal on 21 APR is detailed in a letter from Deputy VA Secretary Sloan Gibson to members of Congress. It would shuffle money inside a \$5 billion fund created last year as part of a bill passed by Congress, “The Choice Act,” that was meant to help solve system-wide problems that lead to the national scandal of patient wait-times last year. The VA says it will not cut any of the money allocated to hire more physicians and medical staff, a shortage that was at the heart of the scandal last year.

The money was largely for upgrades for VA’s physical infrastructure, which the VA says is old and outdated, including many hospitals built during the World War II era, in some cases without private bathrooms or any restrooms for female veterans, whose numbers are rising. Other updates that would be cut include such items as: plans to renovate a morgue building in Long Beach, Calif.; renovating dialysis units in Albany, N.Y.; along with dozens of repairs and updates to everything from elevators to operating rooms in VA hospitals and health clinics across the country. The half-built \$1.7 billion hospital in suburban Denver has been at the center of controversy since the VA announced that it was \$1 billion over budget, more than five times its initial \$328 million estimate, and years behind schedule. Lawmakers have said they are stuck in a no-win situation: leave the hospital unfinished or pour more money into the project.

The Army Corps of Engineers has taken over oversight of the construction from VA and is working directly with the contractor. Several members of Congress have asked that the agency get out of the construction business for future projects, especially after four hospitals this year were drastically over budget and behind schedule. In a statement the VA called the current situation in Denver, “totally unacceptable to both Veterans and taxpayers who deserve better from their VA.” They added that they attempted to “minimize disruptions to Veteran care.” And that, “None of the projects identified will affect Veteran care or safety this year. We will work with Congress to identify a path to secure funding for these important projects.”

Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL) expressed frustration at the plan and said that Congress didn’t give the VA “a slush fund to hide their culture of gross mismanagement.” He continued, “Taxpayers demand new oversight of construction projects, and I am hopeful that the Army Corps can be a part of the solution in addition to firing those responsible. The incompetence and bureaucracy at the VA simply has to change in order to be the safe haven for our American heroes.” Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO) has floated an idea to spend the department’s multimillion-dollar bonus budget on the Denver project. But Gibson, who has been only recently tapped to get the Denver project back on track, called that suggestion “a lousy idea,” saying it would take money out of the pockets of hard-working VA employees. [Source: Washington Post | Emily Wax-Thibodeaux | April 28, 2015 ++]

VAMC West Los Angeles Update 13 ► Missing Funds Accountability

During a 10 APR town hall meeting hosted by the Department of Veteran Affairs at Bob Hope Patriotic Hall in Los Angeles, local veterans and community members aired their concerns regarding homeless veteran issues plaguing the VA West Los Angeles Medical Center. The VA sent multiple officials to sit on a panel and address veterans in attendance and hear their concerns. Panel members included subject matter experts and Stephen Peck, president of U.S. VETS. Although veterans there conveyed various messages to the VA representatives, one thing resonated loud and clear - a sense of urgency in holding the VA accountable for the welfare of veterans and a commitment from the VA to make things right. "As we have people stepping up, we need to hold them accountable," one attendee said. "These people are saying they are going to step up, and we need to hold them accountable. We need there to be transparency so we know what is going on, but we need to hold them accountable for what they say they are going to do."

Vincent Kane, director of VA's National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans and special assistant to Secretary Robert McDonald, relayed messages from the secretary assuring the crowd that their concerns are being heard and changes will continue to be implemented. "It almost sounds very good, but trust having been violated, you kind of take that tongue and cheek," said Francisco Juarez, a chairperson with the California VA Land-use Committee, and member of several veterans service and advocacy organizations. Kane and others unveiled elaborate plans to transform the West Los Angeles campus and give veterans back a sense of ownership over the land. "I heard it's about time from a Marine Corps veteran wearing a cap that says Khe Sahn 1967, and that put everything into perspective," Juarez said.

Kane also expressed an obligation to due diligence and transparency within the organization. However, he and other VA officials failed to provide answers regarding accounting of funds collected from commercial tenants of the West Los Angeles VA when the organization violated land-use agreements. Kane often circled back to a remark he made, "What we should be working on, together, is transforming the VA." He went on to say that future efforts should focus on meeting not only veterans healthcare needs, but their housing, social, vocational, recreational and spiritual needs. "What struck me is that the campus was always meant to be a home - we need to go back to that. This campus needs to feel like a home," Kane said. Originally intended to serve as a home for disabled veterans, the West LA campus has leased its land to several private businesses while turning away veterans in need.

The American Legion has protested this misuse of VA property since the 1980s. The Government Accountability Office (GAO) also released a statement in August of 2014 detailing discrepancies they found during a review of VA facilities, to include West Los Angeles. GAO found weaknesses in billing and collection processes for land-use agreements as a result of ineffective monitoring. The review uncovered that the West Los Angeles VA waived revenue in an agreement with a nonprofit organization—\$250,000 in fiscal year 2012 alone—due to financial hardship. VA policy does not allow revenues to be waived. To date, the money collected in exchange for use of campus assets has not been accounted for.

During her testimony in front of a subcommittee of the House Veterans Affairs' Committee, Skye McDougall, the acting network director of the Veterans Integrated Service Network blamed the accounting oversight on Ralph Tillman, a former asset manager at the VA. She also alleged he permitted private entities to occupy VA land with no lease or a requirement to fulfill any monetary obligations for using the space. Audience members reminded the panel of the original land-use agreement. Juarez said this has been an ongoing concern raised recently among the service and advocacy organizations. "There is only one master plan," he countered. "That is the deed of the 1800s. Once you make a promise, you don't break a promise. Once you make a master plan, you don't break that master plan. So let's call this a settlement plan."

Concerned citizens and veterans were not alone in their pleas for execution of promises. The American Legion called for action, urging the VA to release a report itemizing where funds collected in exchange for use of VA land were allocated. When asked about the funds - how much money has been collected and how

the money benefits veterans - the VA representatives echoed the same words, "I will have to get back to you." [Source: American Legion | Andrea Dickerson | April 11, 2015 ++]

VAMC Wilmington Update 01 ► VA Response Leaves Questions

In a carefully worded letter delivered 20 APR to members of the state's congressional delegation, the director of the Wilmington VA Medical Center appeared to acknowledge that a number of its doctors and nurses have been temporarily reassigned to administrative duties, which would confirm charges a whistleblowing physician at the medical center made last month. Robin Aube-Warren said that 70 percent of the 11 affected positions identified by the physician during a congressional hearing are supervisors, lending credence to the allegation. She didn't say, as the physician charged, that the doctors and nurses are under investigation, only noting that individuals in such positions who are being investigated "are detailed into other administrative positions" in order to protect subordinates from possible "intimidation or retaliation" for having alleged misconduct.



Robin Aube-Warren

The letter's pertinent passage is confusing in that way. On one hand, it connects the positions identified by allegations in a 14 APR story in The News Journal with current supervisory jobs. On the other, it appears to refer only to generic policy, where she states that moving supervisors away during such investigations "clearly demonstrates my commitment to protecting our employees and providing them with a safe working environment." The state's senior senator said he was pleased to hear that. Yet, while sensitive to the delicacy of personnel issues, Sen. Tom Carper would also like a more detailed explanation. "I'm also seeking clarifications on a number of personnel matters in order to better ascertain the Wilmington VAMC's procedures for reassigning clinical employees," he said.

A spokesman for the state's sole member of the House agreed. "The letter answers some questions but raises others," said Albert Shields of Rep. John Carney's office. "This correspondence is part of an ongoing exchange with the VA that the Congressman plans to continue until it is crystal clear that Delaware veterans are getting the care they deserve." "Clearly, there is still work to be done to ensure that every veteran in Delaware has access to quality care," said Sen. Chris Coons. He reiterated the delegation's desire, stated in an 20 APR letter that asked Aube-Warren for details on the reassignments and other items, to see the release of the long-awaited VA Inspector General report on Wilmington, "which will hopefully provide even more detail about the issues we must address."

Aube-Warren also denied any retaliation is taking place, and said she's both repeatedly addressed the issue with employees and required all supervisors to complete training on whistleblower protection. "I will not tolerate intimidation or retaliation against any employee who raises a hand to identify a legitimate problem, make a suggestion, or report what may be a violation of law or policy," she wrote. "To my knowledge, there have been no allegations of retaliation during my tenure." Aube-Warren did confirm for Carper, Coons and Carney that an investigation is underway into neurologist Maryann Hooker's allegation before the House

Veterans Affairs Committee's Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations of an "inappropriate practice" related to the prescribing of Suboxone, a medication used to treat opiate addiction. Hooker said the clinical nurse who reported the practice is himself being investigated and has been assigned to a "clinical clerical position." Aube-Warren didn't specify who is conducting the investigation but said the medical center "has fully cooperated," adding, "This matter is not yet closed."

Spokesman James Coty said 28 APR that because the investigation is ongoing, "We are unable to provide additional information." In The News Journal's story, "Sham Investigations," Hooker, who serves as president of Local 342 of the American Federation of Government Employees and the only Wilmington whistleblower who has gone public, said that none of the investigations was related to professional medical practice. Others, who have insisted on remaining anonymous for fear of retaliation, said at least some of the transferred workers were being punished for speaking out on behalf of veterans' care. Hooker said that two additional providers, a doctor and a dialysis nurse, had been placed into an administrative status but quit or retired; yet another doctor left before an investigation into the surgical department began; and the hospital's then-chief of surgery quit over what he called disgust with Wilmington's senior leadership. The union has filed complaints with the U.S. Office of Special Counsel and the VA Inspector General, calling the investigations a "waste of government resources." [Source: The News Journal | William H. McMichael | April 28, 2015 ++]

VA HCS Maryland ► OIG Reports Delays, Staffing Shortages

The Veterans Health Administration medical center in Cecil County was so understaffed that at one point, federal investigators report, three doctors were caring for 5,000 patients. "I am not able to think of any acceptable or practical way to do all that you are requesting and provide adequate patient care to the veterans we are actually seeing," one of the physicians wrote to superiors in February 2014. "We three ... have been covering [for two absent providers] since at least the end of September. We have had very little help. ... How long are we expected to continue like this? We need help."

The physician's comments were included in a report issued this week by the Veterans Affairs inspector general's office, which investigated concerns related to four VA patients at the request of Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski (D-MD). Two of the patients had died; one from cancer, the other from a self-inflicted gunshot wound. The four were among the 55,000 patients treated by the VA in Maryland annually. Since the investigation, Maryland VA officials say, they have developed a contingency plan for bringing in doctors during staff shortages. They say they have made other changes in response to problems at the Cecil County center in Perry Point and the downtown Baltimore center. "We concur with the recommendations in this report," Dr. Adam M. Robinson Jr., the acting director of the Maryland VA Health Care System, wrote in a response included in the report. "Staff have initiated improvement actions." Mikulski said she was disappointed in the inspector general's findings. "I've heard directly from Maryland veterans about their delays in access to critical care and the quality of that care," Mikulski said in a statement. "I called for the VA to get to the bottom of this, and unfortunately this report confirms what we have all feared. Delays and bureaucratic dithering are unacceptable." Mikulski said she would "hold the VA's feet to the fire" and make sure officials implement the recommendations from the inspector general.

Investigators led by Assistant Inspector General John D. Daigh Jr. found long waits for joint surgery at the Baltimore center, an inadequate job of contacting a patient who needed mental health care and poor coordination for patients seen by both VA doctors and community doctors. Veterans faced delays of at least 31 days in obtaining appointments at the medical centers in Maryland in more than 7,000 cases during a recent six-month period reviewed by the Associated Press. The VA outpatient clinic in Glen Burnie had the

longest delays. Nearly 8 percent of appointments were not scheduled within 30 days, well above the statewide rate of 2.9 percent and the national rate of 2.8 percent. VA officials attributed the delays in Glen Burnie to the loss of two of the clinic's five primary care doctors.

In Perry Point, the staff of five primary care physicians leading Patient Aligned Care Teams, or PACTs, dropped to three after one physician became ill and another missed scheduled clinic days because of "unforeseen personal events and a serious illness," the report found. From October 2013 to September 2014, the three remaining doctors were left to manage the care of more than 5,000 clinic patients, investigators found, far beyond the VA recommendation of 800 to 1,200 patients per doctor, according to the report. The VA responded in early 2014 by sending a part-timer to Perry Point, but that doctor ended up covering for an urgent-care doctor on military leave instead of helping the primary care physicians. "Because of ongoing PACT provider absences, clinic staff often had to reschedule patient appointments more than once," investigators reported. This was the case for the patient who committed suicide, but the inspector general's staff could not determine whether the rescheduled appointments had any effect on the patient.

Another patient told Mikulski's office he faced delays in getting hip replacement surgery in Baltimore. Investigators found that the Baltimore VA offered joint surgeries only once per week, with two to three surgeries each time. By August 2014, 56 patients were waiting for hip or knee replacements at the Baltimore VA, with an average waiting time of 137 days. Patients are usually treated first with physical therapy, medication and weight management before surgery is scheduled. They must complete a series of screenings before surgery. The inspector general's office said it could not substantiate an allegation that the VA missed a patient's cancer diagnosis. Health records showed that the patient had been seen frequently and showed no symptoms that would indicate cancer. The patient "developed a rapidly progressive lung cancer" that was diagnosed at a community hospital. The VA was notified, but the patient soon died at the community hospital. [Source: The Baltimore Sun | Pamela Wood | April 18, 2015 ++]

VARO Oakland Update 01 ► Director Says Claims Were Not Mishandled

Speaking out for the first time, the director of the Oakland VA regional office said 20 APR that benefit claims found stuffed in a file cabinet were not mishandled and that no vet was forgotten. Director Julianna Boor's staunch defense of her office comes two days before a Congressional hearing that will examine allegations of mismanagement of veterans' compensation at Oakland. Boor, who was appointed Director on May 4, 2014, said that the 13,184 claims located in 2012 -- some of them dating back to the mid-1990s -- were merely duplicates of processed claims. Boor admitted that the office's record-keeping had been a problem but that the process since has been streamlined with a paperless digital system. Boor, however, also said that a complete list of those claims does not exist.



Julianna Boor



Rep. Doug LaMalfa



Rep. Jeff Miller



Rustyann Brown

Rep. Doug LaMalfa, R-Oroville, has called for the list to be released to an independent auditor for review to ensure that no veterans or surviving spouses were ignored by the VA -- something that Oakland whistleblowers say occurred. "I wish we could do that," Boor said. "I wish I could just wave a magic wand and make it appear. We were not keeping an audit when we did the review. We were just so focused on making sure the veterans were taken care of properly and make sure that nobody was left behind." On 22 APR, the Oakland and Philadelphia offices will be under a microscope on Capitol Hill when the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs looks into scathing VA Office of Inspector General reports that were critical of both sites. In a statement, Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), the committee chairman, said they will attempt to determine what went wrong at each office, and learn who is responsible and if the VA intends to hold anyone accountable. "Right now VA leaders have a choice," said Miller. "They can either fire those responsible for these failures -- including those who have now moved on to other positions within the agency -- or keep those who caused the problems on the VA payroll, ensuring the substandard service to veterans the IG has documented continues."

Oakland is the conduit for \$1.9 billion in benefits that annually go to more than 137,000 Northern California vets. In February, the office was questioned by VA investigators over how a file cabinet came to be filled with "informal" claims from vets seeking to file for benefits and compensation connected to their military service. The investigation, which was requested by LaMalfa after whistleblowers turned to his office alleging that there was a cover-up, found that Oakland managers conceded that 13,184 claims were improperly stored. But investigators couldn't verify that number due to "poor record keeping practices." Later, Allison Hickey, the VA undersecretary for benefits, said the file cabinet contained only duplicates. Boor said Monday that Oakland staffers told VA investigators the same thing, although that wasn't included in the eight-page report.

In late 2012, when the claims were discovered, the national VA benefits system was in crisis. Oakland, in particular, was overwhelmed. A special team even was sent to help Oakland, which at the time had 35,000 pending formal claims from Northern California vets. When a review was conducted of those file cabinet informal claims -- ones not filled out on the proper paperwork -- it was determined that they were copies and 97 percent required no further action, Boor said. Corrective action was taken on the rest, which usually boosted the compensation award to the vet.

Rustyann Brown, a whistleblower who will appear at Wednesday's hearing, is adamant that those claims were not duplicates -- recalling how one claim was a handwritten plea on stationary from a World War II widow. Boor acknowledged that without a full list, there is no way to verify the VA's numbers independently. "There's no indication that there was any mishandling," Boor said. "But we can't disapprove any allegations because we don't have every document. But our people care for veterans. Half of our employees are veterans. So I have no reason to believe that anyone did anything improper on purpose. But was this the best record-keeping practice? Probably not." Boor said the Oakland staff has reduced the size of the backlog to 16,000, cut the time veterans must wait and have improved the accuracy of processing claims. "A lot of progress has been made," she said. "There was a problem. But we have addressed the problem. I don't mind looking back to make sure that no veterans (have) been left behind. But we are looking forward." [Source: San Jose Mercury News | Mark Emmons | April 20, 2015 ++]

VARO Philadelphia Update 05 ► Vets Underserved & Overcompensated

A Philadelphia VA office simultaneously underserved and overcompensated veterans, keeping them waiting for months to get answers to their benefits questions, paying out millions in duplicative benefits and housing

some employees in a vermin-infested warehouse, according to a report released 15 APR by the Department of Veterans Affairs Inspector General. In the latest bad news for an agency that has been embroiled in a yearlong scandal, the exhaustive report details a range of problems, from failure to process thousands of pieces of mail to unsafe working conditions, at the VA's Philadelphia Regional Office. "There is an immediate need to improve the operation and management of this VA (Regional Office) and take actions to ensure a more effective work environment," the 78-page report reads.



These photos from the VA Office of Inspector General report detail the dingy conditions of the VA Regional Office space in Philadelphia. Among the IG's findings were unsecured doors and pathways that made veterans' personal information vulnerable to any passersby, as well as temperature control issues that left employees seeing 'their breath crystallize and fingernails turn blue at their workstations.

One of the most striking findings was that investigators found 31,000 inquiries went unanswered for an average of 312 days even though staff is supposed to respond to each within five days. Investigators also found 48 boxes of mail with 16,600 of documents that were supposed to have been scanned into the VA's virtual database, potentially affecting veterans' benefits. And that number might understate the problem: Investigators originally found 68 boxes but on a return visit four days later officials said they had scanned 20 boxes worth of documents over a weekend. That was in addition to 22,000 pieces of returned mail, some which had been there for four years, and almost 15,000 pieces of mail related to claims processes that had not been placed in veterans' files — some languishing unprocessed for more than three years. Staff approved about \$2.2 million in improper payments because they failed to account for duplicate records, and in at least two cases they paid dead people. Roughly 150 staffers were made to work in a leaky, dilapidated warehouse that lacked bathrooms and was infested by insects and rodents, according to the report. "The Inspector General's report released today confirmed our worst fears: that the Philadelphia VA Regional Office is rife with systemic mismanagement, deliberate manipulation of data and individuals more focused on misleading the nation than serving our veterans," Rep. Patrick Meehan (R-PA) said in a released statement.

In an email response to a reporter's query, VA spokeswoman Walinda West said the report reflected conditions in Philadelphia more than one year ago and that new director Diana Rubens immediately began remedying the problems after starting her job in July. West said the VA is doing an additional investigation of allegations of mismanagement with results expected by 30 JUN. "Upon receipt of the OIG's draft report in March 3, 2015, VA had already remedied a majority of the findings and continues work to resolve the remainder of the findings based on the recommendations in the report," West said. However, the report specifically refutes that assertion, saying IG staff received complaints from Philadelphia VA employees as recently as March. "Despite having concluded our onsite review work at the Philadelphia VARO on August 15, 2014, we continued to receive additional allegations of wrongdoing from VARO staff," the report says.

Rubens herself has been at the center of another controversy, after receiving nearly \$300,000 in relocation costs upon taking the Philadelphia job, though that is not part of the IG's report. The House Committee on Veterans Affairs will examine that payment at a hearing April 22. Zack Hearn, deputy director for claims for the Legion, said he met with Rubens in March and that he worries her assurances that problems had been fixed might not have been true. He said he's especially concerned that many senior leaders in charge when the reports started coming in are still in place. "They led us to believe that everything was fine, that everything was running smoothly," he said. "There seems to be a little bit of contradiction (in the report) in what's happening at the VA regional office."

The report was released a day after VA Secretary Bob McDonald convened a new advisory panel of business leaders, academics, health care experts and veterans to offer outside advice for his ambitious plan to reorganize the federal government's second largest department. In April revelations that veterans were dying after being put on secret waitlists at a VA medical center in Phoenix led to a nationwide crisis in veterans health care. VA facilities across the country have been implicated in wrongdoing, from manipulating data to poor treatment of suicidal patients and over-prescription of narcotics. McDonald has been under increasing pressure from lawmakers and veterans' advocates to speed the pace of reforms and fire officials blamed for malfeasance, many of whom are still working or on paid administrative leave. [Source: Stars & Stripes | April 15, 2015 ++]

VARO Philadelphia Update 06 ► Temporarily Shifting Leadership

A top manager at the Department of Veterans Affairs office in Philadelphia has been temporarily removed from his position to get "different eyes" on the deeply troubled facility, the department said 17 APR. Gary Hodge was head of the Pension Management Center — one of only three such centers in the country — until earlier this week when an inspector general audit found tens of thousands of unanswered inquiries and pieces of returned mail. Hodge was reassigned as an assistant director of the Pension and Fiduciary Service in the VA's headquarters in Washington, D.C., according to a department spokeswoman. The Philadelphia audit detailed a variety of issues, including chronic inefficiency, mismanagement and unsafe working conditions. It has also rekindled a national scandal that began a year ago with revelations that the VA systematically manipulated patient records to disguise long wait times at hospitals and clinics.



Gary Hodge

The department is "in the regional office by bringing in another leader from another Pension Management Center to see if having different eyes on the problem will bring new solutions," VA spokeswoman Walinda West wrote in an email to Stars and Stripes. West said the move is "not a promotion, demotion or lateral move." Hodge is on temporary assignment that will include ongoing VA projects, and he is slated to resume his duties as manager of the Philadelphia Pension Management Center on Aug. 17, West said. The IG found that the center was responsible for more than 31,000 veteran inquiries that had languished for an average of 312 days — the standard response time is supposed to be five days — and another 22,000 pieces of returned

mail that were never processed. Also, the devices used to time-stamp received mail were not secured, meaning staff could change the date without supervision. [Source: Stars & Stripes | April 15, 2015 ++]

* Vets *



WWII Vets Update 01 ► 3 Former POW's Opinion About Japan Today

Lester Tenney endured three hellish years as a Japanese prisoner during World War II, but with the passing of decades and repeated visits, he's made peace with his former enemy. Yet as Japan's Prime Minister Shinzo Abe prepares to address Congress in MAY, in the 70th anniversary year of the war's end, something rankles the U.S. military veteran about Japan's attitude toward its past. "They don't want the young people to know what really happened," complains Tenney. The Associated Press spoke to three U.S. war veterans about their surrender in the Philippines in 1942 and their exploitation as slave laborers in Japan. It's an episode of history most notorious for the Bataan Death March, when tens of thousands of Filipino and American prisoners of war were forced 65 miles on foot to prison camps. Thousands are believed to have perished. The AP also asked the veterans for opinions about Japan today. The U.S.-allied nation issued a formal apology to American POWs in 2009 and again in 2010, and has paid for some veterans to travel to Japan, leaving them with a more positive view of the Japanese people. All three veterans, however, remain adamant that their wartime experiences, and those of the POWs who didn't make it, should not be forgotten.

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Lester Tenn, 94, was one of more than 140,000 prisoners who endured horrific conditions in Japanese camps during the war, where one in three died from brutal punishments, hard labor, starvation, or disease. Tenney, with the 192nd Tank Battalion, U.S. Army, said he was made to march for eight days after his capture. "You had to stand on your own two feet and you had to keep moving. If you fell down, you died. If you had to go to the bathroom, you died. If you had a malaria attack, you died. The Japanese would just kill you, period. You had to stay on your feet ... If you looked at a Japanese soldier in the wrong way, he would beat the hell out of you."



Lester Tenney poses next to a memorabilia display in his home in Carlsbad, CA 20 APR. Besides a variety of war medals and letters, there is the cover of his book.

After a 28-day journey by ship to Japan, Tenney worked at a coal mine near the town of Omuta run by the Mitsui Mining Co., shoveling coal 12 hours a day for three years. He said British, Australian and Indonesian prisoners also worked there and they had no protective gear, and they'd self-inflict injuries to get days off. His weight dropped from 189 pounds to 97 pounds. He said Mitsui has never responded to his letters calling for an apology. (Mitsui & Co., which was disbanded after the war and then re-established as a major industrial group, denies having any legal or historical responsibility for Mitsui Mining Co.'s treatment of forced laborers before or during the war. It says therefore it cannot comment on complaints or requests for apologies.)

"If Mr. Abe comes here I would like him to say, 'I bring with me an apology from the industrial giants that enslaved American POWs.' He could say that very easily ... I'm afraid that when Mr. Abe leaves here, all of it's going to be forgotten. They're going to forget about apologies to the POWs, they're going to forget they did anything wrong. It's going to like whitewashing the whole thing ... You can't have a high-ranking country today if you're not willing to face your past. They have to admit their failures. If they admit their failures, then by golly they deserve to have the best." After the war, Tenney became a professor of economics at Arizona State University and today lives in Carlsbad, California. He has returned to Japan five times and was instrumental in starting Japanese government-supported "friendship" visits by POWs. "The Japanese people were wonderful. They were very kind, they were very hospitable, no question about it. They treated us beautifully ... And there's no reason why they shouldn't. We didn't do anything wrong (in the war)."

-o-o-O-o-o-

Harold Bergbower, 94, was a private with the 28th Bomb Squadron, U.S. Air Force, when he was captured on the southern Philippine island of Mindanao and sent eventually to Davao penal colony. "We could not have been treated any worse in prison camp," he said. "It was inhuman." Intensely sick during the voyage, he can't recall the journey to Japan, in the broiling, closed holds of "hell ships" that carried POWs and Asian laborers. They were starved of food, deprived of water. Only decades after did he learn that the first ship he was on was hit in a U.S. bombing attack and forced to dock for repairs. Thousands died on such voyages. Bergbower spent two years in brutal labor, scooping ore into open furnaces at a steel mill in the city of Toyama. He was very bitter about his experience as a POW, and for more than 50 years he never talked about it, even to his wife and family.



Retired Chief Master Sgt. Harold Bergbower, 94, who was in the U.S. Army Air Corps and then the U.S. Air Force, pauses in front of his military medals earned.

Bergbower spent almost four years in Japanese prisoner of war camps. During his stay in various camps and eventually on mainland Japan, his weight at one point dipped to under 75 pounds. He still has nightmares about his treatment almost 70 years after World War II Tuesday. "When I got back to the States after the war, I was told to go home and forget about it and that's exactly what I did. I didn't talk to anybody." His view of Japan changed when he went on a friendship visit in 2011 and returned to the factory where he'd been enslaved. Staff there apologized "from the heart" for what the POWs had been through. "I came away with a much different impression of Japan. We couldn't have been treated any better." Bergbower, who lives

near Phoenix, Arizona, said he has forgiven the people of Japan, but not the government. He doesn't dwell on the past but said, "The truth needs to be told ... it needs to be told as it happened."

-o-o-O-o-o-

Darrell Stark, 93, was a new recruit of the 31st Infantry Regiment, U.S. Army, when he was captured and eventually shipped to Yokkaichi, the city in Japan where he was forced to shovel coal at a copper mill. During his time as a POW, Stark suffered from such maladies as malaria, jaundice, dysentery, Dengue fever, and pneumonia. The weight on his 6-foot-2-inch frame dropped to a dangerous 97 pounds. All around him, fellow soldiers wasted away and perished from disease or starvation while others were tortured and murdered. In order to prevent prisoners from attempting to escape "they had us in execution squads of 10," Stark remembered. If one prisoner tried to break free, their captors promised to execute the remaining nine. "I saw heads chopped off," he said in a February interview, his voice breaking as he recounted the horror. "They took the heads and put them on pikes next to the gates."

Five years after the war, Stark received a letter from a Japanese man who showed him kindness and gave him food at the mill. Stark always regretted that he never replied. Stark suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, but he recovered and enjoyed a long career as a corrections officer in Connecticut. He went to Japan on a friendship visit last October, and the current deputy director of the mill clasped his hand and apologized. Stark has also exchanged letters with the son of the man, now deceased, who'd showed him kindness 70 years ago.



Darrell Stark

"I found the people (in Japan) to be very friendly, the country very clean and the people that I talked to were very nice. It is amazing what the two countries have done together to accomplish what we have over all these years. It's also amazing that with all this we have accomplished, they are not completely coming out with the truth. ... It really upsets me there are certain individuals who have completely ignored history and rewritten it to make it look like Japan was attacked, and that there was no Bataan Death March and no cruelty at all on their part. That's not all the people. But there are some. "I think when (Abe) comes, and if he really wants to do something great for his nation and maybe for the world, he should make an apology and be grateful, in a way of appreciation, for things the two countries have done together. That would just about wind it up right there, because we need to be allies. ... Another reason I would love to see Japan and the United States and all countries get along with each other is that if we ever have a total conflict, the whole world is going to be destroyed. No question about it." [Source: Associated Press | Matthew Pennington | April 25, 2015 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure~Ft. McClellan Update 03 ► New Website

The VA launched a Web page in response to years of activism by some veterans who believe that toxic exposure at Fort McClellan made them ill. The [VA] posted the page April 7, providing a comprehensive list of information, but carefully noting that it's unlikely anyone could have developed serious health problems

from serving at the former fort. The VA wants to ensure that veterans who suffer from deteriorating health conditions consistent with exposure to Polychlorinated Biphenyl (PCB) are able to obtain the care and benefits they need. This announcement is a step toward recognizing that these veterans may have long-lasting health effects that are a direct result of their service at Fort McClellan. The VFW will continue to push VA and Congress to ensure they receive the benefits and services they deserve. To read more, visit site at: <http://www.publichealth.va.gov/exposures/fort-mcclellan> Included in the site are the following useful resources for anyone wanting to find out more about any potential exposure:

- DoD Fort McClellan website
- Environmental Cleanup Program Fact Sheets:
 - a. Chemical warfare materials
 - b. Underground storage tanks
 - c. Landfills
 - d. Wildlife refuge
 - e. Cleanup process
- McClellan Land Use Map
- Chemical Fact Sheets:
 - a. PCBs
 - b. Sulfur mustard Nerve agents
 - c. Radioisotopes - Cobalt (Co-60)
 - d. Cesium (Cs-137)
- Environmental Baseline Survey Volume I and II
- ATSDR Health Consultation: Airborne PCBs in Anniston
- Federal Register Notice of Intent (2001)
- EPA Superfund Webpage: Anniston, AL

[Source: VFW Action Corps | April 17, 2015 ++]

National Medal of Honor Museum ► Conceptual Drawings

The National Medal of Honor Museum Foundation has released conceptual drawings for its \$100 million Medal of Honor Museum on Charleston Harbor. The museum is being planned for a site at the Patriots Point Naval and Maritime Museum in Mount Pleasant. Organizers hope to break ground next year. The plans unveiled 22 APR call for an almost 110,000-square-foot facility comprised of three buildings. A pavilion will house the museum entrance and lobby. Then there will be exhibit space with eight permanent exhibits and two special galleries. Also planned is a chapel for special events. Three years ago, organizers announced plans for the museum to replace a smaller one now open aboard the World War II-era aircraft carrier USS Yorktown which is berthed at Patriots Point.



MOH Museum conceptual drawings

The foundation elected to use designs from Safdie Architects and Gallagher & Associates, a museum planning firm. The museum itself features bold, angular architecture and somewhat resembles a boxy, five-petal flower. The five sides evoke the medal's iconic star, and the star features prominently in design elements. The main museum will be linked to a separate lobby, museum entrance and multi-purpose space by a two-level pedestrian bridge over a marsh. "It takes a difficult site and makes it special," Wilburn said of the layout. The museum represents a core part of a legacy eyed by the Congressional Medal of Honor Society, which consists exclusively of the living recipients of the prestigious honor. There are 79 living recipients, according to the society's website.

With nine living recipients who earned their award since Vietnam, the society's number will inevitably dwindle. So through the museum and a pair of other initiatives, members hope to keep alive the memory of the 3,493 total recipients as well as promote the attributes the award embodies. "The message we really want to get across is that ordinary people can do extraordinary things when they put service above self. It's about the legacy of the medals and the ideals behind it." Wilburn, who served as an intelligence officer for the Air Force at the Pentagon during the Vietnam War. "The recipients don't want this to be a monument to themselves but an educational opportunity." Along with preserving stories of honorees, foundation hopes the museum will "inspire visitors about the ideals of patriotism, leadership and courage, and encourage them to embrace their responsibilities as citizens in a democracy."

Medal of Honor recipient Patrick Brady, a former Army major and helicopter pilot in Vietnam, also said the society is not doing this to honor MOH recipients; to him it's about education, especially for children. "Recipients wear the Medal of Honor for every man and woman who has served in America's armed forces, many of whom never came home from the battlefield," said Brady. "We believe there is no higher calling than service to our nation's youth, and we are pleased to support this project that will help fulfill that call." Brady earned his medal for making several trips into enemy-held territory amid heavy fog and fire to rescue pinned-down, wounded soldiers in 1968, according to his citation. He took such heavy enemy fire, including a mine that injured two crew members, that he went through three helicopters to evacuate 51 seriously wounded men.

The museum will provide administrative offices for the museum foundation as well as the MOH Society and its foundation, which carries out other education initiatives and annually honors a small group of everyday citizen-heroes. Plans also include a 240-seat auditorium, an event hall, conference and classroom space, a verdant grass rooftop for the multipurpose entrance building, and a 140-seat chapel. According to the foundation's website, the \$98 million includes \$50 million for the museum, \$20 million for exhibit design and fabrication, \$10 million for site development, \$6 million for parking, \$6 million for fundraising and administrative costs and a \$6 million contingency for overruns. [Source: Associated Press & ArmyTimes | April 23 & 27, 2015 ++]

National Coast Guard Museum Update 01 ► Goal to Open by 2018

The effort to build the only national Coast Guard museum in the United States had been on the ropes for years when retired Adm. Robert J. Papp Jr. took over as the sea service's top officer in 2010. Federal legislation passed in 2004 said it could only be built in Connecticut, but there were disagreements about whether that was the best idea. Papp, then the commandant of the Coast Guard, said he was concerned the project might remain stalled forever. So he and others involved decided to move forward with plans to build

it in New London, the small Connecticut seaport city that is also home to the Coast Guard Academy. "Rather than try to change anything," he told The Washington Post, "We are pressing ahead."

On 20 APR, the Coast Guard Museum Association that oversees the project will launch its first national fund-raising campaign in Washington. It comes following a groundbreaking ceremony on the New London waterfront last spring, and after the city gave the sea service property last year. The goal is to open the museum by 2018. Doing so will give the service a national museum, something the other branches of the armed forces have had for years. But it will require a lot more money: Museum association officials say they have about \$25 million, and need \$100 million. "It's going to be tight, but we have an awful lot of enthusiastic people who are going to be working on this," Papp said.

The service has artifacts in several locations that could be displayed at the museum, including at a warehouse near Washington, Papp said. The Coast Guard Academy also has a museum on its grounds, but it is small and not open to the public often. "It's really one room in the academy's library, and they put some of the artifacts out there on display," Papp said. The new museum will highlight Coast Guard heroes like Signalman 1st Class Douglas Monro, the only member of the service to ever earn the Medal of Honor. He did so during the Battle of Guadalcanal during World War II, putting his boats in the line of fire to allow Marines to evacuate. He was mortally wounded in the process. More recent events like the rescue effort following Hurricane Katrina in 2005 also will be highlighted. The service is credited with pulling 24,135 people from imminent danger, usually off the roofs of homes that had been flooded. Here are some images of what the museum will look like:



[Source: Washington Post | Dan Lamothe | April 22, 2015 ++]

OBIT | Harry E. Steen | WWII ► 18 APR 2015

Harry Edward Steen Sr., El Paso's sole remaining survivor of the Bataan Death March in World War II, was remembered Tuesday for his tenacity and his attitude to keep going, no matter what the circumstances. Steen, who spent more than three years in Japanese prison camps, died in his sleep Saturday morning 18 APR at his East El Paso home. He was 97. "He was a very outspoken fellow, very outspoken, very outgoing, you always knew where he stood on things," said his friend, retired Army Col. Gerald Schurtz. Schurtz's father and uncle were both captured on the Bataan Peninsula in the Philippines with Steen and 1,800 other New Mexico National Guard members in April 1942, during the opening days of World War II.

Thousands of U.S. and Filipino prisoners were murdered and abused in the days after their surrender in an atrocity known as the Bataan Death March. Many of those who survived died in the years of brutal captivity that followed. Only 900 of the 1,800 New Mexico guardsmen who were captured in 1942 were still alive at war's end in 1945. "We went through so goddamn much hell, people wouldn't believe it," Steen told the El Paso Times in a 1992 story marking the 50th anniversary of the Bataan Death March. Schurtz estimates about 25 of the 1,800 New Mexico National Guard soldiers who were captured are still alive, most living in Northern New Mexico. Many of the Bataan survivors, who had been trained at Fort Bliss, settled in El Paso

after the war. Schurtz said Steen was the last of the El Paso survivors. Steen will be buried at Fort Bliss National Cemetery with full military honors.



Harry Edward Steen Sr

Steen was honored with a moment of silence before Tuesday's El Paso Chihuahuas baseball game, with many of his family members in attendance. "He spent 3½ years in a Japanese prison camp and 58 years with me. He was a tough old bird," his widow, Mary Lou Steen, said. As a captive of the Japanese, Steen was tortured and lived off a rice ball a day and whatever he could get his hands on, his wife said. She said her husband weighed about 175 pounds before he was captured and less than 80 pounds when he was liberated in 1945. "He fought till the end," she said. "His attitude was, 'These bastards are not going to get me.' "

Harry and Mary Lou Steen were married in 1958. They moved to El Paso in the early 1970s. He worked for the Spitzer Co. until 1980, and after retiring, spent his time golfing and bowling. The Steens had five children, 12 grandchildren and 13 grandchildren. Steen will be remembered for everything he did for his children and others, she said. His son, Harry Edward Steen Jr., said: "He was very stern. He wanted his children to be seen and to be heard. He was a great provider. He always looked out for family and friends." Mary Lou Steen added, "They all loved Dad. Dad was a good guy." [Source: El Paso Times | Luis Carlos Lopez | April 21, 2015 ++]

Vet Jobs Update 175 ► Best for Vets | 2015 Employer's Rankings

A few years ago, many companies viewed veteran hiring essentially as charity — a nice thing to do, a way to chip away at sky-high vet unemployment rates and get some good public relations in the process. Things have changed. With the unemployment rate for the latest generation of veterans routinely running below 7 percent, companies across all industries have realized how vets can boost bottom lines — and they're fighting to bring people like you onboard. "They bring skills and talent that we desperately need," said Teri Matzkin, manager of military relations and strategic sourcing for talent acquisition at Lockheed Martin Corp. Each year, a team of five veterans, dedicated to recruiting current and former service members for Lockheed jobs, attend more than 200 events for transitioning service members, she said. "Now the competition is even more intense for this type of talent," Matzkin said. "We must continue to look for every means ... to attract and retain them."

Lockheed took the third spot in MilitaryTimes Best for Vets: Employers 2015 rankings. Verizon, USAA, BAE Systems and Charles Schwab & Co. round out the top five. More companies than ever before responded to this year's survey, which included more than 80 questions and explored, in great detail, each employer's recruiting, culture and policies. Some results were dramatic. The efforts start at the top:

- 97 percent of responding companies reported having a current service member, veteran or military spouse among the top leaders.
- Nearly every single responding company — 98 percent — told us they attend military-specific job fairs and went to an average of 39 such events in 2014.
- Better than nine in 10 have relationships with the military's transition assistance program, and a similar number work with both professional military associations and veterans service groups to recruit veterans.
- More than eight in 10 have at least one recruiter who spends significant time specifically on recruiting current or former service members or families.
- Companies reported spending an average of about one-fifth of their recruiting budgets specifically on attracting veterans.

Efforts don't end at recruiting:

- Nearly eight in 10 companies told us they have at least one employee group for military-connected people.
- About 89 percent do military-related service projects.
- Nearly three-quarters accept military experience instead of some civilian certifications.
- A majority try to accommodate military spouses facing a permanent change-of-station move or service member's deployment, such as flexible scheduling, off-site work or job transfer.

Most importantly, every single company that made this year's list told us they are hiring now. Verizon, which climbed to the top of our rankings for the first time this year, increased its number of veteran hires by 90 percent from 2013 to 2014, said Evan Guzman, the company's head of military programs. The company saw the success of its existing veteran employees and made greater recruiting efforts, he said. A separating service member doesn't even have to be in the country to be recruited by Verizon, which has set up virtual platforms to connect with overseas military talent. Still, Guzman said, Verizon's goal isn't just to bring in quality veteran talent for itself, but to be a "veteran advocate" for those who will end up with jobs at other companies. "We want to make sure we at least give them some guidance and support." That's a common sentiment among the companies taking part in Best for Vets: Employers.

One of the biggest multi-company veteran hiring initiatives is the 100,000 Jobs Mission. That effort pioneered by JPMorgan Chase & Co. started in 2011 as a coalition of 11 companies with a goal of hiring 100,000 vets by 2020. By the end of 2014, it had grown to more than 191 companies that have collectively hired more than 217,000 veterans. "While we certainly believe that every veteran hire is important, what's more important about the 100,000 Jobs Mission is the organizational forum that's been created" between companies, said Maureen Casey, managing director of the military and veterans affairs program at JPMorgan Chase. Chris Davison, a military and veteran recruiting manager for BAE Systems, agreed. "It's really a best-practice-sharing exercise," Davison said. "We learn from them. They learn from us. And it just makes us better as a team of employers." Just under half of companies responding to our survey told us they are affiliated with the 100,000 Jobs Mission.

Some of the companies that were not part of that effort were part of others, such as the Military Spouse Employment Partnership, the White House Joining Forces initiative or the Hiring Our Heroes job fairs conducted by the U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation. "As much as we would like to, we cannot hire every veteran out there," said Jackie Purdy, vice president of talent management for San Antonio-based USAA. The company, also a member of the 100,000 Jobs Mission, has developed unique training programs

and jobs catering to veterans and military spouses as part of a wide-ranging recruitment initiative. But USAA also makes efforts to work with vendors focused on military hiring. In addition, the company offers help and advice to vets both within and outside the company.

Lockheed's Military Connect program is a social media community that connects transitioning service members with the company's vet employees — and not just recruiters. "It's not a typical talent community where you are just sending them job postings," said Matzin. "This is content. This is information that will provide them lifelong learning." Pursuing a civilian career related to your military occupational specialty often is an easy and obvious approach — but that doesn't mean it's the right one. "You definitely have to keep an open mind," said Elizabeth D'Angelo, a former Air Force captain who worked in public affairs while in uniform and is now a USAA software developer. "You can't silo yourself just to the career that you've been doing in the military."

Others offered similar advice, noting that military service typically forces people to quickly adapt to new roles and circumstances. "Service members have an accelerated learning curve," Verizon's Guzman said. Thomas Jones, a retired Army first sergeant, said he took a broad view of how the skills and abilities he learned in the military could apply in the civilian world, and that served him well. Now a Verizon employee, Jones advised his fellow veterans not to be hesitant applying for jobs they think they may not get and not to be shy about highlighting awards, recognitions, certifications and other individual achievements. "I'm a firm believer in 'If you've got it, flaunt it.'".

Go to <http://bestforvets.militarytimes.com/best-employers-for-veterans/2015> For MilitaryTimes' 2015 Best for Vet®: Employer rankings. For the methodology by which the rankings were assigned refer to <http://www.militarytimes.com/story/veterans/best-for-vets/2015/04/13/methodology-best-for-vets-employers-2015/25705277/>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | George Altman | April 13, 2015 ++]

Veterans Vision Project Update 04 ► Sargent, USMC



Sgt. Darren F. | United States Marine Corps

Retiree Appreciation Days ► As of 27 APR 2015

Retiree Appreciation Days (RADs) are designed with you in mind. They're a great source of the latest information for retirees and Family members in your area. RADs vary from installation to installation, but, in general, they provide an opportunity to renew acquaintances, listen to guest speakers, renew ID Cards, get medical checkups, and various other services. Some RADs include special events such as dinners or golf tournaments. Due to budget constraints, some RADs may be cancelled or rescheduled. Also, scheduled appearances of DFAS representatives may not be possible. If you plan to travel long distances to attend a RAD, before traveling, you should call the sponsoring RSO to ensure the RAD will held as scheduled and, if applicable, whether or not DFAS reps will be available. The current schedule is provided in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Retiree Activity\Appreciation Days (RAD) Schedule**”. Note that this schedule has **been expanded to include** dates for retiree\vetans related events such as town hall meetings, resource fairs, stand downs, etc. For more information call the phone numbers of the Retirement Services Officer (RSO) sponsoring the RAD as indicated in the attachment. An up-to-date list of Retiree Appreciation Days can always be accessed online 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

[Source: RAD List Manager | Milton Bell | April 27, 2014 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs ► 1 thru 31 May 2015

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. visit the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s website at <http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes/events>.

Fort Leonard Wood, MO - Fort Leonard Wood Transition Summit

May 5 & May 6 [Details](#) [Register](#)

Camden, NJ - Camden Hiring Fair

May 6 - 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Glen Allen, VA - Richmond Hiring Fair

May 7 - 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Fort Hood, TX - Fort Hood Military Spouse Networking Reception

May 11 - 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. CST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Austin, TX - Austin Hiring Fair

May 11 - 8:30 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. CST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Fort Hood, TX - Fort Hood Military Spouse Hiring Fair

May 12 – 10:00 a.m. to 1:00 p.m. CST [Details](#) [Register](#)

<http://www.virtualjobscout.org/#> **Military Spouse Virtual Job Fair**

May 14 - 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Fort Belvoir, VA - Fort Belvoir Military Spouse Networking Reception

May 19 - 6:30 p.m. to 8:30 p.m. EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Boston, MA - Boston Hiring Expo with Boston Red Sox

May 20 – 9:30 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Fort Belvoir, VA - Fort Belvoir Military Spouse Hiring Fair

May 20 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Atlanta, GA - Atlanta Hiring Fair

May 21 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Pensacola, FL - Pensacola Hiring Fair

May 21 - 11:00 am to 2:00 pm EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

Arlington, VA - Transitioning Senior Military Leadership Networking Reception

May 21 - 4:00 pm to 6:00 pm EST [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Assn April 28, 2015 ++]

WWII VETS 85 ► Raymond Biel

In AUG 1945 Second Lt. Raymond “Speedy” Biel, 22, was assigned to the 509th Composite Bomb Group which consisted of 1,700 pilots and crew members. He knew he was participating in a top-secret mission on Aug. 6, 1945, when as a co-pilot of the “Full House”, a B-29 Superfortress, he flew over Nagasaki, Japan to report the weather. But it wasn’t until he returned to the island of Tinian that he learned the mission was to drop an atomic bomb. On 28 JAN, Biel told Marines at Marine Corps Recruit Depot San Diego the story of how he ended up participating in both of the missions to drop atomic bombs on Japan, effectively ending World War II. Born in Chicago, Biel graduated from high school in 1940 and followed his girlfriend to college in Michigan. He was a freshman when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, and he soon enlisted in the U.S. Army Air Force to avoid being drafted, he said. Though he originally was told he would be able to finish college, Biel, 92, said his “deferment was deferred,” and he was sent to flight school. He was chosen to be a co-pilot on a new kind of plane, the B-29, and sent to Fairmont, Neb., where training facilities and runways had been hastily built. Just before the B-29s finally arrived, Biel’s pilot gave him the plane’s manual, which was “about the size of a phone book.” Biel got his call sign “Speedy” when he delivered the book back to the pilot three days later, and the pilot marveled at how quickly the young lieutenant had read it.

Col. Paul Tibbets — the pilot whose plane, the Enola Gay, dropped the bomb “Little Boy” on Hiroshima — chose 15 crews from Nebraska for the secret mission and took them to Wendover, Utah. After training in the desert and in Cuba, the crews began shipping out to Tinian, a tiny island some 100 miles north of Guam. Tinian had been secured by the Marines in the late summer of 1944, and the Japanese had been building an airfield when the battle began. By August 1945, the airfield on Tinian was the busiest in the world, Biel said, with planes taking off every minute from each of the four runways. On Aug. 6, Biel’s plane and two others started off low — around 2,500 feet — then began climbing to 30,000 feet once they reached Iwo Jima, he said. The three weather planes recorded the atmospheric conditions, and all three potential targets were clear.

Three other planes went to Hiroshima to deliver the bomb; one additional plane was parked on Iwo Jima as a backup.



Raymond "Speedy" Biel, shown here in the B-29 during World War II (left) and Retired Navy Capt. Richard Suttie interviewing his friend Dr. Raymond Biel, who during World War II was a co-pilot of one of seven B-29 Superfortresses participating in the first mission to drop an atomic bomb. He became a dentist after he left the service, and now lives in Artesia, Calif.

When the planes returned to the airfield, Biel said, they were told about the atomic bomb, and Tibbets was awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross on the spot. Three days later, Biel was in the backup plane parked on Iwo Jima while six other B-29s flew to Japan. They first flew to Kokura, the site of one of Japan's largest munitions plants, but the weather was cloudy, Biel said. After circling for about an hour, the planes decided to go to the secondary target, Nagasaki. Nagasaki was also cloudy, Biel said, and the pilots had decided to use radar to drop the bomb, but just before they did, a hole appeared in the clouds. The plane dropped the bomb there, missing the original target by about three miles, he said. Later, the men found out that if they had hit the planned target, they would have destroyed a prisoner of war camp, killing 12,000 British prisoners. At the time, Biel said he and the rest of the crew of his plane was sitting on Iwo Jima, worried. After three hours, they heard that the plane had landed on Okinawa and immediately run out of fuel. Two of the plane's engines died on the runway, he said.

Though Biel didn't know before the first mission what kind of bomb they would be dropping, he said he and the other airmen were happy when they found out the details, because they "knew the war was going to end." Retired Navy Capt. Richard Suttie, a friend of Biel's who served as an interviewer at the event, said an invasion of Japan had already been planned, in case the bombing did not prompt Japan to surrender, and that casualties for that attack were expected to be around 80 percent. Col. Mark Tull, commander of Headquarters and Service Battalion at the recruit depot, told the Marines the Japanese had sworn to "fight to the last man," and that the planned landings would have involved 40 divisions. "Those weapons saved lives," Tull said, "and frankly, saved the world." [Source: Stars & Stripes | Jennifer Hlad | Jan. 30, 2015 ++]

State Veteran's Benefits & Discounts ► Massachusetts

The state of Massachusetts provides several benefits to veterans as indicated below. To obtain information on these refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Veteran State Benefits –MA**" for an overview of the below those benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each refer to <http://www.mass.gov/veterans/benefits-and-services>.

- Housing Benefits

- Financial Assistance Benefits
- Education Benefits
- Recently-Returned Combat Veterans
- Other State Veteran Benefits

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-benefits/massachusetts-state-veterans-benefits> Apr 2015 ++]

America's Most Beloved Vets ► Operation Iraqi Freedom (1)



Bill Krissoff



Chris Kyle



David Bellavia



Jessica Lynch

- In the wake of his son's death in Iraq, Doctor Bill Krissoff joined the Navy to honor his memory, deploying to Iraq and Afghanistan.
- Called the most lethal sniper in U.S. military history, the Navy SEAL Chris Kyle served four tours in Iraq and was awarded two Silver Stars and five Bronze Stars for valor.
- While clearing a house during the Second Battle of Fallujah, the soldier David Bellavia killed five jihadists, including one in hand-to-hand combat.
- The first American POW rescued since the Vietnam War and the first-ever woman, Jessica Lynch received unprecedented media coverage.

* Vet Legislation *



114th Congress Update 02 ► What First 100 Day's Meant for Vets

No matter the organization or interest, benchmarks are used as a way to measure the success or failure of an agenda. Since the 114th Congress just passed its first 100 days, its agenda as it relates to veterans and veteran issues should be examined. One of the first pieces of legislation Congress and the Veteran Affairs Committees wrote and passed was the Clay Hunt Suicide Prevention for American Veterans (SAV) Act. Building on the momentum created in the 113th Congress, both the House and Senate passed SAV and the president signed it into law close to within Congress's first 30 days. This bipartisan effort proved that Congress and the president can find common ground on an important veterans issue. The SAV Act seeks to address and prevent the troubling fact that 22 veterans a day take their own life. Congress and the president showed the American people what is possible when they work together for veterans.

In the same manner of bipartisanship, on March 19, 2015, the 12th anniversary of the beginning of the Iraq War, Reps. Scott Perry (R-PA) and Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) launched the bipartisan Congressional Post-9-11 Veterans Caucus in the U.S. House as a congressional member organization purposed to support the veteran community. Open to the more than 30 House members who currently serve or have served since the Sept. 11, 2001 attacks, the caucus seeks to identify issues impacting veterans of this era and work across the aisle to develop and debate legislation aimed at improving the lives of post-9/11 veterans and their families. One such piece of bipartisan legislation was The Choice Act of 2014. The Choice Act, which provides veterans increased access to quality healthcare, was greatly hampered in its effectiveness by the "40-mile rule" (a criteria standard by which veterans seeking private healthcare would have to conform). The Choice Act and the 40-mile rule were slated to be addressed by this Congress in the first 100 days; however, the Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) was able to beat Congress to the punch and address the ineffectiveness of the 40-mile rule determination without a legislative fix.

It is no secret that the continued backlog of veterans' claims, the careless overspending at the Denver VA Clinic, relocation spending and countless other self-inflicted wounds still hamper the VA from being efficient. While it is wholly correct for congressional committees who have jurisdiction over the VA to hold hearings and to investigate these and other missteps, they should also make sure that they continue to advance legislation that helps veterans and provides the secretary of the VA, Bob McDonald, the flexibility to correct course as necessary. One would be hard-pressed to find anyone who doesn't know about the huge problems facing the VA. Our nation's veterans and taxpayers deserve better. Yet Congress must resist the urge to concentrate too heavily on these well-known problems and must have continued motivation during the next 100 days to pass legislation that veterans groups like Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) advocate as ways to help veterans who need solutions in the immediate. These immediate issue recommendations include:

- Adopting the treating physician rule for medical evaluations for compensation and pensions, requiring the VA to treat private medical opinions with the same weight as an opinion of a VA medical specialist when determining disability rating or eligibility.
- Improving follow-up care with veterans that call the Veterans Crisis Line to ensure they are connected to mental health treatment or other services and ensuring proper oversight and implementation of the Clay Hunt SAV Act.
- Increasing support for Vet Centers and VA medical facilities to hire more female practitioners, doctors who specialize in women's health, mental health providers and outreach specialists.

These three recommendations are specifically designed to address the three issues most widely raised among IAVA members: needed reforms to the VA disability claims process; mental health support and modern and adequate healthcare services for women veterans. The issues facing the VA and veterans deserve

continued emphasis. The problems and recommended solutions are well-known and documented. Congress must not lose the momentum it has created during its first 100 days, and it must be equally resolute in its determination during the next 100 days to fulfill the obligation of meeting the needs of those who served our nation. [Source: IAVA | Christopher Neiweem | April 27, 2015 ++]

VA Caregiver Program Update 28 ► S.1085 | Cover Pre-911 Vet Care

Today, there are several programs to support spouses and parents who care for injured service members from the post-9/11 era. The VA provides a monthly stipend, travel expenses, access to health insurance, mental health services, training and respite care for designated caregivers. The Defense Department also provides special compensation for caregivers who give up employment to care for their ill or injured service member. But for the families of countless other veterans injured before Sept. 11, 2001, there is no help beyond medical services. Some members of Congress want to change that. For the second straight year, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) has introduced the Military and Caregiver Services Improvement Act to extend benefits to those who help injured or ill veterans of all eras — not just post-9/11, Iraq- and Afghanistan-era veterans.

Murray's bill also would remove restrictions on who is eligible to receive benefits as a caregiver — to include siblings and friends — and would allow veterans to transfer their Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits to dependents and make the DoD's compensation tax-exempt, among other changes. Murray said the legislation is needed because some caregivers devote full-time hours to supporting their loved ones and need assistance. "These caregivers don't necessarily wear uniforms or go overseas but they serve our country nonetheless. ... They are a critical support system for our veterans yet they ask for very little in return," Murray said. According to Murray's office, there are 5.5 million caregivers of veterans and service members in the U.S., 1.1 million of them caring for post-9/11 veterans. The Congressional Budget Office last year estimated that the legislation would cost VA \$9.5 billion over four years. The current version would phase in veterans of other eras based on need, reducing the immediate impact on VA, Murray said.

Last year's bill (H.R.4892) never made it out of committee. Murray said cost should not be an issue, arguing that caregivers save the government billions by providing care that otherwise would have to be furnished by VA-funded nurses, home health workers or in-patient facilities. "It's unacceptable that we let caregivers and veterans handle this on their own," she said. Paralyzed Veterans of America (Paralyzed Veterans) applauded the introduction of the bill. "This legislation reflects the highest legislative priority for Paralyzed Veterans and our members," said Al Kovach, Jr., national president of Paralyzed Veterans of America. "It would finally eliminate the unfair 'date of injury' as an eligibility requirement and help provide caregivers of catastrophically injured veterans with the benefits and support they need. We thank Sen. Murray and Rep. Langevin for their support of this legislation."

Currently the majority of Paralyzed Veterans members are excluded from these VA caregiver benefits because of the current date requirement. The law also excludes veterans with serious illnesses or diseases such as Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis (ALS) and Multiple Sclerosis (MS), both of which have a catastrophic impact on activities of daily living, and eventually leave veterans dependent upon caregivers. "The need for caregiver support services does not change for service-connected, catastrophically disabled veterans based on the date of injury. And no reasonable justification can be provided as to why pre-9/11 veterans with a service-connected injury or illness should be excluded from the comprehensive caregiver program," said Kovach. "We encourage the Senate to take up and pass this legislation quickly and hope the House will follow suit soon after," added Kovach. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | April 27, 2015 ++]

VA Accountability Update 04 ► H.R.473 Sent to HVAC | Provisions

A House subcommittee on 16 JAN approved legislation that would cap the number of Senior Executive Service members eligible for bonuses, and would give the VA secretary the power to strip pension benefits from department senior executives who are convicted of a crime that influenced their job performance. The 2015 Increasing the Department of Veterans Affairs Accountability to Veterans Act (H.R. 473) contains several provisions aimed at giving the VA secretary more tools to hold misbehaving senior executives accountable, but some of the provisions worry senior executives and their advocates. “We are concerned that the forced distribution of ratings at the outstanding and exceeds fully successful level challenges an underpinning factor of the SES system that agencies make meaningful distinctions in performance,” said Senior Executives Association President Carol Bonosaro in an 15 APR letter to Reps. Brad Wenstrup (R-OH) and Mark Takano (D-CA), the chairman and ranking member, respectively, of the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity. “Senior executives face a high barrier of entry into the corps; therefore a normal distribution of performance should not be expected nor imposed.”

The subcommittee reported out H.R.473, along with several other bills affecting veterans, during a Thursday markup. The legislation, sponsored by House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) would

- Allow no more than 30 percent of VA’s senior executives to receive top performance ratings and qualify for bonuses.
- Require senior executives to change jobs every five years to reinvigorate the idea of a mobile SES. Those job reassignments can happen on a rolling basis so that all VA senior executives aren't switching jobs at the same time.
- Allow the VA secretary to strip pension benefits from VA senior executives who are convicted of a crime that influenced their job performance, and then fired.
- Prevent senior executives about to be fired because they were convicted of such a felony, but who instead retire, from receiving their full retirement benefits.
- Allow the secretary to take away the government contribution portion of the pension for the time period in which the employee was engaged in behavior warranting removal. The rest would be returned to the employee in a lump sum. A third party entity would review the secretary's decision. Bonosaro said SEA supported that provision. “This provision should be narrowly tailored to ensure that the felony conviction is final (no pending appeals) and that the conviction is tied to their job (e.g., embezzlement of funds),” she said. “The legislation should also make clear that the pension clawback is only for the time period in which the felony is committed, as determined by the courts and not the secretary.”
- Reduce to 14 days the amount of paid administrative leave for top department officials under investigation, unless the secretary can show good reason for extending that leave.

During Thursday’s markup, Wenstrup made some changes to the bill based on input from the VA and other stakeholders, including adding a new requirement that senior executives’ performance evaluations include a component assessing how effective SESers are at “employee engagement.” Bonosaro said “it is unclear how efforts of an executive to maintain satisfaction and commitment among employees under their supervision would be assessed and measured for the purpose of informing an executive’s performance appraisal. Further it is not unusual that executives seeking to improve performance may find themselves the subjects of union grievances or EEO complaints which are later found to have no merit.” The legislation now

heads to the full committee, where it could be further amended. [Source: GovExec.com | Kellie Lunney | April 16, 2015++]

VA ID Card Update 05 ► H.R.91 Gathering Steam

A Florida congressman is claiming momentum for his bill H.R.91 ensuring every honorably discharged veteran receives an ID card from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs which, he insists, can be done without burdening taxpayers. U.S. Rep. Vern Buchanan (R-FL) introduced the “Veterans ID Card Act” earlier this year and claimed it was gathering steam on Tuesday. The bill has picked up more than 30 co-sponsors. On 21 APR, the Vietnam Veterans of America and the Association of the U.S. Navy (AUSN) endorsed Buchanan’s bill. The bill has also won the backing of veterans groups including AMVETS and Veterans for Common Sense (VCS) in the past few weeks. “I am very excited that momentum is building for this important legislation to help our nation’s veterans ... The VSOs and members of Congress from both sides of the aisle recognize that this is a straightforward, cost-neutral bill that will make it easier for veterans to provide proof of their service.” Buchanan said.



Rep. Vern Buchanan

The bill would ensure all veterans receive ID cards from the VA instead of just those who served 20 years in the armed forces or are seeking medical treatment for service-related wounds. Buchanan said veterans are forced to carry DD-214 paperwork, which contains sensitive information including Social Security numbers, and an ID card would be more convenient and would do a better job of keeping their personal information secure. “In an age of increased scrutiny in regard to the military service of individuals, every veteran who has served our nation honorably should be able to obtain a VA card if they wish to have one,” said Edgar Rodriguez, the director of government relations for the AUSN, on Tuesday. “These cards empower veterans by allowing them to conveniently carry evidence of their military service, making their lives easier in a variety of ways. We at AUSN support this common-sense measure and hope that it is swiftly passed into law in the 114th Congress.” Buchanan says his bill is budget neutral since veterans who opt for the ID card would have a “small fee” which the VA secretary would examine every five years. [Source: Sunshine State News | Kevin Derby | April 21, 2015 ++]

Enlistment Update 14 ► H.R.1989 | Grant Military Illegals Citizenship

Rep. Jeff Denham (R-CA) reintroduced legislation on 23 APR to make illegal immigrants eligible for citizenship upon completing military service. Denham has introduced the measure H.R.1989, known as the ENLIST Act, repeatedly over the last two years, as both a separate bill and an amendment to the annual national defense authorization. The proposal was made in order as an amendment to the defense authorization

in 2013, but Denham later withdrew it when it came up on the floor after colleagues urged debating it as a standalone measure. Then House GOP leaders prevented Denham's amendment from getting a floor vote at all in 2014.



Rep. Jeff Denham

Denham represents a district with a large Hispanic population and is one of the few Republicans who has endorsed comprehensive immigration reform. He argued that immigrants without documentation who grew up in the U.S. should nonetheless be given a chance to serve their country in the military. "The ENLIST Act would give young adults who came here to no fault of their own, that have graduated from our high schools, that can pass a background check, that can speak English, that the military is asking for to protect and defend the nation that they know and love," Denham said on the House floor. "This is an act of patriotism. This is an opportunity to create a greater national defense and an opportunity for those kids that know of no other country to call home to actually pledge allegiance and be patriots of this great nation," Denham concluded. The House Armed Services Committee is slated to mark up its massive defense authorization for the upcoming fiscal year on Wednesday. Floor consideration is expected sometime in May. [Source: The Hill | Cristina Marcos | April 23, 2015 ++]

VA Firing Authority ► H.R.1994 Applicable to All VA Employees

The head of the Veterans Affairs Department would have much more flexibility to fire corrupt or poor-performing employees under a new bill introduced in the House on 23 APR. The legislation would give the VA secretary "sweeping new authority" to get rid of department employees engaged in misconduct, or who are poor performers, according to a statement from the bill's sponsor, House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL). The 2015 VA Accountability Act would make it easier to fire all misbehaving employees, not just top officials. The 2014 Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, which became law last year, makes it easier to get rid of senior executives at the department engaged in wrongdoing.

Lawmakers and other stakeholders have grown increasingly frustrated that the department has not fired any employees in connection with the data manipulation and excessive wait times for vets that erupted last year at the Phoenix, Ariz., facility. Problems involving data manipulation, mail mismanagement, drug overprescriptions, and retaliation against whistleblowers have come to light since then at several other VA facilities across the country. According to Miller, VA has only attempted to discipline eight people for wait time manipulation. "From Philadelphia to Reno, Nev., to Nashville, Tenn., to Phoenix, VA's tradition of transferring problem workers, putting them on paid leave or simply allowing them to go virtually unpunished continues because current civil service rules make it extremely difficult to properly hold employees accountable," Miller said in a statement. "I know this because high-ranking VA officials – people who work directly for the secretary – have told me so behind closed doors."

The legislation would allow the secretary to remove any VA employee based on performance or misconduct; the employee could file an appeal to the Merit Systems Protection Board within seven days of his or her removal. MSPB would have to rule within 45 days of the appeal filing. The bill also would extend the probationary period for new VA employees from one year to 18 months, and allow the secretary to extend that even further. "When an employee's probationary period ends, their immediate supervisor would be required to make an affirmative decision that the employee is qualified for their position before full civil service protections are granted," according to a press release summarizing the bill. The legislation would include a provision limiting the secretary's authority to fire or demote an employee who is a whistleblower. Several veterans' groups, including Veterans of Foreign Wars, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and Concerned Veterans for America expressed support for the legislation. [Source: GovExec.com | Kellie Lunney | April 23, 2015 ++]

VA OIG Update 02 ► H.R.1938 | Ban Secret Health Care Reports

WASHINGTON — Rep. Ron Kind (D-WI) is introduced H.R.1938 in the House 22 APR which would bar inspectors general in the federal government from keeping from the public the findings of their investigations. The bill is co-sponsored by every other House member from Wisconsin, a rare bipartisan feat in a typically polarized delegation that could help the bill's chances for passage. Kind said he is angry the inspector general at the Veterans Affairs Department failed to release findings last year of an investigation into opiate prescriptions at the Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Wisconsin. The inspector completed the probe in March 2014 but did not release the findings or notify Kind, whose complaint triggered the investigation. Five months later, 35-year-old Marine Corps veteran Jason Simcakoski died from "mixed drug toxicity" as an inpatient at Tomah. "We could have taken much sooner action if we had a little bit more candidness about all this," Kind said in an interview this week.



Rep. Ron Kind

USA TODAY reported last month that the VA inspector general had also withheld from the public the findings of 140 other investigations of veteran health care across the country since 2006. The inspector has since started releasing those reports. Of 23 from last year, six contain substantiated allegations and two involved veterans who were harmed or died. A spokeswoman for VA Deputy Inspector General Richard Griffin, who is interim IG, declined to comment specifically on Kind's legislation. But spokeswoman Catherine Gromek said Griffin wants to retain the authority to administratively close investigations, which in the past has meant keeping findings from the public. "We continue to believe that administrative closures are a necessary tool for a number of reasons," she said. Gromek did not specify the reasons, but she said the inspector could withhold reports from the public when investigations don't result in "productive findings," when they are cut short if a lawsuit is filed, and when the subject of an investigation leaves VA employment.

But Kind doesn't think any reports should be kept private. "It's all about sunlight — government functions better when the light of day is shining in on these things, and obviously with something as important as investigations involving veterans' programs or the VA system overall, we need to have it as transparent and as open as possible," he said. "Otherwise, we don't know what needs to be fixed, what problems are being developed that need further congressional focus and help." There are roughly 75 inspectors general across the federal government. The positions were established under a 1978 law as independent and objective units within federal agencies to combat waste, fraud, and abuse. Among their duties is keeping Congress — and hence the public — "fully and currently informed" of problems they find, according to the law. But there is no standard for how or when they do that. Kind's bill would require that whenever they issue a "work product," such as an investigation report, the inspectors would have to share it with congressional committees and post it publicly on their websites within three days.

Rep. Reid Ribble (R-WI) said signing on to Kind's bill was a no-brainer. "This shouldn't even require legislation," he said. "At a time when public trust in government is at an all-time low, making sure that Congress and the American people have access to the work that federal inspectors general do to keep the bureaucracy on the straight and narrow is the bare minimum." Rep. Sean Duffy (R-WI) said that in Tomah, "multiple missteps, by multiple parties, led to the probable deaths of several veterans. "We are evaluating the federal government's role in these scandalous events, but in the meantime, this bill puts in place safeguards to ensure that the inspector general cannot hide critical information from legislators and, more importantly, the American people ever again," he said. The legislation is similar to a measure (S.579) introduced in the Senate last month by Sens. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Ron Johnson (R-WI). Baldwin has come under intense criticism because she was the only member of Congress to receive a copy of the Tomah opiate report last year, but she didn't act on it for four months. [Source: USA TODAY | Donovan Slack | April 21, 2014 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure Legislation Update 06 ► S.901 & H.R.1769

U.S. Senators Richard Blumenthal (D-CT), Jerry Moran (R-KS), and U.S. Representatives Dan Benishek, M.D. (R-MI), Mike Honda (D-CA) and Elizabeth Esty (D-CT) held a press conference 15 APR on the introduction of bipartisan, bicameral legislation to support research into health conditions faced by descendants of veterans exposed to toxins during their military service. **The Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015** bills (S.901 & H.R.1769) – supported by the Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA), AMVETS, the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) and Rolling Thunder – would establish a national center at a Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facility for research into the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions of the descendants of individuals exposed to toxic substances during their time in service. These include Agent Orange in Vietnam, Gulf War neurotoxins, Iraq and Afghanistan chemical weapons and burn pits as well as other chemicals and toxins.

The bills would require the Defense Department to declassify documents on troops who were exposed to toxic substances and shed new light how exposure affects children. Military records on incidents that exposed at least 100 service members would be released under the bill, which has been introduced in the House and Senate. It would also create a national institute and advisory panel to study the health of troops' descendants. The proposed law is early in the legislative process and had a first hearing before a House subcommittee 23 APR. Similar proposals championed by veterans groups have failed, but if passed it could provide a wealth of new information on long-running health concerns that span from Agent Orange in Vietnam to burn pits in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We believe this may be the most important bill for vets since the Agent Orange Act

in 1991," which extended benefits to those with conditions connected to the herbicide, said John Rowan, national president of Vietnam Veterans of America, which has backed the bill.

The open records measure would require the DoD to provide enough information on toxic events to determine whether a service member was exposed, the potential severity and what health conditions might result. However, the bill, sponsored in the House by Rep. Dan Benishek (R-MI) does include an exception that allows the defense secretary to block a declassification if it endangers United States security. Along with the new documentation, the Department of Veterans Affairs would stand up a research institute for the diagnosis and treatment of children with medical conditions related to the exposures experienced by their parents when they served, according to the bill language. Rowan said the VA recently held hundreds of town hall meetings across the country and heard many accounts of reproductive issues and children's health problems from veterans and their spouses. Such inter-generational problems have been blamed on Agent Orange for decades. But Rowan said too few in-depth health studies on descendants have been done. "I don't want to see that happen to the Persian Gulf vets, and I certainly don't want to see that happen with the new vets," he said.

Toxic exposure has become an issue for those who served in Iraq and Afghanistan. Veterans of those wars are now suing American contractors -- the DoD cannot typically be sued for exposure -- over open-air burn pits they claim caused diseases. The Supreme Court ruled earlier this year that the suits can move forward. Kelly Kennedy, a spokeswoman for Bergmann and Moore, a national law firm that handles veterans' appeals cases, said the release of Pentagon documents could help speed the understanding of mass exposure incidents such as the U.S. destruction of a weapons facility at Khamisiyah in southern Iraq in 1991. Thousands or even hundreds of thousands of troops were exposed the nerve agent sarin during the Gulf War attack, she said. "The government declassified that event 10 years after the fact, and it meant that researchers could look at air patterns to see who was exposed, as well as animal research to see potential symptoms," Kennedy wrote in an email. "That has been extraordinarily important for Gulf War illness."

Many of the symptoms from toxic exposure are frequently misdiagnosed in descendants of veterans due to a lack of understanding and scientific proof. However, veterans have observed increased levels of cancers, birth defects and other conditions in their subsequent generations. The evidence of these wounds of war afflicting the children and grandchildren of servicemembers exposed to toxins is growing and research is warranted to collect data and study this issue. The goal of this medical research is to determine the conditions that result from debilitating toxins and hopefully lead to the appropriate support and benefits veterans and family members deserve. The full text of S. 901, the Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015 can be seen at http://www.moran.senate.gov/public/index.cfm/files/serve?File_id=40623cda-f7a6-4131-bcd3-1b7243bb1aa1. To contact your legislators and ask them for their support of these bills, an editable formatted message has been made available by VVA for your use at <http://capwiz.com/vva/issues>. [Source: Richard Blumenthal Press Conference & Stars and Stripes | Travis J. Tritten | Apr 17 & 24, 2015 ++]

Board of Veterans' Appeals Update 08 ► H.R.800 | VA Pilot Program

On February 20, 2015, Representatives Beto O'Rourke, Jeff Miller, Chairman of the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, and Ranking Member Corrine Brown introduced H.R. 800, the Express Appeals Act. The House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs held a hearing 14 APR, exploring the viability of this pilot program. DAV testified as to the value of implementing this new appeals processing option. The bill would authorize the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out a five-year pilot program, creating an **alternate appeals option** for appellants. It would provide appellants with an option to have their appeals sent directly to the Board of Veterans' Appeals (BVA) bypassing some Veterans Benefits

Administration's (VBA) appeal processing procedures. This pilot could save veterans, their dependents and survivors roughly 1,000 days of appeal processing.

H.R. 800 allows appellants to supply any additional evidence and supporting documents when filing their Notice of Disagreement to start their appeal for BVA review. Evidence submitted after voluntarily opting into the program would result in discontinuance of the program and the appellant would revert back to the standard appeal process. If BVA procures any additional evidence, an appellant (and/or the appellant's representative) would receive copies of this evidence and be given time to respond with additional evidence. DAV supports this bill, with several recommended changes, which the sponsor of the legislation is in agreement, including:

- Establish comprehensive VBA reporting requirements to evaluate the pilot program;
- Preserve and strengthen the Decision Review Officer review option; and
- Ensure appellants receive proper and adequate information to make a well informed decision before making a voluntary election to entry this pilot.

This pilot has the potential to bring about real reform within the VBA. Readers are encouraged to contact their Congressional representatives and ask them to cosponsor and support H.R. 800: the Express Appeals Act. An editable formatted message has been provided by DAV to assist you in doing this. If you do not want to change anything all you have to do is to complete the message's subject line. Click the following link to log in and send your message: https://www.votervoice.net/BroadcastLinks/la_zk5efBOjv36E5vWK9Lg. [Source: Disabled American Veterans Action Alert | April 17, 2015 ++]

Vet Bills Submitted to 114th Congress ► 150415 to 150430

For a listing of Congressional bills of interest to the veteran community introduced in the 114th Congress refer to this Bulletin's "**House & Senate Veteran Legislation**" attachment. Support of these bills through cosponsorship by other legislators is critical if they are ever going to move through the legislative process for a floor vote to become law. A good indication of that likelihood is the number of cosponsors who have signed onto the bill. Any number of members may cosponsor a bill in the House or Senate. At <https://beta.congress.gov> you can review a copy of each bill's content, determine its current status, the committee it has been assigned to, and if your legislator is a sponsor or cosponsor of it by entering the bill number in the site's search engine. To determine what bills, amendments your representative/senator has sponsored, cosponsored, or dropped sponsorship on go to:

- <https://beta.congress.gov/search?q=%7B%22source%22%3A%5B%22legislation%22%5D%7D>
- Select the 'Sponsor' tab, and click on your congress person's name.
- You can also go to <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php>

Grassroots lobbying is the most effective way to let your Congressional representatives know your wants and dislikes. If you are not sure who is your Congressman go to <https://beta.congress.gov/members>. Members of Congress are receptive and open to suggestions from their constituents. The key to increasing cosponsorship support on veteran related bills and subsequent passage into law is letting legislators know of veteran's feelings on issues. You can reach their Washington office via the Capital Operator direct at (866) 272-6622, (800) 828-0498, or (866) 340-9281 to express your views. Otherwise, you can locate their phone number, mailing address, or email/website to communicate with a message or letter of your own making at either:

- http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm
- <http://www.house.gov/representatives>

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

- **H.R.1735 : National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016.** A bill to authorize appropriations for fiscal year 2016 for military activities of the Department of Defense and for military construction, to prescribe military personnel strengths for such fiscal year, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Thornberry, Mac [TX-13] (introduced 4/13/2015)
- **H.R.1769 : Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015.** A bill to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs a national center for research on the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions of the descendants of veterans exposed to toxic substances during service in the Armed Forces that are related to that exposure, to establish an advisory board on such health conditions, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Benishek, Dan [MI-1] (introduced 4/14/2015) Related Bills: S.901
- **H.R.1803 : Veterans Back to Work Act of 2015.** A bill to amend the Internal Revenue Code of 1986 to make permanent the work opportunity tax credit for veterans and to allow an exemption from an employer's employment taxes in an amount equivalent to the value of such credit in the case of veterans. Sponsor: Rep Poe, Ted [TX-2] (introduced 4/15/2015)
- **H.R.1816 : Vulnerable Veterans Housing Reform Act of 2015.** A bill to exclude from consideration as income under the United States Housing Act of 1937 payments of pension made under section 1521 of title 38, United States Code, to veterans who are in need of regular aid and attendance. Sponsor: Rep Heck, Joseph J. [NV-3] (introduced 4/15/2015)
- **H.R.1818 : Veteran Emergency Medical Technician Support Act of 2015.** A bill to amend the Public Health Service Act to provide grants to States to streamline State requirements and procedures for veterans with military emergency medical training to become civilian emergency medical technicians. Sponsor: Rep Kinzinger, Adam [IL-16] (introduced 4/15/2015) Related Bills: S.453
- **H.R.1843 : VA Pilot Program to Improve Disabled Vet's Support.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a pilot program to improve access to supportive services and community coordination for families of disabled veterans. Sponsor: Rep Lawrence, Brenda L. [MI-14] (introduced 4/16/2015)
- **H.R.1860 : Publish VA Health Care Info.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to publish information on the provision of health care by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Boustany, Charles W., Jr. [LA-3] (introduced 4/16/2015)
- **H.R.1862 : VA Outreach on Emergency Medical Care Delayed Payments.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to conduct outreach to veterans regarding the effect of delayed payments of claims for emergency medical care furnished by non-Department of Veterans Affairs medical providers by the Chief Business Office and to direct the Secretary to submit to Congress an annual report regarding such delayed payments. Sponsor: Rep Boustany, Charles W., Jr. [LA-3] (introduced 4/16/2015)
- **H.R.1863 : Expand Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014.** A bill to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to expand the Veterans Choice Program to veterans who would otherwise receive medical care from a deficient medical facility of the Department of Veterans Affairs. Sponsor: Rep Boustany, Charles W., Jr. [LA-3] (introduced 4/16/2015)
- **H.R.1875 : Filipino Veterans Recognition Act.** A bill to extend the Filipino Veterans Equity Compensation Fund and to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to accept certain documents as proof of service in determining the eligibility of a person to receive amounts from such Fund. Sponsor: Rep Heck, Joseph J. [NV-3] (introduced 4/16/2015)
- **H.R.1899 : Family Caregiver Services Program Injured Vet Eligibility.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to extend to all veterans with a serious service-connected injury eligibility

- to participate in the family caregiver services program. Sponsor: Rep Lawrence, Brenda L. [MI-14] (introduced 4/21/2015)
- **H.R.1904 : VA Master's Degree & Doctoral Degree Grant Program.** A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to award grants to establish, or expand upon, master's degree or doctoral degree programs in orthotics and prosthetics, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Cartwright, Matt [PA-17] (introduced 4/21/2015)
 - **H.R.1909 : Over 40 mile Vet Non-VA Health Care.** A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to use existing authorities to furnish health care at non-Department of Veterans Affairs facilities to veterans who live more than 40 miles driving distance from the closest medical facility of the Department that furnishes the care sought by the veteran. Sponsor: Rep Culberson, John Abney [TX-7] (introduced 4/21/2015)
 - **H.R.1911 : VA Vet Funeral Benefits Increase.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to increase certain veteran funeral benefits. Sponsor: Rep Hunter, Duncan D. [CA-50] (introduced 4/21/2015)
 - **H.R.1938 : Ban VA OIG Secret Health Care Reports.** A bill to amend the Inspector General Act of 1978 to increase transparency of the Inspectors General, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Kind, Ron [WI-3] (introduced 4/22/2015)
 - **H.R.1948 : VA Vet Child Care Assistance.** To amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to provide child care assistance to veterans receiving certain medical services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Sponsor: Rep Brownley, Julia [CA-26] (introduced 4/22/2015)
 - **H.R.1969 : VA Family Caregiver Assistance Program Expansion.** To expand eligibility for the program of comprehensive assistance for family caregivers of the Department of Veterans Affairs, to expand benefits available to participants under such program, to enhance special compensation for members of the uniformed services who require assistance in everyday life, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Langevin, James R. [RI-2] (introduced 4/22/2015)
 - **H.R.1978 : VA Veterans Conservation Corps.** A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to establish a veterans conservation corps, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Polis, Jared [CO-2] (introduced 4/22/2015)
 - **H.R.1994 : 2015 VA Accountability Act.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the removal or demotion of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs based on performance or misconduct, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Miller, Jeff [FL-1] (introduced 4/23/2015)
 - **H.R.2029 : Military Construction and Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies Appropriations Act, 2016.** A bill making appropriations for military construction, the Department of Veterans Affairs, and related agencies for the fiscal year ending September 30, 2016, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Dent, Charles W. [PA-15] (introduced 4/24/2015)
 - **H.R.2046 : VA Participation in Prescription Drug Monitoring Programs.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the participation of the Department of Veterans Affairs in the prescription drug monitoring programs of the States. Sponsor: Rep Duffy, Sean P. [WI-7] (introduced 4/28/2015)
 - **H.R.2047 : Expand Authority to Remove VA Employees.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to expand the authority of the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to remove senior executives of the Department of Veterans Affairs for performance or misconduct to include removal of certain other employees of the Department, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Duffy, Sean P. [WI-7] (introduced 4/28/2015)
 - **H.R.2053 : Reserve Component SBP Upgrade.** To amend title 10, United States Code, to eliminate the different treatment under the Survivor Benefit Plan accorded members of the reserve

components who die from an injury or illness incurred or aggravated in the line of duty during inactive-duty training compared to members of the Armed Forces who die in the line of duty while on active duty. Sponsor: Rep Chaffetz, Jason [UT-3] (introduced 4/28/2015)

- **H.R.2054 : Women Vet Access to VA Medical Care.** To amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for increased access to Department of Veterans Affairs medical care for women veterans. Sponsor: Rep Brown, Corrine [FL-5] (introduced 4/28/2015)

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- **S.901 : Toxic Exposure Research Act of 2015.** A bill to establish in the Department of Veterans Affairs a national center for research on the diagnosis and treatment of health conditions of the descendants of veterans exposed to toxic substances during service in the Armed Forces that are related to that exposure, to establish an advisory board on such health conditions, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Moran, Jerry [KS] (introduced 4/13/2015) Related Bills: H.R.1769
 - **S.957 : Veteran Entrepreneur Capital Access.** A bill to increase access to capital for veteran entrepreneurs to help create jobs. Sponsor: Sen Shaheen, Jeanne [NH] (introduced 4/15/2015)
 - **S.979 : Eliminate DIC Reduction of SBP.** A bill to amend title 10, United States Code, to repeal the requirement for reduction of survivor annuities under the Survivor Benefit Plan by veterans' dependency and indemnity compensation, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Nelson, Bill [FL] (introduced 4/16/2015) Related Bills: H.R.1591
 - **S.997 : Aurora VAMC Authorization Extension.** A bill to extend the authorization for the major medical facility project to replace the medical center of the Department of Veterans Affairs in Aurora, Colorado, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to enter into an agreement with the Army Corps of Engineers to manage the construction of such project, to transfer the authority to carry out future major medical facility projects of the Department from the Secretary to the Army Corps of Engineers, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Gardner, Cory [CO] (introduced 4/16/2015)
 - **S.1021 : VA Master's Degree Grant Program.** A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to award grants to establish, or expand upon, master's degree programs in orthotics and prosthetics, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Durbin, Richard [IL] (introduced 4/21/2015) Related bills: H.R.1904
 - **S.1070 : GI Bill Transfer Rule Clarification.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for clarification regarding the children to whom entitlement to educational assistance may be transferred under Post-9/11 Educational Assistance, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Durbin, Richard [IL] (introduced 4/23/2015)
 - **S.1082 : Removal/Demotion of VA Employees.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to provide for the removal or demotion of employees of the Department of Veterans Affairs based on performance or misconduct, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Rubio, Marco [FL] (introduced 4/23/2015)
 - **S.1105 : Homeless Vet Dependent Children Caretaker Per Diem.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to authorize per diem payments under comprehensive service programs for homeless veterans to furnish care to dependents of homeless veterans, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Heller, Dean [NV] (introduced 4/28/2015)

[Source: <https://beta.congress.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> April 29, 2015 ++]



Uniforms Update 04 ► White and Blue Crackerjacks Moving Forward

The good news: Officials have the money for the long-awaited reboot of dress whites and dress blues. The bad news: The money isn't available until 2016. Money problems and a decision to roll-out new women's jumper-style dress blues in tandem with the men's have delayed the roll-out by a year for service dress blues; service dress whites will be delayed for two years. Men and women, E-6 and below, will be able to buy the service dress blues at the Navy Exchange in early 2016, said Capt. Janet Bristol, head of the Uniform Matters Office. The uniforms are likely to be issued to recruits beginning Oct. 1, 2016, the start of fiscal year 2017. Funding for the crackerjack whites is earmarked for fiscal 2017. "We are definitely going forward with it," she said in a recent interview. "We are still formalizing some of our final decisions on the timing and rollout schedule, but the funding is in place, the uniforms will be coming and I think the sailors will enjoy the new features."



The dress blues sport sure-to-be popular updates like a front zipper on the trousers that renders the 13 buttons purely decorative, and a side zipper on the blouse. The dress whites are set for the largest redesign in decades and will have tailored cuffs and piping that matches the blues. But not all changes are being well-received: Many female sailors complain that the "Dixie cup" is easily stained by makeup and doesn't fit hair buns. Many male sailors said they are eager to check out some of the new features, but not eager to cough up the money to buy a new uniform; a current set costs \$87.54. The cost of the updated threads has not been determined, though Bristol said the new blues "will be a little bit more expensive than the current uniform because of the piping and zippers." The new crackerjacks will start as an optional uniform for sailors and then at some as yet undetermined date become required. That introductory phase can stretch as long as three years, and a longer transition would place less burden on the production schedule, Bristol said.

On the other hand, leadership can expedite the requirement, which is a real possibility. The push for women to adopt the crackerjack style-jumper and the "Dixie cup" have been driven by Navy Secretary Ray Mabus, who wants more uniformity in the ranks. The male uniform designs were approved in May 2012 after eight years of tests and trials, but the cash-strapped service didn't have the funds for implementation. Officials kept the effort alive by launching a redesign of the female dress blues. About 30 women donned "Dixie cups" and crackerjacks for an initial three-week wear test in May 2014. Modifications were made based on their feedback, and about 275 women in Norfolk-area bases conducted a three-month wear test from November to January. The plan is to roll out the male and female SDBs together in 2016. Offering them first at the Navy

Exchange allows the Defense Logistics Agency to enter production at a slow and steady pace, and then ramp up for the start of recruit issue later in the year, Bristol said.

The new side zippers will drive up the cost of the blouse but have been a huge hit. Taking off the blouse — an effort reminiscent of Houdini wrestling his way out of a straightjacket — is now done with ease thanks to the side zipper. The trousers also have a front zipper flanked by two pockets. The 13 buttons remain as a decorative element. Women are testing a front and side trouser zipper. Bristol said most women have preferred the side zipper. Navy Times has spoken with more than a dozen women who took part in the two wear tests, and their preferences have been split down the middle. Many women dislike the "Dixie cup" as compared with the bucket-style cover they currently wear. The majority of wearers give it a thumbs-down for a variety of reasons.

The new whites will mirror the blues in appearance: They feature a yoke around the chest and black piping on the back bib and along the tailored cuffs at the end of the sleeves. Two stars rest in the back bib's corners. Female wear testers said they've gotten mostly positive feedback while wearing their prototype uniforms, especially among women. The wear testers have had to endure the occasional joke, and even a harsh look or two. More than one tester has been asked why she was wearing the male uniform. "There are some design features the fleet is going to enjoy," Bristol said. In addition to the side zipper, she continued, "The piping looks very sharp and will add layer of pride. It's going to be worth the wait." [Source: NavyTimes | Lance M. Bacon | April 20, 2015 ++]

Sexual Assault Awareness Month ► Walk a Mile in Her Shoes

April is Sexual Assault Awareness Month. It gets a fair amount of attention in the U.S. military, in which thousands of assaults are reported annually and the Pentagon has acknowledged cultural problems that need to be addressed. One place where the military is addressing the issue is college campuses, where Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC) organizations train students before they earn a commission and become new officers. That has led to this:



Yes, those are photos of Army ROTC cadets wearing red high heels while in uniform. It's part of a campaign known as Walk a Mile in Her Shoes, which bills itself as a "playful opportunity for men to raise awareness in their community about the serious causes, effects and remediations to men's sexualized violence against women." It isn't focused on the military, although a number of units have participated in the past. The photos above were taken at Temple University in Philadelphia. [Source: The Washington Post | Dan Lamothe | April 22, 2015 ++]

Military Allotments Update 02 ► Lawmakers Question Restrictions

Some lawmakers want more information on a Defense Department policy change that has limited the types of allotments troops can set up. Members of the House Armed Services Committee's military personnel panel expressed their concern about the method defense officials used to prohibit certain allotments. In their initial markup of the personnel portion of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill, the lawmakers are calling for extensive information from DoD on the reasons for the new policy, which took effect 1 JAN. The report would be due 1 JAN 2016, if the full House agrees to it. The full committee is scheduled to take up the entire bill 29 APR.



Computers and tablets are among the items that troops are forbidden from buying with allotments under a Defense Department policy

Active-duty troops no longer can set up allotments to purchase, lease or rent consumer items. That applies to all "tangible and movable" personal property, such as vehicles, boats, motorcycles, washers, dryers, furniture, laptops, tablets, TVs and cellphones. Troops still may use credit to buy these items; they just can't use allotments. Like other consumers, they can set up direct payments from checking accounts or use other options. Other allotments are not affected, such as those going to family members, savings accounts, charities and investments, and to pay insurance premiums, mortgages and rent. The policy change does not apply to military retirees or DoD civilian employees.

The change was an internal DoD process and did not require a change in law, one source noted, adding that lawmakers are "trying to get DoD to study whether what they did was a good idea." Consumer advocates and regulators have documented abuses in which troops were enticed to buy items using allotments in deals that misrepresented the total cost of the item, a defense official said at the time of the policy change, which was announced in November. The change came from recommendations following a review of the allotment system ordered by former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel in June 2013. That was spurred by a Consumer Financial Protection Bureau enforcement action against two companies, alleging they required troops to pay by allotments without disclosing all fees charged by third-party processors.

An interagency team conducted the review, consisting of representatives from legal and financial divisions in DoD, as well as the Joint Staff. The CFPB, Federal Deposit Insurance Corp., Federal Reserve Board, Comptroller of the Currency and the National Credit Union Administration also participated. Lawmakers now want information on whether there was a public notice and comment period beforehand, a summary of

public comments received, justification for the change, and an analysis, along with case studies, of the connection between predatory lending and the allotment system, and all other information DoD used in formulating the change. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 28, 2015 ++]

Military 2016 Pay Raise ► HASC Backs 2.3%

A key House committee is quietly backing a 2.3 percent military pay raise next year, a full percentage point higher than what the Pentagon requested. But the House Armed Services Committee appears intent on not making a big deal about it — and the lack of strong supporting language could leave troops' paychecks lighter. Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-TX), committee chairman, said his committee's draft of the 2016 defense authorization bill will not include any language regarding the military pay raise. Instead, the committee will tacitly abide by a law on the books for years that ties the military raise to average increases in private-sector wages. That would result in a 2.3 percent pay hike effective 1 JAN if the White House doesn't intervene. But President Obama's budget request calls for a smaller 1.3 percent pay raise — and he has authority to set the final figure if Congress doesn't specifically mandate something different.



Last year, the House also passed its defense authorization bill without any pay raise language, and the Senate backed Obama's lower proposed raise. The end result: Troops got a raise that was half a percentage point below the increase in average civilian pay. For an E-4 with three years of service, the difference between a raise of 1.3 percent and 2.3 percent totals about \$268 a year. For an O-4 with 12 years, it's about \$838. Outside advocates have lamented the Pentagon's trims to pay hikes as lost money for troops, since their pay won't keep pace with their civilian counterparts or the rate of inflation. But Pentagon officials have argued the smaller pay raises are needed to keep training and modernization accounts solvent, arguing that poorly equipped and prepared service members are more of a danger than lesser-paid ones. The House committee's full draft of its version of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill is due out Wednesday. Senate and House appropriators are expected to weigh in on their military pay raise preferences in coming months. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | April 21, 2015 ++]

UUV ► Unmanned Underwater Vehicles | 2015 Deployment

The Navy will deploy its first underwater drones from Virginia-class attack submarines for the first time in history later this year, the Navy's director of undersea warfare said 14 APR. The deployment will include the use of the Remus 600 Unmanned Underwater Vehicles, or UUVs, performing undersea missions in strategic locations around the globe, Rear Adm. Joseph Tofalo, told Military.com at the Navy League's Sea Air Space annual symposium at National Harbor, Md. "Now you are talking about a submarine CO who can essentially be in two places at the same time – with a UUV out deployed which can do dull, dirty and dangerous type missions. This allows the submarine to be doing something else at the same time," Tofalo

said. "UUVs can help us better meet our combatant command demand signal. Right now, we only meet about two-thirds of our combatant commanders demand signals and having unmanned systems is a huge force multiplier."



Remus 600



The Remus 600 is a 500-pound, 3.25-meter long UUV equipped with dual-frequency side-scanning sonar technology, synthetic aperture sonar, acoustic imaging, video cameras and GPS devices, according to information from its maker, Hyrdoid. The Remus 600 is similar to the BLUEFIN Robotics UUVs, such as the BLUEFIN 21, that were used to scan the ocean floor in search of the wreckage of the downed Malaysian airliner last year. The upcoming deployment of the Remus 600 is part of a larger Navy effort to use existing commercial off-the-shelf technology, Tofalo explained. "We're using commercial off-the-shelf technologies to do real world missions for the combatant commander. The oil and gas industry uses these things for all kinds of functions. The submarine force will be adapting this. The sensors are similar to the sensors that the oil and gas industry might use. They might be surveying where their oil pipes are, whereas we might want to be looking for a mine field," Tofalo said. The Remus 600s will launch from a 11-meter long module on the Virginia-class submarines called the dry deck shelter which can launch divers and UUVs while submerged.

Alongside efforts to make preparations for the first deployment of commercially available UUVs from the Virginia-class attack submarines, the Navy is also planning at-sea tests this year of a UUV launching technology which uses the boat's torpedo tubes. The at-sea test will examine the technological interface between a UUV and the missile tube as a launcher, Tofalo explained. The Navy has been working on developing an 85-foot long section of the Virginia-class submarines called the Virginia Payload Modules. This would help submarines launch both missiles and UUVs from the submarine. "For the large diameter UUV itself, what we want to have is an interface that allows it to come out of that Virginia Payload Module tube. To do that we need an arm that can extend itself with a little platform that can extend itself and go to the vertical," Tofalo said.

At the same time, the Office of Naval Research is preparing to unveil a new autonomous 30-foot UUV prototype called the Large Displacement Unmanned Undersea Vehicle, or LDUUV. The LDUUV is a prototype which may take a variety of different forms in coming years as the technology evolves, said Bob Freeman, ONR spokesman. The LDUUV is being engineered for greater endurance and energy, he added. It will also be autonomous and able to navigate itself through the undersea domain. Alongside UUVs, the Navy is also experimenting with launching aerial drones from submarines as well, Tofalo said. The service is testing the Switchblade, which can launch from a small signal injector tube from the side of the submarine. The Switchblade, built by AeroVironment, is a battery-powered unmanned aerial vehicle that can carry three pounds worth of explosives, Tofalo added. He added that the Navy is also testing a longer-endurance submarine-launched UAV called XFC, an acronym for experimental fuel cell. XFC, which can be launched from a torpedo tube, can stay in the air for nine to ten hours. "These are ways that a submarine can extend its

horizon. They have been tested and we're continuing to work on making them more definitive programs of record," Tofalo said. [Source: Military.com | Kris Osborn | Apr 13, 2015 ++]

N-Zero ► Near Zero Power RF and Sensor Operations

For decades, the military has been looking for ways to collect data and information in places that it can't put people. One method for doing that is cheap sensors that can be left on the battlefield for extended periods of time, long after soldiers have returned home. Case in point: the 1,500 unattended ground sensors that the Pentagon has requested for the hills and battlefields of Afghanistan. Getting the most out of a network of sensors means extending battery life as long as possible. That, in turn, means redesigning the way sensors use power and also the way that they do the work that they do. Smarter sensors, ones that actually know what to pay attention to, as opposed to just sit and collect info, could allow for what the military calls "persistent surveillance" on an order of years.

The Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency, or DARPA, today announced a program called Near Zero Power RF and Sensor Operations, or N-ZERO, which will build a network of sensors that can determine what to pay attention to and when. They will have an innate ability to detect specific frequency signatures "such as the presence of a particular vehicle type or radio communications protocol," according to DARPA. "Our goal is to use the right signal itself to wake up the sensor, which would improve sensors' effectiveness and warfighters' situational awareness by drastically reducing false alarms," program manager Troy Olsson said in a press release. N-ZERO will build sensors that draw just 10 nanowatts of power during the device's "asleep yet aware" phase, as much power as a typical watch battery in storage and about 1,000 times less power than is consumed by typical sensors. It's a technology that will play a role in some current and future DARPA programs, such as the Upward Falling Payload program, which seeks to put a network of pods on the ocean floor, sleeping quietly, until they sense a particular threat and release their pods.

Undersea pods that lie in wait and spring into action only when they detect, say, a submarine, would cut down on the need for other submarines to collect data on undersea threats. Land-based sensors that can detect military vehicles moving across a border in places like Iraq (or elsewhere) could be connected to armed drones that could also be stationed to lie-in-wait until they are needed, potentially cutting down on the need for drone orbits (patrols) or satellite surveillance. Persistent ground sensing could radically reduce the costs of gathering intelligence. Sensors that last for years on end would enable far greater capability for the Internet of Things. It could also turn the entire world into a vast, surveillable frontier. [Source: Defense One | Patrick Tucker | April 13, 2015 ++]

IMX-101 Ordnance ► Safer than TNT and Composition B Explosives

For decades they have been an effective and lethal pair, the explosives behind so many of the military's grenades, mortars and bombs. But TNT and Composition B can also be sensitive devils that detonate when they are not supposed to. And that can have devastating effects. A fire aboard the USS Forrestal set off a chain reaction of explosions that killed 134 sailors in 1967. In 1991, an ammunition carrier loaded with 155 mm artillery shells caught fire at Camp Doha in Kuwait, setting off massive explosions that left three dead and dozens wounded. But now the Army is involved in a massive effort that would eventually replace those weapons with what are called "insensitive munitions," which are less susceptible to exploding inadvertently.



Sailors battle fires that erupted after a chain reaction of deadly explosions aboard the USS Forrestal in 1967. The Army is involved in an effort that would replace many of its weapons with what are called 'insensitive munitions,' which are less susceptible to exploding inadvertently

The technology, developed by BAE Systems, the large defense contractor, uses an explosive that is far more chemically stable and able to withstand extreme heat and outside interference, including getting hit by bullets or shrapnel. TNT and Composition B "are generally stable," said Mike Ervin, director of innovation and customer relations for BAE ordnance systems, and aren't going to spontaneously explode. "But the issue with TNT and Comp B is shock sensitivity. Both are sensitive to external stimuli. If they get hit by a fragment or bullet, they could cause a chain reaction. And instead of losing one round, you could lose your whole store of ammunition."

The Army is now using what's called IMX-101 in some of its artillery, a far safer substance, officials say. And the service hopes to one day make all of its munitions "insensitive." But that's not going to happen quickly. "It'll definitely take a decade or two to turn over the entire inventory," said Raymond Colon, project manager of the Army's Combat Ammunition Systems. The Army already claims at least one success involving the new technology. When a convoy carrying 60 mm mortar rounds was hit by a bomb in Afghanistan a few years ago and caught fire, the shells didn't explode. And that, officials said, saved lives. [Source: The Washington Post | Christian Davenport | April 15, 2015 ++]

DAZ 3D ► Proteus Minisub

While the floor at the annual Sea-Air-Space Exposition is always packed with displays, it's unusual to see lines forming to view any one attraction. But a coal black, sinister-looking undersea vessel on display here for the first time has clearly become a star, drawing crowds milling around the Huntington Ingalls Industries booth. The new celebrity is the DAZ-3D Proteus, a submersible undersea vehicle created by what is now HII's Undersea Solution Group, Battelle and Bluefin Robotics. The craft came under HII's purview in late January with the purchase of the Columbia Group's Engineering Solutions Group, an outfit with long

experience building swimmer delivery vehicles for the Navy. The Proteus is unique, designed to be manually crewed or to function as an autonomous, unmanned underwater vehicle.



DAZ-3D Proteus

The craft was built in 2012 at the group's facility in Panama City, Florida, said Ross Lindman, senior vice president for operations with USG. Since becoming operational, he said, the Proteus has been evaluated by a number of Navy entities, including the Naval Research Laboratory, the Naval Surface Warfare Center in Panama City, the Naval Special Warfare Command in Coronado, California, and the Space and Warfare Systems Command. Now, HII is offering the Proteus as an operational craft. "We're here to bring it out as an asset for the Navy, under lease as a test platform," Lindman said. "It has a very large payload, lots of range, and provides near-term capability to answer urgent needs."

The Proteus is not a submarine, in the sense that it does not provide a dry environment. As a "wet sub," the interior remains flooded at all times, although divers can hook into onboard air flasks. An air module can support a team of six divers up to eight hours, Lindman said. Two divers can fit in the forward end of the vehicle, while directly behind them is a payload bay that opens at the bottom to raise and lower equipment. The craft's lifting mechanism can hoist and lower loads up to 3,600 pounds, Lindman said. Such operations can be carried out in manned modes or as an unmanned vehicle. Battelle handled development of the craft's navigational and software systems, said Fred Byus, the company's vice president for maritime technologies, while software was developed by Battelle subsidiary Bluefin Robotics. The software was developed originally for the Knifefish, an autonomous underwater vehicle developed as a mine hunter for the Navy. The Proteus also uses the same lithium polymer batteries that power the Knifefish.

The result, Byus said, is a craft that is "unique in size and payload capacity. It dwarfs any other vehicle like this." Since entering service, the Proteus has run more than 100 test missions and logged more than 400 hours underwater, Lindman said. "It's ready to go now." The Proteus is just under 26 feet long, with a diameter of about 5 feet, 4 inches, and can be transported in a standard, 40-foot container. Two 20-foot containers are used to carry support gear, Lindman said. The vessel has been transported by air and by road. The craft has a top speed of 9 1/2 knots submerged and cruises at 8 knots, Lindman said. In unmanned mode, it can maintain 4 knots for increased range. The estimated price for the craft is between \$10 million and \$12 million, Lindman said, "depending on the sensors." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Christopher P. Cavas | April 14, 2015++]

Iranian Navy ► Mounting Aggressiveness | Cargo Ship Seized



Iranian navy troops march in a parade marking National Army Day in front of the mausoleum of the late revolutionary founder Ayatollah Khomeini, just outside Tehran, Iran, on April 18.

Iranian naval forces have acted with mounting aggressiveness in the Persian Gulf region in the past week, including encircling and threatening a U.S. flagged cargo vessel 24 APR, USA TODAY learned. The previously undisclosed incident follows news 28 APR that Iranian patrol boats in the Strait of Hormuz fired across the bridge of the Maersk Tigris, a Marshall Islands-flagged cargo vessel. Last week, the U.S. Navy monitored Iranian cargo vessels and warships suspected of running weapons to rebels in Yemen. The nine ships suspected of carrying arms turned back toward Iran after the aircraft carrier USS Theodore Roosevelt and the guided-missile cruiser USS Normandy moved into waters off Yemen, Warren said. The Navy is beefing up its ability to respond to threats in the region, said a senior Defense official speaking on condition of anonymity because the news was not authorized to be released publicly. Its aim is to "respond promptly to incidents in which U.S. and other partner nation commercial vessels are harassed or threatened" by Iranian patrol boats.

In the incident involving an American ship, four Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps navy patrol ships intercepted the Maersk Kensington, a U.S. flagged cargo vessel, in the southern Persian Gulf on an internationally recognized trade route, according to the Defense Department official. The confrontation began the morning of 24 APR when the Iranian sailors radioed the Kensington, whose crew did not respond. The Iranian boats encircled the ship and came up behind it in waters off Oman. The Kensington's crew "interpreted this act as aggressive," the official said. The Iranian boats followed the Kensington before breaking off pursuit. The Kensington reported the threat to the U.S. Navy's Central Command. The Navy informed American shipping companies to report threatening incidents.



Navy warships and surveillance aircraft continued to patrol the Strait of Hormuz in the wake of Iran's seizure of a cargo vessel flagged to the U.S. protectorate Marshall Island

The crew of the Tigris, though not a U.S. flagged vessel, did that 29 APR. The cargo ship was approached by the Iranians along a standard shipping route used by commercial vessels, part of which lies in Iran's territorial waters, officials said. Under maritime law governing the narrow Strait of Hormuz, commercial ships have the right to move through Iran's territorial waters, under the principle known as "innocent passage," officials' said. At about 0900 GMT, at least five ships from Tehran's elite Revolutionary Guards ordered the Maersk Tigris, which had no Americans on board, to head toward Iran's Larak Island, the Pentagon said. The cargo ship's captain "declined" the demand and one of the Iranian vessels fired shots across its bow, Pentagon spokesman Colonel Steven Warren said. The cargo ship then "complied with the Iranian demand and proceeded into Iranian waters in the vicinity of Larak Island." Members of the Revolutionary Guards boarded the cargo ship. The Navy dispatched the USS Farragut, a destroyer, to the area but took no action since the vessel was within Iran's territorial waters.

Iran said it had ordered the ship to be impounded at the Gulf port of Bandar Abbas because of a commercial dispute. An Iranian court had ordered the ship's confiscation over alleged unpaid debts, Hadi Haghshenas of the Iran Ports and Maritime Organisation was quoted as saying by the Tasnim news agency. The container ship had last made a stop at the Red Sea port of Jeddah, on the Saudi Arabian coast, and was sailing through the strait into Gulf waters bound for the United Arab Emirates, according to the website maritimetraffic.com. It was unclear if the last port of call was related to the Iranian decision to take control of the container ship. Iran and Saudi Arabia are waging a proxy war in Yemen, where Saudi-led aircraft are bombing Shiite Huthi rebels backed by Tehran

Naval surveillance planes have begun patrols in response to the incident, Army Col. Steve Warren, a Pentagon spokesman, said Tuesday. The Navy has the ships and planes it needs in the region to respond to more threats, the official said. "The U.S. Navy will respond to any threat to U.S. flagged ships transiting sea lanes in the region," the official said. The official described the confrontations as "unusual," adding that ships regularly encounter Iranian patrols in the region and that "encounters are normally safe and professional." The Iranians appear intent on pushing the Pentagon to the brink of retaliating, said John Pike, executive director of Globalsecurity.org, a defense policy organization. "They're looking for our limits, looking for red lines" Pike said. "They're looking to see how provocative they can be before they can provoke a kinetic response from the United States." [Source: USA TODAY | Tom Vanden Brook | April 28, 2015 ++]

Medal of Honor Citations ► John G. Gertsch | Vietnam



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

Gertsch, John G.

Rank and organization: Staff Sergeant, U.S. Army, Company E, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry, 101st Airborne Division

Place and date: A Shau Valley, Republic of Vietnam, 15 to 19 July 1969

Entered service at: Buffalo, New York 1965

Born: 29 September 1944, Jersey City, New Jersey

Citation

S/Sgt. Gertsch distinguished himself while serving as a platoon sergeant and platoon leader during combat operations in the A Shau Valley. During the initial phase of an operation to seize a strongly defended enemy position, S/Sgt. Gertsch's platoon leader was seriously wounded and lay exposed to intense enemy fire. Forsaking his own safety, without hesitation S/Sgt. Gertsch rushed to aid his fallen leader and dragged him to a sheltered position. He then assumed command of the heavily engaged platoon and led his men in a fierce counterattack that forced the enemy to withdraw. Later, a small element of S/Sgt. Gertsch's unit was reconnoitering when attacked again by the enemy. S/Sgt. Gertsch moved forward to his besieged element and immediately charged, firing as he advanced. His determined assault forced the enemy troops to withdraw in confusion and made possible the recovery of 2 wounded men who had been exposed to heavy enemy fire. Sometime later his platoon came under attack by an enemy force employing automatic weapons, grenade, and rocket fire. S/Sgt. Gertsch was severely wounded during the onslaught but continued to command his platoon despite his painful wound. While moving under fire and encouraging his men he sighted an aidman treating a wounded officer from an adjacent unit. Realizing that both men were in imminent danger of being killed, he rushed forward and positioned himself between them and the enemy nearby. While the wounded officer was being moved to safety S/Sgt. Gertsch was mortally wounded by enemy fire. Without S/Sgt. Gertsch's courage, ability to inspire others, and profound concern for the welfare of his men, the loss of life among his fellow soldiers would have been significantly greater. His conspicuous gallantry, extraordinary heroism, and intrepidity at the cost of his life, above and beyond the call of duty, are in the highest traditions of the U.S. Army and reflect great credit on him and the Armed Forces of his country.



Gertsch went to high school in Sheffield Area Middle/Senior High School (SAMSHS) in Sheffield, Pennsylvania. Gertsch joined the Army from Buffalo, New York in 1965 and by July 15, 1969 was serving as a Staff Sergeant in Company E, 1st Battalion, 327th Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. During a series of engagements on that day and the four following days, in the A Shau Valley of the Republic of Vietnam, Gertsch commanded his platoon after their leader was wounded and repeatedly exposed himself to enemy fire to rescue wounded soldiers and attack the enemy. Mortally wounded on July 19, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor for his actions in September 1974. Gertsch, aged 24 at his death, was buried in North Side Catholic Cemetery, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The John Gertsch Memorial Post 77 of the Veterans of the Vietnam War received its charter in 2003 in his hometown.

[Source: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_G._Gertsch and www.history.army.mil/html/moh/vietnam-a-l.html#Gertsch Apr 2015 ++]

* Military History *



IWO Jima Reflections ► James Krodel | Friends Lost 70 Years Ago

James Krodel didn't travel far from his home growing up in Quitman, Texas. But with the start of World War II he knew he would do his part. I didn't want to be drafted. I thought the Marine Corps had the best looking uniform. I enlisted May 14, 1944, at the age of 17. Even though I was married, my mother was required to sign a permission slip for me to join. Three of my friends Billie Joe Jordan, Jackie Nichols and Jackie Suggart enlisted the same day. We were the first Texans to be sent to Parris Island, South Carolina, for recruit training. After the completion of basic training, he was given 10 days of leave. It took two, long days to travel home. Boot camp was the longest time I had ever spent away from home, and I was so homesick. It was wonderful seeing my wife, family and friends, but the six days passed too quickly and soon

it was time to say so long— again. The two-day trip back to camp was long. It was made longer by knowing I would soon be going overseas and the dread of an unknown future.



Pfc. James Krodel

We arrived at our destination at Camp Pendleton, near San Diego, California, on schedule. Our stay was long enough for a total of 21 injections and paper work. We sailed out to sea from San Francisco November 1944, going under the Golden Gate Bridge headed toward Pearl Harbor. My mind flooded with so many mixed emotions and thoughts of leaving loved ones behind. I felt lost and alone. My greatest fear was the unknown: Where am I going? What is expected of me when I get there? All my thoughts were troubling and my imagination ran wild. Prior to reaching Guam, we docked at Eniwetok, Marshall Islands [now referred to as the Enewetak Atoll.] We were in enemy territorial waters. A Japanese submarine had been following us for days. We learned that an enemy submarine had destroyed and sunk several U.S. supply ships earlier in this area. One of the destroyed ships contained salvageable canned food. I volunteered to help unload the cargo, because I was so sick and tired of being aboard ship so long. The seawater had ruined all the labels. The volunteers were allowed to open cans as long as we ate all of the food. The canned peaches, cherries and pineapple tasted so good.

We continued our journey to Guam. I stayed on deck most of the time to watch the naval drills and moving target practice, which really fascinated me. While on deck one day, I observed the destroying of an enemy submarine. The submarine destroyer from our ship convoy fired a depth charge that made an arch about 50 feet into the air then down into the water. The noise was loud and deafening. Moments later a huge underwater explosion occurred. Debris and oil came floating to the water surface. This may have been the submarine that was following us. As soon as we arrived on the shore of Guam, each Marine was required to have the same 21 vaccine injections again. The medical records were lost, misplaced, destroyed or delayed during our sea travel. Duties continued as usual with jungle warfare and hand-to-hand combat training. When our convoy departed for Iwo Jima, our destination was unknown to us. We had been trained in every detail of wiping out pillboxes, concrete emplacements and heavily fortified positions. Fighting gear was squared away, knives and bayonets were sharpened and all the assorted weapons were cleaned, oiled and ready.

We attempted to land February 20. We climbed down the ship's cargo net with weapons and ammunition packs strapped to our backs to board the Higgins boat, which would take us to shore. Enemy bullets and mortars made a zing-zing sound as they hit the ship around us. Due to very rough water, heavy enemy fire, the congested beach and limited space we had to return to the ships. The next morning we sped toward shore, under heavy enemy fire, in the Higgins boats. Our boat hit a sand bar or an underwater object. The ramp came down and we had to unload in chin deep water. Marines were killed and wounded on the boat and in the water. Bullets, mortars and shells were bursting everywhere. The noise was louder than you can imagine. I finally came ashore with Billie Joe Jordan right there by my side, both of us exhausted. We crawled on a surface of soft, black, lava sand, which gave way and made every movement a lingering effort. We crawled around disabled machinery, guns, jeeps and bodies of the dead and wounded. All this time we were being fired upon and couldn't return fire.

Billie Joe and I sought shelter in a huge bomb crater. He and I had been talking quietly when Billie Joe fell over. I knelt down and took off his helmet. A sniper had shot him directly between the eyes under the edge of his helmet. I held him in my arms. I cried, and cried, as I have never cried before. I marked his location as a fallen Marine for the stretcher-bearers by sticking the bayonet of his rifle into the ground near his body and placing his helmet on top. I hated to leave him, but I had to rejoin my unit as they moved forward. Later on this first day of the battle something struck my left knee. A jagged piece of metal the size of a silver dollar. I tried to remove the shrapnel myself but was unable to. I crawled to first aid, under heavy fire, located in a bomb crater. I was observed for bleeding for several hours then returned to my unit. The 5th Marine Division raised the flag on Mount Suribachi. I was nearby when suddenly everyone started to yell, rejoice and shoot their weapons up into the sky thinking the battle was won. The Japanese laid low and let us rejoice. The worst of the battle was yet to come.

I was trained as a M1 Garand rifleman and was the Browning Automatic Rifleman's assistant. After about six days on Iwo Jima our BAR man was killed. My sergeant personally placed the BAR in my hands and it was my weapon the rest of the battle. The Japanese would enter a cave before us and walk through their network of tunnels, then reappear behind us after we entered the cave. We received gunfire from the front and from the rear. We learned to blast each cave with the aid of flamethrowers. A flamethrower projects a fiery streak of flammable gel that splatters on impact then explodes into a very big, hot, intense fireball. When Marines with flamethrowers approached a cave, I heard the Japanese scream and yell in their native language, in a pleading manner, as if they were saying, "Please don't – please don't!" They knew what damage a flamethrower could do.

Later our objective was to take a landmark called "Cushman's Pocket" and a landmark hill No. 362 at any cost. Cushman's Pocket was the largest, strongest, best fortified and last of the Japanese resistance of the island. We battled against this resistance for eight exhausting, casualty-ridden days. I was pinned down in a foxhole for 36 hours, being continually fired upon. Withdrawal was impossible. Every time one of us moved slightly enemy bullets came flying over our heads, hitting the back of the foxhole near our feet. A tank plowed its way to our position, while machineguns, flamethrowers and heavy weapons provided protection. The tank straddled our foxhole and pulled us to safety through the escape hatch in the bottom.

Before leaving Iwo Jima, all Marines were allowed time to visit the cemetery. I visited the 3rd Marine Division cemetery to look for Billie Joe's white cross. It was marked by only his dog tag nailed on the cross. On my knees at each cross, I read each dog tag until I read, Billie Joe Jordan #558052. I just had to find him to say, "Goodbye, I love and miss you." After a prayer, I left the cemetery with a very sad and broken heart. We sailed from Iwo Jima, April 7 on the USS Randall, returning to camp on Guam. Before leaving port, I stood on the deck looking at the island. I realized at the age of 18 years old, I had served my country for 45 days in a near continuous, bloody and savage battle against the Japanese. The clean uniform I was wearing February 14 was now filthy, ragged, dirty, smelly, blood stained and a shrapnel hole in the left knee. I realized, I had lost my dog tags somewhere on that island crawling around through the hot lava sand.

Upon my return to Guam, a huge bundle of letters was waiting for me. I read each one over and over. I enjoyed and treasured every word. I thanked God and felt so lucky to be alive. In one of the letters from my wife, Jean, she informed me of the birth of our first-born child. I realized, it happened the same day I had been rescued by a tank from the foxhole. There was a point system in place in order to be honorably discharged and go home. I was eligible to go home as a high point Marine. The discharge physical was performed quickly: my teeth were looked at, a chest X-ray was taken and my vital signs were checked. I was asked "Do you feel okay?" If your answer was yes, you were discharged to go home. When I left the discharge center, I carried a great treasure in my pocket. I always carried my cigarette lighter in my right shirt pocket. It was soon after we had been engaged in a heavy battle with the enemy one night that I noticed a bullet size indentation on one side of my lighter as I was lighting a cigarette. As I looked at it, I felt assured in my heart that my lighter had saved my life from an enemy bullet. I was and will forever be a member of

the 3rd Marine Division Association and the Marine Corps League. I served my country with great pride. If I was younger and the need arose again, I would quickly be willing to serve my country. [Source: Defense Media Activity – Marines | Melissa Karnath | March 16, 2015 ++]

Aviation Art 87 ► Pacific Glory



Pacific Glory by Nicolas Trudgian

It is March 1945 and the P-38's of the 475th FG are involved in a huge dogfight with Japanese Zeros over the coast of Indo-China. Flying "Pee Wee V" is Lt Ken Hart of the 431st Fighter Squadron, who has fatally damaged a Zero in a blistering head on encounter. The second P-38L - "Vickie" - belongs to Captain John 'rabbit' Pietz, who would end the War as an Ace with six victories.

[Source: <http://www.brooksart.com/Pacificglory.html> Apr 2015 ++]

Military Trivia 105 ► Caterpillar Club

It was such a terrible tragedy that a suitable parachute was not available to WW1 aircrew until after the war. In 1919, an American, Leroy Irvin, designed a parachute with a silk canopy 32 feet in diameter with 24 silk rigging lines, each 16 feet long. The canopy had a small vent at the top to allow a certain amount of air to pass through it to control oscillation. The chute was packed into a canvas container secured by heavy elastic bands and two metal pins attached to a handle. This became known as the 'Rip Cord'. When this cord was pulled, the pack opened a small pilot chute followed by the main chute allowing the rate of descent to be approximately 20 feet per second as opposed to 175 feet per second without a parachute.

After a few modifications, trials proved so successful, the American Air Corps adopted the design and made the wearing of the parachute standard equipment for all aircrew. It was not until 1925 before the RAAF

purchased their first parachutes. Some of Irvin's friends suggested he start a club as there would be many in the future using the chute. The idea was discussed and it was decided that because silk was used in the canopy and rigging lines, and because the silk worm or caterpillar lets itself down to the ground by a silken thread, it was to be called the Caterpillar Club with the slogan, ' Life depends on a Silken Thread.'



Pin and Membership certificate issued 1957

From a membership of two in 1922, the club has become the most exclusive aviation club in the world with a past and present membership in the tens of thousands worldwide. It's a club without joining fees, committee meetings, offices, or staff, and is open to all nationalities irrespective of race, religion, gender or political affiliation. There is only one condition for membership. The applicant must have saved their life in a genuine emergency descent using an Irvin type parachute. Once accepted, the member receives a certificate and a small gold caterpillar pin with the members name and rank engraved on the back. During WW2, due to economic shortages, the gold was substituted with gilt gold. None of the WW2 Luftwaffe aircrew applied to join the club even though they are eligible as they were using the Irvin chute made at the factory bought by the Nazi Government in 1936. Some applied after the war and were accepted

Most applications were from service personnel during WW2 with a large percentage from POW's. Allied aircrew had available two types of parachute. The seat chute which was worn at all times and doubled as a cushion and the chest type which was stowed in a convenient place and in an emergency, was clipped onto a harness worn by the aircrew. There are thousands of personal stories of aircrew bailing out of stricken aircraft and the following are examples of Australian airmen who survived.

- **Flight Sergeant Don Wills was a rear gunner in a Lancaster with 463 Squadron.** Over Bologne, France, his aircraft was hit by flak. With severely damaged control surfaces, right side engine on fire, right side wing in shreds, half the left wing missing and the fuel tanks blown away, the crew were ordered to bale out. 'We were on our bombing run when I heard two explosions near the aircraft then there was a third and I saw a blazing fuel tank pass my rear turret. The pilot ordered an immediate bale out. My rear turret was out of action so that I had to enter the main fuselage instead of rotating my turret to the beam and dropping out. Inside, I saw the mid upper gunner and wireless operator trying to open the rear door so we all hastened to the front escape hatch. As I passed the astro-dome, I saw a massive hole in our port wing. As we reached the front hatch, we found his parachute trapped the navigator so he had to be helped out. It was found that the front hatch had partially jammed. Both the mid upper gunner and wireless operator had to be helped through the opening. Fortunately for me I was wearing the pilot type parachute, which enabled me to lower my legs through the opening and with one hand, push my parachute pack through and then drop out of the aircraft. All this time the pilot was able to maintain some control of the aircraft but great loss of height. I reached for the ripcord but had trouble in finding it however I must have pulled it because my chute opened and it was only a matter of less than a minute and I was on the ground.'
- **Group Captain Keith Parsons** as the Commanding Officer of the Binbrook Station where 460 Squadron was based occasionally broke the rules by going on operations himself. One such 'illegal'

flight was almost his last. 'We were flying at about 19,000 feet with no navigation lights on as we always flew in complete darkness, when suddenly this Lancaster appeared out of the murk and was heading at 45 degrees straight for us. I took 'George' the autopilot off and shoved the stick hard forward and this bloke wiped right across the top of us smashing the canopy on the top and collected my two port engines. Actually the engines chewed off his rear gunner and turret. We pulled up and almost did a roll and I tried to level the bloody thing but she wasn't behaving very well and we went into a tight spin. I called to the crew to 'Bale Out, Bale Out'. When we went past 7000 feet, I realized that I wasn't going to get out because there wouldn't be time. As the canopy had been shattered on the top, I said, 'Bugger it, I'll try going over the top'. I managed to get my head and shoulders through and then my chute got caught. I broke great chunks of the Perspex with my hands and dragged the chute through. The spin on the aircraft was so tight, that I actually stood on the top of the fuselage quite comfortably, and then I gave one hell of a push off and pulled the ripcord. There was a bang as the chute opened and I bruised the inside of my legs as it hit so hard and the next minute, I was on the ground. I later found out that my chute had been ripped from the bottom up to the apex. Under normal circumstances, the chute would have opened but as soon as it started to fill with air, it would have streamed [collapsed] straight away, so I hit the ground just before it started to stream, possibly from around 100 feet up.'

- **Bomb Aimer Vern Dellitt** from 463 Squadron was near Hanover on the night of 19 February 1944. 'A German fighter had riddled our plane from tail to nose setting us on fire with a couple of bursts of cannon and machine gun fire. It was so dark it would have been impossible for the fighter pilot to see us without some form of radar. The plane was on fire and started to dive and the incendiaries loaded in the bomb bay started to burn so the skipper gave the order to bail out. I released the escape hatch, a hole 23 inches wide and 26 inches long, called the parachute hatch, but it stuck and I had to give it a good thump with my boot to release it. I had got rid of my oxygen mask and head phones so I had nothing around my head that could get caught or possibly choke me. I was almost ready to jump when suddenly someone jumped into my back. I was forcibly thrown through the escape hatch but my legs caught on the rear edge of the hatch and I was swinging from the plane in the slipstream. Thankfully my legs were grabbed and freed, sending me plunging down into the blackness. I left the plane somewhere around 20,000 feet and I was worried my chute wouldn't open. Being somewhat dazed, I let myself fall for some distance before pulling the ripcord. It seemed like hours before my chute opened. As I floated down, I saw our plane in a mass of flames heading earthward, hit and explode, splattering the remains all over the ground.'
- **Wireless Operator Max Staunton-Smith's** Lancaster from 463 Squadron was hit by anti-aircraft fire on an operation over Walcheren Island [Holland] 23 October 1944. 'A 88mm shell went through the radio set in front of me. I jumped up to go to the astrodome and another 88mm when straight through the seat I was just sitting on. I said to the skipper, 'There's a lot of flak passing through the port side wingtips.' 'Fuck the flak' he said, 'Were on our bombing run.' Then all of a sudden, eight 88mm shells hit us in the bomb bay area causing the bomb bay doors to become inoperable. With the aircraft on fire from stem to stern and 15 one thousand pound bombs on board the skipper ordered 'Abandon aircraft' By the time we got out we were down to 2000 feet. As I floated down, I looked up and saw our kite going down in front of me with flames and smoke pouring out of it.'

One RAAF pilot most likely summed up all the club members feelings in a letter from a POW camp, 'It was the sweetest moment in my life when my chute opened and I realized I wasn't going to die.' ---Life did indeed depend on a silken thread----- . Ironically, Leslie Irvin, despite making more than 300 parachute jumps, never became eligible for membership of the club he inaugurated. An active branch of the Caterpillar Club has its annual reunion/dinner/dance in Blackpool in the Northwest of England each March. The club has approximately 70 members, either ex-WW2 RAF aircrew, family members of deceased members or

associate members. Despite its 'North West' title the Club welcomes ex-Caterpillars from across the UK and worldwide. The Club secretary can be contacted via the Doric Hotel, Blackpool. [Source: www.militaryhistoryonline.com | Ken Wright | Feb 2015 ++]

Military History ► WWII Ulithi | The Secret Weapon

Its existence kept secret throughout the war, the US naval base at Ulithi was for a time the world's largest naval facility. In March 1945, 15 battleships, 29 carriers, 23 cruisers, 106 destroyers, and a train of oilers and supply ships sailed from "a Pacific base." What was this base? The mightiest force of naval Power ever assembled must have required a tremendous supporting establishment. Ulithi, the biggest and most active naval base in the world was indeed tremendous but it was unknown. Few civilians had heard of it at all. By the time security released the name, the remarkable base of Ulithi was a ghost. The war had moved on to the Japanese homeland, and the press was not printing ancient history about Ulithi.

Ulithi is 360 miles southwest of Guam, 850 miles east of the Philippines, 1300 miles South of Tokyo. It is a typical volcanic atoll with coral, white sand, and palm trees. The reef runs roughly twenty miles north and south by ten miles across enclosing a vast anchorage with an average depth of 80 to 100 feet - the only suitable anchorage within 800 miles. Three dozen little islands rise slightly above the sea, the largest only half a square mile in area.

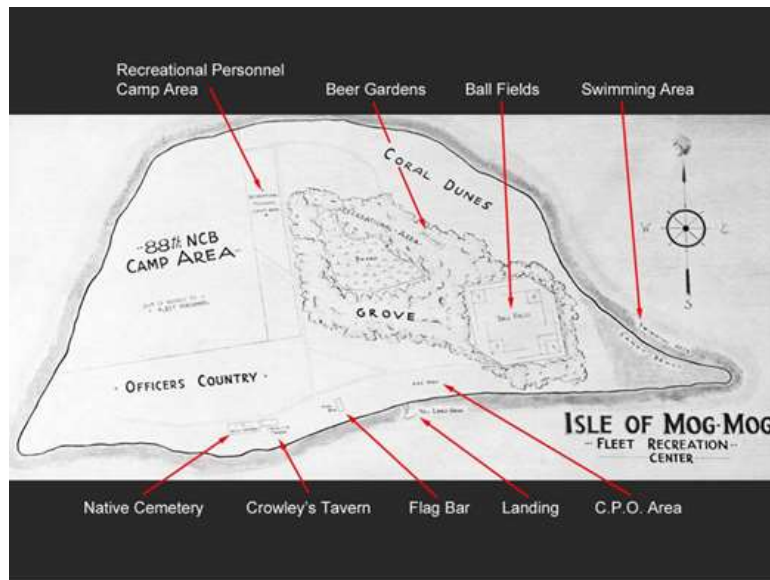


Ships of the 3rd fleet (left) and Murderer's Row (right) the carriers Wasp (CV 18), Yorktown (CV 10), Hornet (CV 12), and Hancock (CV 19) anchored in Ulithi Atoll Dec 1944

The U.S. Navy arrived in September 1944 and found resident about 400 natives, and three Japanese soldiers. The natives on the four largest islands were moved to smaller Fassarai, and every inch of these four was quickly put to use. Asor had room for a headquarters: port director, radio station, evaporator (rain is the only freshwater supply), tents, small boat pier, cemetery. Sorlen was set up as a shop for maintaining and repairing the 105 LCVPs and 45 LCMs that became beasts of all work in the absence of small boats. Mogmog was assigned to recreation. The big island, Falalop, was just wide enough for a 3500-foot airstrip for handling the R4Ds (Douglas DC-3s) and R5C Commandos, which would presently fly in from Guam 1269 passengers, 4565 sacks of mail and 262,251 pounds of air freight a week. This took care of a few services - but where were they going to put the naval base?

Enter "the secret weapon," as Admiral Nimitz called Service Squadron Ten. Commodore Worrall R. Carter survived Pearl Harbor to devise the miraculous mobile service force that made it possible for the Navy

to move toward Japan in great jumps instead of taking the slow and costly alternative of capturing a whole series of islands on which to build a string of land bases.



Within a month of the occupation of Ulithi, a whole floating base was in operation. Six thousand ship fitters, artificers, welders, carpenters, and electricians arrived aboard repair ships, destroyer tenders, floating dry docks. USS AJAX had an air-conditioned optical shop, a supply of base metals from which she could make any alloy to form any part needed. Many refrigerator and supply ships belonged to three-ship teams: the ship at Ulithi had cleaned out and relieved sister ship No. 2 which was on the way back to a rear base for more supplies while No. 3 was on the way out to relieve No. 1. Over half the ships were not self-propelled but were towed in. They then served as warehouses for a whole system of transports which unloaded stores on them for distribution. This kind of chain went all the way back to the United States. The paper and magazines showed England sinking under the stockpile of troops and material collected for the invasion of Normandy.

The Okinawa landings were not so well documented but they involved more men, ships, and supplies-including 600,000 gallons of fuel oil, 1500 freight cars of ammunition, and enough food to provide every person in Vermont and Wyoming with three meals a day for fifteen days. The smaller ships needed a multitude of services, the ice cream barge made 500 gallons a shift, and the USS ABATAN, which looked like a big tanker, really distilled fresh water and baked bread and pies. Fleet oilers sortied from Ulithi to refuel the combat ships a short distance from the strike areas. They added men, mail, and medical supplies, and began to take orders for spare parts.



Mog Mog Liberty

When Leyte Gulf was secured, the floating base moved on, and Ulithi which had had a temporary population the size of Dallas and had been the master of half the world for seven months, shrank to little more than a tanker depot. Once again, it became a quiet, lonely atoll. To view more photos check out <http://www.warbirdinformationexchange.org/phpBB3/viewtopic.php?f=3&t=52966>. [Source: Warbird Information Exchange | George Spangler | March 22, 2015 ++]

Vietnam at 50 ► “Crazy Joe”

Joe Scholle flew hundreds of sorties in Vietnam as a UH-34D helicopter pilot ferrying troops, logistics and medevac patients from base to base and in and out of “hot LZs” – landing zones under fire. While there for a year starting in October 1967, the Marine acquired the nickname “Crazy Joe” for the actions he took at his base at the start of the Tet Offensive. The nickname has stuck all these years, and so have the memories of many close encounters. Scholle, 71, shared a few recently at his home.



Joe Scholle, Marine veteran who flew UH-34D helicopters in Vietnam

A chopper through the trees.

What was supposed to be a “milk run” ended up becoming Capt. Joe Scholle’s first medical evacuation in Vietnam. As the new guy with roughly a week under his belt, Scholle was flying co-pilot. The lead pilot, Jerry Norton, was to log in his very last flight before leaving Vietnam. They were to transport a passenger to another base and return to Marble Mountain Air Facility, where they were attached to Helicopter Marine Medium Squadron 363. “It was a nothing kind of thing to do... a milk run,” Scholle said. “You know, you don’t want to get the guy killed on his last day.” While heading back, they received a distress call from infantry troops who spotted their chopper overhead. They had a very badly wounded man on the ground. The last medevac helicopter just left, and another wouldn’t arrive for at least 30 minutes. “This guy really needs to get out of here,” they pleaded.

“Poor Jerry... talk about agony... on his face. ... It’s his last day,” Scholle recalled. “There’s active shooting going on down there, and you could see that he wanted to say, ‘Well, wait for the medevac, we don’t have a corpsman,’ or something. But he couldn’t.”

So down they went. They flew low and fast keeping the trees between them and enemy forces. At the designated spot, they popped over the trees and, because the wind was at their back, did a quick “buttonhook” maneuver thrusting the nose up and kicking the rudder hard left to turn the Seahorse copter 180 degrees around, essentially heading backward as they landed in a paddy field. The “bad guys” were over the next row of trees in an adjacent field. That made getting out much more risky. Their helicopters didn’t accelerate very well at takeoff, Scholle said. Wanting to reduce the chance of having their aircraft raked with enemy gunfire, Norton headed straight for the trees away from the enemy. He got about three-quarters of the way up and “no

kidding, he chopped the tops off with his rotor blades and went right through the trees,” Scholle laughed as he recalled the episode. They made it out safely, although the damaged rotor blades “talked” to the pilots about their mistreatment, making a loud “whishing” sound all the way back to the base. Mechanics had to reshape and rebalance the blades before the chopper could be used again.

Good friends killed.

Attending college in the early 1960s, Scholle, a native of Brooklyn, N.Y., was well aware that he would likely be drafted. At some point in his youth, he fancied himself becoming a Marine pilot after watching “Flying Leathernecks” starring John Wayne. The question Scholle asked himself: “How do you get out of the draft, and do what you want to do?” The answer: He entered the Marine Corps’ Platoon Leader Class program that placed him as a lance corporal and automatically took him out of the draft. During each of his last two years in college, he spent six summer weeks at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., attending Officer Candidate School. After graduating in 1965, Scholle, then 22, received his commission as a second lieutenant.

By the time he made it to Vietnam two years later, Scholle had developed a strong sense of camaraderie with his fellow pilots. Some had gone through flight school together. Those serving with him in Vietnam faced the same hardships and uncertainties of war, forging close bonds cemented with their shared experiences. The pilots in Scholle’s squadron typically flew six days a week at all hours of the day and night. Crews on medevac duty never knew when a call to pick up casualties might come in. Aside from that stress, there was always the very real possibility of being shot down. There were other dangers, too. Scholle said he lost as many friends from accidents as he did from enemy fire. One friend, Robert “Ike” Isaac Terry III, was copilot on a helicopter out in bad weather. They were flying very low to keep under the clouds when their Huey slammed into the side of Charlie Ridge, a hill just outside the main base at Da Nang. “That was the end of a good friend of mine,” Scholle said. “I wasn’t very happy about it. ... But that’s the kind of thing that happened.”

“Stupidity” was another factor that got pilots killed, Scholle said. He recounted how a close buddy, Joe Cestare, was flying copilot on a gunship that was part of a formation escorting H-46 troop carriers. When an enemy anti-aircraft gun fired at the formation, most of the aircraft scattered to avoid getting hit. However, a major who was the lead pilot in charge of Cestare’s aircraft decided to engage. “God only knows what was running through his mind,” Scholle said of the major. “Everybody’s screaming, ‘Don’t do it, don’t do it, don’t do it.’ And he rolled in. He’s coming down for a strafing run ... Then the 50-caliber opened up.” Scholle wasn’t flying on that mission, but said other pilots who witnessed it told him how pieces of the Huey just flew off, and after the rotor blades stopped spinning, the aircraft plunged several hundred feet to the ground, killing all four aboard. “So, Joe Cestare ... St. John’s University... a New York City kid, like myself...” The thoughts came out in fragments as Scholle just shook his head at the senseless loss of another close friend. “Nobody takes on a 50-caliber with a Huey gunship. Not that. No, no, no.”

The making of ‘Crazy Joe’

Everybody knew the North Vietnamese were about to launch a major offensive, Scholle said. “We just didn’t know the full extent of it.” Scholle planned to capture the battle sounds on a reel-to-reel tape recorder. Ahead of the big event, he hooked up two microphones and hung them outside the windows of his hut. When the attack finally came, he and his roommates jumped out of their hooches and ran to the relative safety of sandbag bunkers. Once there, Scholle realized he forgot to turn on his recording device. So as rockets and mortars rained down on the base, he ran back to his hut to hit the play/record button. “Then I ran back to the bunkers,” Scholle recounted. “One of the senior captains, Joe Clark, says, ‘That’s one crazy Joe.’ And it stuck.” On several occasions after leaving Vietnam, Scholle said he’d make a new acquaintance who, after hearing Scholle’s name, would ask in an awestruck voice, “Are you the Crazy Joe?” “God only knows what stories people are telling about me. ... I hope some of them are true.”

Distinguished Flying Cross

On May 22, 1968, Scholle directed the Seahorse he was piloting to a field near the demilitarized zone between North and South Vietnam to resupply troops engaged in heavy combat. Tall grass hid the troops so well that, not seeing anybody, he began to add power to his aircraft to abort the landing. As he did, voices shouted, “No, no, we’re here.”

Scholle hovered in the area and decided to do a “quick hard left rudder and come around again.” That’s when “all hell broke loose,” he said. With bullet holes peppering the windshield and shrapnel spraying the side of his face and neck, Scholle was eager to leave. “I’m looking out the window. The crew chief is shoveling out ammunition. I’m like, ‘Hurry up, hurry up.’ ” A slap on the leg from the crew chief below the pilot’s seat was the signal that the cargo had been offloaded, and Scholle got away as quickly as possible. Knowing his aircraft had taken many rounds, he looked at his instrument gauges to make sure the hydraulic systems were working. The gauges indicated everything was fine. What he didn’t realize was that an important electrical component had been damaged leaving the gauges frozen in place.

Once airborne, Scholle learned that his copilot was seriously wounded. One bullet came up through the floorboard and lodged in his big toe. Another came through the side of the aircraft, hitting his thigh and giving him a “big flesh wound.” A bullet or piece of shrapnel had also severed a cord to Scholle’s helmet that provided communications in the aircraft. While the aircraft was heading to a medical facility at Dong Ha, the crew chief – unable to tell Scholle that at least one hydraulic system was shot out and that the second one was also likely damaged – tried to inform Scholle of the situation. “We’re flying back... and all of a sudden, up from between my legs comes this big red hand... First thing you’re going to think is ‘blood...’ I’m thinking, ‘Casualties down in the belly.’ ” Scholle learned afterward that the hand was covered in red hydraulic fluid leaking from damaged lines as the chopper was flying. “It was a good thing we landed when we did. Otherwise, it would have been totally out of control.” Scholle said flying a helicopter leaking hydraulic fluid is like driving a car without power steering. And once the hydraulic fluid is gone, it’s like driving a car with the steering wheel completely detached.

He figured the strength he needed to fly the aircraft came from all the adrenaline pumping through his system. For the courage he showed staying in the landing zone until all their cargo was off-loaded and for the skill he showed maneuvering the heavily damaged aircraft to safety, Scholle received a Distinguished Flying Cross. But the experience unnerved him. Scholle said he shook the next three days every time he entered an aircraft. One way to overcome the fear of getting into the pilot’s seat again was to let the copilot fly, he said. He also smoked many cigars to calm his nerves.

On July 4, 1968, Scholle landed at a base that was supposed to be secure. “Everybody was standing up, waving, ‘Hi, how are you,’ ” recalled Scholle. They were carrying to the aircraft a patient who had stepped in a gopher hole and broken his leg. Suddenly, Scholle could hear the rat-a-tat-tat of an AK-47. One bullet struck the corpsman in the leg. Another round tore through the back of the copilot’s flight suit before it burned across the back of Scholle’s neck. “It felt like someone took a hot poker out of the fireplace and slapped you across the back of the neck.” When he felt that, a frantic Scholle told himself, “Time to leave.” Again he flew a damaged helicopter with two wounded crewmembers to the same medical facility he had gone to six weeks earlier. After that second close encounter, Scholle said he had a very difficult time flying again. On the first mission he was assigned after recuperating from his wound, Scholle said he started hyperventilating and nearly passed out. Passing the controls to a bewildered copilot who had just recently reported for duty in Vietnam, Scholle said he tucked his head between his legs and just rocked back and forth until he regained the courage to take the controls again.

[Source: Star and Stripes | Carlos Bongioanni | Nov. 25, 2014 ++]



D-Day ► British Commandos Landing



British Commando troops landing on the Normandy beachhead on D-Day. British Commandoes advanced inland to gain control of the first Normandy village, on June 7, 1944.

WWII Prewar Events ► Anti-Jewish Vandalism Nov 1938



Windows of shops owned by Jews which were broken during a coordinated anti-Jewish demonstration in Berlin, known as Kristallnacht, on Nov. 10, 1938. Nazi authorities turned a blind eye as SA stormtroopers and civilians destroyed storefronts with hammers, leaving the streets covered in pieces of smashed windows. Ninety-one Jews were killed, and 30,000 Jewish men were taken to concentration camps.

WWII PostWar Events ► Aachen, Germany School Registration Jun 1945



German mothers walk their children to school through the streets of Aachen, Germany, on June 6, 1945, for registration at the first public school to be opened by the U.S. military government after the war.

Spanish American War Images 70 ► The Capture of El Caney

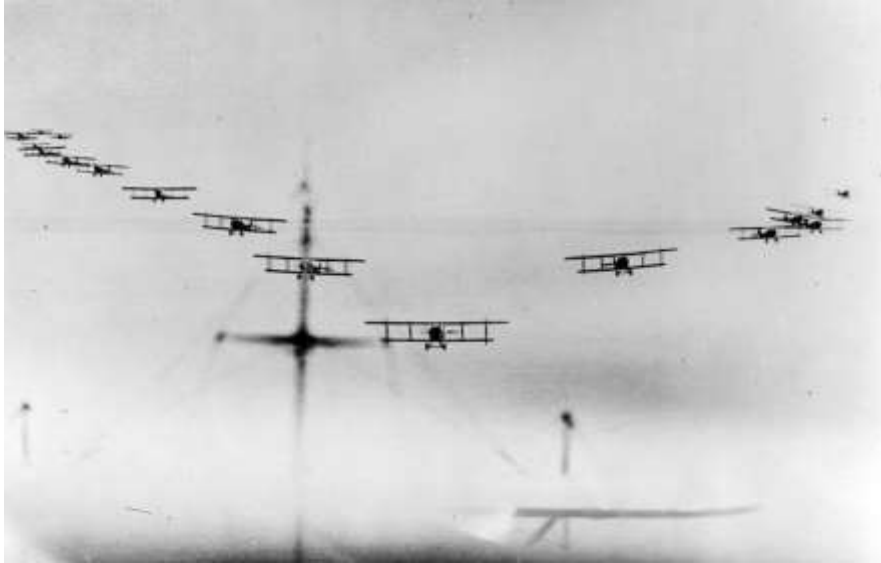


The 7th Regular Infantry, charging through the fields at the north of El Caney, are cutting their way through the wire fence. Major Corliss, who is prominent in the foreground of the picture, was at this time pierced through the shoulder by a Mauser bullet.

Military History Anniversaries ► 1 thru 31 May

Significant events in U.S. Military History over the next 30 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Military History Anniversaries 1 thru 15 May**"

WWI in Photos 116 ► Biplanes Flying in Formation ca. 1914-18



View from an airplane of biplanes flying in formation, ca. 1914-18.

Faces of WAR (WWII) ► Wounded Tarawa Marines



Marines wounded during landing on Tarawa are towed out on rubber boats by their buddies to larger vessels November 1943



Gulf War Syndrome Update 34 ► LED Therapy

Following promising findings obtained from a pilot program, researchers at the VA Boston Healthcare System are testing the effects of light therapy on brain function in veterans suffering from Gulf War Illness, also known as Gulf War Syndrome. The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs defines this condition as a cluster of medically unexplained, chronic symptoms that can include fatigue, headaches, joint pain, indigestion, insomnia, dizziness, respiratory disorders and memory problems. The therapy, although still considered “investigational” and not covered by most health insurance plans, already is used by some alternative medicine practitioners to treat wounds and pain. Veterans in the study will wear a helmet lined with LEDs that apply red and near-infrared light to the scalp, as well as diodes placed in the nostrils, which will deliver light deeper into the brain. Goggles are worn to block out the red light. The light is painless and generates no heat. A treatment takes about 30 minutes.



One trial already underway aims to enroll 160 Gulf War veterans. Half the veterans will get the real LED therapy for 15 sessions, while the others will get a mock version using sham lights. Then the groups will switch. In the end, all the volunteers will end up getting the real therapy, although they won't know at which point they received it. After each veteran's last real or sham treatment, he or she will undergo brain-function tests. “We are applying a technology that's been around for a while ... but it's always been used on the body, for wound healing and to treat muscle aches and pains, and joint problems,” said lead investigator Dr. Margaret Naeser, a Boston VA research linguist and speech pathologist and a research professor of neurology at Boston University School of Medicine. “We're starting to use it on the brain.” Naeser has conducted past research on laser acupuncture to treat paralysis in stroke, and pain in carpal tunnel syndrome.

MRI scans indicate that LED therapy increases blood flow in the brain. It also appears to have an effect on damaged brain cells, specifically on mitochondria, which output energy in the form of the chemical ATP.

The red and near-infrared light penetrate through the skull and into brain cells, subsequently spurring the mitochondria to produce more ATP. According to Naeser, that can mean clearer and sharper thinking. Naeser said brain damage caused by explosions, or exposure to pesticides or other neurotoxins — such as in the Gulf War — could impair mitochondria. She said light therapy can be a valuable adjunct to standard cognitive rehabilitation, which typically involves "exercising" the brain in various ways to take advantage of brain plasticity and forge new neural networks.

LED treatment can supplement what current cognitive behavioral therapy offers for people with traumatic brain injury (TBI) and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), with a combination of both treatment approaches most likely to yield the best results, Naeser said. Naeser said that because the 160-veteran trial "is a blinded, controlled study, neither the participant nor the assistant applying the LED helmet and the intranasal diodes is aware whether the LEDs are real or sham. So they both wear goggles that block out the red LED light." Besides the Gulf War study, other trials of the LED therapy are getting underway. Later this year, a trial will launch for veterans ranging in age from 18 to 55 who have both TBI and PTSD. This VA-funded study will be led by Naeser's colleague, Dr. Jeffrey Knight, a psychologist with the VA's National Center for PTSD and an assistant professor of psychiatry at Boston University School of Medicine. Source: <http://www.photonics.com/Article.aspx?AID=57349> April 14, 2015 ++]

TRICARE Reform ► HASC Will Not Include in 2016 NDAA

The House Armed Services Committee will not consider a sweeping overhaul of the military's Tricare health program in its fiscal 2016 defense bill, panel Republicans said 21 APR. While the committee plans to address massive changes to the military retirement system in its version of the bill being rolled out this week, it will not include recommendations from the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission to move non-active-duty Tricare beneficiaries to civilian health insurance plans, according to Rep. Joe Heck, (R-NV) chairman of the committee's personnel panel. "Tricare was probably the most difficult recommendation to evaluate from the commission, and we couldn't do justice to it with only a three-month review," Heck said. But he did not rule out future Tricare reform, saying the compensation commission's recommendations warrant further study and a stand-alone military health reform bill could come as early as this year or be rolled into the fiscal 2017 defense authorization bill.



Heck and Rep. Mac Thornberry (R-T), chairman of the full House Armed Services Committee, said that in delaying any decision on Tricare reform, the committee weighed concerns from military and veterans advocacy groups over the potential impact of the changes, including the effect on the military health system, cost and access to care. The House version of the bill includes a variation of another commission proposal, calling for the creation of a unified medical command. Heck and Thornberry said such a command would

help streamline operations and eliminate duplication of services and administration. "Before we start asking for higher co-pays, we need to make sure we have squeezed efficiency out of everything else," Thornberry said. The commission called for a broader Joint Readiness Command that would include a subordinate joint medical command. The Pentagon's fiscal 2016 budget proposal called for Tricare reforms that would have introduced new fees for retirees and their families, penalty fees for overuse of emergency rooms for non-emergency care and new Tricare for Life fees. But the committee rejected those proposals in their bill.

The Senate Armed Services Committee is meeting this week to begin drafting its own version of the fiscal 2016 defense authorization bill. Differences between the House and Senate drafts will be worked out in a conference. In the past, proposed changes to Tricare have met with fierce opposition from veterans groups and military support organizations who oppose fee increases and any reductions to military health benefits. But the groups have split over the commission's proposals to move beneficiaries to private insurance plans, with some favoring what they say would be the plan's improved access to care and quality health treatment, and others charging that could cost the Pentagon billions of dollars and destroy a system that has proven itself through 14 years of combat operations. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime & Leo Shane | April 22, 2015 ++]

Staying Healthy ► Men At 50+

Use this information to help you stay healthy at ages 50 and above. Learn which screening tests you need and when to get them, which medicines may prevent diseases, and steps you can take for good health.

Get the Screenings You Need - Screenings are tests that look for diseases before you have symptoms. Blood pressure checks and tests for high blood cholesterol are examples of screenings. You can get some screenings, such as blood pressure readings, in your doctor's office. Others, such as colonoscopy, a test for colon cancer, need special equipment, so you may need to go to a different office. After a screening test, ask when you will see the results and who you should talk to about them. You know your body better than anyone else. Always tell your doctor or nurse about any changes in your health, including your vision and hearing. Ask them about being checked for any condition you are concerned about, not just the ones below. If you are wondering about diseases such as Alzheimer's disease or skin cancer, for example, ask about them. Recommended screening for 50+ men are:

- Abdominal Aortic Aneurysm. If you are between the ages of 65 and 75 and have ever been a smoker, (smoked 100 or more cigarettes in your lifetime), talk to your health care team about being screened for abdominal aortic aneurysm (AAA). AAA is a bulging in your abdominal aorta, your largest artery. An AAA may burst, which can cause dangerous bleeding and death. An ultrasound, a painless procedure in which you lie on a table while a technician slides a medical device over your abdomen, will show whether an aneurysm is present.
- Colon Cancer. If you are 75 or younger, get a screening test for colorectal cancer. Several different tests—for example, a stool test or a colonoscopy—can detect this cancer. Your doctor or nurse can help you decide which is best for you. If you are between the ages of 76 and 85, talk to your doctor or nurse about whether you should continue to be screened.
- Depression. Your emotional health is as important as your physical health. Talk to your doctor or nurse about being screened for depression especially if during the last 2 weeks:
 - ✓ You have felt down, sad, or hopeless.
 - ✓ You have felt little interest or pleasure in doing things.

- Diabetes. Get screened for diabetes (high blood sugar) with a blood test if you have high blood pressure or take medication for high blood pressure. Diabetes can cause problems with your heart, brain, eyes, feet, kidneys, nerves, and other body parts.
- Hepatitis C Virus (HCV). Get screened one time for HCV infection if:
 - ✓ You were born between 1945 and 1965.
 - ✓ You have ever injected drugs.
 - ✓ You received a blood transfusion before 1992.
 - ✓ If you currently are an injection drug user, you should be screened regularly.
- High Blood Cholesterol. Have your blood cholesterol checked regularly with a blood test. High blood cholesterol increases your chance of heart disease, stroke, and poor circulation.
- High Blood Pressure. Have your blood pressure checked at least every 2 years. High blood pressure can cause strokes, heart attacks, kidney and eye problems, and heart failure.
- HIV. If you are 65 or younger, get screened for HIV. If you are older than 65, ask your doctor or nurse if you should be screened.
- Lung Cancer: Talk to your doctor or nurse about getting screened for lung cancer if you are between the ages of 55 and 80, have a 30 pack-year smoking history, and smoke now or have quit within the past 15 years. (Your pack-year history is the number of packs of cigarettes smoked per day times the number of years you have smoked.) Know that quitting smoking is the best thing you can do for your health. Lung cancer can be detected with low-dose computed tomography (LCT). For LCT, you lie on a table while a large machine passes over you to scan your lungs.
- Overweight and Obesity. The best way to learn if you are overweight or obese is to find your body mass index (BMI). You can find your BMI by entering your height and weight into a BMI calculator, such as the one available at: <http://www.nhlbi.nih.gov/guidelines/obesity/BMI/bmicalc.htm>. A BMI between 18.5 and 25 indicates a normal weight. Persons with a BMI of 30 or higher may be obese. If you are obese, talk to your doctor or nurse about getting intensive counseling and help with changing your behaviors to lose weight. Overweight and obesity can lead to diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

Get Preventive Medicines If You Need Them

- Aspirin. Your doctor or nurse can help you decide whether taking aspirin to prevent a heart attack is right for you.
- Vitamin D to Avoid Falls. If you are 65 or older and have a history of falls, mobility problems, or other risks for falling, ask your doctor about taking a vitamin D supplement to help reduce your chances of falling. Exercise and physical therapy may also help.
- Immunizations:
 - ✓ Get a flu shot every year.
 - ✓ Get a shot for tetanus, diphtheria, and whooping cough. Get a tetanus booster if it has been more than 10 years since your last shot.
 - ✓ If you are 60 or older, get a shot to prevent shingles.
 - ✓ If you are 65 or older, get a pneumonia shot.
 - ✓ Talk with your health care team about whether you need other vaccinations. You can also find which ones you need by going to: <http://www.cdc.gov/vaccines>.

Take Steps to Good Health

- Be physically active and make healthy food choices. To aid in accomplishing this the governments provides some guidance at <http://www.healthfinder.gov/HealthTopics/Category/nutrition-and-physical-activity>.
- Get to a healthy weight and stay there. Balance the calories you take in from food and drink with the calories you burn off by your activities.

- Be tobacco free. For tips on how to quit, go to <http://www.smokefree.gov>. To talk to someone about how to quit, call the National Quitline: 1-800-QUITNOW (784-8669).
- If you drink alcohol, have no more than two drinks per day if you are 65 or younger. If you are older than 65, have no more than one drink a day. A standard drink is one 12-ounce bottle of beer or wine cooler, one 5-ounce glass of wine, or 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits.

[Source: Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality | 2014 Update | April 2015 ++]

Medicare Card Update 02 ► ‘Doc Fix’ Law Mandates SSN Removal

Concerned about the rising prevalence and sophistication of identity theft, most private health insurance companies have abandoned the use of Social Security numbers to identify individuals. The federal government even forbids private insurers to use the numbers on insurance cards when they provide medical or drug benefits under contract with Medicare. But Medicare itself has continued the practice, imprinting Social Security numbers on more than 50 million benefit cards despite years of warnings from government watchdogs that it placed millions of people at risk for financial losses from identity theft. That is about to change, after President Obama signed a bill last week that will end the use of those numbers on Medicare cards. “The Social Security number is the key to identity theft, and thieves are having a field day with seniors’ Medicare cards,” said Representative Sam Johnson (R-TX), who pushed for the change with Representative Lloyd Doggett (D-TX)

The main purpose of the law, adopted with broad bipartisan support, was to overhaul the way doctors are paid for treating Medicare patients. But it makes other changes as well. One section that received little attention says Social Security account numbers must not be “displayed, coded or embedded on the Medicare card.” Congress provided \$320 million over four years to pay for the change. The money will come from Medicare trust funds that are financed with payroll and other taxes and with beneficiary premiums. In his budget for 2016, Mr. Obama requested \$50 million as a down payment “to support the removal of Social Security numbers from Medicare cards” — a step that federal auditors and investigators had been recommending for more than a decade. More than 4,500 people a day sign up for Medicare. In the coming decade, 18 million more people are expected to qualify, bringing Medicare enrollment to 74 million people by 2025.

New beneficiaries are often surprised, even shocked, to find that their Medicare cards carry their Social Security numbers. Medicare uses them as the primary means of identifying beneficiaries, placing the numbers on benefit cards along with one or two letters or digits that indicate the basis of a person’s eligibility. In moving to halt the practice, Congress was motivated by the proliferation of electronic health records and a rash of recent cyberattacks, including a data breach at Anthem, one of the nation’s largest insurers. Medicare officials have up to four years to start issuing cards with new identifiers. They have four more years to reissue cards held by current beneficiaries. They intend to replace the Social Security number with “a randomly generated Medicare beneficiary identifier,” but the details are still being worked out.

“Changing to another number will be a humongous job,” said Ms. Rossie, a former Social Security claims representative. “But Medicare needs to recognize the terrible impact on anybody whose identity is stolen. It destroys your self-esteem, and it can take years to re-establish your identity and credit.” Members of Congress said the use of Social Security numbers on the cards provided a case study of bureaucratic inertia. Since 2004, the Government Accountability Office, an investigative arm of Congress, has repeatedly urged officials to curtail the use of Social Security numbers as identifiers. In 2007, the White House Office of Management and Budget told agencies to “eliminate the unnecessary collection and use of Social Security numbers” within two years.

In 2008, the inspector general of Social Security called for immediate action to remove the numbers from Medicare cards, saying their display “unnecessarily places millions of individuals at risk for identity theft.” In that same year, the Defense Department and the Department of Veterans Affairs began carrying out elaborate plans to remove Social Security numbers from their identification cards. But the Department of Health and Human Services, which supervises the agency that administers Medicare, has “lagged behind other federal agencies,” the Government Accountability Office said. Senator Susan Collins (R-ME) and chairwoman of the Senate Special Committee on Aging, said she was puzzled by the delays. “This still does not appear to be a priority” for Medicare administrators, she said. Medicare officials said their top information technology specialists had been preoccupied with efforts to build and repair <http://www.healthcare.gov>, the online system for buying health insurance under the Affordable Care Act, which was overcome by technical problems soon after it began operating 18 months ago.

An internal report cites concerns about “the budgetary and logistical challenges of removing Social Security numbers from Medicare cards.” The agency depends on more than 200 computer systems and pays more than a billion claims a year from 1.5 million health care providers. AARP, the lobby for older Americans, and the National Committee to Preserve Social Security and Medicare said they supported the new prohibition. “Older adults are targeted by fraud artists, who use their Social Security numbers to get loans and credit cards,” said Amy E. Nofziger, manager of the fraud prevention program at AARP. In one case described by Stephen R. Wigginton, the United States attorney for the Southern District of Illinois, a hospital employee and a former employee were convicted of stealing personal information from the charts of older patients and then using the data to apply for credit cards in the victims’ names. The former employee was caught on camera at a store using a credit card obtained with the personal information of a 90-year-old woman who had been admitted to the hospital from an assisted living center. [Source: New York Times | Robert Pear | April 20, 2015 ++]

Sinusitis Update 03 ► Treating Chronic Sinusitis

Chronic sinusitis can be a very bad illness that affects your quality of life. But some remedies have been proven to be effective at relieving the symptoms. Nasal steroid sprays are the most helpful, and surgery is sometimes an option too. Having a stuffy nose for a short time is quite normal and is usually unproblematic. But things become more unpleasant if it is hard to breathe through your nose over a longer period of time and you feel pain or pressure in your face. These kinds of symptoms are often caused by chronic inflammation of the sinuses (chronic sinusitis). There are two main types of bilateral chronic sinusitis (where both sides of the face are affected). Chronic sinusitis without polyps (benign mucous membrane growths): The mucous membranes are swollen, but no polyps have developed. Chronic sinusitis with polyps: The mucous membranes are swollen and polyps have developed. This information deals with these two main forms. Rarer forms of chronic sinusitis can occur as a result of a weak immune system or due to fungal infections. They may require special treatment. Following are the accepted treatments that may provide relief:

- **Steroids.** Nasal steroid sprays reduce mucous membrane swelling and help ease discomfort. Treatment with steroid sprays can cause any polyps that might be there to shrink. It usually takes a few days for the full effects of steroid sprays to be felt. Relieving symptoms for good usually means that medication needs to be taken for several months or even over a year. Some people are reluctant to take any medication containing steroids. Steroids can have side effects when taken in high doses and over a longer period of time. The nasal mucous membranes may become irritated or dry out, which can cause nosebleeds or temporary headaches, but the side effects are usually mild. Nasal steroid sprays have far fewer side effects than steroids taken in tablet form or as an infusion (drip). That is because steroids in tablets are carried throughout the entire body, whereas topical agents like

nasal sprays or skin creams mainly affect only the area they are applied to. It is best to talk with your doctor about the advantages and disadvantages of the treatment.

- **Antibiotics.** There is not enough good-quality research to tell how effective antibiotics are. It is known that sinusitis is not usually caused by bacteria. But antibiotics can only fight bacteria. Plus, inflammation caused by chronic sinusitis is often influenced by other factors as well, such as allergies. Severe bacterial sinusitis can lead to complications in rare cases though. In that event, antibiotics need to be taken quickly to prevent serious complications such as meningitis.
- **Decongestant nose drops.** Decongestant nose drops or nasal sprays aim to soothe the mucous membranes and reduce swelling. This improves nasal breathing in the short term – which can make it easier to sleep. But decongestant drugs can quickly have an opposite effect as well. After just a few hours, the nasal mucous membranes will start to swell again. The more often the medication is used, the stronger this effect is. So it is not a good idea to use this medication continuously for more than a few days. Rinsing your sinuses with a nasal wash to free up your nasal passages is also an option.
- **Nasal irrigation and inhalation.** In addition to medication, you can use saline solutions to reduce swelling in the mucous membranes and to help drain your sinuses. Saline solutions are available as pre-packaged nasal sprays. To relieve symptoms, you can also try rinsing your nose with saltwater. Heating water and inhaling the steam is another option. Some people like to add chamomile or peppermint. But there is not enough scientific research on steam inhalation to say for sure how effective it is.
- **Painkillers.** Some medications may not be able to make you healthy faster, but they can relieve the pain. These include pain-relieving and anti-inflammatory drugs like ibuprofen, paracetamol or aspirin. But some people have an intolerance to aspirin. It might make their chronic sinusitis worse, or even trigger asthma attacks. Painkillers like paracetamol are more suitable in that case.

Other treatments. Apart from drug-based therapies, a variety of other treatments are available. They include herbal products, acupuncture, infrared light therapy and zinc products. There is no scientific evidence that these treatments help to treat chronic sinusitis.

Can surgery help? Some people decide to have surgery, especially if the symptoms are very severe and medication alone does not provide enough or long-lasting relief. One common type of surgery is a procedure that expands narrowed passageways in the paranasal sinuses. Mucous membrane growths (polyps) and inflamed parts of the mucous membrane are also removed. This operation is called "functional endoscopic sinus surgery (FESS)." It aims to improve nasal ventilation and the sense of smell, and make it easier to drain nasal secretion. During the procedure the narrowed sinus passageways are expanded using small instruments inserted via a tube (endoscope). Unfortunately, only few good-quality studies have looked into what long-term effect FESS has on symptoms. There is also no conclusive information about whether surgery can be an alternative to treatment with steroids or antibiotics. Surgery is an option if steroid sprays and other treatments have not provided enough relief. The procedure also aims to help medications or saline solutions work better because they can reach the nasal cavities better once they have been expanded. But even after surgery, you will probably need to continue to use a steroid spray or other medication to relieve the symptoms.

Severe complications following FESS are very rare. More common complications include short-term bleeding, inflammation, bruising and an impaired sense of smell. According to various estimates, between 5 and 15 out of 100 people can expect these kinds of temporary side effects following surgery. Your nose is often stuffed up for several days after the procedure and scabs may form, but this gets better quickly. It may take several weeks until the wounds in the sinuses have completely healed, though. That is why it is important to have regular check-ups for several weeks, and to rinse your nose with a saline solution. Your doctor will also remove wound secretions from your nose at several different appointments. One newer surgical procedure is balloon sinus dilation. A catheter is placed inside the nose to slowly inflate a balloon resting at

the sinus opening. This procedure aims to expand the narrowed passageways at the sinus openings, but it is not suitable for all forms of chronic sinusitis. There is not yet enough conclusive research available on the benefits and possible side effects of balloon dilation.

[Source: <http://www.informedhealthonline.org/treating-chronic-sinusitis.2403.en.html?part=behandlung-p2>
Mar 2015 ++]

TRICARE Alcohol Awareness Program ► Recognizing a Problem

Everything in moderation rings true for many behaviors. If you use this saying, make sure you apply it when you drink alcohol. Excessive drinking is dangerous and irresponsible. But it can be hard to recognize a drinking problem in yourself or a loved one. The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) and TRICARE offers several questions to ask yourself to determine if you have a drinking problem:

- Have you felt that you should cut down on your drinking?
- Do you feel annoyed when people make comments to you about your drinking?
- Do you feel guilty about your drinking?
- Do you ever need a drink in the morning to get yourself going or to get rid of a hangover?
- How did you fair on the “That Guy Quiz” at <http://www.thatguy.com/quiz/>



According to AAFP, if you’ve answered yes to just one of these questions, you may have a problem with alcohol abuse. Many people drink without realizing how much alcohol they are actually consuming. One 12 ounce bottle of beer , a 5 ounce glass of wine, or a 1.5 ounce shot of 80-proof distilled drink, like whiskey or gin is considered a drink. On average, a woman who has more than seven drinks per week or three drinks at one occasion has had too much to drink. A man who has more than 14 drinks per week or more than four drinks at one occasion has consumed too much alcohol.

If you consume alcohol, be sure that you are aware of how much you are drinking and do not take any risks. For example, you should never drink while driving or operating machinery or drink alcohol while taking medication. If you find that your drinking has become a habit or that you need a drink to relax, relieve anxiety or go to sleep, you should reevaluate your drinking and talk to your doctor. To help beneficiaries deal with alcohol abuse, TRICARE has an alcohol awareness program that aims to prevent alcohol misuse and/or abuse. TRICARE’s “That Guy” campaign (<http://www.thatguy.com>) is a multi-media initiative, created specifically for the military community. That Guy encourages young enlisted personnel not to binge drink, by highlighting what’s at stake when they do. You can also get resource and help for alcohol abuse at TRICARE’s Alcohol Awareness page <http://www.tricare.mil/alcoholawareness>. [Source: TRICARE Communications | April 16, 2015 ++]

Medicare Reimbursement Rates 2015 Update 03 ► Doc Fix Becomes Law

In a Congress known for enacting temporary stopgap measures while repeatedly kicking the proverbial can down the road, legislators did something permanent this week. On 14 APR, the Senate, by an overwhelming 92-8 vote, passed the Medicare Access and CHIP Reauthorization Act of 2015, a Medicare overhaul bill commonly known as the “doc fix.” The bill, which the House passed last month with 392 votes, will end the annual threats of Medicare-reimbursement cuts to doctors stemming from the 1997 Sustainable Growth Rate (SGR) law. Since physicians who agree to accept Medicare reimbursement rate must accept TRICARE patients, this removes the threat of reduced physician access to the military community.



Under SGR, Medicare’s budget was calculated by linking Medicare spending to economic growth. This became problematic once health care costs began rising faster than the growth of the economy — meaning, physicians were regularly at risk of Medicare reimbursement cuts. So, 17 times over the last 14 years, Congress passed temporary “doc fixes” to protect physician reimbursements. The new measure eliminates the need for these fixes by repealing the SGR law. The bill adds at least \$141 billion to the federal deficit over the next 10 years. Senator Mike Lee (R-UT) introduced an amendment removing the bill's exemption from the 2010 Statutory Pay-As-You-Go Act (PAYGO) which requires spending increases be offset by savings elsewhere within the same legislative session. The amendment failed 42-58. Additionally, Senator John Cornyn (R-TX) proposed paying for the bill by repealing ObamaCare’s individual mandate; this amendment, which needed 60 votes to pass, failed 54-45.

The president signed the bill into law 1 APR. The bill entrenches government even more in the exam room through increased federal controls and a national link-up of patient electronic health records (EHRs).

- First, the bill offers physicians two questionable payment models: either a Merit-based Incentive Payment System (MIPS), under which physicians will be paid based on how well they comply with certain federal quality metrics (metrics which have yet to be determined), or an “alternative payment model” in which a group of doctors band together to receive lump-sum payments to care for patients. If those physicians can deliver the care for less while meeting the “quality metrics,” then they benefit from some of the leftover funds.
- Second, the bill paves the way road for mandatory connectivity of patient data nationwide. Section 106(b) states, “Congress declares it a national objective to achieve widespread exchange of health information through interoperable certified EHR technology nationwide by December 31, 2018.” In other words, this doc fix requires EHRs to become “interoperable” so Americans’ private medical information can be shared nationwide. That could improve convenience for referrals, but, given the security performance of Healthcare.gov, it's not terribly comforting to know medical records could be hacked.

*** Finances ***



Social Security Lump Sum Payment Options ► Offered to Retirees

There are two Social Security claiming strategies that can provide retirees a lump-sum benefit, but you need to be past full retirement age to be eligible and there are financial drawbacks you need to be aware of too. First, let's review the basics. Workers can begin drawing Social Security retirement benefits anytime between ages 62 and 70. Full retirement age is currently 66 for those born between 1943 and 1954 and it rises in two-month increments to 67 for those born in 1960 and later. You can find your full retirement age at ssa.gov/pubs/ageincrease.htm. At full retirement age, you are entitled to 100% of your benefits. If you claim earlier you'll receive less and if you delay you'll receive about 8% more for each year until age 70.

- **Strategy 1:** If you are past full retirement age and have not yet filed for your benefits, the Social Security Administration offers a retroactive lump-sum payment that's worth six months of benefits. Here's how it works. Let's say you were planning to delay taking your Social Security benefits past age 66, but you changed your mind at 66 and six months. You could then claim a lump-sum payment equal to those six months of benefits. So, for instance, if your full retirement age benefit was \$2,000 per month, then you would be entitled to a \$12,000 lump sum payment. If you decided at age 66 and four months that you wanted to file retroactively, you'd receive only four months' worth of benefits in your lump sum. SSA rules prohibit you from claiming benefits that pre-date your full retirement age.
- **Strategy 2:** File and suspend will provide even more cash. Again, this option is only available to people on or after full retirement age. Here's how this strategy works. Let's say you're 66 and you decide to delay your benefits. You could file for your benefit and then immediately suspend it. This gives you the ability to collect a lump sum going back to the date you filed. So if you need money at age 69 for example and your full retirement age benefit was \$2,000 per month, then you could get a three-year lump sum of \$72,000.

The big downside to these strategies is that once you accept a lump-sum payment, you'll lose all the delayed retirement credits you've accrued and your future monthly retirement benefit will be reduced to reflect the amount you already received. Here's an example of how this works. Let's say that you are entitled to a \$2,480 monthly benefit at age 69. By taking a three-year lump sum payment, your future benefits will shrink back to \$2,000 per month, which is what you would have received at your full retirement age. This also affects your future survivor benefit to your spouse or other eligible family members after you die. You also need to consider Uncle Sam. Depending on your income, Social Security benefits may be taxable and a lump-sum payment could boost the amount of benefits that are taxed. To help you calculate this, see IRS Publication

915 "Social Security and Equivalent Railroad Retirement Benefits" at <http://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p915.pdf> , or call 800-829-3676 and ask them to mail you a copy. One other caveat: If you're married and you "file and suspend" your Social Security benefit, you cannot file a "restricted application" too, which gives you the ability to collect spousal benefits while delaying your own retirement benefit past full retirement age. [Source: USS Midway Savvy Living | Jim Miller | April 2015 ++]

Food Spoilage Update 01 ► Tips to Make Food Last Longer

Tired of the frequent runs to the grocery store to replenish your supply of produce and other perishables? Certain items, like bananas and bread, have a brief shelf life, so you're forced to buy in smaller portions. But with these items and many others, you can use some simple tricks to extend their useful life. Instead of wasting time, money and gas each week, here are some ways to make your groceries last longer:



1. **Toss spoiled produce** - Before storing, examine the contents of each bag and promptly remove items that are bruised, overripe or on the brink of spoiling. Items in this condition release ethylene gas that could spoil good produce. (You can also purchase an ethylene gas absorber on Amazon to delay the ripening process of your produce.)
2. **Ditch plastic for Mason jars** - With glass Mason jars, you won't have to worry about being exposed to the BPA that can be found in plastic containers. Mason jars also do not stain, and your produce will last a few days longer. Mason jars work well for preportioned salads, extending the shelf life to up to 10 days.
3. **Butter and wrap sliced cheese** - Tired of cheese quickly drying out? Apply a thin layer of butter to the exposed side, wrap the block in waxed paper, and place it in a plastic bag.
4. **Puncture plastic storage bags** - Poke a few holes in those produce bags you get at the grocery store. Otherwise, they'll trap moisture that will cause produce to break down faster.
5. **Consider the freezer** - Frozen banana pops preserve unused bananas, and they taste great. Freezing also works well for most fruits and vegetables, as long as they are consumed within eight to 12 months. Just remember to label them so you don't find yourself eating something that's been hiding in the back of the freezer for a decade.
6. **Shrink-wrap the crown of bananas** - It only takes a few seconds to wrap some plastic around the crown of a bunch of bananas, and it will curb the release of ethylene gas. This gas makes any other produce in the vicinity spoil faster.
7. **Bundle up herbs** - Herbs can be displayed like a beautiful bouquet of flowers in a vase of water. Doing this keeps the herbs alive a lot longer without taking up refrigerator space. Just be sure to trim the stems first.

8. **Store counter items away from windows** - It may be convenient to store melons or pears on an area of the counter closest to the window, but don't do it. Sunlight speeds up the ripening process.
9. **Pantyhose are best for onions** - Drop an onion in each foot, tie a knot in between and continue this pattern until you fill the legs.
10. **Don't immediately slice and dice** - You may be planning for the week ahead, but slicing and dicing too far in advance reduces the life of produce. Of course, if you must get chopping, a little lemon juice will help produce last longer before it starts to brown.
11. **Wrap greens in foil** - When wrapped in foil, broccoli, lettuce and celery will last in the fridge for a month or more.
12. **Stabilize the refrigerator's temperature** - Aim for 40 degrees Fahrenheit to prevent the growth of toxic food bacteria. You don't want the temperature so cold everything is frozen. On the other hand, a refrigerator that is too warm results in spoilage. That is like throwing money away.
13. **Paper bags are ideal for mushrooms** - Plastic bags are a haven for moisture, causing mushrooms to mildew.
14. **Place tomatoes upside down on the counter** - If the stem was removed before purchase, place the tomatoes upside down so air won't seep into the small opening, which expedites ripening.
15. **Tidy up and organize the refrigerator** - It may be convenient to leave expired items in the corner of the fridge until you have time to purge. However, the mold content will expand to other areas and contaminate open products. Also, too much clutter reduces the circulation of cool air and creates warm spots.
16. **Don't store milk in the refrigerator door** - The cooler temperatures are found on the middle shelf.
17. **Segregate produce and meats** - Allowing fresh produce and meats to mingle runs the risk of cross-contamination, which causes rapid spoilage. All meats should be wrapped and stored toward the bottom of the refrigerator or freezer (in case they leak). To be extra safe, place meats in a bowl to catch any liquid residue.
18. **Reseal prepackaged goods** - When you keep goods sealed, air will remain in the package and items won't quickly harden.
19. **Freeze bread** - Freezing bread eliminates the onset of mold, which spreads like wildfire and can quickly contaminate an entire loaf. You can also try storing half of the loaf in the fridge and the other half in the freezer.
20. **Store leftovers in airtight glass containers** - Airtight lids keep air out; and with glass, you don't have to worry about any chemicals leaching into your food.
21. **Maximize pantry and counter space** - Not all produce should be refrigerated. Here are some items that should always be stored at room temperature, preferably not in direct sunlight: Bananas, Lemons, Lime, Mangos (in a brown bag), Melon (in a brown bag), Peaches (in a brown bag), Pears, Pineapple (upside down), and Plums. If any of these items begin to ripen and you want to keep them around, place them in the fridge.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Allison Martin | April 01, 2015 ++]

Commissary Rewards Card ► Digital Coupon Redemption System

Customers looking to save even more than the usual 30 percent on their groceries can reach for their personal plastic: the Commissary Rewards Card. The Defense Commissary Agency's digital coupon redemption system allows commissary patrons to access and clip coupons and store them on their card to be scanned at the store. Customers have several ways to access the digital coupons. There are two apps – one for iPhone/iPad and one for Android – both of which allow for on-the-go coupon clipping. The app is available free from the Google Play Store, and along with the previously released Phone/iPad app, enables shoppers to access their Rewards Card accounts on a vast array of smart phones and tablets. The apps also feature information on the commissary closest to the customer along with promotions and contests. There is also a website for those who prefer to use a computer to track their coupons. The site is <http://www.commissaries.com/rewards>. For quick tips on using the Commissary Rewards Card, check out the following easy steps: • Get a rewards card at any military commissary. • Register the card. • "Clip" or download coupons to your account (they are automatically loaded to your card). • Print a list of your coupons and bring it and your card with you on your next shopping trip. • Present your card at checkout so the cashier can scan it for coupons that match your purchased items. • Digital coupons are automatically erased from the account as they are redeemed or if they expire. [Source: NWS Seal Beach Retired Military Newsletter | April 2015 ++]

Saving Money ► Refurbished Electronics

Right now, you could spend \$249 on a brand-new 32 GB iPod Touch or you could spend \$159 for the refurbished version. Both come from the Apple store in a sparkling white box with new accessories, a new battery and a one-year warranty. Which do you choose?



What are refurbished electronics? Refurbished electronics are basically items that have been opened or used at some point. It could be because of any of the following reasons:

- An item bought and returned because the customer didn't like it.
- An item bought and returned for a cosmetic defect.
- An item bought and returned for a functional defect.
- A display or demo item.
- A recalled item.

You may be worried you'll be buying a lemon if you get a refurbished electronic device, but that concern may be overblown. A 2011 report from consulting firm Accenture found that only 5 percent of returned electronics had an actual product defect. Even for those that are defective, most major manufacturers have a rigorous process by which they test, repair and then retest returned items before selling them as refurbished. As a result, you may end up with a refurbished device that has some minor cosmetic issues such as scratches or discoloration, but it should work flawlessly out of the box.

Where should you buy them? Because refurbished electronics may be used, you always want to buy them from a trusted source. Typically, that means a major retailer or manufacturer. Look online in the clearance or outlet sections of these companies' websites:

- Amazon: <http://www.amazon.com/b?ie=UTF8&node=10158976011>.
- HP: <http://www8.hp.com/us/en/hp-information/refurbished/how-to-buy.html>
- Dell: <http://www.dell.com/learn/us/en/22/campaigns/outlet?c=us&l=en&s=dfh>
- Sony: <http://store.sony.com/sony-outlet/cat-27-catid-Certified-Pre-Owned>
- Apple:
<http://store.apple.com/us/browse/home/specialdeals?afid=p231|camref%3AikL5&cid=AOS-US-AFF-PHG>
- Epson: <http://www.epson.com/cgi-bin/Store/BuyEpson/ccHome.jsp>
- Newegg: <http://dealnews.com/c142/Electronics/s504/Newegg>
- Best Buy: <http://www.bestbuy.com/site/electronics-promotions/refurbished-product-faqs/pcmcat249600050017.c?id=pcmcat249600050017&ref=199&loc=je6NUbpObpQ&acampID=1&siteID=je6NUbpObpQ-UxuExOVNs0PVqu.XDkUGyQ>.

You can find plenty of refurbished electronics on eBay as well, but buying through eBay can be tricky. Contact the manufacturer to see if the auction is being run by an authorized reseller, and then double-check their feedback for any recurring problems. If the seller isn't authorized by the manufacturer, you may want to move along. Unauthorized sellers may have vastly different standards when it comes to testing and repairing refurbished items. Plus, these sellers may not offer warranties or accept returns.

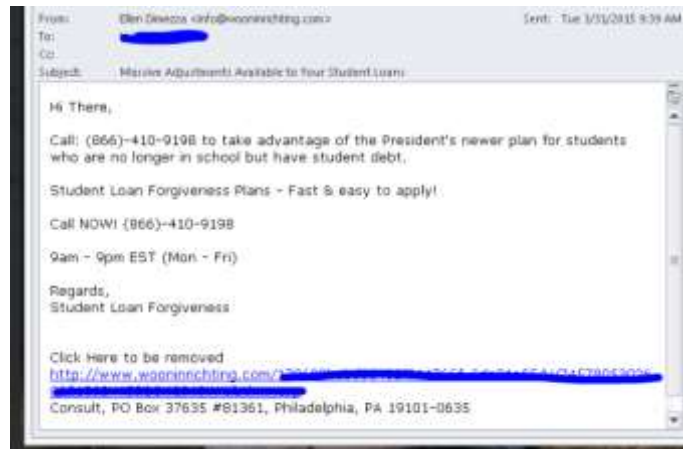
How do you know it's a good deal? First, look up the going price of the item you're buying. How much are retailers selling it for brand new? Refurbished items are often, but not always, a bargain. Just as you would compare prices for any other purchase, shop around before buying a refurbished product. Beyond price, review how the item was refurbished and what your options are if it ends up being defective. Look for answers to all the following questions.

- What is the refurbishing process?
- Is the item tested again after any necessary repairs are made?
- Could there be cosmetic damage?
- Does the item come with the same accessories as a new item?
- Is there a warranty or return policy that will let you send back a defective item?
- If so, do you need to pay a restocking fee?
- Don't forget to look for coupon codes or promos that may bring your final price down even more.

Is there anything you shouldn't buy refurbished? Some people warn against buying refurbished TVs, printers and hard drives, but you probably don't need to make an entire category of products off-limits. Instead, never buy something sold "as is." While most refurbished products are as good as new, there is always the chance you'll get a defective product that wasn't repaired correctly. Don't get stuck with a lemon. Make sure you have a warranty and the opportunity to make a return. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Maryalene LaPonsie | March 26, 2015 ++]

Student Loan Forgiveness Scam ► How to Avoid

Fast and easy forgiveness of your student loans! Sound too good to be true? That's because it is. Watch out for scams that entice student loan holders by promising to erase their debt.



How the Scam Works:

- You get an email or spot a post on social media that claims a company can erase your student loan debt. Many claim that their service is made possible by a new government program or policy. See one example below.
- The company asks for an upfront fee to negotiate with your student loan lender on your behalf. They will claim they've helped numerous other clients, but don't believe them! Student loans can only be forgiven under specific circumstances, and it's not fast or easy. These scammers will take your fee and disappear.
- In another version of the student loan scam, con artists claim that they can save you money by consolidating your loans. Some charge a fee for using a free government service. Others may actually move your loans to a private lender with a higher interest rate.

How to Spot this a Student Loan Scam:

- Never pay upfront. Real lenders will take a percentage once their service is complete. You don't need to pay an upfront fee beforehand.
- Know your options. If you are having trouble paying your student loans, contact your lender directly. You should research programs offered by the federal governments of the US and Canada.
- Never give a 3rd party power of attorney. Don't sign anything giving a company the power to negotiate on your behalf. A scam company can use this to take control over your loans.
- If it seems too good to be true... It probably is. Any company that claims it can erase your student loan debt in minutes is lying. Don't bother responding to the ad or email.

Learn more about student loans at Studentaid.ed.gov for United States residents and Canlearn.ca for Canadians. To find out more about other scams, check out BBB Scam Stopper <http://www.bbb.org/council/bbb-scam-stopper>. [Source: BBB Scam Alert | April 03, 2015 ++]



Government Grant Scam Update 01 ► How to Avoid

It's back! According to BBB Scam Tracker, many people are seeing the "government grants" scam again. It's a classic con where scammers pretend to offer victims "free grant" money, but they are really after bank account information.

How the Scam Works:

- You get a phone call, get an email, or spot a post on social media. No matter the medium, the message is similar: the government is awarding "free grants." Your application is guaranteed to be accepted, and you'll never have to repay the money. You can use the "grant" to pay bills, make repairs, or pay education costs.
- Sound too good to be true? That's because it is. If you reply to the ad or take the bait on the phone, scammers congratulate you on your eligibility. Then, they will ask for your checking account information. They will claim that they need to "deposit your grant directly into your account" or cover a one-time "processing fee." Whatever the story, two things are for sure. You will never see the money, and you've just given scammers access to your bank account.

How to Spot this Scam:

- The government typically doesn't call, text or email. Government agencies normally communicate through the mail, so be very cautious of any unsolicited calls, text messages or emails you receive.
- Don't pay any money for a "free" government grant. If you have to pay money to claim a "free" government grant, it isn't really free. A real government agency won't ask you to pay a processing fee for a grant that you have already been awarded.
- Phone numbers can deceive. Some con artists use Internet technology to disguise their area code in Caller ID systems. Although it may look like they're calling from Washington, DC, they could be calling from anywhere in the world.
- Be wary of look-a-like government agencies. Just because the caller says he's from the "Federal Grants Administration" doesn't mean that he is... or that such an agency exists. When in doubt, do a quick online search and...
- Pick up the phone. If you receive a suspicious call or email, call the local government agency to check its legitimacy. Look for the phone number on previous correspondence or the official government website. Don't call a number in the email.

Read more about government grant scams on the Federal Trade Commission website <http://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0113-government-grant-scams>. To find out more about other scams, check out BBB Scam Stopper <http://www.bbb.org/council/bbb-scam-stopper>. [Source: BBB Scam Alert | March 27, 2015 ++]



Tax Burden for South Dakota Retired Vets ► As Apr 2015

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 South Dakota

Sales Taxes

State Sales Tax: 4% (prescription drugs exempt); municipalities may add up to an additional 2.75%. Residents who are age 65 and older and have a yearly income of under \$10,250 (single) or in a

household where the total income was under \$13,250 are eligible for a sales tax refund.

Gasoline Tax: 40.4 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Diesel Fuel Tax: 48.4 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Cigarette Tax: \$1.53 cents/pack of 20

Note: Tax rates to do not include local option tax of 1 cent.

Personal Income Taxes

No state personal income tax

Retirement Income: Not taxed.

Property Taxes

Property is assessed at 85% of market value between counties. Assessors determine the market value of property by using a combination of the following three approaches: (1) Cost approach whereby the assessor estimates the cost of replacing the property (structures), reduces that amount by its age (depreciation) and adds the value of the land. (2) Market approach whereby the assessor compares the subject property to like properties that have recently been sold. (3) Income approach in whereby the assessor uses the value of the projected income from a property to determine its value. For more information, refer to <http://dor.sd.gov>.

Property taxes are assessed and collected by local government entities. A tax freeze and/or municipal property tax reduction is available for seniors age 65 and older, and disabled persons. Single homeowners 66 and older who earn \$10,250 or less can get a refund of up to 35% of taxes paid. Multi-person households headed by someone 66 and older, where the combined income is \$13,250 or less, are eligible for a refund of up to 55% of taxes paid. The state has several other property tax relief programs. For details, refer to <http://dor.sd.gov/#Sales%20and%20Property%20Tax%20Refund%20for%20Senior%20&%20Disabled%20Citizens> and <http://dor.sd.gov>.

There is a property tax exemption for disabled veterans. Veterans that have been rated as permanently and totally disabled as the result of a service connected disability may be eligible for up to \$100,000 of their property value to be exempt from property taxes. For details refer to <http://dor.sd.gov>.

The state has a property tax homestead exemption that delays payment of property taxes until the property is sold. Taxes are a lien on the property and must be paid along with 4% interest before the property can be transferred. For a single person annual income must be less than \$16,000. For a multimember household, the limit is \$20,000. For more information refer to <http://dor.sd.gov>.

For more information on all property taxes, refer to <http://dor.sd.gov> or call 800-829-9188.

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

There is no inheritance tax and the estate tax is limited and related to federal estate tax collection.

For further information, visit the South Dakota Department of Revenue site <http://dor.sd.gov> or call 800-829-9188.

[Source: <http://www.retirementliving.com> Apr 2015 ++]

Tax Burden for Florida Residents ► As of Apr 2015

Personal income tax

- Florida residents pay no personal income tax.
- The state's intangible tax on stocks, bonds, and mutual and money market funds has been repealed for 2007 and subsequent years.

Sales taxes

- Florida levies a 6 percent sales tax.
- Counties impose additional sales surtaxes. The county tax rates are levied on the first \$5,000 of the purchase price for certain transactions.
- For vehicle and mobile home sales, the applicable surtax rate is that of the county where the vehicle will be registered.

Personal and real property taxes

- Property, or "ad valorem," taxation provides local government funding in Florida. The Property Tax Administration Program, or PTA, administers the assessment and collection of taxes on all real, personal and centrally assessed property. Florida's Property Valuations and Tax Data book provides a comprehensive look at the latest available property tax numbers across the state.
- If you purchase a home in Florida, the tax on it is based on the just or fair market value of the property. Ad valorem taxes are assessed and collected annually by the county property appraiser. Taxpayers with questions about the process should review the Florida Property Taxpayer's Bill of Rights.
- A \$50,000 homestead exemption is available to homeowners who meet certain requirements, primarily that the property is the taxpayer's primary residence. Additional exemptions are also available in several other taxpayer situations. Details on the various benefits can be found at the state's homestead exemption Web page.
- Owners of tangible personal property must file an annual return. However, the first \$25,000 in assessed value is exempt from taxes.
- Questions about local taxes can be directed to your local county property appraiser.

Inheritance and estate taxes

- There is no inheritance tax.
- Florida's estate tax was tied to the federal estate tax laws. As such, federal law changes meant Florida's estate tax was eliminated for estates of those who died after Dec. 31, 2004.

Other Florida tax facts

- Flags, both the U.S. and Sunshine State versions, are exempt from state and local sales taxes.
- Taxpayers can obtain tax assistance and information at one of the state's service centers.
- Florida residents can make child support payments online.

[Source: <http://www.bankrate.com/finance/taxes/state-taxes-florida.aspx> Apr 2015 ++]

Thrift Savings Plan 2015 ► Share Prices + YTD Gain or Loss

TSP Share Prices as of April 28, 2015

	Close	YTD
▲ G Fund	\$14.7056	+0.61%
▼ F Fund	\$17.0860	+1.69%
▲ C Fund	\$28.0782	+3.36%
▲ S Fund	\$38.5018	+6.08%
▼ I Fund	\$27.0104	+11.53%
▲ L 2050	\$15.7872	+5.54%
▲ L 2040	\$27.6733	+4.91%
▲ L 2030	\$25.8873	+4.36%
▲ L 2020	\$23.7043	+3.52%
▲ L Income	\$17.7512	+1.72%

Thrift Savings Plan Returns as of April 02, 2015

Average Annual Returns (As of December 2014)										
	I Income	I 2020	I 2030	I 2040	I 2050	G Fund	F Fund	C Fund	S Fund	T Fund
1-Year	5.77%	5.06%	5.74%	6.22%	6.37%	2.31%	6.73%	13.78%	7.80%	(5.27%)
3-Year	5.16%	10.41%	12.68%	14.36%	15.86%	1.89%	3.05%	20.49%	20.93%	11.13%
5-Year	4.68%	8.37%	9.92%	11.03%	-	2.18%	4.73%	15.90%	17.13%	5.49%
10-Year	-	-	-	-	-	3.29%	4.89%	7.72%	9.44%	4.58%
Since Inception	4.42%	5.98%	6.56%	6.93%	10.83%	5.43%	6.66%	10.43%	9.19%	4.56%
Inception Date	06/01/05	08/01/05	08/01/05	08/01/05	01/31/11	04/01/87	01/29/88	01/29/88	05/01/01	05/01/01
Calendar Year Returns										
	I Income	I 2020	I 2030	I 2040	I 2050	G Fund	F Fund	C Fund	S Fund	T Fund
2010	5.74%	10.10%	12.48%	13.89%	-	2.81%	6.71%	15.08%	29.06%	7.94%
2011	2.23%	0.41%	(0.31%)	(0.96%)	-	2.45%	7.89%	2.11%	(3.38%)	(11.81%)
2012	4.77%	10.42%	12.61%	14.27%	13.83%	1.47%	4.29%	16.07%	18.57%	18.62%
2013	6.97%	16.03%	20.16%	23.23%	26.20%	1.86%	(1.68%)	12.45%	38.35%	22.13%
2014	3.77%	5.06%	5.74%	6.22%	6.37%	2.31%	6.73%	13.78%	7.80%	(5.27%)
YTD	1.03%	1.91%	2.34%	2.66%	2.66%	0.47%	1.60%	0.97%	5.39%	5.70%
Monthly Returns (Past 12 Months)										
	I Income	I 2020	I 2030	I 2040	I 2050	G Fund	F Fund	C Fund	S Fund	T Fund
2014										
Apr	0.31%	0.39%	0.37%	0.32%	0.32%	0.20%	0.90%	0.75%	(2.47%)	1.51%
May	0.64%	1.20%	1.46%	1.63%	1.78%	0.20%	1.21%	2.35%	1.52%	1.72%
Jun	0.58%	1.19%	1.52%	1.77%	1.96%	0.19%	0.14%	2.07%	4.45%	0.99%
Jul	(0.28%)	(0.97%)	(1.34%)	(1.63%)	(1.86%)	0.19%	(0.19%)	(1.37%)	(4.38%)	(1.95%)
Aug	0.84%	1.64%	2.07%	2.40%	2.61%	0.20%	1.12%	4.01%	4.98%	(0.14%)
Sep	(0.42%)	(1.36%)	(1.84%)	(2.18%)	(2.50%)	0.18%	(0.58%)	(1.40%)	(5.10%)	(3.82%)
Oct	0.61%	1.09%	1.36%	1.58%	1.70%	0.20%	0.96%	2.45%	4.11%	(0.67%)
Nov	0.55%	1.04%	1.27%	1.42%	1.55%	0.17%	0.74%	2.70%	1.33%	0.51%
Dec	(0.04%)	(0.50%)	(0.67%)	(0.76%)	(0.94%)	0.18%	0.21%	(0.24%)	0.99%	(4.13%)
2015										
Jan	(0.08%)	(0.58%)	(0.83%)	(1.02%)	(1.18%)	0.18%	2.13%	(2.99%)	(1.85%)	1.19%
Feb	1.19%	2.95%	3.80%	4.39%	4.99%	0.13%	(0.91%)	5.75%	6.05%	5.97%
Mar	(0.07%)	(0.44%)	(0.58%)	(0.64%)	(0.76%)	0.16%	0.47%	(1.57%)	1.24%	(1.43%)
Last 12 mo	3.89%	5.70%	6.65%	7.31%	7.68%	2.19%	6.34%	12.82%	10.61%	(0.61%)

[Source: www.myfederalretirement.com/public/237.cfm & <http://tspcenter.com/tspReturns.php?view=year>
April 29, 2014 ++]

*** General Interest ***



Notes of Interest ► 16 thru 30 Apr 2015

- **Commissary Sale.** To determine the dates of the commissary's APR thru JUN 'Case Lot Sale' in your area go to www.commissaries.com/stores/html/store.cfm?dodaac=N&page=case_lot_dates.

- **WWII Vet Interview.** Check out <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/395572/jerry-yellin-world-war-ii-veteran-interview#.VTcig-9FCpp> to listen to 91 year old Jerry Yellin talk about the last combat mission of the war.
- **Maine National Guard.** State lawmakers will consider a bill this session that would waive in-state college tuition costs for Maine National Guard members. The bill would provide a 100 percent tuition waiver for certain members who enroll at any school in the University of Maine System, Maine Community College System and Maine Maritime Academy.
- **5.56mm Ammo.** The House Armed Services Committee called on the Pentagon 22 APR to explain why the Army and the Marine Corps use different types of 5.56mm ammunition for the M16A4 rifle and the M4 carbine, and to develop a plan for a common round.
- **ATF Vet Gun Seizures.** Sen. Chuck Grassley sent a letter to Attorney General Eric Holder demanding to know why "99.3% of all names reported to the NICS list's 'mental defective' category were provided by the Veterans Administration (VA) even though reporting requirements apply to all federal agencies."
- **IRS.** An overloaded IRS phone system hung up on more than 8 million taxpayers this tax season, The Associated Press reports. Of all the phone calls to the IRS this filing season, just 40 percent were able to get through to a person. And even then, many were forced to wait on hold for 30 minutes or more, the AP said.
- **Bees.** A new report finds that neonicotinoids—the pesticides linked to the global bee die-off—may be not only deadly to bees but also addictive to them. Neonicotinoids are derived from nicotine, the powerfully addictive stimulant in tobacco. And it turns out that bees love it. Even though it kills them.
- **COLA Watch.** The March Consumer Price Index of 231.055 increased 0.7 percent compared to last month. It remains 1.4 percent below the FY 2014 COLA baseline.
- **Millennials.** According to the new Bank of America/USA Today Better Money Habits Millennial Report, 40 percent of millennials get financial help from their parents, including 22 percent of 30-34-year-olds, and 20 percent of millennials who are married or living with a partner.
- **Mother's Day.** Starbucks is selling a limited-edition Mother's Day Premium Starbucks Card online. The metal and ceramic card, the first of its kind, is described as an "elegant gift with its laser-etched floral details and satin ceramic finish." It comes gift-boxed and preloaded with \$50. Here's the catch: It costs \$200. Starbucks plans to sell 1,500 of the "special" cards. There is a limit of one per customer.
- **Phoenix AZ VAMC.** A year after news broke of the waiting list scandal at the VAMC in Phoenix, Arizona, President Obama finally visited the facility in March. And while they didn't quite roll out the red carpet for the president, they did clean the floors -- and spent \$5,000 to do it.
- **Vietnam.** In April of 1975, the North Vietnamese Army was closing in on Saigon as South Vietnamese resistance was crumbling. Approximately 5,000 Americans remained with roughly 24 hours to get out. Check out <http://video.pbs.org/video/2365417082> to view the 112 minute Last Days in Vietnam documentary on the collapse of Vietnam.

Rosie The Riveter ► Iconic Painting Model Dies at Age 92

Mary Doyle Keefe, the model for Norman Rockwell's iconic 1943 "Rosie the Riveter" painting that symbolized the millions of American women who went to work on the home front during World War II, has died. She was 92. Keefe died 21 APR in Simsbury after a brief illness, said her daughter, Mary Ellen Keefe. She had lived for the past eight years at The McLean Village Community in Simsbury. Keefe grew up in

Arlington, Vt., where she met Rockwell — who lived in West Arlington — and posed for his painting when she was a 19-year-old telephone operator. The painting was on the cover of the Saturday Evening Post on May 29, 1943.



October 2007 file photo of Mary Keefe who sat for Norman Rockwell for his war bond posters featuring Rosie the Riveter.

"I was a telephone operator, 19 years old, and we were neighbors. And [Rockwell] often used neighbors for his paintings," Keefe said in a 2012 interview with The Courant. "He liked to paint from photos, so his photographer took pictures of me, just posing me different ways and telling me to look this way or that. I don't remember the photographer telling me to have any kind of attitude on my face, but I'm 90 and don't remember." Although Keefe was petite, Rockwell's "Rosie the Riveter" had large arms, hands and shoulders. The painting shows the red-haired Rosie in blue jean work overalls sitting down, with a sandwich in her left hand, her right arm atop a lunch box with the name "Rosie" on it, a rivet gun on her lap and her feet resting on a copy of Adolf Hitler's manifesto, "Mein Kampf." The entire background is a waving American flag. "Other than the red hair and my face, Norman Rockwell embellished Rosie's body," Keefe said in the 2012 interview. "I was much smaller than that and did not know how he was going to make me look like that until I saw the finished painting." Rockwell wanted Rosie to show strength and modeled her body on Michelangelo's Isaiah, which is on the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel.

Keefe, who never riveted herself, was paid \$5 for each of two mornings she posed for Rockwell and his photographer, Gene Pelham, whose pictures Rockwell used when he painted. "You sit there and he takes all these pictures," Keefe told The Associated Press in 2002. "They called me again to come back because he wanted me in a blue shirt and asked if I could wear penny loafers." Twenty-four years after she posed, Rockwell sent her a letter calling her the most beautiful woman he'd ever seen and apologizing for the hefty body in the painting. "I did have to make you into a sort of a giant," he wrote.

The Rosie painting — not to be confused with a poster by a Pittsburgh artist depicting a woman flexing her arm under the words "We Can Do It" — would later be used in a nationwide effort to sell war bonds. Keefe said that people in Arlington didn't make too much of a fuss about her being in the Rosie painting, aside from teasing her a little about Rosie's big arms. "People didn't make a big deal about things back then," she told the AP. The painting is now part of the permanent collection at the Crystal Bridges Museum of American Art in Bentonville, Ark. [Source: Associated Press | Dave Collins | April 23, 2015 ++]

Flag Desecration Update 02 ► Valdosta State University Georgia

When Air Force veteran Michelle Manhart heard demonstrators at Valdosta State University, Georgia, were walking on the American flag, she knew she had to intervene if campus police would not. "I decided to go up there and see if they're doing anything about it, and if not, I'm simply going just to walk in and pick up the flag and walk away," Manhart told Air Force Times on 20 APR. "I didn't want to cause any ruckus. My intentions were just to kind of go in quietly and not disrupt whatever they were doing." What happened next thrust Manhart back in the media spotlight eight years after her career in the Air Force ended abruptly when she posed nude for Playboy. A video posted on YouTube shows former Staff Sgt. Michelle Manhart being handcuffed at Valdosta State University, Georgia, after refusing to give the flag back to protesters (<http://www.airforcetimes.com/story/military/2015/04/20/air-force-vet-scuffles-with-police-over-american-flag/26065769/>).

Manhart told Air Force Times that she had been alerted by a student at the university, whose father she served with in the Air Force that the demonstrators were walking on the flag. She alerted the university, but the protests continued. When she arrived on campus, she saw the demonstrators were debating among themselves, so she picked up the flag and headed to the parking lot, she said. About 10 feet from the parking lot, the protesters and police caught up with Manhart, whose daughter started videotaping the confrontation. The campus police told her to give the flag back, she said. "They said, 'If you release it to us, we will not give it back to them,'" Manhart said. "I disagreed with that wholeheartedly. There were other people's hands on it as well that belonged with the organization, so, of course I wasn't going to let go, because if I did, it would have been in their hands again."

Manhart felt the need to take the flag from the demonstrators because she was outraged at how they were treating what she sees as an iconic symbol of freedom. "We drape that flag over many coffins over the men and women that unfortunately don't get to come home the way they left; over our firefighters, our police officers, a lot of our civil servants," Manhart said. "If you're walking on that flag, then you're also walking on their caskets and you're walking on everything they stood for and you have no respect for the freedom that they have fought to make sure that you can have."

As part of a campaign for the People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals years ago, Manhart posed nude while draped in the American flag. She said that the picture was meant as a sign of respect for the flag. "What we wanted to try to get out of it is: People in general, we are very big on materialistic items," she said. "Even if you're not big into money, we all want cars and clothes and rings and iPads – it's something that we just naturally want. "When you take away all materialistic things, what's left? It's just us. It's just us standing there in the nude. I would venture to say that most of us, myself included, would not be comfortable just walking down the street completely in the nude. But if you remove all materialistic items, what do you still have? You have your freedom. And if you stand behind your freedom; if you stand behind the flag and what it stands for and everything that it is, then you will always have your freedom."



Michelle Manhart

Manhart's 13-year career in the Air Force was destroyed when she posed in uniform and nude for the February 2007 issue of Playboy. She was roundly criticized by service members, who claimed she had disgraced her uniform, and former talk show host Montel Williams, a Navy veteran, said he would have personally separated Manhart if she were under his command. "I don't want you to step in before a formation of 350 young troops that I know just saw you in the PX with your clothes off," Williams told Manhart in a 2007 episode. To view a Fox interview with Michelle Manhart on the incident and hear her explanation of why she took action refer to <http://burnpit.us/2015/04/obligatory-air-force-vet-and-playboy-bunny-saves-flag-story>. [Source: AirForceTimes | Jeff Schogol | April 20, 2015 ++]

RP~China Dispute Update 07 ► RP-US Combat Exercises Mirror Threat

More than 11,500 American and Filipino military personnel launched one of their largest annual combat exercises 20 APR amid growing alarm over massive land reclamation by China in disputed South China Sea territories. Philippine military officials said the "Balikatan," or shoulder-to-shoulder, maneuvers, which involve more than 90 aircraft and ships, were not directed at China. But the venue of some of the war games in waters facing the disputed region and a focus on territorial defense appear to link the exercises to the long-simmering conflict. More than 120 Philippine and U.S. Marines will be deployed from an amphibious attack vessel to simulate the re-taking of an island occupied by enemy forces in northwestern Zambales province, Filipino officials said. There will be live-fire and search and rescue drills as well as civic work in other areas.



U.S. Marines amphibious assault vehicles (AAV) speed past a landing ship April 21 during an amphibious landing exercise at San Antonio in Zambales province as part of annual Philippine-U.S. joint maneuvers

China seized control of a shoal off Zambales after a standoff with Philippine ships three years ago. Incensed, the Philippines challenged the validity of China's vast territorial claims before an international arbitration tribunal in 2013, straining ties. Shortly before overseeing the start of the military exercises, Philippine military chief Gen. Gregorio Pio Catapang Jr. held a news conference to release surveillance photos showing Chinese reclamation of eight previously submerged reefs in the disputed Spratly Islands, saying Beijing's actions increase the risk of an accidental confrontation. "We have compelling reasons to raise our voice to tell the whole world the adverse effects of China's aggressiveness that has created tensions not only among the countries who have overlapping claims in the area," Catapang said. Washington has expressed concern over China's actions. Sen. John McCain and three other top-ranking senators overseeing U.S. defense and foreign policy have called for a comprehensive strategy to deal with China's territorial

moves, including the massive reclamation, warning that American interests and those of its allies stand at considerable risk.

Adm. Samuel Locklear, the commander of U.S. forces in the Pacific, warned last week that the artificial islands could serve as resupply bases for China's large fleet of maritime security vessels. China eventually could deploy missiles and radar on them, providing a platform for enforcing a possible air defense identification zone similar to one it declared over disputed Japanese-held islands in the East China Sea in 2013. The reclamation has destroyed large swaths of coral reefs, Catapang said, adding that Filipino fishermen have been driven away from the construction sites, denying them of their livelihood. Catapang said some of the reclamation projects were just several kilometers (miles) from a Philippine-occupied island it calls Pag-asa and Second Thomas Shoal, raising the possibility that Chinese military patrols could cut off Manila's access to those areas. Philippine government agencies were meeting to determine how to respond to the situation, Catapang said, adding that Manila wants a peaceful resolution based on international laws.

Chinese officials have defended the land reclamation by saying it is Beijing's territory, adding that the buildings and infrastructure are for public service use and to support fishermen. But the Philippine military has said the massive scale of the reclamation and the emergence of runway-like facilities raise the possibility they are for military use to reinforce China's extensive territorial claims. The chain of Spratly islands, reefs and atolls where most of the Chinese land reclamation has been detected has long been contested by China, the Philippines, Taiwan, Malaysia, Vietnam and Brunei. Aside from possible oil and natural gas resources, the vast region also straddles busy sea lanes and rich fishing grounds. [Source: The Associated Press | Jim Gomez | April 20, 2015 ++]

Baking Soda Update 01 ► Alternate Uses | 1 thru 38 of 85

Baking soda's most recognizable form is in a little orange box. This unimposing product is present even in households where no one ever cooks — frequently stored in the back of the fridge to ward off nasty smells. But its uses are seemingly never-ending, and some are much more remarkable. An Internet user named Justine swears baking soda can save your life in the backcountry if you bring it instead of toothpaste. Because baking soda has no odor of its own, she wrote in the comments section of The Old Farmer's Almanac, "it does not attract bears." By contrast, the ingredients that make our toothpaste minty-fresh also smell delicious to *Ursus americanus*. Clean your chompers with sodium bicarbonate while you're out in the wild, and bears will be less likely to track you down. Baking soda will do a lot of other things, too. First, here's a baking soda cheat sheet:

- For pastes, stir together three parts soda to one part water.
- For solutions, stir four tablespoons (1/4 cup) of soda into one quart of water until dissolved.
- For sprinkling, store in a jar or bottle with a shaker-type cap. I've seen these in thrift shops and dollar stores.

Cleaning stuff

1. Backpack hack. Mix a little baking soda in water to wash dishes while camping. Justine swears by it.
2. Shine the stainless. Use a damp sponge and soda to clean stainless steel appliances.
3. Water stains on wood. Somebody forget to use a coaster? Gently rub a baking soda paste on the surface, then wipe off.
4. Banish tarnish. Use a soft cloth or clean sponge to rub paste onto tarnished silver. Rinse well, then dry with a dish towel.

5. Brighten brass. Sprinkle baking soda onto a lemon wedge to clean and shine brass objects.
6. Soften stickers. A baking soda paste will take care of gummy residue left by adhesive labels or stickers.
7. Help for the toaster oven. Bread crumbs that drop to the bottom of this appliance burn and smell bad; drippings from broiling or cooking make the odor worse. Pop open the bottom and scrub it with baking soda.
8. Laundry day, part one. Justine the backpacker says “just a little water and baking soda in a plastic bag” is a simple way to wash your duds when you’re out in the wild.
9. Laundry day, part two. Your clothes will be cleaner and brighter if you add a cup of bicarbonate to the liquid detergent you use.
10. Laundry day, part three. Babies are always doing something damp and disgusting. If you’re using a gentle laundry soap, add half a cup of soda to the soap.
11. Laundry day, part four. Remove perspiration stains with a soda pretreatment: Rub a paste into the stains, wait one hour and wash with the rest of the laundry.
12. Laundry day, part five. Over time, a clothes hamper can absorb the odors of what’s thrown into it. Sprinkle bicarb on the bottom, and maybe on the sniffiest of the clothes and linens, to keep smells at bay until washday.
13. Sanitary playtime. Clean and deodorize baby toys in a baking soda solution. Note: This also works for dog toys that are sticky with slobber and lint.

De-staining stuff

14. Clean that cookware. Stains inside your enamel pans? Apply a soda paste and leave on for an hour. Next, fill the pan with water, use a wooden spoon to stir the soda loose and boil the mixture for 20 minutes. Rinse and then wash with dish liquid.
15. Revive your Tupperware. Are your plastic dishes stained from storing minestrone or reheating spaghetti at work? Rub off the red with baking-soda paste.
16. Roasting pan save. Sprinkle a lot of baking soda onto crusted-over or burned baking dishes. Add hot water to 2 inches deep and leave it there for two hours. Alternate method: Boil a couple of inches of water in the burned pan, remove from heat, add half a cup of baking soda and leave it overnight. The next morning you should be able to wash it clean.
17. An ugly mug? Use a wet cloth on the inside of stained coffee mugs, then dip the cloth into bicarb and scrub off the stains. If that doesn’t work, fill with a baking soda solution and let sit overnight.
18. Gray gone. Got plates with grayish markings from your knives and forks? Gently rub with baking soda, and they will likely disappear.

De-stinkifying stuff

19. Rehab a pet bed. Over time Fluffy’s or Fido’s bed cushion will get a little sniffy. Use soda to absorb smell, then vacuum.
20. Or rehab the pet. Soak a bandana in a baking soda solution and allow to dry. Tie it around your pooch’s neck. It’s a doggy deodorant!
21. Or dry-bathe the dog. Mary Hunt of Everyday Cheapskate suggests a periodic baking soda spritz for dogs. But not with water: Just sprinkle on the soda, rub it into the fur, and brush or comb it back out. (Note: This also works on human hair, if you’re too rushed to shampoo or you just want to remove excess oil.)

22. That old-paper smell. If a book starts smelling musty, sprinkle soda on the pages and let them air. According to Tipnut.com, you can treat mildewed pages by rubbing soda on the spots and putting them out in the sun's bleaching rays.
23. That new-baby smell. Fill a small spray bottle with baking soda solution. The Coupon Sherpa blog says it will neutralize the impact of that ubiquitous spit-up odor. Spray and then blot dry.
24. Wash your hands. Cleaning fish or chopping onions? Take the smell off your fingers by washing them with baking soda and water.
25. Freshen the dishes. Get those same smells off your utensils and plates by mixing a teaspoon of soda into the dishwater.
26. Freshen the dishwasher. You can do this in a couple of ways. First try putting a layer of soda on the bottom of the appliance overnight. The next morning, use a damp sponge to scrub the dry powder into the inside walls and door; wipe off most of it, and then run the dishwasher on empty (and without detergent) to remove the rest. Alternate tactic: Run a rinse cycle in an empty dishwasher with a cup of baking soda.
27. Freshen your water bottle. Plastic H2O container smelling a bit stale? Soak it in a baking-soda solution, then rinse well.
28. Freshen the baby bottle. You know, the mostly empty one that got left in the car overnight. Eeewww.
29. Freshen your lunchbox. If your lunch bag or box smells like the Ghost of Mealtimes Past, add a heavy layer of soda and allow to stand overnight. Wash in hot water with plenty of dish soap.
30. Freshen what's underfoot. If the wall-to-wall carpeting smells bad, sprinkle it with baking soda, wait 15 minutes and then vacuum up the powder. The smell will come with it.
31. Freshen your feet. Sprinkle a little baking powder into smelly shoes. Hey, if it'll freshen your fridge, it'll also do wonders for your footwear.
32. Freshen your sports gear. Smelly equipment can get a new lease on life with a baking soda solution. While you're at it, sprinkle some dry soda into your gym or hockey bag.
33. Freshen the sponges. Kitchen or cleaning sponges tend to develop a stale or mildew smell over time. Soak them in a baking soda solution.
34. Freshen the mattress. Every so often apply a thin layer of baking soda atop the mattress. In a few hours, vacuum it up.
35. Freshen the luggage. Got an old trunk or suitcase that smells suspicious? Bid bon voyage to bad smells by sprinkling in some soda, closing up the luggage, letting it sit for a couple of days and then vacuuming.
36. Freshen the trash can. Put a layer of baking soda in the bottom of the receptacle. Note: This is especially useful for the trash can you use for dirty disposable diapers.
37. Freshen the litterbox. OK, nothing will really freshen a kitty toilet. But you can reduce its impact by covering the bottom of the box with soda before adding the litter. After scooping, sprinkle more soda on top of the remaining litter.
38. Gas problem. Got a mechanic in the family? According to The Old Farmer's Almanac, you should seal gasoline- or oil-fouled clothes in a trash bag with baking soda for a few days. After that, wash as usual.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Donna Freedman | April 20, 2015 ++]

College Watch Program ► Caution Light for Students | Listing

More than 500 colleges and universities nationwide are undergoing extra scrutiny of their financial practices from the federal Department of Education. The federal government released the list of 556 institutions getting the extra attention for the first time after public record requests from several national and trade news organizations. The watch program is called heightened cash monitoring. There are two levels: HCM-1 and HCM-2, with HCM-1 the lowest level. Institutions under that level of scrutiny must first disburse to students the federal loans and grant money that they are entitled to and then provide detailed information on each recipient before reimbursement. "Heightened cash monitoring is a step that our federal student aid office can take with institutions to provide additional oversight for a number of financial or federal compliance issues, some of which may be serious and others that may be less troublesome," Ted Mitchell, the undersecretary of education, said in a blog post on the department's website.



List of 556 Institutions under Scrutiny Released

Mitchell said institutions may be on this list for a variety of specific reasons, such as late financial statements, outstanding liabilities, accreditation issues, concerns about financial responsibility or possibly severe findings uncovered during a program review. "Heightened cash monitoring is not necessarily a red flag to students and taxpayers, but it can serve as a caution light," Mitchell said. "It means we are watching these institutions more closely to ensure that institutions are using federal student aid in a way that is accountable to both students and taxpayers." "A school is placed on HCM-1 generally for financial responsibility reasons," said Denise Horn, a spokeswoman for the U.S. Department of Education. A college under such scrutiny can have restrictions placed on how it handles federal funds. The restrictions are more severe for colleges with the HCM-2 designation. The list can be found at <http://hosted.ap.org/specials/interactives/documents/college-list.pdf>. U.S. Institutions are listed by state. [Source: MilitaryTimes | April 14, 2015 ++]

Microsoft Windows 7 ► Should Users Be Worried

Windows 7 is the most popular operating system today, despite the release of the much-maligned Windows 8 in October 2012, an eon ago in the computer world. Before Windows 7, the darling of Windows aficionados was Windows XP. But Microsoft stopped supporting XP in April 2014, which meant it stopped releasing bug fixes, including those related to security. For a large number of people, particularly those in the corporate world, this eliminated XP as a viable product. Microsoft currently is working on the successor to Windows 8, which, in a marketing contrivance, it's naming Windows 10, not Windows 9.

In the meantime, Microsoft has been and still is trying to put the brakes on the sale of Windows 7. In October 2014, it ended Windows 7 sales in stores as well as the manufacturing of new desktop and laptop PCs installed with Windows 7 Home Basic, Home Premium, and Ultimate. Even before that, you would have been hard pressed to find a Windows 7 PC for sale in a physical store. You still can buy a new PC running Windows 7 Professional, though you'll likely find it only online. Good sources include Amazon and Newegg.

Of greater concern, at first glance, is that Microsoft stopped "mainstream support" of Windows 7 in January 2015. This sounds more dire than it is; the stopping of mainstream support mostly means Windows 7 won't be receiving any new features. It still will receive the all-important security fixes. But the end of mainstream support also means you'll no longer be able to call Microsoft for free help with Windows 7. Microsoft is planning to maintain Windows 7 "extended support" for another five years, until January 2020. That's when security fixes will no longer be provided, and that's when Windows 7 will become too risky for many users.

With Windows 8, Microsoft made one of the biggest business miscalculations in history. By putting a tablet and smartphone interface on its PC operating system, it sought to boost sales of its own tablets and smartphones, which lagged far behind competitors. But the result was sabotaging sales of PCs made by others while doing nothing for the sale of Microsoft's tablets and smartphones.

Windows 10 is still in public testing, or beta, phase. At this point, it doesn't appear to be the dud that Windows 8 was. Microsoft has moved away from the interface hated by so many PC users and rediscovered the need to provide them with a PC interface. With Windows 10, Microsoft isn't abandoning its wishes that everyone use Windows on smartphones and tablets as well as desktop and laptop PCs, despite pesky competitors such as Apple, Samsung, and others. Microsoft is making it easier for those who use multiple Windows devices to use them together and making available and improving its Microsoft Office word processing, spreadsheet, presentation, and other apps for smartphones and tablets. Window 10 switches interfaces depending on the type of device it's used on. It looks one way on devices in which users primarily use a keyboard and mouse or other pointing device, such as a desktop or laptop PC. And it looks another way on devices in which users primarily use a touchscreen, such as a tablet or smartphone. With convertible laptops/tablets, it asks users what they want.

Microsoft also has brought back the much-missed Start menu, where you can start programs from the bottom left of your screen. Additionally, Microsoft's "modern apps" no longer try to take over, letting you use them in a desktop window if you like, which makes sense because the product is named and has always been named Windows. With Windows 10, Microsoft also has broken precedent by announcing that for consumers wanting to upgrade their existing Windows 8 or Windows 7 machine, the cost during the first year after its release will be, drum roll please, nothing. Apple has been doing this for years, but it's a big move for Microsoft. It will mean, unlike in the past, that previous versions of Windows will no longer have the same desirability for users. The release of Windows 10 is scheduled for late 2015. [Source: Information today, Inc | Reid Goldsborough | April 01, 2015 ++]

Have You Heard? ► Plain English

No dictionary has been able to adequately explain the difference between COMPLETE and FINISHED. However, in a recent linguistic conference held in London, England, and attended by some of the best linguists in the world, Samsundar Balgobin, a Guyanese, was the clear winner.

His final challenge was this: "Some say there is no difference between COMPLETE and FINISHED. Please explain the difference between COMPLETE and FINISHED in a way that is easy to understand."

Here is his astute answer: "When you marry the right woman, you are COMPLETE.

When you marry the wrong woman, you are FINISHED. And, if the right one catches you with the wrong one, you are COMPLETELY FINISHED!"

Photos That Say it All ► This Little Piggy ...



WWII Advertising ► Old Gold Cigarettes



Normandy Then & Now ► Queen Red Beach at la Breche, France



The British 2nd Army, Commandos of 1st Special Service Brigade land on 'Queen Red' Beach, SWORD Area, at la Breche, at approximately 8:40 am, on June 6, 1944 and a view of the seafront and Queen Red Beach on May 8, 2014.

Interesting Inventions ► Jeans for Smart Phone Users

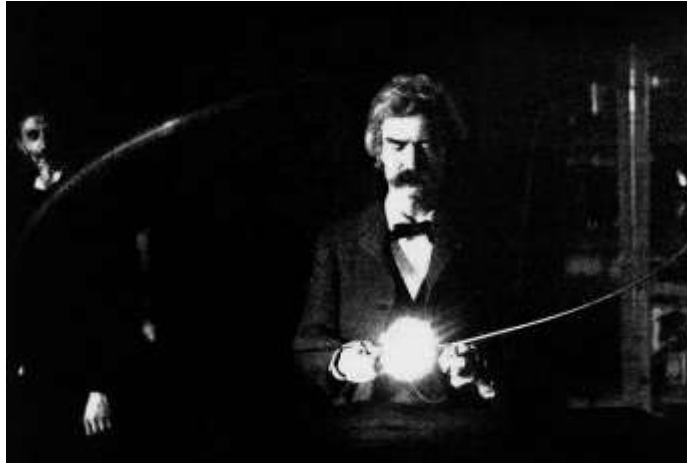


They Grew Up to Be? ► Lacey Chabert (Party of Five)



Lacey Chabert

Moments in US History ► Mark Twain in Tesla's lab, 1894



Mark Twain in Tesla's lab, 1894



Wardenclyffe Tower

The famous "Tesla Tower" and Tesla Laboratory was built by Nikola Tesla from 1901 to 1905, in Shoreham, Long Island. It was intended to become the first broadcasting system in the world. The tower's purpose was also to transmit electrical energy without wires from the huge electricity reserve in Niagara Falls, and transmitted through the Ionosphere and the ground to the whole planet. Tesla wanted to saturate the surface of the globe with electricity for global use. The financier of the huge project was JP Morgan, who later asked how are we going to charge consumers for this electricity? Without a clear answer to this question, Morgan discontinued financial support for Wardenclyffe Tower.



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Lt. James “EMO” Tichacek, USN (Ret)

Editor/Publisher RAO Bulletin

RAO Baguio, PSC 517 Box 4036, FPO AP 96517-1000

Tel: (951) 238-1246 in U.S. or Cell: 0915-361-3503 in the Philippines.

Email: raoemo@sbcglobal.net

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