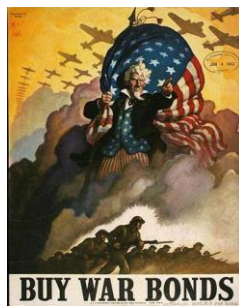


# RAO

# BULLETIN

## 1 March 2017

**PDF Edition**



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2. Numbers contained within brackets [ ] indicate the number of articles written on the subject. To obtain previous articles send a request to [raoemo@sbcglobal.net](mailto:raoemo@sbcglobal.net).

## \* ATTACHMENTS \*

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DoD



### **Military Readiness** ► No Quick Fix

At a hearing of the House Armed Services Committee in FEB the second highest ranking officers of the DoD's Armed Services said that while they welcome the additional funding that has been proposed by the Trump Administration, it will likely take years to fix the Services' readiness problems.

- The Vice Chief of the Air Force, Gen. Stephen Wilson, told the panel, "We're doing our best to retain people, but when you're flying equipment that's 27-years old, on average, we're flying a lot less. In the late '70s, at the very bottom of what we now call the 'hollow force', fighter pilots were flying about 15 sorties a month and about 20 hours. Today, we're flying less hours and less sorties than we were then. We didn't fix that problem overnight. There was a way out of it, and the way out of this starts first with manpower. With the right training, we can bring in the right weapons system support. With the weapon system support, we can increase the flying hours. With the flying hours, we reduce the op tempo. All of this takes time."
- Speaking about the Navy's F-18s, Adm. Bill Moran, the vice chief of naval operations said, "They were designed for 6,000 hours. We're extending the life on those Hornets into the 8,000-to-9,000 range. But it takes about twice the amount of man hours to fix one of those jets as it was designed to take, which gives you a pretty good indication how old they are. And the capacity in our depots has been diminished since 2013, when we had to furlough a lot of our workers ... this is a reflection of how hard we've flown these jets over the last 15 years and that we've not bought enough new ones to replace them."
- Gen. Daniel Allyn, the Army's Vice Chief of Staff, said that only three of the Army's 58 brigade combat teams are ready for immediate deployment. "We will be too late to need," he said. "Our soldiers will arrive too late, our units will require too much time to close the equipping and manning and training gaps. Hope is not a method and we cannot count on the enemy providing us that window of opportunity to close those gaps. The end result is excessive casualties, both to innocent civilians and to our forces that are already forward stationed to close the rest of the force required to accomplish the mission."
- The Vice-Chief of staff of the Marine Corps said an infusion of money this year just keeps the Marine Corps current. But if we were to have a major combat operation, "...we'll send a lot of pilots that don't have the adequate training. Currency is not nirvana for a warfight, you need proficiency, and you only get that through multiple reps and sets." He also said that if the Marine Corps has to keep operating with the same funding that it had last year, which is currently the case, "We would stop flying in about July." "The guys who are forward will still fly, but the training in the continental United States would cease."

While retaining personnel was discussed, what was not discussed at the meeting were personnel benefits. With the military soon operating under both new retirement and health care systems, it remains to be seen what effect they

will have on recruiting and retaining qualified personnel. The 1990's were the last time there was discussion about a "hollow force" and it was at that time the services went to Congress to tell them they had to fix personnel compensation because they were having a hard time recruiting and retaining personnel. Military people programs were grossly underfunded as a result of decades of cutbacks and it took ten years and major increases in compensation to fix retention problems. Congress had to give pay raises that exceeded private sector pay, eliminate out-of-pocket housing costs, and provide health care to retirees forced out of the military health care system.

Fighting to protect the compensation and other benefits of military personnel is what TREA is all about and what they will keep fighting for. As the new retirement and healthcare systems come online, they will carefully monitor what effect they have on keeping our military strong. [Source: TREA Washington Update | February 14, 2017 ++]

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## **SECNAV ► Nominee Philip Bilden Withdraws**

President Trump's nominee for secretary of the Navy withdrew from consideration because of extensive financial ties that would not meet the Defense Department's rigorous ethics standards, the Pentagon confirmed Sunday evening. Philip Bilden, who spent most of his professional career as a Hong Kong-based financier, withdrew from consideration because his ties in Asia "would likely not meet the Office of Government Ethics standards to serve in the position," according to a report from USNI News, which broke the news. In a statement, Defense Secretary Jim Mattis expressed his disappointment and said he'd make a recommendation in the coming days for a Navy secretary.

"This was a personal decision driven by privacy concerns and significant challenges he faced in separating himself from his business interests," Mattis said, in reference to Bilden's withdrawal. "While I am disappointed, I understand and respect his decision, and know that he will continue to support our nation in other ways. "In the coming days I will make a recommendation to President Trump for a leader who can guide our Navy and Marine Corps team as we execute the president's vision to rebuild our military." Bilden is the second service secretary nominee to withdraw because of complicated financial and business holdings. On Feb. 4, news broke that businessman Vincent Viola withdrew from consideration for Secretary of the Army, citing difficulty disentangling business holdings.

Bilden served in the Army Reserve from 1986 through 1996. He has been active in supporting both the Naval Academy and the Naval War College, and has a child at the Naval Academy. Bilden's withdrawal will likely renew speculation that former House Armed Services Committee member Randy Forbes could get the job. Forbes led the committee's Seapower and Projection Forces subcommittee and is intimately familiar with the issues confronting the Navy and Marine Corps. Forbes also served as an adviser to the Trump campaign. Sean Stackley, who was for years the Navy's top acquisition boss, is currently the acting secretary of the Navy. [Source: MilitaryTimes | David B. Larter | February 26, 2017 ++]

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## **DoD Nuclear Mission Update 01 ► 10 Year Modernization Cost**

The current plan to modernize U.S. nuclear weapons will cost \$400 billion from 2017 to 2026, according to a new government estimate. That figure, released 14 FEB by the Congressional Budget Office, is 15 percent higher than CBO's most recent estimate, which pegged the cost for the 2015-2024 period at \$348 billion. Both estimates factor inflation into their figures. The next decade is key for the modernization of the nuclear triad, as a number of programs are expected to leave the early design phase and begin production, both at the Pentagon and at the Department of Energy, whose Nuclear National Security Administration is working to modernize and condense the number of nuclear warheads in stock.

Among programs with key milestones in the next decade are the Navy’s replacement for the Ohio-class nuclear submarine; the Air Force’s B-21, a new bomber design capable of both conventional and nuclear strike; the Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, a replacement for the existing Minuteman III intercontinental ballistic missiles; and the Long Range Standoff weapon, a new nuclear cruise missile. CBO estimates nuclear programs will subsume roughly 6 percent of the overall defense budget during this 10-year period, and it offers a rough breakdown of where that \$400 billion will go:

- \$189 billion for strategic nuclear delivery systems and weapons, which includes Department of Defense funding for strategic nuclear delivery systems (the subs, ICBMs and bombers), DoE funding for activities related to the specific warheads used by those systems, and DoE funding for the nuclear reactors that power the submarines.
- \$9 billion for tactical nuclear delivery systems and weapons, which includes DoD funding for tactical aircraft that can deliver nuclear weapons over shorter ranges and DoE funding for activities related to the warheads that those aircraft carry.
- \$87 billion for DoE’s nuclear weapons laboratories and their supporting activities, including funding for activities at nuclear weapons laboratories and production facilities that are not attributable directly to a specific type of warhead but that are related to maintaining current and future stockpiles of nuclear weapons.
- \$58 billion for DoD’s command, control, communications and early-warning systems that allow operators to communicate with nuclear forces, issue commands that control their use, and detect incoming attacks or rule out false alarms.

That leaves \$56 billion unaccounted for — money that CBO believes will be needed to handle additional costs during this period “if the costs for those nuclear programs exceeded planned amounts at roughly the same rates that costs for similar programs have grown in the past.” As to the 15 percent increase since the last cost estimate, CBO primarily chalks that up to the shifting timetable. By moving the report from the 2015-2024 period to the 2017-2026 period, the new numbers now include more mature programs. “The development costs of weapon systems typically increase as a program proceeds, which means that the current estimate replaces two lower-cost years with two higher-cost years,” the report reads. “The current estimate also includes the initial years of purchases in some programs that were not covered by the previous estimate, further raising costs in the 2017–2026 period relative to the 2015–2024 period. In addition, in the two years since CBO’s earlier estimate, the modernization plans for some nuclear systems have become better defined, leading to higher cost projections for some programs and lower projections for others.”

The CBO report does not touch on the question of what happens if the Trump administration moves to change the current plan, a legacy of the Obama administration. President Donald Trump has ordered a formal Nuclear Posture Review, to be headed by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis. [Source: DefenseNews | : Aaron Mehta | February 14, 2017++]

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## **National Guard Mobilization ► Immigrant Roundup Plan Denied**

White House officials on 17 FEB denied reports that National Guard troops will be used to capture and detain illegal immigrants across America, saying a draft memo circulating among news organizations is not from top administration officials. “That is 100 percent not true. It is false,” White House Press Secretary Sean Spicer told reporters aboard Air Force One en route to an event in South Carolina, according to pool reports. “It is irresponsible to be saying this. There is no effort at all to utilize the National Guard to round up illegal immigrants.” Earlier in the morning, the Associated Press reported it had obtained a draft policy document that included plans to mobilizing as many as 100,000 National Guard troops to round up unauthorized immigrants.

According to the wire service, the 11-page document calls for mobilization of troops for immigration enforcement not just along southwestern border states but also in places like as Oregon and Louisiana. Spicer said he could not say for sure if the document was a low-level, unapproved discussion paper from within the administration. “I don’t know what could potentially be out there, but I know that there is no effort to do what is potentially suggested,” he said. “It is not a White House document.” Later in the morning, Department of Homeland Security officials said the document appeared to be an early policy paper that was never seriously considered by top decision-makers. President Trump has made repeated promises to crack down on illegal immigration into America, including building a wall along the southern U.S. border and issuing restrictive new rules on travel from seven countries in the Middle East and Africa that have been repeatedly challenged in court.

Guard troops are often mobilized for response state emergencies, but can be used in select law enforcement and security roles. Texas state officials have mobilized their state guard members for border security work in recent years, and more than 8,000 Guard members from across the country were mobilized for security support services during Trump’s inauguration. [Source: Military Times | Leo Shane III | February 17, 2017++]

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## China on U.S. Military Update 01 ► South China Sea Sub Transit Rule

Submarines are designed with one primary aim: to travel underwater. But when it comes to foreign vessels operating in the vast waters it claims, China doesn’t much like that idea. According to state media reports posted in mid-FEB, Beijing is drafting a revision to the nation’s maritime “traffic safety” law. While in Chinese waters, according to the changes, any foreign submarine would be required to stay surfaced and display its national flag. It would also need to get approval before entering Chinese waters, and report to maritime management authorities. China would reserve the right to bar or expel foreign ships deemed to threaten “traffic safety and order.” Ships entering Chinese waters without approval could be fined more than \$70,000.



Areas claimed by China

One big problem: China claims nearly all of the contested South China Sea—with its strategic shipping lanes, rich fishing grounds, and oil and gas deposits—as its own territory, based on its nine-dash line. That claim was shot down last July by an international tribunal ruling under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). But Beijing is sticking with it. Another problem is that what most countries consider international waters, China views more as territorial waters.

Under prevailing international norms laid out by UNCLOS, a country’s territorial sea extends out 12 nautical miles (22 km, 14 miles) from the coast. Here a country is free to set laws and regulate use, though a foreign military vessel can still make “innocent passage” whereby it does nothing threatening and carries on its way. After that is a

contiguous zone (another 12 nautical miles) where a nation can continue setting some laws. Beyond that is the exclusive economic zone (EEZ). Extending out 200 nautical miles (370 km, 230 miles), the EEZ is considered to be international waters under UNCLOS, though within it a nation has sole rights to extract natural resources from the waters (for example, fish) and below the seabed (including oil and natural gas).

China is among a small group of nations that interprets UNCLOS to mean (pdf, p. 16) it can regulate foreign military vessels within its EEZ. Under the proposed rules revisions, foreign submarines would be prohibited from serving their purpose well beyond China's coastal waters and throughout most of the South China Sea. "China's waters are open to foreign ships as long as they do not damage the waters' safety, order, or China's sovereignty," Yang Cuibai, a law professor at Sichuan University, told the Global Times. China, he added, should take the lead in establishing legal order in the Yellow Sea, the East China Sea, and the South China Sea. According to the hawkish tabloid, the revisions will take effect in 2020. Beijing would likely ignore any international rulings or statements against the new regulations, just as it dismissed the tribunal's decision last July.

China wouldn't necessarily enforce its new rules immediately. In 2013, Beijing declared an Air Defense Identification Zone (ADIZ) in the East China Sea, requiring foreign aircraft—even if in international airspace—to identify themselves to Chinese authorities. The country has done little to enforce the ADIZ, but establishing it was an important first step that will make enforcement—when it comes—somewhat easier for Beijing to justify. Likewise, the proposed submarine rules might go unenforced for years, until they are eventually used as justification for interfering with foreign vessels. [Source: Defense One | Steve Mollman | February 21, 2017 ++]

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## China on U.S. Military Update 02 ► FONOPS Warning

The San Diego-based carrier Carl Vinson arrived in the South China Sea 18 FEB to begin a presence patrol mission that will be closely watched by China as the new Trump administration works out what it wants its policy in the region to be. The U.S. Navy's Pacific Fleet announced the Vinson's arrival on its website calling the patrol "routine operations." Vinson is joined by the destroyer Wayne E. Meyer. The patrol marks the Vinson's 17th trip to the South China Sea. The Navy's presence in the South China Sea is historically routine, but its patrols there have increasingly agitated China's government, which has made sweeping territorial claims to maritime rights in the 1.35 million-square-mile sea. That has put China at odds with its neighbors and with the United States, which sees itself as the main cop on the beat in the region for protecting freedom of the seas.

Navy Times first reported the pending patrol on 12 FEB, along with the Navy's plans to potentially use the Vinson's carrier strike group for new **freedom of navigation operations**, or FONOPS, that would sail close to the increasingly militarized islands that China claims in the Spratly Islands chain and perhaps the Paracel Islands as well. The Navy Times article sparked a warning from Beijing against upsetting the apple cart in the South China Sea. Chinese Foreign Ministry spokesman Geng Shuang told reporters last week that the situation there had stabilized due to China's diplomatic efforts with its neighbors. "We urge the U.S. not to take any actions that challenge China's sovereignty and security," Geng said, according to a Reuters report.

Any new U.S. Navy FONOPs would have to be approved by the White House and its the National Security Council. Yet it's unclear how much of a priority the new patrols of China's claims will be as the Trump administration's NSC is likely undergoing a reorganization under the new national security chief, Army Lt. Gen. H.R. McMaster, who was nominated Monday to be the new national security advisor. Trump has been tough to pin down on his Asia-Pacific and South China Sea policies. After a recent missile launch by North Korea that occurred during a visit by Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe, Trump called a news conference to make clear that he stood by Japan completely. He thanked Abe for hosting U.S. troops, despite saying during the campaign that Japan needed to pay more for U.S. protection.



Trump's top advisors have also talked tough on China's claims in the South China Sea. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggested the U.S. Navy might blockade China to prevent them accessing their new islands, though Trump administration officials have walked back that threat in recent weeks. Bonnie Glaser, a China expert, said in a recent interview that before the Trump administration pushes ahead with new moves there, they need to develop a set of goals and objectives. "The Trump administration has to decide what it wants to achieve," said Glaser, director of the China Power Project at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C. "I doubt it's possible to compel China to withdraw from its newly built islands in the Spratlys. But the U.S. could develop a strategy aimed at preventing more land reclamation, capping militarization and deterring China from using its new outposts to intimidate and coerce its neighbors," Glaser told Navy Times in an interview. [Source: NavyTimes | David B. Larter | February 21, 2017 ++]

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## **DoD Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 28 Feb 2017**

**Newark, NJ** — A Pennsylvania man whose construction company did work at two military bases in New Jersey has admitted paying bribes and kickbacks to get contracts. Federal prosecutors say **George Grassie** pleaded guilty 21 FEB to providing unlawful kickbacks and conspiracy to defraud the United States and commit bribery. The 54-year-old Covington Township man faces up to 15 years in prison when he's sentenced May 31. Prosecutors say Grassie's firm did construction, excavation and landscaping work at Picattiny Arsenal and Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst and also did work as a subcontractor. Grassie paid bribes valued at \$95,000 to \$150,000 to a staffer with the Army Contracting Command in New Jersey to get and retain subcontracts and other favorable assistance at both bases. He also paid kickbacks valued at \$40,000 to \$95,000 to two project managers for a prime contractor at both bases. [Source: The Associated Press | February 21, 2017 ++]

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## **Arlington National Cemetery Update 68 ► Space Is Going To Run Out**

An uncomfortable truth about Arlington National Cemetery (ANC) is that space is going to run out, whether protocol changes or not. Congress has new impetus to take action on this longtime debate after the release of a recent report. The Advisory Committee on Arlington National Cemetery (ACANC) produced its final report, including options available to extend the life of the cemetery "well into the future." This long-anticipated report, requested by Congress a year ago, marks the completion of the committee's analysis of the capacity situation, and sets the stage for policymakers to act. The report includes analysis of the impact of almost 20 variations of land expansions, eligibility changes, burial procedures and more. These options were provided in prior interim reports but now come with substantive analysis of the likelihood of implementation, necessity of legislative action, and general timelines. Options include, but are not limited to:

- Adopting the VA requirement for 24 month active duty service minimum;
- Restricting eligibility to retirement from the armed services at certain lengths of service;
- Changing eligibility only to those killed in action, active duty deaths, and recipients of qualifying awards;
- Expanding the grounds beyond current physical boundaries; and
- Establishing a new DoD national cemetery.

The Military Officers Association of America (MOAA) believes it is crucially important for decision makers to consider the interests and desires of the potential affected populations if and when policies change. Veterans who may be eligible for burial at ANC should have a voice in the process, and Congress has indicated a strong desire to prioritize their inputs. MOAA surveyed their members, and found participants overwhelmingly rejected the idea of

restricting retirees, with the majority preferring expansion options as the initial course of action. In fact, most participants favored closing ANC to future burials before excluding retirees.

The ACANC document specifically abstained from making any recommendation. The tough decision going forward is in the hands of lawmakers and DoD officials. Nonetheless, the report clearly indicates changes to eligibility requirements and/or expansion of the cemetery's geographic footprint are required in order to extend ANC's capacity well into the future. MOAA appreciates the commitment to exploring all potential courses of action on this issue. Geographical expansion is a preferred solution, as confirmed in their member survey. One such project is currently underway, and 40 more acres of land should be available by 2022. While restricting eligibility delays the debate far into the future, it is not a permanent solution. One way or another, space will run out, and our nation's heroes will be excluded in the end. Space limitation makes this a zero-sum game, and the clock is ticking.

“MOAA would like to see ANC remain open and active well into the future. We don't have a problem reserving a set number of plots for future Medal of Honor recipients and combat deaths. But we don't think an 80-year old retiree who's made plans for Arlington burial should lose eligibility to reserve space for an active duty member who dies in a car accident 150 or 200 years from now,” said MOAA Government Relations Vice President Col. Dan Merry, USAF (Ret). “A lot can change over 50 or 75 years. The Pentagon hadn't been built 75 years ago, and lots of military installations have been “BRAC'ed” over the last 35. MOAA and other military and veterans' associations have told the committee they think all options for further expansion should be pursued before we start turning away vets who planned for ANC interment. We know procuring land can take a long time, so that process should start sooner rather than later.”

Next steps in the process are now out of the committee's hands. MOAA appreciates being allowed to join discussions related to ANC's capacity issues up to this point. They anticipate continuing thorough discussions on the path forward with legislative officials and DoD leadership and look forward to finding amicable solutions that preserve the dignity of the cemetery without disenfranchising servicemembers who want a place at Arlington. MOAA recognizes how important this issue is to their members and will keep veterans informed as discussions continue. [Source: MOAA Leg Up | February 24, 2017 ++]

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## **POW/MIA Update 80 ► Director Post Still Vacant After 9 Months**

As Pentagon officials struggle to fill key posts in the new administration, one senator wants to know when they will name someone for the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency director post that has been vacant almost nine months. “The need for permanent leadership is essential,” wrote Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) in a letter to Defense Secretary James Mattis this week. “A permanent director ensures that (the agency) continues to make sustained progress. “The longer this position remains vacant, the greater the potential for the agency to backslide on its hard-won accomplishments.

The agency, established four years ago, oversees a host of different department efforts to recover the remains of fallen servicemembers. McCaskill was one of the key lawmakers behind efforts to streamline operations and the chain of command for the work, [after a series of scandals concerning office mismanagement and infighting](#). She said in the letter she is pleased with progress in the last few years, but in a statement said that a timeline for a new permanent director is critical to continuing that work. “Families and loved ones of service members deserve an agency with strong leadership that is making best efforts to provide information about the recovery of our missing servicemembers,” she said.

Dozens of key posts at the Pentagon remain unfilled a month into Donald Trump’s presidency. Mattis was sworn in just hours after Trump’s inauguration, but none of the service secretaries have had confirmation hearings before the Senate yet. Last month, DPAA officials informed lawmakers that the new director search was still underway,

but that some hiring actions in the agency were on hold due to a hiring federal freeze put in place by Trump in January. A FEB Defense News report this week found that 75 percent of political appointee jobs inside the Department of Defense remain vacant, leaving a host of temporary office heads and lingering questions about future policy plans.

On 16 FEB, House Armed Services Committee Chairman Mac Thornberry (R-TX) said he's worried the slow pace of getting those posts filled could hurt department budgeting plans, especially since many of the temporary leaders in the Pentagon were hired or appointed by previous administrations. McCaskill said she wants a new update on the hiring process by 10 MAR. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 18, 2017 ++]

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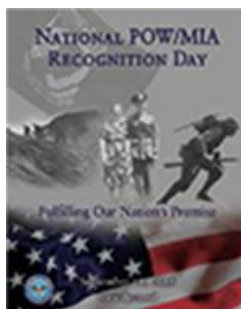
## **POW/MIA Recoveries ► Reported 15 thru 28Feb 2017 | Three**

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,515) Korean War (7,841), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,627), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> 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**

*The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains and burial update of 1 U.S. servicemen who had been previously listed as missing in action from Vietnam. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:*

-- **Air Force Capt. Robert R. Barnett** was a B-57B pilot with the 8th Bomb Squadron. While on a strike mission over Laos, Barnett's aircraft reportedly crashed with no parachutes seen. The hostile threat in the area prevented a search and rescue mission and Barnett was declared killed in action on April 7, 1966. To read more about Capt.

Barnett go to <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Article/1090324/airman-missing-from-vietnam-war-identified-barnett>

**Korea**

none

**World War II**

**The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced the identification of remains and burial update of 2 U.S. servicemen who had been previously listed as missing in action from World War II. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:**

-- **Navy Fire Controlman 3rd Class Robert L. Pribble** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Pribble was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. To read more about Petty Officer Pribble go to <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Article/1083727/uss-oklahoma-sailor-from-world-war-ii-identified-pribble> .

- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Charles W. Thompson** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Thompson was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. To read more about Fireman Thompson to go to <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Article/1090027/uss-oklahoma-sailor-from-world-war-ii-identified-thompson-cw>.

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | February 28, 2017 ++]

**\* VA \***



## **VA Secretary Update 57 ► Senate Confirms Dr. Shulkin 100 to 0**

The Senate easily confirmed Dr. David Shulkin as the new Veterans Affairs Secretary on 13 FEB, making him the first non-veteran ever to serve in the post. Shulkin, who currently serves as the head of VA health programs, was approved by a vote of 100-0. He was sworn into the Cabinet post on 14 FEB. In brief remarks after the swearing in ceremony, Shulkin said he was honored to have this opportunity to continue to serve Veterans. “I have such a ... obligation and duty, that I feel to making sure that we give our Veterans everything that they deserve,” he said. “I think that we have a system that is doing terrific things with very dedicated people, but we all know we have a lot of work to do and that’s what I plan to do as secretary.”

The 57-year-old physician was praised by lawmakers from both parties and veterans advocates as a leader with inside knowledge of the veterans bureaucracy and critical perspective of ways to reform those offerings from his time as a healthcare executive.

- “The solutions to VA’s problems should be based on common sense rather than partisanship or an extreme agenda, and I think Dr. Shulkin recognizes that,” said Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) and ranking member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee. “He is committed to our nation's veterans above all. Through the conversations I've had with him over the last year and a half, I think he understands the challenges that are ahead of us in the VA ... Dr. Shulkin is on top of it.”
- Committee chairman Sen. Johnny Isakson, (R-GA) called Shulkin “the right man for the veterans administration” and hailed the vote as a rare moment of bipartisanship in the increasingly divided chamber.

Shulkin is the only member of President Donald Trump’s Cabinet to be held over from former President Barack Obama’s administration. He’s also the first non-veteran to oversee the department or any of its predecessor agencies. Over the last 94 years, each of the 26 other men to serve in the job boasted military experience. Shulkin’s parents both served in the Army, and he was born on a military base in Illinois. In his confirmation hearing earlier this month, Shulkin said the military and veterans care has played a persistent role in his life. “As a young doctor, I trained in several VA hospitals,” he said. “I view my service at VA as a duty to give back to the men and women who secured the uniquely American freedoms and opportunities we all enjoy, because of sacrifices they made.”

He also repeatedly promised not to “privatize” VA services, and told lawmakers he would not have accepted Trump’s nomination if it came with such a requirement. “What I told him is that I am a strong advocate for the VA, that the services that are available in VA are not available in the private sector,” Shulkin told senators. “My view of where VA needs to go is an integrated system of care, taking the best of VA and the best in the community, and that's what I would work towards.”

- In a statement, Veterans of Foreign Wars National Commander Brian Duffy praised the Senate vote as an important step ahead for the community. "Veterans are very fortunate to have Dr. Shulkin voluntarily stay in what has evolved into the most scrutinized and criticized position in the country. And it should be," he said. "What he brings to the job is a love for veterans, for doing what's right, and for knowing what needs to be done to fix what's broken, to hold employees accountable, and to restore the faith of veterans in their VA. The VFW looks forward to working with him and his staff."
- Paul Rieckhoff, CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, in a statement said his membership supported Shulkin's confirmation "but now the hard work for Shulkin and the President begins." "Big promises from the campaign must be followed by big outcomes," he said. "Dr. Shulkin knows the VA and should not require time to learn. We expect and deserve to see results right away."

Trump made VA reform a pillar of his presidential campaign, including releasing a 10-point plan which called for more mental health care professionals in the department, a private White House hotline devoted to fielding complaints from veterans, and a commission to “investigate all the fraud, cover-ups, and wrongdoing that has taken place in the VA” in recent years. Much of that work has been stalled waiting for a new permanent head for the department. Decisions on who will serve as Shulkin’s chief of staff, top health official and other key deputies are expected to be announced in coming days. Shulkin is the ninth permanent secretary confirmed by the Senate since the Department of Veterans Affairs was reorganized in 1989. Each of other eight were also approved without opposition, either through unanimous or voice votes. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 13, 2017 | ++]

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## **VA Secretary Update 58 ► Time To Stop Berating VA**

Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shuklin said he’s tired of the constant “berating” of his department and thinks the negative reports may be hurting veterans access to care. “It breaks down their confidence in the system,” the new Cabinet secretary said in a department podcast released 24 FEB. “I worry there are people who need help who don’t

come to us because they hear this narrative in the community. “I’m looking for a fair and accurate balance, and I really believe it is time we stop the constant berating on VA, by public officials, by the media, and everyone else. We need to join together with a singular commitment to making this a better organization.” The comments from Shulkin, who was sworn in 10 days ago, run counter to the message being put out by President Trump, who spent much of his campaign last year labeling the department as a bureaucratic mess. At a Florida rally on 17 FEB, Trump again promised major changes at the department, saying that “our veterans have been very, very sadly treated” and “our system and our country has let down our veterans.”

Shulkin’s comments, which did not mention Trump, echo similar assertions made by his predecessor over the last two years. Former VA Secretary Bob McDonald, picked to lead the department in the wake of the 2014 wait times scandal, promised reforms and a more customer-friendly focus during his tenure at the department, but also repeatedly pushed back against the public narrative that VA services were broken or failing. Shulkin said in the recent interview that he worries the negative public perception of VA is also hurting the department’s workforce. “When we make mistakes, we deserve to be held accountable. And I’m not looking to hide our mistakes,” he said. “But this constant berating that VA is filled with unethical people, people that are doing things they shouldn’t do, it’s really painting a picture that frankly is a disservice to the hundreds of thousands of our employees who come to work because they believe in care and have a passion for serving veterans.”

Shulkin has previously promised increased accountability in the VA workforce and fast firings of employees found engaged in improper or criminal acts. But he called the focus on past VA mistakes “an old story” that the public should move past. “I’m disappointed that there seems to be an obsession with finding our failings,” he said. “We are a large organization, we deal with serious problems, day in and day out. There are always going to be difficult circumstances and failings when you have such a large organization dealing with such problems.” Shulkin, who previously served as the head of VA health services under McDonald and President Barack Obama, is the first non-veteran in American history to serve as the head of veterans programs. To listen to the full Podcast #19 refer to <https://twitter.com/search?f=tweets&vertical=default&q=%23VApodcast&src=typd&lang=en> which is also available through the VA website at <http://www.blogs.va.gov/VAntage>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 24, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Private Care Access Update 03 ► Shulkin Endorses Vet Use If Better**

Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Secretary David Shulkin said 23 FEB that he supports veterans receiving care from the private sector if that care is superior to the care offered by the VA. Pete Hegseth, once himself a candidate for the position of secretary of the VA, sat down with Shulkin on the show “Fox & Friends” to discuss Shulkin’s vision for the department under the new Trump administration. As part of that interview, Shulkin mentioned that he backs the idea of veterans being allowed to seek care from the private sector if the VA is not up to snuff. “A veteran deserves the very best health care anywhere,” Shulkin said. “That means sometimes, they should go out into the private sector if something’s being done better than the VA. The veteran [should make that choice] ... and what I’m looking to do is to build a system, what I call an integrated system, of care. The best of VA, the best of the private sector — the veteran’s able to take advantage of both systems.”

Charles Schmidt, national commander at The American Legion, said he was going to meet with Shulkin later that day to encourage him not to pursue any privatization proposals. While Shulkin has said he won’t privatize the department, it seems clear that different groups may have different definitions of privatization. “He said he opposes privatization and that it would not happen under his watch,” Schmidt said Thursday at the National Press Club. “The American Legion has so far been impressed with him. But we do plan to hold his feet to the fire and help him deliver on those promises.”

In contrast, Shulkin's remarks could be interpreted as support for the Veterans Choice Program, which will expire later in 2017. This \$10 billion program implemented a system where veterans could seek care outside of the VA if they waited too long for an appointment or lived 40 miles away from the nearest VA facility. The American Legion also opposes the Veterans Choice Program and wants the funds to be rolled back into the VA to help reduce wait times. GOP Sen. John McCain, chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, advanced a bill in January to remove the expiry date from the Choice Program. [Source: The Daiuly Caller | Jonah Bennett | February 23, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Health Care Enrollment Update 10 ► 500K Applications to Expire**

A whistleblower in the Atlanta office of the Department of Veterans Affairs warned President Trump on 24 FEB that the VA is preparing to throw out hundreds of thousands of benefit applications due to an error the VA itself made during the Obama administration. Scott Davis, a well-known whistleblower who has testified before Congress, wrote an open letter to Trump saying that more than 500,000 of these applications might be scuttled in March unless he intervenes. "I am sending this whistleblower disclosure to your office due to the urgent need for executive intervention," he wrote. "VA is planning on declaring over 500,000 Veteran applications for VA health care as incomplete and abandoned at the end of March 2017."

Davis said those veterans' applications had errors that prevented them from being processed over the last year. The VA categorized them as applications that are about to be tossed out because of errors made by the applicant. But Davis said he has evidence that the errors were instead made by the VA. He provided a December email from the VA's Matthew Eitutis, which acknowledged that 440,000 letters were sent out to veterans asking for "means test information," when the VA actually needed the veterans to provide "military information and vice versa." Davis said another 105,000 veterans were mistakenly told to provide more financial information. And while the VA set a March 2017 deadline for correcting the forms, Davis said the VA still can't confirm if the forms have been corrected.

"Although Mr. Eitutis stated he turned the matter over to the Office of the Inspector General to investigate, no such investigation has taken place," Davis wrote. "As a result VA is planning to go ahead with this illegal action of purging these records without providing Veterans notification or disclosing that these Veterans are entitled to Equitable Relief for health care cost they incurred due to administrative errors by the VA." [Source: Washington Examiner | Pete Kasperowicz | February 22, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Employee Accountability Update 04 ► Shulkin Promises Crack Down**

Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin promised to crack down on underperforming employees in his first televised interview since being sworn into the post in mid-FEB. "When you have one or two or three people who really aren't doing their job, they bring everybody down," he said during an appearance with Fox News host Pete Hegseth, taped 19 FEB. "And so the very best thing I know from my private sector experience is you've got to deal with that, you've got to get them out of the system, because it helps not only the veterans, but the people who work in VA who are trying to do the right thing for veterans." The interview, was shown in sections on the "Fox & Friends" morning show throughout the week, is the first real public comments from Shulkin since he became the first non-veteran in American history to oversee the federal veterans agencies. To see a 5 minute clip of it refer to <http://video.foxnews.com/v/5330956456001/?#>

He promised to work with Congress on new accountability legislation but also to be an advocate for VA workers, calling them “the best people in health care.” Hegseth, an Iraq War veteran who was under consideration from President Trump for the VA secretary post, in the interview accused former VA Secretary Bob McDonald of being more interested in maintaining the status quo at the department than firing troublesome employees. Shulkin pushed back on that accusation, saying: “What I heard (McDonald) saying is that it’s very important to have a due process. You don’t want to arbitrarily fire people.” But he also promised different results than his predecessor. “Watch us,” he said. “People who don’t show up to work, who do cocaine or who are watching porn at work are going to be fired, because I’m not going to tolerate it, and they’re going to be out of our system. Watch our results there. “But remember, the vast, vast majority of our employees are dedicated. They could be working anywhere in health care, but they choose to be working at VA. And I’m going to support them, I’m going to be standing behind them.”

Shulkin was unanimously confirmed by the Senate, one of only a few non-controversial Cabinet picks by Trump. He was President Barack Obama’s pick to lead VA health programs for the last 18 months and still sees patients as part of his VA duties. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 21, 2017 ++]

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## **GI Bill Update 218 ► New Study Justifies Continued Funding**

In the first six years after the rollout of the multibillion-dollar Post-9/11 GI Bill, more than half of the veterans using the education benefit completed their degrees. Through September 2015, about 453,000 degrees were earned. Student Veterans of America, a nonprofit coalition of veterans groups on college campuses, released new research to Congress in early FEB tracking how the Post-9/11 GI Bill has been used. SVA leaders said they want to use the findings to eliminate issues for veterans seeking degrees and to justify to Congress the need for continued funding.

In 2014, about 800,000 veterans used the GI Bill, at a cost to taxpayers of about \$11 billion. Spending for the benefit in fiscal 2016 is about \$12 billion, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. Some in the veterans community fear lawmakers could shrink GI Bill funding to cut costs. “The success we’ve seen from this research ... leads us to understand, in fact, we want more of this, we want more of this success,” William Hubbard, SVA’s vice president of government affairs, told lawmakers. “What can we do to encourage more veterans to pursue a degree? And to that end, what can we do to make the Post-9/11 GI Bill a permanent GI Bill -- not as a wartime benefit -- but as a part of service?” The research was compiled using a sample of student records from the VA and higher education data from the National Student Clearinghouse. SVA will publish a full report next week that was peer-reviewed by researchers at Syracuse University and Purdue University.

The study found that 54 percent of veterans who used the bill from 2009 to 2015 completed degrees. As of September 2015, 18 percent were still working on their degrees. Of those, 23 percent were women, though women are only about 16 to 18 percent of the armed forces. About 40 percent of those who completed degrees were 25 to 29. The highest portion of degrees – 27 percent -- were business-related, and 14 percent were in science, technology, engineering and mathematics. At the current funding level, SVA estimated veterans would complete 100,000 degrees each year. Of veterans who worked toward degrees, 28 percent didn’t complete their education. “We’d like to know what can be done about that,” Hubbard said. “We’re working with the VA on who those individuals are, is there a reason they dropped out, and is there something that can be done.”

The findings show that for-profit colleges receive a large percentage of GI Bill funding. While public schools received 34 percent of all GI Bill funding and produced 64 percent of degrees, for-profit schools used 40 percent of GI Bill funds and produced only 19 percent of degrees, the study found. The remaining funding, about 25 percent, went to private schools, where 16 percent of degrees were completed. Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif, said the ratio of funding to completed degrees at for-profit schools was a “huge problem” and called for more attention to veterans’ experiences there. “There is a real efficiency problem there,” Takano told SVA leaders. “We need to take a look at why this is happening.”



The Defense Department and some Democrats have voiced concerns that for-profit institutions were preying on servicemembers for GI Bill funds. The Federal Trade Commission began an investigation into for-profit University of Phoenix in 2015, in part because of its military recruitment. "Those numbers caught our attention," Hubbard told Takano during a roundtable discussion about the study. "Obviously this is a major concern for us. Whatever it takes to have student veterans be successful, we want that." Chris Cate, SVA's vice president of research, said the group is working on a more detailed study into which academic paths and types of institutions lead to the most degrees. That study is expected to be complete later this year, he said. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 15, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Claims Backlog Update 156 ► Increase to 101,000 Cases**

Officials from the Veterans Affairs Department were pressed 14 FEB to explain how the paperless fix to the disability claims process has initially resulted in growing backlogs. The claims backlog stood at about 76,000 last May before the VA solution called the National Work Queue was fully implemented, but the backlog last week was at 101,000 cases, said Rep. Mike Bost, an Illinois Republican and chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs. At a hearing of the panel, Ronald S. Burke Jr., the VA assistant deputy secretary for Field Operations National Work Queue, didn't dispute Bost's numbers but said one of the problems is that "this is a relatively new initiative."

Willie C. Clark Sr., deputy under secretary for Field Operations, said the new system has improved efficiency for veterans and the result is that "they submit more claims." The queue was described by Thomas J. Murphy, acting under secretary for benefits at the Veterans Benefits Administration, as an electronic records system "to ensure veterans receive a more timely decision on their disability compensation claims." With the technology, the VA now has the ability to shift overloads in the system from one regional VA office to another. "This new environment allows VA the flexibility to move claims around the country that have the capacity to take the next action on a veteran's claim," Murphy said. "On its face, this is common sense," Bost said. "NWQ allows VA to distribute its workload evenly across the nation to reduce waiting times for veterans who file claims for benefits. However, there are some concerns about whether NWQ is actually performing as it should."

The claims backlog was at about 99,000 cases as of 14 FEB, Murphy said, and he acknowledged that "we're never going to get to zero. That's not going to happen." Some claims, particularly those involving radiation disability, simply take more time, and it would "not be the right thing to do" for the veteran to speed up the process, he said. Rep. Elizabeth Esty, a Connecticut Democrat and the acting ranking member on the subcommittee, said she is concerned that the electronic system allows too many VA claims processors to become involved, or have "touches," on a particular case. Burke said that a claim in the new system normally involves five or six involvements by processors. "We need to reduce the number," Esty said.

In a separate panel at the subcommittee hearing, several veterans service organizations said they are generally in favor of the paperless claims system that allows VA to shift cases among regional offices. The implementation of the electronic system "has been credited with assisting in the reduction of the backlog that peaked at 611,073 claims in 2013," said Zachary Hearn, deputy director of claims in the National Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Division of the American Legion. However, in his prepared remarks for the subcommittee, Hearn said the Legion is concerned that its accredited representatives assisting veterans with claims at local regional offices are not being kept fully informed when cases are processed at another regional office. Hearn said there is a need for a notification system to be installed in the queue "for accredited representatives so that they would know when a claim adjudicated in another location requires a review."

A similar complaint came from Ryan Gallucci, deputy director for National Veterans Service at the Veterans of Foreign Wars, who also said that the VFW's accredited representatives are sometimes out of the loop when ratings decisions are made at another VA regional office. "At first, it may look good that VA was able to send the rating to the veteran more quickly," Gallucci said, "but this is no good if the decision is inaccurate and if our advocates have no way to explain the rating decisions to our veterans." [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | February 14, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Scheduling Update 01 ► Single System Lacking**

Rep. David Roe (R-TN), the new chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, took aim at the Department of Veterans Affairs for not settling on a single scheduling system. The VA is moving ahead with multiple projects to overhaul its old and widely criticized scheduling system. "Had VA continually pursued the Medical Appointment Scheduling System [MASS] program rather than starting and stopping, the pilot would be nearly completed by now," Roe said. "Instead, veterans, health care providers and other VA employees are left with uncertainty that's trickling into other parts of the agency." VA opted to roll out an internally developed scheduling module dubbed Vista Scheduling Enhancement at primary care facilities nationwide in March for a two-month test. The move to replace VA's outmoded scheduling system will be among the big IT issues facing Dr. David Shulkin, who was sworn in as VA secretary on 14 FEB after winning confirmation in the Senate on a unanimous vote.

The scheduling tests come with a long back-story. VA had contracted with electronic health records provider Epic and a subsidiary of Lockheed on a five-year, \$624 million plan to add the MASS commercial scheduling module. The contract came in the wake of a scandal at the VA's Phoenix medical center, in which it was revealed that the native Vista scheduling tool lacked a logging function to effectively track allegations of appointment manipulation. Work on MASS was halted when VA began examining a less expensive solution from its own developers. "I remain concerned about the attention redirected to Vista scheduling enhancements and other piecemeal patches to VA's IT systems," Roe said in an emailed statement. "The department needs to make a decision on whether or not they will keep Vista or replace it with an off-the-shelf system, and they need to do it quickly. Otherwise, we'll be having this same conversation 10 years from now, and veterans deserve better," he added.

VA's scheduling woes also came up at a 15 FEB House Oversight and Government Reform Committee hearing held to discuss the government-wide High Risk List released by the Government Accountability Office. "The current scheduling system is 30 years old," said Gene Dodaro, the GAO's comptroller general. "I've raised it on the High Risk List update because I knew it wouldn't be fixed right away." Over the past year or so, VA has been evaluating the possibility of transitioning away from its homegrown Vista system altogether and moving to a commercial, off-the-shelf electronic health record. "You could modify the current systems or you could go commercial," GAO IT specialist Dave Powner said at the Oversight Committee hearing. Typically, he said, commercial electronic health records systems have scheduling modules. "VA is piloting those initiatives right now," Powner said. "They're leaning towards the commercial decision. Now that the VA secretary is in place, they're waiting for a decision to be made. The decision should be go commercial." [Source: FCW | Adam Mazmanian | February 15, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Disability Compensation System Update 06 ► Who is Eligible**

If you believe the internet, or what the guy sitting across from you at your appointment at the VAMC said—which is what he heard from some guy who was sitting next to him at his last appointment—then the answer to the questions

Who is eligible for VA compensation? and How do you get it? is No one, and You don't. First, though, let's bust those myths. VA is still compiling FY16 data, but in FY15, VA paid more money to compensate more Veterans—with more claimed medical conditions rated at higher average percentages—than ever before. As you can see, someone's getting paid, and that someone is (as of FY15) 4.56 million someones—and those someones are Veterans who took home \$4 billion dollars in FY15 for their service-connected disabilities.

So, who are these people getting approved, and how do they do it? VA disability compensation is taxpayer money, there's a legal process to claim that money. This means that VA disability compensation is guarded by the laws that your elected lawmakers wrote. The laws explain who is eligible: those who have separated from active military service with any discharge except dishonorable, as well as those still serving in the Reserves/National Guard. That's the first part. The second part is that, if you want to claim an injury or medical condition, it must have happened to you during the time you were active including Reserves/Guard activated, Reserves/Guard drill and/or annual training. An addition to the second part allows one to claim active military service aggravated a pre-service injury or medical condition. The third part is that, if you claim an injury or medical condition that occurred/happened to you during active service, then you need to give VA evidence of the injury or medical condition that occurred/happened during the time you were in active service.

**Note:** This does not mean that it had to happen while deployed, and it doesn't mean it had to happen in uniform or during the duty day. You can file a claim if you served active duty during peacetime, or got injured in a pick-up basketball game off post after the duty day, and if the injuries you sustained affect you today, then it's something you could claim.

So, what do you do if you don't have much in your records? You can provide evidence. You can use pictures (you, your wound, your clothing and gear, your vehicle, your AAR, etc.), receipts, unit citations, award letters, prescriptions, news clippings, base hospital records, in-take and discharge logs; post-service private doctor records; and statements from your spouse, your commander, your platoon sergeant, your roommate, any witness who was there or knew you or was affected by your injury/medical conditions. The last thing you need is actually two things: a current medical diagnosis from a medical professional (VA or civilian), and for that doctor to give the professional opinion that after reviewing your military medical records your current diagnosis—the injury or condition you suffer from right now—is because of what happened to you in active service. Yes! Have the doc review your records.

**Recap:** Active service period, not dishonorable; evidence that something happened to you on active service; current medical diagnosis; and medical professional agreeing the medical condition was caused by the thing that happened to you on active service.

[Source: VAntage Point | Jason Davis | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## VA Official Time Update 02 ► Joint Hearing Debate on Vet Impact

A recent Government Accountability Office study on official time at the Veterans Affairs Department is sparking a broader debate about the role federal union work should play within agency operations. Many lawmakers are baffled by this report, which says at least at least 340 VA employees spent 100 percent of their working hours on union business in fiscal 2015. This data is unreliable, however, since VA lacks a consistent and reliable method to track their employees' use of official time. About 90 nurses, three addiction therapists, 13 nursing assistants and three pharmacists were among those at VA who spent 100 percent of their normal work hours on official time, said Rep. Jody Hice (R-GA).

But with some veterans still waiting for care, many lawmakers were astounded that some VA employees spent all of their normal work hours on activities other than seeing patients and addressing veterans' claims. "If they spend

100 percent of their time on union activities, is that reasonable, necessary and appropriate?” Rep. Jodey Arrington (R-TX), the chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee asked during a joint hearing with the House Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Operations. “I would describe it that they spend their time on government activities, not union activities,” said J. David Cox, national president for the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents many VA employees. The department typically hires another person to backfill the work that the employee on official time is unable to perform, said Kim McLeod, acting executive director of labor-management relations for the VA. “I see no positive outcome in having to hire two people for the work of one,” Hice said. “Not that people doing union work don’t accomplish some good, but positive outcomes?”

Currently, VA has about 45,000 vacant positions, mostly in medical fields. “You have time that you’re paid to be a doctor,” House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Phil Roe (R-TN) said. “How does that help a patient who can’t see that doctor? A board-certified doctor, and you have no access to him. And we’re short of providers.”

Yet Cox and other lawmakers argued that official time gives VA employees the necessary tools they need to best serve veterans. The debate over official time is moot, they argued. “The problem isn’t official time,” Government Operations Subcommittee Ranking Member Gerry Connolly (D-Va.) said. “The problem is these vacancies.” Rep. Mark Meadows (R-NC), the chairman of government operations subcommittee, said the time is now for proper accounting and a true conversation on official time. “Until you can show me that official time can be directly correlated to the quality of health care that our veterans deserve, we have to reform it,” he said.

Many lawmakers — and the witnesses — sparred over the true purpose of the hearing. “This is not about whether federal employees should or should not participate in official time,” Meadows said in his opening statement. “We recognize, I recognize, the importance of that particular activity. Today’s hearing is really about what is reasonable and what is in the best interest of the taxpayers who fit the bill for official time. With the VA backlog in the tens of thousands, is it reasonable for medical professionals to spend 100 percent of their days on VA union activities?” Several members of both committees insisted they didn’t want to discredit agencies’ overall use of official time, adding that the joint hearing with members of the House Oversight and Government Reform Government Operations Subcommittee and Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee was a chance to better understand VA’s time and attendance accounting problems.

Yet other committee members — and at least one of the witnesses — say the hearing quickly swung in the other direction. “Clearly, it was about whether there should be official time,” Cox said in an interview after the hearing. “There was very few questions, very few comments about accounting and the GAO report, which AFGE supports. It was the issue that they did not believe that there should be official time and official time should go away.”

### **Unreliable official time data**

VA has little to no idea about how much official time its employees use, and the data it does have is unreliable, GAO said. VA can’t track the number of hours its employees spend on union activities for a few reasons. First, the department uses two separate systems to track official time: the VA Time and Attendance System (VATAS), which the department rolled out to some facilities starting in 2013, and an older legacy attendance system. VATAS has specific codes that employees can use to record official time. The older system does not. The department also uses the Labor-Management Relations (LMR) system to collect records, estimates or surveys to track employees’ official time use. About half of VA facilities and one-third of employees have begun to use the new time and attendance system as of September 2016, McLeod said.

VA employees haven’t been properly trained on how to record official time into the new attendance system, GAO said, and the department won’t completely roll out VATAS to all VA facilities until July 2018 — five years after the initial launch. Few members pressed VA about its long timeline. “It’s clear to me this has not been a priority for the VA,” said Rep. Beto O’Rourke (D-TX), ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Economic Opportunity Subcommittee. “The VA at the highest levels of leadership just has not cared about this issue, otherwise

we would have one, unified system, otherwise we'd have reliable data today in 2017, not dependent on information that's, at best, five years old. And McLeod said she wasn't sure why VA's Office of Management hasn't been more assertive in getting VATAS up and running at all facilities.

### **Benefits of official time?**

Most lawmakers were unconvinced by Cox's argument: that official time benefits VA employees, which in turn helps them best serve veterans. "Many try to turn official time into some type of scandal, but the fact is that official time is the antidote to scandal," Cox said. "It's what empowers employees to do their job more effectively and provide veterans with better care." Connolly agreed and said he was concerned that changing official time policies could leave unintended implications for whistleblowers. "These protections have to be enforced," Connolly said. "In the workplace, federal employee unions enforced the whistleblower laws Congress passes, and they do it on official time." One VA whistleblower, who wrote to the committee about her case, said AFGE leaders used official time to help her fight her case of whistleblower retaliation.

Union leaders are protected under law, the Federal Service Labor-Management Relations statute, to use "official time" to handle union business, such as negotiations or handling grievances during normal work hours. Agency management and unions will officially negotiate the circumstances for official time. "VA has negotiated varying amounts of official time in both national agreements and local agreements," McLeod said. "Many VA facilities have local official time agreements and practices specific to their location. Official time arrangements, distinctively local and reflect the relationship and history between local management and local union officials." "And in most cases, agency management does not have the right to select which employees will serve as union representatives," she added.

VA plans to begin bargaining with its national unions to agree to a standard method for requesting, recording and reporting official time in VATAS, McLeod said. Members in the previous Congress introduced several bills in attempt to control or eliminate employees' official time use. The House Oversight and Government Reform Committee considered one piece of legislation that would have required the Office of Personnel Management to submit annual government-wide reports on official time. The Federal Employee Accountability Act, which Hice introduced in 2015, would have barred federal employees from using official time to negotiate collective bargaining agreements. Hice offered an amendment to the fiscal 2016 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act that would have eliminated official time altogether at VA, but it failed to pass the House.

[Source: Federal News Radio 1500 | Nicole Ogrysko | February 16, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Waste & Mismanagement ► GAO Study Rates VA a High Risk**

The Department of Veterans Affairs health care system was again declared a "high risk" area of government, susceptible to waste and mismanagement and in need of more oversight. The Government Accountability Office, a leading government watchdog, presented to Congress on Wednesday its biennial report of government programs that are vulnerable to fraud, waste, abuse and mismanagement. VA health care was listed as one of 34 high-risk areas in the nearly 700-page report titled, "Progress on Many High-Risk Areas, While Substantial Efforts Needed on Others".

The VA was first designated as high risk in 2015, following the discovery that veterans suffered long waits for care at VA facilities. The department didn't improve enough to be removed this year, the report states. The GAO cited a "lack of progress" and noted ongoing issues at the VA with accountability, information technology, staff training, ambiguous policies and cost efficiency. "It certainly underscores that the Veterans Health Administration has not made enough progress towards providing quality care for our veterans," Rep. Phil Roe (R-TN) said in a

written statement. Roe is chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs. "As I've said time and time again, VA should have the resources necessary to serve veterans, but we must also take a close look at how the department is allocating the resources they've been entrusted," the congressman said.

At a hearing last month, Roe said he didn't think the VA was spending its budget wisely, and that improvements wouldn't come solely from a budget increase. The budget for the VA health care system has grown from \$37.8 billion in fiscal 2006 to \$91.2 billion in fiscal 2016, the GAO report states. "Although VA's budget and the total number of medical appointments provided have substantially increased for at least a decade, there have been numerous reports in this same period of time... of VA facilities failing to provide timely health care," the report reads.

In his first public statement as VA secretary, David Shulkin said 17 FEB that he would implement an improvement plan to get the VA off the high-risk list and continue the progress that former Secretary Bob McDonald made through his initiative, "MyVA." "This work takes commitment and infinite resolve. Together with our partners in Congress, GAO, and our dedicated workforce, we will make steady and irrefutable progress to modernize VA," Shulkin said in a prepared statement. "We will implement a plan that directly addresses these risks by building on the progress we have already made through the MyVA transformation." The GAO regularly investigates the VA and issues recommendations for how the department could improve. When the VA was first placed on the high-risk list, it had implemented only 39 of 178 recommendations made since 2010.

In the past two years, the VA has worked on the recommendations more aggressively, implementing 122 of the new total of 244. The VA made an action plan to work on the issues, but the plan was missing an analysis of the root causes of problems and the ability to clearly measure progress, the GAO said. Michael Missal, VA inspector general, testified 15 FEB to a Senate committee about investigations his office has conducted in the past two years into the VA, including a finding that the agency overspent about \$1 billion in constructing a new hospital in Aurora, Colo. He committed to initiating more investigations to weed out issues and help the VA improve. According to the GAO, the Senate and House veterans' affairs committees held more than 70 hearings in the past two years to address challenges at the department. The GAO asked the committees to keep paying attention.

Rep. Tim Walz, (D-MN), ranking member of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, said the report was "concerning." "We all have a responsibility to ensure the VA has the resources they need to provide quality, timely care for veterans," he said. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 16, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Oversight ► How Congress Does It**

Congress performs VBA oversight with the help of Subcommittees. The Subcommittee on Disability and Memorial Affairs is tasked with the following oversight responsibilities:

### **VBA Fiduciary Program Performance.**

The VBA Fiduciary Program is designed to provide financial security to veterans who have been determined unable to manage their VA benefit payments. Fiduciaries are designated by VA and can be a family member, a close friend, or a professional fiduciary. The Committee's review includes oversight of how fiduciaries are appointed and the VA department's compliance with provisions in the Brady Handgun Violence Prevention Act (Pub.L. 103-159, 107 Stat. 1536) enacted November 30, 1993. That law can effectively deny veterans in the fiduciary program of the Second Amendment rights as well as fraud associated with the program. In January 2014, the VA Department issued a proposed rule to provide more oversight of fiduciaries; however, three years later, VA has not yet finalized the rule. Even as VA fails to act to protect veterans, the Office of Inspector General continues to investigate additional cases of fiduciary abuse, such as a fiduciary who served 80 veterans and was indicted for criminal mistreatment and theft of \$211,000. The Committee will review legislation that would better enable VBA

to protect and serve veterans in need of fiduciary and ensure their rights of appeal in cases where they have been declared mentally incompetent.

**Equitable Relief For Administrative Errors.** The VA Secretary has the authority to provide equitable relief in cases when a veteran has been harmed by a mistake made by VA. For example, a veteran may be asked by the Department to reimburse VA for an overpayment even when the overpayment is due to an error made by the Department. In such cases, the Secretary may exercise equitable relief and cancel some or all of the veteran's debt. The law that requires VA to submit an annual report to Congress regarding cases where the Secretary has exercised equitable relief will expire on December 31, 2017.

#### **National Cemetery Administration**

The Subcommittee provides oversight over the National Cemetery Administration (NCA), Arlington National Cemetery (ANC), the American Battle Monuments Commission (ABMC), to include each organization's mission, operations, and inquiries into matters of unclaimed remains, access, and the methodology for determining veteran satisfaction. Each of the above organizations provides a hallowed resting place for veterans. VA alone operates over 150 National Cemeteries to provide an honorable resting place for veterans and certain dependents. The Committee will look into a number of issues including poor cemetery maintenance, destruction of and misplaced grave markers, and overall management issues.

#### **Minority Affairs Administration**

The subcommittee gives advice to the Secretary on the administration of VA benefits for veterans who are minority group members on the topics of health care, compensation, and other services. The authorization for the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans expires on December 31, 2017. The VA's Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans Committee conduct oversight to ensure that this program is ensuring that all veterans receive the respect and services to which they are entitled.

#### **Agent Orange Exposure Benefits**

The Subcommittee is given authority to contract with the HMD (Health and Medicine Division formally known as the Institute of Medicine) of the National Academy of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (a non-governmental organization) to scientifically review evidence on the long-term health effects of Agent Orange. This authority expires on December 31, 2017. The Committee will review this authority for this and other VA programs to ensure that veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange receive all the benefits they have earned.

#### **VA Regional Manila Office Services**

The Subcommittee looks at whether the Manila Regional Office is providing effective, efficient services to World War II veterans who reside in the Philippines. The authorization for the Manila Regional Office expires on September 30, 2017.

[Source: NCOAdvocate | February 21, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Unions ► 1.1M Man-hours Spent on Union Activities**

House Republicans berated the Department of Veterans Affairs on 16 FEB for allowing hundreds of employees to devote all their taxpayer-funded work hours to union activities instead of helping veterans. VA records reveal that 290,000 employees spent around 1.1 million hours on union affairs in fiscal year 2015, with 346 of those employees devoting all of their hours to official time, the Daily Caller reported 17 FEB. Official time is, according to the Office of Personnel Management, "paid time off from assigned government duties to represent a union or its bargaining unit employees," for which taxpayers foot the bill.

This discovery led Republicans and some Democrats on the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform Subcommittee on Government Operations to demand that the VA provide a full account of how official time is spent at the VA. The issue arose after a recent report from the Government Accountability Office showed that the VA does not have a standardized method of tracking hours and attendance. The department uses two different systems to record and calculate work hours and it has not properly trained employees on how to use them.

"The inconsistent recording of official time raises questions about VA's ability to monitor its use, but [VA Time and Attendance System, or VATAS] could help to standardize this process," the GAO report said. "In rolling out the new system, which VA expects to complete agency-wide in 2018, VA has provided inconsistent training and guidance on how to use the codes in VATAS." "Without reliable data, VA cannot monitor the use of official time agency-wide or share reliable data with the Office of Personnel Management, which reports on the government-wide use of official time," the report added. "Something's gotta change," Rep. Jim Jordan (R-OH) said at the 16 FEB hearing. "I appreciate y'all having the hearing, but look, this is unbelievable, unbelievable what we have here. So let's hope we can change it and get rid of all these folks on official time." Union officials and managers at three of the five VA facilities the GAO visited, however, believe that official time can be spent in a productive way to improve relations between management and labor.

In the GAO report, union officials assert that official time is beneficial because it provides time for union officials to "build and maintain good rapport" with management, and managers and union officials from four out of five groups said official time "may help resolve problems before they escalate." Union officials from national and local levels also insist that official time provides a channel for employees to report concerns and uncover issues, such as overprescribing opiates and long wait times for veterans. The report states that officials from one national union had nearly 50 whistleblowers report issues with long wait times at the VA. Despite the whistleblowing, long wait times and prescription problems still persist at the VA. Some critics believe this is because official time consists mostly of rhetoric, rather than caring for veterans.

Rep. Mark Meadows (R-NC) raised these concerns on Thursday, demanding that Kim McLeod, acting VA executive director for labor management relations, and David Cox, national president of the American Federation of Government Employees, provide in 60 days a direct correlation between the number of hours spent on official time and the quality of veteran care. "I need a direct correlation between the amount of official time and a direct result in terms of training and quality," Meadows said.

The number of taxpayer-funded hours spent on union activity at the VA has increased each year. The Office of Personnel Management estimated that in fiscal year 2012, the VA spent nearly \$47 million on union official work, more than any other department. "I love the way government works—a fancy name, official time. It sounds like they're actually working for the taxpayers, working for the veterans, when in fact it's just the opposite," Jordan said. Democrats working alongside Republicans were also concerned by the use of official time at the VA, but some still believe that official time has its benefits. Rep. Beto O'Rourke (D-TX) feared that Republicans saw official time as "shameful," the Daily Caller reported. "If we agree official time has value, then we can move on to the other questions," he said. "If we don't believe in the value of official time, if we think it's a scam and a fraud, well that's a decision we can make as well."

But in the wake of January's GAO report, it is likely that if a correlation is not drawn between official time and improved veteran care, then Republicans will vie for official time to be eliminated. William Lawrence Kovacs, a witness at the hearing and a labor policy analyst for the Competitive Enterprise Institute, told lawmakers that Congress should eliminate official time. "Union official time is an unwise use of limited tax dollars and serves the private interests of unions," he said. "The public does not directly benefit from the use of official time. Congress should eliminate the use of official time." [Source: The Washington Free Beacon | Emily Ferguson | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## VA Opioid Therapy Update 04 ► Tougher Guidelines

It's going to be even harder for U.S. military service members and veterans – especially younger ones -- to obtain opioid pain medication. The Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Defense have released a new clinical practice guideline for VA and military doctors that strongly recommends against prescribing opioids for long-term chronic pain – pain that lasts longer than 90 days. The new guideline is even more stringent than the one released last year by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). It specifically recommends against long-term opioid therapy for patients under the age of 30. And it urges VA and military doctors to taper or discontinue opioids for patients currently receiving high doses. The 192-page guideline which can be viewed at <https://static1.squarespace.com/static/54d50ceee4b05797b34869cf/t/58abad0d1e5b6c62a4b71101/1487645971273/VADoDOTCPG021517clean.pdf> is careful to note that the recommendations are voluntary and “not intended as a standard of care” that physicians are required to follow.



Critics worry the new guideline will be implemented and rigidly followed by military and VA doctors, just as the CDC guidelines were by many civilian doctors. “I am concerned that many of these veterans with moderate to severe pain who may be well-maintained on long-term opioid therapy as part of a multidisciplinary approach or whom have already tried non-pharmacological and non-opioid therapies and found them insufficient will be tapered off their medication for no good reason except that their physicians will be fearful to run afoul of these new guidelines,” says Cindy Steinberg, National Director of Policy and Advocacy for the U.S. Pain Foundation, a patient advocacy group.

Although much of the research and clinical evidence used to support the new guideline was considered “low or very low” quality, a panel of experts found “mounting evidence” that the risk of harm from opioids -- such as addiction and overdose – “far outweighed the potential benefits.”

*“There is a lack of high-quality evidence that LOT (long term opioid therapy) improves pain, function, and/or quality of life. The literature review conducted for this CPG (clinical practice guideline) identified no studies evaluating the effectiveness of LOT for outcomes lasting longer than 16 weeks. Given the lack of evidence showing sustained functional benefit of LOT and moderate evidence outlining harms, non-opioid treatments are preferred for chronic pain.”*

The panel of experts was comprised of a diverse group of doctors, nurses and pharmacists within the Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs, including specialists in pain management and addiction treatment.

*“We recommend against initiation of long-term opioid therapy for chronic pain,” reads the first of 18 recommendations of the expert panel, which said that only “a rare subset of individuals” should be prescribed opioids long term.*

Instead of opioids, the panel recommends exercises such as yoga and psychological therapies such as cognitive behavioral therapy to treat chronic pain, along with non-opioid drugs such as gabapentin (Neurontin).

*“In light of the low harms associated with exercise and psychological therapies when compared with LOT these treatments are preferred over LOT, and should be offered to all patients with chronic pain including those currently receiving LOT.”*

Another strong recommendation of the panel is that opioids not be prescribed long-term to anyone under the age of 30, because of the damage opioids can cause to developing brains. “Some may interpret the recommendation to limit opioid use by age as arbitrary and potentially discriminatory when taken out of context; however, there is good neurophysiologic rationale explaining the relationship between age and OUD (opioid use disorder) and overdose.” Of the seven studies used to support this claim, four were rated as “fair quality” and three were considered “poor quality.” “That strikes me as an extremely weak evidence base for such a sweeping recommendation,” said Steinberg. “There is no mention of severity of pain condition which is extremely relevant in this population, many of whom sustained devastating and gruesome battlefield injuries such as blown off limbs.” The panel recommends alternatives to opioids for mild-to-moderate acute pain. If opioids are prescribed temporarily for acute short-term pain, immediate release opioids are preferred.

### **Risk of Suicide Discounted**

Pain is a serious problem for both active duty service members and veterans. A study found that nearly half the service members returning from Afghanistan have chronic pain and 15 percent reported using opioids – rates much higher than the civilian population. The incidence of pain is even higher among veterans being treated at VA facilities. Over half suffer from chronic pain, as well as other conditions that contribute to it, such as depression and post-traumatic stress disorder. Even more alarming is a recent VA study that found an average of 22 veterans committing suicide each day. The new guideline recommends that patients be monitored for suicide risk before and during opioid therapy, but curiously there is no mention that undertreated or untreated pain is also a risk for suicide. For patients being tapered or taken off opioids, doctors are advised not to take a threat of suicide too seriously.

*“Some patients on LOT who suffer from chronic pain and co-occurring OUD, depression, and/or personality disorders may threaten suicide when providers recommend discontinuation of opioids. However, continuing LOT to ‘prevent suicide’ in someone with chronic pain is not recommended as an appropriate response if suicide risk is high or increases. In such cases, it is essential to involve behavioral health to assess, monitor, and treat a patient who becomes destabilized as a result of a medically appropriate decision to taper or cease LOT.”*

Many patients could find themselves being tapered or taken off opioids if the guideline is taken literally by their doctors. The expert panel strongly recommends against opioid doses greater than a 90 mg morphine equivalent (MME) daily dose and urges caution for doses as low as 20 MME. “This again fails to recognize that patients differ widely in severity of pain, individual response to medication, body size and weight and tolerance for pain,” says Steinberg. “I worry that, as we have seen with the CDC guidelines, clinicians will begin tapering patients who may be well-maintained on stable doses of medication for fear of running afoul of sanctioned limitations rather than being guided by what is best for their patients. These limitations are in direct conflict with FDA approved labeling which is based on safety and efficacy trials and does not include dose thresholds.”

The VA and Department of Defense opioid guideline will affect millions of service members, veterans and their families. Nearly 1.5 million Americans currently serve in the armed forces and over 800,000 in the National Guard and Reserves. The Veterans Administration provides health services to another 6 million veterans and their families. The guideline is the second major initiative by the federal government so far this year aimed at reducing opioid prescribing. As Pain News Network has reported, the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) has announced plans to fully implement the CDC’s opioid prescribing guidelines. CMS is taking those voluntary guidelines a step further by mandating them as official Medicare policy and taking punitive action against doctors and patients who don’t follow them. CMS provides health insurance to about 54 million Americans through Medicare and nearly 70 million through Medicaid.. [Source: Pain News Network | Pat Anson | February 20, 2017 ++]

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## VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2017



**Las Cruces, NM** — A woman has pleaded guilty to stealing more than \$100,000 from the Department of Veterans Affairs. U.S. District Attorney for New Mexico, Damon P. Martinez announced that **Donah E. Davidson**, 54, pleaded guilty in federal court to theft of government property and forgery charges. Davis was charged 9 NOV in a 36-count indictment. She admitted to embezzling money belonging to the VA by depositing 27 “surviving spouse” benefit checks addressed to her mother into her bank account, Martinez said. In a plea agreement, Davidson said that her mother began receiving the checks from the VA in 1970. Davidson said the checks were payable to her mother only. She admitted that when her mother died in 1997, she didn’t tell the VA and continued to collect and deposit the checks into her account. Davidson said she forged her mother’s signature on the back of the checks.

Records showed that since 2003, Davidson stole a total of \$147,557.69 from the VA. According to court records, the VA did not keep records before 2003. Davidson deposited the checks in Doña Ana County from December 2011 to March 2014, the district attorney said. She forged her mother’s signature nine times from April 2012 to January 2014. Davidson plead guilty to all 36 counts and will be sentenced to four months in prison followed by four months of home confinement, as stated in the plea agreement. She will also be required to serve a period of supervised release and will have to pay the \$147,557.69 in restitution to the VA. Davidson sentencing has not yet been scheduled. [Source: KFOX 14 | Jessica Gonzalez | February 15th 2017 | ++]

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**Wilkes-Barre VAMC** — A former registered nurse at the Wilkes-Barre VA Medical Center was sentenced by a federal judge 15 FEB to three years probation after admitting she stole morphine from the hospital’s hospice unit and occasionally used it while on the job. **Janice Monique Matrician**, 50, of Tamaqua, entered a guilty plea and was immediately sentenced at a hearing before U.S. District Judge Richard P. Conaboy at the William J. Nealon Federal Building in Scranton. She was charged in October with a felony count of obtaining morphine by misrepresentation, fraud, forgery, deception and subterfuge. Matrician said she has since been terminated by the medical center, though it could not be determined Wednesday when she was dismissed. Hospital spokesman Bill Klaips did not immediately return a message seeking comment.

Asked during the plea colloquy why she was pleading guilty, Matrician told Conaboy she was owning up to her crime. “I’ve done wrong,” she said. At times, Matrician broke down as she explained that she was 10 years sober before she began stealing morphine that was leftover from veterans’ doses in order to treat her struggle with depression. “I know that what I did was terribly, terribly wrong,” she said. “I’m a good person with a bad disease.” Assistant U.S. Attorney Todd Hinkley said the Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General in 2015 began investigating claims from other staff members that morphine was missing from the hospice unit. He said Matrician admitted she provided the required doses to patients but kept leftovers for her personal use — sometimes while on the job — despite entering into a hospital computer system she had disposed of them. “Whatever was left should have been thrown away,” Hinkley said.

It was unclear whether the morphine Matrician stole should have gone to patients, he added, but evidence suggested it was possible. Matrician maintained she only stole what was left over. "The veterans got all their doses," Matrician said. "I got the waste." Matrician has since sought help, she said. She attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings five times per week in addition to going to a women's support group and Bible study, she said. She also cares for a young granddaughter whose mother is battling an addiction of her own. "My youngest daughter was a heroin addict, so I took in her 9-month-old daughter," she said. Federal Public Defender Ingrid S. Cronin asked the judge to consider a sentence that would allow Matrician to continue seeking treatment while providing care to her family and trying to obtain a job. Cronin noted Matrician has found it difficult to pursue employment due to of the uncertainty of her sentence and status of her nursing license.

Matrician told Conaboy she "didn't have the guts" to check whether the license was suspended. A state records check shows the license, issued in 2008, remains active with no disciplinary actions, though Matrician indicated she faces a 10-year suspension. "She knows she violated the trust of the VA, who gave her a good job," Cronin said. "She will now have to find another way to earn a living." Conaboy ordered Matrician to continue seeking treatment and attending support groups. She must also submit to random drug tests, he ordered. [Source: Times Leader | Joe Dolinsky | February 15, 2017 ++]

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**VAMC Drug Theft** — Federal authorities are stepping up investigations at Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers due to a sharp increase in opioid theft, missing prescriptions or unauthorized drug use by VA employees since 2009, according to government data obtained by The Associated Press. Doctors, nurses or pharmacy staff at federal hospitals — the vast majority within the VA system — siphoned away controlled substances for their own use or street sales, or drugs intended for patients simply disappeared.

Aggravating the problem is that some VA hospitals have been lax in tracking drug supplies. Congressional auditors said spot checks found four VA hospitals skipped monthly inspections of drug stocks or missed other requirements. Investigators said that signals problems for VA's entire network of more than 160 medical centers and 1,000 clinics, coming after auditor warnings about lax oversight dating back to at least 2009. "Drug theft is an area of concern," Jeffrey Hughes, the VA's acting assistant inspector general for investigations, told AP. He said the monthly inspections could help the VA uncover potential discrepancies and root out crime. Both the inspector general's office and the Drug Enforcement Administration said they have increased scrutiny of drug thefts from the VA, with the DEA reporting more criminal investigations.

It's not clear if the problem is worse at the VA than at private facilities, where medical experts and law enforcement officials say drug theft is also increasingly common in a time of widespread opioid abuse in the U.S. But the VA gets special scrutiny from lawmakers and the public, given Americans' esteem for ex-servicemembers served by the agency and because of past problems at the VA, especially a 2014 wait-time scandal in which some patients died. "Those VA employees who are entrusted with serving our nation's wounded, ill and injured veterans must be held to a higher standard," said Joe Davis, spokesman for Veterans of Foreign Wars. The drug thefts will be among the challenges facing newly confirmed VA Secretary David Shulkin, who served as the department's undersecretary of health while the drug problem was growing. At his confirmation hearing this month, Shulkin said he was proud that the VA identified the opioid addiction problem before others did and "recognized it as a crisis and began to take action."

Still, the VA acknowledges it has had problems keeping up with monthly inspections and said it was taking steps to improve training. It also said it was requiring hospitals to comply with inspection procedures and develop plans for improvement. It did not respond to AP requests made three weeks ago to provide a list of VA facilities where drugs had been reported missing or disciplinary action was taken, saying it was still compiling the information. Reported incidents of drug losses or theft at federal hospitals jumped from 272 in 2009 to 2,926 in 2015, before dipping to 2,457 last year, according to DEA data obtained by AP. "Federal hospitals" include the VA's more than

1,100 facilities as well as seven correctional hospitals and roughly 20 hospitals serving Indian tribes. The inspector general's office estimates there are nearly 100 open criminal probes involving theft or loss of VA controlled substances.

Three VA employees were charged in FEB with conspiring to steal prescription medications including opioids at the Little Rock, Arkansas, VA hospital. The inspector general's office says a pharmacy technician used his VA access to a medical supplier's web portal to order and divert 4,000 oxycodone pills, 3,300 hydrocodone pills and other drugs at a cost to the VA of \$77,700 and a street value of \$160,000. Christopher Thyer, the U.S. attorney overseeing the case, said the employees were abusing their position to steal from taxpayers and "poison the communities we live in with dangerous drugs." The drug thefts from VA also raise the possibility that patients will be denied medication they need or that they will be treated by drug-impaired staff.

In one case, a former VA employee in Baltimore pleaded guilty on charges that he injected himself with fentanyl intended for patients heading into surgery, then refilled the syringes with saline solution. Patients received solution tainted with the Hepatitis C virus carried by the employee. Dr. Dale Klein, a VA pain management specialist, said some of his patients suspected they weren't getting the drugs they needed, including one patient with an amputated leg who had to do without morphine because a VA pharmacy said it did not have enough in supply. Klein, who is part of a whistleblowers network called VA Truth Tellers, ran a VA pain clinic from 2015 to 2016 and has filed a retaliation claim against VA, saying the VA restricted his work after he voiced complaints. The VA has said it was looking into the claims.

Klein described several of VA's inventory lists as inconsistent or a "slapdash rush job." That concern was underscored by the findings from the Government Accountability Office, released last week, that drug stockpiles were not always being regularly inspected. Klein's attorney, Natalie Khawam, says she's heard similar complaints from other clients at their VA hospitals.

The GAO review, covering January 2015 to February 2016, found the most missed inspections at VA's hospital in Washington, D.C., according to a government official familiar with confidential parts of the audit. Monthly checks were missed there more than 40 percent of the time, mostly in critical patient care areas, such as the operating room and intensive care units. That adds to the risk of veterans not receiving their full medications. The Washington hospital also missed inspections of the facility's pharmacy for three straight months, violating VA policy, according to the official, who insisted on anonymity to reveal findings that weren't public. In the last year, the hospital had at least five incidents of controlled substances that were "lost" or otherwise unaccounted for, according to the DEA. Other problems were found in VA hospitals in Seattle, Milwaukee and Memphis, Tennessee. Milwaukee had the fewest, which the GAO attributed to a special coordinator put in place to ensure inspection compliance.

Responding to the findings, the House Veterans Affairs Committee planned a hearing on the inspection issue. Its chairman, Rep. Phil Roe, a physician, said failing to follow protocol is serious and "should not be tolerated within VA." [Source: Associated Press | Hope Yen | February 20, 2017 ++]

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## **VAMC Birmingham AL ► Checkmating Alzheimer's Program**

Almost every Saturday morning, volunteers visit the Birmingham, Alabama VA Medical Center (VAMC) are setting up chessboards and sharing their passion for the game with older Veterans. They also bring tactile chess sets for the blind – comprised of chess pieces of varying shades and colors – to accommodate low-vision Veterans. Shortly thereafter, those Veterans who know the rules begin playing, while at the other tables, volunteers teach new players the basics. Chess, a classic “brain game” is a mentally stimulating activity that has been shown to promote brain health and may also decrease the risk of cognitive impairment.



Kevrek Frierson, a 70-year-old Marine Veteran who once guarded the U.S. Embassy in Denmark, was experiencing memory loss and some confusion. He also had vision problems and had to learn a whole new range of skills in the low-vision/blind rehabilitation program at the Birmingham VAMC’s Southeast Blind Rehab Center “I never learned to play chess and really had no interest,” Frierson said. “But, if learning a new activity like chess can postpone mental decline, help my memory, and possibly improve the health of my brain – why not?” Like so many others, he not only learned to play chess, but also became an enthusiastic ambassador for the game, sharing his newfound passion with other Veterans. “All it took [was] someone who has patience to teach me the game and believe that I could do it, even after I was so skeptical,” said Frierson.

Through learning and playing these mind-strengthening games, Veterans are staying mentally stimulated and active. Studies have shown that modest exercise, a sensible diet, socializing and mental stimulation may minimize the risks of Alzheimer’s disease. Studies have also shown that older adults with hobbies that actively engage their brains are two times less likely to develop Alzheimer’s. A recent *Journal of the American Medical Association Neurology* study also concluded brain games have lasting benefits for older adults and may delay cognitive decline.

Stacey Stephens, a blind rehab supervisor with the Birmingham VAMC, and an avid chess fan herself, said: “In a way, chess fits in with our formal curriculum. Veterans in the program have to focus and define [the problem], work past their frustration and [use] the strategies that we use in teaching life skills; they have to transfer those skills to their everyday lives. Chess teaches [you] to deal with challenges, focus and to think about your moves.” You don’t have to be an expert or even an experienced teacher to help Veterans reap these benefits. Know the basic rules of the game you wish to teach, have a standard regulation playing set or two, and a passion to share the game with an older Veteran. [Source: VAntage Point | Michael Ciamarra | February 15, 2017 ++]

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**VA HCS Black Hills SD Update 04 ► Hot Springs VAMC Decision**

National Commander Charles E. Schmidt of The American Legion is calling on VA Secretary David Shulkin to reverse the department’s decision made under the previous secretary to end needed services at the VA Medical Center in Hot Springs, S.D. “The historic Black Hills VA Health Care System has saved countless lives over the

years as veterans from rural areas of South Dakota, Wyoming and Nebraska have relied on this hospital for in-patient care,” Schmidt said. “Veterans who live far from metropolitan areas are already at a significant disadvantage when accessing their benefits. Relocating services to far-off facilities just compounds the problem. Dr. Shulkin is a physician who understands the importance of timely treatment and patient care. We are asking him to take quick action so VA can continue to serve these veterans who have sacrificed for their nation.”

While Hot Springs will continue to offer outpatient services, many veterans will have to travel to Rapid City in order to receive the medical care that they need. Delegates to the 2016 American Legion national convention unanimously passed a resolution reaffirming the organization’s support to keeping the facility and residential rehabilitation services in Hot Springs. The American Legion also called for the creation of a Center for Excellence to treat Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, substance abuse and homeless prevention at Hot Springs. [Source: American Legion | February 17, 2017 ++]

**\* Vets \***



## **MLP ► Medical Legal Partnership Program**

Health care delivery organizations, policymakers, and patient advocates across the United States are increasingly aware that many factors outside the health clinic’s door affect the health of patients and communities. What is less commonly understood is how law functions as an important social determinant of health, and how lawyers can effectively collaborate with clinicians, case workers, patient navigators, and other members of the health care team to both prevent and remedy the many health-harming factors that have their roots in legal problems.

Research indicates that while only 40 percent of an individual’s health is determined by genetics, medical care, and personal choices, fully sixty percent of health is determined by social and environmental factors such as income, access to health care, access to enough healthy food, housing, education, job stability, and personal safety—in other words, all the things that influence an individual’s well-being in the places where she is born, lives, works, and plays. This helps explain why the United States spends far more on health care services than all other industrialized nations, but is not, relatively speaking, particularly healthy, ranking 42nd in life expectancy and 169th in low birth weight; While the U.S. spends just \$0.90 on social services for every dollar it spends on health care, countries with better health outcomes spend almost \$2 on social services for every dollar spent on health care.

The MLP program encourages service delivery collaboration between medical and legal practitioners. MLP Attorneys train health care teams to screen patients for legal needs. The health care teams then refer patients to on-site legal clinics, whose pro bono attorneys provide advice, intervention, and representation. The health and legal teams collaborate to resolve the issue and provide any necessary follow-up services. The program is designed specifically for those who are in need of legal representation/consultation for non-criminal offenses, who may not otherwise be able to afford legal representation, in the following areas:

- Veterans Benefits
- Social Security Disability Benefits
- Assistance obtaining identification cards
- Ancillary Elder Law
- Family Law matters
- Guardianship
- Fiduciary
- Landlord Tenant
- Child Support
- Military Discharge Upgrade
- Compensation and Pension Support

Services are provided by MLP attorneys at no cost. Medical-Legal Partnerships have been established in 294 health care institutions in 41 states. To locate one near you go to <http://medical-legalpartnership.org/partnerships> and select the state you reside in for a complete listing of participating facilities. Note that the Bay Pines VA HCS

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## **Vet College Performance ► Better Than Civilians**

Student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill are mostly pursuing bachelor's or graduate degrees, attending public or private schools rather than for-profit institutions, and studying disciplines such as business, healthcare and STEM, a new study from Student Veterans of America found. The National Veteran Education Success Tracker, or NVEST, project also found that student veterans earn degrees at rates better than comparable nonveteran students. But pinpointing a completion or success rate for this group remains difficult and highly open to interpretation. By one measure, it's 72 percent. By another, 42 percent. That lower number still beats the 39 percent completion rate for all students who enter school over the age of 24, which is likely the best comparison group for student vets, as calculated in a 2015 National Student Clearinghouse study. "The percentage of those who have been successful is amazing and needs to be applauded," said Courtney Brown, vice president of strategic impact at the Lumina Foundation, which helped fund the study.

Veterans Affairs Department Education Service Director Robert Worley, who joined Brown on a panel discussing the findings during an SVA conference in January, effusively praised the NVEST project. "I want to congratulate SVA for this research, and it is nothing short of phenomenal," Worley said. "It was massive. It's going to be far-reaching in its impact." Since August 2009, when the Post-9/11 GI Bill went into effect, the government has spent some \$71 billion on the benefit, according to Worley. With such a high price tag, veterans advocates and government officials have sought, for years, a clearer understanding of how the Post-9/11 GI Bill is used: how well vets do in college, where they go to school and what they study. Questions over the quality of the education received by veterans, particularly at for-profit colleges and universities, have further increased this interest.

But the intense spotlight on the issue has not resulted in a wealth of information. Some of the Education Department's most relied-on academic progress statistics are calculated in a way that ignores most student veterans. The VA has developed veteran graduation rate figures, but these cannot track students who transfer schools or continue their studies after their education benefits expire. NVEST attempts to bridge this gap through a partnership with VA and the National Student Clearinghouse that allows researchers to identify and track students using the Post-9/11 GI Bill throughout their academic careers, even as they transfer schools or run out of GI Bill benefits. "The value of this report is that it's tracking those student veterans wherever they go," said Doug Shapiro, the National Student Clearinghouse's executive research director.



**72 percent or 42 percent?** -- Student Veterans of America's NVEST project offers new insights about student veterans but also comes with its own caveats and problems. Veterans advocates, including SVA, have long feared that lawmakers could be tempted to cut back or eliminate the generous Post-9/11 GI Bill, especially if it appears that vets aren't putting the taxpayer dollars to good use by graduating. Some of the NVEST project's results are interpreted in ways that could inflate veteran academic success rates. SVA touts what it calls a 72 percent "success rate" as a banner finding from the NVEST study. However, that includes not just the 54 percent of veteran students who earned a certificate or degree but another 18 percent still in school at the end of the study.

On top of that, it counts degrees earned prior to a veteran's first use of the Post-9/11 GI Bill. By that method, a student who earned a vocational certificate at a community college, joined the military, then attended a university on the GI Bill as a veteran and flunked out would count as a successful graduate because of the vocational certificate. Strip out the students still in school and those with only pre-GI Bill degrees and the study shows that 42 percent of veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill earned a degree or certificate. SVA said the study's interpretations of success were necessary to compensate for other limitations.

For example, similar research projects are typically limited to groups of students starting school in the same year. This is the case for the previously mentioned National Student Clearinghouse study, which found that 39 percent of adult students graduated. That study was based on students starting in 2009. By contrast, NVEST studied veteran students who first used the Post-9/11 GI Bill between Aug. 2009 and Dec. 2013. Students who enrolled in school closer to 2009 had more time to earn a degree and be counted as graduating, as compared with students who started closer to 2013. "There would be an unintentional penalty against those student veterans who used the Post-9/11 Bill in later years," SVA spokesman Barrett Bogue said in an email. Counting students still in school at the end of the project's period of study, as well as veterans whose only degree came before they used the GI Bill, as part of the 72 percent "success rate" could make up for that unintentional penalty. SVA plans to continue studying student veteran academic success rates, and officials said that future projects will go into greater detail.

**What vets study and where** -- The study looked at 822,327 student veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill -- excluding military family members using transferred benefits -- whose first GI Bill use was between 2009 and 2013. Students were counted as graduating if they earned an academic credential of any kind by September 2015, whether that credential was a low-level certificate, a doctorate, or anything in between.

- Bachelor's degrees were the most popular academic credential, accounting for 43 percent of all academic credentials tracked by the NVEST study. Associate degrees accounted for 27 percent, master's degrees 18 percent, certificates 10 percent, and doctoral or post-doctoral degrees 2 percent.
- About 20 percent of vets using the Post-9/11 GI Bill studied fields related to business, management and marketing. STEM subjects -- a category that SVA defines to include computer science, engineering, math, technological studies and various sciences -- were studied by 11 percent of vets in the study.
- The next three most popular fields were liberal arts and the humanities at 9 percent, healthcare at 8 percent and law-enforcement at 7 percent. "The majority of student veterans are majoring and earning degrees in high-demand, stable career fields," said Chris Cate, SVA's vice president of research.

The NVEST project did not detail how vets attending for-profit schools fare as compared to those in public or private nonprofit schools. But it did show that vets are turning more to public institutions. Nearly 59 percent of student vets enrolled in school between January and September 2015 attended public colleges and universities, with 26 percent at for-profit schools and 15 percent at private nonprofit institutions. Based on study results, SVA projects that about 100,000 GI Bill users will earn degrees each year going forward. "To be able to say that the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the hard work of student veterans produces 100,000 degrees a year is phenomenal," Worley said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | George Altman | February 24, 2017 ++]

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## **IAVA Update 01 ► Founder Denies Grant Spending Allegations**

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA) founder and CEO Paul Rieckhoff has denied allegations that he had pressured the staff to misuse grant money and mislead donors. The allegations by unidentified former employees were published by the Daily Caller. The conservative news website quoted seven anonymous sources as saying IAVA grant money reports were “exaggerated and doctored” to overstate the group’s work or cover for events that were funded but never occurred. The claims could not be independently verified by Stars and Stripes on 23 FEB.



**Paul Rieckhoff, CEO of Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**

Rieckhoff issued a statement about the allegations against the group, a New York City nonprofit that advocates for veterans who have served in wars since 9/11. “Some troublesome, anonymous accusations have been made against me and IAVA in the partisan internet news source, the Daily Caller,” Rieckhoff wrote. “It’s unfortunate that these nameless sources have gone to such lengths to attempt to discredit me and undermine IAVA’s critical mission.” He said the group is committed to efficient and sound financial management and transparency. “I’ve operated in the public eye for over 13 years and my work has been an open book,” Rieckhoff said. “I hope my long record of impact, dedication, success and support for my colleagues and our members will speak for itself.”

The allegations centered on Rieckhoff, calling him the “mastermind” behind doctored grant spending. In one example cited in the Daily Caller, the accusers allege IAVA received grant funding for anti-suicide mental health training across the country but failed to complete the number of events stipulated by the grant and then allegedly used unrelated events to make up the difference. “There would be discussion about what needed to be included in a grant to make the funders happy, but that wouldn’t necessarily include facts,” one source told the news site. “In an effort to be honest, I would say ‘Well, this isn’t real, this didn’t happen’ — and I would just be rebuffed.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Travis J. Tritten | February 22, 2017 ++]

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## **Wounded Warrior Assistance Update 04 ► Top 10 Unmet Needs**

After a year of extensive roundtable discussions in 2016, a group of community leaders and experts identified 10 of the most prevailing issues facing wounded, ill, and injured troops (WII) over the next five years. The discussions provided a forum to help MOAA and interested stakeholders work toward a common goal of improving the overall health and well-being of wounded warriors and their families. Below are the priorities identified during the discussions:

- Amplify communications and outreach efforts to improve government and public awareness of the WII population and their needs.

- Create a dedicated online forum for nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) to provide updates and improvements to manage and maintain a robust, real-time National Resource Directory.
- Establish a centralized and uniform process and format for government memorandums of understanding/agreements to maximize partnerships with NGOs and leverage resources and capabilities to respond rapidly to changing demands and real-time needs of those WII to help fill gaps in government support programs.
- Leverage organizational platforms to advocate for a coordinated government research effort on toxic exposure and other service-connected illnesses and diseases.
- Collaboration between the VA and DoD regarding caregiver support, including seamless transition between VA and Dod programs designed to support family caregivers.
- Expand long term care and support service capability within the DoD and VA health systems.
- Establish a short- and long-term integrated federal and civilian health network of care coordination.
- Review the effectiveness of current DoD and VA disability evaluation systems.
- Review the effectiveness of current DoD, military service, and VA WII Programs.
- Evaluate and mitigate disruption in care and benefits for WII among various federal medical benefits, integrating systems where possible, and strengthen collaboration, cooperation, and communications among the agencies.

Many of these are issues The Military Coalition, and other veteran service organizations and roundtable partners have worked for many years “Thanks to the hard work of the roundtable participants, they were able to identify specific areas in which governmental and non-governmental organizations could address these unmet needs,” said MOAA's director of government relations for veterans and wounded warrior care, Cmdr. René Campos, USN (Ret). “We can't let current fiscal uncertainties facing our government prevent us from continuing the progress made in caring for our most vulnerable heroes over the last decade,” Campos said.

Readers are requested to ask their lawmakers to do their part in resolving these crucial issues by implementing the solutions outlined in the above list. One way to do so is to forward your legislators the preformatted message provided at <http://capwiz.com/moaa/issues/alert/?alertid=75547626>. [Source: MOAA Leg UP | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## **Vet Cemetery Indiana ► Crown Hill Expansion Battle Ends**

A legal battle over expansion of a veterans’ cemetery in Indianapolis ended when the Indiana Forest Alliance and its allies dropped their challenge to the project, enabling work to continue. The controversy began in 2013 when the National Cemetery Administration, which the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) oversees, sought to purchase 14.75 acres to expand the Crown Hill National Cemetery, which includes one of the only old growth forests still within Indianapolis. Some of the trees are hundreds of years old, and the association, responsible for interring deceased service members and veterans, intended to construct a columbaria on the land, a building designed to house cremated ashes.

After the VA purchased the property in September 2015, the Indiana Forest Alliance sued in December to block the project. The alliance is a nonprofit group that promotes protection of Indiana’s native forests. Its case rested on the allegedly flawed process the VA took in preparing its environmental assessment under the National Environmental Policy Act. For a federal agency to produce a complete environmental assessment under the law’s guidelines, it is required to “involve environmental agencies, applicants and the public, to the extent practicable.” In the land acquisition process, the cemetery association and VA solicited comments from 11 federal and state agencies as part of an “early coordination packet” which included an environmental review process. The information

described the area in question as “heavily wooded with numerous shagbark hickory, oak and cottonwood trees (among others) comprising the overstory.”



**The Crown Hill National Cemetery with a gothic chapel in the background.**

The Indiana Department of Environmental Management and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service responded by highlighting the proximity of the project to the roosting spot of two endangered bat species, as well as three small wetland areas under an acre. Other agencies expressed concern that removing trees might interfere with migratory and stop-over patterns of some birds and suggested how to avoid drastically disturbing the environment. The cemetery association and VA also hired an environmental consulting firm whose report concluded that the project didn't require an environmental assessment to continue. Regardless, the VA wanted an assessment because “public involvement is an important aspect of this project and should be considered,” according to court documents.

But how exactly the public was involved is exactly what W. Russell Snipes, the attorney who represents the Forest Alliance, took issue with. Snipes argued that a public meeting should have been held to discuss the environmental assessment before the draft was published. Instead, the VA placed drafts in local libraries and advertised its availability in a local newspaper. No public comments were submitted. Agencies have great leeway in how they choose to involve the public, according to prior case law involving the National Environmental Policy Act. Recognizing this, Snipes still found the limited public engagement to be a byproduct of the VA botching the environmental assessment process, and inadequate for the public to fully weigh in on the proposed deal. The VA needed to purchase the property before Sept. 30, 2015, or else it would have needed to go back to Congress for another appropriation, which would delay the project further. Realizing it had failed to alert the public until late June, it opted for the public notice and draft postings to complete the assessment in time.

“We think that was an egregious violation of the whole policy behind the National Environmental Policy Act, which is full public involvement in the process so that agencies can make a fully informed decision, and so then the courts have a fully developed record if that system is challenged,” Snipes said. The Forest Alliance also argued that the VA failed to properly consider other alternatives to the project, or that it should have produced an environmental impact statement, which would carry with it stricter regulations. U.S. District Chief Judge Jane Magnus-Stinson found that the Forest Alliance failed to prove the VA or National Cemetery Association acted “arbitrarily or capriciously” in complying with the law. The U.S. 7th Circuit Court of Appeals also refused to block the project.

Before dropping the case, Snipes and the Forest Alliance hoped to convince the National Cemetery Association to accept an offer by the Dr. Laura Hale Charitable Trust to purchase the land from the VA. They also suggested a potential land swap organized through the trust. The Department of Veterans Affairs rejected this deal. When approached for comment, the National Cemetery Association's attorney, Shelese Woods, declined to answer specific questions, including why the deal was rejected. Tim Horthy, the public affairs officer for the U.S. Attorney's Office for the Southern District of Indiana, speaking on behalf of the VA, issued a statement that read, “The U.S. Attorney's Office thought the current location best met the needs of the VA. We look forward to helping the families of our veterans establish a fitting place to honor their loved ones in Indianapolis.”

Despite the Forest Alliance’s failed court challenge, the VA acknowledged in a statement that it had taken public concerns into consideration regarding the preservation of old growth trees near the project. Jessica Schiefer, a VA communications and outreach officer who wrote the statement, said that the cemetery association instructed the Army Corps of Engineers “to revise the site plan to preserve as many mature trees as possible.” The plan will retain and incorporate all trees measuring 40 inches in diameter or greater. The revised plan also retains 73 percent of all trees between 30 and 39 inches in diameter. Schiefer said that tree felling has already begun to complete removal by the beginning of April, when the endangered bat species begins to roost. Construction is then expected to resume at the end of this summer. [Source: Great Lakes Echo | Ian Wendrow | February 23, 2017 ++]

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## Afghanistan Vet 02 ► Nick Mendes | Quadriplegia

Sgt. Nick Mendes, a veteran who was paralyzed from the neck down by an IED in Afghanistan in 2011, found love in an unexpected place — a Veterans Affairs hospital. Mendes had been at the VA hospital in Long Beach, California for five months when he met Wendy Eichler, a medical caregiver who specialized in paralyzed patients. The pair hit it off, and Eichler began visiting Mendes during her off hours and continued to see him when he was released from the hospital. Their friendship turned into a romantic relationship and they soon fell in love. The two are the subjects of a new documentary by filmmaker Julie Cohen called “American Veteran.” Sgt. Nick Mendes met Wendy Eichler while he was being treated at the VA hospital in Long Beach, California. “I thought she was hot,” Mendes says of his wife in a short trailer for the upcoming documentary. “But at the same time I just got blown up, so I was trying to focus on me.”



**Sgt. Nick Mendes met Wendy Eichler (left) while he was being treated at the VA hospital in Long Beach, California and (right) the couple on their wedding day on Sept 28, 2014.**

The couple married on about three and a half years after Mendes’ injury. According to filmmaker Julie Cohen there is a secret to the couple’s happiness. “Any married person — and I’ve been happily married for 17 years myself — will tell you that a mutual sense of humor is important,” she told The Huffington Post. “That’s particularly true of Nick and Wendy and fortunately they’re both very funny people who are quick to laugh at pretty much anything.” Plus, they’re open minded when it comes to sex. “A lot of assumptions I had in my head about what it’s like to be paralyzed from the neck down were wrong,” Cohen told HuffPost. “Starting with the assumption that sex is out of the question. As Wendy put it: ‘When it comes to sex, you find a way and you make it work.’”

“American Veteran” will be screened five times in New York in early March as part of the ReelAbilities Film Festival, which promotes awareness and appreciation for the disability community through film, and will then travel to a number of other cities through the ReelAbilities tour. Check the festival’s website <http://reelabilities.org> for more info. [Source: Huffington Post | Elyse Wanshel | February 15, 2017++]

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## Retiree Appreciation Days ► As of 28 Feb 2017

Retiree Appreciation Days (RADs) are designed with all veterans in mind. They're a great source of the latest information for retirees and Family members in your area. RADs vary from installation to installation, but, in general, they provide an opportunity to renew acquaintances, listen to guest speakers, renew ID Cards, get medical checkups, and various other services. Some RADs include special events such as dinners or golf tournaments. Due to budget constraints, some RADs may be cancelled or rescheduled. Also, scheduled appearances of DFAS representatives may not be possible. If you plan to travel long distances to attend a RAD, before traveling, you should call the sponsoring RSO to ensure the RAD will held as scheduled and, if applicable, whether or not DFAS reps will be available. The current updated schedule for 2017 is available at:

== HTML: [http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs\\_and\\_Other\\_Retiree-Veterans\\_Events.html](http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.html)

== PDF: [http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs\\_and\\_Other\\_Retiree-Veterans\\_Events.pdf](http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.pdf)

== Word: [http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs\\_and\\_Other\\_Retiree-Veterans\\_Events.doc](http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.doc)

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

(NOTE: Attendance at some events may require military ID, VA enrollment or DD214. "@" indicates event requires registration\RSVP.)For more information call the phone numbers indicated on the schedule of the Retirement Services Officer (RSO) sponsoring the RAD.

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

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

[Source: RAD List Manager | Milton Bell | February 28, 2017 ++]

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## Vet Hiring Fairs ► 01 thru 31 Mar 2017

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> . Vet Job Fairs being conducted in the next 30 days in state order include:



**Recruit Military Listings** *Note: Click on site for details*

|   |                |
|---|----------------|
| <a href="#">Fort Bragg NC Job Fair</a>              | March 01, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Greater Dallas TX Veterans Job Fair</a> | March 02, 2017 |
| <a href="#">San Diego CA Veterans Job Fair</a>      | March 02, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Washington, DC Veterans Job Fair</a>    | March 02, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Fort Bragg NC Job Fair</a>              | March 02, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Houston Veterans TX Job Fair</a>        | March 09, 2017 |
| <a href="#">New York NY Veterans Job Fair</a>       | March 09, 2017 |
| <a href="#">San Jose CA Veterans Job Fair</a>       | March 09, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Fort Lee VA Job Fair</a>                | March 09, 2017 |
| <a href="#">New Orleans LA Veterans Job Fair</a>    | March 23, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Pittsburgh PA Veterans Job Fair</a>     | March 23, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Kansas City MO Veterans Job Fair</a>    | March 23, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Huntsville AL Veterans Job Fair</a>     | March 29, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Columbus OH Veterans Job Fair</a>       | March 30, 2017 |
| <a href="#">Philadelphia PA Veterans Job Fair</a>   | March 30, 2017 |

**U.S. Chamber of Commerce Foundation Listings**

[AMPLIFY Military Spouse Career Intensive - Seattle](#) March 1 to March 2  
Seattle, WA [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Fort Campbell Military Spouse Career Event](#) March 1 - 6:00 pm to March 2 - 1:00 pm

Fort Campbell, KY [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Fort Leonard Wood Transition Summit](#) March 7 - 8:00 am to March 8 - 4:00 pm

Fort Leonard Wood, MO [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Wright-Patterson Air Force Base Military Spouse Career Event](#) March 8 - 7:00 pm to March 9 - 1:00 pm

Wright-Patterson Air Force Base, OH [Details](#) [Register](#)

[McLean Military Spouse Networking Event](#) March 14

McLean, VA [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Detroit Hiring Fair](#) March 18 -10:00 am to 3:00 pm

Detroit, MI [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Houston Hiring Expo with the Houston Rockets](#) March 20 -9:30 am to 2:00 pm

Houston, TX [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Fort Bliss Transition Summit](#) March 22 - 9:00 am to March 23 - 4:00 pm

Fort Bliss, TX [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Lake Charles Hiring Fair](#) March 22 - 10:30 am to 1:30 pm

Lake Charles, LA [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Philadelphia Hiring Expo with the Philadelphia Flyers](#) March 28 - 9:30 am to 2:00 pm

Philadelphia, PA [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Little Rock Hiring Fair](#) March 30 - 10:30 am to 4:00 pm

Little Rock, AR [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Veteran Career/Job Fairs**

[Herndon, VA](#) March 8, 2017, 3pm - 7pm [More information](#)

Security University, 510 Spring Street, Herndon, VA 20170

[Washington, DC](#) March 15, 2017, 11am - 2pm [More information](#)

Verizon Center, 601 F Street NW, Washington, DC 20004

[Detroit, MI](#) March 18, 2017, 10:30am - 1:30pm [More information](#)

Detroit VA Healthcare System, 4646 John R Street, Detroit, MI 48201

[Houston, TX](#) March 20, 2017, 11am - 2pm [More information](#)

Toyota Center, 1510 Polk Street, Houston, TX 77002

[Lake Charles, LA](#) March 22, 2017, 10:30am - 1:30pm [More information](#)

Lake Charles Civic Center Exhibition Hall, 900 Lakeshore Drive, Lake Charles, LA 70601

[Philadelphia, PA](#) March 28, 2017, 11am - 2pm [More information](#)

Wells Fargo Center, 3601 South Broad Street, Philadelphia, PA 19148

[King George, VA](#) March 30, 2017, 3pm - 7pm [More information](#)

University of Mary Washington-Dahlgren Campus, 4224 University Dr., University Hall/Rm 110, King George, VA 22485

[Little Rock, AR](#) March 30, 2017, 1pm - 4pm [More information](#)

Walters Community Support Center, Arnold Drive, Building 940, Little Rock, AR 72099

[Source: Recruit Military <https://events.recruitmilitary.com> & <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/events/hiringfairs>  
& <https://www.legion.org/careers/jobfairs> | February 28, 2017 ++]

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## Vet State Benefits & Discounts ► Virginia 2017

The state of Virginia provides several benefits to veterans as indicated below. To obtain information on these plus discounts listed on the Military and Veterans Discount Center (MCVDC) website, refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Vet State Benefits & Discounts – VA**” for an overview of the below benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the below refer to <https://www.dvs.virginia.gov> & <http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/virginia.html>. The commonwealth of Virginia provides several veteran benefits. Following is a brief description of each of the following benefits.

- Housing Benefits
- Financial Benefits
- Employment Benefits
- Education Benefits
- Recreation Benefits
- Other Commonwealth Sponsored Veteran Benefits

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/virginia-state-veterans-benefits.html> | February 2017 ++]

### \* Vet Legislation \*



**Note:** To check status on any veteran related legislation go to <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress> for any House or Senate bill introduced in the 115th Congress. Bills are listed in reverse numerical order for House and then Senate.

## Vet Jobs Update 214 ► H.R.1001 | Eliminate Vets From Hiring Freeze

Legislation introduced in the House on 13 FEB would exempt veterans seeking employment from the federal government hiring freeze imposed by President Trump in his first week in office. Rep. Stephen Lynch’s (D-MA) bill would allow federal agencies to hire veterans for newly created positions and for vacant jobs. “President Trump’s federal hiring freeze not only hurts everyday Americans seeking a prompt response from a federal agency, but also makes it difficult for veterans looking for employment in the federal government across the country. Veterans have earned their hiring preference and I am deeply concerned that the federal hiring freeze will disproportionately hurt America’s veterans,” Lynch said in a statement.

An executive order Trump signed last month halts the federal government from hiring any new personnel except for the military or if an agency determines a position is needed for national security or public safety. The Office of Personnel Management found in a report released last November that veterans made up 30.9 percent of the federal workforce. It also found that federal agencies had hired 6,000 more veterans in fiscal 2015 than in the previous year. Trump is the first president to order an across-the-board federal hiring freeze since Ronald Reagan. Former President George W. Bush also issued a hiring freeze upon taking office, but it didn’t apply to agencies where he

hadn't yet appointed leaders. Lynch's bill as of 14 FEB had 21 co-sponsors, none of whom were Republicans. [Source: The Hill | Cristina Marcos | February 13, 2017 ++]

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## Vet Jobs Update 215 ► H.R.512, H.R.244 and H.R.974

Sen. Thom Tillis and Rep. Richard Hudson are throwing their support behind several bills aimed at helping veterans. In mid-FEB, in separate releases, the Republicans lauded legislation introduced or passed aimed at supporting job creation for veterans and improving access to veteran records for congressional staffers. Hudson, who represents North Carolina's House District 8, called the bills "common sense steps to help veterans find jobs and help them better navigate the complicated bureaucracy at the VA." Hudson was referring to House bills that were passed in FEB: HR 512, HR 244 and HR 974, otherwise known as the WINGMAN Act, the HIRE Vets Act and the BRAVE Act.

- The WINGMAN Act would allow congressional staff to have read-only access to Veteran Benefits Administration records if authorized by a veteran, allowing the congressional office to better assist the veteran in navigating the Department of Veterans Affairs claims process.
- The HIRE Vets Act would encouraged businesses to hire veterans through a new medallion program. Participating businesses could earn a medallion and certificate if they prove they recruit, employ and train veterans.
- And the BRAVE Act, which stands for Boosting Rates of American Veteran Employment, would allow the VA to give preference to awarding contracts to businesses that employ veterans on a full-time basis.

In the Senate, Tillis and Sen. Tammy Baldwin, a Wisconsin Democrat, introduced that body's version of the BRAVE Act on 14 FEB. In a statement, Tillis said the legislation would support businesses that employ and back veterans. "The men and women who served in our military bring tremendous leadership capabilities and work ethic to the private sector, and the BRAVE Act is a major win for both veterans and employers who hire them," he said. The VA gives preference to businesses owned by veterans, but not to those that employ veterans, Tillis said. The legislation, if passed, would change that while encouraging VA contractors to employ veterans. Several veterans groups, including the American Legion, Veterans of Foreign Wars and the Military Order of the Purple Heart, also have thrown their support behind the bill, Tillis said. [Source: The Fayetteville Observer | Drew Brooks | Feb 19, 2017 ++]

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## VA Blue Water Claims Update 38 ► S.422 | Reintroduced in Senate

Senators Kristen Gillibrand (D-NY) and Steve Daines (R-MT) reintroduced the **Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (S.422)** on 17 FEB. The legislation formerly introduced in the 114th congress as S.1629 would ensure that thousands of Navy veterans, known as "Blue Water" veterans are able to receive disability and health care benefits they need after exposure to Agent Orange while fighting in the Vietnam War. Agent Orange is a toxic chemical that was used to remove foliage during the Vietnam war that had devastating health effects on millions serving. In 2002, Veterans Affairs decided that it would only cover Veterans who could prove that they had orders for "boots on the ground" during the Vietnam War. This exclusion prevented sailors from receiving benefits even though they had significant Agent Orange exposure from drinking and bathing in contaminated water just offshore.

Senators Gillibrand and Daines have been pushing for the passage of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act alongside a bipartisan coalition in the U.S. House of Representatives. This legislation would clarify the existing law so that Blue Water veterans would be covered by the VA if they served within "territorial seas," or approximately 12

miles offshore of Vietnam. The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act would make it easier for the VA to process Vietnam War veterans' claims for service-connected health conditions and alleviate a portion of the VA's backlog by extending presumptive coverage of Agent Orange benefits to these veterans.

This legislation is cosponsored by Senators Jon Tester (D-MT), Mike Crapo (R-ID), Edward Markey (D-MA), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK), Elizabeth Warren (D-MA), Marco Rubio (R-FL), Patrick Leahy (D-VT), Amy Klobuchar (D-MN), Heidi Heitkamp (D-ND), Tammy Baldwin (D-WI), Brian Schatz (D-HI), Sheldon Whitehouse (D-RI), Ron Wyden (D-OR), Robert Casey, Jr. (D-PA), Tim Kaine (D-VA), Debbie Stabenow (D-MI), Mark Warner (D-VA), Gary Peters (D-MI), Robert Menendez (D-NJ), Rob Portman (R-OH), Roy Blunt (R-MO), Mike Rounds (R-SD), and Dan Sullivan (R-AK). [Source: ABC 13 WHAM | February 17, 2017 ++]

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### **SBP DIC Offset Update 47 ► H.R.846 | Eliminate Widow's Tax**

On 3 FEB Representative Joe Wilson of South Carolina introduced H.R. 846, the Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act, a bill to repeal the requirement for reduction of survivor annuities under the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) for military surviving spouses to offset the receipt of veterans Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC). Purchased SBP annuities are unfairly offset by the amount of any benefit payable under the VA DIC program. SBP is not a government gratuity; rather, it is a type of insurance benefit purchased out-of-pocket by military retirees for their survivors. Thousands of survivors of military retirees are adversely affected by this mandated offset between SBP and DIC benefits.

H.R. 846 is in accordance with DAV Resolution No. 009, which supports legislation to repeal the offset, otherwise known as the widow's Tax, between SBP annuity payments and DIC payments. Readers are urged to contact their legislators and request they support this legislation. DAV has prepared editable email at <https://www.votervoice.net/BroadcastLinks/GqkXBzX8cNEdOjeEh2BQjA> for this purpose. Readers are requested to use it or draft their own to request their Representative support this important bill and ask that it be brought to the floor for a vote and passed as soon as possible. [Source: Veterans Corner w/Michael Isam | February 18, 2017 ++]

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### **VA Employee Fairness Act ► H.R.980/S.336 | Collective Bargaining**

Sen. Sherrod Brown (D-OH) introduced legislation to support healthcare workers at Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical facilities. The VA Employee Fairness Act would help build and retain a strong, talented team of nurses, physicians, and other healthcare professionals by restoring the right to bargain for wages and benefits for VA medical professionals. Ohio is home to five VA medical facilities in Chillicothe, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Columbus, and Dayton. "Creating a better workplace for vha nurses, doctors, and other healthcare providers will lead to higher quality care for Ohio veterans," said Brown. "All workers should have the opportunity to bargain for better wages, benefits, and working conditions – including those serving the veterans health administration who care for our veterans."

While VA employees have had collective bargaining rights since 1991, health care providers are exempted from collective bargaining on matters of professional conduct or competence, peer-review, or changes to employee compensation. As a result, they are prevented from raising grievances about staffing shortages that undermine patient care or negotiating for competitive pay that will attract health care workers to the VA. The VA Employee Fairness Act removes this exemption, and grants front line health care providers their full collective bargaining rights. U.S. Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA-41) introduced a House companion bill. "The quality of care our veterans receive is ultimately determined by the quality of the VA workforce that treats them," said Rep. Takano. "We need

to focus our efforts on recruiting the best doctors, nurses, and other medical professionals to VA health facilities and this bill is a step in the right direction.”

The VA Employee Fairness Act is supported by the American Federation Government Employees (AFGE) and National Nurses United. Comments regarding the bill introduction included:

- “The Employee Fairness Act will make the VA stronger and continue its reputation as a world-class health care system for our nation’s veterans,” said AFGE National President J. David Cox. “The act will help the VA recruit and retain much-needed front-line doctors and nurses at medical centers across the country. This legislation will ensure those workers have strong workplace rights and are not silenced when they advocate for improvements to veterans’ care.”
- “Registered nurses are on the front lines of patient care for our nation’s veterans – in fact, they serve as the first line of defense for patients in the V.A.,” said Jean Ross, RN, Co-President of National Nurses United. “Without full collective bargaining rights, V.A. nurses have been limited in their ability to speak out about working conditions that impact the quality and safety of patient care, such as safe staffing.
- “The restoration of their full collective bargaining rights is necessary for registered nurses to serve as effective advocates for their patients,” she continued. “We applaud Senator Brown and Rep. Takano for fighting for improved patient care in the V.A., and the restoration of the rights of RNS in the V.A.”

[Source: The Ohio Clermont sun | February 16th, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Claims Assistance Update 07 ► H.R.512/S.242 | Wingman Act**

Congress wants to be your "wingman." That's what lawmakers are calling a bill they hope would make it easier for you to find out where veterans’ medical claims stand. H.R. 512 would enable congressional staff, which would include staff sometimes referred to as “caseworkers”, to have “read only” access to veterans’ records in the databases of the Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA), if the veteran provides permission to the Congressional office to allow their records to be accessed. This would enable staff, who are already certified to access these records, to bypass the step of having to use the VA as a intermediary to receive them. The bill would also prohibit the VA from using any funds to provide new training to Congressional employees, limits the number of employees in each Congressional office who may have access to such databases, and clarifies that no additional funds are authorized to be appropriated by this legislation.



**Retired Marine Luis Gomez relaying his plight to News 4 reporter.**

Retired Marine Luis Gomez at the oldest VFW post in Texas where veterans share their war stories, had this to say about record access on his VA claim. "I went into the Marine Corps in 1969," said. "I was 18 years old. Never

in my wildest dreams did I think, you know - I lost my hearing in my right ear in Vietnam. My heart attack's attributed to Agent Orange." He had quadruple bypass surgery more than a year ago. The VA still hasn't paid the medical bills because of a dispute with the private hospital. "I was in an EMS ambulance," explained Gomez. "I couldn't very well call them." Like so many other veterans, Gomez asked lawmakers for help.

It's a tedious process, says Congressman Lloyd Doggett. "We want to provide a prompt response," Rep. Doggett told News 4. "And sometimes, there's so much red tape, it's such a big bureaucracy, we're unable to do that." The "Wingman Act" would give certified congressional staffers the ability to access the VA database and give veterans immediate answers. "It's mainly a matter of looking and seeing precisely what the Veterans Administration has, what was their basis for denying or not acting promptly on a claim," Rep. Doggett explained. It passed the house with bipartisan support.

Republican Lamar Smith wrote in a statement, "I am hopeful this bill will help our veterans and caseworkers alike to speed up the claims process." Democrat Joaquin Castro agrees, saying in a statement "it will help reduce the VA's processing time." "If it expedites it, I'm all for it," said Gomez. For Gomez, the clock is ticking. "The medical bills are in my credit report now, and I get letters almost on a monthly basis," Gomez told us. The bill now moves to the Senate, where lawmakers will deal with any privacy issues this could raise. [Source: San Antonio News 4 | Emily Baucum | February 14, 2017 ++]

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## **Congressional Gold Medal Update 08 ► S.352 | MSgt Rodrick Edmonds**

Tennessee's two U.S. senators are hoping to get the federal government to honor a Knoxville soldier who is credited with saving the lives of more than 200 Jewish Americans during World War II. Sens. Lamar Alexander and Bob Corker filed a bill (S.352) to award a Congressional Gold Medal to Master Sergeant Rodrick "Roddie" Edmonds in recognition of his heroic actions during World War II. The two Republicans were joined on the legislation by two Democrats: Sens. Tim Kaine of Virginia and Ben Cardin of Maryland.

Edmonds was captured by Nazi forces on 19 December 1944 and sent to Stalag LXA prison camp. As the senior noncommissioned officer he was responsible for the camp's 1,275 American POWs. In January 1945 he rejected a Nazi order to single out Jewish prisoners. Edmonds ordered more than 1,000 Americans captives to step forward with him and brazenly pronounced: "We are all Jews here." The Nazi officer pressed his pistol to Edmonds' head, but he didn't waver, and his captors eventually backed down after Edmonds warned they would be prosecuted for war crimes. "Even when faced with death himself, Master Sgt. Edmonds and the men under his command stood united to protect their fellow soldiers," Corker said. "His moral fortitude and humility serve as an example for us all."



Edmonds survived 100 days of captivity, and returned home after the war, but never told his family of his actions. His wife gave his son, Baptist Rev. Chris Edmonds, a couple of the diaries his father had kept while in the POW camp. Rev. Edmonds began researching his story, locating several of the Jewish soldiers his father saved, who provided witness statements to Yad Vashem. Among the Jewish-American POW servicemen who were saved was Sonny Fox, the first host of the \$64,000 Question TV show who witnessed, and in interviews speaks of Edmonds' heroic act. On 10th February 2016, Yad Vashem recognized Master Sergeant Roddie Edmonds as Righteous Among the Nations. Chris Edmonds received the Righteous medal and certificate of honor from the Israeli ambassador, Ron Dermer, and Yad Vashem Council Chairman, Rabbi Lau on his father's behalf at a ceremony attended by the President of the United States, Barack Obama, on January 27th 2016. At the awards ceremony, held at the Embassy of Israel in Washington, Obama praised Edmonds for going "above and beyond the call of duty

Edmonds, who died in 1985, has never been formally recognized by the U.S. government. Edmonds' son, Chris Edmonds of Maryville, told The Commercial Appeal that the family is thrilled he is being considered for the Congressional Gold Medal. "The lives he saved — I know those families, and to see their smiles and to know their contributions to the world, that's our greatest reward," he said. [Source: The Associated Press | February 15, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Facility Expansion Update 12 ► S.233/H.R.90 | Approval for 24 Leases**

A handful of lawmakers are again making attempts to open 24 new Department of Veterans Affairs facilities across the country, some of which have been held up by Congress for two years. The VA must receive congressional approval to lease medical facilities with annual rent payments totaling more than \$1 million, according to federal law. Combined, the 24 facilities -- most of them outpatient clinics -- would cost about \$228 million during the lease periods, which in some cases can last 20 years. Congress has not approved a medical facility lease for the VA since 2014, said the office of Sen. Mark Warner (D-VA). Warner and Sen. Susan Collins (R-ME) reintroduced legislation that would give the VA the go-ahead to open the clinics. Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA) reintroduced a similar measure in the House.

One of the pending leases is for a new outpatient clinic in Hampton Roads, Va., totaling more than \$18 million. In 2014, veterans at the Hampton VA Medical Center suffered the longest average wait times in the country for primary care, the Hampton Roads Daily Press reported. The wait times resulted from an increase in the number of patients, along with space and staff shortages. Warner, who represents Virginia in the Senate, said health care providers at the hospital need the clinic to better manage their workload. "Veterans deserve convenient access to the high-quality health care they have earned through their service," Collins said in a written statement. "These facilities... will allow veterans to receive outpatient care without the stress and difficulty of traveling to larger VA medical centers, which may be located far away from their homes." One of the pending leases is an expanded outpatient clinic for Collins' constituency in Portland, Maine, totaling about \$6.9 million. A \$6.3 million clinic is planned for Oxnard, California, in Brownley's district. The facilities span 12 other states.

Last May, 15 senators wrote to Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA -- chairman of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee and Sen. Richard Blumenthal D-CT) the top Democrat on the committee --, asking that they act to approve the 18 leases pending at the time. The VA has also been struggling to work with Congress to gain the approvals. James Sullivan, director of the VA's Office of Asset Enterprise Management, told a House committee in September that many of the VA's 10 to 15 year leases are coming to an end. Without authorization for the new leases, some facilities might be forced to close and new ones might not open immediately, he said. "Without authorization from Congress, VA cannot begin work to secure needed leased space to meet the needs of veterans

seeking VA health care," Sullivan testified. "Failure to receive authorization will have a growing and worsening effect on veteran access to care nationwide."

At the September hearing, lawmakers voiced concern the VA had not provided proof that leasing medical facilities was more cost-effective than building their own. VA leases haven't been approved on a regular basis since 2012, when the Congressional Budget Office changed how it estimates costs, Warner's and Collins' offices said. The Congressional Budget Office previously noted only the annual cost of the leases, but, in 2012, it began recording the total cost of the leases up front. If the leases were approved, Congress would still have to decide each year whether to appropriate annual funds for them, Warner's office said. Fifteen cosponsors signed onto the Senate bill, S. 233. Brownley's legislation, H.R. 90, has nine cosponsors. Brownley also introduced legislation this session to prohibit Congress in the future from appropriating funding for a medical facility lease without also approving the lease. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 11, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Adult Day Care Update 01 ► H.R.1005 | Severely Disabled Vet Access**

Congressman Lee Zeldin (R-NY), along with Democrat Co-Lead Congresswoman Kathleen Rice (D-NY-4), re-introduced bipartisan legislation (H.R. 1005) to help severely disabled veterans on Long Island and across the country, by expanding access to Adult Day Health Care for disabled veterans who need extra assistance and special attention in their day to day lives. Service members who are 70% or more disabled from a service connected injury often require significant assistance from others in order to carry out basic everyday tasks. Many times, the burden falls on family members of disabled veterans; some veterans may even need to reside in institutionalized facilities to receive the daily assistance of a trained medical professional. Both of these options can create financial and emotional hardships.

One program that is currently available to help disabled veterans is Adult Day Health Care, which can be offered at State Veterans Homes across the United States. However, the expense of the program is often times directly shouldered by the veteran and their family, which significantly limits the number of veterans who can enroll. The program is also only currently offered at three facilities in the United States; one being the Long Island State Veterans Home, which is located in the First Congressional District of New York, in Stony Brook. Congressman Zeldin's bill would define the Adult Day Health Care program as a reimbursable treatment option through the Department of Veterans Affairs, which would guarantee that all severely disabled veterans, those who are 70% or more service connected disabled, are able to access Adult Day Health Care at no cost to them. The bill would also help expand the program, which could be offered at any of the 153 State Veterans Homes (SVH) across the country.

Congressman Zeldin said, "Passing this bill is an important way that we can help expand care for disabled veterans on Long Island and across our country. By providing disabled veterans with access to Adult Day Health Care, we can ensure that all veterans receive the best and most efficient outpatient services to provide them with the assistance and special attention that they need in their day to day lives, while still allowing them to maintain their independence. Adult Day Health Care programs allow veterans to lead a much more fulfilling life, and also helps keep families together and strong, while simultaneously reducing overall healthcare costs for the veteran. I will continue the fight in Congress to expand Adult Day Health Care for our disabled veterans to ensure that all veterans receive the proper treatment and care they deserve after fighting for our country."

"Disabled veterans have sacrificed and suffered for our country, and we have a duty to ensure they have the care and support they need to overcome the challenges they live with every day as a result of their service," said Representative Kathleen Rice. "Expanding access to high-quality, individualized day-to-day care will give disabled veterans more independence, reduce health care costs, and significantly ease the burden on family caregivers. I'm proud to support this bipartisan bill and will keep working to get it passed." Last year, Congressman Zeldin's bill (H.R. 2460) received strong bipartisan support in Congress, with over 50 cosponsors, including the entire Long

Island Congressional Delegation. The bill passed the House unanimously with strong bipartisan support. The bill also received support from various Veteran Service Organizations (VSOs), including the American Legion, AMVETS and Disabled American Veterans (DAV). [Source: Long Island News 51 | Kelly Tenny | February 16, 2017 ++]

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## **VA Vacancies Bill ► 20+ VAMCs Have No Permanent Director**

In order to improve the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) broken management system, Congressman Bill Shuster (R-PA) signed on as an original sponsor to the **VA Health Center Management Stability and Improvement Act**. This bipartisan legislation, which was officially introduced on 16 FEB , works to address the issue with more than 20 VA medical centers across the country lacking a permanent director. “It’s ridiculous that we have more than 20 VA medical centers without a permanent director across the country, including James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center in Altoona,” said Congressman Shuster. “It makes it difficult for these facilities to succeed when there is no permanent leadership, and I strongly support legislative efforts to require the VA to address this problem.”

According to the VA there are more than 20 centers without a permanent director, and some have gone almost two years with interim directors. The James E. Van Zandt VA Medical Center has had several different interim directors this year and currently do not have a permanent director. This legislation directs the Secretary of the VA to develop and submit a plan to Congress to hire qualified medical directors at each center without one and to identify impediments causing this problem. The report would be required within 120 days of the legislation’s enactment. “No business or organization can successfully operate under a revolving door of short-term leaders – especially not one tasked with caring for America’s heroes,” said bill sponsor Congressman Mike Bost (R-IL). “At a time when restoring accountability and leadership at the VA is a primary focus, we can’t afford to continue operating in this haphazard way. As a veteran myself, it’s my duty to do my part in providing the stability necessary to ensure our veterans receive the care they deserve.”

This bill was introduced in a previous session of Congress as H.R.3956 and was passed by the House on May 23, 2016 but was never passed by the Senate “There are wonderful people working hard for our veterans at the VA, and they need permanent leadership,” continued Shuster. “It’s a problem in Altoona and clearly a problem elsewhere. I hope this can get the VA to address these issues and do what’s best for our veterans.” [Source: Altonia Mirror | Ryan Brown | February 18, 2017 ++]

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## **Military Academies ► Teen Appointed to All Four**

A Fairfax teenager is celebrating a huge and rare accomplishment. Tim Park has been appointed to all four main U.S. military academies and it is an honor for the high school senior who is following in the footsteps of his family



members. Being appointed to the United States Coast Guard Academy, the United States Naval Academy, the Air Force Academy and the United States Military Academy is a rare achievement. The Trinity Christian High School student told Fox 5 News that the accomplishment is “almost surreal.” But it is something this 18-year-old has been working toward since he was very young.



“I would say when I was about 8 years old, there was a documentary on the History Channel talking about these four service academies and I thought to myself that day, I want to do that,” he recalled. But Park’s mother said she noticed his desire to serve even before that moment. “In fact, I remember even younger than that age when we actually took him to Hawaii and we explained the whole history of how Japan attacked Pearl Harbor,” said Jenny Park. “I just saw the look on his face and that forever changed. Then I could tell from then on that he really wanted to serve.”

The will to serve was also in part inspired by his grandfather. He survived the Korean War, graduated from medical school and started his own practice in the United States. “He gave free medical care to all Korean War veterans and their families as a way to repay what he called a debt of honor,” Tim said. “He started this legacy of service that I really want to continue.” Tim’s father is also in the military. He is currently in the U.S. Army Reserve. Even though he has a tough decision to choose from the four academies, Tim seems to be leaning toward one place in particular (West Point), however he’s keeping his options open and he will be visiting the academies once again before the end of the school year. [Source: FOX 5 | Sarah Simmons | January 26, 2017 ++]

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## **Military Funding ► Congress' Behavior Will Cost Lives**

The last time Congress completed work on a federal budget before the new fiscal year was 20 years ago So at the moment the government is operating under what's called a "continuing resolution," meaning last year's funding levels and priorities have been carried over into the new year. That wouldn't be a problem if this were the Ottoman Empire circa 1900, because nothing much changed from year to year back then anyway. In America, though, things are changing constantly. If the budget doesn't change with them, the backlog of unaddressed business begins to pile up. Road repairs. Medical research. Military training. When Congress fails to fund military programs adequately or predictably, the human consequences can be devastating.

The way continuing resolutions work, federal agencies can't increase the funding of any program above the prior year's level. And if an agency was planning to begin a new program that wasn't funded in the previous year, it has to wait until the "CR" is replaced with a real budget funding the program. The plan right now is to replace the current continuing resolution with a budget for the remainder of the fiscal year in late April -- by which time the year will be

more than half over (it began October 1). But some observers think Congress will go the entire year without passing a real budget and just extend the CR, given the partisan turmoil on Capitol Hill. That would have devastating consequences for the military, because it is already on the ragged edge in terms of readiness and gradually losing its warfighting advantages over potential adversaries. In fact, when you combine the fiscal uncertainties of doing a CR each year with budget caps that Congress legislated in 2011, the consequences could be literally fatal.

That's what the Army's vice-chief of staff, General Daniel Allyn, told Congress in February. He said the Army needs "sustained, long-term, and predictable funding," which is the opposite of what it has been getting from Capitol Hill. Budget caps force it to underfund training, maintenance and investment, while the continuing resolutions prevent it from using what money it has efficiently. Take the Army's top aviation modernization priority, the program to develop an improved engine for its Apache and Black Hawk helicopters. Those helicopters have been gaining 70-100 pounds of weight per year since they debuted during the Cold War as more equipment was added, so now they are under-powered for operating in hot or high-altitude environments. The Army wants to field a more powerful engine as soon as possible. But it can't because money it was counting on in the new fiscal year hasn't been appropriated. If the continuing resolution lasts for all of 2017, engineers working on the program will need to be reassigned, and a year's worth of development activity will be lost.

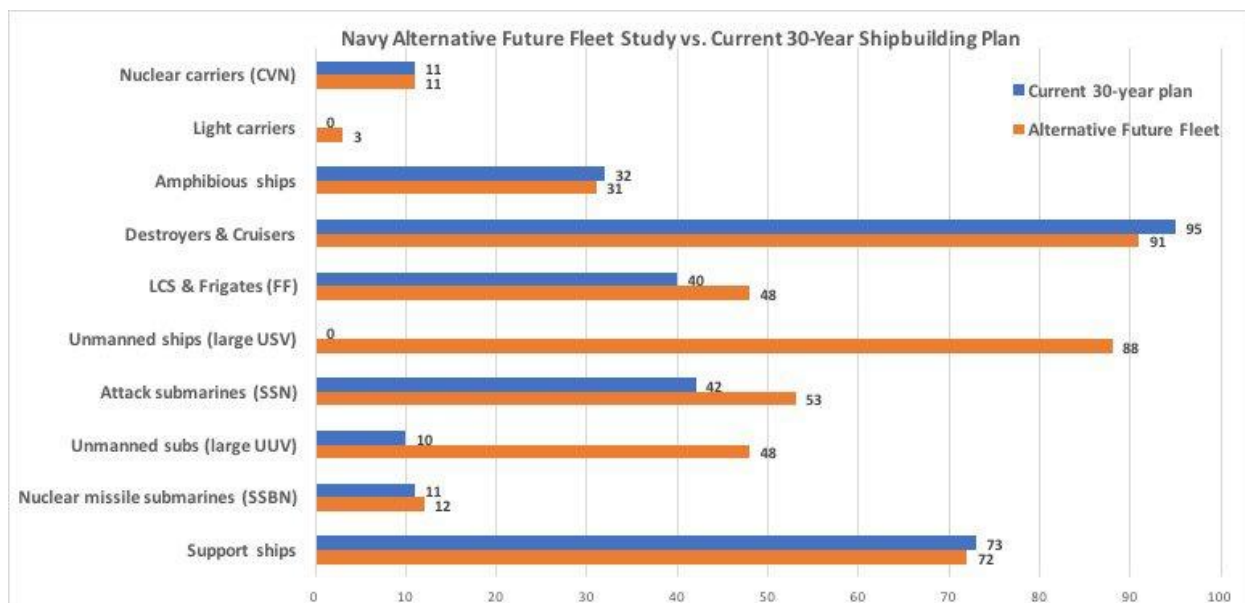
General Allyn, who testified with senior officers from the other services, put the slow and unpredictable pace of congressional funding in stark terms. He said if Congress doesn't fix the problem, the Army will be forced to reduce funding for readiness and contemplate "sending under-trained and poorly equipped soldiers into harm's way." In other words, congressional dysfunction in the budgeting process is likely to get soldiers killed. General Allyn went on, Our Army requires modernized equipment to win decisively, but today we are outranged, outgunned and outdated.... An unintended consequence of current fiscal constraints is that the Army can no longer afford the most modern equipment, and we risk falling behind near-peers in critical capabilities.

Like, for example, the Russians. The Army has repeatedly warned that it is undermanned and under-equipped in Europe, where the Russians increasingly outclass U.S. soldiers in long-range fires, armored vehicle protection, air defense and electronic warfare. But the Army can't move forward with initiatives like the new helicopter engine and a Long Range Precision Fires program to replace aging battlefield missiles until Congress gets its act together. General Allyn said the most important thing Congress can do to help the Army is **repeal the budget caps**. But it also needs to rise above partisan squabbling to pass a real budget for fiscal 2017 and the years that follow. Otherwise, America's Army could be headed for major defeat, and massive casualties. [Source: Forbes | Loren Thompson | February 15, 2017 ++]

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## **Alternative Future Fleet ► Bold Vision for the Future of the Navy**

Light carriers. Robot PT boats. Unmanned subs. A congressionally chartered study, the Alternative Future Fleet Platform Architecture Study available at <http://www.mccain.senate.gov/public/cache/files/a98896a0-ebe7-4a44-9faf-3dbbb709f33d/navy-alternative-future-fleet-platform-architecture-study.pdf> does not represent any official Navy position, but offers a surprisingly bold vision for the future of the US Navy. The study, by a Navy Project Team of officers, civil servants, and contractors free to brainstorm without being constrained by the service's official plans, calls for a future battle force of 321 manned ships. That's 10 percent smaller than the official Navy program for 355, let alone the parallel studies Congress commissioned from thinktanks CSBA, which calls for 340 manned ships, and MITRE for 414.



But while the official 30-year shipbuilding plan submitted to Congress in 2017 only includes 10 large, seagoing unmanned vessels, and CSBA proposes 80, the Alternative Future Fleet would include 138. That would be a mix of 48 unmanned underwater vessels — designed to supplement traditional nuclear-powered attack submarines — and a whopping 88 unmanned fast attack boats, derived from the Mark V Special Operations vessel or the Mark VI patrol craft. (A Coast Guard patrol boat is a third option). Instead of developing a new purpose-built unmanned boat, like DARPA’s Sea Hunter, this approach would build on ongoing Navy experiments with converting standard small craft for unmanned operations. They’d be launched from shore bases or from the well decks of amphibious assault ships normally used to transport Marines. The Alternative Future Fleet vessels would be about the 80-foot length of World War II Patrol Torpedo boats and like the PT boats, they’d be armed to attack much larger vessels, with “anti-ship cruise missiles, mines or torpedoes with an operating range in the hundreds of nautical miles.”

The PT boats suffered heavy casualties in World War II, and the modern Navy has shunned such well-armed but fragile small craft. Countries more callous about casualties, such as Iran, have embraced them. Making the expendable attack boats unmanned might make them palatable to the Navy. But 88 robot PT boats with missiles ranging hundreds of miles would be just part of the Alternative Future Fleet’s take on Distributed Lethality. This new Navy concept, first promulgated in 2015, would put anti-ship weapons on essentially every vessel that can take one, from destroyers to Littoral Combat Ships to supply ships: “If it floats, it fights.” The Alternative Future Fleet would take distributed lethality to greater lengths than any official Navy plan so far. It would shift away from the current reliance on nuclear-powered aircraft carriers to widely dispersed task forces of surface ships, both manned and unmanned — plus plenty of support ships to keep the scattered squadrons supplied, with a robust network to keep them all connected.

The study calculates this “distributed fleet” would create 10 times as many independent units capable of offensive operations as the current, concentrated force. Putting more pieces on the chessboard would give US commanders more options and enemies more headaches, especially with extensive use of Electronic Warfare to hide each task force’s true make-up and location. While deemphasizing nuclear-powered carriers, the Alternative Future Fleet would keep the same number as we have now. It would complement the supercarriers with a new class of light carriers, derived from the LHA-6 America-class amphibious assault ships.

Both the CSBA and MITRE studies suggested something similar to increase the fleet’s airpower, but the Alternative Future Fleet goes further and specifically calls for operating flat-tops in pairs, one nuclear powered supercarrier cruising with one light carrier (plus escorts) per task force. The study also calls for many more

unmanned aircraft — even at the price of fewer manned fighters — primarily to provide more reconnaissance to find targets long-range missiles. Some of these drones would fly from a specialized variant of the DDG-51 destroyer which trades VLS missile tubes for more UAV and helicopter capacity.

In an interesting contrast to the MITRE and CSBA studies, the Alternative Future Fleet doesn't propose canceling the controversial Littoral Combat Ship. Instead, the study gives the LCS anti-submarine warfare (ASW) variant a major role escorting carriers and support ships. In the long term, the study says, "as the LCS small surface combatants are decommissioned, they would be replaced by FFs (frigates), which would provide greater lethality and combat capability," but it doesn't express any urgency about this upgrade.

In fact, the total small surface combatant force — LCS and future frigates together — would be 20 percent higher in the Alternative Future Fleet, as compared to the current 30-year shipbuilding plan (48 ships versus 40). Meanwhile, the number of large surface combatants would slightly decrease, retiring all cruisers while adding a few more destroyers. Combine these changes with the large flotilla of unmanned vessels, and you have a Navy in which the average ship is considerably smaller than today. The Alternative Future Fleet study's bet is that long-range missiles, robotics, and robust networks will make this fleet of small ships much more than the sum of its parts. [Source: Breaking Defense | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr. | February 13, 2017 ++]

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## **Navy Fleet Size Update 03 ► CBO Projects \$566B Cost for Increase**

A U.S. Navy plan to build a 308 ship fleet will cost a whopping \$566 billion, according to the Congressional Budget Office. As of 2016, the Navy's fleet of combat capable ships numbered 272, an inadequate number to meet Navy's role of policing the global commons and responding to near-peer adversaries like Russia and China, according to 2014 Navy assessments. The 2017 Navy shipbuilding plan, submitted to Congress in July, intends to increase the size of the fleet to 308 ships by building 254 ships over a 30-year period. Figuring in retirement plans of current ships, the U.S. Navy would reach that goal by 2021, according to a report published by the CBO. The CBO projects that the Navy's plan would cost roughly \$566 billion over thirty years. This means nearly \$19 billion a year for new ships — a figure 36 percent higher than the historical average of \$14 billion the Navy usually spends yearly.

The construction of the ships will be a phased approach starting with seven in 2017, 38 ships between 2017 and 2021, and another 216 ships between 2022 and 2046. Included in the plan is the construction of six CVN-78 Gerald R. Ford class aircraft carriers, which will allow the Navy to sustain an eleven carrier fleet until 2039 as older carriers reach the end of their service life. However, submarines are expected to consume most of the shipbuilding budget despite the gargantuan cost of a new aircraft carrier, estimated at \$11 billion for the new CVN-79, the John F. Kennedy. The Navy's fleet of attack submarines currently stands at 69, which includes 14 Ohio-class ballistic missile submarines capable of firing Trident nuclear missiles — a critical component of America's nuclear deterrent. The U.S. Navy intends to add 56 submarines to the fleet, including 12 additional new Columbia-class ballistic missile subs that are expected to replace the aging Ohio-class Trident submarines, nuclear armed submarines that are nearing end of service life. The new Trident missile submarines are slated to begin construction in 2021, and that program alone is estimated to cost \$104 billion, with the remainder of the attack subs adding another \$74 billion, the report reads.

However, as a result sequestration — the automatic series of budget cuts enacted by Congress in 2011 — the Navy faces an uphill battle in funding its plan to increase the fleet, forcing the Navy to potentially cut spending in other areas. The 2011 law placed caps on defense and non-defense discretionary spending through 2021. Based on a 2016 force structure assessment, the Navy has since revised its goal of a 308 ship Navy to 355. The CBO has thus far only provided a detailed analysis of the plan submitted to Congress this past July calling for 308 ships. However, if the Navy got its 355 ship fleet, that cost would skyrocket to \$25 billion a year, or 60 percent higher than historical averages, according to CBO estimates.

President Donald Trump has pledged a 350 ship Navy, the largest Navy buildup since the Reagan administration. It is not yet known how the U.S. Navy will meet its shipbuilding goal. Despite White House support for the endeavor, there are many legal road blocks ahead, including budget hawk Mick Mulvaney, who was confirmed mid-February to run the White House Office of Management and Budget over the objection of fellow Republican Sen. John McCain. The Arizona Senator voted no on Mulvaney's confirmation over his support of defense spending cuts. [Source: NavyTimes | Shawn Snow | February 24, 2017 ++]

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## **Navy Readiness Update 01 ► Sailors Told to Toughen Up**

The Navy's top officer wants sailors to toughen up. As maritime threats from Russia and China grow and anti-ship missiles proliferate among even low-tech adversaries such as Yemeni rebels, Adm. John Richardson is telling sailors to get tough. The chief of naval operations wants to get sailors in a mindset of constantly thinking about potential enemies and how to beat them. "Not everything is going to go our way ... there may be setbacks along our path," Richardson said in a recent Navy podcast. "If we keep the competition in mind -- we want to be doing things better than our competition, outfoxing our competition, constantly thinking of ways to beat them -- I think this toughness dimension is going to be an important aspect."

The focus on toughness comes one year after a stunning series of mistakes led to 10 sailors and two patrol boats being captured by Iranian Revolutionary Guard forces after drifting into Iranian-held waters. Many senior Navy leaders questioned whether the lack of professionalism was a more systemic issue in a Navy that has not seen large-scale maritime combat since World War II. By contrast, Navy leadership has seized on the Mason's fight with Yemeni rebels in October as an example of sailors getting it right. Richardson praised the Mason's crew for their response when the Mason came under missile attack. "They were ready and responded just as we would hope to a cruise missile attack off the coast of Yemen," Richardson said.

Richardson relayed his conversation with Mason's commanding officer, Cmdr. Chris Gilbertson, who told the CNO that training was the key to the ship's success. "A lot of it was just drilling the team so that they became very familiar at running through the steps to identify a threat, target that threat and release the weapon to combat that threat," Richardson said. "I'll paraphrase Nimitz a bit, under stress, in combat you're not going to have your best day ever. You're not going to rise to achieve success like you've never seen it before. You are going to fall to the level of your training." Richardson has made preparing the Navy for "great power competition" the core of his tenure as CNO. China and Russia have both made heavy investments in weapons designed to threaten American aircraft carriers and its high-tech destroyers and cruisers in an effort to keep the U.S. Navy at bay. But the Navy's core mission is operating and showing U.S. presence all over the globe to protect freedom of the seas. That means in a world of high tensions between the U.S. and China and the U.S. and Russia, sailors are increasingly operating under constant threat of attack in places such as the Black Sea and the South China Sea.

This has sparked uncomfortable discussions among Navy leaders and observers about the possibility that, in a conflict with a major adversary, the Navy risks incurring casualties at a rate not seen since World War II. The need for toughness in the fleet was discussed in the podcast by the Mason's executive officer, Cmdr. Stephen Aldridge. Recounting the October attacks, he said that for some in his crew, combat was their introduction to life on board Mason. "It happened on the ninth [of October], we didn't know it would happen again on the 12th," Aldridge said. We had new crew members check on board that day then on day one they found themselves in a missile battle. So you really have to be ready that first day you check on the ship, the minute you leave the school house." You can listen to the full podcast at <https://soundcloud.com/cnorichardson/soundings-cno-discusses-navy-core-attribute-of-toughness>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | David B. Larter | February 15, 2017 ++]

## Navy Training ► New Plan Shortens A Schools

The Navy is pulling the trigger on radical changes to the way it trains the entire enlisted force. Gone will be the days of long, upfront technical training known as Class A school: the one that can last up to two years and for many sailors is the only trade-school training they will get during a 20-year career in the Navy. Instead, the new regimen will include a far-shorter stint following boot camp that will be whittled down to just what sailors need to succeed in their first tour. Sailors will get to the fleet far sooner — and with far less preparation — than with traditional A schools. After that, additional training will be spread over a sailor's career, coming in blocks given each time a sailor returns to sea. The new model will make enlisted training more closely resemble that of officers, who receive professional military education and career-specific training at various points throughout their careers.

The Navy's new training system, which starts this year for several ratings, will involve less brick-and-mortar schooling and more distance learning. It will aim to keep sailors more abreast of the cutting-edge technology impacting their career field. And it will give the Navy more agility to revamp and modernize training for future missions. "We are developing a career-long learning continuum where training is delivered by modern methods to enable faster learning and better knowledge retention at multiple points throughout a career, just as we do for officers," said Vice Adm. Robert Burke, the chief of naval personnel. The end result, Burke said, will transform what he calls the current "industrial, conveyer-belt-training model" into career-long training where "content is refreshed for changing technologies so sailors are ready to perform on day one at their new units."

The new, truncated A schools will be on average about 30 percent as long as those that sailors attend today. Yet for many career sailors, the new regimen will actually increase the total amount of training and education they'll receive during a Navy career. The Navy calls it Ready Relevant Learning, and considers it a critical piece of the ratings modernization effort announced last year. That effort included the Navy's controversial decision to eliminate sailors' ratings, a move that the top brass reversed in December after months of criticism. Nevertheless, Burke and other top Navy leaders plan to push ahead with structural reforms aimed at a similar goal of making Navy career paths more flexible, which include breaking up traditional A school into a series of training blocks spread over many years.

Over time, the Navy hopes the training pipeline will provide customized training and development for individual sailors, allowing sailors to train and qualify in an array of skills outside their own rating's traditional career path. That, in turn, will open up new duty assignments, advancement opportunities and civilian certifications. The biggest change of all may be the decision to transfer responsibility for most of the training to the fleet. Today training is mostly overseen by Naval Education and Training Command, but in the future, the NETC's oversight will end after a sailor completes their initial schools on the way to their first sea tour. That's a big challenge — and potential pitfall — for the fleet, Navy officials say.

**WHO GETS IT AND WHEN** -- The transformation of the training pipeline has been in the works for a few years, but it wasn't until the start of fiscal year 2017 in October that the Navy received the funding to set it in motion. The implementation will start this year as sailors in four ratings begin to train in the new system, and 15 additional ratings could get the go-ahead later this year. Another 34 ratings are in the early stages of development and will gradually come online over the next three years Navy officials say. By 2020, a majority of Navy's 87 ratings will be training sailors under the new format. The seed of the concept has been around for decades and stems from the model the Navy currently uses to train pilots throughout their careers. When aviators and flight officers wrap up shore duty and get ready to head back to the fleet, they go back to flight school for a refresher course to get current not only in flying but in the latest technology as well.

Nothing like that happens for most sailors, who might spend three years pushing boots at Great Lakes or recruiting, and are then sent right back to sea with the expectation that they will pick up where they left off. The

time required for them to get back up to speed reduces readiness, top Navy officials say. “The concept is called block learning,” said Rear Adm. Mike White, who commands Naval Education and Training Command and has helped spearhead development of the new custom career paths. “We take today’s curriculum [for each rating] and look at it from that lens of: When would it best be delivered across the first tour and across a career? We will then break it apart and deliver it at the appropriate time.” Sailors will get “block zero” during their initial pipeline training on their way to their first sea tour, White said. Block one would occur during the first sea tour, block two would be their second sea tour and so forth.

The individual training blocks completed by sailors will be tracked with a new Navy database that will allow the Navy to have full visibility on its human capital and help detailers to assign sailors in the most effective way. “We will need to ... create a single, authoritative database that captures a sailor’s combination of NECs, experience and proficiency — a snapshot of their DNA,” CNP Burke said.

**BLOCK CONSTRUCT** -- As Navy officials draw up new training plans for individual ratings, take a close look at not only what skills sailors will need in the fleet, but also when they will need those skills. For example, one of the first ratings transitioning to the new model this year is logistics specialist. Those sailors are the Navy’s supply clerks, but they’re also responsible for the mail system — collecting, sending sorting and delivering the mail. Currently in A school, all sailors training to be logistics specialists get postal clerk training before entering the fleet. But, “it turns out that most apprentice LS’s will not be a postal clerk for at least a couple of years in the fleet,” White said. “They spend their first couple years mastering their other duties in the rating before they’re assigned to this kind of work,” White said. That’s why the postal clerk training has been pushed out into a block that sailors will receive after they’ve served in the fleet for a while. “We believe it is best if you defer that postal clerk training; and then deliver it after a couple years when they are ready to take on that responsibility,” White said.

Deferring that block of training, which in this specific case lasts up to eight days, until later in a sailor’s first sea tour saves time and also ensures that knowledge is fresh and up to date when the sailors take on that duty, White said. Training for tasks that more senior sailors do will be put off to for future blocks of training as they return to sea for second and third sea tours with the same idea of ensuring the skills are fresh and they have been taught the most current information. Right now, White said, about 53 of the Navy’s 87 ratings will fit well into this block training construct. But that leaves 34 ratings to wrestle with how to put their skills into a career-long learning construct.

One such rating is air traffic controllers. “They need to come out with essentially their FAA qualification so that they can go be part of an air traffic control team,” White said. “That was not one we could give them half the training up front and half later because they had to leave the schoolhouse ready, so we did not see a way to block that curriculum.” Now, down the road, this effort may give us some tools to help improve the way they learn, but, it just did not fit the mold of the premise of Ready Relevant Learning.” What happens to these ratings, remains to be seen, but officials tell Navy Times the long-term goal is to provide all sailors with career-long training opportunities, though much may need to simply evolve over time.

**HIGH-TECH TRAINING** -- Today’s junior sailors are used to using technology in all aspects of their lives. That means that the Navy is looking at quite a wide range of possibilities when it comes to delivering training to sailors. This doesn’t mean that traditional brick and mortar schools are going away. Instead, it means that schools could be augmented with high-tech tools that help sailors learn by using gaming and virtual reality along with traditional book study. These high-tech tools could be made mobile, making training available to sailors at the waterfront without having to send them miles away from their homes and commands. To help the Navy develop new and more effective training, White said they’ve turned to the Naval Air Warfare Center Training Systems Division out of Orlando, Florida, where Navy officials are already at work developing the next generations of training technology. “They are leading the effort to now visit the classrooms that we teach those ratings in today, and do a little bit of a knowledge capture and analysis of that training — should it continue to be instructor led? Do we have modernized

delivery methods with computer simulation, or gamification, or other opportunities that would increase the retention of knowledge?”

One such technology is what he calls the Multi-Purpose Reconfigurable Training System, something that’s already in the fleet being used by the submarine community. Simply put, this is a room of large, flat, touch-screen displays, White said. Those displays can simulate a torpedo room on a Virginia Class submarine in the morning and be re-booted in the afternoon to be a submarine radio room. This system can be installed permanently in a schoolhouse or configured as mobile training platform, put into a trailer and drive down the pier to provide the training where the sailors are, he said. In addition, he said, the service is also looking at other options for training, such as applications that can be accessed on personal smart phones and tablets. Already the service has begun to offer such apps that teach some General Military Training topics. But this is expected to expand to other areas in the future, officials say.

[Source: : MilitaryTimes | Mark Faram | February 19, 2017 ++]

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## USCG Icebreakers Update 01 ► More Needed to Counter Russia

A Republican lawmaker is pushing President Trump to buy more icebreakers for the Coast Guard to counter Russian moves in the Arctic. “Russia is launching its biggest icebreaker — the nuclear powered Arktika. It should be of tremendous concern that next to this vessel, there is no equivalent in the world,” Rep. Duncan Hunter (R-CA) wrote Trump in a letter 21 FEB. “In other words, Russia is not just exceeding the U.S. in icebreaker production and Arctic presence, they’re in a class by themselves and setting a standard, supported by enhanced capability, that is unmatched,” he continued. “We must act with the same sense of urgency.” Global powers are relying on icebreakers as they move to maintain access to — if not control of — new waterways created as Arctic sea ice melts.



**USCG 399 ft Polar Star (WAGB-10)**



**Russian 520 ft Nuclear Powered Arktika**

The Coast Guard has just two fully functional icebreakers, only one of which is a heavy-duty icebreaker. In contrast, Russia has 40 icebreakers and another 11 planned or being built. With Russia’s progress on icebreakers, Hunter said, the U.S. should prioritize funding for six new icebreakers — three heavy-duty and three medium-duty. Hunter, an early Trump supporter and chairman of the House Transportation subcommittee on the Coast Guard, has long pushed for the Coast Guard to acquire more icebreakers. He recently met with Trump, according to the letter, but did not have time to discuss the issue of icebreakers with him. In his letter, Hunter said the Coast Guard has had to order parts online to operate its single heavy-duty icebreaker. “It’s not the Navy that will be responsible for patrolling the Arctic. It’s the Coast Guard,” he wrote. “As such, funding for six new icebreakers must be a high priority to ensure the Coast Card can begin undertaking a more expansive Arctic mission without any further delay.”



Hunter's letter to Trump follows a similar one to Defense Secretary James Mattis and Homeland Security Secretary John Kelly last week. The Coast Guard is under the purview of Homeland Security, but Hunter asked both secretaries for their support on the issue, especially as discussions are underway on requesting more defense funding. "In your respective leadership capacity, I also ask that both the law enforcement and military service duties of the Coast Guard are evaluated to fully understand the urgent needs that currently exist," Hunter wrote to Mattis and Kelly. "And, as part of any funding considerations, to include any emergency requests that might be currently under discussion, it is important that the Coast Guard is not overlooked."

In the interim the U.S. Coast Guard has awarded five fixed-price contracts for design studies and analysis of new heavy polar icebreakers. Coast Guard and Navy personnel will use the studies to refine heavy polar icebreaker specifications. "These contracts will provide invaluable data and insight as we seek to meet schedule and affordability objectives," Rear Adm. Michael Haycock, the Coast Guard's director of acquisition programs and program executive officer, said in a statement. "Our nation has an urgent need for heavy polar icebreaking capability." The U.S. Navy is working collaboratively with the Coast Guard to develop "a robust acquisition strategy that drives affordability and competition, while strengthening the industrial base," Jay Stefany, the executive director of the Navy's Amphibious, Auxiliary and Sealift Office, added in the statement. The studies are expected to take a year to complete. The Coast Guard hopes to award a contract for design and construction of the lead heavy polar icebreaker in fiscal year 2019. [Source: The Hill & KT & 22 | Rebecca Kheel | February 21 2017++]

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## **Russian Military Strength Update 01 ► Information Warfare Troops**

Along with a steady flow of new missiles, planes and tanks, Russia's defense minister said 22 FEB his nation also has built up its muscle by forming a new branch of the military — information warfare troops. Sergei Shoigu's statement — which came amid Western allegations of Russian hacking — marked the first official acknowledgement of the existence of such forces. Speaking to parliament, Shoigu said that the military received a sweeping array of new weapons last year, including 41 intercontinental ballistic missiles. He added that the wide-ranging military modernization will continue this year, with the air force set to receive 170 new aircraft. The army will receive 905 tanks and other armored vehicles, and the navy will receive 17 new ships. Also this year, three regiments of Russia's strategic nuclear forces will receive new intercontinental ballistic missiles, Shoigu said. Each regiment has up to 10 launchers.

The rising number of new weapons has raised demands for new personnel. Shoigu said the military currently needs 1,300 more pilots and will recruit them by 2018. Declaring the formation of the dedicated information warfare troops, Shoigu noted that "propaganda needs to be clever, smart and efficient." He wouldn't describe the troops' mission. Retired Gen. Vladimir Shamanov, the head of defense affairs committee in the lower house of parliament, was equally vague, saying that the information warfare troops' task is to "protect the national defense interests and engage in information warfare," according to the Interfax news agency. He added that part of their mission is to fend off enemy cyberattacks. Viktor Ozerov, the head of the upper house's defense and security committee, also told Interfax that the information troops will protect Russia's data systems from enemy attacks, not wage any hacking attacks abroad.

U.S. intelligence agencies have accused Russia of hacking Democratic emails to meddle in the U.S. election, a claim Moscow has denied. Some EU officials also voiced concern that the Kremlin could seek to influence this year's elections in the Netherlands, France and Germany. Retired Col. Gen. Leonid Ivashov, the former head of the Defense Ministry's international cooperation department, said that Russia should rely on information warfare troops to fight back against what he described as Western propaganda. "We must stop offering excuses and force the West into the defensive by conducting operations to expose its lies," Ivashov said in remarks carried by RIA Novosti news agency.

A severe money crunch after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union left the military in tatters, with most of its planes grounded and ships left rusting at harbor for lack of funds. As part of President Vladimir Putin's military reforms, the armed forces have received new weapons and now engage in regular large-scale drills. Russia has used its revived military capability in Syria, where it has launched an air campaign in support of Syrian President Bashar Assad and used the conflict to test its new weapons for the first time in combat. The weapons modernization effort has seen the 1 million-strong Russian military narrow the technological gap in areas where Russia had fallen behind the West, such as long-range conventional weapons, communications and drone technologies.

Shoigu said the military now has 2,000 drones compared to just 180 in 2011. He also noted that Russia has now deployed new long-range early warning radars to survey the airspace along the entire length of its borders. Shoigu also said the military will complete the formation of three new divisions in the nation's west and southwest, and also deploy a new division on the Pacific Islands, which have been claimed by Japan. The dispute over the Kuril Islands just north of Japan, which the former Soviet Union seized in the closing days of World War II, has prevented the two countries from signing a peace treaty. Russia previously has deployed new long-range anti-ship missiles on the Kurils to protect the coast. The deployment of a full-fledged Russian army division there appears intended to stake Moscow's claim to the islands, which have strategic importance and are surrounded by fertile fishing grounds. [Source: The Associated Press | Vladimir Isachenkov | February 22, 2017 ++]

**\* Military History \***



### **Pearl Harbor Mail Plane ► Sikorsky JRS-1 Under Restoration**

On the 75th anniversary of the Japanese attack Pearl Harbor, there was a plane with a unique story to tell. It is one of the few planes to have flown against the Japanese on that day. With its silver and orange-yellow paint scheme with a bright green tail and red trim, it wasn't the most likely combat aircraft. It was designed to be a small airliner for transporting troops, mail, and photographers around Hawaii. It had a boat hull for landing and take-off in the water and big tires for landing and taking off on a runway. The plane was piloted by Ensign Wesley Hoyt Ruth. "The fact that Ruth got out and got back is . . . absolutely amazing," says Smithsonian museum specialist Pat Robinson.

Robinson said that the plane would not have survived if it had found the Japanese fleet. It was also fortunate not to be shot down by the Americans as they returned to Pearl Harbor. It's also amazing that the plane was not sent to the junkyard for scrap. "Somewhere . . . someone looking at the log books realized the significance of the airplane, and where it had been," and alerted the Smithsonian, which retrieved it from military storage, Robinson said. "It's a huge deal, to have this here," he said. "It represents American involvement in the Second World War. It was there when it started." The Smithsonian wants to restore the plane, but there are a lot of planes in line ahead of it. The plane was built for the Navy in 1938. It was built at the Sikorsky plant in Stratford, Connecticut. It's a big plane with two huge propeller engines in the wings, a hatch in the nose for photography, and porthole-type windows. The museum curators found an old emergency water purification kit and the rusted keys to a lockbox in the radio compartment.



Sikorsky JRS-1 under restoration at the Steven F. Udvar-Hazy Center

The plane was part of a squadron based on Ford Island in the middle of Pearl Harbor. Ruth was having breakfast in his bachelor's quarters at the time of the attack. He thought that it might be a drill until he saw the bombs. His son, Thomas A. Ruth II, said that his father was an experienced aviator who could fly anything. Ruth survived the war, but his brother, Thomas, who was also a Navy pilot was killed when he was shot down in the South Pacific in 1943. Ruth grabbed his coat and jumped into his convertible and drove as fast as he could toward the airstrip to avoid being hit by enemy fire. As he reached the runway, the USS Arizona exploded, showering the area with pencil-sized gunpowder pellets.

Once the attack ended, the Americans wanted to find the fleet that had attacked them. A senior officer told Ruth to take the first plane and go find them. Ruth piloted the plane, and Emery C. "Pappy" Geise, 35, was his co-pilot. Oscar W. Benefeild Jr. worked the radio and Amos P. Gallupe was the plane captain. Two other sailors joined them on the flight. Before takeoff, the senior officer provided three Springfield rifles. Ruth said, "we would have had to shoot through the windows." They took off in the brightly colored plane and headed north. They flew for hours and covered 250 miles but didn't see anything. The enemy fleet was in the Pacific, north of Hawaii, but the crew made no contact. The next task was to get back home without being shot down by nervous soldiers from their own side. According to historians, numerous US planes were shot down by anxious US anti-aircraft guns. Luckily, they landed back at the airstrip safely.

After that, the plane was sent to a base in California and then given to a forerunner of NASA for testing. It was placed in storage after that and then sent to the Smithsonian when the historical importance of the plane was realized. Ruth passed away at the age of 101 in Matthews, NC. He was buried in Arlington National Cemetery in January, The Washington Post reported. Because of his bravery at Pearl Harbor, Ruth earned the Navy Cross, their second-highest honor. "Although contact with the enemy meant almost certain destruction," his citation reads, Ruth's courage, airmanship, and skill "were at all times inspiring and in keeping with the highest traditions of the United States Naval Service. [Source: <https://www.warhistoryonline.com/war-articles> | February 14, 2017 ++]

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## **Battle of Tarawa ► Japanese Defeated in Three Days**

Following the December 1941 Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor, the Philippines, Wake Island and other Pacific islands, the U.S. began to halt Japan's aggression expansion with important battle victories at Midway Island in June

1942 and Guadalcanal from Aug. 1942 to Feb. 1943. To continue the progress against the Japanese occupying scattered island chains, Allied commanders launched counter-offensive strikes known as "island-hopping." The idea was to capture certain key islands, one after another, until Japan came within range of American bombers. Rather than engage sizable Japanese garrisons, these operations were designed to cut them off and let them "wither on the vine."

By themselves, the islands held little value to the Japanese or the Americans. They were situated about halfway between Pearl Harbor and the Philippines and were barely large enough to hold an airfield. But they served as an essential steppingstone across the Pacific: If American bombers wanted to reach Japan, they would need an air base in the Mariana Islands; to capture the Marianas, they would first need the Marshall Islands; and for the Marshalls, they needed Tarawa Atoll, a series of small islands in the Gilberts. The major Japanese outposts were on Betio, a bird-shaped island in the southern part of the chain; and Makin, which was raided early in 1942 by U.S. Marines.

Tarawa turned out to be the most fortified atoll America would invade during the Pacific Campaign. The leader of the Japanese garrison, Rear Adm. Keiji Shibazaki, and 2,500 Imperial Naval Marines with 2,300 Korean and Japanese laborers transformed Betio into a fortress of unparalleled intricacy, with coconut log bunkers cemented with crushed coral and intersecting zones of fire supported by coastal guns, antiaircraft guns, heavy and light machine guns and light tanks. Betio's beaches were naturally ringed with shallow reefs, which were covered with barbed wire and mines. Shibazaki reportedly bragged that the U.S. "couldn't take Tarawa with a million men in 100 years." American forces proved him wrong.



On Nov. 20, 1943, after a three-hour bombardment by naval gunfire and bombing runs by carrier-based aircraft, the 2nd Marine Division landed on Betio. It would take 35,000 men three days to conquer Tarawa. At the end of the battle, neither side would look at the war the same way. The attack was a monumental effort of combined arms coordination in a new war tactic which relied upon heavy pre-invasion bombardment by battleships and carrier planes. Marines were to approach the shore in new amphibious tractor vehicles dubbed amphtracs. These landing crafts, armed with machine guns and carrying 20 troops each, were able to crawl over shallow reefs and other barriers. The highly coordinated U.S. battle plan at Betio relied on the precise timing of several key elements to succeed, but almost from the beginning there were problems.

- Heavy sea turbulence slowed transfer operations of the U.S. Marines to the ship-side landing crafts.
- A pre-invasion air raid was delayed, upsetting the timetable for other parts of the assault.
- Holding for the air raids, support ships ready to launch massive pre-invasion bombardments lingered in position longer than expected. They were forced to dodge increasingly accurate fire from the island where Japanese defenders were dug in.

Compounding these problems was a lower-than-anticipated tide level around the island that morning. Most amphtracs in the first assault wave were able to reach the beach as planned, but nearly all the larger, heavier landing crafts behind them jammed into coral reefs exposed by the shallow tide. Japanese coastal guns pounded the snagged

vessels and desperate Marines gave up on freeing the boats and instead waded toward shores hundreds of yards away through chest-deep water under intense enemy fire, and within the first hour the first wave had suffered almost total casualties. Precious gear, especially radios, became soaked and useless. Many Marines were hit in the open water, and those who made it to shore arrived exhausted or wounded, ill-equipped and unable to communicate with supporting forces. Making matters worse, the assault path through the lagoon to the shore became congested with disabled landing crafts and bloodied corpses, which hindered the dispatching of reinforcements. Marines on the beach crawled forward, inch by inch, knowing that to stand or even rise slightly made them easy targets. By the end of the first day, 5,000 Marines had landed at Betio; 500 had perished in the process. By the end of the first night, it was not definite that the Americans were here to stay.

Like the Japanese Navy in the Solomon's, Americans were losing their junior officers and noncommissioned officers rapidly. Advance was only due to a Sergeant or a Lieutenant leading their squad or platoon over the seawall and moving inland. The Japanese would not give up. They would fire until they had one bullet and kill themselves with their big toe in the trigger of their rifle.

On the morning of 21 NOV, the second day of fighting, unexpectedly low tides continued to plague the U.S. assault. Again, assault troops had to leave their crafts short of the shore and wade in through enemy fire. In addition to being fired upon from shore, Marines were also assaulted from their sides and rear by enemy snipers who had entered the lagoon under the cover of night to position themselves on crafts that had been wrecked and abandoned the day before. By noon, however, the tide finally began to rise, and U.S. destroyers were able to maneuver closer to shore to lend accurate supporting fire. Reserve combat teams and support craft transporting tanks and weapons raced to shore, and the ground assault finally took orderly form. The Marines moved inland, blasting surviving enemy emplacements with grenades, demolition packs and flamethrowers.

On day three of the battle, 22 NOV, the Marines fought on, destroying several Japanese pillboxes and fortifications. Dead and wounded were mounted on both sides and even the division reserve could not turn the tide. At dusk the Americans had occupied enough ground to ensure that Tarawa would be taken; the only question was the amount of blood. Shibasaki and his entire command staff died sometime on the third day, committing suicide rather than face capture. That night, the remaining 300 Japanese and Korean laborers came out of their last positions and attacked in a desperate attempt to inflict as many casualties as possible. If these men had died in their pillboxes, certainly more Americans would have died. At morning light on 23 NOV, the island defenders lay in tangled heaps: All but 17 Japanese soldiers had died defending Betio. Seventy-six hours after the invasion began, Betio was finally declared secure.

It was a fight that lasted only three days, but it was among the bloodiest in 20th-century American history. By the time the battle ended, 1,084 U.S. Marines lay dead on the sandy earth and churning water. Some 2,101 were wounded. In the 76-hour Battle of Tarawa, U.S. Marines suffered almost as many killed-in-action casualties as U.S. troops suffered in the six-month campaign at Guadalcanal Island. Legendary war correspondent Robert Sherrod wrote, "No one who has not been there, can imagine the overwhelming, inhuman smell of 5,000 dead who are piled and scattered in an area of less than one square mile." Offices of government and military offices were flooded with angry letters over the number of Americans dead on Tarawa. The number of dead and wounded on both sides would only get larger as the war in the Pacific progressed. However, according to "The Pacific War" by John Costello, U.S. commanders learned important lessons from the Battle of Tarawa that would be applied to future island wars, including the need for better reconnaissance, more precise and sustained pre-landing bombardments, additional amphibious landing vehicle and improved equipment.

After the battle, Marines who died were wrapped in ponchos and folded into shallow graves in several areas around Tarawa. But there were so many bodies, including the thousands of Japanese soldiers, that the U.S. Navy eventually bulldozed the site and expanded the airfield and built a network of roads and offices. By the time an excavation team arrived in 1946 to exhume and identify the dead, no one could remember where they were. Investigators spent three months searching, but they found only half the Marines in five of eight known impromptu

burial sites. One of the unfound sites was Cemetery 27, presumed to contain the bodies of 33-year-old Medal of Honor recipient 1st Lt. Alexander "Sandy" Bonnyman, Jr. and approximately 40 other Marines killed in action. Its occupants were officially declared "unrecoverable" by the U.S. government which issued a letter stating that most of the Tarawa war dead were presumed lost at sea near the island. But without conclusive proof that Bonnyman was among them, his family began a decades-long campaign to procure information about their beloved soldier's final resting place.

In 2008, working with the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, Mark Noah's History Flight funded and conducted two six-week long searches in the Marshall, Caroline and Gilbert Islands hunting for remains previously believed to be unrecoverable. History Flight also hired a geophysical inspection firm and brought a geophysicist to the island of Tarawa to search for "lost" Marine graves with a ground penetrating radar. In the six weeks the team spent on Tarawa interviewing local residents who had accidentally unearthed 20 American skeletons during construction activity on the island, they were able to locate, identify and survey five large American burial sites and three individual sites that contained over 200 U.S. Marines left behind after WWII. Cemetery 27 was not among the burial sites found. Over the years, letters and calls went unanswered as Bonnyman's family sought answers, and the details of the soldier's death and burial became even further muddled in the memories of his loved ones.

A glimmer of hope came in 2010, when a joint team from the Defense POW and MIA Accounting Agency began a recovery mission on the Gilbert Islands in hopes of locating the mass graves in which U.S. and Japanese soldiers were said to have been buried. That was the first time members of Bonnyman's family - some of whom were unaware the remains were still missing - heard that there might be chance of recovery. In 2011, JPAC discovered Cemetery 27, the site where Bonnyman and 35 others were buried underneath a parking lot. Excavation began in March 2015 and continued through the end of June.

When History Flight began calling families to obtain DNA samples of the Marines unaccounted for at Tarawa, Bonnyman's grandson Clay Bonnyman Evans jumped at the opportunity to volunteer with the group and flew to Betio to assist in excavations. "I spent my childhood idolizing him, even though he died 18 years before I was born," said Evans, who made the long trip from his home in Boulder, Colorado, to Tarawa to be here while JPAC is digging for remains. Evans traveled at his own to observe the team's work, hoping they might find his grandfather's remains. "I have felt a very strong connection to this man that I never knew. He loomed large for me as a kid ...," Evans said. "I have wanted to come here for a long time." He retraced his grandfather's steps at Tarawa, wading through the water onshore, then climbing to the top of a bunker referred to as "Bonnyman's Bunker." Now overgrown and filled with trash, the bunker was a Japanese stronghold during the battle.

It was at this bunker that assault troops were pinned down by heavy enemy artillery fire at the seaward end of the long Betio Pier, on his own initiative Bonnyman organized and led five men over the open pier to the beach. There he voluntarily obtained flame throwers and demolitions and directed the blowing up of several hostile installations. On the second day of the struggle, Bonnyman, determined to breach the enemy's strong defensive line, led his demolitions teams in an assault on the entrance to a huge bombproof shelter which contained approximately 150 Japanese soldiers. The enemy position was about forty yards forward of the Marine lines. Bonnyman advanced his team to the mouth of the position and killed many of the defenders. His team was forced to withdraw to replenish its supply of ammunition and grenades. Bonnyman again pressed his attack and gained the top of the structure, thereby flushing more than one hundred of its occupants into the open where they were shot down. When the Japanese fought back, the Lieutenant stood at the forward edge of the position and killed several attackers before he fell mortally wounded.

For his actions during the battle, Bonnyman was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor. The medal was formally presented to his family by Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal in 1947. His 12-year-old daughter, Frances, accepted the medal on behalf of the Bonnyman family. Evans knew that his grandfather had distinctive dental work, including gold teeth. He said he was breathless when Kristin Baker, the History Flight Recovery Team leader, called him over to examine the teeth on an exposed cranium. "It is gold," Baker told him. Evans said it's

very likely that the remains are those of the Medal of Honor recipient, but legal verification was still required. On July 26, 2015, the remains of the three dozen Marines arrived at the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency's laboratory at Joint Base Pearl Harborâ€”Hickam in Honolulu Hawaii where a team of specially trained dentists and other experts work to authenticate their identities.



On August 27, 2015 Bonnyman's remains were identified and on September 28, 2015, he was returned to his childhood home town of Knoxville, Tennessee and interred with his family, with full military honors at West Knoxville's Berry Highland Memorial Cemetery. For nearly 73 years, Bonnyman's family - members of which now live in Boulder County - remembered the handsome, adventurous man they had lost with what few artifacts they had left: his Medal of Honor, awarded posthumously for his efforts to hold back a Japanese counterattack; a large portrait, commissioned from an Italian oil painter; and a few black-and-white photographs taken during the assault on Betio.

- "It feels great," Clay Evans said of the culmination of his family's generation-spanning quest. "My great-grandparents really worked hard to get his remains back. They wrote letters, and they just sort of got every story in the book from the military; they thought they would never have his remains."
- "I actually grabbed my stomach and thought, 'Good grief. Is it really going to happen?' I never thought it would," said Bonnyman's oldest daughter, Frances Evans, now 83.

Bonnyman was the last of four Medal of Honor recipients from the Battle of Tarawa to be located. With the discovery of Bonnyman's remains, there are only 30 Medal of Honor recipients killed in World War II whose final resting places are still unknown, according to Laura Joyey of the Congressional Medal of Honor Society. [Source: TogetherWeServed | September 2016 ++]

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## Harlem Hellfighters ► WWI African American Troops

“Up the wide avenue they swung. Their smiles outshone the golden sunlight. In every line proud chests expanded beneath the medals valor had won. The impassioned cheering of the crowds massed along the way drowned the blaring cadence of their former jazz band. The old 15th was on parade and New York turned out to tender its dark-skinned heroes a New York welcome.” So began the three-page spread the New York Tribune ran Feb. 18, 1919, a day after 3,000 veterans of the 369th Infantry (formerly the 15th New York (Colored) Regiment) paraded up from Fifth Avenue at 23rd Street to 145th and Lenox. One of the few black combat regiments in World War I, they’d earned the prestigious Croix de Guerre from the French army under which they’d served for six months of “brave and bitter fighting.” Their nickname they’d received from their German foes: “Hellfighters,” the Harlem Hellfighters.



**WWI Harlem Hellfighter's homecoming parade on 5th Avenue in New York (left) and in the front lines (right) with the French Army under General Pershing**

In their ranks was one of the Great War's greatest heroes, Pvt. Henry Johnson of Albany, N.Y., who, though riding in a car for the wounded, was so moved by the outpouring he stood up waving the bouquet of flowers he'd been handed. It would take another 77 years for Johnson to receive an official Purple Heart from his own government, but on this day, not even the steel plate in his foot could weigh him down. It was, the newspapers noted, the first opportunity the City of New York had to greet a full regiment of returning doughboys, black or white. The Chicago Defender put the crowd at 2 million, the New York Tribune at 5 million, with even the New York Times conservatively estimating it at "hundreds of thousands."

"Never have white Americans accorded so heartfelt and hearty a reception to a contingent of their black countrymen," the Tribune continued. And "the ebony warriors" felt it, literally, beneath a hail of chocolate candy, cigarettes and coins raining down on them from open windows up and down the avenues. It would have been hard to miss them, at least according to the New York Times, to whom all the men appeared 7 feet tall. Yet as rousing as those well-wishers were, the Tribune pointed out, "the greeting the regiment received along Fifth Avenue was to the tumult which greeted it in Harlem as the west wind to a tornado." After all, 70 percent of the 369th called Harlem home, and their families, friends and neighbors had turned out in full force to thank and welcome those who'd made it back. Eight hundred hadn't, an absence recalled in the number of handkerchiefs drying wet eyes.

That morning, it had taken four trains and two ferries to transport the black veterans and their white officers from Camp Upton on Long Island to Manhattan, and the parade, kicking off at 11:00 a.m.—an echo of the armistice that had halted the fighting three months before—stretched seven miles long. In his 1845 slave narrative, Frederick Douglass had likened his master to a snake; now a rattlesnake adorned the black veterans' uniforms—their insignia. On hand to greet them was a host of dignitaries, including the African-American leader Emmett Scott, special adjutant to the secretary of war; William Randolph Hearst; and New York's popular Irish Catholic governor, Al Smith, who reviewed his Hellfighters from a pair of stands on 60th and 133rd Streets.

In Harlem, the Chicago Defender observed, Feb. 17, 1919, was an unofficial holiday, with black school children granted dismissal by the board of education. A similar greeting—on the same day, in fact—met the returning black veterans of the 370th Infantry (the old Eighth Illinois) in Chicago, Chad L. Williams writes in his 2010 book, *Torchbearers of Democracy: African American Soldiers in the World War I Era*. And in the coming months, there would be other celebrations, even in the Jim Crow South, most notably Savannah, Ga., the state that in 1917 and 1918 led the nation in lynchings, according to statistics published by the Tuskegee Institute. It was, to be sure, a singular season, a pause between the end of hostilities abroad and the resumption of hostilities at home in a nation still divided so starkly, so violently, by the color line. Congress would not make Armistice Day an official U.S. holiday until 1938, and it would not be called Veterans Day until 1954. But the people of New York didn't need



Congress to tell them what to do when their black fighting men returned home, and so you might say, the first “veterans day parade” in New York associated with “Armistice Day” was held for black soldiers on Feb. 17, 1919, during the month that would eventually be set aside for black history.

### **Blacks Debate the War Effort**

Two years before, on April 2, 1917, President Woodrow Wilson asked Congress for a declaration of war in order to enter a conflict between European powers that had started over the assassination of an archduke in 1914. “The World must be made safe for democracy,” the president said. The nation’s allies: the British, French and Russians. Its enemies: Germany, Italy, Austria-Hungary, the so-called Central Powers. For some African Americans, Wilson’s rhetoric smacked of hypocrisy. After all, he was the president who had screened *Birth of a Nation* (a film glorifying the Ku Klux Klan) at the White House and refused to support a federal anti-lynching bill, even though each year averaged more than one lynching a week, predominantly in former Confederate states that had effectively stripped black men of their voting rights.

“Will some one tell us just how long Mr. Wilson has been a convert to TRUE DEMOCRACY?” the Baltimore Afro-American editorialized on April 28, 1917 (quoted in Williams). “Patriotism has no appeal for us; justice has,” the *Messenger*, a Socialist publication launched by editors Chandler Owen and A. Philip Randolph (of March on Washington fame), declared on Nov. 1, 1917—a sentiment that would land both men in jail under the Espionage Act in 1918 (quoted in Adriane Lentz-Smith’s 2009 book, *Freedom Struggles: African Americans and World War I*).

Many more blacks viewed the war as an opportunity for victory at home and abroad. W.E.B. Du Bois, a founder of the NAACP in 1909, urged his fellow African Americans to “Close Ranks” in a (now infamous) piece he wrote for the *Crisis* in July 1918, despite the persistent segregation of black officers at training camp. “Let us, while this war lasts, forget our special grievances and close our ranks shoulder to shoulder with our white fellow citizens and the allied nations that are fighting for democracy,” Du Bois advised—a stance, Williams notes, that would stir controversy when Du Bois was exposed for making simultaneous “efforts to secure a captaincy” for himself. In all, Williams writes, “2.3 million blacks registered [for the draft]” during World War I. Although the Marines would not accept them, and the Navy enlisted few and only in menial positions, large numbers served in the army. Some 375,000 blacks served overall, including “639 men [who] received commissions, a historical first,” Williams adds in his essay “African Americans and World War I.”

### **Wartime Violence**

The U.S. Army segregated its black troops into two combat divisions, the 92nd and the 93rd, because, as Williams explains, “War planners deemed racial segregation, just as in civilian life, the most logical and efficient way of managing the presence of African Americans in the army.” But a different kind of violence soon spread—at home, most notably in East St. Louis, where, on July 2, 1917, the rumor that a black man had killed a white man resulted in the murder of nine whites and hundreds of blacks, not to mention half a million dollars in property damage. Things weren’t much better in the South. On August 23, 1917, black soldiers in the 24th Infantry garrisoned in Houston revolted when one of their comrades was beaten and arrested by two white police officers after he tried to stop them from arresting a black woman.

Quickly, rumors flew that a white mob was approaching the camp, which, whether true or not, prompted the black troops to scour the camp for ammunition under the notion that the best defense is a good offense. Marching through the rain to Houston, they killed 15 people, including four policemen and a member of the Illinois National Guard. Two of the black soldiers died in the fighting, one shooting himself in the head rather than risking capture. “Ten men probably ‘could not begin to tell the complete story of what took place that night,’ ” Lentz-Smith quotes “Army prosecutor Colonel Hull,” yet in the fallout, “they charged 63 members of the battalion with mutiny,” and hanged 13 in “their army khakis.”

### **‘Over There!’**

Of the 375,000 blacks who served in World War I, 200,000 shipped out overseas, but even in the theater of war, few saw combat. Most suffered through backbreaking labor in noncombat service units as part of the Services of Supply. Lentz-Smith puts the number of combat troops at 42,000, only 11 percent of all blacks in the army. For the first of the two black combat divisions, the 92nd, the Great War was a nightmare. Not only were they segregated, their leaders scapegoated them for the American Expeditionary Forces' failure at Meuse-Argonne in 1918, even though troops from both races struggled during the campaign. In the aftermath, five black officers were court-martialed on trumped-up charges, with white Major J. N. Merrill of the 368th's First Battalion writing his superior officer, "Without my presence or that of any other white officer right on the firing line I am absolutely positive that not a single colored officer would have advanced with his men. The cowardice showed by the men was abject" (quoted in Williams, *Torchbearers*). Even though Secretary of War Newton Baker eventually commuted the officers' sentences, the damage was done: The 92nd was off the line.

[Source: The Associated Press | Russell Contreras | February 9, 2017 ++]

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## **Military History Anniversaries ► 01 thru 15 MAR**

Significant events in U.S. Military History over the next 15 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Military History Anniversaries 01 thru 15 MAR**". [Source: This Day in History <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history> | February 2017 ++]

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## **American Revolution Quiz 1 ► Questions**

### **How Well Do You Know The American Revolution?**

1. What was the name of the American Colonial army during the American Revolution?
2. Who led the Continental Army through the American Revolution?
3. Colonial unrest began in part over taxation on which goods?
4. Which document officially began the American Revolution in earnest?
5. Who wrote the Declaration of Independence?
6. When was the Declaration of Independence signed?
7. How many colonies signed the Declaration of Independence?
8. Was Florida one of the original 13 colonies?
9. Which river did George Washington famously cross with his troops?
10. The Hessians were mercenaries contracted by the British. What was their nationality?
11. The intervention of which country on the side of the colonists ultimately helped secure American independence?
12. What 1773 act of protest involved dumping a beverage into Boston Harbor?
13. Which French officer was one of Washington's most trusted generals, and became one of the key leaders in the revolution?

14. Which Continental general switched sides to the British during the war?
15. Who is famous for his midnight ride warning of the imminent arrival of the British army?
16. True or False? General Arnold betrayed the Continental Army because he was angry at being repeatedly passed over for promotion.
17. Which battle is considered to have started the American revolution?
18. Which battle is considered to have concluded the American Revolution?
19. What was the term most predominantly used to refer to British soldiers?
20. Which British general ultimately surrendered to the Continental Army at Yorktown?

[Source: Frontlines of Freedom | <http://offbeat.topix.com/quiz/17242/qidx1> | October 28, 2016 ++]

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## WWII VETS 129 ► Talmadge Mitchell | French Legion of Honor

Army Veteran Talmadge Mitchell. Talmadge served during World War II. Talmadge was born and raised on a tobacco farm in Franklin County, Virginia. He was the oldest son in a family of nine children. He spent most of his childhood helping his father feed a family of 11. He worked in a dye plant, then for a plumbing, heating and roofing contractor. On Nov. 4, 1941, Talmadge joined the Army. He served in the 991st Field Artillery Battalion. During that time, he was involved in five major battles in Normandy, northern France, Ardennes, Rhineland and Central Europe.



His unit landed on Omaha Beach on July 11, 1944, about a month after D-Day. “The third night the commander wanted to see if we could back the Germans up. We had four guns, and we shot 55,000 pounds of shells in one night,” he said. “We were on duty for 24 hours a day for nine and a half months.” After Normandy, the battalion moved through France, crossing the Seine and Marne rivers before turning north and entering Belgium in September 1944. From there, they headed toward Aachen, a city on the Belgian-German border that was part of the Siegfried Line, a series of interconnecting German defenses. Aachen was the first German city attacked by Allied ground troops. He spent Christmas Day in the Ardennes Forest fighting in the Battle of the Bulge.

In all, Talmadge and his unit fired 500,000 pounds of shells during their nine-month campaign. Talmadge attained the rank of Corporal before being discharged on Oct. 28, 1945. He received several awards for his service, including the European African Middle Eastern Service Ribbon, American Theater Service Ribbon, American Defense Service Medal, Good Conduct Medal and the Bronze Star Medal. In April 2015, he was one of five WWII Veterans presented with the French Legion of Honor, France's highest honor, by Ambassador Gérard Araud for helping liberate France from the Nazis during the war. "Oh Lord, oh Lord. This smile is going to be here a long time," Mitchell said of being inducted into the Legion of Honor. "I don't know just how anybody stood through that [war], but the good Lord had to be with me."

Thank you for your service, Talmadge!

[Source: Vantage Point | December 24, 2016 ++]

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## WWII VETS 130 ► Paul A. Weiser | BB-55 Sailor

Like many other men and women of his generation, Paul A. Wieser volunteered to serve his country at a young age. In two separate oral history interviews available online as part of the Library of Congress's Veterans History Project ([http://stream.media.loc.gov/vhp/video/afc2001001\\_029578\\_mv0001001\\_640x480\\_800.mp4](http://stream.media.loc.gov/vhp/video/afc2001001_029578_mv0001001_640x480_800.mp4) 63 minutes), Wieser shared his experiences as a member of the United States Navy, focusing on his memories of World War II.

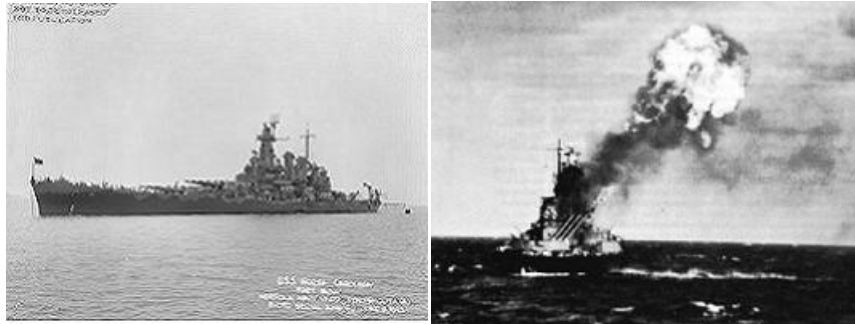


Paul Wieser being interviewed in 2001, on his wedding day during WWII, and his final resting place

Wieser was born and raised in Linden, New Jersey. His parents were immigrants who came to this country from Austria, and he "had six brothers and two sisters." He described his parents as "hardworking people" who instilled in their children a "love of the country very early. His parents were very proud of the United States." After graduating from high school, Wieser found that "work was hard to get." He also recalled that "as a youngster, ... [he] thought the greatest thing in the world was to be a soldier." Although he had participated in an Army program as a high school student and found that Army life was not for him, Wieser determined that his earlier experience did not rule out all military service. He therefore "decided to join the Navy," formally enlisting on "February the 14th, 1941." In choosing to become a sailor, Wieser was required to commit to "six years" of service, and, for most of that time, the United States was at war.

Wieser went through recruit training in Newport, Rhode Island, before being "assigned to the new battleship, North Carolina." On the ship, he "was put in the deck force...[and] assigned to ... Mount 7 and a Left Gun. He was the powder man ... the guy that put the powder charge in the tray" to fire projectiles. When the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor on Sunday, Dec. 7, 1941, men who had been on leave came back early, and Wieser, who had been on duty, learned the news from them. After the United States declared war, the USS North Carolina was sent "down to

the Gulf of Mexico ... [to] train for 40 days.” Then, they were ordered to Maine, where they practiced and patrolled the area for German battleships. After a little while, the Navy told the North Carolina to go to the Pacific, and it “just about fit through” the Panama Canal en route to San Francisco. They continued to practice before being sent to Pearl Harbor in June 1942.



**USS North Carolina (left) in June 1942, en route to Panama Canal in battle (right),**

Wieser was saddened by the destruction that was still evident there, but the North Carolina was soon on the move again, this time headed to fight in the Pacific Theater of World War II. As a fast battleship, the North Carolina was tasked with protecting carriers from air attacks, and it was “the only battleship there at the time of, uh, Guadalcanal.” On Aug. 24, 1942, the North Carolina “got baptized in fire,” firing at enemy planes for the first time after being attacked by the Japanese. Wieser praised his shipmates, saying “We had a good crew. ... They were ... really good.” After this event, the ship continued to patrol the waters, “operating with the aircraft carrier Hornet.”

On Sept. 15, 1942, a Japanese I-19 “saw the Wasp [another aircraft carrier], and ... fired six torpedoes at him.” Unfortunately, the Wasp sunk when three of the torpedoes hit it. Even though the North Carolina was “miles away,” one of the torpedoes that had missed the Wasp “came all the way over and hit [the North Carolina]. ... It blew a, uh, 35-foot hole.” Luckily, “the ship is compartmentized off,” which prevented it from sinking. Growing up, Wieser’s father was very strict about proper treatment of the United States flag, which Wieser later credited with helping him get “a good job” as crane operator on the USS North Carolina. As a crane operator, Wieser “was kinda his own boss,” and, when the torpedo hit, he had snuck away from the crane because he heard that they were selling ice cream elsewhere on the ship. The whole ship shook when the torpedo hit, so he was lucky that he wasn’t up on the crane, but, after the hit, he had to hustle to get back to his battle station before the doors on the ship closed and he got in trouble for not being where he was supposed to be.

During its time in the Pacific Theater, the North Carolina island-hopped and was involved in events in Guadalcanal, the Eastern Solomons, Tarawa, Palau, Iwo Jima, and Okinawa, among others. When the war ended, Wieser “still had a year and a half to go” on his enlistment, and he continued to work on the North Carolina until he was discharged in “Brooklyn, where he went aboard it.” He had survived the war and come full circle on that one ship. The North Carolina “never went to sea again,” and, since Wieser ended up living less than ten miles away from where the ship was kept, he frequently took Sunday drives out to see it. After being discharged from the Navy, Wieser “worked on the dock for a short while” and then decided to join one of his brothers on the fire department of his town. He also enlisted in the Naval Reserve. Due to the United States’ involvement in the Korean War, Wieser was called into duty, serving aboard the USS Kula Gulf.

While the USS North Carolina was deployed to the Pacific during World War II, Wieser spent his “spare time... [doing] a lot of writing.” He and his future wife grew up next door to each other, and they kept in touch by sending each other letters, even deciding to get married through this long-distance correspondence. In total, Wieser “wrote 600 letters to her.” Wieser’s wife saved the letters that she received from him, and, more than a decade after the war ended, when the state of North Carolina bought the USS North Carolina and turned it into a memorial museum, Wieser’s letters became a part of that museum. Wieser himself maintained a relationship with the North

Carolina, as he later moved down to North Carolina and “spent 10 years giving tours” aboard his old ship. Paul A. Wieser passed away on Dec. 12, 2006 and was laid to rest in Culpeper National Cemetery. We honor his service. [Source: Vantage Point | Bryce Carpenter | December 21, 2016 ++]

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## American Revolution Quiz 1 ► Answers

### How Well Did you do?

1. The US troops were known as the Continental Army after the North American continent
2. George Washington was the leader of the Continental Army throughout the entire war.
3. Tea - Being British subjects, the colonists took their tea seriously.
4. The Declaration of Independence adopted by the North American colonies stated that the colonies now considered themselves sovereign states no longer under British rule -- though fighting had actually begun the year before.
5. Thomas Jefferson who largely unknown when he was tapped to write the Declaration of Independence.
6. The Fourth of July holiday celebrates the signing of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776.
7. Thirteen colonies signed the Declaration, and are known as the "13 original colonies."
8. No - Florida was a Spanish colony which was ultimately ceded to the United States in 1821. It became a US State in 1845.
9. Washington crossed the Delaware in a move to attack the Hessians at the Battle of Trenton, a crossing depicted in Emmanuel Gottlieb Leutze's appropriately-titled Washington Crossing the Delaware.
10. The Hessians were Germans who took their name from the German state of Hesse-Kassel.
11. France - Though the French were mainly in it to stick it to the British, they played a hugely important role in helping the colonists win the war.
12. Boston Tea Party - Colonists dressed up as Native Americans and dumped a crapload of tea into Boston Harbor as a means of protesting the Tea tax.
13. Marquis de Lafayette - Gilbert du Motier, Marquis de Lafayette, joined the American Revolutionary forces out of a belief in the nobility of their cause. He was a close personal friend of Washington, Alexander Hamilton, and Thomas Jefferson.
14. Arnold's betrayal was felt so deeply that his very name has become shorthand for treacherous behavior  
Benedict Arnold - His betrayal was felt so deeply that his very name has become shorthand for treacherous behavior.
15. Paul Revere - Though he never shouted "The British are coming" and there may have ultimately been as many as 40 riders acting to warn colonists of the British advance, Revere did ride through Massachusetts.
16. True! He was also upset that other officers had taken credit for many of his accomplishments of which there were actually many -- he was one of the most successful Continental officers in the war.
17. Battle of Lexington and Concord - Predating even the Declaration of Independence, poet Ralph Waldo Emerson referred to the shots fired at the Battles of Lexington and Concord (which happened in quick succession, hence why they're paired) as "the shot heard round the world."
18. Siege of Yorktown - Though the treaty ending the war wasn't officially signed until two years later, the British surrender at Yorktown, Virginia in 1781 effectively marked the end of hostilities in the American Revolution.
19. Redcoats - British soldiers were known for their bright red coats. They weren't so good at camouflage.

20. Charles Cornwallis who was one of the principal British commanders during the war.

[Source: Frontlines of Freedom | <http://offbeat.topix.com/quiz/17242/qidx1> | October 28, 2016 ++]

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## Medal of Honor Citations ► Rosser~Ronald E | ROK



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

### **RONALD E. ROSSER**

**Rank and organization:** Corporal, U.S. Army, Heavy Mortar Company, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2d Infantry Division.

**Place and date:** At Vicinity of Ponggilli, Korea, 12 January 1952.

**Entered service:** Crooksville, Ohio 1946

**Born:** October 24, 1929, Columbus, Ohio

### *Citation*

Cpl. Rosser, distinguished himself by conspicuous gallantry above and beyond the call of duty. While assaulting heavily fortified enemy hill positions, Company L, 38th Infantry Regiment, was stopped by fierce automatic-weapons, small-arms, artillery, and mortar fire. Cpl. Rosser, a forward observer was with the lead platoon of Company L, when it came under fire from 2 directions. Cpl. Rosser turned his radio over to his assistant and, disregarding the enemy fire, charged the enemy positions armed with only carbine and a grenade. At the first bunker, he silenced its occupants with a burst from his weapon. Gaining the top of the hill, he killed 2 enemy soldiers, and then went down the trench, killing 5 more as he advanced. He then hurled his grenade into a bunker and shot 2 other soldiers as they emerged. Having exhausted his ammunition, he returned through the enemy fire to obtain more ammunition and grenades and charged the hill once more. Calling on others to follow him, he assaulted 2 more enemy bunkers. Although those who attempted to join him became casualties, Cpl. Rosser once again exhausted his ammunition obtained a new supply, and returning to the hilltop a third time hurled grenades into the enemy positions. During this heroic action Cpl. Rosser single-handedly killed at least 13 of the enemy. After exhausting his ammunition he accompanied the withdrawing platoon, and though himself wounded, made several trips across open terrain still under enemy fire to help remove other men injured more seriously than himself. This outstanding soldier's courageous and selfless devotion to duty is worthy of emulation by all men. He has contributed magnificently to the high traditions of the military service.



Rosser was the oldest of seventeen children. He joined the Army in 1946 at age 17 for a three-year term of service. After one of his brothers was killed in the early stages of the Korean War, he re-enlisted from Crooksville, Ohio, in 1951 as a way of getting revenge. Initially stationed in Japan, Rosser requested to be sent into combat and was then deployed to Korea with the heavy mortar company of the 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division.

On January 12, 1952, Rosser, by then a corporal, was acting as a forward observer with Company L's lead platoon during an assault on a heavily fortified hill near Ponggilli. When the unit came under heavy fire, Rosser went forward three times and attacked the hostile positions alone, each time returning to friendly lines to gather more ammunition before charging the hill again. Although wounded himself, he helped carry injured soldiers to safety once withdrawal became necessary. For these actions, Rosser was awarded the Medal of Honor.

Rosser returned to the United States in May 1952 and was formally presented with the Medal of Honor by President Harry Truman a month later, on June 27, 1952. In 1968, another of Rosser's brothers was killed in action, this time in the Vietnam War. Rosser requested a combat assignment in Vietnam but was rejected and subsequently retired from the Army. To listen to his own account of the events that led up to him receiving the Medal of honor go to <https://youtu.be/p4Xy-qr4azI>.

[Source: <http://www.history.army.mil/moh/koreanwar.html#ROSSER> | March 2016 ++]

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**Medal of Honor Citations** ► Eubanks, Ray E | WWII



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



## RAY E EUBANKS

**Rank and organization:** Sergeant, U.S. Army, Company D, 503d Parachute Infantry

**Place and date:** At Noemfoor Island, Dutch New Guinea, 23 July 1944

**Entered service:** LaGrange, N.C. 1942

**Born:** February 6, 1922, Snow Hill, North Carolina

### *Citation*

Citation: For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty at Noemfoor Island, Dutch New Guinea, 23 July 1944. While moving to the relief of a platoon isolated by the enemy, his company encountered a strong enemy position supported by machinegun, rifle, and mortar fire. Sgt. Eubanks was ordered to make an attack with 1 squad to neutralize the enemy by fire in order to assist the advance of his company. He maneuvered his squad to within 30 yards of the enemy where heavy fire checked his advance. Directing his men to maintain their fire, he and 2 scouts worked their way forward up a shallow depression to within 25 yards of the enemy. Directing the scouts to remain in place, Sgt. Eubanks armed himself with an automatic rifle and worked himself forward over terrain swept by intense fire to within 15 yards of the enemy position when he opened fire with telling effect. The enemy, having located his position, concentrated their fire with the result that he was wounded and a bullet rendered his rifle useless. In spite of his painful wounds he immediately charged the enemy and using his weapon as a club killed 4 of the enemy before he was himself again hit and killed. Sgt. Eubanks' heroic action, courage, and example in leadership so inspired his men that their advance was successful. They killed 45 of the enemy and drove the remainder from the position, thus effecting the relief of our beleaguered troops.



Eubanks joined the Army from La Grange, North Carolina in 1942, and by July 23, 1944 was serving as a Sergeant in Company D, 503rd Parachute Infantry Regiment. On that day, on the island of Noemfoor in Dutch New Guinea, Sgt. Eubanks single-handedly assaulted an enemy position with a Browning Automatic Rifle (BAR). Although he was wounded and his BAR disabled during his approach, he nevertheless charged the position, using his gun as a club to kill several Japanese soldiers until he was himself killed. For these actions, he was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor eight months later, on March 29, 1945. Eubanks, aged 22 at his death, was buried in Westview Cemetery, Kinston, North Carolina.



September 5, 1943. Dwarfed by and silhouetted against clouds of smoke (created to provide concealment), C-47s from the US Army Air Forces drop a battalion of the 503rd Parachute Regiment at Nadzab, New Guinea. A battalion dropped minutes earlier is landing in the foreground.

[Source: <http://www.history.army.mil/moh> | March 2017 ++]

### \* Health Care \*



## Tricare Physician Availability Update 02 ► Some Reportedly Dropping Out

Some military families are seeing some doctors and other health care providers dropping out of the Tricare network in advance of the change in Tricare contracts this year, according to complaints submitted to the Department of Defense Military Family Readiness Council. “There’s concern about providers backing out of the network,” said Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Cody, who is a member of the council and has seen the submissions. He asked about oversight DoD is providing, given the anxiety of some service members and families. “We’re already seeing some ill effects,” he said. Cody did not provide the number of complaints the council has received, nor the number of providers leaving the network.

The contracts will take effect later this year. Among other things, Tricare’s three regions are now consolidated into two, with Humana in the East region and HealthNet in the West, pending one challenge to the contract. DoD has strict requirements in the contracts for the number and types of providers in each area, said Navy Capt. Edward Simmer, deputy director of Tricare, who provided a briefing at the council's Wednesday meeting. “If they don’t meet that, we hold them accountable. Right now, for most of the specialties, they’re doing very well. “I’ve seen their proposed networks,” Simmer added. “Humana will stay in the South, so that won’t change very much. With Humana going into the North region and HealthNet moving out to the West, they’ve really had to show us what they’re doing, how they’re getting these networks in place. So far, I think they’re doing very well and I feel very good about where they are, but I can assure you that before this goes live and we go to these new contracts, they’re going to have to show us they have these providers in place ready to see patients, or we’re not going to make the switch.”

Cody said there should be “a conversation, especially with folks who have acute conditions and special needs,” where continuity of providers is important. He said that continuity of care is already taken into consideration when personnel decisions are made about moving people, but it’s a different scenario if that care is taken away when the family is in their current location. “We absolutely have to account for that on the forefront. This can’t be triaged,”

Cody said. And for those who have expressed concerns about the issue to the council, there should be follow-up, he said. Simmer said Tricare officials “are constantly watching that. If we see any problems along those lines, we’re going to challenge [the contractors].” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 15, 2017++]

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## Medicare Drug Procurement ► Negotiated Pricing

President Trump's recent attack on pharmaceutical companies as "getting away with murder" is the stuff of headlines. He also commented that the federal Medicare program could save billions of dollars if the program negotiated prices directly with pharmaceutical companies. But lawmakers and the public should understand what direct Medicare drug price negotiations might mean for seniors' access to needed treatments. As of now, price negotiations for Medicare drugs are administered by Part D plan sponsors, who in turn negotiate directly with pharmaceutical companies. What could happen if Medicare takes over of this process?



We need not look any further than the Veterans Affairs (VA) healthcare system for a glimpse of that reality. The VA pharmacy benefits program already negotiates drug prices and pays less for drugs than many other providers. To contain costs, the program does not cover many of the newest, most effective treatments. Many of these include newly approved drugs with no substitutes available. According to an August 2016 report by Xcenda consultants, only three of the 25 most innovative drugs were available in the VA drug formulary. Compare that to 11 Medicare Part D plans that covered all 25. The majority of Medicare plans covered 21 of the 25 drugs. While "doing something" about prescription drug prices might be politically popular, it also risks leaving patients far worse off. Should the incoming administration pursue the same drug price negotiations the VA already employs, we should expect the same dismal results that keep some of the most effective treatments out of patients' hands.

Before taking such a risky approach, there are three essential things that we must understand about drug costs and how we can address the challenge.

**1. Innovative treatments are expensive to develop.** While the cost of some prescription drugs can be high, consider that it takes an average of more than \$2.5 billion to bring a drug to market, according to the Tufts Center for the Study of Drug Development. By allowing the marketing of drugs earlier in the approval process, speeding up approvals for competing compounds, and reducing the costs to bring new treatments to market, the FDA could allow for more price competition without harming innovative and access to effective treatments.

**2. Innovative drugs offset other healthcare costs.** Medicine has changed dramatically for the better, and mostly because of the new drugs clinicians have in their toolbox. A 2012 Congressional Budget Office study estimated that for every one percent increase in medication utilization, overall Medicare program costs fell by one-fifth of a percent. Since 1991, the nation's cancer death rate has dropped by 25 percent, according to a recent report by the American Cancer Society. Some cancers, like chronic myelogenous leukemia, are no longer a death sentence;

metastatic melanoma, previously a death sentence, can now sometimes be controlled such as was done for President Carter. Hepatitis C can be cured with a short course of pills; and today the life expectancy of HIV patients is about the same as the general population. It is important to remember that today's drug treatments are, often, enormous advances in disease treatment.

**3. Price controls will kill innovation.** The United States is the engine of innovation in healthcare, producing roughly half of the world's new drug treatments in the past decade. But the current proposals could threaten patient access and the development of future treatments. Health care economists John A. Vernon and Joseph A. Golec found that price controls imposed in the EU between 1986 and 2004 not only reduced R&D spending, they also "resulted in about fifty fewer new drugs and about seventeen hundred fewer scientists employed in the EU." Rather than feasting on the goose that lays the golden eggs, we should be looking for ways to grow more geese.

Medicare is facing serious, long-term funding challenges. There is no question that new approaches to this half-century old program are overdue. But, we shouldn't repeat the mistakes of the past. Instead, Medicare beneficiaries should have more freedom to choose the coverage and services that best meet their individual needs and preferences. Before following the same ill-conceived path of the VA pharmacy program, we need to understand the risks of that approach and decide if we are willing to surrender control over these important healthcare decisions to the government. [Source: The Hill (Opinion) | Rafael Fonseca M.D. | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## Health Care Reform Update 66 ► Signup Changes

President Trump has promised to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act without taking insurance away from the millions of people who gained coverage under the law. On 15 FEB his Department of Health and Human Services made its first substantive proposals to change the marketplaces for individual coverage, commonly known as Obamacare. The proposed rules aim to keep insurers in the market during a transition to a new system. One way is to tighten up when people can sign up for coverage.



Secretary of the Department of Health and Human Services Tom Price

Insurers like Aetna. The company's CEO, Mark Bertolini, said 15 FEB that Obamacare is failing. "It's in a death spiral," he said at a conference sponsored by The Wall Street Journal. "And in the first look at this quarter it's not going to get any better. It's getting worse." Bertolini hinted that Aetna may follow insurance giant Humana, which said 14 FEB it was dropping out of the ACA exchanges altogether because not enough healthy people are buying insurance. HHS's proposed changes are designed to make the individual health care market less vulnerable to gaming by consumers. Insurance companies have complained that many people delay signing up until they're sick and then drop coverage after getting care. The administration's proposals include cutting the annual open enrollment

period to about six weeks instead of three months — to reduce the number of people who buy a policy because they find out about a health issue during that time.

HHS will also require people who want to sign up for coverage during so-called special enrollment periods to first prove they qualify because of a life change like losing a job or getting divorced. "The overall effect of many of the policies here would actually, over time, I think, actually shrink enrollment, not grow enrollment," says Sabrina Corlette, a research professor at Georgetown University's Center on Health Insurance Reforms. The rules would make it harder to enroll, and adding more paperwork will just turn off more people, she says, citing research into Medicaid and other public benefit programs. And the people who leave are likely to be the healthier ones, making the situation even worse for insurance companies. "Your healthy people are the ones who are going to be more likely to say, 'Oh, this is too much of a pain in the neck. I'm not going to go through with this,'" Corlette says. Still, Caroline Pearson, senior vice president at consulting firm Avalere, says some change is needed. "The special enrollment periods are a real problem in the market," she says. Her research shows that people who buy insurance during special enrollment periods incur a disproportionate share of money spent on health care.

The HHS proposal also allows insurers to increase deductibles and copayments, by loosening the standards of coverage. Right now plans are rated in terms of what proportion of the costs a customer pays. The new rules would widen the band by 2 percentage points, so that a plan that's marketed as covering 60 percent of health costs could actually pay for as little as 56 percent of those. In addition, the proposal says insurance companies can demand consumers pay off any missed premiums before they get a new policy. Today, a consumer can enroll in a plan, pay for just one month and then continue coverage for 90 days before getting cut off. The following year, the insurance company has to write a new policy even if the person hasn't paid for those three months. "In total, I think that the rule is helpful for insurers but probably not enough to change plans' minds in how to approach the exchange markets," Pearson says. "Plans that were going to leave the market will probably still leave the market and plans that were inclined to stay in will probably stay in, albeit a little happier." Humana is, therefore, unlikely to rethink its decision because of these changes.

As HHS tried to stabilize Obamacare while Congress debates its ultimate fate, the IRS is relaxing its plans to enforce the ACA's tax penalty. The agency had planned to reject tax returns of people who didn't say whether they had health insurance during the tax year. But the IRS changed that policy in response to Trump's executive order directing all federal agencies to ease the burden of the health care law. Taxpayers may still owe the penalty if they don't have coverage, however. "Legislative provisions of the ACA law are still in force until changed by Congress, and taxpayers remain required to follow the law and pay what they may owe," the IRS said in an emailed statement. Pearson at Avalere says the combined actions by HHS and the IRS could lead healthy people to drop their insurance coverage. "In total, I actually think the exchange market is going to shrink in size, dramatically, as a result of both the rule and the IRS move." [Source: NPR: All Things Considered | Alison Kodjak | February 15, 2017 ++]

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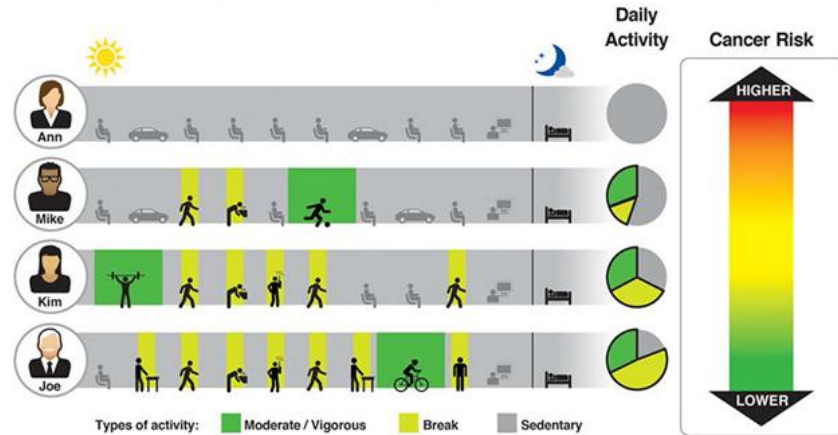
## **Sitting Disease Avoidance ► Reduce Your Cancer Risk**

Getting at least 30 minutes of exercise each day improves fitness and reduces your risk of chronic disease. But what you do for the other 23½ hours also can affect your health. Even though you're getting the minimum amount of exercise, you're at risk of "sitting disease," if the rest of your day is spent doing sedentary activities such as sitting or sleeping. You're still at risk of heart disease, diabetes, and other illnesses too. But there are ways to move more throughout your day.

### **The sedentary lifestyle**

For many, a typical day is spent sitting or sedentary – whether you're at your desk, in the car, at the dinner table, on the couch, or in bed. All this sedentary time puts you at greater risk of chronic diseases, including heart disease, diabetes, high blood pressure, and even cancer. The simple act of standing up has even more physiological benefits

when compared to sitting. The “active couch potato” phenomenon shows that even people who are relatively fit and meet the minimum requirements for daily exercise still exhibit risk factors for metabolic syndrome and other chronic diseases as sitting time increases. Sure, you might take the dog out for its morning walk, or maybe you did PT before work. Still, the more time you spend sitting the rest of the day, the greater your risk of disease. According to the American Institute for Cancer Research, even those who engage in moderate amounts of exercise and physical activity are still at risk of cancer if 12 or more hours in the rest of their day is spent seated or lying down.



### Workplace workout

Time is often a major reason that people say they don’t get enough exercise or physical activity during their day. It’s true that work can get busy, but it might just take a little creativity to turn it into a productive and physically active workday. It’s still unclear exactly how much exercise offsets or reduces your risk from sitting, and more research is needed in this area. In the meanwhile, try these tips to help reduce your sedentary time:

- Bike or walk to work, if possible. If you don’t live close enough to bike or walk the entire commute, try walking for at least part of your travel time. For example, park further from your building. Or choose a higher level in the parking garage.
- Take walking breaks. Walk to a coworker’s office instead of calling or emailing. You could walk to a cafeteria, park, or nearby bench before eating lunch. Experts suggest that even 2 minutes of walking per hour can be beneficial, so set your timer and go.
- Take the stairs. The more you climb, the easier it will get. Walk up and down escalators too instead of riding. Avoid elevators as much as possible.
- Take small standing breaks. When your phone rings, you could stand up to answer it and remain standing during the call. When someone visits your workspace, stand during your conversation. Or consider switching to a standing desk in your office.
- Use an activity tracker. Wearable technology can help remind you to stay active and keep moving.

Doing what you can to increase the amount of time you spend standing, exercising, and being physically active will improve your chances of a longer and healthier life. [Source: Human Performance Resource Center | February 14, 2017 ++]

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### Heart Maintenance ► Avoiding Heart Disease

The human heart is a remarkable machine, pumping blood through our bodies at an astonishing 85,000 beats a day. But like all machines, the heart must be well-maintained to function properly. Without care, heart disease becomes a very real possibility. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), an estimated 27.6 million

adults have been diagnosed with heart disease in the U.S. and nearly 610,000 people die from it every year, making it the No. 1 cause of death in both men and women. However, there are several steps you can take to maintain your heart health and reduce your risk of developing heart disease, no matter your age.

**Be aware of when you eat** -- Research by the American Heart Association (AHA) strongly suggests that when we eat matters just as much as what we eat (diet is one of seven factors that can make or break your heart health) when it comes to maintaining a healthy heart. The reason? Our organs have their own “clocks,” which might affect how our bodies process food throughout the day, explains Marie-Pierre St-Onge, lead author of the AHA scientific statement. The AHA recommends you consume a good amount of your daily calories in the morning. This makes sense because several studies have found breakfast eaters tend to weigh less, have better blood pressure, and have a lower risk of heart disease and other illnesses than those who skip breakfast. For best results, pile your breakfast plate high with fresh fruit, whole grain bread, low-fat yogurt, and other healthful items, while keeping the bacon to a minimum.

**Eat nuts** -- Not only are nuts tasty, but they're also rich in unsaturated fatty acids, fiber, vitamins, and other healthful compounds, all of which work together to reduce your risk of coronary heart disease, stroke, and other health issues. Researchers with Imperial College London and the Norwegian University of Science and Technology conducted a meta-analysis of 29 existing studies from around the world and found that as little as 20 grams of nuts a day - equal to a handful - can reduce the risk of coronary heart disease by nearly 30 percent, the risk of cardiovascular disease by 21 percent, and the risk of all cancers by 15 percent. Tree nuts - including almonds, cashews, hazelnuts, macadamia nuts, pine nuts, and walnuts - are your best bet. Peanuts, which actually are legumes, also are a good heart-healthy choice. Because nuts are high in calories, make sure to consume them in moderation and stick to the recommended serving size.

**Add red cabbage microgreens to your diet** -- Microgreens are seedlings of edible plants such as basil and kale that, until recently, primarily were used as garnish in fancy restaurants. We now know microgreens are packed with essential nutrients such as vitamins C and E and beta-carotene, and that red cabbage microgreens in particular might be able to reduce the risk of cardiovascular disease. Researchers with the U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA) gave red cabbage microgreens to mice that were fed a high-fat diet and saw a significant reduction in circulating LDL cholesterol, the so-called “bad” cholesterol that can boost one's risk of heart attack and stroke. The microgreens also reduced levels of dangerous triglycerides in the liver, the researchers reported.

**Watch your consumption of saturated fat** -- Americans love their saturated fat - the kind found in butter, red meat, lard, and dairy fat - even though it can raise our risk of coronary heart disease significantly. However, you can reduce that risk by as much as 8 percent simply by replacing 1 percent of saturated fat with healthier fats, whole grains, and plant proteins, report researchers with the Harvard T.H. Chan School of Public Health in Boston. According to senior author Dr. Qi Sun, assistant professor in the school's Department of Nutrition, the findings of the study corroborate current USDA guidelines regarding the consumption of saturated fat. Healthful alternatives include vegetable cooking oils rich in polyunsaturated fats and monounsaturated fats and low-fat dairy products.

**Go back to school** -- According to researchers with the Sax Institute in Australia, there is a significant link between lower education and a higher risk of heart attack or stroke. Analysts followed 267,153 men and women over age 45 for five years and found the heart attack rate among those without a college education was more than double that of people who had a university degree. The risk was around two-thirds higher among subjects with intermediate levels of education. How can graduating college help reduce your risk of cardiovascular disease and stroke? By influencing the type of job you have, where you live, what food choices you make and other life decisions, reports Kerry Doyle, CEO of the Heart Foundation New South Wales in Australia.

**Get extra help tracking and understanding your heart health** -- Every 40 seconds someone dies from heart disease in the U.S, according to the American Heart Association. And cardiovascular disease is the leading cause of preventable deaths in the U.S. To gain a better understanding of your heart health, reduce the risk factors of

developing cardiovascular disease (like obesity, high cholesterol, and high blood pressure), and make daily changes that will go a long way toward living a heart healthier lifestyle, check out these 12 apps. (Search for them in the iTunes App Store or Google Play on your smart device.)

- **ASCVD Risk Estimator** (American College of Cardiology): The ASCVD's free app helps you understand the risks of developing cardiovascular disease, as well as which risk factors are most relevant to you. As part of this highly individualized app, users can enter basic information - like their age and whether or not they smoke - and then further customize the app's tips by including their history of conditions like high blood pressure and diabetes. After entering this health data, the app provides a lifetime risk assessment for developing heart disease along with detailed information about individual risk factors and how to avoid them.
- **Blood Pressure Companion** (Maxwell Software): Blood Pressure Companion (free) illustrates the correlation between blood pressure and weight. As you track your blood pressure and weight through this app, you get data that shows how fluctuations in pounds can affect your blood pressure readings. In addition, the app reminds you to test your blood pressure, which helps to keep the data as accurate as possible.
- **Blood Pressure Log - MyDiary** (Zlamaniec): While this free app does not include a blood pressure monitor, it does keep detailed records to analyze trends. By entering data such as blood pressure readings, body posture, and cuff location, users create detailed graphs that can be sent to a doctor via email or used to generate reports in Excel spreadsheets or MS Word documents. Users can also track their glucose levels, weight, and oxygen saturation with this app.
- **Blood Pressure Monitor** (Taconic System LLC): This app allows users to monitor their blood sugar and blood pressure levels, as well as their weight. You can enter the medications you use and your daily diet in order to get statistical reports on vital functions. In addition, the free app allows you to easily email health data to your physician.
- **Cardiio** (Cardiio Inc.): Cardiio (free) helps users determine their ideal heart rate and, as they monitor their progress, lets them know when they're experiencing abnormalities. In addition, Cardiio shows how your heart rate measures up against others, like an Olympic athlete or someone living on an island. The app also has a seven-minute workout routine.
- **Cardiograph** (MacroPinch Ltd.): Cardiograph (\$1.99) makes heart health a family affair. By using the same type of technology found in a doctor's office, this app allows multiple users to track their heart rhythm by taking a picture of their fingertip. In addition, the app includes fun facts and trivia to help you learn about heart health in an entertaining way.
- **Health Mate** (Withings): Users can find out their blood pressure trends and real-time data through Health Mate, which includes a health pressure monitor. The app is free, but the blood pressure monitor can be purchased for \$129.95.
- **Healthy Heart 2** (Ringful LLC): If you are at high risk for developing heart disease, you can track your blood pressure, glucose, potassium, and cholesterol levels with this free app. In addition, you can enter information about your medications and behavioral factors that might contribute to the possibility of developing heart disease.
- **Instant Heart Rate** (Azumio Inc.): Through Instant Heart Rate (\$2.99), you can monitor your heart rate as you exercise, while avoiding putting too much stress on your heart. In addition, this app allows you to make comparisons about your heart rate during different activities. From running to resting and everything in between, Instant Heart Rate provides data that gives you an idea of when you're making your target heart rate - and when you're not.



- **Kardia Mobile** (AliveCor Inc.): Kardia Mobile is a \$99 product, which can be used with Android and Apple devices, designed for those who already have a history of cardiovascular problems. This compact tool allows users to record a medical-grade EKG in less than a minute and send data to a doctor to diagnose possible atrial fibrillation. In addition, Kardia Mobile tracks sleep, exercise, and dietary habits, as well as shortness of breath.
- **MotionX 24/7** (MotionX): Those who want to monitor their heart health while they're awake and asleep use MotionX 24/7 (\$0.99). For daily monitoring, you can compile data on weekly and monthly heart-rate highs and lows, as well as get information on heart rates during exercise and rest. In addition, MotionX 24/7 has a motion sensor that tracks sleep habits, a microphone to detect snoring, and a smart alarm. This app also has a pedometer function to help users track heart health data on multiple fronts.
- **Smart Blood Pressure** (SmartBP) BP Tracker (Evolve Medical Systems LLC): This free app is particularly helpful for those who either have heart disease or are at high risk of developing it. Through SmartBP, patients can record their systolic and diastolic blood pressure, as well as their pulse, and easily share that data with their doctor. It also has a feature that tracks body mass index, helping those who want to lose weight meet their goals.

[Source: MOAA News Exchange | Don Vaughan | February 16, 2017 ++]

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## TRICARE Podcast 385 ► Cyberfit | Heart Attacks | GASpO

**Staying Cyberfit**-- Medical devices are getting more connected to each other through the internet, hospital networks, other medical devices, and smartphones. While this technology helps improve patient care and reduces errors, it comes with cyber security risks that could affect the safety and security of your medical device.

There are steps you can take to secure your medical devices. Before you even go home with your device, talk to your doctor and address any concerns you may have. Make sure the device works properly and that you know how to use it. This includes knowing how to configure your device so that it's as secure as possible.

If your device connects to wireless networks, make sure yours has a strong, unique password and don't share it. Don't connect your device to public Wi-Fi and install any malware or virus protection software that is available for your device. Hold on to your digital medical device when you're in a public place. Finally, if you no longer need your medical device, then delete all the information you have stored on it before getting rid of it. Get more cyberfit at [www.TRICARE.mil/cyberfit](http://www.TRICARE.mil/cyberfit) .

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**Recognizing Heart Attacks** -- If you were having a heart attack, would you know? According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the major symptoms of a heart attack are pain or discomfort in the jaw, neck, or back; feeling weak, lightheaded, or faint; pain or discomfort in arms or shoulder; and shortness of breath. But sometimes symptoms aren't what you'd expect. For example, women are more likely to have other symptoms, including unusual or unexplained tiredness, and nausea or vomiting. Sometimes symptoms may have a gradual onset, come and go, or be mild. You may confuse your chest pain for heartburn. If you have diabetes, then you may have no symptoms at all.

Find out your heart attack risk from your doctor. If you have heart disease, then there is a greater danger that part of your heart's blood flow could be blocked, causing a heart attack. Remember, the sooner you get to an emergency room after a heart attack, the less damage that will be done, and the higher your likelihood of survival. Don't feel embarrassed if your symptoms turn out to be something less serious. Heart disease is the leading cause of death, and one out of every five heart attacks is silent. If you think you may be having a heart attack, call 9-1-1 immediately. You must go to the emergency room to prevent and reduce heart muscle damage. TRICARE covers emergency care.

Go to [www.TRICARE.mil/emergency](http://www.TRICARE.mil/emergency) . But TRICARE also covers preventive services that can help you avoid, diagnose, and possibly even reverse heart disease. Go to [www.TRICARE.mil/preventive](http://www.TRICARE.mil/preventive).

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**Great American Spit Out** -- Roses are red, violets are blue, but chewing tobacco makes your lover say “Eww!” Don’t let smokeless tobacco ruin your date night plans. On 23 FEB, veterans dropped the dip with TRICARE and Quit Tobacco. The Great American Spit Out or GASpO is an annual event where smokeless tobacco users around the country ditch the dip for twenty four hours in the hopes that it helps them quit for good. When you drop the dip you also drop the risks for developing cancer in your mouth, heart disease, high blood pressure, heart attacks and high cholesterol. You’ll lose the leathery white patches and red sores in your mouth, as well as smelly breath and maybe even the possibility of tooth loss!

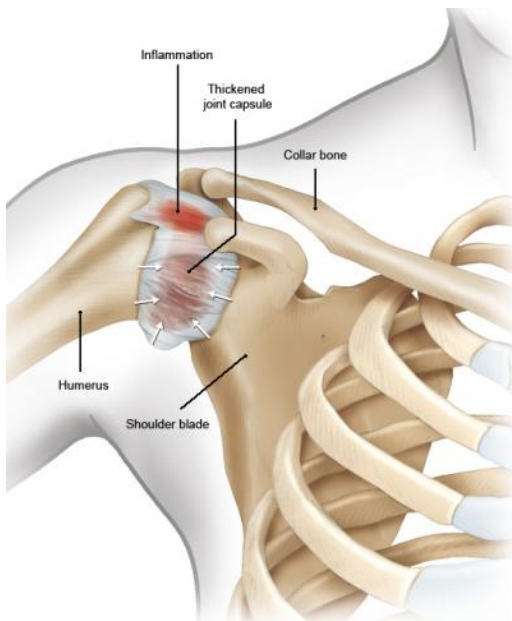
Did you know snuff and dip have three to four times more nicotine than a cigarette, which makes it more addictive and harder to quit? Though it may not be easy, the Quit Tobacco campaign here to help. Visit [www.UCanQuit2.org](http://www.UCanQuit2.org) for tips and resources including a quit support text message program, FAQs, a savings calculator and 24/7 live chat support. TRICARE covers a number of programs including quitlines, live chat counseling, educational materials and tobacco cessation medication. Learn more at [www.TRICARE.mil/tobacco](http://www.TRICARE.mil/tobacco) .

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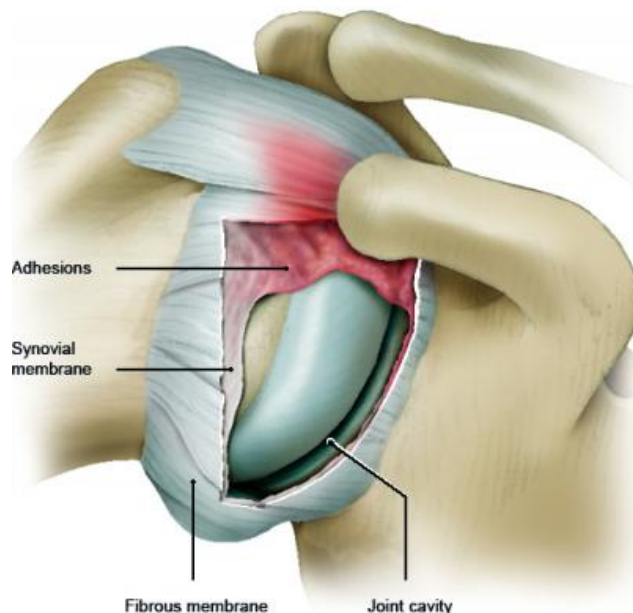
The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: <http://www.tricare.mil/podcast> | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## Frozen Shoulder ► Cause & Treatment



*Shoulder with an inflamed joint capsule*



*Frozen shoulder: Scar-like adhesions in the joint capsule*

If you have what is known as frozen shoulder, your shoulder gradually becomes painful and stiff without there being any clear cause. It most commonly affects people around the age of 50. Frozen shoulder will usually get better without treatment. It can take several months for the pain to disappear completely, though, and a lot longer until you

can move your shoulder normally again. But a number of treatments can help to temporarily relieve the symptoms. Frozen shoulder starts out very gradually. The pain is usually only mild at first, but becomes more severe over the course of a few months and often makes it hard to sleep. It then becomes increasingly difficult to lift your arm up or move it backwards. Over time the shoulder can become so stiff that it is nearly impossible to move, as if “frozen” in place. The medical term for frozen shoulder is “adhesive capsulitis.”

Joints connect the different bones in our bodies. In the shoulder joint, the rounded end of the bone in the upper arm (humerus) fits into a socket in the shoulder blade (scapula). This “ball and socket joint” is surrounded by a strong fibrous membrane called the joint capsule. In frozen shoulder, scar-like adhesions form in the joint capsule, causing it to thicken. Inflammations are believed to play a major role here, but it is not entirely clear what happens. In most cases no underlying cause is found for frozen shoulder. In rare cases it may develop following an accident, an inflammation or immobilization of the shoulder joint, for example after surgery. It is then referred to as “secondary” frozen shoulder.

Frozen shoulder is most common in people between the ages of 40 and 60. It is estimated that 2 to 5% of the population are affected by frozen shoulder at some point, and it is somewhat more common in women than in men. People with diabetes are particularly likely to develop a frozen shoulder: About 10 to 20% of people in this group get it, but it is not yet known why this happens. The condition tends to go through three phases:

- In the first phase, the shoulder starts hurting and becomes more and more painful. The pain is worse at night if you lie on the affected shoulder, or when you move your shoulder up or back. This stage can last two to nine months.
- In the second phase, the shoulder “freezes.” It becomes increasingly difficult to move, and the pain starts subsiding. The shoulder muscles may weaken somewhat due to limited movement. This phase lasts between four and twelve months.
- In the third phase, the shoulder becomes more flexible and increasingly easier to move. It can take one to three years for the shoulder to become as flexible or nearly as flexible as before.

The time that frozen shoulder lasts can vary greatly. Many people only have minor problems after one to one-and-a-half years, but the healing process can also take a lot longer. Most people only develop frozen shoulder once in their lifetime. But about 6 to 17 out of 100 people who have frozen shoulder get it in their other shoulder within five years. Shoulder pain can be caused by a lot of different things. Doctors diagnose frozen shoulder based on a description of the symptoms and an examination of the shoulder. You might have an x-ray or MRI scan of your shoulder to rule out other possible problems, or if it is especially difficult to determine the cause of your symptoms. But this is usually not necessary.

The healing process takes time and cannot be sped up. But there are various pain relief options and ways to improve shoulder mobility. During the first phase of frozen shoulder, the focus is on pain relief. Afterwards, the main goal of treatment is to help you move your shoulder more. Common treatments for pain relief include the following:

- Application of heat or cold to the joint
- Anti-inflammatory painkillers like ibuprofen (tablets or cream)
- Steroids (tablets or injection in shoulder)
- Hydrodilatation / Arthrographic distension (injection of a solution to improve joint flexibility)
- Stretching exercises and physiotherapy can be used to improve joint mobility. Surgery is rarely used in the treatment of frozen shoulder because it gets better on its own, and the procedure carries the usual risks associated with surgery and the use of anesthetics. This also applies to mobilization of the joint under general anesthetic.

[Source: <https://www.informedhealth.org/frozen-shoulder.2583.en.html> | February 23, 2017 ++]



## Concurrent Receipt Status Update 07 ► Proposal Concerns

TREA has been receiving many inquiries from members regarding an issue that has apparently been going around the internet and getting many people upset. This has to do with Concurrent Receipt. They are being asked about the CBO report titled “Eliminate Concurrent Receipt of Retirement Pay and Disability Compensation for Disabled Veterans” which was previously reported in the Bulletin. Note that this is NOT a proposal. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) puts out a report each year which lists government programs that 'COULD' be eliminated or cut back if Congress wants to save money. However, these are only for informational purposes to Congress. They are NOT proposals. This proposals would only become a problem if a member of Congress decided to take information and have a bill drafted to do what the report says could be done. TREA will let everyone know if this changes and someone in Congress or the Administration actually decides to propose this change in the law. TREA would, of course, along with many other veteran organizations do all they can to stop it. If this were to come to pass readers will be encouraged to call their legislators and express their disapproval of any such action. [Source: TREA Washington Update | February 1, 2017 ++]

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## Pay Withholding by State ► Where Does Your State Rank?

Crossing state lines can make a big difference in your take-home pay. In fact, one state — Hawaii — withholds more than \$542 from every median-salary worker’s paycheck, a recent GOBankingRates analysis found. By contrast, several other states withhold just under \$403. For the analysis, the financial data site calculated how much money is withheld per paycheck in every state and Washington, D.C., for a worker making \$50,000 a year. Depending on the state, these withholding amounts can include:

- Federal income taxes
- Federal Insurance Contributions Act (FICA) taxes — better known as Social Security and Medicare taxes
- State income taxes
- Family leave insurance
- Unemployment insurance

GOBankingRates found that the worst state for withholding for someone who makes \$50,000 a year — or \$1,923.08 biweekly — is Hawaii. From every paycheck, \$542.24 would be withheld. For someone making a median-range salary of \$50,000, the five worst states for withholding are: Hawaii, Oregon, Idaho, South Carolina,

and Minnesota. The study also looked at the impact on higher-salary workers. For someone who makes \$100,000 a year, the worst states are: Oregon, California, Hawaii, Idaho and Washington, D.C.

The states that take the least money out of residents' paychecks have a key characteristic in common: no state income tax. These states are:

- Alaska
- Florida
- Nevada
- New Hampshire
- South Dakota
- Tennessee
- Texas
- Washington
- Wyoming

In all of these states except Alaska, \$402.93 would be withheld from the biweekly paycheck of someone who earns \$50,000 a year. In Alaska, which withholds money for a state unemployment tax, \$412.55 would be withheld from the biweekly paycheck of someone with a \$50,000 salary. To see exactly how much is withheld in every state, check out the full analysis by GOBankingRates at <https://www.gobankingrates.com/personal-finance/much-money-gets-taken-out-paychecks-state>. While withholding amounts might comprise a big chunk of a paycheck in any state, they aren't the only financial factor to consider when crossing state lines. To learn about other factors, check out:

- <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/top-10-states-for-protecting-your-nest-egg-retirement> "Top 10 States for Protecting Your Nest Egg in Retirement"
- <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/the-17-best-states-for-retirees-2017> "The 17 Best States for Retirees in 2017"
- <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/property-taxes-where-does-your-state-rank> "Property Taxes: Where Does Your State Rank?"

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | February 24, 2017 ++]

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## **Debt** ► **Housing, Car, and Student Tips**

Americans rang in 2017 with near-record debt. The Federal Reserve Bank of New York reported<sup>16 FEB</sup> that household debt balances "increased substantially" in the fourth quarter of last year, totaling \$12.58 trillion as of Dec. 31. That figure reflects an increase of 1.8 percent from the previous quarter. It is now only 0.8 percent below the peak of \$12.68 trillion in total household indebtedness seen in the third quarter of 2008. Several members of the New York Fed's Research and Statistics Group note in a blog post that if American debt continues to grow at recent rates, total household indebtedness will return to that peak level sometime this year. Our current indebtedness is different than it was in 2008, though. For example, the report says delinquencies are "much lower" — 4.8 percent at the end of 2016 compared with 8.5 percent in the third quarter of 2008. The composition of our debt has also changed since 2008.

### **Housing debt**

Mortgages and home equity lines of credit, or HELOCs, made up 79 percent of household debt in 2008, "a figure that had been fueled by the rapid growth in house prices during the boom," the researchers note. Now such debt makes up 71 percent of all household debt, "a level even lower than the 74 percent observed in 2003, as the housing boom was underway." While this might be good news, few homeowners enjoy having a mortgage hanging over their heads. Take a look at "Your Mortgage: The Rate That Changes Lives" in MoneyTalksNews Solutions Center at

<http://www.moneytalksnews.com/rates/mortgage-rates> if you're considering refinancing to help pay your mortgage off sooner, or if you're in the market for a mortgage. There, you can search for a better mortgage rate. Also, you may want to check out the pros and cons of refinancing in "6 Painless Ways to Pay Off Your Mortgage Years Earlier" at <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/6-painless-ways-pay-off-your-mortgage-years-earlier>.

While refinancing can help you retire the debt earlier, it's not be the best way to pay off a mortgage ASAP. As explained at <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/ask-stacy-should-pay-off-mortgage> "... there's only one way to do it: Always pay more than the minimum. Send in as much as you can as often as possible." There's a hitch to this, though. it continues: "... make sure you designate the additional money as principal reduction. A simple note on your check or electronic payment should do. But check with the servicer. If they don't get the message, the extra money could go to prepay future payments rather than paying off principal."

Other debt

### Car & Student loan debt

According to the New York Fed's report, the rising debt seen in recent years has been driven not by housing debt but by student loans and car loans. Looking at 2016 as a whole:

- Car loans increased by \$93 billion, or 8.7 percent. Additionally, 2016 saw more new car loans taken out than in any year in the 18-year history of this data.
- Student debt increased by \$78 billion, or 6.3 percent.

If you have a car loan or are considering one, be sure to check out "Car Loans: Are You Paying Too Much?" <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/rates/auto-loans>. You might also want to check out:

- <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/4-ways-car-loans-can-wrong-and-how-avoid-them> "4 Ways Car Loans Can Go Wrong and How to Avoid Them"
- <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/dont-take-out-car-loan-before-reading-this/> "Don't Take Out a Car Loan Before Reading This"
- <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/4-simple-steps-get-the-very-best-car-loan%E2%80%8B> "Need a Car Loan? Here's How to Get the Best Deal"
- <https://www.moneytalksnews.com/solutions/student-loans> "Get Help with Student Loan Debt."

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsler | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## Homeowners Insurance ► Claims | Inventory & Contents Tips

When you deal with an insurance company on a claim where large dollars are at stake—it's business. You're not dealing with your "good neighbor"—you're dealing with a company that's in business to be profitable. Give your insurance company a chance to do the right thing, but don't mistake a friendly adjuster for a friend. Adjusters are trained to control payouts by gaining your trust while being firm about dollars and cents. You're probably overwhelmed by your losses and the insurance process. You're not on a level playing field. To assist you in the process of preparing your claim go to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Home Inventory & Contents Claim Tips**". [Source: VFW Post 10132 | Rich McMeekin | February 16, 2017 ++]

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## Homeowners Insurance Update 01 ► What's Not Covered

When a 5.8 magnitude earthquake hit Washington, D.C., in August 2011, those of us who experienced damage rushed to find our homeowners insurance policies to see if we were covered. The answer: nope. Earthquakes aren't a

covered peril under most homeowner policies. It's easy to assume the premiums you pay automatically assure that no matter what happens, you're "in good hands." Most insurance policies cover damage that's of the once-in-a-blue-moon variety – like an airplane landing on your roof. Few, however, cover something experienced by thousands of homeowners every year: damage from flooding. The most common policy, an HO-3 (HO stands for "homeowners"), covers everything other than things specifically excluded. But the exclusions can be glaring... What's not covered

- When the earth moves – Think earthquakes, landslides, and sinkholes.
- Water damage – Burst pipe? Yes. But water coming from rivers, lakes, streams, or ocean? No. Also not covered: water seeping from the ground.
- Neglect – Failure to preserve your home and stuff to the best of your ability during or after a loss.
- War – Not covered, whether it's an undeclared war, civil war, insurrection, or a "warlike act." Also not covered: discharge of a nuclear weapon, even if it's accidental.
- Governmental action: If your stuff is destroyed or seized by the cops or other governmental agencies, no coverage.
- Business-related property and liability: If you're running a business from your home, stuff related to that business may be excluded and require additional coverage. Likewise, liability from business-related activity may also be excluded.
- Power failure: If you lose the food in your freezer because of a blackout, you might have limited coverage, but for other damage, no.

For more on what's covered and what's not, see the <http://www.iii.org/article/am-i-covered> page of the Insurance Information Institute's website. Better yet, find the exclusions in your own policy by looking at it – they can vary by state and type of policy.



If you want to save on homeowners insurance, don't do it by cutting coverage. Maintain enough property insurance to fully replace your home and furnishings, as well as enough liability coverage to protect your net worth in case you're sued. If there's even an outside chance you could be affected by flood, get flood insurance. It's probably cheaper than you think. For a quick estimate visit the government's [floodsmart.gov](https://www.floodsmart.gov/floodsmart/pages/faqs/what-will-my-flood-insurance-premium-cost.jsp) page at <https://www.floodsmart.gov/floodsmart/pages/faqs/what-will-my-flood-insurance-premium-cost.jsp> for a quick estimate. Another place to avoid scrimping is replacement vs. cash value coverage. From the clothes in your closet to your furniture, the things in your home are worth a lot less than you paid for them. If they're destroyed and you want them replaced with new stuff, you need replacement coverage. If you have only cash value coverage, you'll be paid their depreciated value – think yard-sale prices. If you can afford it, always get replacement coverage.

So how do you save? The best way is raising your deductible. The more you're willing to pay before your insurance company has to, the lower the cost. Raising your deductible from \$250 to \$1,000, for example, can lower your premium by 10 percent or more. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Michele Lerner | February 18, 2013 ++]

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## Funeral Homes Update 01 ► Cost Estimate Reliability

It can be difficult to get an accurate cost estimate for the price of a funeral these days. Why? Because some funeral homes are effectively burying their costs from consumers. A Federal Trade Commission regulation known as the Funeral Rule (<https://www.consumer.ftc.gov/articles/0300-ftc-funeral-rule> ) is intended to protect consumers in part by requiring funeral homes to provide transparent pricing information. However, some funeral homes fail to comply with those federal disclosure requirements. A recent undercover investigation by the FTC revealed that 31 of the 133 funeral homes it investigated were in violation of the Funeral Rule because they did not provide consumers with an itemized price list.

Joshua Slocum, executive director of the death care watchdog Funeral Consumers Alliance refer readers to <http://www.npr.org/2017/02/08/504031472/despite-decades-old-law-funeral-prices-are-still-unclear> for an explanation of the funeral pricing challenge: “*The consumer stands firmly in 1951, because that seems to be the technological level and the transparency level that the majority of American funeral homes are stuck at.*” Fortunately, funerals don’t have to break the bank. Many Americans are now opting for cremation, rather than a traditional burial. Cremation offers a significant cost savings, but that’s just one of the “7 Reasons Cremation Is Becoming America’s Favorite Last Act” at <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/7-reasons-cremation-becoming-americas-favorite-last-act>. You can also opt for a “green” or “natural” burial, or perhaps even a home burial. Those are just two of the money-saving ideas included in “15 Ways to Have a Memorable Funeral on the Cheap” at <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/15-ways-to-have-a-memorable-funeral-on-the-cheap>.

Hosting a funeral in an alternative location has benefits beyond saving money, as that story makes clear: *A simple memorial service also can be held in a park, the mountains, the beach or another lovely place that’s free of charge or perhaps was meaningful to the deceased.* If you’re planning the funeral of a loved one and you’re not sure where to start, check out “How to Manage the Costs of a Funeral” at <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/how-manage-the-costs-funeral>. [Source: MoneyTalksNews Krystal Steinmetz | February 16, 2017 ++]

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## IRS Audit Update 08 ► Tips On Surviving One

The Internal Revenue Service is severely underfunded, which means the odds are low that your federal tax return will be audited. After losing about a quarter of its enforcement staff amid recent budget cuts, the agency’s capacity is the lowest it’s been in a decade, according to U.S. News & World Report. The chance of an audit is under 1 percent on average — but soars to nearly 35 percent in the uppermost income brackets, according to a breakdown by the nonprofit Tax Foundation. But if you are among the unlucky ones who open the mailbox and find a notice of audit, here’s how to proceed:

1. **Take a deep breath** -- Calm yourself. After the shock wears off, reread the IRS letter to understand exactly what it says. Look for details explaining which aspects of your tax return are in question and precisely which documents you need to provide. “If you filed your tax return yourself and you have a complete understanding of each item on your return, you should be able to make it through an audit without any trouble,” says CNBC.
2. **Understand your rights** -- Hearing from the IRS can be scary, but you have rights. The IRS adopted a 10-point Taxpayer Bill of Rights in 2014 acknowledging those rights. A couple of examples:
  - IRS rules give the agency just three years from when you filed your return to demand any additional money for that tax year. (There are a few exceptions, including a finding of fraud on your part.)
  - The IRS has 10 years to collect back taxes from you.



The National Taxpayer Advocate, an independent service within the IRS, explains taxpayer rights in more detail at <https://taxpayeradvocate.irs.gov/taxpayer-rights> and has additional information and articles answering tax questions.

3. **Get help** -- If you hired a CPA to prepare your tax return, or if you did your own return but feel unequipped to face the IRS, get professional help. Check with the tax adviser who prepared your taxes to see if representation during an audit is part of the service. If not, learn the cost of hiring representation. Accountants often caution their clients not to respond directly to an IRS notice. There is potential for problems, such as bringing down additional scrutiny on yourself by saying the wrong thing or trying to respond to a question you'd be better off not answering. "Not only does a tax preparer have a professional stake in their clients' audits, they have the knowledge and expertise to easily identify the reason for an IRS exam and help businesses and individuals prepare documentary evidence to counter claims of tax deficiencies," says legal website Nolo (<http://www.nolo.com>).

A representative acting on your behalf can always plead ignorance of the answer, follow up with you and then get back to the auditor. "This not only buys time for you to think carefully about how you will answer; it may also let the question drop if the auditor fails to follow up on it," enrolled agent Steven J. Weil of RMS Accounting in Fort Lauderdale, Florida says. If the IRS brings up tax fraud, get a tax adviser to represent you. Also, if a meeting with the IRS seems to be going poorly, request a recess to consult with an adviser.

4. **Get a postponement** -- Schedule your appointment with an auditor as far in advance as possible so you have plenty of time to prepare for the meeting. If you need more time, just before the meeting date, ask for a postponement so you can continue your preparations. Be sure to get a response to your request — in writing.

5. **Meet on neutral ground** -- When scheduling your meeting with the auditor, hold it on neutral territory — at your tax adviser's office or at another venue. Holding it at your home or office puts you at a disadvantage. If you are asked to host an audit at your business premises, consult a tax pro, advises Nolo.

6. **Meet every deadline** -- Don't make grief for yourself by blowing off crucial deadlines for filing responses, attending meetings and producing documents. Stay on top of every single deadline.

7. **Thoroughly prepare for your meeting** -- Begin immediately locating and organizing your tax returns for the year in question and pull out all supporting documentation. This enables you to see and gain command of the materials in question, fill in any gaps and familiarize yourself with the documents. Also, there are more subtle benefits: You'll gain confidence from preparation and having command of your response, and attending meetings thoroughly prepared tells your auditor that you are diligent and respect the process.

8. **Resist the urge to be extra-helpful** -- Give the auditor exactly what was requested and nothing more. Answer the questions you are asked, and produce the documents requested. But do not bring to a meeting or offer to produce copies of other years' tax returns or any documents that are not named in the audit request. "You do not want them opening up lines of questioning on other issues because you said or showed something that made them question something else," says CNBC. Nolo offers this advice: If you have something to hide, don't provide evidence to the auditor, but don't lie, either. The adjustments she may make could be less damaging than if you had given her what she asked for.

9. **Recalibrate your expectations** -- You may well be required to pay a penalty. Depending on why your return is being audited, emerging from an audit scot-free may not be a realistic goal.

10. **Negotiate on the issues** -- When you get the auditor's report, you can call the auditor if you disagree with the findings or do not understand them. If that is not satisfactory, request a meeting with the auditor's manager, and try to come up with a compromise. But haggling with the IRS auditor over how much tax you owe is not a winning strategy. Neither is pleading poverty. "Instead," says Nolo, "negotiate tax issues — for example, whether a certain deduction should be allowed." In other words, make sure you understand the auditor's points and mount a reasonable, well-researched case to rebut them, backed up by your documentation.

11. **File an appeal** -- If your efforts to discuss the findings don't produce a satisfactory result, and you receive a Statutory Notice of Deficiency (or "90-day letter") saying you owe additional taxes and listing the areas where the IRS disputes your tax return, you have the right to appeal and will have 90 days to make the appeal. The IRS publication "Your Appeal Rights and How to Prepare a Protest if You Don't Agree" (<https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p5.pdf>) explains the options. Nolo also explains in "The Pros and Cons of Appealing an IRS Audit" at <http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/pros-cons-appealing-irs-audit-29757.html>.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Marilyn Lewis | February 17, 2017 ++]

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## Tax Burden for Nebraska Retired Vets ► As of Mar 2017

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 Nebraska. **Note:** The state has a statutory provision for automatic adjustment of tax brackets, personal exemptions or standard deductions to the rate of inflation.

### Sales Taxes

**State Sales Tax:** 5.5% (food and prescription drugs exempt); local option taxes could add an additional 2.0% to the state rate. For local rates, refer to <http://www.revenue.nebraska.gov/ratefinder.html>.

**Gasoline Tax:** 46.6 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

**Diesel Fuel Tax:** 52 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes. *Fuel taxes are variable and are reset on July 1 and January 1*)

**Cigarette Tax:** 64 cents/pack of 20

### Personal Income Taxes

**Tax Rate Range:** - 2.46%; High – 6.84%

**Income Brackets:** Four. Lowest – \$3,060; Highest – \$29,590 (The tax brackets reported are for a single individual. For married couples filing jointly, the same rates apply for income under \$6,120 to over \$59,180.)

**Personal Tax Credits:** Single – \$131; Married – \$262; Dependents – \$131;

**Standard Deduction:** Single – \$6,300, Married – \$12,600

**Medical/Dental Deduction:** Federal amount

**Federal Income Tax Deduction:** None

**Retirement Income Taxes:** Railroad Retirement benefits are exempt. Out-of-state government pensions are fully taxed. Social Security is taxable to the extent of federal taxation.

**Retired Military Pay:** Follows federal tax rules.

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

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

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

### Property Taxes

Real property is assessed at 100% of its actual (market) value. A property tax credit is provided for all parcels of property based on the valuation of each parcel. The estimated credit for 2012 is \$71.50 for each \$100,000 in valuation. The state has a homestead exemption that provides relief from property taxes by exempting all or a portion of the valuation of the homestead from taxation. There are three groups of exemptions: A) persons age 65, B) certain disabled individuals, and C) certain disabled veterans and their widow(er)s. Call 800-742-7474 or 402-471-5984 for details or go to <http://www.revenue.nebraska.gov/info/96-299.pdf>. For information about the homestead exemption refer to <http://www.revenue.nebraska.gov/PAD/homestead.html>.

### **Inheritance and Estate Taxes**

Nebraska's inheritance tax, which is collected at the county level, applies to bequests, devises, or transfers of property or any other interest in trust or otherwise having characteristics of annuities, life estates, terms for years, remainders, or reversions. Nebraska inheritance tax is computed on the fair market value of such annuities, life estates, terms for years, remainders, and reversions. The fair market value is the present value as determined under the provisions of the Internal Revenue Code of 1954, as amended, and its applicable regulations with respect to estate tax. The Nebraska estate tax and generation-skipping transfer tax have been repealed for decedents dying or transfers made on or after January 1, 2007.

Visit the Nebraska Department of revenue site [www.revenue.nebraska.gov/index.html](http://www.revenue.nebraska.gov/index.html) for further information,

[Source: <http://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-kansas-new-mexico#NEBRASKA> | March 2017 ++]

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## **Social Security Reform Update 04 ► Possible Major Changes**

With Republicans in control of the House, the Senate, and the White House for the first time in eight years, The Senior Citizens League (TSCL) believes that major changes to the Social Security program could be on the way. Last summer, when they adopted their party platform, Republicans promised to make changes to the program in order to extend the solvency of its trust funds past 2034. The platform that they adopted rules out revenue increases – such as an elimination of the payroll tax cap that would require millionaires and billionaires to contribute more to the program – a proposal supported by 75% of older voters and backed by TSCL. That leaves only benefit cuts on the table. The following three proposals have gained the support of Republican leaders in recent years, and TSCL believes they will be featured strongly in Social Security reform plans in the near future. Without vigilance from senior activists and strong efforts to fight benefit cuts, these proposals could be signed into law by President Trump before the end of the 115th Congress.

**Proposal 1:** Increasing the eligibility age. Life expectancy has increased in recent decades, and many on Capitol Hill believe Social Security's eligibility age should be adjusted accordingly. Last summer, legislation was introduced that would raise the retirement age from 67 to 69 over the course of 12 years, and then tie the age of eligibility to life expectancy. That comprehensive reform plan received praise from many leading lawmakers, despite research that shows a one-year increase in the eligible age amounts to an across-the-board benefit cut of roughly 7%.

**Proposal 2:** Adopting the “chained” COLA. Proposals to switch to a more slowly-growing Social Security cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) have been floating around the halls of Congress for years. Budget hawks have touted it as a minor technical correction to the way inflation is measured, but according to TSCL's research, it would amount to a significant benefit cut when compounded over the course of a retirement.

**Proposal 3:** Means-testing benefits. Many Republican leaders on Capitol Hill have also supported proposals that would create a Social Security means test, so that moderate and high-income seniors would receive reduced monthly benefits. But creating a means test would transform Social Security from an insurance program – where benefits are based upon lifetime earnings – into a welfare program for older Americans, and many believe that it would

dramatically weaken public support for the program over time and leave middle income seniors living close to the poverty level.

It's too early to tell what President Trump and the 115th Congress have in store for older Americans, but TSCL believes the three proposals mentioned here will likely gain traction on Capitol Hill. In the months ahead, TSCL will monitor negotiations to reform the Social Security program very closely, and continue to advocate for solutions like the Social Security Expansion Act that would strengthen and modernize the program responsibly, without cutting benefits for current or future beneficiaries. [Source: TSCL Leg Up | February 21, 2017 ++]

\* General Interest \*



## Notes of Interest ► 1 thru 14 Feb 2017

- **Immigrant Children.** Nationwide, 25 percent of children have at least one immigrant parent—in California, that number is doubled with 4.5 million kids. In congressional districts 17, 34 and 46, which represent parts of greater Los Angeles and the San Francisco Bay Area, more than 75 percent of children have at least one immigrant parent.
- **Military Power Report.** The annual International Institute for Strategic Studies report released 14 FEB on military power throughout the world cites Chinese and Russian activity as rising threats to Western powers. It also says Britain has fallen below the 2 percent defense spending target set for NATO countries.
- **Fat Leonard.** Navy Cmdr. Mario Herrera is the 12th Navy official to be charged in a wide-ranging bribery case involving a Malaysian defense contractor nicknamed "Fat Leonard." Herrera was accused in a complaint unsealed 16 FEB of accepting prostitutes, luxury trips, and \$1,800 in steaks from Leonard Glenn Francis in exchange for classified information. A total of 17 people have been charged so far in the case that has taken down officials for about three years.
- **Drug Prices.** A recent survey of over 3,000 brand name prescription medications found that prices have more than doubled for over 60 drugs since 2014.
- **COLA.** The January CPI is 236.854, 0.8 percent above the FY 2016 COLA baseline. The CPI for February 2017 is scheduled to be released on March 15, 2017.
- **Execution.** Arizona has found a unique way to attack the crippling shortages of the anesthetics it uses for executing the condemned. Inmates facing the death penalty are now permitted to supply their own lethal drugs.
- **Fortune cookies.** One of America's top writers, Donald Lau, is calling it quits. He has been writing fortune cookies for Wonton Foods for the past 30 years. He is suffering from writer's block. James Wong will be taking over the writing. He is a relative of the company's founder. Donald Lau could not get inspired to write and now it's going to be all Wong. In this case a few Wongs will make a write.
- **Smart TVs.** Samsung has confirmed that its "smart TV" sets are listening to customers' every word, and the company is warning customers not to speak about personal information while near the TV sets. The company revealed that the voice activation feature on its smart TVs will capture all nearby conversations.

The TV sets can share the information, including sensitive data, with Samsung as well as third-party services.

- **Battle of Ia Drang.** In the last RAO Bulletin I reported the death of 94 year old Ret. Gen Hal Moore who was the U.S. commander during the first major battle with the North Vietnamese. Four videos related to that battle can be viewed at [https://youtu.be/wK\\_pTsl6jHQ](https://youtu.be/wK_pTsl6jHQ), <https://youtu.be/FxPeHqH4XxI>, <https://youtu.be/82LqvxhuFEY>. and <https://youtu.be/jPRI48pQJIY>.
- **American Legion.** Happy Birthday to the American Legion who celebrated their 98th birthday on 15 March 2017.
- **50's.** For a nostalgic pictorial trip back to the 1950's accompanied by the music of Buddy Holly go to <http://nethugs.com/interesting/memories-of-the-1950s/#asdm4Wre13vwd27.99>.
- **North Korea.** The situation on the Korean Peninsula may become more unpredictable with North Korea's economy expected to be hit hard by a Chinese ban on buying its coal, and as the United States and South Korea prepare for joint military drills. The Ministry of Commerce said China would suspend all imports of coal from North Korea for the rest of the year, in accordance with existing United Nations sanctions over Pyongyang's nuclear and missile programme.
- **U.S. Army.** The Army is offering bonuses worth up to \$40,000 or enlistment contracts as short as two years as it tries to recruit 6,000 more soldiers this year than it had planned.
- **Prisons.** The U.S. Justice Department has reversed an order by the Obama administration to phase out the use of private contractors to run federal prisons. Attorney General Jeff Sessions said the Obama policy impaired the government's ability to meet the future needs of the federal prison system.
- **Who's On First.** For those of you old enough to remember this Bud Abbot -Lou Costello skit you can see it again and have a few laughs at <https://youtu.be/sShMA85pv8M>.

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## South China Sea ► ASEAN Militarization Concerns

Southeast Asian countries see China's installation of weapon systems in the South China Sea as very unsettling and want to -prevent militarization and urge dialogue to stop "recent developments" from escalating, the Philippines said. Foreign ministers of the 10-member Association of South East Asian Nations (Asean) were unanimous in their concern about Beijing's reclamation and militarization of man-made islands, Philippine Foreign Secretary Perfecto Yasay said. Yasay did not specify which developments provoked the concern, but said the bloc hoped China and the US would ensure peace and stability.



"The Asean members have been unanimous in their expression of concern about what they see as a militarization of the -region," Yasay told reporters after a ministers' retreat on the Philippine island of Boracay. The Philippines is

chairman of the grouping this year and will host its annual meetings, some of which are joined by other powers, including China and the US. “They have noticed, very unsettlingly, that China has installed weapons systems in these facilities that they have established, and they have expressed strong concern about this,” Yasay said, referring to artificial islands.

Friction between the US and China over trade and territory under United States President Donald Trump have fuelled worry that the South China Sea could become a flashpoint, with many Southeast Asian economies heavily dependent on both powers. China claims most of the energy-rich waters, through which about US\$5 trillion in trade passes every year. Neighbors Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam also have claims. China on 17 FEB completed war games involving its aircraft carrier. The next day the U.S. navy said its aircraft carrier strike group had begun routine patrols in the South China Sea. Three days earlier China warned against that, following an incident in February when a US navy plane and a Chinese military aircraft came close to each other over the South China Sea.

Yasay said Asean nations recognized policies under Trump were still “evolving” but hoped he would unveil them within the next few months to provide a “more concrete and clearer picture”, especially regarding China. [Source: South China Morning Post | February 21, 2017 ++]

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## **GTMO Prison Update 09 ► Iraqi Suicide Bomber Was Ex-Detainee**

A suicide bomber who attacked a military base in Iraq in mid-FEB along with at least three other ISIS fighters detonated suicide bombs in Mosul that left several Iraqi soldiers dead and others wounded. According to the Associated Press he was a former Guantanamo Bay detainee freed in 2004 after Britain lobbied for his release, raising questions about the ability of security services to track the whereabouts of potential terrorists. The Islamic State group identified the bomber as Abu Zakariya al-Britani, and two British security officials also confirmed the man was a 50-year-old Briton formerly known as Ronald Fiddler and as Jamal al-Harith. He was one of 16 men paid a total of 10 million pounds (now worth \$12.4 million) in compensation in 2010, when the British government settled a lawsuit alleging its intelligence agencies were complicit in the torture of prisoners at Guantanamo Bay, according to the officials. The officials spoke on condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the issue.



**Ronald Fiddler aka Abu Zakariya al-Britani allegedly in car in which he blew himself up**

Al-Harith was a web designer and convert to Islam when he set off on a visit to a religious retreat in Pakistan in October 2001. He says he was warned the country was not safe due to deep anti-British and American sentiment in the days before the U.S. attack on Afghanistan, and decided to return to Europe by land via Iran and Turkey.

Instead, he said he was detained at gunpoint near the border with Afghanistan and turned over to the Taliban, which charged him with being a British spy, beat him and threw him in jail. A couple of months later he was liberated by the Northern Alliance and allowed to call home. He told his family he would be back soon, but instead was turned over to the Americans and sent to Guantanamo Bay. Like many others, he claims he was tortured there. He was released in March 2004 along with four other British detainees who had been held for up to two years over their alleged links to al Qaida and the Taliban.

Hardship followed him to his native Manchester, England, said his sister, Maxine Fiddler. He struggled to find work. "Once you've been labeled (as a terrorist) people always say there's something there, and that's stopped him from getting a job," Fiddler said of her brother in an interview in 2007. Al-Harith and 15 others had sued the British government, alleging it knew about or was complicit in their treatment while in the custody of U.S. forces. Alex Carlile, Britain's former independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, said that al-Harith's case was settled to avoid disclosing sensitive documents in a court battle. "Plainly he was a terrorist and he was a potentially dangerous terrorist," he told the BBC. "The issue was the legal disclosure rules. If someone brings a civil action for damages they are entitled to disclosure of material, some of which may be national security material."

The issue will raise questions about how a person clearly on the radar of security officials might have left Britain and traveled to the Middle East without raising signals from the security services. Arthur Snell, a former head of the Prevent program, which is part of the Britain's counter terrorism strategy, said the authorities clearly had lost track of him. "It's obvious that collectively, the authorities — and obviously I have some personal responsibility there — we failed to be aware of what Fiddler was up to," he told the BBC. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Paisley Dodds & Danica Kirka | The Associated Press | February 22, 2017 ++]

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## Help!!! ► Things that might make you say it (10)



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## Have You Heard? ► Potpourri || UP

### Potpourri

- Marriage is a relationship in which one person is always right, and the other is a husband.

- A Polish immigrant went to the DMV to apply for a driver's license. First, of course, he had to take an eyesight test involving a card with the letters 'C Z W I X N O S T A C Z.' 'Can you read this?' the officer asked. 'Read it?' the Polish guy replied, 'I know the guy.'
- Mother Superior called all the nuns together and said to them, 'I must tell you all something. We have a case of gonorrhoea in the convent.' 'Thank God,' said an elderly nun at the back. 'I'm so tired of chardonnay.'
- A wife was making a breakfast of fried eggs for her husband. Suddenly, her husband burst into the kitchen. 'Careful,' he said, 'CAREFUL! Put in some more butter! Oh my gosh! You're cooking too many at once. TOO MANY! Turn them! TURN THEM NOW! We need more butter. Oh my gosh! WHERE are we going to get MORE BUTTER? They're going to STICK! Careful. CAREFUL! I said be CAREFUL! You NEVER listen to me when you're cooking! Never! Turn them! Hurry up! Are you CRAZY? Have you LOST your mind? Don't forget to salt them. You know you always forget to salt them. Use the! salt. USE THE SALT! THE SALT!' The wife stared at him. 'What in the world is wrong with you? You think I don't know how to fry a couple of eggs?' The husband calmly replied, 'I just wanted to show you what it feels like when I'm driving.'
- Fifty-one years ago, Herman James, a North Carolina mountain man, was drafted by the Army. On his first day in basic training, the Army issued him a comb. That afternoon the Army barber sheared off all his hair. On his second day, the Army issued Herman a toothbrush. That afternoon the Army dentist yanked seven of his teeth. On the third day, the Army issued him a jock strap. The Army has been looking for Herman for 51 years.
- February 2017 calendar structure will not occur again in your life time. February 2017 has: 4 Sundays, Mondays, Tuesdays, Wednesdays, Thursdays, Fridays & Saturdays This happens once every 823 years
- Having already downed a few power drinks, she turns around, faces him, looks him straight in the eye and says, "Listen here, good looking, I will screw anybody, anytime, anywhere, their place, my place, in the car, front door, back door, on the ground, standing up, sitting down, naked or with clothes on... It doesn't matter to me. I just love it." His eyes now wide with interest, he responds, " No kidding... I'm in government too. Are you federal or state?"
- Donald Trump has announced that he now has all the necessary materials to build "the wall" along the Mexican border. You should have known this when Trump won the election; 60 million Democrats each shit a brick.
- An old Marine Pilot sat down at the Starbucks, still wearing his old USMC flight jacket and ordered a cup of coffee. As he sat sipping his coffee, a young woman sat down next to him. She turned to the pilot and asked, 'Are you a real pilot?' He replied, 'Well, I've spent my whole life flying planes, first Stearmans, then the early Grummans... flew a Wildcat and Corsair in WWII, and later in the Korean conflict, Banshees and Cougars. I've taught more than 260 people to fly and given rides to hundreds, so yeah, I guess I am a pilot, and you, what are you? She said, 'I'm a lesbian. I spend my whole day thinking about naked women. As soon as I get up in the morning, I think about naked women. When I shower, I think about naked women. When I watch TV, I think about naked women. It seems everything makes me think of naked women.' The two sat sipping in silence. A little while later, a young man sat down on the other side of the old pilot and asked: "Are you a real pilot?" He replied, 'I always thought I was, but I just found out I'm a lesbian.'

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UP -- These thoughts come from a retired Army lieutenant colonel: Lovers of the English language might enjoy this.

There is a two-letter word that perhaps has more meanings than any other two-letter word, and that is 'UP.'



- It's easy to understand UP, meaning toward the sky or at the top of the list, but when we awaken in the morning, why do we wake UP?
- At a meeting, why does a topic come UP?
- Why do we speak UP and why are the officers UP for election and why is it UP to the secretary to write UP a report?
- We call UP our friends.
- And we use it to brighten UP a room, polish UP the silver; we warm UP the leftovers and clean UP the kitchen.
- We lock UP the house and some guys fix UP the old car.

At other times the little word has real special meaning.

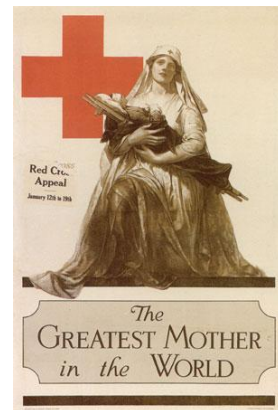
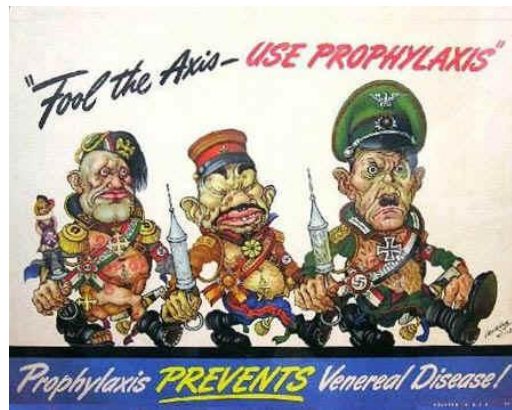
- People stir UP trouble, line UP for tickets, work UP an appetite, and think UP excuses.
- To be dressed is one thing, but to be dressed UP is special.
- A drain must be opened UP because it is stopped UP.
- We open UP a store in the morning but we close it UP at night.
- We seem to be pretty mixed UP about UP!

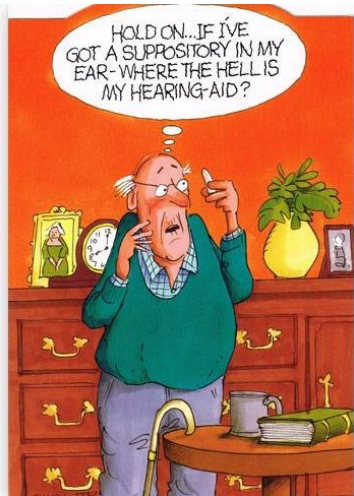
To be knowledgeable about the proper uses of UP, look the word UP in the dictionary. In a desk-sized dictionary, it takes UP almost 1/4th of the page and can add UP to about thirty definitions.

- If you are UP to it, you might try building UP a list of the many ways UP is used.
- It will take UP a lot of your time, but if you don't give UP, you may wind UP with a hundred or more.
- When it threatens to rain, we say it is clouding UP.
- When the sun comes out we say it is clearing UP
- When it rains, it wets the earth and often messes things UP.
- When it doesn't rain for awhile, things dry UP.

One could go on and on, but I'll wrap it UP, for now my time is UP, so.....it is time to shutUP! Now it's UP to you what you do with the word UP.

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