

RAO BULLETIN 1 May 2018

PDF Edition



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1. The page number on which an article can be found is provided to the left of each article's title
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.

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NPRC Lost Records Update 05 ► 3K to 5K Restored Weekly

On July 12, 1973, approximately 16-18 million Official Military Personnel Files were destroyed when a fire ripped through the National Personnel Records Center (NPRC) in St. Louis. More than 40 years later, staff at the NPRC still are attempting to piece together those records. Kevin Pratt, NPRC's assistant director for Military Records, told American Legion Department Service Officers School attendees that teams at the facilities are reconstructing 2,000-3,000 records per week. Using information that was not destroyed, and working with other agencies and the military branches to get additional information, close to six million records have been reconstructed since the fire.

"It is probably the most painful thing I have to deal with on a day-to-day basis," Pratt said. "It's very difficult to tell a veteran and family members that we don't have their records and that it was destroyed in the fire. It's frustrating to deal with, but we've done a lot of things over the years to try to ... satisfy the requirement for the service veterans. "We're at about 90 percent-plus able to do a record recreation of that veteran's service and produce a document they can use for the (Department of Veterans Affairs) and other benefits. That's a good thing, but there's obviously a lot of history lost in that fire."

The NPRC houses military records of individuals who served in the Army, Navy, Marine Corps, Air Force and Coast Guard dating as far back as 1886 and as recently as 2008. No National Guard records are stored at the NPRC unless a Guardsman served on active duty or was federalized. Those who were never called up to active duty will likely be referred to their respective state. No military unit information is housed at the facility, though Pratt said staff there has contacts with agencies that can help locate that info. "A lot of what we do at the NPRC is liaising with both the (military branches) and the VA in order to provide benefits for the veterans," Pratt said. "In many cases, there's a lot of complexity associated with it, and have to kind of weed through it to find out what we need to do to provide the benefits for the veteran."

Pratt urged anyone seeking a veterans' records for the sake of receiving VA benefits makes sure to state that is the reason for the request. There is a fee of \$25 per five pages to receive a record, but there is no fee if the request is to secure a veteran benefits. With 77 million records that include several of the same names, Pratt urged providing the most specific information possible when submitting a records request. But, "if a veteran sends it to us on a cocktail napkin, we'll honor that request as long as they sign it," he said. [Source: The American Legion, Steve Brooks, July 27, 2017]

Defense Health Agency Update 09 ► TRICARE Overpaid \$16.2M for Breast Pumps

The Pentagon has been spending as much as \$1,400 for an electric breast pump that goes for \$192 in stores, according to an Inspector General's report released 27 APR. Overall, the Defense Health Agency (DHA) overpaid \$16.2 million for standard electric breast pumps and replacement parts provided to beneficiaries in the former North, South and West Tricare regions, the Pentagon IG's office said.

Congress first ordered Tricare to provide a free standard electric breast pump to all new moms as part of the 2015 National Defense Authorization Act. With a physician's prescription, each mom can receive a free new breast pump and supplies, such as tubing and breast pump bottles, per "birth event." Under Tricare's policy, the pumps can be ordered through a medical supply company and billed directly to Tricare, or users can purchase a pump at a store and submit the receipt themselves. But the DHA policy failed to "require contractors for the three Tricare regions to use suppliers with fixed reimbursement rates," the investigation found.

The report said DHA "overpaid for breast pumps by 91.2 percent [overpaying for 54,006 of 59,241 pumps] and by 56.8 percent for replacement parts [overpaying for 380,911 of 671,112 parts] when compared to the negotiated fixed reimbursement rate for eight different breast pump models. DHA paid \$12.2 million more for breast pumps and \$4 million more for replacement parts than it would have if it had required the Tricare regional contractors to use suppliers with fixed negotiated rates. If the DHA continues the practice of excessively over paying reimbursements to beneficiaries, given the current pricing and volume, they could overpay \$81.2 million over the next five years." The worst example of overpayment was to a supplier in Pennsylvania in Tricare's then-North region of \$1,400 for a Medela Pump in Style Starter Set. "This same breast pump can also be purchased on the open market for \$192," the IG's report said.

The report began as an examination of whether the Defense Department was paying too much for breast pumps and replacement parts for Tricare beneficiaries. The report recommends that the Defense Health Agency put in place

fixed rates for breast pumps and parts, a step that then-Tricare West contractor United Healthcare had taken on its own with two national suppliers. Even so, United Healthcare recouped more than \$718,000 in overpayments from one unnamed supplier, Tricare officials told investigators.

They added in their official response that they plan to revamp their coverage policy to include fixed reimbursement rates across the system. The report also said Tricare should eliminate the option for moms to buy their own pumps and supplies and submit receipts for reimbursement, an option less than 1 percent of beneficiaries used in 2016, they found. But Tricare disagreed with that recommendation. "The DHA Director stated that the DHA wants to allow beneficiaries to continue to have access to out-of-network providers and retail environments for the purchases of these items with reasonable cost controls," the report said. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk & Amy Bushatz | Apr 27, 2018 ++]

DoD Blended Retirement System Update 01 ► Retention Concerns

The military's personnel chiefs are concerned about retaining troops under the new Blended Retirement System, they told members of the House Armed Services Personnel Subcommittee in recent testimony. The BRS went into effect 1 JAN for all new entrants into military service. At the same time, the window opened for the one-time-only opt-in period to the new system for those eligible servicemembers.

In response to a question about the impact of the new BRS from Rep. Don Bacon (R-Neb.), a member of the subcommittee and a retired Air Force officer, the personnel chiefs unanimously voiced their concerns regarding retention. "The new BRS fundamentally requires the services to relook at the way that we seek to retain talent and will force the Air Force to fundamentally change the way that we retain airmen," Lt. Gen. Gina Grosso, Air Force deputy chief of staff for Manpower, Personnel, and Services, said. The personnel chiefs said they anticipate the services will have to look at the how they use continuation pay as a retention incentive. They acknowledged they will not have any data about what, if any, effect the BRS has on retention for at least seven to 10 years.

Continuation pay is a key component of BRS in that the services will need to retain the right talent to stay on at the midpoint of a 20-year career. The baseline amount for continuation pay is 2.5 times a servicemember's base pay, but leaders currently have the authority to increase that amount based on the career field and manpower requirements. Active duty servicemembers, including Active Guard Reserve and full-time support personnel, may be eligible for a continuation pay multiplier of 2.5 to 13 times their monthly basic pay. National Guard or Reserve members in a drilling status may be eligible to receive a multiplier of 0.5 to 6 times their monthly basic pay (as if serving on active duty).

MOAA has continued to work closely with Congress and DoD to ensure full BRS details are readily available not only to affected servicemembers and their leadership but also to spouses. Find more information regarding the BRS on www.Defense.gov and on your individual service's website. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | Mike Barron | April 20, 2018 ++]

Afghan AWOL's ► 9 of 150 AWOL Trainees in U.S. Remain Unaccounted For

The Defense Department has reported that as of February, nine of the more than 150 Afghan trainees in the United States who went absent without leave, or AWOL, across the nation remain unaccounted for. Afghan trainees in the United States go AWOL at a rate of 6 percent. Conversely, trainees from other countries go AWOL at a rate of only 0.07 percent, according to the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction. The numbers were given to

Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO), the ranking member of the U.S. Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs.

In a press release, McCaskill’s office said 11 of those Afghan trainees who went AWOL were training at Fort Leonard Wood, in her home state of Missouri. “The fact that there were ever Afghan military personnel unaccounted for in Missouri is deeply concerning, and I’m glad to get answers from the Defense Department showing that they’ve all been accounted for — however, it’s clear that there’s more the government can do to prevent this moving forward,” McCaskill said in a statement.

The trend of Afghan military personnel ditching their duties has been fairly common, according to a report published in October by the special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, or SIGAR. “We found that nearly half of all foreign military trainees that went AWOL while training in the United States since 2005 were from Afghanistan (152 of 320),” the report reads. Company-grade officers, with the rank of lieutenant or captain, were the most common trainees to go AWOL. Given the key role company-grade officers play in providing direct leadership to their NCOs and younger enlisted personnel, the trend of defection among them is concerning, according to SIGAR. SIGAR also found the number of Afghan trainees going AWOL has been increasing since 2015. The instances of AWOL trainees may degrade the operational readiness of Afghan National Defense and Security Forces (ANDSF) and the morale of fellow trainees and home units, as well as pose a security risk for the United States, according to SIGAR’s report.



Students from the 24th Commando Qualification Course applaud during their induction ceremony at the Afghan National Army Special Operations School of Excellence, Camp Commando, Kabul, Afghanistan, on Jan. 24, 2018.

the United States for additional instructional courses they can’t get elsewhere, the report said. McCaskill originally raised her concerns to the Defense Department and Department of Homeland Security late last year after reading SIGAR’s findings. She requested answers on the current status of Afghan trainees in the United States as well as details on how the agencies work together to locate those who go missing, according to her office. “Protecting the security of Missourians and all Americans is one of my most important responsibilities as a Senator, and I’m committed to getting to the bottom of how the government will do a better job of keeping track of foreign military personnel in the U.S.,” she added.

While McCaskill cited security concerns for U.S. citizens, SIGAR’s report found that Afghan trainees tended to go AWOL on years that coincided with much higher levels of violence on the battlefield back home. AWOL trainees were particularly high in 2009, for instance, which coincided with a 50 percent increase in the total number of Afghan Army and National Police killed in action. Part of the problems found in tracking Afghan trainees include limited vetting of their visas, which can make it difficult to locate those who go missing. In a letter sent 23 APR to the Department of Homeland Security’s Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE), McCaskill’s office said she was requesting more answers concerning “what has been done to improve coordination across different agencies to

lessen the risk of trainees going AWOL and locate them if they do.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Kyle Rempfer | April 24, 2018 ++]

Exchange/DeCA Merger Update 01 ► **Exchange Execs Opposed to Proposal**

Defense Department officials want Congress to include in its fiscal 2019 defense policy bill new authorities to execute its plan to merge the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) with the three military exchange services under a single system of on-base stores to be called the Defense Resale Enterprise. Resisting that effort out of public view are executives of the exchange services who fear their own success in running base department stores, gas stations and convenience outlets, which generate profits to support on-base morale, and recreational activities, could be put at risk by some of the policy executives they blame for deepening the decline in sales across the commissary system.

Congress two years ago gave the department authority and new tools to “transform” base grocery stores, which for generations relied on taxpayer dollars to offer a wide array of brand products to military families and retirees at cost. In addition, shoppers pay a five percent surcharge to fund the modernizing or replacement of aging commissaries. The goal of recent reforms is to turn commissaries into profit-generating stores, similar to exchanges, thus lowering the \$1.3 billion annual subsidy so that money can be diverted to more critical needs for sustaining a ready fighting force. Congress insisted, however, that overall savings to patrons not drop, even as DeCA phases in more business-like practices. Two big ones are variable pricing of goods to replace the tradition of selling at cost, and adoption of commissary-label goods to compete for patron dollars with a narrowed selection of national brands.

Manufacturers over the past year have competed through pricing for commissary shelf space. Surviving brands, in turn, often have cut coupon offerings and other promotions to make up for lower pricing, say industry sources. Meanwhile, they have complained, it’s unclear whether their reduced profit margins are being passed on to patrons or retained to offset commissary operating costs. So far, critics in industry contend, one clear consequence of commissary reforms has been to accelerate declining sales. Policy officials implementing the reforms are now seen as doubling down on their bet, insisting that, to survive, military resale stores must consolidate to squeeze out inefficiencies, rescue commissaries and evolve into super retailers to more effectively compete with commercial stores, not only on prices but on providing a more attractive, rewarding and convenient shopping experience.

Officials are warning Congress, store suppliers and advocates for military shoppers that defending the status quo, amid falling sales, will jeopardize “the department’s ability to ensure the long-term viability” of base stores. The comment appears in a draft legislative proposal for creating the Defense Resale Enterprise by merging DeCA with the Army & Air Force Exchange Service, Navy Exchange Command and the Marine Corps exchange system. A merger, the proposal contends, will reduce reliance on appropriated funding; eliminate management redundancies; increase standardization of processes and systems; cut operating costs, and generate greater margins on goods sold “to be reinvested in price reductions, morale, welfare and recreation program funding and capital reinvestment.” It also contends it “will increase the enterprise’s agility to respond to dynamic mission, industry and patron requirements and trends; and [to] ensure the long-term viability of these services” as benefits of military service.

Sources say exchange officials are concerned that the team executing what so far are unproven commissary reforms is directing a merger of all resale operations with misleading claims. They are bristling at briefing materials to explain merger plans that lump exchanges in with DeCA as distressed operations. That’s just wrong, exchange leaders are contending, according to sources. For example, AAFES touts that it has almost doubled earnings from sales over a recent five-year period, from 3.2 percent in 2012 to 5.9 percent in 2016, despite an 11 percent force drawdown across Army and Air Force in those years. Also, its website business is growing 50 percent annually and AAFES says it consistently has delivered about \$375 million annually to support MWR programs.

And yet, sources say, to win support for a merger, Defense officials have portrayed exchanges as part of a failing resale system. The only store system that has been mismanaged, particularly against outside competitors, is DeCA, they insist. One internal communication referred to DeCA “the elephant in the room,” with sales down 20 percent since 2012 and current reforms aggravating patrons rather than turning sales around.

On 12 APR, Defense officials briefed some military associations on merger plans, perhaps also learned what sort of resistance to expect. Advocacy groups say they need to learn more. “We are open to ideas that could make the system more efficient as long as they also preserve the value of the benefit for military families,” said Eileen Huck, deputy director of government relations for National Military Family Association. Priorities for families are to sustain shopper savings, improve the in-store experience and ensure proper funding of MWR programs, Huck added.

Streamlining of backroom processes across base stores to gain efficiency, without diluting the shopping benefit, “is something we support,” said Brooke Goldberg, director of military family policy for Military Officers Association of America. But how does a full merger of stores benefit the exchanges, she asked. “We don’t have answers on that,” she said. “The intriguing part of all this is the untapped potential of commissaries...[T]here are things that should be explored [to] preserve that benefit. But we also want to preserve the exchange benefit,” Goldberg said. “Any change to the commissary that negatively affects the exchange is not something we support.”

Steve Rossetti, director of government affairs for the American Logistics Association, the industry trade group for businesses supporting military resale, cautioned against using exchange earnings to underwrite a wider resale enterprise. The earnings belong to patrons, he said, and have been used for decades to reinvest in exchanges and support MWR to improve base community programs. Rossetti suggested Defense officials should focus first on reversing the falloff in sales at commissaries before launching a merger with exchanges to try to gain long-term efficiencies, and also that they “take a long hard look before they leap to ensure benefits truly outweigh costs.”

There’s fear a broken commissary system, and the quest to cut taxpayer support of it, could endanger still thriving exchanges if, through merger, their profits are seen as a life raft to save grocery discounts as the law requires. The draft legislative proposal, however, describes different goals aimed at keeping all base retail operations competitive, for example by allowing exchanges and commissaries to combine into single stores. This could “respond to generational shopping habits” and to market forces “impacting all traditional grocery and retail stores,” it says. “Millennials (ages 22-36), who collectively represent the majority of military shoppers, [are] using technology to shop and save, and are driven by speed, convenience, proximity, variety (rather than brand) and experiences.” [Source: Military.com | Tom Philpott | 19 Apr 2018++]

DoD Budget 2019 ► Major Bill Aims to Slash Pentagon Bureaucracy

The chairman of the House Armed Services Committee has targeted most Pentagon support agencies for a 25 percent cut, proposing seven be shuttered entirely. If adopted, it could lead to thousands of defense civilian job cuts and massive changes for defense contractors. Texas Republican Rep. Mac Thornberry announced the proposal 17 APR, aimed at eliminating bureaucratic waste to reap more than \$25 billion to reinvest in war fighting. The moves come after he and other pro-defense lawmakers won a two-year budget deal that boosts defense to \$700 billion in fiscal 2018 and \$716 in fiscal 2019.

The proposal netted swift condemnation as “foolish and shortsighted” from the American Federation of Government Employees, which represents 700,000 workers in the federal government. “Proposing across-the-board budget cuts and eliminating agencies that support the war fighter is counterproductive to our national security mission and disruptive to the lives of civilian employees, many of whom are veterans, whose jobs could be eliminated if Congress approves these cuts,” said AFGE National President David Cox. On 17 APR, Thornberry

unveiled at a news conference legislative language aimed at taming what he sees as uncontrolled growth within the Defense Department's "fourth estate" agencies, which are supported by 200,000 civilian personnel and 600,000 contractors, at a cost of more than \$100 billion per year.

"All of the savings and efficiency have to stay within DoD to get more capability into the war fighter faster," Thornberry said. "To summarize the whole thing from my perspective, it is reduce the overhead to put more resources at the tip of the spear." Thornberry proposed eliminating these agencies, "whose functions are more efficiently replicated elsewhere" in DoD:

- **Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA)**, whose information technology support mission would be folded into U.S. Cyber Command.
- **Defense Technical Information Center (DTIC)**, which acquires, stores and disseminates scientific and technical information to aid in defense research and development.
- **Office of Economic Adjustment (OEA)**, which aids communities hurt by defense program changes, including base closures.
- **Defense Technology Security Administration (DTSA)**, which guides policy on U.S. arms transfers overseas to safeguard America's military edge and prevent the diversion of defense-related goods to terrorists.
- **Test Resource Management Center (TRMC)**, which coordinates among DoD test and evaluation facilities.
- **Defense Human Resources Activity (DHRA)**, which guides and implements human resource initiatives, budgets, policies and programs.
- **Washington Headquarters Services (WHS)**, which provides operational and administrative services to the DoD. Hiring a senior executive service employee through the agency, Thornberry argued, "is considered a success if it takes less than nine months."

The proposal is not law, but draft language intended for the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, which is due to be marked up in full committee next month — and later reconciled with the Senate's expected version of the NDAA. The cuts, if adopted, would not take effect for two years. DoD's chief management officer would gain new service secretary-like authorities over the agencies and submit a plan by March 1, 2020, to execute the cuts by Jan. 1, 2021. DoD combat-support and intelligence agencies would be exempt from the proposed cuts. That includes the Defense Intelligence Agency, the Defense Health Agency, the National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency and the National Security Agency.

At the news conference, Thornberry defended likely cuts to the civilian and contractor workforces as an attempt to streamline Pentagon decision-making. He cited more than 20 agencies that have input into the Committee on Foreign Investment in the United States as an example of DoD redundancy run amok. "I'm going to try to get rid of one of them because I don't think we need 20," he said. "Is it possible that the civilians who work for that agency feel like their job is threatened? Yes, I understand, but we have to speed up decision-making and have accountability."

The moves, he said, are consistent with his and the new Defense Department leadership's commitment to getting better value for taxpayers and make DoD more agile. "I'm not saying they endorse all this stuff by any stretch, but I do think we are trying to swim in the same direction," he said, adding that he wanted to spark a discussion with the DoD's own internal reform cell. Asked whether he was concerned by the cultural change he was seeking by merging DISA and Cyber Command, Thornberry said: "If I'm not making somebody nervous, I'm not doing anything." "We have to have a culture that is willing to be disruptive if we're going to adequately defend the nation," Thornberry said. [Source: DefenseNews | Joe Gould | April 17, 2018 ++]

Federal Website Confusion ► Vets.gov vs. Veterans.gov

Sen. Claire McCaskill wants to know whether vets.gov, a federal website designed to give information about their benefits, is being undermined by veterans.gov, a wholly separate federal website designed to give information about their benefits. She’s hoping President Donald Trump’s administration, which has repeatedly pledged to cut back on government waste and redundancy, can step in and simplify the problem. “I have no doubt the intention behind the decision to do this was good, but the practical effect is confusing and needs to be fixed,” the Missouri Democrat said in a statement 18 APR. “Men and women who’ve served our country in uniform have earned the benefits laid out on these sites. It’s unnecessary to make accessing them more complicated than it already is.”

Vets.gov, which is run by the Department of Veterans Affairs, was launched in 2015 in an effort to give veterans a single internet entry point for a host of benefits and department information. Visitors can apply for VA health services, education stipends and ID cards through the site. **Veterans.gov**, which is run by the Department of Labor, focuses on employment opportunities and business start-up benefits for veterans. In a letter to the two department’s acting leadership, McCaskill asked why the two separate sites don’t coordinate and whether they share her concerns that the arrangement contributes to confusion among veterans. The sites are operated independently and do not feature links to each other.

The Department of Labor’s oversight on a host of veterans programs has been a source of conflict in recent years, with questions of whether those offerings would be more efficiently handled within VA. McCaskill’s website complaint is the latest round in that discussion. She has asked for an official response from the administration by mid-May on whether there are any plans to connect the sites or eliminate one of them. [Source: AirForceTimes | Leo Shane III | April 18, 2018 ++]

DFAS Address Change Update 01 ► All Retirees and Annuitants | Final Notice

On May 1, 2017, the mailing addresses for Retired and Annuitant Pay changed, and mail has been forwarded from the old P.O. Box addresses to the new mailing addresses since that date. The old addresses in Kentucky will be discontinued on April 30, 2018 and any mail received after April 30, 2018 will be returned. The new addresses are:

Retired Pay: Defense Finance and Accounting Service, U.S. Military Retired Pay, 8899 E 56th Street, Indianapolis IN 46249-1200

Annuitant Pay: Defense Finance and Accounting Service, U.S. Military Annuitant Pay, 8899 E 56th Street, Indianapolis IN 46249-1300

Mail sent to the old P.O. Boxes in London, KY, will be forwarded to the new addresses until April 30, 2018 (after that date, mail sent to the old addresses will be returned). Sending mail to the old addresses will add seven to ten days to the normal processing time. The telephone and fax numbers have not changed. Continue to use <https://mypay.dfas.mil/mypay.aspx> to access your Retiree Account Statements. For additional information visit <https://www.dfas.mil/retiredmilitary.html>. [Source: DFAS-Cleveland | Director, Retired Pay | April 18, 2018 ++]

Transgender Troops Update 16 ► Trump Ban On Hold Pending Trial

A U.S. judge in Seattle has ordered President Donald Trump not to ban transgender troops from serving in the military, saying it’s unclear whether recent changes to his administration’s policy are constitutional. U.S. District Judge Marsha Pechman was one of four judges nationwide who blocked Trump late last year from overturning an

Obama-era directive allowing transgender troops to serve openly. The Justice Department asked her to dissolve that ruling, citing changes that would allow transgender troops to serve in limited cases.

Because the changes were announced just last month, the sides had not had time to argue whether the policy is discriminatory or whether the military is entitled to set its own policy, given its expertise in what's needed for national defense, Pechman said in an order 13 APR. She told the parties to prepare for trial. "Because transgender people have long been subjected to systemic oppression and forced to live in silence, they are a protected class," Pechman wrote. "Therefore, any attempt to exclude them from military service will be looked at with the highest level of care." She also said the government must show that the ban "was sincerely motivated by compelling interests, rather than by prejudice or stereotype, and that it is narrowly tailored to achieve those interests."

The Pentagon lifted its longstanding ban on transgender troops in 2016. Trump took defense leaders by surprise last July, when he tweeted that the U.S. government would not allow transgender members to serve. It triggered a number of lawsuits, and federal judges in Seattle; Baltimore; Washington, D.C.; and Riverside, California, blocked Trump from rescinding former President Barack Obama's policy. The Pentagon began allowing transgender people to serve and enlist on 1 JAN. Defense Secretary Jim Mattis also launched a review on the issue, forwarding recommendations to Trump in February.

Trump issued a memo 23 MAR giving the Pentagon the go-ahead to implement a policy that would block transgender people from serving in many cases. Transgender people who have been diagnosed with gender dysphoria or have a history of the condition would be banned, with some exceptions. Those who can show they have been stable for 36 months would be allowed to serve if they adhere to the standards for their "biological sex." Anyone who has transitioned to their preferred gender or who needs medical treatment to do so would be presumed ineligible for service, though they could seek individual waivers allowing them to serve.

Under Pechman's ruling, that policy can't take effect. She said the changes didn't truly amount to a new policy but "instead threaten the very same violations" that led her and other judges to block the ban. Her ruling came in a challenge brought by several transgender troops or prospective troops, as well as civil rights organizations including Lambda Legal. The state of Washington is also a plaintiff. "The court's ruling means President Trump's hastily conceived and discriminatory ban now has to stand up to the court's most rigorous standard of review," Attorney General Bob Ferguson said in a statement 15 APR. "I am confident the ban will not withstand that."

The head of the U.S. Coast Guard on 17 APR said it will continue allowing transgender members to serve in the military branch until a policy officially bans transgender troops. The Coast Guard operates under the Department of Homeland Security but is a branch of the U.S. armed forces and would fall under the transgender ban. [Source: The Associated Press | Gene Johnson | April 16, 2018 ++]

Transgender Troops Update 17 ► All 4 Service's Leadership Concur Not An Issue

Air Force Chief of Staff Gen. Dave Goldfein told Congress 24 APR he was not aware of any negative effects from transgender personnel serving, joining all three other service chiefs in a rare public split with President Donald Trump over the issue. Sen. Kristen Gillibrand (D-NY), as she had with the top military leaders of the Army, Navy and Marine Corps when they appeared before the Senate Armed Services Committee for their budget hearings, used the opportunity to question Goldfein as to whether he was aware of any "issues of unit cohesion, disciplinary problems or issues of morale resulting from open transgender service."

"In the last two weeks Gen. [Mark] Milley, Gen. [Robert] Neller, and Adm. [John] Richardson have told me that they have seen zero reports of issues of cohesion, discipline, morale as a result of open transgender service in their respective service branches," Gillibrand said, referring to the chiefs of staff of the Army, Marine Corps and Navy, respectively. Goldfein said he was not aware of any issues with transgender service members, but emphasized that

each case is unique. Goldfein said among the transgender service members he had talked to, he had found a “commitment to serve by each of them.” Likewise, in earlier testimonies, when the three other service secretaries were asked if they had heard of any harm to unit cohesion or other problems, they responded:

- Navy: “By virtue of being a Navy sailor, we treat every one of those Navy sailors, regardless, with dignity and respect,” said Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson. “That is warranted by wearing the uniform of the United States Navy. By virtue of that approach, I am not aware of any issues.”
- Marine Corps: “By reporting those Marines that have come forward, there’s 27 Marines that have identified as transgender, one sailor serving. I am not aware of any issues in those areas,” said Marine Commandant Gen. Robert Neller.
- Army: “We have a finite number. We know who they are, and it is monitored very closely, because, you know, I’m concerned about that, and want to make sure that they are, in fact, treated with dignity and respect. And no, I have received precisely zero reports,” said Army Chief of Staff Gen. Mark Milley.

Last month the White House announced that it would leave the decision to the service secretaries on whether or not to allow transgender personnel to serve; but also directed that a subset of transgender personnel — those with a diagnosis of gender dysphoria — would be prohibited from serving. Gender dysphoria is a condition where a person experiences discomfort with their biological sex. In his February guidance to President Trump, Mattis also listed several other limitations on transgender service, including an extension of the amount of time someone would need to be stable in their preferred sex to 36 months and a prohibition on service members who have undergone corrective surgery. Critics have said the gender dysphoria argument is an attempt to keep all transgender personnel from serving, because “gender dysphoria” is a broadly used diagnosis used by the medical community for transgender persons and not indicative of a more serious issue.

The four service chiefs, along with the chief of the National Guard Bureau and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Joseph Dunford, comprise the president’s top circle of military advisers. Each service chief’s testimony marked an unusual split with the president and Defense Secretary Jim Mattis, who have advised that allowing personnel with gender dysphoria to serve would harm unit cohesion and present an “unreasonable burden on the military.” The administration’s prohibitions on transgender service are still being challenged in the courts; four federal courts have already overturned Trump’s previous ban on new accessions by transgender personnel and the other aspects of the administration’s transgender policy are now part of ongoing lawsuits. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Tara Copp | April 24, 2018 ++]

Tricare for Life Update 05 ► Will Enrollment Fees Be Next?

Many military beneficiaries are getting frustrated over unexpected and disproportional increases in their TRICARE service fees. The fee changes have been implemented across just about every fee category. However, TRICARE for Life (TFL) beneficiaries, a perennial target, are currently unscathed by the budget knife. But just because DoD did not include any specific fees for TFL in its budget submission this year does not mean Congress will not try to slip some new fees into the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) during the markup process.

As recently as last fall, Congress raised pharmacy fees for everyone. Those increases reduced the amount of the Survivor Benefit Plan/Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (SBP/DIC) offset for military widows. Essentially, the dramatic increase in pharmacy copayments is funding the reduction of SBP/DIC, also known as the widows tax. Compound these increases with DoD's end run of all the other TRICARE fee increases, and well, you get the picture: Beneficiaries are funding and offsetting their own earned benefits. And you can bet Congress will again look for money anywhere they can get it. This is why MOAA is on guard to prevent any attempt to establish a new enrollment fee for TFL. TFL beneficiaries already pay more for their health care coverage than any other uniformed

service beneficiaries. And now they are paying much more for their medications, too, and will continue to do so with the planned increases in the out-years.

Congress was thoughtful in its establishment of TFL, enacted in 2001, deeming it a commitment of a grateful nation. Before TFL, TRICARE beneficiaries immediately lost their TRICARE coverage when they became Medicare eligible at age 65 (including those who were Medicare-eligible due to disability). This positioned them at the same level of coverage as U.S. citizens who had never served the full 20-plus year careers in the uniformed services. However, Congress recognized health care coverage was an important benefit earned through decades of service and sacrifice - and one that should be sustained over the lifetime of the servicemember and their family.

TFL, which has no enrollment fee, was set up to be the second payer after Medicare pays first. To be eligible, individuals must be TRICARE- and Medicare- eligible and have purchased Medicare Part B coverage. Out of all of the TRICARE benefit plans, this one has been the most successful and is tremendously popular with the age-65-and-over beneficiary population. The reality continues to be that personnel costs are not rising to be more than a third of DoD's budget. This has been consistent for the past several decades. And more specifically, TFL's costs have actually decreased or flattened. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | Kathryn M. Beasley | April 12, 2018 ++]

POW/MIA Displays Update 02 ► Group Seeks to Add Multiple Religious Text

Last week's decision by a San Diego-based Navy admiral to nix an investigation into the use of a Christian Bible in a "Missing Man" display in Okinawa apparently did nothing to quash a controversy that now has engulfed at least 31 other military units worldwide. At issue is whether exhibits by the Navy, Marine Corps and Army that use the Bible to honor POW/MIA's -- prisoners of war and those missing in action -- suggest official endorsement of Christianity as a religion. Critics say that would run afoul of the U.S. Constitution and Pentagon regulations barring religious discrimination.

To drive their point home, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation is now demanding that the display inside U.S. Naval Hospital Okinawa -- the Navy's largest overseas hospital -- be amplified to include similar sacred texts from more than a dozen other faiths, plus books championed by atheists and agnostics. "To claim that the Bible isn't there for something religious is patently ridiculous," said Michael "Mikey" Weinstein, a former Air Force officer and the foundation's founder. "Either the Navy will agree with us, and the table will collapse from too much weight, or he won't and the table will be moved to the chapel or somewhere else."

The controversy stems from a complaint made to Weinstein's nonprofit in early April by 26 service members, Department of Defense civilian workers and their families in Okinawa. Initially, an official at Navy Medicine West told the foundation that the San Diego-based department overseeing all Navy hospitals in the Pacific region would probe the complaint. But last week commander Rear Adm. Paul D. Pearigen reversed course, telling the foundation in a letter that "neither further review nor an investigation of this matter is necessary." On 26 APR, Pearigen's staffers said that they were assessing the foundation's late Wednesday request to add other religious texts to the table but worry that they're hamstrung by military regulations. A Navy protocol manual drafted nearly 17 years ago mandates a Bible on the "Missing Man" table and doesn't mention substitutes or accompanying books.

"As one of nine symbolic references on the table, the purpose of the book and accompanying description is not to promote religion, but to commemorate the strength and resolve required of POW and MIA personnel in the most difficult of times. Each item on the table contributes to an atmosphere of remembrance and solemnity, without emphasizing the book as a religious text," explained Navy Medicine West spokeswoman Regena E. Kowitz in an email to The San Diego Union-Tribune. Weinstein countered by saying the "bottom line is that the Constitution is going to trump whatever is in a manual by the Army or the Navy or the (U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs)."

In recent years the Air Force, American Legion, VA and other agencies and organizations quit featuring a Christian book in their displays. Partly that's because the Pentagon requires the armed forces to honor the religious diversity of all troops, Weinstein said. To truly honor it, Adm. Pearigen wants the Okinawa "Missing Man" display to include texts sacred to Roman Catholics, Protestants, Satanists, Muslims, Jews, Shintoists, Buddhists, Hindus, Mormons and others, plus several humanist and secularist works that nonbelievers favor. Pearigen hasn't responded, but it's a tactic that's worked for the foundation in the past. In early 2016, the VA removed a Bible from a similar display in Youngstown, Ohio, after patients demanded equal treatment for the Torah and the atheist manifesto "The God Delusion." VA officials replaced the Bible with a generic book designed to represent many faiths -- or none at all.

Weinstein said that since news of the Okinawa controversy broke, his foundation has received complaints from troops at 31 other units worldwide who say they're bothered by Bibles in displays. They include an exhibit aboard an unnamed Navy submarine and another at the Army's Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, he said. Even without the religious controversy, Pentagon rules already ban implied command endorsement to any private organization, which is why Weinstein is targeting the Camp Arifjan display.

The Bible at the Kuwait base is emblazoned with the logo of "Operation Worship," a Placer County-based nonprofit group that distributes free holy books and Christian music to troops worldwide. Weinstein said that tells troops that commanders favor Operation Worship over other groups. "If the military can't endorse Ford over Chevy, then it can't endorse Operation Worship over other Christian groups, much less Jews, Muslims and others," Weinstein said. In an email to the Union-Tribune, Operation Worship co-founder Jeff Hilliard said that he was unaware of any complaints about his organization's Bibles. "We have been providing free military Bibles to chaplains for years with no complaints," he said. "With respect to deliveries overseas, we do deliver some at times but are unaware as to where they end up. We have never asked for or received military endorsements for our Bibles either."

Weinstein said that he doesn't "blame the organization. We blame the command that put it there." He also says it's a sign that the military too often fails to take seriously the religious sensitivities of citizens overseas, where many American bases are located. Several Shinto and Buddhist spouses of American personnel objected to a placard on the "Missing Man" display in English and Japanese that said the Bible "represents the strength gained through faith to sustain those lost from our country, founded one nation under God," according to Weinstein. As for Camp Arifjan's exhibit, Weinstein worries it could insult citizens in a Middle Eastern country that's overwhelmingly Muslim. "What if Kuwaitis think we should put a Koran there?" he asked. Soldiers at the Pentagon did not return messages seeking official comment on 26 APR. [Source: The San Diego Union-Tribune | Carl Prine | April 27, 2018 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries ► Reported 16 thru 30 APR 2018 | Fourteen

“Keeping the Promise“, “Fulfill their Trust“ and “No one left behind“ are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II 73,025, Korean War 7730, Vietnam War 1604, Cold War (126), Iraq and other conflicts (5). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home.

For a listing of all missing or unaccounted for personnel to date refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil> and click on ‘Our Missing’. Refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Year/2018> for a listing and details of

those accounted for in 2018. 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 names, photos, and details of the below listed MIA/POW's which have been recovered, identified, and/or scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin are listed on the following sites:

- <https://www.vfw.org/actioncorpsweekly>
- <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/News-Releases>
- <http://www.thepatriotspage.com/Recovered.htm>
- <http://www.pow-miafamilies.org>
- <https://www.pownetwork.org/bios/b/b012.htm>
- <http://www.vvmf.org/Wall-of-Faces>

LOOK FOR

- **Air Force Reserve 1st Lt. David T. Dinan, III**, 25, of Nutley, N.J., whose identification was previously announced, was buried April 13 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. On March 19, 1969, Dinan, a member of the 34th Tactical Fighter Squadron, 288th Tactical Fighter Wing, was piloting an F-105 Thunderchief on a strike mission over northern Laos. During the second strafing pass, Dinan transmitted a distress message before the aircraft crashed. The forward air controller did observe Dinan's parachute enter the jungle. Search and rescue aircraft conducted an aerial search and located a parachute and confirmed the death of the pilot; however, they were unable to recover the body due to enemy fire. [Read about Dinan.](#)
- **Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Vincent L. Politte** served as a gunner with the 345th Bombardment Squadron (Heavy), 98th Bombardment Group (Heavy), 9th Air Force. He was killed in the summer of 1943 while participating in a raid on the Ploesti Oil Refinery complex north of Bucharest, Romania, during Operation Tidal Wave. During the raid, Politte's B-24 Liberator aircraft was hit by machine gun fire and crashed. Following the war, his remains could not be identified. Interment services are pending. [Read about Politte.](#)
- **Army Cpl. Leonard V. Purkapile**, 26, of Potosi, Wis., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried April 26 in Lancaster, Wis. Purkapile was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. In late November 1950, Purkapile's unit was engaged by Chinese forces in the vicinity of Unsan while withdrawing southeast to Yongbyon, North Korea. Purkapile could not be accounted for following the battle and was declared missing in action on Nov. 28, 1950. [Read about Purkapile.](#)
- **Army Master Sgt. Finley J. Davis**, 39, of Pittsburgh, whose identification was previously announced, was buried April 19 in North Charleston, S.C. Davis was a member of Company D, 2nd Engineer Combat Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division. On Nov. 25, 1950, Chinese forces initiated an offensive along the 8th Army front, forcing all 8th Army units to withdraw on November 29. Davis' battalion, assigned to provide

security for the division, was attacked again by the Chinese and Davis was reported missing in action as of Dec. 1, 1950. [Read about Davis.](#)

- **Army Pfc. John H. Walker** was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 18th Infantry Regiment, 1st Infantry Division, when he was reported missing in action after his unit engaged in fierce fighting on Hill 207 near Schönthal, Germany in the Hürtgen Forest. With no evidence that Walker had been captured or survived combat, his status was changed to deceased on Nov. 25, 1945. Interment services are pending. [Read about Walker.](#)
- **Army Pvt. Raymond Sinowitz**, 25, of Bronx, N.Y., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried April 23 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. Sinowitz was a member of 454th Ordnance Company, 27th Bombardment Group, the Far East Air Force, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands on Dec. 8, 1941. After months of intense fighting, Corregidor fell and American forces surrendered on May 6, 1942. Sinowitz was one of the thousands of U.S. and Filipino service members taken prisoner and eventually moved to Cabanatuan POW camp. [Read about Sinowitz.](#)
- **Army Sgt. 1st Class Lester R. Walker**, 19, of Ferriday, La., whose identification was previously announced, was buried April 18 in Downsville, La. Walker was assigned to Battery B, 82nd Anti-Aircraft Artillery Automatic Weapons Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division. On Sept. 3, 1950, Walker was attached to Task Force Haynes in the vicinity of Changnyeong, South Korea, when he disappeared. Based on a lack of information concerning his status, the U.S. Army declared him deceased and his remains non-recoverable. [Read about Walker.](#)
- **Army Sgt. 1st Class Milton M. Beed**, 30, of Meadow Grove, Neb., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried April 25 in Norfolk, Neb. Beed was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 38th Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division. The unit was supporting South Korean forces in the village of Hoengsong, an area known as the Central Corridor in South Korea, when Chinese forces launched a massive counteroffensive, forcing them to withdraw to Wonju. Beed could not be accounted for and was declared missing in action as of Feb. 12, 1951. [Read about Beed.](#)
- **Marine Corps Pfc. Clarence E. Drumheiser** was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force. On Nov. 19, 1943, Drumheiser's unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll against stiff Japanese resistance. Drumheiser was killed on the third day of the battle, one of approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors killed in the intense fighting. Interment services are pending. [Read about Drumheiser.](#)
- **Navy Aviation Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Durell Wade** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Wade was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. [Read about Wade.](#)
- **Navy Fireman 2nd Class John D. Wheeler**, 26, of Gaither, Ark., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried April 28 in Harrison, Ark. Wheeler was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Wheeler was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. [Read about Wheeler.](#)
- **Navy Reserve Lt. William Q. Punnell**, 27, of Flandreau, S.D., whose identification was previously announced, will be buried May 2 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. Punnell was the acting commanding officer of the VF-14 Fighter Squadron, operating from the aircraft carrier USS Wasp. On July 25, 1944, Punnell flew his F6F-3 "Hellcat" with several other aircraft on a strafing mission against Japanese targets on the islands of the Republic of Palau. Punnell was in the lead position when the tail of his aircraft took a direct hit from anti-aircraft fire. His fellow pilots witnessed his plane crash into the water and immediately sink with no bailout reported. Interment services are pending. [Read about Punnell.](#)
- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class Joe M. Kelley** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Kelley was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. [Read about Kelley.](#)
- **Navy Water Tender 1st Class Stephen Pepe** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. Pepe was one of 429 crewmen killed in the attack. Interment services are pending. [Read about Pepe.](#)

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | April 30, 2018 ++]



VA Generic Drug Business ► New Company Being Established

To help combat shortages and the ever climbing cost of prescription drugs, Veterans Affairs is getting into the generic drug business. Dr. Carolyn M. Clancy, executive in charge of the Veterans Health Administration, said “As an organization which must have an affordable and stable supply of generic pharmaceuticals to fulfill its healthcare mission, the Department of Veterans Affairs looks forward to the value this new company will bring to healthcare in the United States ... Increasing generic drug manufacturing capacity will generate a more stable generic drug supply and will reduce the negative clinical impact of chronic drug shortages, including the impact on our nation’s veterans.”

The new drug company, yet to have a name, is the result of a partnership with VA and four US health systems which represents more than 450 hospitals. Intermountain Healthcare, Ascension, SSM Health and Trinity Health are already onboard, but since the announcement was made earlier this year, an additional 70 hospital systems have expressed interest in joining. The new company plans to be an FDA approved manufacturer and will either make the drugs directly or sub-contract with reputable manufacturing organizations. The hope is that the new company will give lower cost and a more predictable supply of generic medicines.

“It’s an ambitious plan,” said Dr. Marc Harrison, CEO of Intermountain Healthcare. Harrison believes this collaboration is a game changer for the generic drug market. “Healthcare systems are in the best position to fix the problems in the generic drug market. We witness, on a daily basis, how shortages of essential generic medications or egregious cost increases for those same drugs affect our patients. We are confident we can improve the situation for our patients by bringing much needed competition to the generic drug market.”

Some generic drug manufacturers have been criticized recently for the arbitrary price increase and for making artificial shortages of medications. Much of the current problem is due to a reduction in the number of suppliers and consolidation of production so there can be a concentration of market pricing power. To help fight this, the new company plans to directly ship its meds to hospitals, cutting out pharmacy benefits managers and wholesalers. It will also publish product prices online to increase transparency. The new company plans to start operations this fall and will focus first on drugs that are currently in short supply. Last year, VA spent just about \$7 billion on prescription drugs for the 4.9 million veterans using the VA pharmacy system. [Source: ConnectingVets.com | Jonathan Kaupanger | April 13, 2018 ++]

VA Infertility Services ► Evaluation, Treatment, and Adoption Reimbursement

Our nation’s Veterans bravely serve our country knowing they may return as civilians with service-connected disabilities. However, in deciding to join the military they probably did not consider they might have to sacrifice parenthood. Good news. If you are a Veteran with service-connected infertility, you may be eligible for treatment. VA regulations were amended to offer in vitro fertilization (IVF) evaluation and treatment to Veterans with service-

connected conditions that resulted in infertility, as well as to their spouses. This is a long-awaited benefit for many Veteran couples.

VA also provides infertility evaluation, management, and treatment services to all Veterans who are enrolled and eligible for VA health care, regardless of service-connection. Infertility care is available either at your local VA medical facility or through referral to health care providers in your community. For more information, check out the [VA Infertility Brochure](#). Veterans interested in infertility services should contact their VA health care provider. Veterans can also contact their local VA Women Veteran Program Manager for more information about infertility services.

VA now provides reimbursement of qualifying adoption expenses incurred by Veterans with a service-connected disability that results in infertility. Covered Veterans may request reimbursement for qualifying adoption expenses incurred for adoption finalized after September 29, 2016. More information can be found on the [Federal Register](#). For more information on IVF treatment please visit [VHA Office of Community Care](#). [Source: Vantage Point | April 25, 2018 ++]

VA EHR Update 12 ► \$16B 10+ Year Overhaul Plan In Jeopardy

Plans to overhaul the Veterans Affairs medical records system, one of President Donald Trump's most touted achievements last year, may be on the verge of collapse because of the leadership upheaval at the department in recent weeks. Multiple sources close to work on the issue say White House officials are wavering on whether to move ahead on contract plans with the Missouri-based Cerner Corp. to bring VA's electronic medical records systems in line with the Defense Department. Meanwhile, the department's new chief technology official — just appointed this week — is facing heavy criticism for a lawsuit accusing him of sexual harassment while he was working for Trump's presidential campaign, calling into question whether he can shepherd the deal to completion.

The controversies cast a pall over the ambitious medical records plan, expected to take more than a decade and upwards of \$16 billion to implement. Last summer, Trump touted the agreement as a victory for veterans and proof that his administration could cut through Washington bureaucracy to provide better services for all Americans. Former VA Secretary David Shulkin, who unveiled the plan in a highly hyped press conference last June, had said he expected contract negotiations to be completed by last fall, then by early 2018. He also said publicly he was close to finalizing the deal in the days before his firing by Trump last month. Now, both Cerner and administration officials are mum on when a new deal will be signed, **if at all**. Cerner referred all questions on the matter to VA leadership.

When asked for the current status of the deal, VA spokesman Curt Cashour said the department “doesn't typically comment on ongoing negotiations.” When asked if the department is still committed to adopting the same health records platform as the Defense Department, he gave the same reply. But Cashour did say the firing of Shulkin has not affected work on the issue. The VA's electronic health records systems have been a point of contention for years, with lawmakers repeatedly questioning why the department and Pentagon cannot better share troops' medical information. In 2009, then President Barack Obama made promises similar to Trump's to modernize both department's medical records and provide seamless transition for troops leaving the ranks. But in the ensuing years, VA has spent more than \$1 billion to make its legacy health record systems work better with military systems, with mixed success. The new VA-Cerner contract would have put veterans records on the military's new MHS GENESIS records system, which is currently being installed at military health facilities.

Administration and Cerner officials have quarreled behind the scenes over intellectual property rights and universal compatibility issues with the VA contract, but department officials had downplayed those in recent months as technical discussions that did not endanger the deal. In early March, in testimony before the House

Appropriations Committee, Shulkin said he was confident the work would be completed soon and would have widespread benefits “not only for veterans but across the country for all Americans.” He believed the new records system could serve as a standard for nationwide electronic health records, breaking down proprietary barriers that health experts have long lamented. “I believe we will soon be at a contract that will be groundbreaking for new rules in interoperability,” he said. “We’ve gotten 11 major hospital systems to sign on to a pledge that they will adhere to open (application program interfaces) and industry standards. And more and more health systems will want to work with veterans.”

Scott Blackburn, VA’s acting executive for the Office of Information and Technology, had been working on finalizing the contract with Shulkin in recent months. He left the post this week, and was replaced by Camilo Sandoval, the former data operations director for Trump’s presidential campaign. Sandoval’s appointment is temporary, but has already drawn strong reactions from lawmakers on Capitol Hill. On 18 APR, Politico reported that another former Trump campaign staffer filed a lawsuit against Sandoval in November charging he sexually harassed and discriminated against her while the two worked to get Trump into the White House.

“President Trump’s naming of a profoundly inexperienced campaign staffer accused of sexual harassment to serve as VA’s Chief Information Officer is disturbing, unacceptable, and another sad illustration of this administration’s disregard for our nation’s veterans,” said Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN) and ranking member of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee. “At a time of implementation of critical VA initiatives, such as the modernization of VA’s electronic health record system and confronting an aging IT infrastructure, this is a profoundly bad decision that disrespects those who have worn our nation’s uniform.” Fellow committee member Rep. Ann Kuster (D-NH) similarly called for Trump to remove Sandoval, who was also among a group of political operatives in the administration that Shulkin accused of undermining his tenure at VA.

The medical records issue is expected to be among the topics that VA Secretary nominee Ronny Jackson faces at his confirmation hearing before the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee on 25 APR. Jackson, who currently serves as the White House physician, has not made any public comments on the matter thus far. Meanwhile, Trump named Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness Robert Wilkie as the new acting VA secretary during Jackson’s confirmation process. White House officials have not said whether he’ll have the authority to move ahead with the Cerner negotiations during that time. The department has been without a permanent under secretary for health since February 2017, when Shulkin was promoted from that spot to the top VA post, and without a permanent chief information officer since January 2017, when LaVerne Council stepped down during the presidential transition. Cashour said a candidate for the latter post has been identified and is being vetted by the White House. [Source: ArmyTimes | Leo Shane III | April 19, 2018 ++]

GAO High Risk List ► VA Actions To Get Off List

Recently the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced actions it will take to address challenges and issues identified by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) when it placed VA on its [High-Risk List](#). The move is designed to address lingering deficiencies in its health-care system once and for all. Every two years, GAO calls attention to agencies and program areas that are high risk as a result of vulnerabilities and in need of transformation.

VA is currently in the midst of a department-wide modernization that will build capacity for long-term management of GAO High-Risk List activities and strengthen VA’s foundational business practices. “We thank GAO for its review and for highlighting practices that VA needs to improve,” said VA Acting Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Under President Trump, we are serious about doing business differently to improve Veterans’ care and we are holding ourselves accountable to the nation’s Veterans and to American taxpayers who entrust them to our care.”

GAO identified five specific risk areas when it added VA health care to the Federal government's list of 32 high-risk agencies and programs in 2015: ambiguous policies and inconsistent processes, inadequate oversight and accountability, information technology challenges, inadequate training for VA staff, and unclear resource needs and allocation priorities. VA recently delivered a comprehensive action plan to GAO that includes these crucial steps the agency has taken to address these risk areas for VA health care, along with a number of others to improve business operations:

- **Reducing ambiguity and red tape.** Eliminated outdated policy documents. VA has already purged more than 235 expired directives and 85 percent of all outdated manuals.
- **Eliminating bureaucracy and streamlining decision making.** VA has reduced central office staff positions by 10 percent and consolidated its policy and operations functions in mental health, primary care, and geriatrics to improve support to field activities and Veteran-facing services. These restructuring actions allow VA to become more efficient by pushing decision rights to the lowest appropriate level.
- **Strengthening internal oversight and accountability.** The Veterans Health Administration (VHA) established the Office of Integrity to consolidate its compliance, ethics, and oversight programs under a single executive, and moved swiftly to establish an internal audit function and associated governance committee that provides the Under Secretary for Health with an independent and objective way to assess operations.
- **Modernizing information technology support.** VA's Electronic Health Record (EHR) Modernization program will enable seamless care and full interoperability with the Department of Defense's EHR modernization solution, and enhance the ability to exchange Veteran health data with community health partners.
- **Clarifying resource needs and priorities.** VA established a centralized manpower management office to integrate staffing processes, and transformed its financial management methods to improve resource planning and allocation.

In addition to addressing the GAO high-risk areas, VA continually responds to GAO recommendations on VA operations throughout each year. At any given time, there are 80 to 100 open recommendations about VA health care. Overall, VA has succeeded in closing approximately 377 recommendations since 2009, and is committed to closing as quickly as possible all 22 recommendations that GAO has identified as high priority. VA expects the next GAO report to be released in early 2019.

[Source: VA News Release | April 16, 2018 ++]

VA Privatization Update 15 ► Debate | 5 Things To Know

Debate over privatizing healthcare services under the Department of Veterans Affairs is nearing a boiling point as President Donald Trump's VA secretary-nominee prepares for a Senate confirmation grilling. The spark was Trump's firing of David Shulkin, who has since warned loudly that the administration is heading down the privatization road. A confirmation hearing for the nominee, White House physician Ronny Jackson, is not yet set.

Privatization conversations ramped up in 2014, when the Veterans Health Administration was embroiled in a high-profile negligence scandal after several high-level officials were found falsifying data about patient wait times. The controversy gave way for the rise of hardline privatization advocacy organizations such as Concerned Veterans for America, funded by Republican donors Charles and David Koch, which pushed for privatizing much of the VA's healthcare services as opposed to reinvesting in the department. With uncertainty surrounding the future of the VA and potential changes to the ways in which veterans' healthcare services are delivered on the horizon, here are five things to know about potential VA privatization.

1. The state of healthcare in the VA

Widespread privatization would be an ambitious undertaking: The VA oversees 145 hospitals, 300 veterans' centers and over 1,200 outpatient facilities. As of 2016, the department had more than 377,800 employees, making it the second-largest federal agency. The U.S. is home to about 22 million veterans, and about 9 million of them are enrolled in the VA. All have varying healthcare needs and geographic differences that impact their access to that care. "We're getting into a political fight over one-third of the veteran population," Rory Riley, a consultant for veterans organizations such as the National Organization of Veterans' Advocates, told Healthcare Dive. "It's hard to lump them all into one category. One size doesn't fit all."

Many are already getting most of their care through the private sector. A 2014 Congressional Budget Office report comparing private sector and VA healthcare costs found about 70% of veterans enrolled in the VHA system already receive most of their care outside the system. Bob McDonald, VA secretary under President Barack Obama, cited a higher figure in 2016, saying the average veteran uses the VA for just 34% of their care. "If that 34% becomes 35%, we need a \$1.4 billion increase in budget," he told Fortune in 2016. The \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill signed by Trump last month includes about \$185 billion in Veterans Affairs funding, though not all goes to care. The bill also left out funding for one VA program that allows veterans to get care through the private sector.

2. What's currently privatized

The Veterans Choice Program was created through the Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act, a bipartisan bill signed by Obama in 2014 in response to the wait time scandal. The program, offered through the Office of Community Care, allows veterans the option of receiving care from the private sector if they live more than 40 miles driving distance from a VA facility, or if they have to wait more than 30 days to get an appointment. The program was originally intended as a pilot that would last two years, and it has faced funding difficulties as it has been extended. In December, Congress approved \$2.1 billion for the program, but Shulkin warned before his departure that the program would run out of money by early June. The \$1.3 trillion spending bill did not include funding for Choice. As a result, TriWest, one of two private insurers contracting with the VA to manage the networks for eligible veterans, is preparing to lay off up to 25% of its workforce, about 700 people. The other payer, Health Net Federal, will not get a renewed contract after September.

Republicans back expanding the Choice program to give more veterans the option of getting care through the private sector. Democrats argue expanding the program would give way to widespread privatization of the agency altogether. "Rural people may not live close to a VA or private care provider," consultant Riley said. "For them, the consideration is different from someone in New York City who wants to get the best care no matter where it is." A 2016 RAND report found that veterans relying most on VA care tend to be younger, poorer and to live in rural areas where they lack healthcare from other sources. However, only 25% of veterans live within an hour of a VA medical facility, and access to specialized services is even slimmer. Some 43% of veterans live within 40 miles of VA interventional cardiology services and 55% of veterans live within 40 miles of VA oncology services.

Maggie Elehwany, government affairs and policy vice president at the National Rural Health Association, told Healthcare Dive that the organization is "very pleased" to have a better working relationship with the VA through the Choice program, but "there's still so much to be desired." The 40-mile mandate, for example, includes Community-Based Outpatient Clinics, which often don't offer specialized services, especially in rural America. "The VA system can be wonderful, and it offers some of the best specialized care ... but we need to get veterans the ability to better access care in rural areas. They should have the choice to see their local provider," Elehwany said. "When they have been able to access care at a local provider, it's been cumbersome and difficult for the provider to get reimbursement."

The RAND report concludes that Congress "may need to revise VA's authority to purchase outside care" to mitigate barriers to access. Most hospital groups haven't taken a firm stance on privatization. AHA was not able to

comment for this story. NRHA, according to Elehwany, is a proponent of "hybrid privatization" that gives veterans more options through programs like Choice.

3. Is private sector care better or cheaper? Poor data collection is a barrier.

Inadequate data collection has made it difficult for analysts to determine which type of care has served veterans better. Subsequently, studies on private sector and VA costs are lacking. The 2014 CBO analysis, which is based on old and sparse research itself, notes that by 2000, only two studies had attempted to calculate the costs of services VHA provided using private sector rates, each of which were limited in scope. Those studies estimated that VHA's inpatient care cost was about 10% less than comparable services in the private sector. Another study published in 2009 compared spending between VHA and estimated costs for comparable services in the private sector and found VHA's costs to be "considerably higher." The CBO notes that that study, too, is "relatively weak."

"Comparing health care costs in the VHA system and the private sector is difficult partly because the Department of Veterans Affairs, which runs VHA, has provided limited data to the Congress and the public about its costs and operational performance," the authors noted in 2014. A CBO spokeswoman told Healthcare Dive the agency doesn't have additional information or context to provide since the report was published. The authors "don't have anything further to offer regarding more current comparisons or findings," she said. "The VA is notoriously not good at keeping track of its own data," Riley said. That has a direct impact on policy. According to a National Academies of Practice evaluation of the VA's mental health services published in January, the VA has "not yet operationalized a comprehensive system for collecting health outcome data with standardized patient-reported outcome measures," making it difficult to assess whether or not care, especially specialized care for veterans, is better provided by the VA or in the private sector.

4. Most veterans groups like the VA health system, despite its problems

Aside from the Koch-backed group, most veteran groups largely support VA care. "From our perspective, the VA is the best place for veterans with polytrauma, veterans who need prosthetics, veterans who need comprehensive care for especially battlefield injuries," said Joe Plenzler, director of media relations at advocacy organization American Legion. A VFW report published last year found that 92% of veterans preferred fixing the VA's deficiencies over dismantling the system or a universal healthcare card that would allow them to see any private provider, an idea Trump campaigned on.

The Koch-backed Concerned Veterans of America has been lobbying for making the VA health system a nonprofit contracted by the government. Opponents say that level of privatization places profits over people. "I am convinced that privatization is a political issue aimed at rewarding select people and companies with profits, even if it undermines care for veterans," Shulkin wrote in his post-resignation New York Times op-ed. "There are many things I think the private sector does well," consultant Riley said. "If they were given the opportunity to compete, they'd be able to do it as well if not better than what the VA currently provides." Rep. Phil Roe (R-TN), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans Affairs, said as much at a committee hearing last year, stressing the need to give veterans options while preserving the VA's place as their "central coordinator for care."

The VA denied privatization efforts in a statement earlier this month, saying "to suggest otherwise is completely false and a red herring designed to distract and avoid honest debate on the real issues surrounding veterans' health care." But there is an effort in Congress to push further down the privatization route. Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS) has argued for weaning veterans off the Choice program and touted his own bill with Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) that would give more veterans the option of choosing where to receive care through a revamped program. Moran, whose campaigns have been funded by the Kochs, has denied that the bill gives way for privatization. "Proposals to reform and consolidate community care were fully supported and endorsed by those who now want to call it privatization," Moran wrote in an op-ed earlier this month.

5. The private sector may not be ready for wholesale privatization

According to RAND research, about 31% of Iraq and Afghanistan veterans suffer from a mental health condition or have reported experiencing a traumatic brain injury. The National Academies of Practice found the VA's ability to

provide high-quality mental health care consistently to be "an ongoing challenge," with progress stifled by staffing, infrastructure and scheduling. However, the study found a majority of Operation Enduring Freedom, Iraqi Freedom and New Dawn era veterans reported "positive aspects" of experiences with the VA's mental health services. When RAND surveyed New York state providers' readiness to accept veterans as patients earlier this year, they found that of the 92% of providers accepting new patients, only 2.3% met criteria for efficiently serving veterans. Of the providers surveyed, mental health professionals were the least likely to participate in VA Community Care.

Shulkin, who served as a executive for providers like Beth Israel Medical Center in New York City and Morristown Medical Center in New Jersey before being appointed VA secretary, argues that the private sector is "ill-prepared to handle the number and complexity of patients" that would require their services if VA facilities were shuttered or downsized, "particularly when it involves the mental health needs of people scarred by the horrors of war." Some experts say physician burnout, already a potential problem, will become exacerbated by moving more VA services into the private sector. In a testimony delivered to the House Committee on Veterans Affairs in 2014, the AHA voiced hesitation over taking on more patients without receiving special protections as contractors.

Aside from headaches stemming from pre-clearance permissions, obligations that the Department of Labor's Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs imposes on federal contractors "will only add to hospitals' costs and frustration without enhancing protections against discrimination," the AHA said. An earlier version of the omnibus bill included a mandate for promptly paying private providers in the Choice Program. With the future of the program in flux, the private sector's place in veterans care is still to be determined. Riley said the issue has become unnecessarily polarized. "People are treating this as an all-or-nothing proposition. Either invest in the VA or send all the vets out to the private sector," she said. "I don't think it has to be that. It's not black and white. We need to have a more nuanced discussion."

[Source: Healthcare Dive | Tony Abraham | April 11, 2018 ++]

VA Presumptive Disabilities Update 01 ► Gulf War and Radiation

Click on highlighted condition for description and symptoms:

Gulf War Related

1. Abnormal Weight Loss
2. [Cardiovascular Signs & Symptoms](#)
3. Fatigue
4. [Gastrointestinal Signs & Symptoms](#)
5. [Headaches](#)
6. Joint Pain
7. [Menstrual Disorder](#)
8. [Muscle Pain](#)
9. Neurological Signs & Symptoms
10. Skin Symptoms
11. Upper & Lower Respiratory Symptoms
12. [Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis \(ALS\)](#)
13. [Brucellosis](#)
14. [Campylobacter Jejuni](#)
15. [Coxiella Burnetii \(Q Fever\)](#)
16. [Malaria](#)
17. [Mycobacterium Tuberculosis](#)
18. [Nontyphoid Salmonella](#)
19. [Shigella](#)
20. [Visceral Leishmaniasis](#)

21. [West Nile Virus](#)

Radiation Related

1. [Alveolar Cancer](#)
2. [Bile Duct Cancer](#)
3. [Bone Cancer](#)
4. [Brain Cancer](#)
5. [Breast Cancer](#)
6. Bronchiole Cancer
7. [Colon Cancer](#)
8. [Esophageal Cancer](#)
9. [Gallbladder Cancer](#)
10. [Leukemia](#) (other than chronic lymphocytic leukemia)
11. [Liver Cancer](#)
12. [Lung Cancer](#)
13. Lymphomas (except for Hodgkin's disease)
14. [Multiple Myeloma](#)
15. [Ovary Cancer](#)
16. [Pancreatic Cancer](#)
17. [Pharynx Cancer](#)
18. [Salivary Gland Cancer](#)
19. [Small Intestine Cancer](#)
20. [Stomach Cancer](#)
21. [Thyroid Cancer](#)
22. [Urinary Tract Cancer](#)

[Source: <http://www.veteranprograms.com/pd-full-list.html> | April 2018 ++]

VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 16 thru 30 APR 2018

The founder of a vocational training program for disabled veterans pleaded guilty 16 APR to bribing a Department of Veterans Affairs official as part of a scheme to defraud the federal government. According to prosecutors, **Albert Poawui** founded Atius Technology Institute in March 2017 and established two campuses for the school, one in Beltsville, Maryland, and the other in Springfield, Virginia. They charged that beginning in August 2015, Poawui began bribing a public official overseeing rehabilitation and counseling services for disabled veterans to direct prospective clients to Atius, and to approve the program's submitted paperwork, regardless of its accuracy. The unnamed official, was a counselor for the VA's Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment program. In that role, the official advised veterans on which schools to attend and processed payments to those schools for the veterans' tuition and supplies.

Over the life of the scheme, the government said, Poawui defrauded the Department of Veterans Affairs out of \$2.2 million, paying the official a total \$155,000 in cash. On Monday, Poawui, of Laurel, Maryland, pleaded guilty before U.S. District Judge John Bates to one count of bribing a public official. He also admitted to making numerous false statements to the Department of Veterans Affairs to bolster the scheme's profits, doing so in concert with a second Atius employee. Together, Poawui said, he and the employee certified veterans attending Atius were enrolled in up to 32 hours of class per week, when in fact they both knew Atius offered a maximum of six weekly class hours. Prosecutors said once the VA began an administrative audit of Atius, Poawui and his co-conspirators attempted to cover up their misdeeds. Judge Bates did not set a date for Poawui's sentencing. [Source: Courthouse News Service | Dan Mccue | April 16, 2018 ++]

VA IT Security ► Annual FISMA Assessment | 2018

The Veterans Affairs Department continues to have significant security weaknesses, including previously flagged flaws that have yet to be fixed, according to the results of its annual IT security assessment. “VA continues to face significant challenges in complying with the requirements of the Federal Information Security Modernization Act (FISMA) due to the nature and maturity of its information security program,” according to the report, which was prepared by CliftonLarsonAllen LLP and reviewed by the VA inspector general before being released 13 APR. The report offers 29 separate recommendations for improving the department’s cybersecurity, though the thrust boils down to three “specific actions”:

- Address security-related issues reported in previous audits.
- Improve deployment of security patches, system upgrades and system configurations to be consistent at headquarters and all field offices.
- Improve monitoring of controls at all facilities and communications with department personnel who can mitigate or close security gaps.

VA IT leadership agreed with all but one of the recommendations in the report—though they disagreed with certain aspects of four others. The department disagreed with the auditors’ final recommendation to encrypt and otherwise secure sensitive data. IT officials said this recommendation—which had been issued in previous FISMA reports—had been resolved as of March 2017. Upon further review, the auditors agreed and closed the recommendation. Department officials provided plans to remediate the other outstanding issues. The auditors said the plans are sufficient but withheld full praise until they see results. The auditors broke their findings into eight areas of concern for VA to address:

Agencywide security management program: The department has an Enterprise Cybersecurity Strategy Team working on 31 plans of action to close specific weaknesses in the VA’s security. The team is making progress, according to auditors. “However, the aforementioned controls require time to mature and demonstrate evidence of their effectiveness,” they wrote. “Accordingly, we continue to see information system security deficiencies similar in type and risk level to our findings in prior years and an overall inconsistent implementation of the security program.” Auditors made six recommendations in this area.

Identity management and access controls: The audit found “significant information security control deficiencies” in the department’s access management programs, which determine who has access to VA systems and what those persons are allowed to do on those systems. Specifically, the department lacks strong password management, access management, audit logging and monitoring and strong authentication, such as using two-factor logins for local networks. The report includes four recommendations to improve these controls, one for each area identified as deficient.

Configuration management controls: Baseline configurations are used to establish and push minimum security across an enterprise, including areas like access controls and vulnerability patches. The department has specific guidelines on baseline configurations but auditors discovered these baselines are not being adopted or enforced consistently. “During testing we identified unsecure web application servers, excessive permissions on database platforms, vulnerable third-party applications and operating system software and a lack of common platform security standards and monitoring across the enterprise.” Six of the 29 recommendations focus on remedying this imbalance.

System development and change management controls: The VA has policies to ensure that new systems and applications meet the department’s security standards as they come online. However, the plans, results and approvals for specific projects were often incomplete or missing, according to the report. “Specifically, at two major data centers and five VA medical centers, we noted that change management policy and procedures for authorizing, testing and approving system changes were not consistently implemented to support changes to mission-critical

applications and networks,” auditors wrote. Auditors made a single recommendation to better enforce department policies, which they noted is a repeat recommendation from previous FISMA reports.

Contingency planning: Auditors noted the department has contingency plans to secure and recover veteran data in case of a major systems failure. However, those plans have not been fully tested and are inadequate in places, they said. For instance, officials at two data centers and 12 medical centers failed to encrypt backups for mission-critical systems that were being transported to a storage facility. Two recommendations were made in this area, one specific to encrypting backups and another to improve testing of contingency plans.

Incident response and monitoring: The department has made significant progress in this area, auditors said, but there are still improvements to be made. Investigators conducted four network scans during the course of the audit, none of which were picked up by VA cybersecurity. “During testing, we were able to exfiltrate a file that contained mock data including formats resembling social security numbers, email addresses and passwords,” the report states. The department is also failing to fully monitor sensitive network connections with VA business partners, auditors said. They made four recommendations in this area, all of which were recommended in previous reports.

Continuous monitoring: VA has made progress in this area, as well, but it has been inconsistent. The department does not have a “comprehensive continuous monitoring program” that could identify abnormalities in the system, ensure consistent patching across the network or find and remove unauthorized applications. Auditors made two recommendations—build comprehensive white and black lists for applications and a process to fully inventory software across the enterprise.

Contractor systems oversight: Finally, the auditors assessed the department’s oversight of vendors that work with or on VA networks and maintain at least some amount of government or patient data. The audit found the department lacking, specifically when it comes to its cloud services. “VA did not have adequate controls for monitoring cloud computing systems hosted by external contractors,” the report states. “Consequently, we identified numerous critical and high-risk vulnerabilities on contractor networks due to unpatched, outdated operating systems and applications.” The report includes two recommendations to improve contractor oversight and reporting.

[Source: NextGov.com | Aaron Boyd | April 13, 2018 ++]

VA Appeals Update 28 ► New Appeals Status Tool

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the U.S Digital Service have announced their launch of an improved Appeals Status Tool to increase transparency and enable veterans to track the progress of their benefits claims appeals. Veterans now have the opportunity to track their appeals process in a timely and efficient manner, and, for the first time ever, to access detailed information about the status of their benefits appeals including alerts about needed actions, as well as estimates of how long each step of the process takes. It also shows their place on the Board of Veterans’ appeals docket, including the number of appeals that are ahead of them.

The tool, which went live 21 MAR on VA’s www.Vets.gov website, has given some veterans who have previewed it renewed hope in their appeals process although many now clearly understand that the process might take longer than expected, but they now have a timeline. There are eight steps to a veteran’s benefits claim appeal process and the total time involved depends on several factors such as the type of claim filed, complexity of the disability, the number of disabilities claimed and the availability of evidence needed to decide the claim. A full explanation can be seen online at <https://www.benefits.va.gov/compensation/process.asp>. [Source: Providence Journal | George W. Reilly | April 15, 2018 ++]

VA CBCM Program ► New Program Streamlines VA Claim Correspondence

As a result of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' ongoing efforts to improve management of taxpayer dollars, the Veterans Benefits Administration has rolled out a new program called the Centralized Benefits Communications Management (CBCM) Program across the nation earlier this month. The new program represents a new centralized printing and mailing process system designed to improve productivity and streamline correspondence with American military veterans about VA compensation benefits and VA pension burial claims. "CBCM is one of many great examples of how VA continually explores ways to update outdated processes," said Acting VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "With this program, we took proven industry practices and adapted them to our needs."

Prior to the rollout of this new program on 22 MAR, VBA's 56 regional offices were individually tasked with manual processing of all outbound mail. Under the new program, VA claims processors across the country now can submit letters electronically to one central location for printing and distribution, which in turn allows specialized VA employees to focus more time and energy assessing veteran claims. In addition to improving productivity, the program also is intended to help cut maintenance requirements of hundreds of regional office printers, reduce the likelihood of returned mail through additional address verification and to augment and enhance security and privacy concerns of veteran information through minimized handling of postal mail.

For the past five years, the VA has improved the way it processes compensation and pension claims which has led to the development of this new program. In the future, VA will enhance the program's design to improve further VBA's methods of communication with veterans by allowing them to choose between paper or digital correspondence. For more information or questions about CBCM, email VAPublicAffairs@va.gov. [Source: Journal Tribune | Ed Pierce | April 15, 2018 ++]

VA Medical Marijuana Update 44 ► Louisiana Vets Advocate Use

Four veterans representing countless others have been sticking their necks out to advocate for the legalization of medical cannabis in Louisiana. Bud Clark of Longville served in the US Navy from 1972 to 1975, Paul Bonial of Alexandria served in the Louisiana Army National Guard and then the U.S. Army from 1983 to 1992, Tony Landry of Jennings served in the U.S. Navy from 1988 to 1994, and Brian Greer of Lafayette served in the Louisiana Army National Guard from 1987 to 1991. The four of them on 27 MAR participated in a rally for the legalization of medical cannabis in Baton Rouge. "We are being the voice for many people who contact us," Landry said. "We aren't just advocating for veterans but for all people in Louisiana." Landry moderates a Facebook page called Louisiana Veterans for Medical Cannabis at <https://www.facebook.com/louisianaveteranscann>.

The goal of their involvement is to help veterans who suffer from chronic pain and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). They also strive to educate and break down stigma and misinformation surrounding the medical use of cannabis. "There is empirical evidence showing cannabis is effective for both of these issues," said Bonial, who is a practicing counselor, mostly for addiction treatment. Many veterans with chronic pain are prescribed addictive opioid medications. These come with a whole host of issues — one being that the body eventually builds a tolerance to opioids. "The opioid epidemic is a national scourge," said Landry, who injured his back while serving in the US Navy.

He went through two back surgeries and started on a "20-year odyssey with pain meds." Landry turned to alcohol when his prescribed opioid drugs no longer remedied his chronic pain. He has since discovered legal hemp-based oils and balms which have a great effect on the pain. "I had no life on opioids," Bonial said. "The federal government is crashing down and doctors are drastically reducing opioid dosages. Some of these people have been prescribed these drugs for over a decade and they aren't being weaned off properly." In this situation these people often start

looking to obtain cannabis or other drugs illegally in order to remedy their pain and withdrawal symptoms. This can lead to arrests for buying illegal substances and loss of employment. “They are making us into criminals and we are veterans,” Bonial said. “We are law abiding citizens. We respect and covet the constitution.”

The beginning of the end of the cannabis prohibition began in 2012 when voters in Colorado and Washington said yes to its legalization and regulation. Since then a total of 29 states and Washington, DC joined the cannabis-friendly ranks. Some also legalized its recreational use. “I fought (with the Navy) for all 50 states, not just 30,” Clark said. Greer, who became a mechanical engineer after his military service, has spent some time in Colorado. While there he tried several different delivery methods and various cannabis strains. “I just scratched the surface,” he said. “Some work extremely well and others are much less effective, medically, for me.” Greer explained that CBD (cannabidiol) is a hemp or cannabis extraction which has a very low percentage of THC and is “great for inflammation.” THC (tetrahydrocannabinol) is the chemical compound in cannabis responsible for feelings of euphoria. “THC makes the pain tolerable,” Greer said.

The current legality of CBD is a gray area. Scientific and clinical research — much of it sponsored by the U.S. government — underscores CBD’s potential as a treatment for a wide range of conditions, including arthritis, diabetes, chronic pain, PTSD, depression, epilepsy, and other neurological disorders. THC can relieve pain, anxiety, psychosis, seizures, spasms and other conditions, without the disconcerting feelings of lethargy and dysphoria caused by many psychoactive drugs. “When people with PTSD use cannabis, they are able to let their guard down,” Landry said.

Veterans with PTSD tell of their experiences with so called “zombie drugs.” These are just about any psychoactive prescription drug, Bonial said. PTSD patients are regularly offered antidepressants, specifically SSRIs (selective serotonin reuptake inhibitor) like Zoloft or Paxil. If one of these does not work others such as Prozac, Celexa or Lexapro can be tried. Another popular antidepressant option is an SNRI (serotonin-norepinephrine reuptake inhibitor), like Effexor. Such drugs may help ease suffering but some people complain that they do not feel like themselves while taking them. Hence the term “zombie drugs.” The right strain of cannabis for PTSD provides enough detachment from traumatizing experiences that veterans are able to go out and enjoy the world, Bonial said.

The state of Louisiana technically legalized marijuana for medical purposes in 1978, and then again in 1991. But while the prescriptive side was legally established, there was no framework for the growth and dispensing of the product. The LSU AgCenter on September 14, 2017 finalized an agreement with GB Sciences Louisiana to produce therapeutic cannabis products for qualifying patients. Approved medical care providers will oversee patients with debilitating conditions. Patients who have exhausted other medical options without a positive result may be recommended for therapeutic cannabis by their practitioner through specific delivery methods and dosages.

The Louisiana State Board of Medical Examiners has developed stringent guidelines for doctors to recommend therapeutic cannabis, including regular follow-ups and reporting. Delivery methods are limited to oils, oral methods such as pills, sprays or chewables, topical applications, transdermal patches and suppositories. Louisiana law does not allow for any product to be inhaled, raw or smoked. The LSU AgCenter is authorized to conduct research on therapeutic cannabis. Research will likely include variety development, growth management practices, extraction techniques, compound identification and isolation, drug delivery methods and efficacy testing.

GB Sciences will be responsible for the cultivation, extraction, processing, and production of therapeutic cannabis and will provide and perform all other necessary activities to provide usable therapeutic cannabis products for patients through licensed dispensary pharmacies. At present, the AgCenter has not yet begun research. “Some regulatory hurdles are slowing the process,” Greer said. The first medical cannabis sale in Louisiana could take place by this fall, but there is no sure date as to when this will happen. [Source: The Louisiana Sun Herald | Rachel Steffan | April 14 2018 ++]

VA Rating Criteria Update 01 ► Official Changes to the Rating For The Eyes

On April 10th, the VA published on <http://www.militarydisabilitymadeeasy.com/theeyes.html> their final changes to the ratings for The Eyes. The changes will go into effect May 13, 2018. Any Eye conditions rated on or after May 13th will be based on these new ratings. There are currently two different options for rating Eye conditions: The [Visual Impairment Rating System](#) and [Incapacitating Episodes](#). All Eye conditions are rated under one of these two options unless other ratings are specified. Under the new changes, these two options will still be available, but with adjustments. Also, there are changes to the eye codes themselves. For an explanation of these adjustments and code changes and how they differ from the former rating criteria, a good source to refer to is the 'Advice From The Big Guy - A Military Disability Blog' at <http://blog.militarydisabilitymadeeasy.com/2018/04/official-changes-to-rating-for-eyes.html>

Of the nine sets of changes that have been proposed so far as part of the VA's complete rewrite of the [VASRD](#), this is the fifth to be made official and final. The other finalized changes were to the ratings for [Dental and Oral Conditions](#) and the [Endocrine System](#) made last fall, the [Mental Disorders](#) made in 2014, and the new [Female Reproductive System](#) changes that will go into effect the same time as these Eye changes. Other proposed changes include the [Hemic and Lymphatic System](#), [the Skin](#), the [Genitourinary System](#), and the [Musculoskeletal System](#). [Source: Military Disability Made Easy | George P. Johnson | April 17 2018 ++]

VA Vet Choice Update 76 ► White House Steps Up Pressure For Reforms

The Trump administration is hustling Congress to move VA Choice healthcare reforms before the end of May despite the absence of a department secretary. Key negotiators believe a deal to expand community care for veterans is around the corner. In a 12 APR roundtable meeting at the White House, President Donald Trump specifically called out Sen. Jerry Moran (R-KS.) in front of the group of lawmakers to discuss VA Choice and emphasized that he wants to get the reforms done, according to two people with knowledge of the talks. Moran, a linchpin for expanding the community care options, has also been championing at the bit to wrap up the legislation, which stalled last month when House Democrats blocked it from inclusion in the spending omnibus.

The bill has been tangled for months in the debate over concerns from critics who say it goes too far down the road of privatizing VA healthcare. Negotiations also got tangled up in drama surrounding former Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin who was forced out in late March. The day after Shulkin's unceremonious dismissal via Twitter, the embattled former secretary published an op-ed in the New York Times blasting officials within the VA and what he called the intensifying "ambitions of people who want to put VA health care in the hands of the private sector." Last week, the VA and Moran went on the offensive. In a piece he penned for the Kansas City Star, Moran decried the privatization rhetoric as a political tool to block the overhaul. "This false narrative diverts attention from the very real problems that persist at the VA and ignores the hard truth: Proposals to reform and consolidate community care were fully supported and endorsed by those who now want to call it privatization," Moran wrote. "Do not be fooled by this double talk, which unfortunately is all too familiar."

Late last week, the VA released a statement entitled '[Debunking the VA Privatization Myth](#)'. "The fact is that demand for veterans' healthcare is outpacing VA's ability to supply it wholly in-house," the VA said. "And with America facing a looming doctor shortage, VA has to be able to share healthcare resources with the private sector through an effective community care program. There is just no other option and ... VA has offered this solution since the World War II era."

House VA Committee Chair Phil Roe (R-TN) said 13 APR he believes a final agreement is in sight, although precise timing on projected passage is still up in the air. He would like to see the legislation move in the next four to

six weeks. Roe also said the likely changes to the partial compromise blocked by House Democrats in MAR will be mostly technical and non-substantive. A draft of that partial deal obtained by Modern Healthcare outlined the ways lawmakers tried to make care standards equal for community providers and VA clinics. Moran and the White House had wanted to tie a VA clinic's ability to keep a patient to certain access standards. Democrats and other stakeholders wanted a compromise to hold private providers accountable as well, but ultimately the legislative text has a weaker mandate for community providers as the White House said making them equal was unworkable, according to a Democratic aide.

On 12 APR, a U.S. Government Accountability Office report called for greater oversight of the VA's community care programs, highlighting weaknesses they found in community-based outpatient clinics and issuing recommendations "to help ensure veterans receive the same standard of care regardless of whether a clinic is operated by VA or by a contractor." House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) stopped the partial deal last month, but Roe said he has "heard through the grapevine" that she will be supportive. "I hope that's true," Roe said. An aide from Pelosi's office said the committees have been in bipartisan, bicameral discussions since the passage of the omnibus and progress is being made. A spokesperson for the Senate VA Committee's ranking Democrat Jon Tester (MT) also said that although negotiations are ongoing, the senator "remains optimistic that a deal will be reached soon."

The Capitol Hill and administration negotiations are happening without a VA secretary, as Trump's pick—Dr. Ronny Jackson—has yet to be confirmed. The Senate committee is still waiting for official paperwork from both Jackson, the president's personal physician, as well as from the White House. Roe said that he hasn't yet spoken with Jackson, who he said is "under wraps" as he prepares for his confirmation hearing. "I'm acting like the secretary is there," said Roe, who had been a staunch supporter of Shulkin. "I've got things to do." [Source: Modern Healthcare | Susannah Luthi | April 13, 2018 ++]

VA Vet Choice Update 77 ► Congress' Debate Not Yet Over

Ask any veteran if they would like to have more choices for accessing health care, and they likely would say yes. Who wouldn't? Many sometimes struggle to get an appointment at the VA or through their TRICARE provider and would welcome the opportunity at times to go elsewhere for care when they have an immediate need. But in terms of veteran's health care, lawmakers are really only in two camps of thinking when it comes to choice:

- Wanting to give veterans more access to medical services outside of the VA if they choose, allowing veterans to be in the driver's seat, or
- Wanting to leave the VA fully responsible for deciding where veterans should receive their care.

A real philosophical difference exists between House and Senate leaders and administration officials on what veterans' health system reform should look like, particularly how much care should be delivered in VA medical facilities and how much care should be purchased through private providers in the community. While Senate leadership was able to reach an agreement on provisions in a draft bill - called the Caring for our Veterans Act - the effort failed to get included in the massive 2018 omnibus spending package signed by the president 23 MAR. The \$50 billion draft bill would have allowed more flexibility for the VA in determining veterans' eligibility for private-sector care and included provisions to expand VA comprehensive caregiver support to veterans prior to Sept. 11, 2001, and to assess VA facilities and infrastructure needs and assets. Still, some Republicans and the administration didn't see the bill going far enough in giving veterans greater choice to get care in the community.

On the other side of the Capitol, House Republicans and Democrats have been embroiled in similar disagreements around the issue of veterans' choice; some Republicans want to put the decision squarely in the hands of the veteran, while some Democrats see the draft bill going too far in funding VA community care, by diverting

funds from infrastructure and medical services to pay for private-sector care - seen as crossing a redline and leading to privatization of veterans' health care.

Veterans' groups have worked tirelessly with VA and congressional leaders to protect, strengthen, and reform the VA health care system over the past several years. Efforts to reform the medical system and integrate community-care programs into a broader network of care requires vigilance in striking the right balance of public and private care while ensuring the VA maintains the ability to be the primary resource for delivering veterans' health care. No veteran should be left with the impression the VA isn't responsible for providing them the health care they require.

While MOAA is supportive of reform efforts, there also must be legislative solutions and funding to support and preserve foundational and specialty services inherently under the purview of the VA. As the primary provider of medical care and services, the VA must provide clinically appropriate solutions and patient outcomes across the system, whether care is delivered inside a VA facility or in the community, and leave no veteran behind. To accomplish that, the VA must maintain visibility, management, and accountability of this responsibility. Moving all care completely to the private sector erodes the VA's responsibility and limits Congress' ability to hold the VA directly accountable.

The good news is the VA reform and veterans' choice debate is not over. The chairs of both the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees are committed to tackling health care, caregiver, and infrastructure system reforms. The end goal? The committees will press hard to get a final reform bill enacted before Memorial Day. MOAA and their veterans' service organization partners will remain engaged every step of the way with lawmakers to ensure the needs of veterans today and in the future are met by reforms to the health system - a system that puts veterans at the center of the decision-making process for how and where they'd like to receive their care and keeps the VA responsible and accountable. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | Rene Campos | April 17, 2018 ++]

VA Secretary Update 75 ► Confirmation Hearing Postponed

The Senate on 24 APR postponed a planned confirmation hearing for President Trump's nominee to lead the Veterans Affairs Department, putting in question whether lawmakers will ever approve the secretary-designate. Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA) and ranking member Jon Tester D-MT) announced the delay following widespread reports of Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson's misconduct in prior jobs. including allegations of leadership failures, on-the-job drinking and employee harassment while serving as White House physician and in that medical office. The senators wrote a letter to Trump requesting any inspector general reports looking into Jackson's prior behavior and all communications available involving such reports.

"The Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs is postponing the hearing to consider the nominee to be secretary of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs in light of new information presented to the committee," Isakson and Tester said in a joint statement. "We take very seriously our constitutional duty to thoroughly and carefully vet each nominee sent to the Senate for confirmation. We will continue looking into these serious allegations and have requested additional information from the White House to enable the committee to conduct a full review."

Jackson was already expected to face a contested hearing on 25 APR, with lawmakers on both sides and key stakeholders questioning his lack of relevant experience. Few senators had pledged to support Jackson, with even Isakson saying he needed to learn more about Jackson's views. The White House on 24 APR stood by its nominee. "Adm. Jackson has been on the front lines of deadly combat and saved the lives of many others in service to this country," said Hogan Gidley, a White House spokesman. "He's served as the physician to three Presidents—Republican and Democrat—and been praised by them all. Adm. Jackson's record of strong, decisive leadership is exactly what's needed at the VA to ensure our veterans receive the benefits they deserve."

Senators would not detail the allegations, and Trump said he was unaware of the specifics. In his remarks, he repeatedly praised Jackson as “one of the finest people I have met.” in an interview with MSNBC, Jackson said on Tuesday, he was “looking forward to the hearing so we can sit down and I can explain everything and answer all of the senators’ questions.” But just a few hours later, Trump suggested that Jackson may drop out of the process altogether to avoid the political fallout. “What he is is a leader and a good man,” Trump said in response to questions about the allegations. “I don’t want to put a man, who is not a political person, through a process like this. It’s too ugly and disgusting. We’ll see what happens. I would stand behind him.”

Trump also blamed the confirmation hearing delay on Senate Democrats, even though the postponement was announced by Republican and Democratic leaders on the committee. He suggested the allegations (which Capitol Hill sources said came from whistleblowers) were actually planted by lawmakers upset that they couldn’t derail nomination of Mike Pompeo to be secretary of State, another contentious confirmation process. “The Democrats have become obstructionists, they can’t do anything else,” he said. “They have bad ideas. They have bad politics. The one thing they do is obstruct.”

Jackson was on Capitol Hill on 24 APR to continue meetings with senators in advance of a hearing. If he had opted to stay as the VA secretary nominee, the committee could have rescheduled another confirmation hearing the week of 7 MAY to consider his candidacy. President Donald Trump said his nominee to take over the Department of Veterans Affairs would decide in coming days whether to drop out of the confirmation process, and pledged to back his decision either way. “The fact is I wouldn’t do it,” Trump told reporters at a White House press conference. “What does he need it for? To be abused by a bunch of politicians that aren’t thinking nicely about our country. I really don’t think, personally, he should do it, but it’s totally his decision.”

“No matter whether these allegations against Dr. Jackson prove true or false, whether they continue to delay his confirmation indefinitely or sink it altogether, it’s the latest in a chain of unforced errors for which veterans are continuing to pay the price,” AMVETS National Executive Director Joe Chenelly said in a statement 24 APR. “Veterans are losing six different ways right now, from all directions, and it’s discouragingly unclear why this keeps happening.”

Officials at the American Legion called VA “a physical reminder of our nation’s promises to care for those who return from war injured or ill” and noted significant progress in recent years (both under Trump and former President Barack Obama) in reforming the department. “While the VA is the nation’s second largest bureaucracy ... we believe it is entirely manageable and effective when staffed with motivated, experienced, and competent people,” American Legion National Commander Denise Rohan said. “Our veterans deserve a properly led, efficient, and transparent VA that delivers on the American people’s promises.” [Source:GovExec.com & MilitaryTimes | Eric Katz & Leo Shane III | April 24, 2018 ++]

VA Secretary Update 76 ► Jackson Withdraws

President Donald Trump's pick to run the Department of Veterans Affairs has withdrawn from consideration following allegations of wrongdoing, allegations which he denied in a Thursday statement. “Going into this process, I expected tough questions about how to best care for our veterans, but I did not expect to have to dignify baseless and anonymous attacks on my character and integrity,” Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson, the White House physician, said in a statement. “The allegations against me are completely false and fabricated. If they had any merit, I would not have been selected, promoted and entrusted to serve in such a sensitive and important role as physician to three presidents over the past 12 years.”

Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT) , the ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, told Meet the Press host Chuck Todd 25 APR that 23 people had approached his office about Jackson's behavior on the job. Jackson was

accused by current and former colleagues of drinking while on duty, writing himself prescriptions for drugs, and contributing to a toxic leadership environment, USA Today reported this week. Jackson denied the claims in his statement.

“In my role as a doctor, I have tirelessly worked to provide excellent care for all my patients,” he said. “In doing so, I have always adhered to the highest ethical standards. Unfortunately, because of how Washington works, these false allegations have become a distraction for this President and the important issue we must be addressing - how we give the best care to our nation's heroes.”

Trump named Jackson to lead the massive health agency last month after losing confidence in then-VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin. Jackson, an Iraq War veteran, has served as the White House doctor for three administrations. As speculation of the allegations was building, Jackson hosted several veterans' groups at the White House on Friday, which MOAA attended. Flanked by administration officials, Jackson opened the meeting by recounting his more than 20 years in the Navy and making a firm, yet passionate declaration of his commitment to putting veterans first if confirmed by Congress. The introductory meeting gave VSOs a first look at how Jackson planned to lead the VA. MOAA shared its concerns and priorities for the department, too, which included:

- Replacing Choice and reforming VA community care programs.
- Enhancing women veterans health care.
- Preserving foundational and specialty care services.
- Advancing toxic exposure research and health care for veterans exposed to contaminants as part of military service.
- Protecting earned benefits.
- Strengthening mental health and suicide prevention programs.

Jackson said he wanted to put veterans first, ensuring VA the best for them. His work, he pledged, would be built around one question: What's best for veterans? “This is an important question to me because I will be a veteran soon,” Jackson said. “I have a son at the Naval Academy and another son aspiring to follow his brother, so I have a stake in making sure veterans get the best.” Jackson also made it clear that he had no interest in dismantling the VA, as some in the administration push toward privatization. Instead, he said he wanted a stronger system built around the best care. He also said the VA must also be good stewards of Americans' tax dollars, which meant looking carefully at how the agency's massive budget was spent. He wanted to inspire VA employees, too, which he said “serve with a servant's heart.”

Since that meeting though, Tester told Meet the Press Daily, people had come forward “everyday about some of the challenges that Admiral Jackson had as chief of the White House medical unit.” They were allegations, he said, that members of his committee needed to assess carefully in order to ensure they got the right person to lead the department that cares for veterans and their families. “I think what we've seen is a pattern of problems that people deserve to know,” Tester said. “I know a lot of folks have said, mainly from the White House, that we shouldn't be doing this. But look, it would be senatorial malpractice for us not to follow up on this.” Trump said Jackson was being railroaded by a “vicious group of people” on Capitol Hill. It's not immediately clear who Trump will nominate to lead the department now that Jackson has withdrawn. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | Gina Harkins & Rene Campos | April 26, 2018 ++]

VA Management ► Are Things Unraveling At the VA?

With Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson withdrawing his name from consideration to lead the Veterans Affairs Department, even the Trump administration is admitting things are unraveling at the federal government's second largest agency. In a statement released 25 APR, before Jackson announced his withdrawal, VA Press Secretary Curt Cashour said

the “main goal” of the department under acting Secretary Robert Wilkie was to “restore regular order” at VA. The department’s rank and file agreed VA is suffering from uncertainty in leadership, as did an array of veterans service organizations.

Even Gene Dodaro, head of the Government Accountability Office, flagged the issue in an unrelated congressional hearing on 26 APR. “They need leadership,” Dodaro told the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee. “I’m very worried about the Veterans Administration. They have some of the most entrenched management problems in the federal government.” Denise Rohan, the American Legion’s national commander, which represents 2 million veterans, said VA could right its ship if it had the proper leadership in place. “The American Legion is very concerned about the current lack of permanent leadership at the Department of Veterans Affairs,” Rohan said. “While the VA is the nation’s second largest bureaucracy with a budget of \$200 billion and more than 350,000 employees, we believe it is entirely manageable and effective when staffed with motivated, experienced and competent people.” Other criticism on VA’s current situation included:

- Joe Chenelly, national executive director for **AMVETS**, said the botched nomination of Jackson is just “the latest in a chain of unforced errors for which veterans are continuing to pay the price.” “Veterans are losing six different ways right now, from all directions, and it’s discouragingly unclear why this keeps happening or what might make it stop,” Chenelly said. He added there is “nothing but downside for veterans in prolonging the uncertain period between permanent secretaries.”
- P.J. Rieckhoff, head of **Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America**, said VA has entered an “unprecedented time of chaos,” and the issue was trickling down to VA employees. “VA’s reputation is damaged, staff is demoralized, momentum is stalled and the future is shockingly unclear,” Rieckhoff said.
- Marilyn Park, a legislative representative at **American Federation of Government Employees’ VA** council, which represents 230,000 VA workers, said the leadership tumult has exacerbated problems caused by a high number of vacancies. “VA has been in acting mode in almost every single position for a very long time,” Park said, “and that certainly speaks to not making any new changes when the permanency of the leadership is worse than ever.”

The department is facing important deadlines in the coming weeks, such as the popular Veterans Choice Program likely running out of funding in early June. The program enables veterans who face delays in receiving health care at a VA facility or live far from one to access private sector care on the department’s dime. VA and the White House had hoped to use the deadline as a marker for Congress to pass more comprehensive reforms to the programs VA runs to give veterans access to private care, but those plans could be scuttled without leadership in place at the department.

“You’ve got a deal that’s been brokered between the House and the Senate already, and the White House,” said Darin Selnick, who served as the White House’s top VA policy person until earlier this month. Democrats balked at the 11th hour to putting that framework into the recently signed omnibus spending deal, and will likely remain skittish about enacting the legislation until a permanent leader is installed at VA and assuages any lingering concerns about the changes being a first step toward privatizing veterans health care. Cashour said VA would like to see “community care reform legislation” passed by Memorial Day. “Why not give it one last shot of money, fix it, and be done with it?” Selnick said.

To Park, however, the authority provided to VA management in that bill should not be awarded to a yet-to-be-named secretary. The agreement, which has been brokered largely by Sens. Johnny Isakson (R-GA) and Jon Tester, (D-MT), the leaders on the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, would provide the VA secretary with more latitude in determining which veterans are eligible for private care at the government’s expense. “It adds to the uncertainty of adding these very broad tools of authority when we don’t even know who will be carrying them out,” Park said. “It’s very troubling.” She said AFGF is encouraging Congress to “take a pause” and wait for VA to have “a more stable leadership situation” before proceeding with sweeping reforms.

According to VA Press Secretary Cashour, things at VA are already improving since Shulkin's ouster. Under acting Secretary Wilkie, who is temporarily leading VA after being confirmed as the Defense Department's undersecretary for personnel and readiness, Cashour said VA officials are "on the same page" and "speaking with one voice" on behalf of veterans, employees, Congress and outside groups. That process has been aided by the removal of dissident employees, he explained, and will enable the department to better implement Trump's agenda. "In a number of cases, employees who were wedded to the status quo and not on board with this administration's policies or pace of change have now departed VA," Cashour said. Many of the veterans groups do not hold the same view.

- "It was a mistake to fire [former secretary] David Shulkin to start, neutralizing the progress he was making at VA for those who depend on it with their lives," said **AMVETS'** Chenelly. "That mistake hurt veterans and continues to work against the administration." He added that veterans "deserve and need a stable VA with leaders properly vetted and confirmed."
- The **American Legion's** Rohan also said things had been trending in a positive direction. "The VA has made significant improvements in modernizing and realigning the department since 2014 and was headed in the right direction under the past two incumbents," Rohan said. "Our nation's veterans deserve a strong, competent and experienced secretary to lead this vitally important department."
- **IAVA's** Rieckhoff said VA needs a secretary who can usher the department out of its current situation. "Our veterans are simply looking for a competent, proven and dynamic leader with integrity that can lead our nation forward out of this storm of darkness and into a brighter future," Rieckhoff said.

[Source: GovExec.com | Eric Katz | April 26, 2018 ++]

VA Inspector General Update 01 ► IG Squads

It's been reported by various sources that "IG Squads" from Veterans Affairs (VA) are scouring the country looking for veterans believed to be defrauding the U.S. Government. Almost daily, USVCP staff are getting more and more reports from veterans everywhere that VA "IG Squads" are roaming the countryside spying on disabled veterans. The "IG Squads" are allegedly filming disabled veterans from drones, automobiles, and buildings close to a disabled veterans home and workplace, all in the hope of capturing enough data that might identify a veteran believed to be malingering. That is, faking an illness or physical condition for monetary gain.

Initially, one might think veterans are simply paranoid and confused. But, consider the evidence. Truth be told, there is a **VA Office of Inspector General Rewards Program** that the general public and veterans may participate in for the sole purpose of identifying fraud, waste, and abuse within the government. The rewards program provides cash to the individual for disclosing information concerning criminal or unlawful activities involving VA programs and personnel.

Types of criminal or unlawful activity include, but are not limited to, false or fraudulent claims for benefits, medical care, services, or payment from VA to beneficiaries, survivors, fiduciaries, contractors, veterans and VA employees; theft of identity of veterans or fictitious or exaggerated military service claims against VA (including offenses known as "stolen valor"); fraud related to pharmaceutical firms' illegal defective pricing or off-label marketing activities; acts of embezzlement, extortion and bribery committed by VA employees; theft and diversion of legal drugs by VA staff and others; sale of contraband drugs and pharmaceuticals by and to VA staff and patients; theft of VA resources and data; assaults involving VA employees and patients, including homicide, manslaughter and rape; threats against VA employees, patients, facilities, and computer systems; mortgage fraud; and workers' compensation fraud.

There seems to be no shortage of veterans and civilians eager to take on the role of watchdog for VA inspectors. Allegedly, some veterans have made it a fulltime job for themselves looking for veterans who may be defrauding the government. Veterans have sent USVCP many cases where unsuspecting disabled veterans have been spied on for weeks and convicted of fraud. Consider snippets of the following cases:

A jury in Huntington, Kentucky, returned a guilty verdict in the trial of a Kentucky veteran for defrauding the Veterans Health Administration. Phillip M. Henderson, 50, of Olive Hill, Kentucky, was convicted following a five-day jury trial. The jury required only an hour of deliberations before finding Henderson guilty of fraud for pretending to be blind.

And another...

In Tampa, Florida, a veteran is facing a possible federal prison sentence after he admitted that he lied about being blind to collect government benefits. Although he claimed he couldn't drive or even get around without help, the veteran actually worked as a mailroom clerk and drove for years. The veteran, Gary W. Gray, 67, of Kenneth City, suffered a service-related eye injury while serving in the Army between 1968 and 1970. Over the years, he collected Veterans Administration benefits, claiming his disability — hypertensive retinopathy — worsened after a stroke to the point he was almost totally blind. He couldn't drive, he said, or read to handle his financial matters. He depended on his wife and other people to help him get around. But he was lying about the severity of his condition. And on Monday, Gray pleaded guilty to stealing government money, a charge that carries up to 10 years in federal prison. IG Squads used several methods of surveillance over several weeks showing that Mr. Gary not only was able to drive himself, but was extremely active at his place of employment.

And another...

In Sacramento, California, a veteran was charged with fraud for faking the severity of a shoulder injury. While the veteran's shoulder injury was service-connected, the veteran was charged with fraud for pretending the injury left him permanently disabled. IG Squads filmed the veteran at a local park playing football, and using his "bad shoulder" to toss footballs more than 50 yards at a time.

And another...

A veteran who was service-connected at 100% with PTSD, had his rating dropped to 0% after he was seen at a VA function playing tennis, and cooking BBQ for other veterans in attendance. A VA inspector used a spy-like camera-pen to record the veteran engaged in a VA social function.

At this point, you might be thinking to yourself, "The severity of my disability is real, and the VA has proof." Which, by the way, is the case for 99% of veterans with service-connected disabilities. However, all it takes is for one person to report you to the VA for fraud, and the next thing you know you're being investigated without your knowing of it. You don't want VA "IG Squads" snooping around your home or business looking for the first sign of what they believe to be fraud. This is not an attempt to frighten you or cause some degree of oversensitivity to the issue of fraud. It is only an attempt to make you aware that VA IG inspectors are watching you. Always! [Source: USVCP | Laura Martinez | April 25, 2018 ++]

VAMC Tampa FL Update 08 ► Robotic Treatment Increases Cancer Fighting Options

A new robotic treatment was recently used for the first time at James A. Haley Veterans' Hospital in Tampa. It's a treatment that will increase the number of options Veterans have in their fight against cancer. Staff members in the radiation therapy unit used the Cyberknife M6 machine for the first time 28 FEB to treat a Veteran with a cancerous brain tumor. Tampa is only the second hospital in the VA system to use the Cyberknife, with the Michael E DeBakey VA Medical Center in Houston the other. The Cyberknife uses an arm similar to those used by

manufacturing robots in auto plants to precisely deliver high dosage radiation to tumors to destroy cancer cells. Despite its name, it is a completely non-invasive procedure and causes no pain or sensation in the patient during treatment.

The Cyberknife joins another machine used in the RTU to give Veterans more treatment options. “We’ve started a stereotactic program and the program includes two machines,” said Dr. James Pearlman, hospital’s chief of radiation oncology. Stereotactic denotes a therapy that delivers precisely targeted radiation in high-dose treatments. “One is a Varian Truebeam STx that has excellent capabilities to treat multiple lesions. The Cyberknife is a machine that was designed more for stereotactic purposes. It has some advantages over the other machine and the Truebeam has some advantages over it. Combined, it gives a lot of options for us to offer Veterans different ways of being treated,” Pearlman added.



The Cyberknife's computer generates an image showing where each of the 67 radiation "shots" will be aimed during the 19-minute treatment.

One advantage the Cyberknife has over other treatments is the ability to track and treat a tumor in real time. The machine uses x-rays to continuously image the patient and track any tumor movement, for instance a lung tumor moving while the patient is breathing. “The Truebeam always shoots its dose at one point in space. To treat something, you have to physically place that thing in the center,” said Radiation Therapy Physicist Sidney Tazeh, who has been working with the Cyberknife system since 2007. “The Cyberknife is shooting anywhere in a flat volume so you don’t have to move the patient, you just move the robot, so that’s the biggest difference.” While the Truebeam is better when a patient has multiple lesions, the Cyberknife can more precisely target a tumor, cutting down on the amount of healthy tissue that is subjected to the high doses of radiation. While the radiation is the same used in standard imaging x-rays, the dosage can be anywhere from 1,000 to 40,000 times greater in radiation therapy, meaning the less healthy tissue treated, the fewer side effects for the patient.

In order to determine the best treatment, the Cyberknife’s computer will take input from the physician and physicist – to include the radiation dosage needed to kill the tumor – and will come up with a plan that attacks the cancer from multiple angles over the course of several treatments. In the case of the first patient, the machine repositioned itself 67 times over the course of the 19-minute treatment. Pearlman said he is most excited about offering more options for treatment to Tampa area Veterans now that the both Cyberknife and the Truebeam machines are up and running. While there are treatment facilities that use one or the other machines, nobody in this area offers both. “We have both machines so we can offer either treatment depending on what machine best suits your needs, and that’s what we’re happy about, that we can offer both,” Pearlman said.

Radiation therapist Andrew Hawkins is one of three therapists trained to operate the Cyberknife. During a typical treatment, all three are busy monitoring the machine and the patient to ensure a safe and successful therapy session. He said he’s also excited about the Cyberknife operation starting. “We don’t have to send our patients off to be treated somewhere else,” Hawkins said. “Our doctors here and our physics staff are very thorough and they do a lot of double-checking. I know what kind of treatment they’re going to get. We have all their records and Dr. Pearlman is constantly trying to improve the process, improve the experience for the Veterans and make sure they’re getting the best care possible. He’s looking for the best care, and if we can do it here, that’s even better.” [Source: Vantage Point | Ed Drohan | April 20, 2018 ++]



SBP DIC Offset Update 51 ► Many Are Blindsided by Widow's Tax

Near Amsterdam, Netherlands, on July 4, 1972, an American neighbor introduced 20-year-old Elly Boelhouwer to a U.S. Air Force staff sergeant. John Gibbons was 25, a Vietnam veteran and the owner of a red Jaguar. The Dutch woman and the American airman married a few months later. Over the next 45 years, they begat two children, a lifelong marriage and 40 years of military service, most of it in Fort Smith. Then early last year, John's military service took his life. He died of cancer caused by exposure to Agent Orange in Vietnam. And Elly was further shaken by a federal law that reduces survivors' payments for military widowers and widows like herself.

Dubbed the "Widow's Tax," the law isn't a tax at all. It's a two-sentence provision, 10 U.S. Code 1451 (c)(2), that bars certain widows and widowers from collecting all of the paid-for annuities they and their spouses had counted on. The law applies only to widows and widowers of military servicemen and servicewomen who died in action or, like John Gibbons, died in retirement from service-caused illnesses. In addition to their paid annuities, these surviving spouses qualify for a death compensation benefit known as the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) from the Department of Veterans Affairs. The DIC amount, known as an offset, is currently \$15,397 per year. The federal "Widow's Tax" law won't let widows and widowers collect both in full. With the law in place, 64,600 military widows and widowers see their potential annuity incomes reduced. More than three of every five widows and widowers lose every dollar of their survivor annuities.

Nearly all who are affected — 99 percent — are women, according to Defense Department data. More than 85 percent are age 62 and older. "I was outraged," Elly Gibbons said. Though she flies a 5-foot American flag over her home every day, Gibbons finds it insulting. "Our husbands honored their commitment to their country. Now it is high time for the government to honor its commitment," she told the Arkansas Democrat-Gazette newspaper.

The U.S. Department of Defense offers the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuity program. Military retirees generally choose to pay in 6.5 percent of retirement compensation with the understanding that if they die first and their retirement money stops, their survivors will receive 55 percent of their retirement pay for the rest of their lives. Cause of death usually isn't a factor. Under the 1972 federal law, the Survivor Benefit Plan annuity "paid to a surviving spouse shall be reduced by the amount" of the VA's "dependency and indemnity compensation." The benefit-cut law affects 919 surviving spouses in Arkansas, according to the most recent Defense Department data. States with the largest numbers include California, 6,048; Florida, 6,127; and Texas, 7,690.

Don Berry of Sherwood, a spokesman for the Arkansas Veterans Coalition, and other veterans group spokesmen say too many widows they talk to don't know the law's impact, or even its existence, until their spouses die. A spokesman for the Defense Department, which sells the Survivor Benefit Plan annuity, says information about the VA payment's impact is provided to service families in meetings and in printed materials. Even so, a former Veterans Affairs benefits counselor says he sees many new widows blindsided by it. "You start out speaking to a lady who's in horrible shape because she's just lost her husband," said John Tilford, a retired Army Reserve colonel.

He has counseled veterans and survivors for the VA, for county government and as a volunteer in the Bloomington, Ind., area. "When you fully describe it, the widows raise their eyes and look at you like, 'You've got to be kidding,'" Tilford said. "If the widows aren't already crying, they start. They suddenly realize they will be punished for the remainder of their lives because their spouse gave his life for their country. It does not make sense."

Defense Department spokesman and Air Force Maj. Carla Gleason wrote in an email that the offset law ensures the service-member's survivor "receives the higher of the two annuities" and allows the VA benefit to retain a tax-exempt status. Also, the government refunds all or part of the service members' annuity premiums, Gleason wrote. Veterans groups point out that refund doesn't include interest on premiums paid, often for decades.

Kathy Prout of Coronado, Calif., didn't start lobbying to repeal the "Widow's Tax" until several years after her husband, Navy Rear Adm. James Prout III, died in a 1995 military air crash. The couple had three children. Her Survivor Benefit Plan annuity was supposed to pay about \$2,500 per month, she said. The benefit-reduction law cut it to about \$1,750. In about 2013, frustrated by the difficulty in contacting others also affected, Prout started a Facebook group, which now has more than 1,640 followers.

As of late March, 241 of 435 House members had co-sponsored the House Resolution 846, the "Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act." All four representatives from Arkansas have signed on. In the Senate, 38 of 100 U.S. senators had signed to co-sponsor the similar Senate Bill 339, the "Military Widow's Tax Elimination Act of 2017." Arkansas' Republican U.S. Sens. John Boozman and Tom Cotton are among them. "The widows and children of our service members have sacrificed in service to our country, and they deserve the very best," Sen. Tom Cotton said through a spokesman. "We should be honoring them, not taxing their benefits." [Source: Arkansas Democrat-Gazette | Lisa Hammersly | April 11, 2018 ++]

MOPH National Service Program ► Vet VA Assistance Will End 30 JUN 2018

Veterans and their families will soon have one less resource to help them navigate the at-times labyrinthine maze that is the Department of Veterans Affairs. The Military Order of the Purple Heart of the U.S.A., or MOPH, a Virginia-based nonprofit, announced this month that it will no longer be able to provide such assistance to those in need through its National Service Program. Citing a lack of funding, the charity will shutter all National Service Program offices on 30 JUN, according to a press release. Veteran claims being administered by the program will be transferred to accredited veteran service organizations, or state and county entities. "No Veterans' claims will be stopped or harmed in any way by this action," the announcement states.

MOPH spokesman John Bircher could not offer an estimate of the number of veterans who would be impacted, but said the non-profit has 100 offices nationally. The National Service Program's end was necessitated by "failure of the Purple Heart Foundation, the fundraising arm of the Organization, to be able to raise sufficient funds to sustain operation of the Service Program and a number of other programs of the Order," according to the press release. "Faced with a dramatic reduction of 50% of the prior year's operating budget, already well below earlier years, the (nonprofit) has been left with no choice other than to dramatically reduce expenditures for its outreach programs."

Nearly two million troops have received the Purple Heart, according to the National Purple Heart Hall of Honor. MOPH was formed in 1932 to protect and serve the mutual interests of veterans and active-duty men and women who received the decoration for wounds sustained in combat. It runs several additional programs, including VA volunteering, JROTC awards and scholarships, among others. "This announcement in no way affects continuation of the MOPH as a patriotic and fraternal organization," the release states. "MOPH wants to assure the public that service to Veterans remains our number one priority. Every possible action is being taken to streamline operating

costs, while at the same time restructuring our fundraising efforts to reach out to new and existing sponsors and supporters for their assistance.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | April 26, 2018 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure ~ Water ► 126 Military Installations Impacted

The water at or around 126 military installations contains potentially harmful levels of perfluorinated compounds, which have been linked to cancers and developmental delays for fetuses and infants, the Pentagon has found. In a March report provided to the House Armed Services Committee, the Pentagon for the first time publicly listed the full scope of the known contamination. The Defense Department identified 401 active and Base Closure and Realignment installations in the United States with at least one area where there was a known or suspected release of perfluorinated compounds.

These included 36 sites with drinking water contamination on-base, and more than 90 sites that reported either on-base or off-base drinking water or groundwater contamination, in which the water source tested above the Environmental Protection Agency’s acceptable levels of perfluorooctane sulfonate or perfluorooctanoic acid, also known as PFOS and PFOAs. The man-made chemicals, which can be used to make items heat or water resistant, are found in everyday household, food and clothing items, even take-out food wrappers. At military bases, however, they are concentrated in the foam used to put out aircraft fires. The Pentagon MAR 2018 report containing a list of all contaminated bases is at https://partner-mco-archive.s3.amazonaws.com/client_files/1524589484.pdf .

Maureen Sullivan, deputy assistant secretary of defense for environment, safety and occupational health, said DoD has already made safety changes at affected bases, including installing filters and providing bottled water to families living there. It has also released the full list of installations, reported in a lengthy chart attached toward the end of the congressional report, and will be working with the Centers for Disease Control next year on a study of the potential long-term effects of exposure.

Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson was asked about the exposure this week on Capitol Hill, where she was testifying about the service’s fiscal 2019 budget needs. “It’s an issue not just in New Hampshire, but at military installations across this country,” said Sen. Jeanne Shaheen, D-New Hampshire. “We have 1,500 people who have been tested with elevated levels in the Portsmouth area, who are anxious about their future and their children’s future. And I know there are many people throughout the Air Force and our other military installations who share that concern.”

In all, 25 Army bases; 50 Air Force bases, 49 Navy or Marine Corps bases and two Defense Logistics Agency sites have tested at higher than acceptable levels for the compounds in either their drinking water or groundwater sources. Additionally, DoD tested 2,668 groundwater wells both on and in the surrounding off-base community and found that 61 percent of them tested above the EPA’s recommended levels. In 2016 the EPA established a new, lower guideline for acceptable levels of PFOS or PFOA levels in water supplies: no more 70 parts per trillion. While the EPA did not make the guidelines enforceable, DoD decided to test all of its locations and work toward complying with the new standards.

It won’t be a quick fix, Sullivan said. The first target for the department was to address the 36 direct drinking water sources that are contaminated and “cut off that human exposure as soon as possible,” Sullivan said. DoD was only able to do that quickly at the 24 locations where it manages the water supply. At those locations it has installed filters at the water source or inside base housing, relocated water usage to another well, or provided alternate drinking water, such as water bottles, for personnel, Sullivan said.

For the other 12 drinking water sources, provided either by a contracted vendor or through the local utility, it’s a harder fix, because the EPA’s guidelines are not enforceable. For example, commercial airports and industrial sites also use the foam, which could impact a municipality’s drinking water, but it will be up to that municipality to

determine if it will test and make fixes to comply with the EPA’s guidelines, Sullivan said. “It’s up to the owner of that system to make a decision on what they’re going to do,” Sullivan “So we’re on a fine line of trying to provide drinking water to our folks when we’re buying it from somebody else.” In those cases the department is working with the vendors or utilities on a solution, and providing bottled water or filters as needed, Sullivan said. Each base should have its water information posted, Sullivan said. Families with any concerns should be able to go to the base’s restoration program manager — an on-site point person tasked with addressing environmental cleanup issues — with their questions.

DoD has already spent \$200 million studying and testing its water supply, and also providing either filters, alternate wells or bottled water to address contamination. For the groundwater sources, both on-base and off-base, however, cleanup will take years to address, Sullivan said. Those groundwater sites will be added to the department’s long list of environmental cleanup responsibilities it has at each of its more than 2,900 facilities around the world, and will prioritize that cleanup based on risk. Sullivan estimates the groundwater perfluorinate cleanup will add about \$2 billion to the \$27 billion previously identified cleanup projects for which the department is responsible. The services are also phasing out the firefighting foam they use and working on replacements that do not contain perfluorinated compounds, Sullivan said. [Source: NavyTimes | Tara Copp | April 26, 2018 ++]

POW Burials ► **Enlisted Survivors Denied Full Honors**

Army Pvt. 1st Class Robert Fletcher was captured by Chinese forces in Korea on Nov. 27, 1950, after heavy fighting. The Buffalo Soldier endured three years in captivity, where he was subjected to starvation, freezing temperatures and physical and psychological torture. He carried these scars until his death 12 FEB. Thanks to an act of Congress regarding prisoners of war, the native of Ann Arbor, Mich., will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery on 4 JUN. However, his survivors have joined a growing number of dissatisfied POW families angry that enlisted POWs who survived captivity and made it home are denied full honors — most notably, an escort and the iconic horse-drawn caisson — at the nation’s most hallowed cemetery.



The 3rd U.S. Infantry Regiment Caisson Platoon, known as "The Old Guard," escorts a former Army colonel to his final resting place at Arlington National Cemetery, April 2, 2018.

Those honors are reserved for officers and those killed in action. “It’s just disgusting,” said Fletcher’s daughter, Kanda Fletcher. “My dad fought that war and lived the POW experience until the day he died ... and you’re going to

sit there and tell my family that my dad can't be buried with full honors because he wasn't and could never be an officer? I don't think it's right." Fletcher is not alone. "I wanted the caisson because I thought after all he had been through for this country that he deserved that," said Charlotte Smith, whose husband, Bill, died at 86 in June 2016.

Bill Smith was captured in Korea on Nov. 2, 1950. Like Fletcher, he spent nearly three years in captivity, followed by 15 months recuperating at what was then Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington. Before he died, Bill Smith told his wife he wanted to be buried at Arlington with his "band of brothers." "When we started the process to bury him in Arlington, I — in my naivety — thought that he would be honored with a full military service, and when I asked for that they said, 'Oh no, no, he has to be an officer or be killed in action,'" Charlotte Smith said. "I said, 'Do you mean to tell me that after he spent 2 ½ years and went through the torture that he went through, that he is not entitled to that?' It's not right."

The rules regarding burial and honors at Arlington can be confusing. Eligibility for former POWs is established by the Code of Federal Regulations, according to Renea Yates, Arlington's deputy superintendent for cemetery administration. It says any former POW who served honorably and died on or after Nov. 30, 1993, can be buried in-ground there. A Defense Department instruction titled "Military Funeral Support," sets a standardized baseline of services to be provided, Yates said. This includes a two-person uniformed detail, the playing of taps, the folding of the flag and presentation to the family of the deceased. Additional elements such as a rifle detail, color guard, pallbearers, caisson and military flyover "could be provided ... if personnel and resources are available," the Defense Department's "Military Funeral Honors" website says.

On top of the Defense Department's standardized guidelines, the veteran's service branch also has discretion over which, if any, additional honors are bestowed, Yates said. Arlington follows an Army regulation titled "Salutes, Honors and Visits of Courtesy," as administrator over the cemetery. The minimum, per the Army regulations, for enlisted servicemembers eligible for in-ground burial provides a casket team, a firing party, the playing of taps by a bugler and a chaplain, which is what Fletcher will receive, Yates said. Officers eligible for burial at Arlington, as well as E-9 and above, are eligible for "full honors," which includes an additional escort, a marching element, a band and the horse-drawn caisson. "The decedent's branch of service provides the respective military honors for his or her service and the level of military honors rendered depends on the rank of the deceased as well as service customs, traditions and availability," Arlington spokeswoman Kerry Meeker wrote in a statement to Stars and Stripes. "There are no stipulations that afford prisoners of war different funeral honors."

The same policy applies to Medal of Honor recipients, Yates said. Yates said she feels bad that some families walk away from the process unhappy, but said Arlington can barely keep up with the current number of requests. There are only eight horse-drawn caisson slots per day, and the cemetery performs up to 30 burials, she said. There is a minimum of a four-month wait to receive standard honors at Arlington and a seven- to nine-month wait for full honors and the caisson. There were 5,071 former POWs living in the United States as of August, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs. However, this number may not be complete, as it includes only those in the VA system. Kanda Fletcher lamented that officers who never stood on the firing line could get full honors at Arlington, but enlisted former POWs could not. "Shame on you," she said, directing her anger to the Army and Arlington. "My dad deserves so much more than that."

Robert Fletcher dropped out of high school at 17 and joined the Army in 1950. In a few short months he was in Japan as a member of the 24th Infantry Regiment, an acclaimed unit of black soldiers and white officers. When the Korean War started, Fletcher's regiment was the first to go to the peninsula, he would later tell journalist/filmmaker James Militzer in a 2013 documentary. They arrived at Pusan and pushed toward Seoul. The North Koreans and Americans took turns wiping each other out. Of the 250 men Fletcher landed with, 212 were killed. The regiment received replacements and rejoined the fight. It wasn't long before the North Korean army was decimated. Fletcher's regiment was sent north to the Yalu River that separates North Korea and China. The Chinese were waiting for them.

“On Nov. 27 [1950], we got hit with everything but the kitchen stove,” Fletcher recalled. They lost more than 100 men, including half of Fletcher’s squad. Many, including the unit leadership, were wounded. “We were caught on a little knoll; we were out of ammunition; I had, I think, a clip left,” Fletcher said in the film. “Some people had four or five rounds ... I really don’t know how we could have fought any longer.” As a unit, the men decided to surrender to the Chinese. Wearing summer clothes, they were marched toward prison camps as temperatures dropped well below freezing. “A lot of guys froze to death; a lot of guys starved to death; a lot of guys died from wounds,” Fletcher recalled.

They were passed from the Chinese to the North Koreans, who exacted their revenge. Dysentery claimed many men. “The death rate started climbing,” he said. “I was 180 pounds and I went down to about 90 pounds.” Fletcher recalled being forced to watch fellow soldiers thrown into a pit alive and eaten by rats, or tied to a tripod and soaked with water repeatedly until they froze to death. He remained in captivity until Aug. 8, 1953. Out of 8,000 prisoners taken with him, Fletcher said only 3,000 came back alive. “I don’t know why I survived,” he said. “I just said the good Lord up there was not ready for me. That’s the only thing I can say.”

Fletcher — who was dedicated to veterans’ issues and spent 22 years on the Advisory Committee on Former Prisoners of War — hadn’t even wanted to be buried at Arlington, but his family pushed him into it. Hearing that he won’t receive full honors at the nation’s most hallowed cemetery felt like a slap in the face. It doesn’t sit well with advocates either. “Of course, this is ridiculous!” Korean and Cold War POW/MIA Network Executive Director John Zimmerlee wrote in an email to Stars and Stripes. National League of POW/MIA Families chairwoman and CEO Ann Mills-Griffiths doubted that denying former POWs full honors could even be happening. “Why would this occur? It makes no sense,” she wrote to Stars and Stripes. “If that is true, then it is entirely offensive.” Attempts to get the policy changed or to receive an exemption have failed.

Charlotte Smith said her family was offered the horse-drawn caisson from the family of an officer who was not a POW but was eligible for burial with full honors, but Arlington would not allow it. After receiving a complaint from Fletcher’s family, Sen. Debbie Stabenow (D-MI) tried to intervene and get full honors for Robert Fletcher, Kanda Fletcher said. She was not successful. A high-ranking military officer who knew Robert Fletcher also tried. Arlington officials said any changes to policy would have to come from the Secretary of the Army Mark Esper or Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis.

For the loved ones left behind, depriving these men full honors continues to pick away at them. “I was angry; I was hurt. I was incensed for my husband because I felt like it made him less honored for what he had done for this country,” Charlotte Smith said. “It’s just not right. When he came back at 82 pounds, he suffered just as much as an officer did. They went through the same torture; they went through the same cold; they went through the same deprivation.” Nevertheless, Charlotte Smith said it would not take away from the legacy of Bill Smith and his fellow enlisted POWs, like Fletcher. Smith was most proud that he never signed a confession in captivity and never “turned his back on a buddy.” “He never gave in,” she said. “He always said they got to his body but they never got to his mind.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Matthew M. Burke | April 22, 2018 ++]

Pennsylvania Gulf War Bonus ► Bonus Deadline Fast Approaching

Under an extension that was signed by Gov. Tom Wolf, Persian Gulf veterans were given more time to sign up for bonuses. Act 50 extended by three years the application deadline for veterans who might be entitled to compensation. The application deadline for Gulf War veterans originally ended on August 31, 2015, but the change extends it to August 31, 2018. The bonus is paid to a veteran or family of a deceased veteran for a one-time benefit of \$75 per month for each month of service in the Persian Gulf conflict, with a maximum compensation of \$525. If the veteran was a prisoner of war between August 2, 1990, and August 31, 1991, he or she is entitled to a one-time benefit of \$5,000 under the program. Veterans are encouraged to visit their Veterans Service Officer (VSO), nearest

military organization or contact the Persian Gulf War department at your local Veterans Affairs (VA) Regional Office to learn more about the program. [Source: USVCP | April 18, 2018 ++]

Vet Student Loans Update 02 ► Trump Moves to Cancel Disabled Vet Student Debt

It may be getting easier for some disabled veterans to erase their student loan debt. The Department of Education announced 16 APR that it will partner with the Department of Veteran Affairs to identify disabled student loan borrowers who are eligible for debt forgiveness. Such borrowers will be notified of their potential eligibility in the mail and will also receive a Total and Permanent Disability Discharge application, the avenue though which borrowers with severe physical impairments are approved to erase their debt.

Such outreach is needed: Many disabled veterans are currently unaware that they can be eligible for student loan debt forgiveness, said Carrie Wofford, president of Veterans Education Success, a nonprofit advocacy group. "It's horrific," Wofford said "There are disabled veterans who served their country who are financially struggling — and sometimes destitute — who are legally entitled to have their student loans forgiven but it's not happening." Indeed, there are likely "tens of thousands" of severely disabled veterans who aren't aware of their federal student loan forgiveness options, according to estimates from the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau based on Department of Veterans Affairs data.

The match program builds on an effort started during the Obama administration to help severely disabled Americans. In 2016, the Education Department partnered with the Social Security Administration to identify borrowers receiving disability payments with the specific designation of "Medical Improvement Not Expected," an indication of discharge eligibility. The agencies found 387,000 matches in its first review, of whom 179,000 were in default on their loans and at risk of having with their Social Security benefits garnished. That process, however, failed to capture permanently disabled veterans who receive benefits through Veterans Affairs, rather than the Social Security Administration. Although the VA signed an agreement in November 2016 that would have extended the match program to veterans, Education Department spokeswoman Liz Hill said the information was never exchanged. Monday's action seeks to rectify the oversight, much to the delight of veterans groups.

Recent changes in the tax law would benefit disabled veterans whose loans are discharged under the new initiative. A provision in the new tax code waives federal income taxes on forgiven education debt for permanently disabled people. Historically, the IRS considered such cancelled debt as taxable income. For example, in 2017 the Lansing State Journal told the story of a veteran who had his \$223,000 in student loan debt erased — only to receive a tax bill for around \$62,000. "The government shouldn't be preying on the misery of borrowers," said Mark Kantrowitz, a student loan expert. "Making this debt dischargeable without taxes is a much, much better process."

But the streamlined process may still be challenging for some disabled veterans, say, those with traumatic brain injuries, Wofford said. An automatic discharge would be even better. "It would be nice if the letter just said: 'You are no longer responsible for your loans. Thank you for your service,'" she said. [Source: CNBC | Annie Nova | April 17, 2018 ++]

Transition Assistance Program Update 04 ► VA Briefing Portion Updated

As part of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) ongoing efforts to help transitioning service members navigate and understand VA's various benefits, the agency recently updated VA's briefing portion of the Transition Assistance Program (TAP) – an interagency initiative authorized as a voluntary program in 1991 under the National

Defense Authorization Act and made mandatory under the VOW to Hire Heroes Act in 2011 to help service members adjust to civilian life. The new VA briefing is designed to be more collaborative and stimulating, helping service members make informed decisions about their health care, employment, housing and other benefits.

“Each year, thousands of military members leave the service and settle in communities around the nation, with the goals of establishing comfortable homes, attaining quality education for themselves and their families, and finding rewarding employment opportunities,” said Acting VA Secretary Robert M. Wilkie. “Coming from the Department of Defense, I understand the importance of this great program, and I believe these changes will strengthen it further and provide real-life relevance to those who have given a portion of their lives to serving our nation.” Because no two transitions are the same, the updates deliver elements relevant to service members based on where they are in their career and life. The redesign will encourage whole-health support for service members and their family members, to include relevant information about Veterans Service Organizations (VSOs) and allow time to identify local VSO representatives.

The updates, released this month, incorporated suggestions made by Veterans, VSOs and post-9/11 Veterans groups, including taking a more holistic view of a service member’s new life, as well as the psychosocial aspects of the transition to civilian life. “In fiscal year 2017, VA provided more than 63,000 events to educate more than 500,000 transitioning service members and family members,” said Margarita Devlin, executive director of the VA Benefits Assistance Service. “VA consistently receives high evaluations from service members who attend these benefits briefings, and we have taken the next step by incorporating recommendations by other stakeholders to make the program even better.” VA will now work to fully integrate TAP objectives into the military lifecycle, and as an added benefit, will begin implementing a post-transition Veteran survey. To view VA’s updated curriculum, visit www.benefits.va.gov/TAP. [Source: VA News Release | April 16, 2018 ++]

Facebook Fake Pages ► Vietnam Vets Targeted

In mid-APR, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg promised lawmakers that his platform would crack down on fake accounts and foreign influence. But at least two Facebook pages linked to websites operating out of Bulgaria are still targeting U.S. veterans of the Vietnam War, according to a letter obtained by The Atlantic that was sent to lawmakers by a nonprofit veteran’s organization.

The U.S. military community is not a new or unusual target for foreign influence operations. A study published in October by the University of Oxford found that three websites linked to Russia—Veteranstoday.com, Veteransnewsnow.com and Southfront.org—engaged in “significant and persistent interactions” with veterans during the election, concluding in part that veterans are targeted because they tend to be “community leaders” trusted by the public. Russian operatives went as far as to use advertising tools to target users by demographics and geography throughout 2016, prompting House and Senate investigators to question Facebook, Google, and Twitter executives about how foreign actors were exploiting their platforms to conduct influence operations.

Despite their exposure, however, these operations are ongoing—likely so that foreign actors can use them to spread divisive or fabricated news and other political content, especially in the run-up to the 2018 midterm elections. In August 2017, the nonprofit Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) discovered a Facebook page bearing its name, logo, and registered trademark that was not affiliated with the organization and whose posts linked to “vvets.eu”—a website anonymously registered through Netfinity JSC of Bulgaria. The page shared divisive political content, including posts about the NFL “Take a Knee” boycott controversies and the racially charged “Blue Lives Matter” movement.

The page had nearly 200,000 followers by October 2017, according to VVA, but was not shut down when the organization first flagged it to a Facebook representative on August 23, 2017. (Facebook said later that it had

initially determined that the imposter page had not violated its terms of use.) VVA’s assistant director for policy, Kristofer Goldsmith, told a Facebook representative in late August that the page was “building an audience by sharing incendiary fake news” and propaganda, according to emails obtained by The Atlantic. On 31 AUG, the representative asked Goldsmith whether he had reported the page, and said it was being reviewed by Facebook’s internal team. When the page had still not been shut down by 26 SEP, Goldsmith reached out again, this time to flag a video posted by the page with the caption: “Do you think the criminals must suffer?” The Facebook representative did not respond.

The page was ultimately taken offline for copyright infringement. But two more like it—“Nam Vets” and “Vietnam-Veterans.org,” both of which are registered to the same Netfinity JSC of Bulgaria—were subsequently discovered. “Vietnam-Veterans.org” is registered specifically to an individual named Nikola Mitov, also through Netfinity JSC of Bulgaria. Mitov did not respond to an request for comment sent to an email listed under his name. Facebook did not respond to a request for comment.

Combined, “Nam Vets” and “Vietnam-Veterans.org” have fewer than 4,000 followers. But they have used the same tactics to gain traction and engagement as the previous imposter page did. “Vietnam-Veterans.org” used a logo similar to VVA’s as its profile photo, and “Nam Vets,” at its inception in 2015, co-opted the logo entirely. Both pages have promoted divisive political content including videos of protesters stomping on American flags and photos of veterans’ memorials being defaced. The pages are riddled with spelling and grammatical errors, mirroring the pages and ads purchased by Russian actors during the election that impersonated Americans and spread misinformation. “Does all of your friends know what day is today?” reads one link posted by “Vietnam-Veterans.org.” “Very useful inormation (sic) for each Veteran!” reads another posted by “Nam Vets.”

In the case of the now-defunct “Heart of Texas” Facebook page, the language was the biggest clue that it was a project spearheaded by foreign actors and not dissatisfied Texans seeking to secede. The memes posted in the group contained typos, grammatical errors, and a general unfamiliarity with basic English phrases. Still, followers engaged with the content and rarely, if ever, raised questions about the grammar. Moreover, some of the Facebook pages exposed as foreign influence operations were not limited to memes and “news” stories—they actually transformed into an organizing force, promoting rallies and protests that average Americans attended during the lead-up to the 2016 election.

“On behalf of the 80,000-plus members of Vietnam Veterans of America, we are requesting the assistance of your committee in investigating the use of social media by foreign actors to target and influence American veterans,” Vietnam Veterans of America wrote in their letter to the chairman and ranking member of the House Committee on Energy and Commerce. “As social media becomes ever more important to the daily lives of all generations of veterans, we hope to see the government take a proactive approach to ensuring a safe cyber environment.” In his marathon congressional testimony earlier this week, Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg seemed pessimistic about the prospects of halting foreign influence operations on social-media platforms altogether. “This is an arms race,” he told lawmakers. “They’re going to keep getting better.” [Source: The Atlantic | Natasha Bertrand | Apr 12, 2018 ++]

Homeless Vets Update 85 ► Safe Parking Pilot Program

Homeless veterans who live in their cars will soon be able to park overnight on the Department of Veterans Affairs' West Los Angeles campus, City Councilman Mike Bonin has announced. The pilot program will provide the veterans an assigned spot where they may sleep safely, as well as access to social services and eventually housing, Bonin's office said 13 APR. The program on the sprawling campus will launch in the next two weeks and is being run by the nonprofit group Safe Parking L.A. It initially will serve 10 vehicles, but could later accommodate dozens more, Safe Parking L.A.'s executive director, Dr. Scott Sale, said in a statement provided by the councilman's office.



Safe parking programs give those without shelter a spot where they can spend the night in their vehicles. Thomas Goodwin and his daughter Leilani Miranda Duenez Goodwin, above, participate in a program in Santa Barbara.

Bonin said the program's launch demonstrated "the VA's renewed commitment to serving our homeless veterans." More than 35 neighborhood council and homeowners groups on the Westside supported the proposal, his office said. The city now has three safe parking sites; the others are in South Los Angeles and Koreatown. Using vehicles as a primary shelter has become a fact of life in Los Angeles, where more than 34,000 people are homeless. However, neighbors and businesses complain about the trash and human waste from the parked campers, cars and RVs. Those who live in the vehicles criticize city rules barring them from parking in some residential and commercial areas. Los Angeles County Supervisor Sheila Kuehl, who represents the Westside, said in the statement that it was "important to find partners like the VA who will create safe parking areas for the more than 8,500 Angelenos currently living in cars, vans and campers." Bonin said he's seeking additional safe parking sites on the Westside. [Source: Los Angeles Times | Dakota Smith | April 14, 2018 ++]

Did You Know (02) ► Items of Interest to Vets

Do You Know About Other Compensations?

- If a veteran has a service-connected rating of 60% - 90% that causes unemployability, the veteran may be eligible for compensation at 100%.
- If a veteran is hospitalized for 21 days or more, or inconvalescent care for one month or more for service-connected disabilities, the veteran will be compensated at 100% during the time period.
- Any veteran rated 10% or more for a service-connected disability is eligible to receive training from Vocational Rehabilitation Training program.
- Any veteran rated 10% or more for service-connected disabilities may have the Home Loan fee waived.
- If your service-connected disabilities are disabling to the point you are unable to hold down steady, gainful employment, you may apply for total disability. To apply, visit your VSO or nearest VA office and complete VA Form 21-8940, which is the Veteran's Application for Increased Compensation Based on Unemployability.
- Compensation payments are exempt from claims made by creditors. With certain exceptions, compensation payments are not assignable and are not subject to attachment, levy or seizure except as to claims of the United States government.

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How to Rate a Mental Disorder

When evaluating a veteran for a mental disorder, the rating agency shall consider the frequency, severity, and duration of psychiatric symptoms, the length of remissions, and the veteran's capacity for adjustment during periods of remission. The rating agency shall assign an evaluation based on all the evidence of record that bears on

occupational and social impairment rather than solely on the examiner’s assessment for the level of disability at the moment of the examination.

Example: An examining psychologist must take into account the veteran’s entire psychological history that may have a determining factor on an accurate diagnosis.

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Horse Therapy for Veterans

Hanging out with horses - not riding them, but just being in a barn, or arena or field with them - may have therapeutic value for people dealing with issues of all sorts. The nonprofit organization Reins of Change in rural Elgin, Illinois offers quality mental health services, personal growth and educational opportunities for people, utilizing Equine Assisted Psychotherapy and the Equine Assisted Growth & Learning Association (EAGALA) model. EAGALA is the leading international nonprofit association for professionals using equine therapy to address mental health and human development needs. Equine Specialists at Reins of Change work with mental health providers who specialize in particular areas. The organization provides services for eating disorders, anger management, self-injury, ADHD, addiction, anxiety disorders, depression, grief, OCD, PTSD, and other mental health issues. For more information, call 847-464-5177 or email: info@reinsofchange.com .

[Source: <http://www.veteranprograms.com/did-you-know3.html> | USVCP | April 30, 2018 ++]

Obit: R. Lee Ermey ► 14 April 2018 | Iconic Marine DI

As he approached the Pearly Gates, Saint Peter sounded off "Attention on Deck. Gunnery Sergeant R. Lee Ermey Arriving". And the Golden Road was then manned by all Marines from the Gate to the Commanding General's Quarters. Gunny marched to the Big House, halted, saluted at attention and reported, "Another Marine arriving Sir. I've served my time in hell". Rest in Peace, Gunny and keep those young Marines squared away the manner in which only you can do. Hope I see you when and if I get there.



R. Lee Ermey, legendary Marine and one of the most memorable actors from the movie “Full Metal Jacket,” died 14 APR at age 74. Ermey passed away from complications of pneumonia, Bill Rogin, Ermey’s long-time manager, said in a statement on Twitter. “It is with deep sadness that I regret to inform you all that R. Lee Ermey (“The Gunny”) passed away this morning from complications of pneumonia. He will be greatly missed by all of us,” Rogin wrote. In a statement to Marine Corps Times, Rogin added that nobody was prepared for the “terrible loss” of Ermey. “He has meant so much to so many people. And it is extremely difficult to truly quantify all of the great things this man has selflessly done for, and on behalf of, our many men and women in uniform,” Rogin said. “He has also contributed many iconic and indelible characters on film that will live on forever.”

Ermey “was a family man, and a kind and gentle soul. He was generous to everyone around him. And, he especially cared deeply for others in need.” Rogin asked Ermey’s fans to honor him with “hope and kindness,” and by supporting the men and women in the military. “That’s what he wanted most of all,” Rogin said. Ermey is best

known for his pivotal role as Gunnery Sergeant Hartman in “Full Metal Jacket.” He would go on to star in television shows and inspire Marines everywhere.

The role of Gunnery Sergeant Hartman earned Ermey a Golden Globe nomination for best supporting actor and led to dozens more on-screen appearances and several off-screen ones, where he provided voices for characters in the “Toy Story” franchise, “The Simpsons” and other properties. He also hosted Outdoor Channel’s ” GunnyTime with R. Lee Ermey” and ” Military Makeover,” from the producers of Lifetime’s “Designing Spaces”, and wrote a book and established a million-strong Facebook following. Ermey, a former drill instructor, served from 1961 to 1972. He left the Marine Corps as a staff sergeant, and later received an honorary promotion to gunnery sergeant from then-Commandant Gen. James Jones in 2002. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | Michelle Tan | April 15, 2018 ++]

Obit: Michael D. Healy ► 14 APR 2018 | Special Forces Legendary "Iron Mike"

An icon of special operations and a man who at one time was the Army’s most battle-tested officer has died. Maj. Gen. Michael D. Healy, 91, died 14 APR in Jacksonville, Florida, according to officials. The general served in the military for 35 years, spending much of his career at Fort Bragg. When he retired in 1981, he was the nation’s most senior Special Forces soldier. He was a veteran of wars in Korea and Vietnam, with his service in the latter spanning a decade and ending with him overseeing the withdrawal of troops from the country. And he was the inspiration for John Wayne’s character, “Col. Iron Mike Kirby,” in the 1968 film “The Green Berets.”

Maj. Gen. Healy is also a former commander of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg. On 18 APR, the current commanding general of SWCS said Healy left an indelible mark on the organization. “Maj. Gen. Mike Healy is a true Special Forces legend, not only for his actions during war, but for his leadership and vision during a pivotal time in the Regiment’s history,” said Maj. Gen. Kurt L. Sonntag. “As the commander of the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, then called the U.S. Army John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance, he streamlined training, and aligned it to deal with modern threats. During his tenure, he solidified the role and value of Army Special Operations to the Army and the Nation.” “We owe a debt of gratitude to him for his vision, leadership, and for the professionalism he brought to the force,” Maj. Gen. Sonntag added. “His passing is truly a loss that we all feel, and we’re keeping his loved ones are in our thoughts.”



Maj. Gen. Michael D. Healy

Maj. Gen. Healy is survived by his wife of 67 years, Jacklyn, and their sons Michael Jr., Daniel, Timothy, Sean, Kirk and Patrick. He also has 10 grandchildren and eight great grandchildren. His son, Sean, told the Florida Times-Union that he enjoyed hearing others speak of his father. “I would talk to people, and especially if they brought something up about the military, I would ask them if they had heard of Iron Mike,” Mr. Sean Healy said. “If they knew who that was I would let them go on for a while, and then I would say ‘that’s my dad.’” Retired Sgt. 1st Class Cliff Newman, executive director of the Special Forces Association headquartered in Fayetteville, said Maj. Gen.

Healy's legacy would not be forgotten in the close-knit Special Forces community. "He was one of the first Americans to go into Vietnam and one of the last to leave," he said. "He just did some amazing things. He was just an icon in Special Forces. Everyone knew who he was and he was just a presence — you knew you were talking to somebody who was somebody." Special Forces Association Chapter 37 in Chicago is named in Maj. Gen. Healy's honor.

Healy earned the nickname "Iron Mike" while serving as a young officer leading Army Rangers on combat patrols deep behind enemy lines in Korea in the early 1950s. According to the SWCS, then-Lt. Healy was commander of the 4th Airborne Ranger Company during an airborne operation at Munsan-Ni in South Korea. When a platoon under his command was pinned down and under heavy fire, he and four others weaved their way through trenches to hold the high ground until reinforcements arrived. The monicker would follow him throughout his career, including during five tours — nearly eight years in all — in Vietnam. "I asked him once how he got the Iron Mike nickname," Bruce Pastorini, a Jacksonville, Florida, resident who got to know him in his later years, told the Times-Union. "It was his stamina that he was able to take heavy loads and help other guys with their loads. He was that kind of soldier. It didn't come from an iron will or anything like that, it came from his stamina and his willingness to help others."

By the end of his career, Maj. Gen. Healy had earned numerous awards and decorations, including a Distinguished Service Medal, two Silver Star Medals, a Legion of Merit with three oak-leaf clusters, a Distinguished Flying Cross, a Bronze Star Medal with valor device, an Air Medal with Valor device, a Navy Commendation Medal with valor device and two Purple Heart Medals. He is also a member of the Officer Candidate School Hall of Fame. According to SWCS, Maj. Gen. Healy was "known by his men for his loyalty, compassion and love, as much for his tenacity in war."

Healy was a native of Chicago who enlisted in the Army at the age of 19 at the end of World War II. He served with the 1st Cavalry Division in Japan before taking command of the 4th Airborne Ranger Company as a lieutenant. After serving with the company in Korea, Maj. Gen. Healy attended several military schools before being recruited to serve as chief of the Special Warfare Operations and Foreign Intelligence Branch for the Office of the Assistant Chief of Staff for Intelligence. He served the first of five tours in Vietnam in 1963 as a Special Forces major, serving as operations officer and senior advisor to Vietnamese special forces, building a force of mobile guerilla battalions that fought alongside American troops. In 1964, he became a liaison officer to South Vietnamese special forces and then served in numerous roles with the 5th Special Forces Group. In August, he assumed command of the 1st Battalion, 501st Parachute Infantry Regiment, 101st Airborne Division. Two years later, he delayed his attendance at the U.S. Army War College to lead the battalion back to Vietnam.

In 1967, Maj. Gen. Healy returned to the states for the War College. He would return to Vietnam two years later as commander of special troops and assistant chief of staff, G1, for the 24th Corps and later served as commander of the 1st Brigade, 9th Infantry Division in the Mekong Delta. Three weeks after leading the brigade back home from Vietnam, Healy — then an Army colonel — was recalled to Vietnam for his fourth tour in the country. He assumed command of the 5th Special Forces Group, which he would lead for 20 months before redeploying in 1971. Upon returning to Fort Bragg, Maj. Gen. Healy was promoted to brigadier general and assigned as the assistant division commander of the 82nd Airborne Division.

His fifth and final tour in Vietnam came in 1972, when then-Brig. Gen. Healy served as commanding general of the 2nd Regional Assistance Command, Military Region Two as U.S. forces prepared to withdraw from the war. After Vietnam, he was charged with dismantling the Army's special operations, according to SWCS. But instead, during a three-year tour as commander of the John F. Kennedy Center for Military Assistance, Maj. Gen. Healy instead further cemented the role of special operations forces in the modern Army. For his efforts, SWCS officials honored him as a Distinguished Member of the Special Forces Regiment near his home in Jacksonville in 2015. "He not only ensured the continued sustainment of Special Forces, Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs, but also

increased its value,” SWCS officials said in 2015. “Furthermore, he raised morale and competencies of the soldiers, cadre and students.”

Following his command at SWCS, Maj. Gen. Healy served as Chief of Staff of Combined Military Planning in Ankara, Turkey, leading all joint maneuvers in the Middle East. He ended his Army career in 1981 as commander of the Army Readiness Region V at Fort Sheridan, Illinois. That year, he noted that Fort Sheridan was the same installation where he had enlisted as a private 35 years earlier. Looking back on his career, he thanked his family and the soldiers he served alongside. “My wife and family have been tremendously supportive of me. That’s No. 1,” he told the Associated Press. “Next is the comradery provided me by the American soldier. I just acted functionally — like I was trained to perform.” During the interview, Maj. Gen. Healy said his only regret was that he couldn’t start all over again. “I would like to walk in the back gate at Fort Sheridan like I first did and say, ‘Yes, sir, I’ll go.’ But today, I’m in civilian clothes. My uniform is packed away,” he said. “I’m no hero,” the general added. “I’m just a very fortunate and lucky officer who has had the privilege to take care of that ultimate weapon, the American soldier.”

Officials said Maj. Gen. Healy will be buried at Arlington National Cemetery in the coming months. It was his desire to be buried near his mentor, the late Gen. Creighton Abrams. [Source: The Fayetteville Observer | Drew Brooks | April 18, 2018 ++]

Vet Deportations Update 21 ► Vet Returns Only Way He Could | In A Casket

Veteran Lance Cpl. Enrique Salas' flag-draped casket was loaded into a hearse with a Marine Corps seal and two miniature American flags protruding from either window. Salas finally made it home to the central San Joaquin Valley the only way he could. The Persian Gulf War veteran, who was deported to Mexico in 2006, was buried with military honors in a Reedley cemetery on 20 APR beside his younger brother, another fallen Marine. "My parents gave two of their children to the Marine Corps, and now they've lost both of us," Salas once told the American Civil Liberties Union for a report titled "[Discharged, then Discarded: How U.S. veterans are banished by the country they swore to protect.](#)"



Enrique Salas pictured as a young Marine and later in life.

"The veterans, they fought for the country," said Salas' sister, Miriam Rodriguez, tearfully outside St. Anthony of Padua Catholic Church in Reedley. "Some made some mistakes, but they shouldn't be punished by being sent to a foreign country. He was here since he was a kid. He grew up here." Salas, a graduate of Reedley High School, was recently seriously injured in a car accident in Tijuana, where he was living after he was deported. Rodriguez said an emergency humanitarian parole visa was applied for after the accident and was granted 10 days later to transport him across the border to receive better medical care from the University of California, San Diego. While waiting, he

suffered a heart attack, then another en route to San Diego, where he was pronounced brain dead. His sister called the treatment he received in Mexico "inhumane" and "awful." Salas died April 12 at age 47.

Hardworking and funny, family and friends recall, Salas was devoted to his family and finding a way to return to them. His jovial, warm personality earned him the nickname of 'Papa Bear'. "Unfortunately, we were not able to bring him back to the United States to seek the medical treatment that he's entitled to in time to save his life," said Ricardo Franco, chairman of the Committee on Deported Veterans under the Veterans Caucus of the California Democratic Party. Salas is among up to 1,500 U.S. veterans who have been deported, Franco said, with an estimated 200 to 300 alive and known by the Committee on Deported Veterans. Franco, who is running for Congress against incumbent Rep. Devin Nunes, said it's hard to get an exact number because immigration officials and the Department of Veterans Affairs don't keep track of how many deportees are veterans.

"Getting deported to a country that you don't really understand is one of the worst crimes that we can ever think of," Franco said, "and to think that this is happening to people who put on that uniform and swore allegiance to our country to protect it from every single other country on this planet – then we discard them like this, it's a national travesty and disgrace, quite frankly." Franco was among around 150 people who attended Salas' funeral Mass, including friend and fellow deported veteran Hector Barajas. Barajas, director of Deported Veterans Support House, made national headlines this month after Gov. Jerry Brown granted him a pardon that paved the way for his return to California. Last week, he became a U.S. citizen.

Barajas believes the same fate was in store for Salas. "He was one of the guys who was going to be able to come home. ... We shouldn't bring these men and women home in a body bag." Barajas said the Deported Veterans Support House is aware of more than 350 men and women who are being deported to 42 countries, or who have recently been deported.

Deporting a veteran

The ACLU report details Salas' story. It begins with his arrival in Los Angeles at age 6 with his parents and four younger siblings. Salas wanted to be a Marine from the age of 11, when he saw a television commercial recruiting for the Marine Corps. He enlisted at age 17 and celebrated his 18th birthday in boot camp at Camp Pendleton in San Diego. Salas served four years' active-duty in security details in the Philippines, Thailand and Singapore. He was honorably discharged in 1992 after serving in the Persian Gulf War, his military record rife with commendations including National Defense Service Medal, Sea Service Ribbon, and Good Conduct Medal. He remained in the Marine Reserve until 1996.

However, the report goes on to say, Salas began to struggle with drugs, which he attributed in part to his military service. He was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder. Salas was convicted in 2004 for possession of a controlled substance for sale, which was flagged as an aggravated felony under amended immigration law that made his deportation mandatory. He was arrested on the spot at a border checkpoint in December 2006 while trying to return home on a trip with family to Tijuana. Salas had asked for a replacement green card at the checkpoint after losing his wallet in Tijuana. "Facing a long detention that would prevent him from providing for his family and without enough money to consult an attorney, Salas signed his own deportation order," the report reads. "He believed his military service and his grandmother's status as a U.S. citizen would help, but it was to no avail.

"After 30 years in the United States, including four years of honorable active-duty military service, Salas was forced into exile." Desperate to reunite with his family and provide for his two daughters, he reentered and was deported from the country two more times. After receiving a traffic ticket in 2014, the report states Salas was prosecuted on a federal charge of illegal reentry after a removal order and was sentenced to 18 months in federal prison. "The judge acknowledged Salas' military record and work history, but under the 1996 immigration mandates, his hands were tied. 'I don't know what you're doing here,' the judge reportedly said. 'You don't belong in Mexico, but I can't do anything for you.'"

In Tijuana, Salas met other deported veterans through the Deported Veterans Support House. He was active with the group, attending as many of their events as possible in hopes he'd someday be allowed to return to his family in Reedley. Through his own research, Salas learned he had been eligible to become a U.S. citizen upon discharge from the Marines. Had he applied for citizenship anytime prior to his 2004 conviction, he could have been a citizen, the report reads, "but he was never given what would have been life-changing information." In Tijuana, Salas lived with a relative and worked for a plant that services and repairs industrial gas tanks.

He was unable to continue his treatment for PTSD in Mexico. He also suffered from back pain that may have stemmed from a car accident while in the Marines. Franco said so much of Salas' life was stolen from him. "We have to recognize this as that kind of travesty and correct it," Franco said. Fred Martinez stood solemnly outside the Reedley church as the body of his second cousin was loaded into the hearse. Martinez, also a retired Marine, said Salas' death "really hits me pretty hard." "This is a bad way to get back to the states." [Source: The Fresno Bee | Carmen George | April 20, 2018 ++]

Stolen Valor Update 111 ► Reported 180416 thru 180431

Morley Piper, 93, of Essex, said he was not a member of the 29th Infantry Division, which suffered heavy casualties as part of the first wave of the historic invasion, as he had claimed. Piper's fabrication was brought to light when someone contacted the New England Newspaper & Press Association, where he worked for 47 years and has an award named in his honor. The association said in a statement that Piper, when confronted with the allegations, admitted to making up stories about serving in the invasion force. The association said it would no longer name its annual First Amendment award after Piper.



World War II veteran Morley Piper, 90, Mass., salutes during a D-Day commemoration, on Omaha Beach in Vierville sur Mer, western France , Friday June 6, 2014.

In an interview at his Essex home 26 APR, Piper apologized for lying about his military service. He said he served in the Army with the 459th Anti-Aircraft Artillery Battalion and participated in the Normandy invasion but well after the 29th Infantry stormed the beaches and bore the brunt of the German resistance. Piper's updated account of his military service could not be immediately verified.. Piper said he began lying about his experience when he needed a credential to attend the 50th anniversary of Normandy in 1994. He told organizers he had been a member of the 29th Infantry so that he could participate in the ceremonies, he said. When he returned to the United States and was asked to speak about his war-time experiences, he began including the misrepresentation that he had been with the 29th Infantry, including in stories that appeared in The Salem News. "I could have shut it off afterward, but I didn't," he said. "It kind of spiraled out of control."

In speeches to various groups, including schoolchildren, Piper give details about what he said it was like on D-Day. "Inch by inch, we managed to get up off of the beach and mollify the guns," he said in a 2015 speech to the

Georgia Press Association. "We captured small towns along the beach and took the main coastal highway." Piper told the group that he earned a Bronze Star for heroism that day but now acknowledges that was not true. Piper gave a speech in Normandy during events recognizing the 70th anniversary of the D-Day invasion, and even shook hands with then-President Barack Obama during remembrance ceremonies in France.

In a message that Piper said he planned to send to friends and others affected by his fabrications, he wrote, "I am profoundly sorry that I have to tell you I am one of those sad old men with an altered WWII military record. I made a terrible mistake. It should have never happened." Piper, a native of Illinois, was 18 when he joined the Army. He worked in the newspaper business for more than 60 years, including 12 years at The Boston Globe and 45 as a member and eventual director of the New England Newspaper Association. The association said its board plans to meet to determine whether any other action regarding Piper is warranted. "I meant no harm, though it seems inadequate to say that now," Piper wrote in his message to friends and others. "People make mistakes. Mine is inexcusable." [Source: The Salem News | Paul Leighton | Apr 26, 2018 ++]

Vet Fraud & Abuse ► Reported 16 thru 30 APR 2017

A Santa Fe couple accused of fleecing a decorated World War II veteran out of \$340,000 while acting as his caretakers pleaded guilty 26 APR as part of an agreement that will allow them to avoid prison time if they do well on probation and make efforts to pay \$120,496 in restitution. **Dian Zeemin** and **Joseph Rosko** each faced 26 criminal counts — 25 of them felonies — in connection to allegations that they stole hundreds of thousands of dollars from former Army Staff Sgt. Dennis Ferk by obtaining about a dozen credit cards in the veteran's name and in that of his late wife, cashing in some of his insurance policies and attempting to take out a loan on his home while working as his caretakers from 2010-15.

Under the terms of the deal, each defendant admitted guilt on six of the 26 counts — including one count of exploitation of a resident's property, a second-degree felony, and five counts of tax evasion, a fourth-degree felony. The remaining charges were dismissed. Zeemin and Rosko were sentenced by Judge Mary Marlowe Sommer to nine years in prison, but prison time was suspended on the condition they enter supervised probation and pay restitution. They're also prohibited from being caretakers. Assistant District Attorney John Osborn said during the hearing that the deal was in the best interests of justice because it allowed the state to get convictions in the case while sparing Ferk — now 97 and in deteriorating health— the stress of having to go through a jury trial. Osborn said the state's "biggest concern" was making sure Rosko, 64, and Zeemin, 70, would be classified as convicted felons "for the rest of their lives."

Ferk — who used to live in a home with a casita, where he allowed Rosko and Zeemin to reside — now shares a one-bedroom apartment in public housing with his disabled adult daughter. Ferk did not attend Thursday's hearing. But his new guardian and longtime friend, Gilbert Martinez, said he was not happy with the outcome of the case. "I wanted jail time," Martinez said, "but judges make those decisions." District Attorney Marco Serna said he didn't seek prison time for Zeemin and Rosko because neither had a criminal history and "neither showed they were violent or a danger to the public." Serna said his office generally does not seek incarceration when it comes to "white-collar crime." "We don't believe that is going to rehabilitate anyone who is not a violent criminal," he said. "I don't want to send these people to prison if they are able to work and can pay restitution."

Serna said it also would have been difficult to prove all the charges against Zeemin and Rosko because of the multiple transactions involved and Ferk's failing memory. "Given the circumstances," Serna said, "I believe this is the most just outcome. These two individuals are guilty of second-degree felonies. That will be on their records, and they will pay restitution." Zeemin's defense attorney, Public Defender Hans Erikson, told the court the defendants have been "essentially homeless" since being charged two years ago. They had been living in an RV purchased with Ferk's money, but since that was seized, they've been living in their truck and homeless shelters. Zeemin and Rosko

“aren’t just indigent but are essentially destitute,” Erikson said. Erikson said he just wanted to make sure “everyone is aware the amount of restitution they are on the hook for is pretty pie-in-the-sky.”

Sommer responded that the plea agreement requires Zeemin and Rosko to make payments toward restitution in order to stay out of prison. If they fail to pay, she added, they will be incarcerated. Sommer did not scold the defendants as judges sometimes do at sentencing — nor did Rosko or Zeemin offer any words of remorse or apology. Sommer did thank Martinez for taking over as Ferk’s champion and said she hoped resolving the case would provide some closure for a man who, Martinez said, received three Purple Hearts and two Bronze Stars during his military service. [Source: The New Mexican | Phaedra Haywood | April 26, 2018 ++]

Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule ► As of 1 MAY 2018

The Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule is intended to serve as a one-stop resource for retirees and veterans seeking information about events such as retirement appreciation days (RAD), stand downs, veterans town hall meetings, resource fairs, free legal advice, mobile outreach services, airshows, and other beneficial community events. The events included on the schedule are obtained from military, VA, veterans service organizations and other reliable retiree\veterans related websites and resources.

The current Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule is available in the following three formats. After connecting to the website, click on the appropriate state, territory or country to check for events scheduled for your area.

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

Please note that events listed on the Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule may be cancelled or rescheduled. Before traveling long distances to attend an event, you should contact the applicable RAO, RSO, event sponsor, etc., to ensure the event will, in fact, be held on the date\time indicated. Also, attendance at some events may require military ID, VA enrollment or DD214.

Please report broken links, comments, corrections, suggestions, new RADs and\or other military retiree\veterans related events to the Events Schedule Manager, Milton.Bell126@gmail.com

[Source: Retiree\veterans Events Schedule Manager | Milton Bell| 30 April 2018]

Vet Hiring Fairs ► Scheduled As of 1 MAY 2018

The U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s (USCC) Hiring Our Heroes program employment workshops are available in conjunction with hundreds of their hiring fairs. These workshops are designed to help veterans and military spouses and include resume writing, interview skills, and one-on-one mentoring. For details of each you should click on the city next to the date in the below list. To participate, sign up for the workshop in addition to registering (if indicated) for the hiring fairs which are shown below for the next month. For more information about the USCC Hiring Our Heroes Program, Military Spouse Program, Transition Assistance, GE Employment Workshops, Resume Engine, etc. refer to the Hiring Our Heroes website <http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes/events>. Listings of up upcoming Vet Job Fairs nationwide providing location, times, events, and registration info if required can be found at the following websites. You will need to review each site below to locate Job Fairs in your location:

- <https://events.recruitmilitary.com>

- <https://www.uschamberfoundation.org/events/hiringfairs>
- <https://www.legion.org/careers/jobfairs>

[Source: Recruit Military, USCC, and American Legion | April 30, 2018 ++]

State Veteran's Benefits & Discounts ► Texas 2018

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

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

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/texas-state-veterans-benefits.html> | APR 2018 ++]

* 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. Bills are normally initially assigned to a congressional committee to consider and amend before sending them on to the House or Senate as a whole.

Vet Residential Care ► H.R.5397 | Allow VA To Pay Vice Vet

Representative Rosa DeLauro (D-CT) introduced The Veterans Residential Care Choice Act (H.R. 5397) a bill that would allow the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to pay for eligible veterans to live at residential care facilities such as assisted living facilities licensed or certified by the State if the cost of care is lower than it would be at other care sites including VA hospitals, nursing care or community nursing home facilities. Currently, VA may help veterans find a residential care facility to live in, but veterans and their families have to pay for it. The bill would

also require any facility receiving VA payments to enter into an agreement with VA to ensure the facilities are adequate to serve the needs of veterans.

DAV Resolution 227 calls on Congress to expand the types of long-term care services and supports VA providing it to veterans with service-related disabilities. DAV believes H.R. 5397 would add to the continuum of service options available to meet the long-term care needs of eligible veterans and therefore supports this legislation. Readers are encouraged to use the prepared editable letter at [Take Action](#) to contact their representative and urge them to cosponsor H.R. 5397, the Veterans Residential Care Choice Act.

[Source: DAV National Commander | April 16, 2018 ++]

Military Spouse Deportation Update 06 ► H.R.5593 | Protect Patriot Spouses Act

Rep. Darren Soto (D-FL) introduced H.R. 5593, “Protect Patriot Spouses Act,” which would amend the Immigration and Nationality Act. Under the current law, military spouses who entered the country illegally may not pursue citizenship without first departing the country. “This legislation will give priority for residency for military spouses,” Soto said. “No military spouse should be deported. It sends the wrong message to our troops who have sacrificed everything, and military spouses are essential to our national defense.”

Under Soto’s amended act, spouses married to active duty or veteran service members with an honorable service record would be eligible to waive that previous inadmissibility and allow the spouse to stay in the U.S. while they pursue legal residency. The amendment is not unlike the Parole-in-Place program touted by Vice President Mike Pence when he was an Indiana representative in 2010, a fact not lost on Rep. Anthony Brown (D-MD). “When I was in Iraq, I served side by side with patriotic Americans. Some of us were citizens. Others were not,” said Brown, an Army Reserve colonel with 30 years active duty and Reserve service.

When Pence was in Congress he called on DHS to “use all of their power to protect military families from deportation,” Brown said.”So I’m calling on the vice president to rein in the president, to rein in the Department of Homeland Security to ensure that military spouses and family members will not be deported.“ Texas Rep. Joaquin Castro, D-San Antonio, and Rep. Norma Torres, D-California, also spoke, reading the names of additional veterans or service members from their districts who have either already been deported or face deportation. Since President Donald Trump took office, he has directed DHS to strictly enforce immigration laws and increase the number of deportations it conducts.

Immigration and Customs Enforcement removed 61,094 people in fiscal year 2017, compared with 44,512 in fiscal year 2016, a 37 percent increase, according to Department of Homeland Security data. There are as many as 11,800 military families with members potentially facing deportation, American Families United has reported. There are various bills under consideration in Congress to assist veterans or their dependents who are facing deportation, and legislation to bring some previously deported veterans home. The bills have been part of the larger immigration debate, which has been stalemated over disagreements on border wall funding and protections for Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals, or DACA recipients, young men and women who were brought to the U.S. as children and have tenuous protections from deportation. “This is an issue we can get the administration to work with us on,” Soto said. “President Trump and Vice President Pence expound upon their support of the military. This is the military.”

[Source: ArmyTimes | Tara Copp | April 26, 2018 ++]

Transition Assistance Program Update 05 ► H.R.5553 | Requires DoD Action Plan

Congressman Don Bacon (NE-02) has introduced H.R. 5553, the *Loya-Sears Warrior Transition Assistance Reform Act*. Ryan Loya and Jeremy Sears were both Marine Corps Sergeants who served in combat together. Each suffered a traumatic brain injury (TBI) from the same IED explosion and were diagnosed with post-traumatic stress (PTS). Ryan is now living in New York City and successfully employed in a new career. Jeremy, however, has a different story. After his last deployment, he separated from the Marine Corps and struggled to find a job. After being unemployed for two years and suffering from survivor's guilt, Jeremy died by suicide. This bill bears their names to call attention to the importance of our military transition assistance programs.

The Act requires the Department of Defense (DOD) to provide an action plan to improve the DOD Transition Assistance Program (TAP) by mandating earlier pre-separation counseling, standardizing curriculum, increasing participation rates, and improving transition assistance resources. The bill also requires the development and measurement of long-term metrics to assess outcomes and provide continuous feedback to DOD transition assistance program managers, in coordination with the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Department of Labor.

Congressman Bacon said, "Americans who volunteer to serve in the Armed Forces embody the best qualities of selfless-service, courage, integrity and commitment. By providing an effective transition from the military, we honor their service and make our communities stronger. Despite the progress we've made over the last decade, it's clear that our warrior transition programs must be continuously improved to ensure every veteran can live a healthy and productive life after they take off the uniform."

Ryan Loya said, "While in the service, the priority is mission readiness. So, it falls on the Institution to set our service members up for success with the right resources and timeline. There is no other job in the world where you can become homeless and unemployed, all in one day. Jeremy was my brother. He unfortunately didn't get the transition services he needed and it ended up costing him his life. This could have been avoided. This legislation gives our military personnel the resources they deserve and rightfully earned through their selfless service."

The Veterans of Foreign Wars recently endorsed H.R. 5553: "We know that it will take a collaborative effort from all stakeholders to reduce our Veteran suicides, unemployment and homelessness and this proposed Bill is a great step in the right direction. We must continue to improve programs that prepare our transitioning Service members and their families for life after the Military."

[Source: Press Release | Don Bacon | April 20, 2018 ++]

Commissary Authorized Users ► H.R.5397 | Expand Eligibility

Representatives Daniel Lipinski (D-IL) and Walter Jones (R-NC) introduced H.R. 5467, the *Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018*, which is endorsed by the VFW and would allow veterans with a service-connected disability, Medal of Honor recipients, veterans formerly held as prisoners of war, and veteran caregivers to use commissaries and MWR programs. [Read the bill text](#). Currently, authorized users are limited to:

1. Active-duty Members of the Military -- Any active-duty member of any branch of the military, including Army, Marines, Navy and Air Force, is permitted to shop at any commissary in the United States. While active-duty members are also permitted to shop at international commissaries, the rules regarding bringing the items back to the United States vary, according to the DeCA, which also notes the commissary privilege is substantially restricted and will vary from country to country, depending on agreements with the host country. Active-duty members must show a valid and current military ID to shop in the commissaries, both in the United States and abroad.

2. Guard and Reserve Members -- Guard and reserve members are also permitted to shop in commissaries. This benefit encompasses any commissary in the United States, Puerto Rico and Guam, according to the DeCA. Any member of the Ready Reserve, Selected Reserve, Individual Ready Reserve and the Inactive National Guard are included in this benefit.

3. Retired and Disabled Individuals -- Members of the military who have retired retain their rights to shop at commissaries. This includes "gray area" retirees -- those who retired from the military but have not yet reached 60. These retirees have unlimited use of commissaries in the United States, Guam and Puerto Rico; the rules overseas depend on agreements with host countries. Veterans who are 100 percent disabled in connection with their military service also have the right to shop at commissaries.

4. Medal of Honor Recipients -- Those who are discharged before service that continues through retirement do not retain their rights to shop at commissaries unless they have been awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor or are 100 percent disabled because of their service, according to DeCA. These individuals retain the right to make purchases at commissaries in the United States, Guam and Puerto Rico.

5. Authorized Individuals -- Immediate family members of active-duty service members, reservists, retired members of the military, disabled individuals and those with a Medal of Honor are authorized to shop at commissaries with the appropriate ID. A named person, who may or may not be related to someone authorized to shop at the commissary, can shop for an authorized person with appropriate permission and identification, according to the Department of Defense. This can occur if the authorized person is disabled or otherwise can't shop for himself. In emergency situations, such as a natural disaster, the Department of Defense can authorize temporary access to commissaries for civilians in order to maintain quality of life. In many cases, diplomats and other persons serving at U.S. embassies overseas can shop at commissaries in the host country.

[Source: <https://classroom.synonym.com/who-is-eligible-to-use-a-commissary-12080107.html> | April 20, 2018 ++]

VA VR&E Program Update 02 ► H.R.5538 | Benefit Eligibility Revision

On 17 APR, U.S. Congressman Scott Peters (CA-52) introduced the **Reserve Component Vocational Rehabilitation Parity Act** to extend Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment (VR&E) services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to reservists and guardsmen who are called to serve during times of war or national emergency. Under current law, the Department of Defense can authorize the involuntary activation of up to 60,000 troops for up to a year to support preplanned operations of a combatant commander per 12304b authority. However, reservists involuntarily mobilized under this law do not accrue service time to become eligible for all benefits. The bill would correct this inconsistency by extending vocational rehabilitation services, including career and academic guidance on using VA benefits to achieve career goals, to all servicemembers who deploy for preplanned missions.

“Our veterans bravely answered the call to serve our nation and they have earned their full benefits,” said Rep. Peters. “These men and women all deserve our support as they begin their careers or go back to school, regardless of how and when they serve. We need to ensure guardsmen and reservists have the same opportunities as the rest of our veterans.”

The Reserve Component Vocational Rehabilitation Parity Act is cosponsored by fellow House Veterans Affairs Committee members Ranking Member Rep. Tim Walz (MN-01), O&I Subcommittee Chairman Jack Bergman (MI-01), Julia Brownley (CA-26), Steven Palazzo (MS-04), Bruce Poliquin (ME-02), Beto O’Rourke (TX-16), and Ann McLane Kuster (NH-02). The bill is supported by the National Guard Association of the United States and the Reserve Officers Association.

“Having served in and commanded the United States Marine Corps Reserves, I know first-hand the unique and vital role that our nation’s guardsmen and reservists hold in our military,” said Rep. Bergman. “This bill will provide parity to those who have served our country as a reservist or guardsman by offering the same vocational rehab benefits as active duty personnel, allowing them to prepare for, obtain, and maintain suitable employment after their military service.” Rep. Walz said, “Service members who wear the same uniform and do the same job should get the same pay and the same benefits.” “The Reserve Component Vocational Rehabilitation Parity Act is an important step in our work to ensure fairness for our Guard members and Reservists mobilized under 12304b authority.”

“We need to ensure that our veterans have access to the benefits they have earned, as well as the resources to succeed after their service – including all National Guard Members and Reservists who bravely serve our country,” said Rep. Brownley. “The Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program provides critical job training, and there is no reason all veterans with service-connected disabilities shouldn’t be able to benefit from it. I thank Congressman Peters for introducing this bill, which is an important step forward to support our Guard and Reserve members, and I urge my colleagues in Congress to lift the time limit altogether to benefit veterans of all ages.”

[Source: Press Release | Scott Peters | April 18, 2018 ++]

Vet State Income Tax Update 01 ► AB2394 | CA Military Retirement Pay Exemption

California is home to 1.8 million military veterans, representing 8% of the total population of American veterans. However, over the next years veterans will leave California based on concerns about our state’s cost of living or because they are attracted to incentives provided by other states for veterans. According to a report and recommendations from the Governor’s Military Council, State leaders should explore appropriate ways to incentivize veterans to stay in California. By exempting military retirement pay from state income tax, California will join 16 other states like Hawaii, New York, and Massachusetts that provide these benefits.

California Assemblyman William Brough has announced legislation that would exempt military retirement pay from state income tax for veterans who are residents in California. Assembly Bill 2394 would incentivize veterans to stay in California. We should do our part to not only give back to our veterans, but to attract future veterans to keep their skills here in the Golden State. AB 2394 will have its first bill hearing soon. By signing the petition located at <https://www.change.org/p/assemblyman-bill-brough-support-ab-2394-exempting-military-pay-from-california-state-income-tax> you can indicate your support of this effort. This petition is free and only asks for a name, email, and area you live in. NOTE however that Change.org will ask if you would like to “Donate \$3 to the petition?” This donation is entirely optional and is unaffiliated with the efforts of the bill’s supporters. Optionally, you can email or write to the Assembly Committee on Veterans Affairs urging the support of AB 2394.

If you do not know who your representative is or his/her contact info go to <http://findyourrep.legislature.ca.gov> and enter your address. Following is a suggested format for your communication:

SAMPLE LETTER

Assembly Committee on Revenue and Taxation
Legislative Office Building
1020 N Street, Room 167A
Sacramento, California 95814

Dear Chairwoman Burke and Members of the Assembly Committee on Revenue and Taxation:

I write in support of AB 2394 introduced by Assembly Member Brough. California is home to 1.8 million military Veterans, representing 8% of the total population of American Veterans. By exempting military retirement pay from state income tax, California will join 28 other states such as Nevada, Texas, Washington, Hawaii, New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts, which either have no personal income tax on their residents - or which do not tax the military retirement pay of their Veterans.

According to a report and recommendations from the Governor's Military Council, State leaders should explore appropriate ways to incentivize Veterans to keep their excellent skills, such as, leadership, teamwork, and a high aptitude for technology here in California, as opposed to moving to another state where their military retirement pay is not taxed.

Sincerely,
NAME
City, State, Zip code

SAMPLE EMAIL

Just copy and paste the above letter and email to: Assemblymember.Brough@assembly.ca.gov. His staff will print it and hand it to the committee members.

[Source: Reserve Officers Assn | Art Curtis, ExSecy | April 15, 2018 ++]

IRS Phone Calls Update 01 ► H.R.5470 | Dedicated Number for Military Questions

Ahead of Tax Day, U.S. Representatives Tim Walz (MN-01) and Ron Kind (WI-03) introduced the Military Taxpayer Assistance Act (H.R. 5479), which establishes a year-round dedicated toll-free IRS telephone line to answer questions military taxpayers and their families have about their taxes. "Helping our warriors and their families navigate their uniquely complex tax issues is the least we can do for those who sacrifice so much for our country," said Rep. Tim Walz. "This commonsense bill will help provide our service members and their loved ones the peace of mind they deserve when working to meet their tax obligations." "The brave men and women that serve in our armed forces often face unnecessary challenges when completing their taxes," said Rep. Ron Kind. "We need to set our military members and their families up for success, and provide every possible resource to them ahead of tax day."

The Retired Enlisted Association also voiced support for the bill: "Filing taxes is complicated. It becomes even harder once you come down on orders," said Michael Saunders, Deputy Legislative Director for The Retired Enlisted Association. "There are over 30 different types of orders that members of the National Guard and Reserves can receive; each one can have different types of tax implications. Having a dedicated phone number to call where somebody can quickly answer your questions would go a long way towards simplifying a process that some people hate more than going to the dentist. It is long overdue that the IRS become more user-friendly for our men and women of the seven Uniformed Services. 'I don't know' is not an acceptable answer, and neither is antiquated information on the IRS website."

There are about 1.3 million active duty service members and over 800,000 Reserves and National Guard personnel in the United States. Currently, the IRS does not have employees assigned exclusively to assist service members or dedicated telephone lines for military taxpayers to call with questions. Because of the unique tax issues and challenging situations they face, members of the military and their families often need specialized assistance in meeting their tax obligations. The bill will also create a special unit within the IRS, staffed by veterans, to develop and conduct outreach, create education materials, and provide assistance to current service members, including

National Guard and Reservists. Refer to <https://walz.house.gov/sites/walz.house.gov/files/Military-Taxpayer-Assistance-Act-One-Pager.pdf> to learn more about the Military Taxpayer Assistance Act.

[Source: TREA Washington Update | April 18, 2018 ++]

VA Hiring Update 12 ▶ **H.R.5521 | Medical Personnel Trainee Recruitment**

The bipartisan bill H.R. 5521 would enable VA to recruit and initiate the hiring process for physicians two years prior to completing their requisite training. Such authority would put the department on equal footing with the private sector, said Rep. Vicky Hartzler (R-MO) who authored the bill. “America’s veterans deserve the best health care available,” Hartzler said. “We want to remove barriers the VA faces in hiring physicians to care for those who have served our country.” The measure is the latest in a series of potential and actual reforms to help VA trim its backlog of more than 30,000 positions. The department this year received direct-hire authority for 15 occupations deemed critical, ranging from accountants to health technicians.

Lawmakers have recently sounded the alarm on policies they say restrict VA from efficiently filling vacancies at its medical facilities around the country, but the department has pushed back on those claims. Still, VA just this week boasted that it has trimmed its central office workforce by 10 percent. Democrats in Congress have warned that such reductions make it harder for field offices to recruit and hire, as the central office provides key human resource functions.

Hartzler said her **VA Hiring Enhancement Act** bill, by boosting hiring efforts for internal medical positions, would also help allay concerns that VA is seeking to push more care to the private sector. The American Legion, which has long fought against privatization efforts, endorsed her bill. VA has said it has no intention of privatizing veterans health care, and former Secretary David Shulkin worked closely with lawmakers in both parties and key stakeholders to forge an acceptable framework to consolidate and streamline VA’s various community care programs. Shulkin’s nominated replacement, Rear Adm. Ronny Jackson, has yet to take a public stance on the topic, but told Tester on Tuesday he would follow the path Shulkin paved.

[Source: GovExec.com | Eric Katz | April 17, 2018 ++]

VA Medical Marijuana Update 45 ▶ **H.R.5520 | Directs VA to Conduct/Support Research**

A bipartisan group of lawmakers are pushing to allow the Veterans Affairs Department to conduct research into medical marijuana, saying it could help former military personnel suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder and chronic pain. The top lawmakers on the House Veterans Affairs Committee joined more than 30 colleagues in introducing the **2018 VA Medicinal Cannabis Act** (H.R. 5520) on 17 APR. The introduction followed a pronouncement from the Trump administration that while VA was “committed to researching and developing ways to help” veterans cope with PTSD and chronic pain, federal law prevented it from engaging in any research—including referring patients to outside studies—involving medical marijuana.

The measure would promote such research by clarifying it is “well within the authority of VA” and requiring the department to report to Congress on how it plans to exercise that authority. Lawmakers said they expected the bill would improve and save veterans’ lives. Members of both parties said they had heard from veterans who praised the benefits of medical cannabis, especially compared to the opioids they had been prescribed. “While we know cannabis can have life-saving effects on veterans suffering from chronic pain or PTSD, there has been a severe lack of research studying the full effect of medicinal cannabis on these veterans,” said Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN), the

ranking member of the House VA committee and the author of the bill. “Simply put, there is no department or organization better suited to conduct this critically important research than VA, and there will never be a better time to act.”

- Rep. Phil Roe (R-TN), chairman of the committee, said he too has heard from veterans who said they could benefit from medical marijuana and wanted further research. “Until we have sound science behind whether or not medical cannabis is an effective treatment, we should not move forward with prescribing it,” Roe said, “and I believe VA is uniquely equipped to conduct this important research.”
- The American Legion, a congressionally chartered veterans service organization, has for two years called on VA to conduct research into medical marijuana and threw its weight behind the new bill on Tuesday. The group in 2017 conducted a survey of its 2.2 million members and found, with a 3.5 percent margin of error, that 92 percent of veteran households favor additional research into the medical benefits of cannabis.
- Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), the top Democrat on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, said he plans to introduce companion legislation in the upper chamber. “Veterans must have a say in how they manage their pain and the VA needs to listen to those veterans who are finding relief in medicinal cannabis,” Tester said.

The Trump administration has shown some openness to medical marijuana, with the Veterans Health Administration issuing a directive late last year to allow its doctors to discuss their patients’ use and options regarding cannabis in states where it is legal. The department has previously faced criticism for preventing its medical staff from recommending patients to a state-funded research project that has the backing of several federal agencies and is examining the relationship between disorders affecting veterans and marijuana. Brad Burge, a spokesman for the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, the organization conducting the study, said previous resistance from VA was based on “stigma, not law” and it was therefore unclear to what extent the bill would help MAPS’ research.

The bill’s language to not just conduct but “support” cannabis research should, if the measure were passed, “make it resoundingly clear—even to the VA secretary—that there is nothing preventing VA from referring patients to independent federally regulated medical marijuana studies,” Burge said.

[Source: GovExec.com | Eric Katz | April 17, 2018 ++]

GI Bill Update 254 ► H.R.4830 | Eliminate Student Unpaid Fee Balance Problems

When Kaanan Fugler transferred to a new college last year, she didn’t expect to rack up \$6,000 in student loans for tuition costs she thought would be fully paid for. But when her education benefits from the Veterans Affairs Department weren’t paid to her new school before the semester started, the Army widow and mother of five said the university’s financial aid office told her she had to foot the bill — or risk being dropped from her courses. “We get penalized because it’s not set in stone that (schools) have to allow us to go to school while they wait for that money,” Fugler said in a recent interview.

“It is not the fault of the veteran,” said Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) speaking to fellow members of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs at a recent hearing on Capitol Hill. “They don’t need that extra stress.” The congressman recently introduced a bill, dubbed the SIT-REP Act, that would require schools to adopt a policy stating they will not deny access to classes or facilities, impose late fees, or make students pay out-of-pocket because of an unpaid balance — if a student has provided a certificate of eligibility for VA benefits. The legislation would apply to VA benefits paid directly to the school, such as the Post-9/11 GI Bill and the Fry Scholarship for surviving dependents, such as Fugler, who used the benefit before she remarried last fall.

Barring a waiver from the VA secretary, schools that don’t adopt this policy would be ineligible to enroll students using such benefits. The legislation, which Bilirakis called a “common sense” measure, has garnered the

support of House representatives from both parties and veteran service organizations, including American Legion, Student Veterans of America and the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors. Though SIT-REP currently has no Senate companion, many view the legislation as an easy sell, as there are no associated costs.

“We agree with Congressman Bilirakis that veterans don’t need that kind of treatment, especially when they know the VA is going to pay,” said retired Maj. Gen. Robert Worley, VA director of education service. Payment deadlines differ by school, and many institutions don’t certify GI Bill payments until after the drop-add period — an approach the VA supports because it cuts down on the number of corrective payments the department would have to make if a student’s course load changes, Worley said. “But, (if) the school is going to then impose penalties and things like that on individuals, obviously that’s not a good thing,” he said. “Those are school policies. We don’t control the schools.”

VA education benefit claims are categorized as either original claims, requested by a student for the first time, or supplemental claims, which are for continuing benefit usage after the approval of an original claim. According to a VA spokesperson, the department processed more than 340,000 original claims and over 3 million supplemental claims for GI Bill benefits last year. The initial claims took an average of 25.76 days to process, and supplemental claims took an average of 9.38 days — both lower than the VA’s goals of 28 days for initial claims and 14 days for supplemental claims for fiscal 2018. It’s difficult to determine just how common it is for schools to penalize students whose VA payments don’t come in by their deadline. According to a recent Military Times survey of more than 600 colleges and universities, a large majority of respondents said they have policies for students whose VA or Defense Department education benefits are delayed, protecting these students for late fees or dropped classes for an unpaid balance.

Ashlynn Haycock, deputy director of policy and legislation at TAPS, the organization leading advocacy efforts in favor of SIT-REP, said in some cases, penalizing GI Bill students is a one-off. But at other campuses, it’s a systemic issue. In her testimony to Congress, Haycock gave multiple examples of students her organization has helped after their schools told them to take out student loans, sign up for payment plans or pay late fees while waiting on their benefits to come in. “These students did everything by the book,” she said. “They applied for and received a certificate of eligibility (COE). They provided that COE to the school certifying official with proof of enrollment on time, yet they were still penalized because of unfair institutional policies.” And this could get worse come August if VA payments are delayed as the department rolls out several changes to the GI Bill going into effect this fall, she said.

Fugler said her daughter, also a Fry Scholarship recipient, was removed from classes she had already registered for when her benefits did not arrive until after the semester started. She had to start on an accelerated schedule in February after her balance was paid. The widow’s new husband, a disabled veteran, also had to take out student loans to cover the cost of his schooling before his GI Bill benefits were paid to his school, she said. Now the family is worried about the interest that will accrue on those loans before they can be repaid. “These benefits are supposed to be our guarantee to not have to deal with all the student loans and nonsense that goes along with them, yet every single person in my household has had to take out student loans while using these benefits,” Fugler said.

Haycock told Military Times, “Sometimes I think it’s the smaller schools that don’t necessarily know the VA policies well enough to feel comfortable waiting for the money, and so having something in statute that says that money is coming and something for us to refer back to would make it a lot easier for our families.” The SIT-REP legislation is awaiting approval from the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, as well as the full House and Senate. As of 16 APR, a date for further committee action on the bill had not yet been set, according to a committee spokeswoman. But Bilirakis’ message to his colleagues at the hearing was urgent: “Let’s take care of this as soon as possible.”

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Natalie Gross | April 16, 2018 ++]



Military Retirement System Update 29 ▶ **Will It Entice More to Leave Early?**

Service personnel chiefs told lawmakers 13 APR they are watching how the new Blended Retirement System affects retention. “I think it will be a significant indicator on retention in the out years,” Army Lt. Gen. Thomas Seamands, deputy chief of staff, G-1, told the House Armed Services Committee’s military personnel panel. “I think we’re going to have to fundamentally change how we address retaining talent.” In today’s Army, if someone stays for 10 years, there’s a pretty high probability they’ll stay until the 20-year mark, he said. But “that dynamic could potentially change, but we won’t see that probably for the next seven to 10 years. So we need to be prepared. We’re thinking about it now, trying to get our heads around it.”

Rep. Don Bacon (R-NE) said it’s his hunch that service members will get out at the 17-year mark under the new BRS, which comes with a retirement-fund matching plan and reduced pension, instead of the legacy system’s all-or-nothing retirement approach. Those who are eligible to make a choice have until the end of 2018 to opt into BRS. Eligibility is limited to active-duty service members who have fewer than 12 years of total service as of Dec. 31, 2017; and reserve-component members in a paid status with fewer than 4,320 retirement points as of Dec. 31, 2017; all those entering service as of Jan. 1, 2018, automatically join BRS, and all those who’ve served beyond those benchmarks remain in the legacy system. Under the legacy system, only about 19 percent of active-duty members and 14 percent of reservists stay long enough to earn retirement.

Just over a quarter into 2018, about 11 percent of the 1.6 million service members eligible to make a choice between the legacy retirement system and BRS have opted in to the BRS, according to DoD spokesman Army Maj. Dave Eastburn. That’s roughly 183,000 service members. Eastburn also provided a breakdown by service branch:

- Army: 7.5 percent (60,405 opt-ins out of 810,301 eligible).
- Air Force: 12.6 percent (47,223 opt-ins out of 374,003 eligible).
- Navy: 14.3 percent (39,798 opt-ins out of 278,910 eligible).
- Marine Corps: 20.4 percent (35,743 opt-ins out of 175,627 eligible).

Those in the Army, Air Force and Navy must take action only if they want to opt in to the BRS. The Marine Corps is the only service that requires its members to register their decision regardless of whether they choose the new system or want to stay in the legacy system. Of the Marines eligible to make the decision, 28.4 percent have done so, with 72 percent of those Marines choosing the BRS. DoD “has no target or goal for opt-in and no preference for which system a member should choose,” Eastburn said. “Each member’s decision will depend entirely upon his or her own personal circumstances.”

Under the BRS, troops automatically get a contribution from DoD of 1 percent of their monthly base pay to their Thrift Savings Plan, and up to 5 percent in matching contributions. The services will also make a one-time payout of continuation pay to those under BRS when they reach 12 years of service. For active duty members, it’s 2.5 times their monthly basic pay. The services have flexibility in determining the amount and some terms of the continuation

pay. "How we manage that continuation pay will be critical," said Air Force Lt. Gen. Gina Grosso, deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel and services. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 14, 2018 ++]

Tomahawk Missile Update 01 ► **Russia Claims It Recovered Two From Syria Attack**

Russia has gotten its hands on a U.S. Tomahawk cruise missile and it's going to study it to improve its own weapon systems, their Defense Ministry said 25 APR. However, the U.S. Department of Defense told CNBC that the claims from Moscow are "absurd." An official within Russia's ministry said that an unexploded Tomahawk cruise missile and one high accuracy air-launched missile that the U.S. and its allies used in their last airstrike in Syria on April 14 has been brought to Moscow, Russian news agency TASS reported.

The chief of the Russian General Staff's main operations directorate, Colonel-General Sergey Rudskoy, told a news briefing on Wednesday that Russian military specialists were already studying the missiles. "Some of the missiles failed to reach the designated targets apparently due to technical failures, which created the risk of destroying civilian facilities and causing civilian casualties," Rudskoy said. "Two of them, a cruise missile Tomahawk and a high-accuracy air-launched missile, have been brought to Moscow," he said, adding that Russian specialists were studying them. "The results of this work will be used to improve Russian weapon systems."

A Pentagon spokesman for the U.S. Department of Defense blasted Russia's claims, telling CNBC that they were an attempt to distract people from its alliance with Syrian President Bashar Assad's regime. "This is another example of the Russian disinformation campaign to distract attention from their moral complicity to the Assad Regime's atrocities and the civilian carnage in western Syria," Eric Pahon, Pentagon spokesman, told CNBC via email on Wednesday. "The claims ... regarding our target selection are absurd, as is the rest of the (TASS) article. On the Tomahawk, we have seen no proof, other than statements made to Russian state-owned media, that their claims are true. This is likely another smoke screen of propaganda to distract from the real issue at hand — the murder of innocent civilians by a murderous regime propped up by Russian backing," he said.

Tomahawks

Tomahawk missiles are, their maker Raytheon says, "modern, mature, powerful" and can "circle for hours, shift course instantly on command and beam a picture of its target to controllers halfway around the world before striking with pinpoint accuracy." Raytheon notes that Tomahawks can be launched from a ship or submarine and can fly into heavily defended airspace more than 1,000 miles away "to conduct precise strikes on high-value targets with minimal collateral damage. Launching the weapon from such a long distance helps to keep sailors out of harm's way."

It notes that the U.S. and allied militaries have used Tomahawk missiles more than 2,000 times in combat, and flight-tested them 500 times. In April 2017, U.S. Navy destroyers launched 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles at targets on a Syrian air base, it said. A U.S. Department of Defense press briefing on 14 APR — the date the U.S. and its allies launched an airstrike on Syrian government bases in retaliation for a suspected chemical weapons attack carried out by the Syrian regime, an ally of Russia — confirmed the use of multiple Tomahawk missiles in the airstrikes. Pentagon Chief Spokesperson Dana White and Joint Staff Director Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr. said Tomahawk missiles had been deployed to various targets in Syria including the Barzeh Research and Development Center (believed to be involved in chemical weapon research and development) and a chemical weapons storage facility.

What Russia will learn from the Tomahawk missile is uncertain given that it has recently boasted of developing state-of-the-art missiles itself. Only in March, Russian President Vladimir Putin unveiled what he called a state-of-the-art slew of new defense systems. This included a new prototype missile that "can reach any point in the world"

and a supersonic weapon that cannot be tracked by anti-missile systems. [Source: CNBC | Holly Ellyatt | April 25, 2017 ++]

Military Sexual Assault Update 05 ► 10% Jump Reported in 2017

U.S. officials say reports of sexual assaults across the military jumped by nearly 10 percent in 2017, a year that saw a massive online nude-photo sharing scandal rock the services, triggering greater awareness of sexual harassment and other similar complaints. The overall increase was fueled by a nearly 15-percent surge in sexual assault reports in the Marine Corps, according to officials familiar with the data. The Marines were at the center of last year's online investigation by the Naval Criminal Investigative Service, and launched a large public campaign to raise awareness of inappropriate behavior and beef up enforcement of social media rules and conduct.

The Navy and the Air Force saw increases of more than 9 percent in reported sexual assaults, while the Army went up 8 percent. Several U.S. officials spoke on condition of anonymity to provide details ahead of the public release of the Pentagon's annual report. Overall, there were 6,769 reports of sexual assaults in the fiscal year that ended last Sept. 30, compared to 6,172 in 2016. The roughly 10 percent hike is the largest increase the Pentagon has seen since 2015. Last year, an anonymous survey done as part of the annual report showed some progress in fighting sexual assault, as fewer than 15,000 service members described themselves as victims of unwanted sexual contact. That was 4,000 fewer than in a 2014 survey and a dramatic decline from the 26,000 in the 2012 survey.

The surveys are conducted every other year, so it's impossible to determine if this year's increase in reported assaults also corresponds with a decline in service members anonymously reporting inappropriate conduct. Defense officials have argued that an increase in reported assaults is a positive trend, because it's a highly underreported crime, both in the military and across society as a whole. Greater reporting, they argue, shows there is more confidence in the reporting system and greater comfort with the support for victims. It's unclear, however, if the increased reports in 2017 actually represent a growing problem or if victims are just more willing to come forward. In an effort to gain a better understanding of the depth of the problem, the Pentagon has used the anonymous surveys for several years to track sexual assaults, harassment and other similar issues. According to several U.S. officials, the number of reported assaults in the Marine Corp increased from 870 in 2016, to 998 last year, while Navy reports went from 1,450 to 1,585.

The nude-photo sharing scandal came to light early last year, when nude photographs of female Marines, veterans from across the military, and other women were shared on the Facebook page "Marines United." Accompanying comments and posts under some photos included obscene and threatening comments. The photos showed women in various stages of undress, and some were identified and others were not. The site was touted as being for men only. After months of investigation, NCIS determined that the overwhelming majority of the photos were selfies or were posed for and then voluntarily shared, which is not illegal even under military code. As a result, only a small number of military members faced charges or discipline for their participation on the website. [Source: Associated Press | Lolita C. Baldor | April 25, 2018 ++]

C-130 Fleet ► 33 of 43 Remain Grounded After 9 Months

Nearly a year after the fiery crash of a Marine Corps Forces Reserve [KC-130T](#) killed 15 Marines and a Navy corpsman, most of the Navy's [C-130](#) fleet remains grounded due to lack of new propellers, impacting one of the service's sole capabilities for transporting people and gear, according to U.S. lawmakers and service officials. A propeller problem was identified during inspections of the fleet that occurred after the July 10, 2017 crash in

Mississippi, when most Navy and Marine Corps C-130Ts and KC-130Ts stopped flying. Only 10 of the 43 C-130s in the fleet are currently available for operations, according to Greg Kuntz, a spokesman for Naval Air Systems Command, or NAVAIR.

As those aircraft sat grounded and Naval Reserve's lift capability diminished as a result, the sea service initially opted to place new propeller funding on an unfunded priorities list. That was rectified in March, when the propellers were funded via a \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill passed by Congress. Marine Corps spokeswoman Capt. Sarah Burns said the 12 remaining Marine Reserve KC-130Ts are no longer grounded, and that the squadron conducted its first flight in October, a few months after the crash. "Some of them are flying," Kuntz said. "We are bringing them back online as they are needed operationally." Kuntz declined to say why some C-130 variants can fly today while others are still grounded.

Following last summer's crash, which pancaked the aircraft upside down and left it broken in two, scattering debris for miles, Kuntz said most Navy and Marine Corps C-130Ts and KC-130Ts stopped flying immediately. NAVAIR issued a grounding bulletin on Sept. 1, 2017, "as a precaution based on the preliminary engineering investigation," he said. During inspections after the grounding, a propeller issue "was one of the things identified," Kuntz said. "It is not tied directly to that incident," Kuntz said. "It was identified during the inspection that these needed to be replaced." The new propellers had been considered before the July crash, he said, and are "now the most expedient option to return the C-130T aircraft to the fleet." "It's not uncommon after an incident to do a program-wide look at the aircraft," Kuntz said. "If you were to identify something, such as the propellers, you would focus on what the solution was."

Marine Corps officials declined to comment on the cause of last summer's crash, citing the ongoing nature of the investigation. Fourth Marine Aircraft Wing commander Brig. Gen. Bradley James said after the crash that the mishap began while the plane was at cruising altitude. The Associated Press reported in August that some witnesses described the plane descending in a "flat spin," where the plane twirls around like a boomerang. The wire service quoted a local named Andy Jones, who said he saw the plane corkscrewing downward with an engine smoking. "You looked up and you saw the plane twirling around," he was quoted as saying. "It was spinning down."

Marine Aerial Refueler Transport Squadron 452 flew the legacy KC-130T on the day of the crash, an aircraft that is being phased out for the new KC-130J variant. "The current fleet of C-130s has a long history of safe operations supporting Navy and Marine objectives with the current propellers," Kuntz said. As the C-130s sat grounded, the new propeller project was initially placed on the Navy's unfunded priorities list, Kuntz said. That list lays out programs the Navy wishes to see bankrolled if more money was available from Congress. But the initiative was recently moved to the Fiscal 2018 budget and is now funded via the massive \$1.3 trillion omnibus spending bill passed by Congress in March.

Why the Navy did not initially prioritize funding the new propellers to get the C-130 fleet flying again remains unclear. Kuntz said "probably multiple reasons" factored into the new props not being a funding priority for the Navy. "It was really obvious when the funding became available, and we got the omnibus, that they were included," he said. "We worked very hard to make that happen." South Carolina Congressman Joe Wilson, the House Armed Services Readiness Subcommittee chair, questioned the head of Navy Reserve, Vice Adm. Luke McCollum in March about how the lack of propeller money and C-130 grounding was affecting Navy readiness.

Navy Reserve "provides 100 percent of the inter-theater lift for the Navy," McCollum told the subcommittee. "Said another way, boxes, people, crews, parts, have to be sourced and delivered around the globe," he said. "The capability that resides in a Navy Reserve that delivers this is in the C-40 Alpha and C-130 Tango." The grounding of the C-130Ts had led to a 42 percent loss of that capability, McCollum said, adding that it was "highly important" that the C-130T propellers get upgraded. "The demand signal for Navy Reserve in this capacity is very high," he said.

The new propellers cost \$2.7 million per kit and take a month to install. The Navy intends to replace propellers for all 43 aircraft in fleet, Kuntz said. “The Navy has an aggressive schedule that could have the first aircraft with these new propellers returned to service in the fall and have the entire fleet back to service by Spring 2019,” Kuntz said. The new propellers will offer increased thrust at the same engine torque, he said. Navy and Marine Corps C-130T fleet age varies from 21 to 34 years, Kuntz said. “Propellers, like other parts of the aircraft, are routinely inspected and replaced (in accordance with) maintenance procedures when required,” he said. [Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | April 26, 2018 ++]

Military Memorial Services ► 82nd Airborne Policy Change | Suicides

Soldiers who die by suicide may not receive full military honors in future 82nd Airborne Division memorial ceremonies, a spokesman confirmed to Army Times.^b Going forward, commanders in the 82nd Airborne can choose from two different kinds of ceremonies: The regular ceremony with the usual complement of military courtesies, and an alternate ceremony, created for soldiers who died by suicide and those who died by misconduct, that allows units to omit a handful of courtesies. Those courtesies include the final roll call, firing of volleys and sounding of taps, among others, according to a course of action decision slide provided to Army Times.

“The decision to allow for an alternate memorial ceremony in the event of paratrooper suicide was made in an attempt to reinforce the value of life and the reliance we place on one another,” said Lt. Col. Joe Buccino, spokesman for the 82nd Airborne. “This decision does not equate suicide with paratrooper misconduct.” Until recently, the division put on memorial ceremonies with full honors for all fallen soldiers, which was above and beyond what the Army requires in AR 200-1. “There are a variety of options available to units when memorializing the service of a paratrooper who has tragically passed away as the result of suicide,” Buccino told Army Times.

The new alternate ceremony, which is described as suitable for suicide or deaths by misconduct, withholds those honors. There will also be no posthumous awards or promotions presented at the ceremony, and general officer attendance is not required, unless granted an exception by the commanding general. Research has found that when responding to suicide, it is key for an organization to strike a balance between not glorifying the victim while also not stigmatizing the person’s struggle, a senior behavioral scientist at Rand Corp. told Army Times in a Tuesday phone interview. “It is a change, and it suggests that it’s coming from somewhere,” said Rajeev Ramchand, an expert in mental health and substance abuse in service members and veterans. “In the best of worlds, it’s coming from this effort that they don’t want to promote contagion, and in the worst of worlds, it’s saying that they’re thinking that these people are different or immoral or weak, and that’s what we don’t want.”

Contagion, he said, is the phenomenon that prompts suicides to inspire others to also take their lives. “With respect to all of this, we know more about what not to do than we know what to do,” he said. But the key, he added, is not to portray victims as heroes, while taking steps to assure their community that there are resources available and that the person’s life and service are important. “From one perspective, one could say, so maybe we don’t give them full honors,” Ramchand said. “But if we do that, the problem with that is, it kind of chips away at this other goal, which is to honor their service and honor their family.”

A memorial ceremony should be an outlet for a unit and its leadership to grieve and remember the person’s life, he added, but it can be problematic to pick and choose who receives which honors. “... Within the 82nd Airborne Division we actually expand on the Army policy for memorials, even in the event of paratrooper suicide; the Army merely recommends leaders’ remarks, reflection, moment of silence, and benediction, while these are mandated for a paratrooper suicide, with the commander allowed the flexibility to include the final roll call, firing of volleys, and sounding of taps,” Buccino said. The ceremony also includes a moment of silence, while the chaplain’s memorial reflection will highlight the value of life.

“Within the 82nd Airborne Division we pursue a culture wherein our paratroopers and their families are encouraged to seek help,” Buccino said. “Asking for help is not weakness; it is a sign of strength.” Fallen soldiers are still able to receive full honors at a funeral service, Buccino added, which is different than a memorial. Memorials focus on fellow soldiers, while funerals are given for families. [Source: ArmyTimes | Meghann Myers | April 24, 2018 ++]

USCG Drug Interdictions ► 13 Tons of Seizures Off-loaded at Port Everglades

Twelve tons of cocaine and a ton of marijuana will not make it to the streets of South Florida or anywhere else for that matter after being seized at sea by the U.S. Coast Guard. The noxious white powder and devil weed, seized during 17 interdictions off the coasts of Mexico, Central, and South America by multiple U.S. Coast Guard cutters and Canadian Naval vessels, with cooperation and intelligence from the Mexican government are worth an estimated \$390 million. On 23 APR the drugs were brought to Port Everglades by the Coast Guard Cutter Legare where they were offloaded. The crew of the Legare is responsible for seizing a ton of the cocaine and eight kilograms of marijuana during the interdictions. All of the seizures were delivered to the Legare, which in French translates to “the station.” The cutter was the collection station for the multi-nation busts of drug-running vessels.

“Today’s offload sends them a message that our network of partners and allies remains resolute in our commitment to stem the flow of illicit trafficking that breeds instability,” said Cmdr. Jonathan Carter, the skipper of Legare. “This is a dangerous mission. It’s a mission that requires highly skilled operators, it requires intense training and preparation,” Carter said. Taking down huge amounts of coke and pot can be hazardous work, often at night, at high speeds, sometimes involving gunfire. It is risky business that has its rewards. “We know it’s worth it, and it’s times like this that we get to take a step back and look at what we’ve done, what we’ve accomplished, so we’re very proud, all of us,” said Chief Petty Officer Jesse Oliver.

The Coast Guard has increased its presence in the Eastern Pacific Ocean and Caribbean Basin, which are known drug transit zones off of Central and South America, as part of its Western Hemisphere Strategy. During at-sea interdictions in international waters, a suspect vessel is initially located and tracked by allied, military or law enforcement personnel. The Coast Guard crew members spend more than half a year, 185 days on average, on the water, away from home. Seaman Haz Martinez of Homestead, FL who hasn’t seen his wife and loved ones in three months said on the cutter Tuesday, “I miss them a lot, definitely ... But we have a job to do, and that’s something that keeps me going, in order to help others, and I just love it.”

Martinez and his fellow crew members were scheduled to be home at the Legare’s home station of Portsmouth, VA on 27 APR. The Captain said everyone’s family would be there to greet them. The interdictions, including the actual boarding, are led and conducted by U.S. Coast Guardsmen. The law enforcement phase of counter-smuggling operations in the Eastern Pacific is conducted under the authority of the Coast Guard 11th District headquartered in Alameda, California. [Source: CBS Miami | April 24, 2018 ++]

Silver Star | Lt. Philip Sauer ► Posthumously Awarded After 51 Years

A young Marine lieutenant killed 51 years ago while holding off an enemy ambush was awarded a long overdue Silver Star for battlefield heroics at a ceremony held 24 APR. First Lt. Philip H. Sauer, a native of Coronado, California, was posthumously awarded the third highest U.S. valor award after sacrificing his life while holding off an enemy ambush with his .45-caliber pistol, allowing his five-man squad to withdraw to safety.



Lt. Philip Sauer

The award was presented to his brothers and sister by Maj. Gen. Eric Smith, commanding general of 1st Marine Division, aboard Camp Pendleton, California. On April 24, 1967, Sauer, a lieutenant patrolling with 1st Battalion, 9th Marines led a five-man squad on a recon patrol of Hill 861 in the Republic of Vietnam. His patrol “was suddenly ambushed” from “well-placed enemy bunkers and trenches,” according to a reading of his award citation. The point man was killed almost immediately. Sauer ordered his men to withdraw while he laid down cover fire “with only his personal sidearm,” according to the citation. “He was last seen holding his position in the face of overwhelming enemy fire.”

Smith, the officer presiding over the ceremony, described the day as a historic one for the Corps. “Fifty-one years ago today a lieutenant named Phil Sauer gave his life so that other Marines might keep theirs,” Smith said during the ceremony. “Armed with a .45 caliber pistol [Sauer] stood his ground against somewhere north of 30 enemy armed with automatic weapons,” Smith told a crowd gathered. Smith said it was Sauer’s job as the senior Marine that day to take care of his men, and that “he did it with unbelievable courage.” Armed only with a pistol against an overwhelming force Sauer gave his life to save his men. “Who does that?” Smith asked. “Phil Sauer did that.”

Recognition of Sauer’s heroic actions that day was delayed for nearly half a century until Ret. Marine Lt. Col. David Little befriended Sauer’s brother and began to dig into the storied lieutenant’s last stand on Hill 861. Little researched short published histories by the Marine Corps about the conflict commonly called “Green Books” named for the color of their cover. These books covered each year of the Vietnam War. Little came across a short paragraph that “described a five-man patrol, dispatched to establish an artillery observation post, that was ambushed by far greater North Vietnamese Army forces, dug-in and well-concealed with automatic weapons and grenades,” according to a story Little wrote about Sauer’s delayed recognition. After months of pouring through documents, the internet, the National Archives and news articles, Little was able to track down a survivor from the ambush and Sauer’s company commander.

But because of time constraints, an awards package had to be submitted by a member of Congress with an accompanying waiver. It took nearly nine months total from the day Little heard of Sauer’s heroism, but the award was finally submitted in January 2016, according to Little. Secretary of the Navy Richard V. Spencer approved the award in March, more than two years after the package was submitted, Little said. In attendance at the 24 APR award ceremony was a sole eyewitness then-Lance Cpl. William Marks who provided a statement for Sauer’s Silver Star. Marks, an artillery forward observer at the time of the fateful patrol, said in his witness statement, “I didn’t meet Lt. Sauer until that day. I never met him before,” Smith told the crowd. He “met him a couple hours before the patrol.

Sauer’s siblings were in attendance to accept the award. “You create bonds of comradery, esprit de corps and standards of conduct that are so strong that you will let nothing stand in your way of accomplishing your mission. That was Phil,” said Phil’s sister, who accepted the award on her brother’s behalf. “He loved his Marine Corps family and took care of his men,” she added. “He died honoring your Corps values of honor, courage and

commitment. The Silver Star is the nation’s third highest award for combat bravery. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | Shawn Snow | April 24, 2018 ++]

CH-53K King Stallion ▶ **New Heavy-Lift Helicopter | \$144M+ Each**

The CH-53K King Stallion heavy-lift helicopter is on track to enter arsenals around the world within the next few years — but it’ll cost militaries a pretty penny. Marine Corps officials announced early this month that the CH-53K was on track to enter service sometime in 2019 as a replacement for the existing CH-53 Echo fleet. Weeks later, manufacturer Sikorsky debuted the CH-53K at a German air show in a move that, per Aviation Week, signals that the defense contractor is “preparing to fight for export orders.” Both are signs of the King Stallion’s imminent arrival downrange after more than a decade in development. “[This is] the most powerful helicopter the United States has ever fielded,” CH-53 program chief Marine Col. Hank Vanderborght told the audience at the annual Sea-Air-Space expo on April 9, per Military.com. “Not only the most powerful, the most modern and also the smartest.”



But the King Stallion is expensive as hell. Back in April 2017, a leaked decision memo revealed that each CH-53K would cost around \$138.5 million; a month later, that figure had ballooned to \$144 million apiece. All of these figures are well above the multimillion-dollar price tag of the notoriously garbage F-35A Lightning II joint strike fighter, which has seen its price decline in recent weeks. The King Stallion’s costs will likely only grow. After the CH-53K successfully pulled off its first cross-country flight last summer, Naval Air Systems Command announced its first official production contract for two helicopters for \$303.97 million, or just under \$152 million for each aircraft, “along with engineering and integrated logistics support, spares, and peculiar support equipment.”

Then again, the King Stallion might just be worth the eye-popping price tag. Sikorsky engineered the CH-53K to haul up to 27,000 pounds, three times the cargo of the Pentagon’s current heavy-lift workhorse, without any significant changes in the airframe dimensions. And that makes a difference downrange, as Task & Purpose’s Brian Jones wrote of the King Stallion in March:

When I was in Afghanistan from 2011 to 2012, the CH-53 was so critical to combat operations it was the only squadron the Marine Corps kept two iterations of. The 2nd Marine Aircraft Wing (Forward) had a CH-53E Super Stallion squadron and a CH-53D Sea Stallion squadron. But both versions of the aircraft

were decades old, but were incredibly busy across the theater of operations. Those platforms desperately need to be upgraded.

The new CH-53K King Stallion certainly seems to be an excellent iterative development of this combat-tested and combat-proven platform. The new helicopter [can hoist an external payload](#) of more than 27,000 pounds, more than triple what the CH-53E could do. While the old version, the CH-53E, was just barely too thin to hold a Humvee in its fuselage, the new helicopter can hold a Humvee.

It's also worth noting that unlike other uber-expensive next-generation military projects, the King Stallion isn't a complete garbage pile (see: [the Littoral Combat Ship](#)). Sure, the program has its set of very special technical problems — airspeed indication anomalies, reliability issues in the rotor gearbox, and tail boom and rotor structural problems, according to a 2017 DoD report — but the airframe has demonstrated mission reliability beyond expectations for this point in its development lifecycle. “I am proud of what the team has negotiated to bring this remarkable and unrivaled helicopter one step closer to the fleet,” Col. Vanderbrough said of the airframe in September. “Future Marines, not even born yet, will be flying this helicopter well into the future.” Here's hoping he's right. [Source: Task & Purpose | Jared Keller | April 23, 2018 ++]

Military Enlistment Update 20 ► DHA Aware of Dependent MHR Concern

The director of the Defense Health Agency said she is aware of concerns that have been expressed about the health care military children have received, and whether it “shows up” when they're trying to enter the military. “We need to look at that ... because, for me, I don't want to deny somebody the care that they need,” Navy Vice Adm. Raquel Bono said 19 APR during a leadership breakfast hosted by the National Military Family Association. “At the same time, I know it's extremely important that we document everyone's care so that we can give that comprehensive service and support to their health care,”

Information was not immediately available about whether Defense Department officials have taken steps to address the issue. A defense health spokesman said previously that the practice of combining the records has been in effect since 2004, when an electronic medical records system was implemented, but the policy was put into place in 2010. Military Times has reported on the service branches' practice of combining the electronic medical records of military children with their active-duty medical treatment record, when they join the military, giving their military medical providers access to those prior records. The services don't have that access to records of recruits from civilian families.

One Army major's daughter was forced out of Air Force basic training because of notations in her medical record that she and her parents weren't aware of, related to counseling she'd received to help her cope with her frequent moves, and her father's deployments. She was denied a waiver by the Air Force to re-enter, despite multiple clean bills of health from civilian and DoD behavioral health providers. Her younger sister has been denied a waiver to enlist in the Army, also because of notations in her dependent medical record — and also despite multiple clean bills of health.

Bono made the comments in response to a question about what she sees as the biggest challenge for military children today, given that a number of future service members are children of today's service members. Bono said DoD health officials pay close attention to this fact in determining how to position themselves to be responsive in the future. “About 30 percent of our family members end up being part of the military down the road,” Bono said. “How do we make sure all of our family members are positioned with their health, and the care they receive in our system, to pursue what they need either in the military or elsewhere?”

Military Times has received a number of responses from families who have said their children were forced out of the military because of issues noted in their dependent medical records. Defense and service officials have

encouraged service members and families to seek help, and constantly say they won't be punished for doing so. But Army Maj. Rudy De La Rosa said that in his case and those of and other military parents, "our children are not protected. We are not told that DoD clinicians are building their permanent military health record that will follow them their whole lives." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 20, 2018 ++]

USS Portland (LPD-27) ► Commissioning 21 APR 2018

The amphibious transport dock the USS Portland will be commissioned 21 APR in Portland, Ore., in a ceremony attended by Deputy Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan and Bonnie Amos, the ship's sponsor and wife of retired Marine Corps commandant Gen. James Amos. The Portland — which will be homeported in San Diego — is the 11th San Antonio-class amphibious ship in the Navy's inventory, and boasts the ability to embark more than 800 Marines and accommodate the MV-22 Osprey tilt-rotor aircraft. It can also launch and recover landing craft and amphibious vehicles. San Antonio-class ships can "support a variety of amphibious assault, special operations or expeditionary warfare missions, operating independently or as part of Amphibious Ready Groups, Expeditionary Strike Groups, or Joint Task Forces" as well as humanitarian or anti-piracy missions, a Defense Department statement said.

The Portland should be a welcome addition for the Navy, which has been criticized for having a lack of amphibious ships to support Marine Corps operations. During congressional testimony last December, Defense Capabilities and Management Director Cary Russell said the lack of amphibious ships was causing "training shortfalls." "In summary, Navy and Marine Corps units completed training for certain amphibious operations priorities but not others due to several factors," he said. "The most prevalent factor we found that hampered training completion was a lack of available amphibious ships on which to train. The Navy and Marine Corps have taken some steps to identify and address amphibious operations training shortfalls, but these efforts are incomplete."

The number of amphibious transport docks has been declining since a peak in the 1980s when the Navy had 16 such vessels. The service expects to have 12 in its ranks by 2024, according to a Government Accountability Office report released in December. The USS Portland was tentatively chosen to serve as the flagship for this summer's Rim of the Pacific naval exercise in Hawaii, Capt. Brian Metcalf, program manager for landing platform dock amphibious warfare vessels, said in January at the Surface Navy Association's annual symposium in Arlington, Va. However, the final decision will not be made until a RIMPAC planning meeting this month, Navy officials said.

The ship is slated this fall to be fitted with the next generation of the Navy's laser weapons system for testing, according to USNI News. The previous iteration was tested in the Middle East aboard the USS Ponce. Secretary of the Navy Richard Spencer said the new ship will be entering a world of "dynamic security challenges." "USS Portland enters service in a period of dynamic security challenges, and I am confident this ship and crew will conquer these and future challenges because of the strength and talent of the Sailors and Marines who will serve aboard this ship," he said in the Pentagon statement. "I am certain that USS Portland will proudly represent both the United States and the people of Portland in maritime operations around the world for decades to come."

The vessel is the third Navy ship to bear the name Portland. The first was a cruiser commissioned in 1933 and named after Portland, Maine. It fought in the Guadalcanal, Leyte Gulf, Corregidor and Okinawa campaigns of World War II. The second USS Portland was a dock landing ship commissioned in 1970 and named after both cities in Maine and Oregon, and participated in a variety of missions in its more than three-decade career. These included the 1976 evacuation of American citizens from Lebanon, the 1983 multinational peacekeeping mission to Beirut, Lebanon, and deployment of Marines to Kuwait in support of Operation Iraqi Freedom. The commissioning ceremony, which is set to begin at 10 a.m. Saturday, local time, can be watched online at <http://navylive.dodlive.mil>. [Source: Stars & Stripes | April 20, 2018 ++]

Toxic Exposure | Peterson AFB ► PFC Tainted Water

The U.S. military has agreed to spend more than \$900,000 to buy water and take other steps for Colorado communities where wells were tainted by chemicals from nearby Peterson Air Force Base. The Gazette reported 18 APR the Air Force will purchase clean drinking water and pay for operating and maintaining filter systems. Compounds called PFCs were found in well water in three utility systems serving about 69,000 people in the city of Fountain and an unincorporated community called Security-Widefield. PFCs have been linked to cancer and other problems, and levels found in the Colorado communities exceeded the federal government’s recommended limits. PFCs were a component of firefighting foam. The military confirmed in 2017 the chemicals found in the Colorado wells came from Peterson Air Force Base. [Source: The Associated Press | April 18, 2018 ++]

Submarine Service ► Navy Wants More Women

The Navy’s silent service is making some noise about wanting more female enlisted sailors to earn their dolphins and serve aboard submarines, according to the chief of naval personnel. Vice Adm. Robert Burke extended the deadline for female enlisted sailors to apply to convert to the submarine force. Applications are now being accepted through 1 JUN, and selections from this round of applications will be part of the initial female integration of USS Georgia (SSGN-729) or to fill openings on previously integrated submarines. The Navy is aggressively promoting itself as a career choice for women, and pushing out messaging detailing the multitude of jobs available to female sailors, Burke said last week while testifying before the House Armed Services military personnel subcommittee. “We’re really trying to highlight the situations that women can see themselves,” Burke said during the hearing.



Currently, 18 submarine crews include female officers, and four of these crews have female enlisted sailors. By the end of 2024, the Navy will have 21 crews with female officers, and 14 of these crews will include female enlisted sailors, Cmdr. Sarah Self-Kyler, a SUBLANT spokeswoman, told USNI News on 18 APR. The Navy rescinded its males only on submarines policy in 2010. Not everyone agrees with the Navy’s continuing effort to integrate women into submarine service. After the deadline extension was announced last week, several online commentators posted derogatory comments to the Commander, Submarine Forces Facebook page. “So glad I am retired and not involved with this social engineering experiment,” one commenter posted. In response, the command posted, “Integrating women aboard submarines is not a social engineering experiment and it is not something new.

Women have been serving aboard submarines in other nations since 1995. The U.S. Submarine Force requires the best and the brightest America has, regardless of gender. Glad you are enjoying retirement.”

Vice Adm. Joe Tofalo, the commander of Submarine Forces, didn’t actually type the responses to Facebook, but approved the messaging posted on his behalf, Self-Kyler told USNI News. “We feel it’s important to be a part of the conversation with our followers,” Self-Kyler said. “When we feel our policy is not understood, we do our best to inform our readers using our most current policy and perspective on the topic.” The submarine service is extending the application deadline because there was some concern the original announcement did not provide enough time for everyone interested to apply. The submarine force has received a good response so far from interested female sailors, Self-Kyler said.

For ranks E-6 and below, submarine career fields open for conversion include: Yeoman Submarine (YNS), Culinary Specialist Submarine (CSS), Logistics Specialist Submarine (LSS), Sonar Technician Submarine (STS), Fire Control Technician (FT), Electronics Technician Submarine Navigation (ETV), Electronics Technician Submarine Communications (ETR), Information Systems Technician Submarines (ITS), Machinist’s Mate Weapons (MMW), and Machinist’s Mate Auxiliary (MMA), according to the Navy. “It’s an operational imperative for the Navy to increase our numbers of women so we are frankly targeting them in our recruiting efforts and our messaging because that’s where the talent is,” Burke said during the hearing. “Our new ad campaigns prominently feature women. Our most recent one, has a female submariner earning her dolphin.” [Source: USNI | Ben Werner | April 18, 2018 ++]

Military Food Stamps Update 04 ► Proposed Farm Bill's Impact On Families

Tens of thousands of military families nationwide experienced food insecurity last year, and yet the new Farm Bill will make it more difficult for these families to get relief. U.S. House Committee on Agriculture Chairman Mike Conaway, (R-TX) released a video at <https://youtu.be/hLIsOJ5uPiY> about the 2018 Farm Bill that ends with an echoing proclamation that, "we must get this policy right." It's hard to see how his draft of the Agriculture and Nutrition Act of 2018 even comes close to achieving that goal. Instead, this bill includes proposals and provisions that threaten to pull the rug out from under millions of Americans, among them thousands of currently serving members of our nation's armed forces.

It is a harsh, underreported reality that far too many lower-ranking enlistees need help feeding their families. Military families may experience food insecurity because of financial emergencies, low pay, and crises levels of chronic unemployment or underemployment of military spouses in a society where most families need dual incomes to live. Neither the Department of Defense nor the Department of Agriculture tracks this issue specifically, but we do have ample evidence that hunger among military families is a problem.

- Department of Defense data shows that, on average, of the roughly 19,000 children enrolled in DODEA schools in the U.S. during the 2014-15 school year, 26 percent qualified for free meals and 25 percent were eligible for reduced price meals.
- Information obtained by Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger, a leading national anti-hunger organization, reveals that food pantries operate on or near every single Navy and Marine Corps base in the United States. A Government Accountability Office report released in 2016 identified four food pantries on one base alone, one of which provides food assistance to an average of 400 to 500 Marine families every month.
- The 2017 Blue Star Families Military Family Lifestyle Survey found that 8 percent of respondents had sought emergency food assistance through a food bank or other charitable organization. Even more strikingly, 43 percent of active duty families had participated in social welfare programs like SNAP and WIC.

Low-income American families who meet prescribed eligibility criteria can get assistance from the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), commonly known as food stamps, the cornerstone program of our federal nutrition safety net. But because of a glitch in existing law, far too many of the men and women who bravely serve our nation don't qualify for this vital program. Chairman Conaway could have fixed this technical error by advancing the common-sense solution provided in bipartisan bills H.R. 1078 & S. 2488 that have been introduced by U.S. Representative Susan Davis (D-CA) and Senators Tammy Duckworth (D-IL), Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) and Tom Udall (D-NM)

These bills exclude a service member's Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH) from counting as income when determining eligibility for federal nutrition assistance benefits -- a straightforward solution that would help thousands of low-income military families put food on the table. Instead, he chose to confuse the issue by excluding only the first \$500 of a service member's BAH from counting as income for SNAP eligibility determination. It's already challenging enough for struggling military families to navigate the existing patchwork of perplexing eligibility criteria when applying for desperately needed benefits. If Chairman Conaway really wanted to prevent hunger among military families, he would simplify the rules and establish consistency across different program eligibility criteria so that military families do not have to jump through hoops to get the help they need.

Instead, he has perpetuated a confusing situation without fully resolving this unacceptable problem that military families needlessly endure. What also remains unclear, even to the advocates who have been on the front lines of the effort to fix this issue, is how he arrived at this arbitrary amount. How many military families does he suggest will be helped by this \$500 income exclusion? And just as important: how many will still be left behind? We can all agree that no one -- especially military families that sacrifice so much for our country -- should struggle to put food on the table.

We have an opportunity in the Farm Bill to advance bipartisan solutions to make even greater progress in the effort to end hunger in this country. Sadly, the partisan farm bill proposed by Chairman Conaway gets the policy on SNAP so very wrong and would make the problem of hunger worse. It's time to stop playing politics with real people's lives. We need to get this policy right. [Source: Military.com | Abby J. Leibman & Kathy Roth-Douquet | April 18, 2018 ++]

Warships That Will Change The Future ► HMS Agamemnon S-124



The British Royal Navy can't have enough ships! Although it's only planned to be launched in 2020, The HMS Agamemnon will be an integral part of a family that includes six nuclear-powered submarines that will have the ability to go and stay underwater for three whole months! The HMS Agamemnon was in service in the famous American Revolutionary, French Revolutionary and Napoleonic Revolutionary wars. She is also known to be the ship that Nelson was most fond of. She will be the sixth vessel of the Royal Navy to bear the name, after the legendary Greek king Agamemnon. Agamemnon's nuclear reactor will not need to be refuelled during the boat's 25-year service. Since the submarine can purify water and air, she will be able to circumnavigate the planet without resurfacing. The main limit is that the submarine will only be able to carry three months' supply of food for 98 officers and ratings. Agamemnon will have provision for up-to 38 weapons in six 21-inch (533 mm) torpedo tubes.

* **Military History** *



USS Helena (CL-50) ► Remains Located After Sinking July 6, 1943

The expedition crew of Microsoft co-founder Paul Allen has discovered yet another Navy ship that was previously lost to history. The crew of the Research Vessel (R/V) Petrel located the sunken wreckage of the St. Louis-class light cruiser USS Helena (CL-50) late last month, only weeks after discovering the [USS Juneau](#), known for having all five Sullivan brothers on board, and less than a month after discovering the wreckage of the [aircraft carrier USS Lexington](#).



USS Helena off Boston 15 JUN 1940 (top), Oil-covered survivors from the USS Helena aboard a Navy destroyer that rescued them (left), and wreckage discovered in New Georgia Sound, South Pacific (right)

The Helena, which was moored in Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, was sunk during the Battle of Kula Gulf by Japanese torpedoes on the morning of July 6, 1943. Almost 75 years later, she was located, resting 860 meters below the surface on the floor of the New Georgia Sound, off the coast of the Solomon Islands. “Each ship has a story that touches families and friends of those who perished or survived,” Robert Kraft, director of subsea operations for Allen, told the editors of [Paul Allen’s website](#).

The story in the case of the Helena is one of heroic survival on the part of her crew. As the ship slowly went under, sailors huddled into groups in the water while continuing to take enemy fire. Rescue operations were launched but had to be repeatedly suspended as U.S. destroyers were re-routed to pursue enemy ships instead. Some of the wounded from one of the huddled groups were placed on lifeboats, and able-bodied sailors clung to the sides, working to push the boats toward one of the nearby islands, an effort made futile as wind and current pushed the sailors deeper into enemy territory.

The flotilla of weary sailors eventually reached the island of Vella Lavella, where local natives did what they could to care for the wounded. Many of the remaining sailors fled to the jungle to avoid being spotted by Japanese patrols. Finally, the Navy dispatched ships to the location and rescued the Helena sailors, along with 16 Chinese who were also hiding on the island. Through a combined effort of U.S. Navy ships, volunteer motor whaleboats and life rafts, 732 of Helena’s 900 crew were ultimately rescued over the course of 10 days. “It’s gratifying to hear those stories each time we announce a new discovery,” Kraft said. “We do these missions as testament to the brave souls who served on these ships.” Go to <http://www.usshelena.org/cellozzi.html> to read more stories told by actual USS Helena survivors. [Source: NavyTimes | J.D. Simkins | April 14, 2018 ++]

Battle of Heartbreak Ridge ► Korea | 18 AUG thru 5 SEP 1951

By the summer of 1951, the Korean War had reached a stalemate as peace negotiations began at Kaesong. The opposing armies faced each other across a line which ran with many twists and turns along the way from east to west, through the middle of the Korean peninsula, a few miles north of the 38th parallel. UN and communist forces jockeyed for position along this line, clashing in several relatively small but intense and bloody battles. One bloody ground battle took began as an attempt by UN forces to seize a ridge of hills which they believed were being used as observation posts to call in artillery fire on a UN supply road. It was a joint operation conducted by South Korean and the U.S. Army’s 2nd Division. To read the details of this battle and its outcome refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titles, "**Battle of Heartbreak Ridge**". [Source: Together We Served News | Bill Wilson | January 2018 ++]

Curragh ► WWII's Most Bizarre POW Camp

During World War II, a Canadian bomber flying from a base in Scotland crashed in what the crew thought was the vicinity of their airfield. Spotting a pub, they entered to celebrate their survival with a quick drink but were stunned to see a group of soldiers wearing Nazi uniforms and singing in German. Even more confusingly, the Germans responded to their entry by shouting at them to “go to their own bar.” The crew was soon given an explanation: after getting lost they crashed in the Republic of Ireland... and now they were captured, just like the Jerries.

Having negligible military power, Ireland was a neutral nation during the war; Prime Minister Éamon de Valera went to great lengths to maintain that neutrality. As part of this policy, he made a deal with both the British and German governments: combatants of either country could be detained if found in Ireland and interned there for the

duration of the war. Technically, the men were not prisoners of war but “guests of the State,” with an obligation on the state to prevent them from returning to the war. A 19th century military camp named Curragh Camp or “K-Lines” was designated to hold “guests” of both nationalities – along with a much higher number of Irish citizens who were imprisoned because they were considered a threat to the country’s neutrality, such as IRA men and pro-Nazi activists.

At first, authorities looked the other way when British aircraft crashed or emergency landed in Ireland, allowing the crews to make their way home. The appearance of a German aircrew in 1940, however, forced them to start taking their job seriously. Lieutenant Kurt Mollenhauer’s Focke-Wulf Fw 200 Condor aircraft was taking meteorological readings off the Irish coast when they got lost in the mist and hit a mountain, with two crewmen suffering injuries. They were captured and taken to Curragh. They experienced some harsh treatment first but the Department of External Affairs quickly requested the army to improve their living conditions. With some Germans in actual custody, it was now also necessary to detain British pilots who landed in Ireland to maintain neutrality and the two sides had to be given the same treatment – preferably a lenient one to avoid angering Britain.

Between 1940 and 1943, some 40 British and 200 German military personnel were taken to K-Lines, mainly air crews and men from shipwrecked U-boats. In appearance, the camp was a regular POW camp with guard towers, barbed wire and huts built on short stilts to prevent tunneling to freedom, though the fence separating the British and German sides was a mere four feet tall. Unlike in most camps, however, the guards had blank rounds in their rifles and the prisoners were allowed to run their own bars with duty-free alcohol.

The British bar was run on an honor system, with everyone pouring for themselves and recording their consumption in a book. Prisoners were also allowed to borrow bicycles and leave the camp, provided they signed a parole paper at the guardhouse, giving their word of honor not to escape and to return in time. Pub visits, with separate bars for groups of different nationalities, evening dances with the locals, fishing and golfing trips and fox hunts were the norm, with one English officer even having his horse transported there from home and others having their families join them in Ireland for the duration of the war. Some prisoners ended up marrying local girls and one German prisoner, Georg Fleischmann, stayed and became an important figure in Irish film industry.



Some British (left) and German (right) inhabitants of K-Lines (below)

While both sides enjoyed the chance to sit out the war in reasonable comfort and without dishonorable behavior such as desertion, the Germans were generally more uptight about their situation. Despite being given some money to buy themselves civilian clothes for trips to nearby towns, the preferred to stay in uniform inside the camp, planted gardens, made tennis courts, held exercise classes. On one occasion, they even set up a court to convict a comrade for treason, though the defendant couldn't be executed, as the Irish refused to furnish the Germans with a rifle and a single bullet. Sometimes, German prisoners sang Nazi songs just to piss off of their British co-internees. The two nations held boxing and soccer matches, with a historical record noting a German victory of 8-2 at one.

Escape attempts were rare. The Germans had no easy way of reaching continental Europe and the British had their own special problem, best demonstrated through the story of Roland "Bud" Wolfe. An American citizen, Wolfe signed up with the RAF before the U.S. entered the war, getting stripped of his American citizenship as a consequence. After flying cover for a ship convoy off Ireland, his Spitfire's engine overheated and he had to land in the Republic of Ireland, where he was taken to the Curragh. Unwilling to sit out the war, he made his move two weeks after his capture, in December 1941. One day he walked out of the camp, deliberately "forgetting" his gloves. He quickly went back for them and left again without signing a new parole paper, so he now considered his escape to be a legitimate one. He had lunch at a nearby hotel, left without paying and made his way to nearby Dublin, where he boarded the first train to Belfast in Northern Ireland. To his surprise, his superiors were far from pleased when he reported at his base and he was quickly sent back across the border to the internment camp.

The reason was that Ireland's neutrality was important not only to the Irish but to Great Britain as well. Though Churchill considered Ireland's refusal to fight a betrayal, he understood that a pro-Nazi Ireland would have allowed the Kriegsmarine to use its Atlantic ports and wreak havoc on vital convoys from America. In order to guarantee Ireland's neutrality, however, the British also had to play fair and prevent K-Line internees from jeopardizing the diplomatic status quo by escaping whenever they pleased. As a result, attempts were sparse: Wolfe tried to escape again only to be captured this time around as well, finally settling into the relaxed life of the camp. There was an aborted tunneling attempt and a successful mass rush on the gate, which the Irish decided was a "legal" escape and the men who made it back to British territory were not returned.

In 1943 it became clear that the Allies were slowly winning, British airmen were moved to a separate camp and secretly freed, while 20 Germans were allowed to rent residences in Dublin and attend the local colleges. All remaining German prisoners were repatriated after the war, ending the history of what might well have been history's strangest, and possibly most comfortable, POW camp.

The story of the British and German prisoners living together in Ireland, hushed up during and after the war, only came to light in the 1980s, when English novelist John Clive heard the story from a taxi driver who had served as a guard at Curragh, and decided to research the matter for a novel. [Source: <https://givemeliberty01.com/tag/world-war-ii> | April 2018 ++]

Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto ► Researchers Mark Death

A group from the U.S. and Japan is trekking to a remote Pacific island jungle to document what is considered one of the most important wreck sites of World War II: where American fighters shot down a Japanese bomber carrying the mastermind of the Pearl Harbor attack. Three members of a New York-based WWII research organization and a Japanese aviation expert plan to visit the crash site on Bougainville, part of Papua New Guinea, on 18 APR, the 75th anniversary of Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto's death.

Yamamoto had spent several years in the U.S. earlier in his military career, studying at Harvard University and admiring America's industrial might. Yamamoto held several important posts in the Imperial Japanese Navy (IJN), and undertook many of its changes and reorganizations, especially its development of naval aviation. He was

promoted to admiral on November 15, 1940. In the aftermath of Pearl Harbor, he was quite possibly the most hated man in America. “As long as he lived, the Japanese navy was a threat,” said Donald A. Davis, a Colorado-based writer who told the story of “Operation Vengeance” in a 2005 book. “He was feared in the Pacific.”



Adm. Isoroku Yamamoto, commander in chief of the Japanese combined fleet and the mastermind of the attack on Pearl Harbor.

Historians generally credit Yamamoto, an innovative proponent of air power, with the idea of attacking the U.S. Pacific fleet and convincing Japanese military leaders that his plan could work. The Dec. 7, 1941, sneak attack on the naval base at Pearl Harbor on Hawaii’s Oahu Island killed more than 2,400 people, sunk or damaged 18 ships, destroyed 300 warplanes and drew the U.S. into the war. Getting Yamamoto became very much a mission of its own. The big break for the U.S. came on April 13, 1943, when Navy code breakers discovered that Yamamoto planned to tour bases in areas of the Solomon Islands still held by Japanese forces. The admiral’s tour was scheduled for April 18 — just five days away.

U.S. military officials quickly approved an air mission to intercept the admiral’s plane and shoot it down. The task fell to a squadron of Army Air Forces P-38 Lightnings based on Guadalcanal, in the Solomons. After the pilots closely reviewed Yamamoto’s flight plan, 16 P-38s flew 400 miles west and spotted two enemy bombers over Bougainville, another island in the Solomon archipelago. While some of the P-38s engaged Yamamoto’s fighter escort, other American planes attacked the two bombers. One slammed into the jungle, while the other crashed off shore. Yamamoto, 59, was among 11 men who died in the plane that crashed on land.

Yamamoto’s death was yet another blow to the Japanese after the tide of the Pacific war turned with the American victory at Midway and the taking of Guadalcanal. Japanese troops recovered Yamamoto’s body, cremated it and sent his ashes back to Japan, where the admiral was given a state funeral. But Japan didn’t officially announce Yamamoto’s death until weeks later, saying he died aboard a warplane “while directing general strategy on the front line,” according to an Associated Press story on the announcement in Tokyo.

The U.S. military had wanted to keep his death a secret lest the Japanese learn their code had been broken. But one of the American pilots on the mission had spilled the beans almost immediately, telling everyone upon landing that he had shot down Yamamoto’s plane. (Decades later, historians determined another pilot had fired the fatal burst). As the worst-kept secret in the Pacific spread among American troops, AP correspondent J. Norman Lodge confirmed details of the mission even before the Japanese announcement, but U.S. military censors withheld his story. The Pentagon didn’t officially release details of the mission until Sept. 11, 1945, nine days after Japan surrendered.

The wreckage of the Yamamoto’s Mitsubishi G4M “Betty” bomber remains in the jungle. Most of the plane was destroyed on impact but a large section of the tail survives. Over the decades, parts of the plane were removed and placed in museums. Justin Taylan, founder of New York-based Pacific Wrecks who has been compiling data on WWII airplane crashes for more than 20 years, said the purpose of visiting the Yamamoto site is to “document the wreckage and perform digital preservation of what remains for posterity.” The group will commemorate the anniversary at the site with a Shinto religious ceremony conducted by Japanese WWII aircraft expert Yoji Sakaida.

Yamamoto remains a revered figure in Japan, where a museum was established in his honor in his hometown of Nagaoka. Artifacts on display include the left wing from Yamamoto's aircraft. Museum officials say an annual memorial event will be held 18 APR at nearby Yamamoto Memorial Park, where the house in which he was born once stood [Source: Stars & Stripes | Matthew M. Burke | April 5, 2018 ++]

Battle of Stones River ► Civil War | A Bloody New Year

It was cold at the turning of the year in Murfreesboro, right in the middle of the state of Tennessee. The little town nestled under a crook in the arm of the Stones River, near where the water rushed and chattered over a long shallow ford. The Civil War had raged across the country for nearly two years. At the end of December in 1862, the Union force called the Army of the Cumberland was maneuvering into position to challenge the Confederacy's Army of Tennessee. The Confederate troops were commanded by Gen. Braxton Bragg, a tall, thickly bearded, sad-eyed veteran of the South's campaigns. His army numbered around thirty-five thousand men, cavalry, cannon, infantry, and skirmishers. They had been encamped north of Murfreesboro for a month when the Union forces finally arrived.

Maj. Gen. William Rosecrans was in command of the Union Army of the Cumberland, which out-numbered Bragg's force by nearly ten thousand men. They had marched the long road south from Nashville to Murfreesboro, and by New Year's Eve in 1862 they had deployed in a line stretching four miles long facing the Confederate Army. Overnight, the armies were camped so close to each other that they could hear and see each other clearly. Each army was well equipped with musicians, and both sides began to play and sing competing songs under the starry sky. After some time, one band struck up a tune which resonated with both sides, and the musical competition became an alliance. Thousands upon thousands of voices from both sides joined together in a song everyone knew. 'There's no place like home, boys' they sang, 'There's no place like home.'

Both sides were readying themselves to attack in the morning, but Bragg struck first. The left wing of the Confederate army swept forward in a huge wave toward the Union lines. Ten thousand men marched swiftly toward the enemy, pausing only to unleash huge barrages of rifle-fire against their enemy. The Union soldiers were not prepared for the sudden onslaught, and when their enemies closed the distance and charged to fight hand-to-hand they were driven back yard by yard, three miles from their original position. Their losses were terrible, but they fought for every foot of ground they gave. Cannons began to fire from both sides, and the second wave of Confederate soldiers began to advance on the disintegrating Union right.



Gen. Rosecrans scrambled reinforcements toward the fighting, riding to and fro at a gallop across the battlefield. He was covered in blood, and everywhere he went he cried out in strident tones to his men, encouraging them. The right flank of the Union army was crumbling, and the line was so long that it would be some time before the reinforcements were able to be of any use. However, in a little grove of Cedar trees in the center of the right flank,

one man had not been caught short by the early morning attack. Union Maj. Gen. Philip Sheridan was in command of a division of infantry and cannon, and his men had been up, fed and deployed long before the rest of the divisions on the right. He was a stubborn, canny fellow, sharp-eyed and quick to act, and he commanded the respect and trust of the men under him.

As the Union army around him gave ground, his men held their position and returned fire rapidly at the advancing enemy. Again and again, the Confederate soldiers assaulted his position with blade and bullet, but each time they found the defense could not be broken. Sheridan and his men fought with the bravery and determination of those who know that to retreat is to fail utterly. As the morning wore on Bragg's army's efforts became concentrated on Sheridan and his ferocious resistance at the center of the Union right. The trunks of the Cedar trees were scarred by bullets, and the ground below them was red with blood. The Confederate dead were piled up at every point where the assault had been hottest, but still, Sheridan did not give up his position. As the Confederate attack on Sheridan intensified, the attack on the rest of the Union right waned, and the reinforcements, chivvied on by Rosecrans himself, were able to reach their goal and strengthen the position held by those troops who had been forced back in the initial assault.

A little after 11 AM Sheridan's ammunition was running out, and he had no choice but to give the order to withdraw. He left more than a third of his men dead among the Cedar trees, but his actions had allowed the reinforcements to arrive, and when he reached the main body of the army he found a great mass of men and artillery assembled with their backs to the road. The Confederate troops were now advancing into the teeth of massed volleys of cannon fire, and the regrouped Union forces were now able to hold their position against the enemy advance.

On the left flank of Rosecrans' army, a similar story was taking place. Confederate Lt. Gen. William Hazen, a tough, battle-hardened veteran, held the center of his line steady while the rest of the army around him was driven back. Behind him, supporting fire from an artillery division helped his cause, but it was the hand to hand combat which saved the day for the Union army. Again and again, Confederate assaults were repulsed, and it slowly became apparent to the attackers that Hazen's brigade would fight to the last man. Without this resolute defense, the battle on the Union right would have been outflanked by Bragg's troops, and all would have been over. Instead, as late afternoon bled into the evening, the Confederate forces withdrew. Both sides had suffered horrific casualties, numbering many thousands, but the Union troops now held a strong position from which it would be hard to shake them.

The next day was New Years, January 1st, 1863, and all was relatively quiet. After the horror and ferocious fighting of the previous day, both armies tended to the wounded and gathered up their dead. Great long wagon trains carried these unfortunate souls away north from the Union line, protected by units of cavalry. The movement of troops was so large that Bragg's scouts reported to him, mistakenly, that Rosecrans' army was retreating, so Bragg did not attack again. He thought he had gained a victory, but by the late afternoon of the next day he was aware of his mistake and ordered the assault to begin again.

The Union troops had regrouped and redeployed. The main strength of their artillery had been arrayed facing the approach to the river, while a great body of infantry had crossed and now occupied a hill on the other side. The Confederate attack was hard and determined, and the Union troops were forced back across the ford, but the Confederate troops now found themselves advancing straight toward forty-five field guns, which laid down a relentless curtain of shot among them. After only an hour they had lost almost two thousand men, and they withdrew as they saw groups of Union infantry and Cavalry massing for the counter-attack. Devastated, Bragg's army began their retreat on January 3rd, and Rosecrans did not pursue him. He crossed the river and occupied the town of Murfreesboro, where he began the long process of resting and rebuilding his army, and of reinforcing the town.

The American Civil war raged on for more than a year, and many more battles were fought. Few, however, were as costly as the battle fought at Stones River that New Year. More than twenty-four thousand men died there over a three-day period, in one of the bloodiest battles in this long and violent period in American history. [Source: Together We Served Newsletter | April 2018 ++]

Ernie Pyle Update 01 ► Memorial Service 22 APR 2018

Navy Capt. Robert Mathewson Jr. didn't know much about famed World War II correspondent Ernie Pyle before being asked to speak during a memorial service Sunday at the spot where Pyle was felled by a Japanese bullet. As memories of the war fade, so too have recollections of Pyle's importance and impact. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for chronicling the average American soldier in foxholes across Europe. His "letters home" reached more than 14 million households and were read avidly by President Harry Truman, Eleanor Roosevelt and members of a grateful nation, who often prayed for him as they did their own sons. Pyle was mourned nationwide at his death and was awarded a posthumous Purple Heart, a rare honor for a civilian.

Since 1952, when Okinawa's American Legion Post 28 began hosting memorial services for Pyle, the number of attendees has dwindled to a couple of dozen, mostly Boy Scouts and Marines. There is no longer a color guard, nor a firing party made up of uniformed soldiers wearing shiny ceremonial helmets. The number of flowers that once flooded the monument built on Ie Island in Pyle's honor has dwindled, and the number of attendees familiar with his work has also dropped sharply. Yet Mathewson — a decorated combat veteran who commands Okinawa Naval Base — said Pyle's dedication to the average soldier must live on. "He didn't just write about American soldiers to the public; he brought them to life," he said. "It is this commitment that inspires me to be better as I lead and care for our current generation of fighters."



Ernie Pyle (left) sits at his typewriter in this undated photo from World War II. Capt. Robert Mathewson Jr. Okinawa Naval Base commander, and Brad Reeves, American Legion Post 28 vice commander (right) lay flowers at the Ernie Pyle memorial on Ie Shima, Okinawa, Sunday, April 22, 2018.

Mathewson read from one of Pyle's most famous works, "The Death of Captain Waskow," and recounted how Pyle had advocated for "fight pay" in one of his columns, something Congress then granted. "As a commander and an officer, I have no higher priority than my sailors," Mathewson said. "Preparing for this speech and learning about the infantry's friend Ernie Pyle has made me take pause and look more closely at the individual faces in my command. Our Navy's strength is in the individual sailor — whether it's a master at arms coming off a 12-hour shift or our young surface warfare officer in her sixth month at sea. They deserve leadership who sees them as Pyle did, as brave Americans with a story to tell. I am renewed in my commitment to serve my sailors, to fight for them and to hear them."

Pyle was born Aug. 3, 1900, near Dana, Ind. After graduating high school, he joined the Navy Reserve, just in time to see the final months of World War I. Pyle studied journalism at Indiana University, and later won acclaim writing daily feature columns as a war correspondent for Scripps-Howard newspapers. As his profile grew, his work

was featured in a growing number of newspapers, including Stars and Stripes. Pyle traveled to London in 1940 to report on the German bombings known as the “Blitz.” It wasn’t long before he joined the American troops stationed there. He covered the war in North Africa, Italy and finally Normandy, France. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1944 for his coverage of the war in Europe.

After a short break, Pyle volunteered to cover the Pacific campaign. He linked up with the 77th Infantry Division as it bore down on Okinawa, Japan. He was riding in a jeep to a forward command post during the battle for Ie Shima with Army Lt. Col. Joseph Coolidge when the jeep was fired upon by a Japanese machine-gun from a ridge above. “We all jumped out of the jeep and dived into a roadside ditch,” Coolidge told The Associated Press. “A little later Pyle and I raised up to look around. Another burst hit the road over our heads and I fell back into the ditch. I looked at Ernie and saw he had been hit. He was killed almost instantly, the bullet entering his left temple just under his helmet.”

Pyle was buried near where he fell. His body was later moved to Okinawa’s main island and then to his final resting place beside the soldiers he covered at Hawaii’s National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, known as “the Punchbowl.” The monument erected where he was killed reads, “At this spot the 77th Infantry Division lost a buddy. Ernie Pyle, 18 April 1945.” Legion Post 28 leases the site and maintains the memorial with the help of Marines stationed on the island. “Ernie Pyle was known throughout the world as the ‘GI journalist’ and ‘soldier’s best friend,” said Post 28 commander Charles Cathey. “Now that you know just a little bit about this great man, you can understand why we are here today paying our respects to our comrade in arms.”

Marine 1st Lt. Christine Baldrige said she hadn’t known about Pyle before she became Ie Shima training facility officer in charge earlier this year, but after learning about his contributions to the troops during World War II and his importance, she brought the Marines under her command out to the memorial to learn about him. “We can’t fight the fight without having a support base at home, without people actually truly understanding our stories out here abroad,” said the 26-year-old from San Jose, Calif. “So having a ceremony like this to give our appreciation for his sacrifice and what he did so that way he could bring the story of the troops on the ground back home to help build that support, to get the truth; it’s something that we need out here as far as morale goes as well to help us push forward. “He could have sat in a cushy office back at home kind of getting the story from afar but he chose to be out here with the troops,” she said. [Source: Stars And Stripes | Matthew M. Burke | April 23, 2018 ++]

Military History Anniversaries ► Military History Anniversaries

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 May**. [Source: This Day in History <http://www.history.com/this-day-in-history> | April 2018 ++]

MOH Awards Update 09 ► WWII Hero's Second Chance at Medal Of Honor Successful

A soldier who fought in World War II is set to posthumously receive the Medal of Honor after 20 years of his family fighting for the upgrade. Army 1st Lt. Garlin Murl Conner will be honored during a ceremony at the White House later this year for his bravery on Jan. 24, 1945, while assigned to K Company, 7th Infantry Regiment, 3rd Infantry Division, according to the Lexington Herald Leader. Conner, a Kentucky native who died in 1998 at age 79, earned four Silver Stars, one Bronze Star, three Purple Hearts and the Distinguished Service Cross for his actions during 28 months in combat during World War II as an intelligence officer. He is said to be the second-most decorated soldier

from World War II, after Maj. Audie Murphy, who is commonly referred to as the most decorated WWII soldier. Conner joined the Army in 1941 and was discharged in June 1945.

According to language in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2018, President Donald Trump was given the authority to award the Medal of Honor to Conner. On Jan. 24, 1945, the first lieutenant volunteered to run 400 yards through “an intense concentration of enemy artillery” in Houssen, France, according to Conner’s Distinguished Service Cross citation. Along the way, he unrolled a spool of telephone wire so he could use a field telephone to direct attacks on the enemy. Conner directed friendly artillery fire to hold off six German tanks and about 600 German infantrymen. As shells exploded 25 yards from him, he set up an observation post, where he stayed for more than three hours, the citation said. Conner was individually credited with stopping more than 150 German troops, destroying the tanks and “disintegrating the powerful enemy assault force and preventing heavy loss of life in his own outfit,” the citation said.

The effort to upgrade Conner’s award began when Richard Chilton, a former Green Beret, wrote to the Army Board for Correction of Military Records saying Conner should be honored. Chilton was researching details of his uncle’s military career, and he came across Conner, who had served with Chilton’s uncle. The board rejected the application for upgrading Conner’s Distinguished Service Cross to a Medal of Honor in 1997 and turned away an appeal in 2000. Conner’s widow, Pauline, collected three eyewitness accounts of Conner’s actions and resubmitted the case to the board in 2008. Nothing happened, and after support grew from lawmakers, veterans, historians and authors in 2014, a Kentucky district court ruled that Conner’s widow had resubmitted the case two years after the statute of limitations expired.

The decision went back to the Army board, which went against the advice of its staff and the judge and voted unanimously in 2015 that sworn statements from those who served with Conner were “sufficient to warrant a recommendation.” A federal mediator took up the case brought by Conner’s widow. Then on 28 MAR, more than 20 years after the first application was rejected, Pauline Conner received a phone call from President Trump. Trump told the 88-year-old that her late husband would finally be receiving the Medal of Honor. The NDAA language had waived the time constraints on Conner’s case. “I think it’s one of the most wonderful things that’s ever happened to me besides marrying my husband. That was best,” she told the Lexington Herald Leader. “He said my husband had one of the best records that he had seen.” [Source: ArmyTimes | Charlsy Panzino | March 29, 2018 ++]

Medal of Honor Citations ► **Gonzales~David M | WWII**



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

DAVID M. GONZALES

Rank and organization: Private First Class, U.S. Army, Company A, 127th Infantry, 32d Infantry Division

Place and date: Villa Verde Trail, Luzon, Philippine Islands, 25 April 1945

Entered service: March 1944 Pacoima, Calif.

Born: September 28, 1926 in Alameda, California

Citation

He was pinned down with his company. As enemy fire swept the area, making any movement extremely hazardous, a 500-pound bomb smashed into the company's perimeter, burying 5 men with its explosion. Pfc. Gonzales, without hesitation, seized an entrenching tool and under a hail of fire crawled 15 yards to his entombed comrades, where his commanding officer, who had also rushed forward, was beginning to dig the men out. Nearing his goal, he saw the officer struck and instantly killed by machinegun fire. Undismayed, he set to work swiftly and surely with his hands and the entrenching tool while enemy sniper and machinegun bullets struck all about him. He succeeded in digging one of the men out of the pile of rock and sand. To dig faster he stood up regardless of the greater danger from so exposing himself. He extricated a second man, and then another. As he completed the liberation of the third, he was hit and mortally wounded, but the comrades for whom he so gallantly gave his life were safely evacuated. Pfc. Gonzales' valiant and intrepid conduct exemplifies the highest tradition of the military service.



David Gonzales was a semi-skilled machine shop worker in Los Angeles when he joined the U.S. Army at the San Pedro, California in March 1944.

On April 25, 1945, Gonzales' company found itself engaged in combat against Japanese forces at Villa Verde Trail on Luzon island in the Philippines. The Army Air Corps was using a tactic called "skip bombing" and were fusing the bombs for delayed action detonation to destroy the labyrinth of Japanese caves and tunnels in the northern Luzon campaign. This fusing allowed the bomb to bury itself deeply into the ground prior to detonation. This event trapped five American soldiers in their standing foxholes. [

On December 8, 1945, President Harry S. Truman, posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor to Gonzales, presenting the medal to his surviving family. On February 2, 1949, Gonzales' body arrived in a funeral train to San Fernando, California where he was buried.

In 1999, David Gonzales, Jr. and his wife Bea attended a ceremony for war heroes in Santa Ana, California. There they discovered that the picture the Army was sending out to military ceremonies was not of his father, but of someone else. Gonzales Jr. wrote to the Army in Washington, D.C. to tell them of their mistake, but did not receive a response. He then wrote to Congressman Howard Berman, who in turn referred the letter to his aide Fred Flores. Flores, who was also from Pacoima, California, immediately called Pentagon officials and had them correct the mistake. However, Flores found out that the family had only been presented with a Medal of Honor and a duplicate

Purple Heart — the original one was stolen — and he realized that Gonzales had earned many other medals. During a November 7, 2002 ceremony at Los Angeles Mission College, Congressman Berman presented David Gonzales, Jr. the following medals earned by his father: the Bronze Star, the Purple Heart, the World War II Victory Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with two Bronze Service Stars, the Philippine Liberation Medal, the World War II Honorable Service Lapel Button, the Combat Infantryman Badge, and the Expert Rifle Badge. Finally he presented the Gold Star Lapel Button, which identifies the next of kin of members of the military who lost their lives while engaged in action.

The photo of a soldier who was not Gonzales, but identified as that of the medal winner, had been erroneously displayed in the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes. The photo was removed and replaced with a correct one of Gonzales after the renovations of the Pentagon — made necessary by the 9/11 attack — were completed on March 31, 2003.

In honor of David M. Gonzales, Pacoima Park in Los Angeles County, California was renamed David M. Gonzales/Pacoima Recreational Center. The local Army recruiting station there also carries his name, as does a county Probation Department camp in Malibu. In November 2015 the interchange between the 5 and 118 freeways in Los Angeles' San Fernando Valley was renamed the David M. Gonzales Memorial Interchange.

[Source: <https://history.army.mil/moh/wwII-g-1.html> | April 2018 ++]

WWII Bomber Nose Art [05] ► A Bit of Lace

Back in the day when America was in the "Big War" WWII, planes were flown by young boys. Politically correct was "go to war to break things and kill the enemy. Apparently no one worried about nose art on the bombers. Most of the "men," or soon to become men, were in their late teens or early twenties. Testosterone levels were high and the names and accompanying pictures on the assigned aircraft helped to boost morale. With no TV or other means, Moms or girlfriends back home would never know or see it! These planes would probably would not be allowed to leave the ground today.

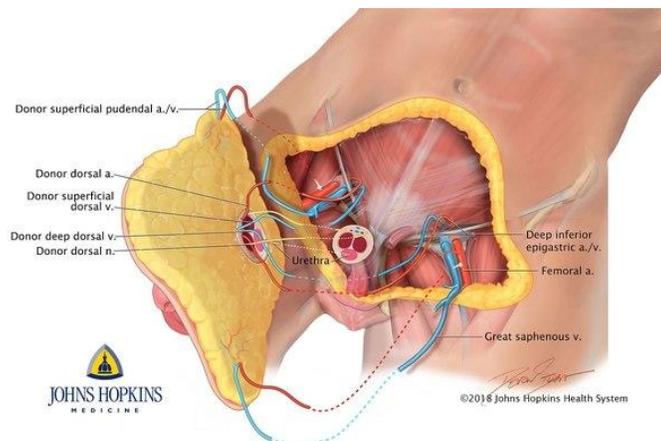




Transplants ► First Ever Penis and Scrotum

A veteran who had his genitals blown off in an IED blast while serving in Afghanistan made history last month by becoming the world’s first recipient of a full penis and scrotum transplant. Nine plastic surgeons and two urological surgeons from Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore, Maryland, completed the transplant after a meticulous 14-hour procedure, a [hospital release](#) said. The parts, which also included a portion of the abdominal wall, came from a deceased donor. “We are hopeful that this transplant will help restore near-normal urinary and sexual functions for this young man,” Dr. W.P. Andrew Lee, director of plastic and reconstructive surgery at the Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, said in the release.

The patient, who asked not to be identified, is expected to be released from the hospital this week. A single section from the donor’s lower abdomen was removed containing skin, muscles, tendons, bone, blood vessels and nerves. The section measured 10 inches by 11 inches and weighed about five pounds, the New York Times reported. Johns Hopkins funded the operation, which Lee estimated to cost between \$300,000 and \$400,000, the report said. All of the surgeons performed the procedure for free.



A diagram of the abdominal portion removed from the donor.

As a result of the IED blast, the patient also lost both legs above the knee, but it was this affliction that ravaged him the most. And while he was relieved, at first, to have survived such extensive trauma, the thought of being permanently disabled in such a way was a rapid catalyst for suicidal ideations. “There were times you’d be hanging out and guys would be talking about getting hurt, and that’s one of the first things when they get blown up, to check down there, and they would say things like, ‘If I lost mine I’d just kill myself,’” he told the New York Times. “When I would actually think about killing myself, I would think, ‘Am I really just gonna kill myself over a penis?’”

Despite the ground-breaking procedure, which at times involved up to 25 people in the operating room, the soldier will remain unable to father children after the blast destroyed his own reproductive tissue. Testosterone and Cialis, however, will help compensate for the loss and encourage erectile function, the report said. In a statement through the New England Donor Services, the donor’s family expressed their gratitude for the opportunity to help.

“We are so thankful to say that our loved one would be proud and honored to know he provided such a special gift to you,” the statement read. “As a family, we are very supportive of all the men and women who serve our country and grateful for the job you did for this nation. Please know that this is truly a heartfelt statement. ... We hope you can return to better health very soon, and we continue to wish you a speedy recovery.”

So far, the recovery has gone as hoped. So, what’s next for the soldier? He plans on attending medical school and possibly settling down into a relationship. “Just that normal stuff,” he said. No matter what he decides, he’ll now be able to do “that normal stuff” feeling like a new man. “I feel whole again.” [Source: ArmyTimes | : J.D. Simkins | April 23, 2018 ++]

STIs ► Regular Testing Needed to Detect Symptomless Chlamydia & Gonorrhea

Some may feel itching, burning, or pain, while others see physical signs. But more often than not, two of the most common sexually transmitted infections or STIs – chlamydia and gonorrhea – are ignored because of a lack of symptoms. Military Health System experts encourage men and women to take steps to ensure their health and prevent these infections. “Many sexually transmitted infections do not have any symptoms, so getting tested regularly is an important part of sexual health,” said Rolando C. Diaz, epidemiology technician at Fort Belvoir Community Hospital in Northern Virginia.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, more than 2 million cases of the most reported STIs – chlamydia, gonorrhea, and syphilis – were reported in the United States in 2016. Those are the highest numbers ever recorded, the CDC said. These three conditions can be spread through vaginal, anal, or oral sex with an infected person, and can cause infection in the genitals, rectum, and throat. “If you have had new partners or unprotected intercourse, or develop symptoms, talk to your provider about your concerns and exposures to help them order the correct tests to keep you and your sexual partner(s) healthy and safe,” said Diaz.

Commonly known as sexually transmitted diseases, most conditions are now referred to as sexually transmitted infections. Catherine A. Gangaas, a public health nurse at Fort Belvoir, said this term helps providers prevent further spread of the STI by looking for the cause of the infection, rather than just treating the disease. “The change in terms came about when it was recognized that people could be infected and transmit the infection to others without ever developing symptoms or disease,” said Gangaas. It’s now recommended that women get tested every year during their annual exam rather than waiting for symptoms to appear, she said.

The September 2017 Medical Surveillance Monthly Report, or MSMR, said incidence rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea were highest among service members younger than 25. The report said STIs rates, with the exception of syphilis, were higher among women than men. According to the report, rates of gonorrhea decreased among female service members in 2016, but slightly increased among males. The rates of diagnosis for chlamydia among women were generally three to five times those among men. The CDC said women can have a greater risk for an infection because the lining of the vagina is thin and delicate, making it vulnerable to bacteria and viruses. Women are also less likely to have symptoms for chlamydia and gonorrhea than men. If symptoms do occur, they can go away even if the infection remains.

Men can experience a burning sensation while urinating; painful or swollen testicles; and white, yellow, or green discharge. Symptoms in women, which are similar to those of a yeast infection, include increased vaginal discharge and a painful or burning sensation while urinating. Bleeding between periods can also be an indication of gonorrhea in women. Gangaas said gonorrhea and chlamydia are often tested for together as they are often transferred together. These conditions are especially common among teenagers and young adults. It’s estimated that one in 20 sexually active young women 14-24 years old has chlamydia, said Diaz.

Both conditions are treated with antibiotics prescribed by a health care provider. Patients going through treatment are encouraged to refrain from sex because they can still infect others even during treatment, said Diaz. “It takes seven days for the medication to treat these infections and only after this time is the chance of infecting others gone,” said Diaz, adding that the treatment won’t work if someone is re-exposed to chlamydia or gonorrhea and reinfected within that time. Using a condom during the treatment period can help lower risk of partners reinfected each other – but there is no guarantee, he said. People who have completed treatment for chlamydia or gonorrhea can also be re-infected, said Gangsaas. Lifestyle choices, such as not being in a mutually monogamous sexual relationship and not using condoms correctly 100 percent of the time, can increase risk for having an STI.

“Make sure you complete all medication prescribed by your health care provider, and ensure that your sex partner is both tested and treated,” said Gangaas. “It is important to be retested no sooner than three weeks after completing your medication to ensure that you are clear of the infection.” If left untreated, gonorrhea and chlamydia can have serious consequences, including infertility or risk of being passed from a mother to a baby during pregnancy and delivery. When this occurs, the CDC said babies are at risk for still birth, low birth weight, brain damage, blindness, and deafness.

While rates of chlamydia and gonorrhea have increased among service members in recent years, the MSMR report found rates of human papillomavirus infections have decreased. If an HPV infection persists, it can cause genital warts or various types of cancer, including cervical cancer. Nearly 14 million new cases of HPV infections occur every year, but a vaccine is available to help reduce risk of an infection. “Being informed about sexually transmitted infections is essential for a healthy sex life,” said Diaz. “For our patient population, this means knowing what they can do to stay safe and healthy, and how to directly ask their health care provider about testing.” [Source: Health.mil | April 26, 2018 ++]

Sarcopenia ► **Muscling In On Muscle Loss: DC Team Seeks New Ways To Detect, Treat It**

You’re at the gym, doing a bench press. You push up, raising the barbell—that’s the “concentric” phase. Now you ease the weight down toward your chest—that’s what exercise physiologists call the “eccentric” phase. (That’s pronounced “ee-centric.” Not “eck-centric,” like a millionaire who wears old, rumpled clothes and leaves all his worldly possessions to his cats.) VA’s Dr. Michael Harris-Love is a believer in the benefits of this particular form of physical exertion—eccentric exercise, aka negative work training. Google the term and you’ll find lots of sites devoted to elite athletes with chiseled physiques and bulging muscles.



Harris-Love, with the Washington, D.C. VA Medical Center and George Washington University, is developing and testing programs that make specific use of eccentric training to help Veterans and others with a range of

ailments and health challenges—including the frail elderly. One health problem in his crosshairs is sarcopenia: the gradual drop in muscle mass, strength and function that comes with aging. Strength training and good nutrition can help prevent sarcopenia. Harris-Love asserts that eccentric training may be just what the doctor ordered when it comes to stopping or slowing the condition. “We want to look at muscle health in a way that is less costly, more efficient and more comprehensive.”

The investigator, who was a weightlifter himself before going on to become an exercise physiologist, physical therapist and health science researcher, explains that eccentric training can offer more bang for the buck: It can work the muscles with less stress on the heart, compared with conventional strength training. What’s interesting about lengthening contractions — during the eccentric phase of an exercise, the muscles lengthen — is that they place lower metabolic demands on the body. They use less oxygen for the same amount of energy. You tend to be 20 to 35 percent stronger eccentrically than concentrically, and there’s less cardiovascular demand. So for some infirm populations, light eccentrics might be useful because it’s less demanding on the heart.”

Harris-Love’s team is now looking at data from a study they did with people who had knee arthritis. “It’s a paradox,” he says. “Eccentrics has this reputation of huge muscle forces, and there are some risks for athletes for who may train this way. But here was this [older] population that was able to do it lightly and get some benefit out of it, despite having some physical limitations.” To learn more about the study, visit VA Research Currents at <https://www.research.va.gov/currents/0418-muscling-in-on-muscle-loss.cfm>. [Source: VAntage Point | Mitch Merkin | April 24, 2018 ++]

Tricare/CHAMPUS Fraud Update 18 ► \$65M In Unnecessary Prescriptions

Two physicians from Cleveland, Tenn., have admitted to cheating the military's health care program, TRICARE, out of more than \$65 million by writing thousands of expensive, unnecessary prescriptions to patients they never examined. In a San Diego federal court last week, Dr. **Carl Lindblad** and Dr. **Susan Vergot** pleaded guilty to conspiracy to commit health care fraud for their operations at Choice MD, a walk-in clinic on Candies Creek Ridge Road. The two doctors worked with a team of co-conspirators to obtain patient information from TRICARE-enrolled Marines and their families — mostly from the San Diego area — and write prescriptions for costly, custom-made drugs to those individuals, according to a news release from the Southern California U.S. Attorney's Office.

The case is one of several across the country concerning TRICARE and specialty drugs known as compounded medications, according to the San Diego Union-Tribune, which first reported on the investigation. When a physician determines an existing drug won't work for a particular patient, such as in the case of an allergy or special dosage, a pharmacist can compound a medication to meet the individual's medical needs. The Union-Tribune reported that in early 2015, the costs of claims to TRICARE for compounded drugs surged to more than \$1 billion and pointed investigators to a pharmacy in Utah issuing prescriptions to patients in Southern California. Most of those prescriptions were authorized by Lindblad and Vergot who practiced in Tennessee at Choice MD.

Once signed by the doctors, those prescriptions weren't given to the beneficiaries, but sent directly to particular pharmacies controlled by co-conspirators, which filled the prescriptions and billed TRICARE at exorbitant prices, according to the news release from the U.S. attorney. Lindblad and Vergot represent the fifth and sixth defendants charged in relation to the scheme, and their sentencings are scheduled for 29 JUN. Jimmy and Ashley Collins, the owners of Choice MD, were indicted in March on charges of conspiracy to commit health care fraud and illegal payments of remunerations. That case remains pending. [Source: Times Free Press | Elizabeth Fite | April 16, 2018 ++]

Tricare/CHAMPUS Fraud Update 19 ► Ex-NFL Player Gets 22-Years

A former NFL and University of Florida football player has been sentenced to nearly 22 years in prison for a health care fraud scheme that prosecutors say bilked the federal government out of about \$20 million. Federal court records show that 46-year-old **Monty Grow** was sentenced 16 APR and ordered to pay about \$18 million in restitution. Grow was convicted earlier this year on 17 counts of health care fraud and money laundering in a kickback scheme from Patient Care America, a South Florida compounding pharmacy. Prosecutors say Grow got millions in illegal payments for recruiting patients who were covered by the Tricare health insurance program for the U.S. Department of Defense, which services veterans.



Monty Grow

From 2014 to 2015, Grow and his network of hired sales representatives referred hundreds of TRICARE patients to PCA, a Broward County pharmacy, according to Grow's indictment. "Evidence at trial established that Grow targeted Tricare beneficiaries and induced them to order expensive drugs they did not need by paying them either directly for their own prescriptions or indirectly for those of their family and friends," a Department of Justice news release said. Also named as part of Grow's scheme, among others, was his former University of Florida teammate, 47-year-old Shane Matthews, who was paid \$440,000 to connect Grow's reps with TRICARE patients. Matthews, who also played for several NFL teams during his 14-year career, was sentenced earlier in February to three months in prison for his role. Grow played two NFL seasons with the Jacksonville Jaguars and Kansas City Chiefs. From 1989 until 1993 he was a linebacker for the Florida Gators. [Source: The Associated Press | April 18, 2018 ++]

TRICARE Smoking Cessation Program Update 01 ► FAQ

- 1. Who is eligible?** TRICARE beneficiaries, 18 and older and not eligible for Medicare. There are restrictions on certain drugs for some active duty service members, though other choices are unrestricted for those personnel. Home Delivery of the medications is only available to residents of the United States.
- 2. How do I get a prescription for smoking cessation drugs?** Request a prescription from your healthcare provider after discussing the best option(s) in your particular situation. Not every product is suitable for every person making a quit attempt. In this program, a prescription is required, even for the medications which are available over-the-counter.
- 3. Which medications are covered?** A variety of over-the-counter (OTC) and prescription smoking cessation medications are covered under the program. Approved medications can be found through the [TRICARE Formulary Search Tool](#).

4. How many quit attempts are covered? The TRICARE Smoking Cessation Program allows for two 120-day quit attempts during any one-year period. In certain situations, a third attempt in the same year may be offered with pre-approval. There is a limit to the number of nicotine replacement prescriptions that can be provided.

5. What if I get the drugs from a network retail pharmacy? Products identified for smoking cessation, including over-the-counter (OTC) nicotine products, are only covered under the Smoking Cessation Program if obtained through TRICARE Pharmacy Home Delivery or at a military treatment facility (MTF).

6. I don't currently use TRICARE Pharmacy Home Delivery but would like to get started and take advantage of this program. What do I do? To get started by placing an order, [sign in to your account](#) and navigate to the forms page by selecting Benefits then Print Forms. Here you can print out an order form to mail along with your written prescription, or blank fax form that your doctor can fill in and fax to us with the prescription.

7. If I receive smoking cessation drugs through Home Delivery, can I still fill my other prescriptions at a retail pharmacy? Yes.

[Source: <https://www.express-scripts.com/TRICARE/faq/qanda.shtml> | April 2018 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 445 ► Qualifying Life Events | MilConnect

Qualifying Life Events -- When life changes for you and your family, your TRICARE options may also change. With TRICARE, certain life events, like PCSing to a new location, getting married or divorced, becoming Medicare eligible or losing health coverage, are called Qualifying Life Events or QLEs. QLEs include military and family-related changes.

Depending on your eligibility, a QLE may allow you to enroll in a new TRICARE plan or change your coverage options. If you want to enroll in or change your plan, you must make the enrollment changes within 90 days following the QLE. No matter when you initiate this change, coverage starts the date of the QLE. You must pay any enrollment fees or premiums due during that period. This is similar to civilian plans, where changes outside the annual enrollment window are only allowed after certain life events. This allows families to reevaluate health plan options and make any changes to have the health plan option that best meets their situation. If one member in a sponsor's family experiences a QLE, all eligible family members may change their enrollment status during the QLE period.

This is one of several enrollment changes you'll hear more about throughout the year. Learn more about QLE's and take command of your health care by visiting www.TRICARE.mil/lifeevents.

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MilConnect -- milConnect is a convenient self-service portal that allows you to manage your benefits and records. After you register on the milConnect website, you can update your information in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, view or change TRICARE enrollment information, sign up for email notifications and much more. If you already have an account, log in to www.milconnect.dmdc.osd.mil to verify that your information is correct and turn on email notifications for important updates, including notifications regarding your TRICARE plan. Don't have a milConnect account? Register today for one at www.dmdc.osd.mil/identitymanagement.

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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> | April 13, 2018 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 446 ► Transferring Enrollment | TRICARE Pubs

Transferring Enrollment -- Moving season is right around the corner. While your TRICARE eligibility doesn't change when you move, your health plan options may change. Transferring your TRICARE enrollment by phone, online or by mail is easy. You can call, go online or mail changes to DEERS. Follow these easy steps.

First, before moving, fill your prescriptions. Second, don't disenroll from any plan before you move. You're covered by your current plan on your way to your new location. And if your family is enrolled in the Extended Health Care Option Program, call your current regional contractor to tell them you are moving. They will help transfer care to a new primary care manager and will share your Exceptional Family Member Program information with the new contractor if your move takes you to a different region.

While traveling if you need care, most TRICARE Prime enrollees don't need a referral when seeking urgent care from any TRICARE-authorized urgent care center. Point-of-service charges don't apply for urgent care claims when seeking care from an urgent care center in the TRICARE network. Active Duty Service Members enrolled in TRICARE Prime need a referral and should visit military hospitals and clinics for care. Active Duty Service Members enrolled in TRICARE Prime Remote don't need a referral for urgent care, but they are still held to applicable DoD and Service regulations concerning Active Duty Service Member care outside military hospitals and clinics. If you're enrolled in TRICARE Select or any other TRICARE plan, you may visit any TRICARE-authorized provider, network or non-work, for urgent care without a referral. If you're not sure if you need urgent care, you can call the Nurse Advice Line at 1-800-TRICARE and choose option 1.

If you have an emergency, call 911 or go to an emergency room. For more information when traveling with TRICARE visit www.TRICARE.mil/traveling. Once you arrive at your new duty station or location, update and verify your new address, phone number or other personal information in DEERS. Visit www.TRICARE.mil/deers for more information.

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TRICARE Publications -- Do you have questions about your TRICARE medical or dental benefit? Visit the TRICARE publications webpage at www.TRICARE.mil/publications for helpful resources.

You can view and download TRICARE handbooks, newsletters and other educational materials. Select categories from the sub-headings or use the search field to search all publications. You'll find resources ranging from broad topics like the TRICARE Plans Overview to detailed topics like the Maternity Care Brochure. Products are continuously updated and added. Check out our latest resource, the TRICARE Stateside Guide, for beneficiaries living in the U.S. You'll find information about health plans, covered services, enrollment guidance and more.

And, if you have suggestions for new products or feedback on existing products, we would love to hear from you! Take the publications survey. A link to the survey is at www.TRICARE.mil/publications.

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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> | April 20, 2018 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 447 ► Allergy Relief | Freedom Quitline | Orthodontic Coverage

Allergy Relief -- In the spring, many people are happy to spend time outside after being inside for the winter. Temperatures are warmer, the days are longer and flowers are in full bloom. Unfortunately, spring is also the time of

year when allergies flare and can cause discomfort to many. Allergies occur when your immune system reacts to substances that do not bother most other people. Some common allergens are:

- Animal dander
- Insect bites
- Plants and pollens.

Reactions vary when a person is exposed to something to which they are allergic. First-time exposure may only produce a mild reaction. Repeated exposures may lead to more serious reactions including facial swelling or difficult breathing. One of the most severe allergic reactions, anaphylaxis, is a sudden and severe allergic reaction that occurs within minutes of exposure. Anaphylaxis requires immediate medical attention. Without treatment, anaphylaxis can lead to death within 15 minutes. Doctors use skin and blood tests to diagnose allergies. Treatments can include medicines, allergy shots and avoiding the substances that cause the reactions. TRICARE covers proven services and supplies needed to diagnose and treat allergies. For more information, visit www.TRICARE.mil/allergy.

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Freedom Quitline -- Did you know that 7 out of 10 cigarette smokers want to quit smoking? Ask yourself, if you were to quit smoking today, in what ways would your life be better? Many people say that cigarettes help them deal with stress and are good for when they're bored. For many smokers though, the smell of stale tobacco on your clothes, the cost, the hassle of finding a place to smoke and of course, wondering whether you'll get cancer because of your smoking, can often persuade smokers that it's time for a change.

The Freedom Quitline is grant funded by the National Institutes of Health, in cooperation with the University of Virginia and the Defense Department. The Freedom Quitline offers free care to all TRICARE beneficiaries. It provides free nicotine replacement treatment mailed directly to your home, plus personalized telephone counseling to maximize your chances of success. Imagine a tobacco free life. If you or someone you know is interested in quitting cigarette smoking, visit www.freedomquitline.org for more information.

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Orthodontic Coverage -- Does your child need braces? The TRICARE Dental Program covers orthodontic treatment for:

- National Guard and Reserve sponsors under age 23
- Spouses of active duty or National Guard and Reserve sponsors, who are under age 23
- Children under age 21, or under age 23 if enrolled full time at an accredited college or university

The maximum lifetime benefit for orthodontic services under the TRICARE Dental Program is \$1,750 per enrollee. Your coverage lasts until the last day of the month in which you reach your age limit. And if you reach the age limit for orthodontic care coverage during your treatment, the TDP contractor will reimburse you for only the months that you were covered. You have to pay any costs for treatment received after you reached the age limit. Learn more, including differences in CONUS and OCONUS orthodontic coverage, at www.uccitdp.com. And if you're looking for information about dental coverage options under TRICARE, download the "Dental Options" Fact Sheet from the TRICARE publications page at www.TRICARE.mil/publications.

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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> | April 27, 2018 ++]

* Finances *



IRS 2018 Filing Season Update 02 ► New Tax Law's Impact on 6 Households

The recently passed overhaul of the U.S. tax code is already affecting the way many companies do business. But how will the plan affect the income taxes of older Americans? People who have studied the new law—which goes into effect starting with the 2018 tax year—say that most of us will pay less in taxes in the next few years, thanks to lower tax rates and higher standard deductions. But the loss of some prized tax breaks and new caps on others like state and local taxes could result in higher tax bills in April 2019 for some older taxpayers, particularly those living in states with high tax rates. And over time, some of the benefits of the new tax bill will fade away; experts project that a majority of taxpayers will pay more within 10 years. AARP asked H&R Block's Tax Institute to analyze the 2018 impact of the new tax code on a cross section of hypothetical households. Here's a look at how some older taxpayers fare under the old and new tax code, assuming similar [income](#) and expenditures each year.

Scenario 1: Wisconsin sweethearts

John, 67, and Susie, 63, who live in Madison, still have a mortgage on their home. He's retired and pulls in \$17,000 from Social Security; she still works, earning \$50,000 a year. Both are relatively healthy, and Medicare and her work insurance cover most of their medical bills. In 2017 they claimed \$13,000 in itemized deductions:

- \$5,000 in real and personal property taxes
- \$5,000 in mortgage interest
- \$2,000 in state and local income taxes
- \$1,000 in charitable donations

2018 result: Federal taxes **will go down** by \$1,114.

What changes:

- Higher standard deductions eliminate their need to itemize. The couple have a new standard deduction worth \$25,300, comprising \$24,000 for couples filing jointly and John's \$1,300 extra deduction, since he's 65.
- The couple can no longer claim \$8,100 in personal exemptions, but that's offset by the couple's higher standard deductions.

Scenario 2: Dallas doughnut shop owners

Robert and Susan, both 53, own and run a small business and file jointly. The couple have net business income of \$100,000 and they own a home that they are working to pay off. In 2017 they claimed \$20,000 in itemized deductions:

- \$8,000 in mortgage interest
- \$7,000 in property taxes
- \$4,000 in state and local sales taxes
- \$1,000 in charitable contributions

2018 result: Federal taxes **will go down** by \$2,554.

What changes:

- Their standard [deduction](#) nearly doubles. The new tax bill boosts the couple's standard deduction to \$24,000, up from \$12,700. That exceeds the \$20,000 in itemized deductions they took for 2017.

- Their tax rate falls. The couple were in the 25 percent bracket in 2017. Under the new tax law, they're in the 22 percent tax bracket.
- They benefit from the new qualified business income deduction of 20 percent.
- This couple's qualified business income is \$100,000 (net income from their doughnut shop), and their taxable income before accounting for this deduction is \$68,935, which means they qualify for a deduction of \$13,787. (This deduction, however, does not lower their self-employment tax.)

Scenario 3: The suburban family

Californians Julie and Nick are married and have two kids—a son in college and a daughter in high school. They own a home and both still work; their combined wages total \$150,000. In 2017 they claimed \$22,000 in itemized deductions on their tax return:

- \$8,000 in mortgage interest
- \$7,000 in state and local income tax
- \$4,000 in property tax
- \$1,000 in personal property tax
- \$2,000 in charitable contributions

2018 result: Federal taxes **will go down** by \$2,577.

What changes:

- Their standard deduction nearly doubles, but their exemptions go away. The new tax bill increases Julie and Nick's standard deduction to \$24,000, up from \$12,700. Nick, 66, also gets the extra \$1,300 standard deduction available to filers 65 and older. However, the couple loses \$16,200 in personal exemptions they took in 2017. Net effect: They pay taxes on a larger amount.
- They no longer need to itemize their deductions, since their standard deduction is higher than their itemized deductions of \$22,000.
- Their tax rate falls. The couple were in the 25 percent bracket in 2017. Under the new tax law, they're in the 22 percent tax bracket.
- They can take advantage of the Child Tax Credit (CTC). The new tax law raised income limits on families claiming the CTC and raised the level of the credit from \$1,000 to \$2,000. They can also get a \$500 non-child [dependent](#) credit for their son, claiming a total of \$2,500.

Scenario 4: Strapped with medical bills in Idaho

Deborah and Michael, both 66, pay \$3,000 per month to cover medical expenses, using a home equity loan on their Boise home. They have \$30,000 in Social Security income and pull in another \$50,000 from a private pension. They claimed \$40,975 in itemized deductions in 2017:

- \$30,975 in medical expenses (maximum allowed after applying the 7.5 percent adjusted gross income floor)
- \$5,000 in interest from home equity loan
- \$4,000 in real and personal property taxes
- \$1,000 in state and local taxes

2018 result: Federal taxes **will go up** by \$1,549.

What changes:

- Under the new tax law, the couple lose two significant tax breaks. They can no longer write off the \$5,000 in home equity loan interest. They also lose \$8,100 worth of personal exemptions. Those changes mean their taxable income increases by \$13,100.

Scenario 5: The Midwestern widow

St. Louis retiree Donna, 75, lives alone in a condo she owns but has a second mortgage that she uses to pay for splurges and doctor bills. Each month she receives Social Security benefits of roughly \$1,400 and pension payments

of just over \$4,100, putting her annual income at \$67,000. She claimed itemized deductions totaling \$16,166 in 2017:

- \$5,166 of her \$10,000 in medical expenses, as she could deduct only the amount in excess of 7.5 percent of her adjusted gross income
- \$4,500 in [real estate](#) and personal property taxes
- \$2,500 in state income taxes
- \$3,000 in mortgage interest
- \$1,000 in charitable contributions

2018 result: Federal taxes **will go down** by \$233.

What changes:

- Donna loses personal exemptions of \$4,050.
- She's in a lower tax bracket. While she doesn't benefit from the new higher standard deduction (since her itemized deductions exceed the standard \$12,000 plus \$1,300 for people 65 and older), the new law puts her in the 22 percent tax bracket in 2018, down from 25 percent in 2017.

Scenario 6: The big-city executive

Raymond is a single man living in a condo he owns in Manhattan. Last year he earned \$500,000 as a senior vice president and claimed \$135,000 in itemized deductions:

- \$55,000 mortgage interest
- \$46,000 state and local income tax
- \$24,000 real and personal property tax
- \$10,000 charitable contributions

2018 result: Federal taxes **will go up** by \$6,396.

What changes:

- His biggest tax deduction goes away. Under the new tax bill, the deduction for all state and local taxes (SALT) is limited to \$10,000. Raymond's SALT total, which includes both income and property taxes, is \$60,000 over the limit. So his overall itemized deductions drop by that amount, to \$75,000.
- So does his personal exemption. Under the new law, the personal exemption was eliminated. That increases Raymond's taxable income by \$4,050 in 2018.
- His tax rate goes up. [Tax rates](#) were reduced under the new law. But in Raymond's case, the loss of \$60,000 in SALT deductions pushes him into a higher tax bracket. The top rate he'll pay on some of his income is 35 percent, compared to 28 percent in 2017.

[Source: AARP Bulletin | Gary Strauss | March 2018 ++]

Thrift Savings Plan 2018 ► Unfriendly Features To Be Aware of

The Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) has numerous positive attributes: the extremely low costs, the simple but effective investment options, and the ease of investing in a tax-efficient manner for your future. However, the TSP does have some unfriendly features of which military members should be aware.

The required minimum distribution (RMD) process does not allow the use of all the withdrawal tables established by tax law. RMDs are required withdrawals from your retirement accounts once you turn 70½ years old — Uncle Sam wants his tax money. Only Roth individual retirement accounts (IRAs) do not require withdrawals after a certain age. The RMD tables specify your withdrawal amount each year. Life-expectancy rates determine the annual withdrawal amounts in the RMD tables. Three RMD withdrawal tables are established in the tax code (see [IRS Publication 590-B](#) for details):

- Single Life (the greatest withdrawal amount)
- Uniform Lifetime (usually the middle amount)
- Joint Life and Life Survivor (usually the smallest amount)

The TSP does not allow the Joint Life and Life Survivor table as an option for TSP participants following RMD requirements. This table is for those who have spouses more than 10 years younger than themselves and allows for smaller RMD withdrawals so retirement account assets last longer for a younger surviving spouse. Note that both Roth TSPs and corporate Roth 401(k)s have RMDs — only Roth IRAs do not have RMDs.

Your withdrawal options after military service are limited with a TSP. You cannot make multiple partial withdrawals from your account because TSP allows only a single partial withdrawal per participant. The TSP requires you: a) withdraw your entire account balance in a single payment, b) begin receiving monthly payments, c) purchase a life annuity, or d) use a combination of these withdrawal options. (NEWS UPDATE: A law passed in 2017 allows more than one partial withdrawal. Stay in touch with TSP, www.tsp.gov, for details as they develop.)

Choose option B based on your life expectancy, and know the Single Life table noted above is used for people age 69 and younger and the Uniform Lifetime table is used for people age 70 and older. If you do not make an allowed withdrawal election by the RMD deadline, you forfeit your account balance to the TSP. You cannot request regularly scheduled withdrawals of just your RMD because that is not a TSP-approved withdrawal option.

Transferring assets into the TSP. You can transfer most existing retirement accounts outside of the TSP into the TSP. However, the TSP does not accept transfers from Roth IRAs.

[Source: MOAA Newsletter | Shane Ostrom | April 26, 2018 ++]

Laundry Detergents Update 01 ► Do You Really Need Them?

If you live in modern society, you probably use soap. It keeps you clean and smelling good, and who doesn't want to smell good? But that doesn't make it OK for companies that make this stuff to take you to the cleaners. When it comes to laundry detergent, Americans pay plenty for a never-ending cascade of hyperbole: "New!" (No, it's not.) "Improved!" (How do you improve soap?) "Ultra!" (Ultra?) The latest twist is to sell us less product at a higher price with "ultra-new" concentrated detergents. Gee, that certainly sounds thrifty. Well, here's the dirty little secret that the suds salesmen don't want you to know: Some people get decent results with no detergent at all. Others save 90 percent of the cost of store-bought detergent by making their own.

Is laundry detergent even necessary? The blogger behind [Funny About Money](http://FunnyAboutMoney.com) decided to forgo detergent completely as part of an experiment. The result: "By and large, all of the freshly washed clothing came out with an odor: It smelled of clean water!" You might be surprised to learn that, while clothing has been around in some form for hundreds of thousands of years, laundry detergent is relatively new. And yet, ancient people were still able to get their clothing clean. How? As it turns out, the main ingredient other than water is agitation. Ancient people used rocks and rivers, but your modern washing machine can clean lightly soiled clothes by just pushing them around in water. In other words, you can get away without using detergent at all.

But if the idea of using nothing more than water to wash your gym socks sounds a little scuzzy, make your own detergent. It's easy. There's no shortage of homemade laundry soap recipes. Here are **the ingredients** for one that seems to work pretty well: 4 cups of water, 1/3 bar of grated cheap soap, 1/2 cup washing soda (not baking soda), 1/2 cup of Borax (20 Mule Team), 5-gallon bucket for mixing, and 3 gallons of water. **The directions:** Mix the grated soap in a saucepan with 4 cups of water, and heat on low until the soap is completely dissolved. Add hot water/soap mixture to 3 gallons of water in the 5 gallon bucket, stir in the washing soda and Borax, and continue stirring until thickened. Let the mix sit for 24 hours, and voila! — homemade laundry detergent.

There are lots of other recipes and articles online. A good one is at [The Simple Dollar](#). And [Tipnut lists 10 different recipes](#). Of course, who'd post a recipe without trying it out first? The of this article made and washed several loads of clothes with homemade detergent. And he, like many before him who've traveled this road, couldn't tell the difference between store-bought and homemade. Total cost per load? In the neighborhood of 2 cents. Store-bought detergent, depending on what you buy and where you buy it, can cost about 20 cents per load — 10 times more.

So, now you have two alternatives to the agitation of paying a bunch of money for laundry detergent: Ditch it altogether and use nothing more than water in your washer, or save 90 percent by making your own laundry soap. And here's a third idea for those who don't intend to do either of the above options: If you're going to stick with store-bought, try using less. The writer tried just filling the bottom of the measuring cup that came with his store-bought detergent. Guess what? No difference in smell or cleanliness that he could detect. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Jim Robinson | April 24, 2018 ++]

Car Insurance Update 16 ► Claim Impact on Your Annual Premium

For all the talk of [accident forgiveness](#), it seems clear that many car insurance companies are still going to make you pay if you file a claim. A study from [InsuranceQuotes](#) and Quadrant Information Services found a single \$2,000 claim increases auto insurance premiums an average of 41.81 percent nationwide. However, the financial damage is even worse if you live in some states. Using premium data from the National Association of Insurance Commissioners, here's how much a car insurance claim will cost you in every state and the District of Columbia, according to InsuranceQuotes. To see how much of an increase in premiums you can expect for a claim in your state refer to the following table:

State	NAIC Average Annual Premium	Average % Increase For Making One Claim	Average Annual Premium After Making One Claim
New Hampshire	\$733	65.9%	\$1,216
California	\$783	63.2%	\$1,278
Rhode Island	\$1,066	61.7%	\$1,723
Massachusetts	\$1,008	60.9%	\$1,622
Iowa	\$572	56.5%	\$895
Georgia	\$801	53.4%	\$1,229
Texas	\$895	53.0%	\$1,369
Maine	\$593	48.3%	\$879
Minnesota	\$745	47.0%	\$1,095
Oregon	\$783	46.9%	\$1,150
District of Columbia	\$1,187	45.8%	\$1,731
Ohio	\$659	43.8%	\$948
Connecticut	\$1,011	43.8%	\$1,454
Wisconsin	\$621	43.8%	\$893
South Dakota	\$581	43.5%	\$834
Vermont	\$656	42.5%	\$934
Arizona	\$811	41.6%	\$1,148
North Dakota	\$605	40.7%	\$851
North Carolina	\$625	40.2%	\$876
Maryland	\$979	39.0%	\$1,361
New Mexico	\$723	38.9%	\$1,004
Virginia	\$719	38.3%	\$994
Nevada	\$936	38.3%	\$1,294
Illinois	\$745	36.7%	\$1,018
New Jersey	\$1,254	36.3%	\$1,709

State	NAIC Average Annual Premium	Average % Increase For Making One Claim	Average Annual Premium After Making One Claim
Delaware	\$1,101	35.9%	\$1,496
Nebraska	\$639	34.9%	\$862
Colorado	\$778	34.9%	\$1,049
South Carolina	\$794	33.6%	\$1,061
Utah	\$734	33.2%	\$978
Hawaii	\$739	33.0%	\$983
Idaho	\$553	32.8%	\$734
Louisiana	\$1,146	32.6%	\$1,520
Missouri	\$704	31.5%	\$926
Alaska	\$889	31.2%	\$1,166
New York	\$1,182	31.1%	\$1,550
Florida	\$1,144	31.0%	\$1,499
Arkansas	\$703	30.8%	\$919
Pennsylvania	\$841	30.7%	\$1,100
Montana	\$679	29.9%	\$882
Mississippi	\$768	29.7%	\$996
Wyoming	\$640	29.0%	\$826
Alabama	\$674	28.6%	\$867
Kansas	\$669	28.2%	\$858
Indiana	\$622	28.1%	\$797
Washington	\$838	28.0%	\$1,072
West Virginia	\$859	27.8%	\$1,098
Oklahoma	\$768	23.4%	\$947
Michigan	\$1,131	22.2%	\$1,382
Tennessee	\$704	20.1%	\$846
Kentucky	\$773	19.4%	\$923
US Average	\$841	41.81%	\$1,193

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

VA Home Loan Update 63 ► Older Vet Applicants

Veterans between the ages of 72 and 92 are far more likely to use a VA-backed loan to purchase a new home than their younger counterparts, according to a demographic study released in March by the National Association of Realtors. Their [report](#), which measured home-buying trends over a 12-month period (July 2016-June 2017), showed that 1 in 4 of the loans used by the oldest age group surveyed came with VA backing. Other age groups fell well short:

- 37 and under: 10 percent VA.
- 38 to 52: 12 percent VA.
- 53-62: 13 percent VA.
- 63-71: 19 percent VA.

It's tougher to determine how those older veterans fared with the VA loan process itself. The 72-to-92 age group had the highest percentage of borrowers who thought getting their loan was easier than expected (24 percent), but also had the highest percentage of those who either had a much more difficult or somewhat more difficult process than they'd planned on (38 percent). Responses weren't broken out by loan type.

While a larger percentage of older home buyers may have access to VA loan benefits than their younger counterparts because they've fulfilled their service requirement, Kathleen Ricketts, a Realtor who teaches the National Association of Realtors' class that allows members to receive a Military Relocation Professional certification, told Military Times prior to the survey that some older veterans are less than enthused about applying for a VA loan. "If they used it 20 years ago, they're horrified we'll even suggest it," said Ricketts, who operates in Chicago's northwest suburbs. They're like, 'Oh, it took too long. It was a mess,' et cetera. And then we have to dispel that, and say technology has changed that. Following are the VA mortgage rates for April 19, 2018:

- 30 Year VA Interest Rate 4.125 % = APR of 4.348 % - [Disclosures](#)
- 20 Year VA Interest Rate 4.125 % = APR of 4.434 % - [Disclosures](#)
- 15 Year VA Interest Rate 3.750 % = APR of 4.140 % - [Disclosures](#)
- 5/1 ARM VA Interest Rate 4.375 % = APR of 4.445 % - [Disclosures](#)

[Source: Military Times | Kevin Lilley | April 18, 2018 ++]

Generic Buying Update 01 ► Drugs | FAQ

1. What are generic drugs? A generic drug is a chemically equivalent, lower-cost version of a brand-name drug. The generic version becomes available when the brand-name drug's patent protection expires, and it usually costs about half the price of the brand-name version. All drugs have a generic name. When a pharmaceutical company first develops a new drug, it gives the drug a generic name (or "chemical name"). The company then gives the drug a brand-name as part of its marketing plan.

2. What is "generic substitution"? Generic substitution occurs when a prescription is written for a brand-name drug but is filled with a generic version.

3. Does TRICARE Pharmacy Home Delivery require generic substitution? Yes. The TRICARE Pharmacy Home Delivery is a generic-based pharmacy service. Brand-name drugs for which a generic equivalent is available may be dispensed only if your doctor submits documentation of medical necessity to Express Scripts for prescribing

the brand-name drug in place of its generic equivalent. All generic drugs dispensed through TRICARE Pharmacy Home Delivery meet the stringent standards of the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) for quality and therapeutic efficacy.

4. How can I know when a generic drug is available? Just ask your doctor to allow for generic substitution when he or she writes your prescription. Then, if a generic is available, your pharmacist will provide it to you. Managed healthcare programs encourage doctors to prescribe generics because they are less expensive, but some doctors (and patients) still choose higher priced brand-name drugs. Most plans charge a higher copayment for brand-name drugs than for generics. You may even pay additional costs if you request a brand name instead of its generic version.

5. What if my doctor prescribes a brand-name drug, but my plan requires generic substitution? The TRICARE Pharmacy Program requires the use of generic drugs. If your doctor writes a prescription for a brand name drug and specifies that it should be dispensed as written, a pharmacist will contact your doctor and request the generic version.

6. Why do some generic drugs look different than their brand-name versions? All drugs — brand-name and generic — have inactive ingredients (such as dyes, fillers and preservatives) that often determine the size, shape and color of the drug. The inactive ingredients in a brand-name drug may be different than those used in the generic versions.

7. If generic drugs are just as good as brand-name drugs, why do generics cost less? Unlike the manufacturers of brand-name drugs, the makers of generics don't have to spend money on research and development, marketing, and advertising. Advertising in particular has become a huge cost of doing business, and this cost is passed along to the consumer in the form of higher priced brand-name drugs. As for quality, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA) makes sure that generic drugs are equivalent to brand-name drugs. By equivalent, the FDA means that generics must contain the same active ingredients and work the same way in the body.

8. Are there reasons to stick with a brand-name drug even if there is a generic on the market? In some cases, the generic version might not be right for you. Remember, the FDA regulates the equivalency of active ingredients in generic drugs. But there are also tiny amounts of inactive ingredients, which may give the drug its bulk or a specific shape or color. For some people these inactive ingredients may have an unanticipated effect. For example, suppose you're allergic to wheat. If a drug has some added fiber to help it pass through the gastrointestinal system quickly, that fiber doesn't affect how the drug works on your arthritis pain. However, if the bulking agent is wheat fiber, you may experience a slight allergic reaction. If you have a specific allergy, ask your pharmacist about the ingredients in your medicine and remind your doctor of your allergies. There are sometimes several generic versions of a drug with slightly different inactive ingredients, so there may be one that is right for you.

9. What about the companies that make generic drugs? Are they as trustworthy as the companies that make the brand-name drugs? That's a common concern, but you can trust generic drug manufacturers. Many times the same company that developed the brand-name drug releases a generic version when the patent expires. Other companies specialize in making generic drugs. Many drugs are difficult to make, even when their active ingredients are known. In fact, some drugs never become available as generics because they are too difficult or costly to make.

10. Why aren't all prescription drugs available in a generic version? When a company develops a new drug and submits it for FDA approval, a 17-year patent is issued. A generic version cannot be manufactured until the 17-year patent expires. In some cases, a drug is on the market for only a few years before the generic is available. This is usually because the original testing period required by the FDA took so many years that, by the time the drug was approved, there were only a few years left on the patent.

[Source: <https://www.express-scripts.com/TRICARE/faq/qanda.shtml> | April 2018 ++]

Tabnapping Scam ► New Phishing Scam

Scammers have a new technique called "tabnapping". They hijack inactive browser tabs and trick people into giving up their login and password information.

How the Scam Works

- You are working, shopping or just browsing online. As you do so, the open tabs on your browser begin to add up. No harm there, right? Unfortunately, those open, inactive tabs on your browser could put you at risk.
- Tabnapping is a phishing scam in which scammers load a fake webpage (typically a login form) in an inactive tab. It looks very similar to the site you had open. When you click back on the tab, you may not even notice the change. However, as soon as you "login" to the fake page, the scammers gain access to your login ID and password.
- Scammers can tabnab your online banking website, email homepage, and any other trusted websites you regularly visit. With your login and password information, scammers can steal your identity or even gain access to your bank account.

Protect Yourself from Tabnapping:

- Before signing in, double check website URLs. Ensure that it's the true URL of the company
- Close tabs when you finish using them. Make it a habit to close each tab when you finish with the website. This way tabnabbers won't be able to gain access to inactive tabs in the first place.

For More Information

Read more about [tabnapping on BBB.org](#). If you've fallen victim to this type of scam, you can help others avoid being scammed by filing a report with [BBB.org/ScamTracker](#). Learn more about other scams and how to avoid them at [BBB.org/scamtips](#).

[Source: BBB Scam Alert | April 13, 2018 ++]

No-Talk Phone Scams ► Dialing Deceivers Don't Need You To Say Anything To Rip You Off



Most telephone scammers rely on talk, getting you to pick up the phone so they can give their impersonations of IRS agents, noble fundraisers, tech-support saviors or grandkids in need. But with a new breed of telephone fraudsters, sometimes you don't even need to say "Hello" to get ripped off. Here's how some of these crooks may target you.

Call Center Fraud

There are scam artists who spend hours calling the customer service centers of banks, insurance companies and other institutions, posing as people like you, to try to access accounts. These crimes have more than doubled in the past year. “That’s because reps only ask a couple of simple authentication questions — maybe your mother’s maiden name or your Social Security number — before you can transfer money or do whatever,” explains Ken Shuman of Pindrop, a company that provides antifraud services to call centers.

Scammers start by assembling information on you, stolen in data breaches, purchased on the “dark web” or gleaned with a simple Google search. Then, working from boiler rooms (often overseas), they spend all day phoning different call centers to determine if you have accounts with those companies. With your data in hand, they can often answer the authentication questions that call centers ask.

ATM PINs are especially prized — and vulnerable, adds Shuman. He notes that there are only 10,000 possible combinations for a four-digit PIN. Unless a bank’s system blocks calls after several tries — and some don’t — there are scammers who call back 150 times a day, trying different PINs until they get it right. Then they immediately log in as you, change your PIN and take over your account.

Smartphone Swindles

An ever-growing segment of the 20 billion text messages sent each day are attempts at defrauding people through “smishing” (a word that combines the SMS technology that sends text messages and phishing, a ploy to coax confidential information out of you). Typically, a scam texter will fake a problem with one of your financial accounts and ask you for data. Or they might pitch low-cost mortgages or credit cards, or promise free gift cards. If you respond by texting back confidential personal information, your identity may be stolen. Millions of these smishing texts can be launched simultaneously.

Your best defense is to be stingy with your phone number. Scam texts may result if you provide it to contests, say, or businesses. Mobile apps can also be to blame. When you install them, the fine print in the user agreement may grant permission to the app’s developer to use or sell your phone number and sometimes even the numbers of your contacts. In one recently popular scheme, scammers get your contacts from mobile apps, then text you posing as people you know to seek money or ID-theft-worthy information, says Jonathan Sasse, marketing executive at First Orion, a digital security firm that provides the mobile app PrivacyStar.

One more important tip: Never follow a text’s instructions to push a designated key to opt out of future messages. Instead, forward the questionable text to short code 7726, so cellphone carriers can block that sender. You can further bolster defenses against mobile scams — which have quadrupled in the past two years — with call-blocking apps such as Hiya, Truecaller, NoMoRobo and PrivacyStar.

Curiosity Cons

Knowing that you are likely to ignore unrecognized or private numbers on caller ID, today’s crooks use software that allows them to display fake numbers that are hard to resist. Here are some variations.

- The neighbor ploy Your area code and prefix are displayed, so the call appears to be from a neighbor or nearby business. “Fewer people are comfortable blocking local numbers, increasing scammers’ success rates,” notes Jonathan Nelson of Hiya. And the fake number makes it hard for law enforcement to track.
- The “Hey, there’s a call from my own phone number” scam It’s hard to resist answering a call from your own number, which scammers can simulate. And they are able to get around any call blocking that you’ve set up.
- The one-ring rip-off Criminals sometimes program auto-dialers to make repeated calls to you, each disconnecting after just one ring. They know this might spur you into calling back the displayed number to complain. There’s double trouble if you call area codes such as 268, 664 and 876. These are for Caribbean countries and other places that have high per-minute phone charges. One scam involves getting you to call one of those numbers, then getting you to hold through transfers that rack up your bill until a scammer gets on the line and starts a fraudulent pitch.

[Source: AARP Bulletin | Sid Kirchheimer | April 6, 2018 ++]

Phony Vehicle Report Scam ► Potential Buyer Request

If you are selling your car or truck, a potential buyer may ask you to purchase a vehicle history report from a specific company. It sounds like a reasonable request, but it's really the premise of a new scam.

How the Scam Works

- You want to sell your car or truck, so you post an ad on a classifieds website. You are contacted by someone who claims to be interested in purchasing your vehicle. But first, this potential buyer wants a report on the vehicle's identification number (VIN). He sends you a link to a website, and asks you to buy the report through that service.
- Some of these scam sites may simply be a way to steal \$20 from unsuspecting customers (that's the typical cost of a report). But if the site captures personal information such as an address, driver's license number, and/or credit card information, buying these reports opens up victims to the risk of ID theft. In other cases, the website link itself may be the scam, downloading malware to the victim's computer.

Tips to avoid this scam:

- If an interested buyer wants a VIN report prior purchasing your vehicle, select the reporting service yourself and check them out at BBB.org.
- Check vehiclehistory.gov. In the United States, the National Motor Vehicle Title Information System provides a list of approved providers on their website. In Canada, the Insurance Bureau of Canada, the national insurance industry association, offers [vehicle history reports](#).

For more information:

Read more about this [vehicle report scam](#) and [online purchase scams](#) on www.BBB.org. If you've been a victim of a vehicle purchase scam, help others avoid being scammed by filing a report with BBB.org/ScamTracker. Learn more about other kinds of scams and how to avoid them at BBB.org/ScamTips. [Source: BBB Scam Alert | 27, 2018 ++]

Tax Burden for District of Columbia Retired Vets ► As of APR 2018

Many people planning to retire use the presence or absence of a state income tax as a litmus test for a retirement destination. This is a serious miscalculation since higher sales and property taxes can more than offset the lack of a state income tax. The lack of a state income tax doesn't necessarily ensure a low total tax burden. States raise revenue in many ways including sales taxes, excise taxes, license taxes, income taxes, intangible taxes, property taxes, estate taxes and inheritance taxes. Depending on where you live, you may end up paying all of them or just a few. Following are the taxes you can expect to pay if you retire in **the District of Columbia**.

Sales Taxes

- State Sales Tax:** 5.75% (food, prescription and non-prescription drugs, residential utility services exempt)
- Gasoline Tax:** 41.9 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)
- Diesel Fuel Tax:** 47.9 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)
- Cigarette Tax:** \$2.50/pack of 20

Personal Income Taxes

Tax Rate Range: Low – 4.0% up to \$10,000; High – \$82,025 plus 8.95% of the excess over \$1,000,000)

Income Brackets: Six – \$10,000; Highest – \$1M. Note: Excludes Social Security income and maximum \$3,000 exclusion on military retired pay, pension income, or annuity income from DC or federal government.

Personal Exemption: Single – \$1,775; Married filing joint return – \$3,550 - Dependents – \$1,775

Standard Exemption: Single – \$5,200; Married – \$10,275; Head of Household - \$7800 Note: Exemptions are phased out by 2% for every \$2,500 in income above \$150,000.

Medical/Dental Deduction: Same as Federal taxes

Federal Income Tax Deduction: None

Retirement Income Taxes: Social Security is exempt. Taxpayers 62 and older can exclude \$3,000 of military, federal, and state/local pensions. All state government pensions are fully taxed.

Retired Military Pay: Up to \$3,000 of military retirement pay excluded for individuals 62 or older, Survivor benefits are taxable.

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

Property is assessed at 100% of market value. Taxes on owner-occupied real estate are \$0.85 per \$100 of assessed value. The first \$67,500 of assessed value (homestead deduction) is exempt from taxes. Several property tax relief programs are available to assist property owners and first time home buyers. These include a homestead deduction, tax credits for historic properties, senior citizen tax relief and property tax exemptions and deferrals. Homeowners 65 and older with household adjusted gross income of less than \$100,000 receive an additional exemption equal to 50 percent of their homestead deduction. Refer to <http://otr.cfo.dc.gov/page/homesteadsenior-citizen-deduction> for details.

The real property tax deduction has increased. As a result of changes made to Federal year law, non-itemizers (those who take the standard deduction) may now increase the standard deduction by up to \$500 (if single, head of household, married filing separately) and up to \$1,000 (if filing jointly) if they took the real property tax deduction on their Federal tax return as an increase to the standard deduction. Tangible personal property is taxed at the rate of \$4.30 per \$100 of assessed value. The first \$225,000 of taxable value is excluded from tax. Call 202-727-1000 for more information.

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

There is no inheritance tax and only a limited estate tax.

Other State Tax Rates

To compare the above sales, income, and property tax rates to those accessed in other states go to:

- Sales Tax: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/sales-tax-by-state>.
- Personal Income Tax: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/income-tax-by-state>.
- Property Tax: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/property-tax-by-state>.

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For further information visit <http://cfo.dc.gov> or contact the Office of the Chief Financial Officer at 1350 Pennsylvania Avenue, NW, Suite 203, Washington, DC 20004 Tel: 202-727-2476/1643F TTY: 711 Email: ocfo@dc.gov.

*** General Interest ***



Notes of Interest ► 16 thru 30 APR 2018

- **CPI.** The March, 2018 CPI is 243.463, 1.6 percent above the FY 2018 COLA baseline. The CPI for April, 2018 is scheduled to be released on May 10th, 2018. Collectively, the CPI is used to adjust annuities for federal retirees, survivors, and Social Security recipients.
- **Naples Italy.** The fast-attack Virginia-class submarine John Warner fired six Tomahawk cruise missiles in the 13 APR allied airstrikes against Syria. Now the mayor of Naples, Italy, is demanding the submarine stay far away from his self-designated “nuclear-free” city, according to several Italian media reports
- **Flag Flying.** A Jacksonville city inspector walked into a Cedar Hills Estate business and issue a warning citation over the display of 2 U.S. & 5 military related flags it was displaying on its roof. View the video at https://cfvod.kaltura.com/p/2028331/sp/202833100/thumbnail/entry_id/0_eiykjmw3/version/100041/width/640/height/395.
- **Robocalls.** Unsolicited phone calls are a serious and growing nuisance in our society. Systems now exist that can broadcast millions of robocalls per day for a single vendor—and most such calls are scams. The Federal Trade Commission is getting more than 200,000 complaints per month about them. Two things you can do to reduce your calls are [Register with the Do Not Call List](#) and [Check whether you are on the Do Not Call List](#)
- **U.S. Army.** The U.S. Army will not meet its mission to recruit 80,000 active duty soldiers this year and has officially lowered that goal. But Army leaders said the service has been able to encourage more experienced service members to stay on the job to satisfy a growing demand for troops.
- **Trick shots.** If you have any questions whether or not <https://youtu.be/VRJmcxCrAOA> is real or not watch it all the way through.
- **Blue Angels.** A bird threw a wrench into the plans of the Navy’s elite flying squadron 21 APR when it glided into the engine of one of the Blue Angels’ F/A-18 Hornets during an air show in Vero Beach, Florida. Damage estimate is \$1,000,000.
- **Smartphone Security.** Chinese-made smartphones that the heads of U.S. intelligence have urged Americans not to buy are being sold to servicemembers across Germany at on-base exchange facilities.
- **Water.** Drinking water is usually healthy, but the key is moderation. If you drink too much water too fast, it can lead to headaches, fatigue, vomiting and other serious symptoms that indicate water intoxication. [People even have died from water intoxication](#). Yes, hydration is important but don’t overdo, [even if you’re a marathoner](#). If someone is suffering the symptoms of excess hydration, immediately seek medical care.
- **Cats.** Felines can spread a bacterium called *Bartonella henselae* through biting or scratches to humans. The worst cases involve complications to the brain, heart, eye and internal organs. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reported that 12,000 people each year develop cat-scratch disease and 500 people are hospitalized for it.
- **VA News Releases.** People wishing to receive e-mail from VA with the latest news releases and updated fact sheets can subscribe to the [VA Office of Public Affairs Distribution List](#).

- **Navy E-8.** Good news for advancement-eligible chief petty officers as the chance to make senior chief rose for a third straight year, resulting in the best chance to advance to E-8 in the past 22 years. Eligible chief petty officers have a nearly a 14% chance to put a star over their anchors, with 13,256 eligible chief petty officers competing for 1,853 quotas.
- **Military Pay.** House lawmakers are backing White House plans for a 2.6 percent pay raise and another sizable boost to the military end strength in their first draft annual budget legislation released 25 APR.
- **Texas Shooting.** The gunman in a mass shooting at a Texas church last year told a military judge in 2012 he “would never allow myself to hurt someone” again while admitting to abusing his stepson and a long struggle with anger, according to Air Force records obtained by The Associated Press on 26 APR.

[Source: Various | April 30, 2018 ++]

Syria ► What Went Into the Syrian Strike

The Pentagon Declared the 14 APR Strike on Syria Successful. U.S.-French-British strike “overwhelmed” the Syrian air defenses and degraded the Assad regime’s chemical weapons capabilities. Three facilities were targeted in the 4 a.m. strike, in which allied warships and planes fired 105 weapons, including the first combat use of the Joint Air to Surface Standoff, or JASSM, missile, Lt. Gen. Kenneth McKenzie, Jr. said. The Syrians responded by firing 40 surface-to-air missiles, most of them after the allied munitions had already struck their targets. The head of the joint staff called the defensive fire “materially ineffective” against the coalition forces, but said it likely did pose a threat to civilians on the ground. “It is likely that the regime shot many of these missiles on a ballistic trajectory – without guidance,” he said. “When you shoot iron in to the sky without guidance, it will inevitably fall to earth.”

The most significant target was the Barzah Research and Development Center, located close to downtown Damascus, and heavily protected by Syrian air defenses. It was targeted by U.S. warships, which launched 57 Tomahawk cruise missiles and B-1 bombers 19 JASSM missiles. The bombers were escorted by attack aircraft and an EA-6B electronic warfare jet. McKenzie said initial assessments indicated the Barzah center was destroyed. “This is going to set the Syrian chemical weapons [program] back years” he said.



Before-and-after DigitalGlobe satellite images of the Barzah Research and Development Center (Damascus, Syria)

The second site was the Hims-Shinshar Chemical Weapons storage facility near Homs, against which U.S. forces fired nine Tomahawks. The British fired eight Storm Shadow cruise missiles from Royal Air Force Tornado jets. France also participated in the strike, sending Rafale and Mirage combat jets and the Languedoc FREMM multipurpose frigate. French forces fired three Naval Cruise Missiles and two SCALP land cruise missiles at the Hims-Shinshar Chemical Weapons facility and another seven SCALP missiles at the final target, the Hims-Shinshar Chemical Weapons Bunker. Pentagon officials said both targets appear to have been destroyed. The

JASSM and the French-made Storm Shadow allow non-stealth jets to attack targets beyond the range of air defenses, 500 miles in the case of the JASSM. The cruise missiles themselves are “low observable,” making it difficult for air defenses to see and track.

Russian officials had earlier vowed to shoot any missiles out of the sky, a threat they did not follow through on. “We do not have any indication that any Russia air defense systems were employed,” said McKenzie. Largely absent from the firefight was the dreaded Russian S-400 anti-aircraft radar and missiles, the later of which have a range of more than 250 km. The presence of the weapon had been a concern for the U.S. forces, and likely accounted for the use of the EA-6B electronic warfare jet. “The Russians have used Syria to operationally test their systems and see how they operate. If you look back over time and look at the different strikes that they’ve done, they’ve gone and used Syria as an opportunity to see how well their systems are working. From a cyber and electronic attack perspective, we watch that stuff.” Lt. Gen. Jeffrey Harrigan said at an Air Force event in September.

When asked how the S-400 affected his choice to use certain planes over others, Harrigan said, “Those capabilities were part of the equation that I have to think through... We are consistently monitoring them to see if something changes their intent because we have to manage that and respond quickly... We look at it everyday. It’s an every day discussion to make sure our force can manage that risk.” McKenzie did not say whether or not the S-400 radars were turned off on Saturday morning, only that its batteries did not fire on the attacking jets. Asked whether Russian or Syrian forces used electronic warfare or cyber measures against coalition forces, McKenzie answered only, “The Syrian response was remarkably ineffective in all domains. That’s the best answer I can give you.” [Source: DefenseOne | Patrick Tucker | April 14, 2018 ++]

AUMF ► **Replacement Needed But No Blank Check**

Democrats are in wide agreement the post-2001 Authorization of Use of Military Force (AUMF) should be repealed, House Minority Leader Nancy Pelosi said 19 APR. But what to replace it with opens up a tough conversation about where the military should be used, and where it shouldn’t. The House Armed Services Committee’s top Democrat, Rep. Adam Smith of Washington, said as much in a C-SPAN interview Thursday. “Legislatively, to craft the language — in such a way that it makes sure the president doesn’t have a blank check to use military force wherever and whenever he wants, but at the same time, making sure that he does have the authority to use it when necessary — is difficult,” Smith said.

“Congress needs to pass an AUMF, we need to work together to figure out: What is our policy?” Smith said. “What should we be using our military for to protect our national security?” Democrats for the most part seem to agree, according to Pelosi, who said the House Democratic Caucus discussed at its meeting 18 APR how to unite Congress around replacing the current war authorizations. That pits Democrats against the Trump administration and House Speaker Paul Rya (R-WI) who said this week he won’t allow any bill to come to the House floor that he thinks would restrict military commanders’ ability to fight.

Earlier in the week in the Senate, a bipartisan group of senators on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee unveiled a major rewrite of the AUMF, which would give President Donald Trump new abilities to fight terror groups while reserving Congress the ability to limit the president. The bill contains no expiration date, fueling criticism from Democrats and others that the proposal is too expansive. The renewed debate over the authorization comes after Trump approved missile strikes in Syria late last week to punish Syrian President Bashar Assad for allegedly carrying out recent chemical attacks against civilians there. The proposed war authorization does not address Assad and Syria, as it’s focused on terrorist groups.

The administration holds that Trump had the authority to carry out the strikes under Article II of the U.S. Constitution, which permits the president to use military force to protect the national interest from immediate threats. Many Democrats and some Republicans disagree, saying that interpretation would give the president almost unlimited war powers. “It’s beyond illegal — it’s unconstitutional,” Republican Rep. Thomas Massie said 17 APR after a classified briefing on the strikes from Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and Marine Gen. Joe Dunford, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. Massie told BuzzFeed that Congress “could do a lot” to check the president’s power. “But there are not 218 members here who are concerned about the president’s ability to act, in my opinion, in conflict with the Constitution,” Massie said.

On 19 APR, Rep. Adam Schiff (D-CA), ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, and Sen. Tim Kaine (D-VA), a member of the Senate Armed Services and Foreign Relations committees, sent a letter to Trump requesting he detail the legal basis for those U.S. military strikes. They called “not sufficient” the letter Trump sent Congress asserting he used his power as commander in chief to defend important national interests Mattis and the White House have publicly refuted a New York Times report that there was an internal debate on the issue — that Mattis urged Trump to seek congressional approval last week before the strike.

Pelosi (D-CA) has called on Congress to debate a Syria AUMF and for the administration to present a Syria strategy. On 19 APR, she said Trump’s notification to Congress about the Syria strikes included no assurance that he would seek its approval for further action. “Here he is saying he’s not coming to Congress,” Pelosi said. “What is the security risk to the United States? Let’s have that discussion.” Smith, who opposed the Syria strike, said the administration has not laid out the strategy for reaching its difficult objectives in the complex, multi-sided conflict. The administration seeks to prevent Assad from using chemical weapons and the Islamic State group from securing a haven — goals with which Smith seemed to agree. “The policy is clear, the ability to achieve it is not,” Smith said. “I don’t think lobbing missiles once a year, saying ‘mission accomplished’ and calling it good is going to achieve that policy objective.” [Source: DefenseNews | Joe Gould | April 19, 2018 ++]

Good Samaritan ► Helping Hand For Airman On Emergency Leave

A woman in active duty for the Air Force received the call from her family on 2 APR that everyone dreads. Her father’s health was failing... and he only had a few days to live. Brittany Bunker spoke with her leadership and was granted emergency leave to fly out the next day and go home to see him. But after a series of unfortunate events with airlines, Bunker was left with no way home — until a selfless patriot in the airport sprang into action. Bunker was scheduled for four connecting flights that would have gotten her to her destination at midnight. Unfortunately, her first flight was ran late and she missed her second flight. She began to get overwhelmed, but was quickly calmed down by a flight attendant that assured her another flight was headed where she needed to be.

“Before I boarded my second flight, a man came up to me because I had Shiva (shes my service dog) and showed me pictures of his Malinois,” she wrote on Facebook. The man explained to Bunker that he was in the Guard and grew up in the same area as she did. Before her second flight had landed, Bunker found out that her last flight home was canceled. “As I’m getting off the plane (it’s about 9:30pm) I’m texting and talking on the phone with my family trying to figure out how to get home that night. Then 2 flight attendants approach me saying they were able to get me a flight that leaves at 11:30pm,” she wrote on Facebook.

As she was talking to the flight attendants, her family was trying to find a way to travel 5 hour to pick her up from the Chicago airport and bring her back home. “Then, the man I met before boarding my second flight came up to me while he was on the phone. He told me he was arranging for a professional driving company to drive me from the airport straight to my house, all at his expense,” she explained in her Facebook post. Bunker was nervous at first to accept his generous offer, but she explained that the man showed the receipts to the flight attendants and sent them a picture of the car, license plate, and driver once the driver arrived at the airport. She explained, “Before I left,

he said all he wanted in return was for me to let him know I made it home.” The driver drove Bunker 5 hours from Chicago airport to her front door step, she made it home by 3am on Apr. 4 — in time to see her father one last time.



Bunker's Facebook Note: His name is Tim Gerdeman (hopefully this gets shared enough that he'll see this and know how thankful my family and I are for his generosity)

“I was able to get the man’s name and he had already given me his number. The driver told me that it cost the man almost \$900,” Bunker wrote. “Thanks to this man’s selflessness, I was able to make it home and say goodbye to my father before he passed a day later on the morning of 5 APR she continued. There are still many selfless, generous human beings in this world. And thanks to this kind man, an active duty service member was able to make it home before her father passed away. This kind act teaches other that there are plenty of times we can choose to help others, and that we should always *pay it forward*.”

Note: Paying it forward is a third-party beneficiary concept that involves doing something good for someone in response to a good deed done on your behalf or a gift you received. When you pay it forward, however, you don't repay the person who did something nice for you. Instead, you do something nice for someone else.

[Source: The Horn News | Kylie Handler | April 17, 2018 ++]

IRS Reform ► **House Passes 9 Reform Bills | First in 20 Years**

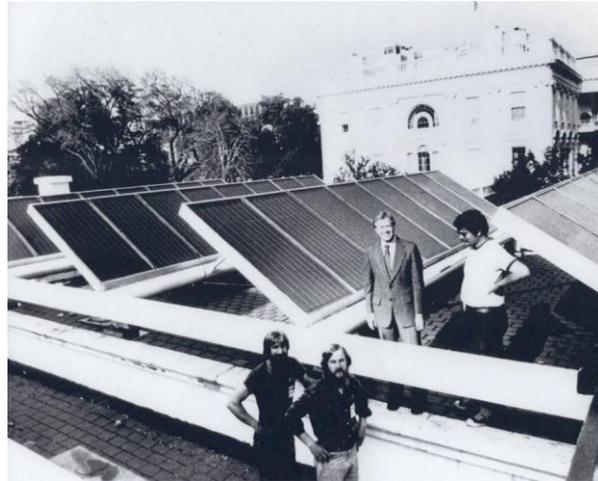
The day after Tax Day 2018, as the Internal Revenue Service struggled to restore a balky website, the House on 18 APR nearly unanimously approved a package of nine bills touted as the first reforms to the tax agency in 20 years. With titles such as “**21st-Century IRS Act**” and the “**Taxpayer First Act**,” the bills would redesign the tax agency to stress customer service, new taxpayer appeal rights, improved responsiveness to victims of identity theft and modernization of technology. “A new tax code calls for a new tax administrator, and we have worked together so that the IRS can be transformed into an agency with a singular mission: “taxpayer first,” said Ways and Means Committee Chairman Rep. Kevin Brady (R-TX). The bills are “refocusing the agency to live up to its mission of quality service, and reining in its enforcement powers to prevent future abuse.”

In floor debate, Brady said the measures remind “the IRS they are not just an enforcement agency – they are also our tax administrator. That’s why the legislation changes the title of the IRS chief from commissioner to administrator.” Oversight Subcommittee chairman Rep. Lynn Jenkins (R-KS) said on 18 APR, “As a CPA, I’ve seen first-hand countless examples of the IRS being out of date with technology and out of touch with the needs of the taxpayer. Yesterday’s website failure at the IRS added more urgency to the need to modernize the IRS and focus on the taxpayer experience.”

Democrats largely backed final passage, though some objected during voting on the rule for the major bills because they didn’t have opportunities to offer amendments. Ranking Ways and Means member Rep. John Lewis, (D-GA) said days before the vote on the Taxpayer First Act, “I am very proud of our work to set an income level for the private debt collection program," which "costs three times more than it collects. It also targets and abuses

thousands of low-income taxpayers by enrolling them in installment agreements that they cannot afford. In my heart of hearts, I believe that the program is a shame and a disgrace, and that it must end. I am glad that our bill moves us in the right direction.” Senate Finance Committee Chairman Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-UT) has said he supports the package. [Source: GovExec.com | Charles S. Clark | April 19, 2018 ++]

Solar Energy Update 01 ► White House



President Carter with engineers and solar panels newly installed on the White House, 1979. President Reagan had them removed in 1986, to be reinstalled by President Obama in 2010

Electromagnetic Pulse Threat ► What It Is & How to Defend Against It

What makes this threat so worrisome is that only a handful of nuclear weapons in the hands of a dictator who has obtained the ability to deploy one or two at altitude over the continental U.S. would create a devastating burst of energy called an electromagnetic pulse. While the science of EMPs is not fully settled — largely because it is impossible to test on a grand scale — there is plenty of credible evidence that they constitute a real threat, especially in the context of North Korea.

The short burst of vastly powerful electrical and magnetic shocks involved in an EMP could potentially devastate everything from your iPhone to the entire U.S. power grid. Imagine thousands of lightning strikes hitting every home and business in America. Bursts from a high altitude nuclear weapon — or a major solar event, by the way — could start by producing a so-called E1 shock, a brief pulse that is particularly devastating to what are known as supervisory control and data acquisition systems. The developed world is dependent on these Scada systems, which include manufacturing facilities, water-treatment plants, HVAC systems and many other things we take for granted.

Immediately after the E1 would follow an E2 burst, which is of lesser magnitude and may last as little as a microsecond. Yet these pulses are still able to cause significant damage, in large part because many protection systems will have been wiped out by the E1. Finally, a longer E3 pulse could last several minutes and attack long-line systems such as the electric power grid by destroying substations across the nation. E1 and E3 are the effects of greatest concern because we are the least hardened against them. Together, they could deprive large parts of the country of electricity for weeks, months, or even a year or two.

How likely are these scenarios? The idea of either a terrorist group or a rogue state using a high-altitude EMP burst has been seriously examined by scientific and government groups, but there is no agreement on the potential size of the effect. Some analysts insist an EMP would not be as apocalyptic as described in the widely referenced 2011 dystopian novel [“One Second After.”](#) which portrays an America brought to its knees by such a strike. Others contend that it’s highly unlikely that any hostile power would attempt one, given the overwhelming U.S. nuclear counterstrike that would quickly follow. There are military options the U.S. can take simultaneously for a higher level of defense.

- **First** and foremost, we can harden our key systems, beginning with intercontinental ballistic missiles and other nuclear strategic weapons. Next comes vital infrastructure — the electric grid, water supplies, transportation systems, financial and medical networks, and so on. The cost would run to the billions — but probably not the trillions. And it would make us safer not only against rogue nuclear strikes but also EMP effects from [huge solar storms](#), which occur on a regular basis every century or two.
- **Second**, the military needs to increase its ballistic missile defenses against the “single shot” attack that would use EMP. This could include more ground-based interceptors to knock down attacks over the North Pole — a route that North Korea or Iran could attempt. The Navy should plan how it would position its destroyers and cruisers equipped with Aegis combat systems off our coasts in times of rising tension.
- **Third**, the U.S. should be pursuing a variety of advanced systems that can counter long-range missiles through non-kinetic means: lasers (which can be deployed on aircraft or from space); cyber systems that can disable enemy missiles in pre-launch and possibly while airborne; and electronic jamming that can counter cruise missile variants of EMP systems.
- **Finally**, we need to focus more intently on intelligence and early warning systems, primarily based in space, that can detect the movement of launch systems, indications of pre-launch activity, a launch itself, and then track incoming threats. Part of this involves stitching together the various components of the “detect-to-kill chain” in an overarching system that itself is hardened against a preemptive cyber-attack.

[Source: Bloomberg | James Stavridis | April 26, 2018 ++]

Vinegar Update 04 ► Multiple Uses | De-stinking Stuff, Pet Help, & Misc Magic

De-stinking Stuff

1. **Rescue your lunchbox** -- Wipe out the inside with vinegar to kill weird smells. Pour vinegar and water in the Thermos and let sit overnight to remove any odors.
2. **Eliminate kitchen odors** -- Having a fish fry or a cabbage boil? Leave a small dish of vinegar nearby to neutralize olfactory havoc. If it’s too late to prevent the smell, put a half-cup of vinegar and one cup of water into a small pot and boil until it’s almost gone.
3. **Wipe out sponge smells** -- Kitchen and bathroom sponges can develop some pretty gnarly smells. Soak them overnight in a 50/50 vinegar and water bath.
4. **Deodorize the remodel** -- Since vinegar neutralizes strong scents, keep shallow dishes of the stuff in rooms that you’re painting.

Pet Help

1. **Remove urine stains** -- Wash the carpet with mild soap and water, rinse and blot as dry as possible. Saturate the area with a 1-to-3 mix of vinegar and water and allow to stand for 10 minutes, then blot.
2. **Think inside the box** -- After emptying and washing the cat box, add half an inch or so of vinegar. After 20 minutes, rinse well and dry before adding fresh litter.

- 3. Shine the aquarium** -- Vinegar and a nylon scrubber can remove mineral deposits from the glass.
- 4. Kill pet pests** -- Spray pets with a 50/50 vinegar and water solution (cover their eyes!) to discourage fleas and ticks. This may be easier said than done, especially with cats.
- 5. Save the upholstery** -- Deter cats from attacking couches and chairs by spraying on a little full-strength white vinegar.
- 6. De-skunk the dog** -- Should Fido have a run-in with Pepe Le Pew, spray him with a 2-to-1 mix of water and vinegar, rubbing the liquid in well. Wait five minutes, then rinse well. And no, he won't like it much.

Miscellaneous Magic

- 1. Keep eggs intact** -- Add a couple of tablespoons of vinegar to the cooking water so the shells won't crack.
- 2. Coax out condiments** -- Add a small amount of vinegar to the last of the salad dressing, then shake. If the mustard bottle is mostly empty, add some vinegar and shake well. This makes a zesty addition to cooked greens, soups and stews.
- 3. Wash vegetables** -- Want to remove residue from fruits and veggies? Mix 2 tablespoons of vinegar in 1 pint of water.
- 4. See more clearly** -- Dampen a lint-free cloth (not a paper towel, which can scratch plastic lenses) with vinegar and wipe off smudges and oil.
- 5. Clean DVDs** -- Skipping or freezing issues? Dampen a microfiber or flannel cloth with vinegar and wipe the disc from the center straight to the edge. Once all the surface has been cleaned, use a second soft cloth to wipe dry.
- 6. Clean scissors** -- Wipe gummy blades with undiluted vinegar.
- 7. Adhesive remover** -- Kids put stickers on the windows again? Remove them and their residue by wiping with vinegar. This works on bumper stickers and other decals as well.
- 8. Strip wallpaper** -- Soak the paper you want to remove with a 50/50 vinegar and water mix. Wait a few minutes, then attack with a scraper.
- 9. Bust rust** -- Drizzle vinegar over rusted/corroded nuts, screws or hinges to make them easier to remove. Soak rusted hand tools in vinegar for a couple of days, or until the rust goes away.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Donna Freedman | March 7, 2018 ++]

Have You Heard? ► Senior Citizens 3



I am a Seenager. (Senior Teenager)
 I have everything that I wanted as a teenager, only 50+ years later.
 I don't have to go to school or work.
 I get an allowance every month.
 I have my own pad.
 I don't have a curfew.
 I have a driver's license and my own car.

I have ID that gets me into bars and the liquor store.
The people I hang around with are not scared of getting pregnant.
And I don't have acne.
Life is Good!

-o-o-O-o-o-

Brains of older people are slow because they know so much.
People do not decline mentally with age, it just takes them longer to recall facts because they have more information in their brains, scientists believe.
Much like a computer struggles as the hard drive gets full, so too, do humans take longer to access information when their brains are full.
Researchers say this slowing down process is not the same as cognitive decline.
The human brain works slower in old age, said Dr. Michael Ramscar, but only because we have stored more information over time.
The brains of older people do not get weak. On the contrary, they simply know more.
Also, older people often go to another room to get something and when they get there, they stand there wondering what they came for.
It is NOT a memory problem, it is nature's way of making older people get more exercise!

-o-o-O-o-o-

Dorothy and Edna, two "senior" widows, are talking.

Dorothy: "That nice George Johnson asked me out for a date. I know you went out with him last week, and I wanted to talk with you about him before I give him my answer."

Edna: "Well, I'll tell you. He shows up at my apartment punctually at 7 pm, dressed like such a gentleman in a fine suit, and he brings me such beautiful flowers! Then he takes me downstairs. And what's there; a limousine, uniformed chauffeur and all. Then he takes me out for dinner; a marvelous dinner, lobster, champagne, dessert, and after-dinner drinks. Then we go see a show. Let me tell you Dorothy, I enjoyed it so much I could have just died from pleasure! So then we are coming back to my apartment and he turns into an ANIMAL. He went completely crazy, He tears off my expensive new dress and has his way with me three times!"

Dorothy: "Goodness gracious!... so you are telling me I shouldn't go?"

Edna: "No, no, no... I'm just saying, wear an old dress."

-o-o-O-o-o-

Couple in their after 65 years are both having problems remembering things. During a check-up, the doctor tells them that they're physically okay, but they might want to start writing things down to help them remember ..

Later that night, while watching TV, the old man gets up from his chair. 'Want anything while I'm in the kitchen?' he asks.

'Will you get me a bowl of ice cream?'

'Sure.'

'Don't you think you should write it down so you can remember it?' she asks.

'No, I can remember it.'

'Well, I'd like some strawberries on top, too. Maybe you should write it down, so as not to forget it?'

He says, 'I can remember that. You want a bowl of ice cream with strawberries.'

'I'd also like whipped cream. I'm certain you'll forget that, write it down?' she asks.

Irritated, he says, 'I don't need to write it down, I can remember it! Ice cream with strawberries and whipped cream - I got it, for goodness sake!'

Then he toddles into the kitchen. After about 20 minutes, the old man returns from the kitchen and hands his wife a plate of bacon and eggs. She stares at the plate for a moment. 'Where's my toast?'

Where There's a Will, There's a Way ► 15



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