

RAO

BULLETIN

1 March 2019



PDF Edition

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2. Numbers contained within brackets [] indicate the number of articles written on the subject. To obtain previous articles send a request to [\[L\]](#)
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National Military Strategy ► New Edition Completed | Unclear if the Public Will Ever See it

Gen. Joe Dunford, the outgoing chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, has finished his new edition of the National Military Strategy (NMS) — but currently has no plans to roll out a public version of the traditionally unclassified document. “The 2018 National Military Strategy was approved by Gen. Dunford in December and submitted to the secretary of defense and Congress in accordance with statutory requirements,” said Col. Patrick Ryder, Dunford’s spokesman, in response to a question from Defense News. “The strategy is classified to enable the chairman to fully assess the joint force operating environment and provide unfettered military advice in support of the 2018 National Defense Strategy,” Ryder continued. “An unclassified version is not currently available.”



Marine Corps Gen. Joseph Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff

The National Military Strategy is perhaps best thought of as the operational version of the National Defense Strategy outlining how the military will execute the goals laid out in that document, which was released in January 2018. Ryder described the NMS as the “strategic framework to inform the prioritization of force employment, force development and force design for the joint force. The NMS explains how the joint force will maintain its military advantage now and in the future to implement the defense strategy as articulated in the 2018 National Defense Strategy.”

Traditionally, the National Military Strategy, published at different intervals since the late 1990s, has come in an open format, including as recently as the 2011 and 2015 editions. However, in 2016, Dunford said that it was his belief the document should be more heavily classified than it previously had been. While there currently is not an unclassified version, Ryder did not rule that out as a future possibility — and keeping the document fully classified would go against Dunford’s own comments made in the last year. Last January, the chairman said “We’ll come out certainly with an unclassified description of it, so that we’re transparent — as we were last time.” And during a speech last July, Dunford told an audience at the Center for Strategic and International Studies that “it’s an unclassified document that has historically been written for the public. And we will certainly articulate to the public the guts of a National Military Strategy.”

Loren DeJonge Schulman, a former Pentagon and National Security Council staffer now with the Center for a New American Security, questions how much benefit the National Military Strategy brings given the recent publication of the National Defense Strategy — let alone the Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review documents published in the last year. “The NMS could be a useful process, but in the past it’s just been a way to insert confusion and to overstress the civ-mil tensions in the department without resulting in distinct military priorities to execute the strategy,” she said. Still, while saying it is “wise” for the Joint Staff to keep the bulk of the document classified in order to avoid worrying about public perception of their work, Schulman warned that keeping the document entirely behind walls could backfire.

Doing so would be part of “an unfortunate, and frankly undemocratic, tendency by this administration to withhold basic defense information from the general public,” she said. “DoD believes that intensified ‘opsec’ and overall discretion is a virtue and a return to the days of the Cold War. This is a total misread of that period. It is also going to do more harm than good when they need the support of Congress and the American people,” Schulman added.

What to expect

Thematically, the NMS is expected to follow the broad layout from the National Defense strategy which prioritized dealing with the so-called “2+3” challenges to America – China and Russia as the primaries, followed by North Korea, Iran and violent extremism. Structurally, Dunford described four key focus areas for the NMS over the summer: providing best military advice, strategy development, supporting the secretary of defense and making sure that the joint staff provides the integrating functions for war plans. “In my mind, what the national military strategy ought to do is drive the development of our operation plans and, more importantly, drive the development of viable options that we would need in a crisis or contingency,” Dunford said.

He also emphasized that this document is being formulated at the highest levels of the Joint Staff, saying “this is not a document being written by the staff and then subsequently sent out for comment. We sit in. We’re framing the problem. We’re providing top-down guidance on each of these problem sets and then pulling that together.” Although reluctant to get into details, Dunford did hint that part of the NMS is focused on more effective ways to use intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. “We can’t buy more Predators. We can’t have more CAPs and think that we’re getting out of the problem,” the chairman said. “So if you talk about an area where something disruptive is necessary, something innovative is necessary, it’s what information do we need to make decisions and how do we get that information is the question we’re trying to solve, not how can we afford to buy more CAPs.” [Source: DefenseNews | Aaron Mehta | February 13, 2019 ++]

Okinawa U.S. Military Bases Update 01 ► Residents Deliver A Resounding “No” Vote

Just over half of Okinawa’s 1.15 million registered voters turned out 24 FEB to deliver a resounding “no” vote in a referendum on the plan to relocate Marine Corps Air Station Futenma. Out of the 601,733 voters who turned out, 434,149 — or approximately 72 percent — voted against the reclamation of land in Oura Bay at Camp Schwab for a new military runway. The plan is to close Futenma and relocate Marine air operations to Henoko on Okinawa’s less populated northern coast. The vote is sure to further complicate matters for Japan’s central government, which has pushed forward with the project for decades despite a persistent local protest movement.

Construction of the runway is already underway and Prime Minister Shinzo Abe has said the relocation project will continue regardless of the referendum’s result. “We have been holding dialogue with people in Okinawa for a long time and intend to keep doing so to seek their understanding,” he told reporters a day after the vote, Kyodo News service reported Monday. But it “cannot be postponed any further.”



Construction equipment is seen near Oura Bay at Camp Schwab, Okinawa, Dec. 4, 2018.

The referendum was the brainchild of the Henoko Referendum Group, which began collecting signatures at local supermarkets in May, group chairman Jinshiroh Motoyama told Stars and Stripes last year. By July, the group had collected over 100,000 signatures, about 76,000 more than needed to put the issue on the ballot. Anti-base signs seemed to appear on every street corner in the weeks ahead of the vote. Besides the 434,149 votes against the reclamation work at Henoko, 114,908 voted in favor of the move and 52,676 were undecided. Per the referendum, if the majority vote is greater than 25 percent of all registered voters, then Gov. Denny Tamaki must report the result to Abe and U.S. President Donald Trump. The “no” votes in this case tallied about 38 percent of registered voters.

The local arm of Japan’s Ministry of Defense, the Okinawa Defense Bureau, declined to comment on the vote, saying it was “local governance.” Japan’s chief cabinet secretary, Yoshihide Suga, told reporters 23 FEB that Tokyo would continue the construction with “persistent effort.” Defense minister Takeshi Iwaya said 18 FEB that Japan’s central government would not entertain moving the approximately 30,000 U.S. troops stationed in Okinawa off island due to Okinawa’s strategic importance. “Okinawa is a key location for Japan’s security and a deterrent in the region,” Iwaya said. “Japan will make sure to return Futenma back to Okinawa to reduce the burden of hosting U.S. bases.” He added that it was the central government’s responsibility to close Futenma due to safety concerns.

Gov. Denny Tamaki – who was elected in September on an anti-base platform – told Stars and Stripes in a statement 25 FEB that the referendum showed the will of the Okinawan people and must be respected. “Tokyo must take this result sincerely and they must reconsider their idea that, ‘Henoko is the only [option],’ and stop the construction,” he

said. They must “discuss and resolve the root of the issue; closing the MCAS Futenma and return the land to Okinawa as soon as possible.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Matt Burke & Aya Ichihashi | February 25, 2019 ++]

Border Wall Update 09 ► DHS Asked to Identify Construction Location Priorities by DoD

The Pentagon has asked Department of Homeland Security to identify locations where border wall construction would improve the “effectiveness” of military troops deployed there, a key justification required to redirect military construction spending that would otherwise go to local base projects. In a memo, dated 18 FEB, DoD asked DHS to identify “priorities for potential construction,” a U.S. official familiar with the memo’s contents told Military Times. Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan is asking for a priority list, as well as the data used to generate that priority list, to help him determine “what projects we support” and what could be delayed, the official said.



The Pentagon is looking at how it could spend military construction funds, or MILCON, to comply with President Donald Trump’s declaration of a national emergency last week. Shanahan has not received a response yet from DHS, the official said. Shanahan told reporters 21 FEB that Pentagon officials would be going to Capitol Hill Friday to brief Congress “on the way forward and to give people a sense of not just the activities we are going to undertake but [also] the timing.”

House Democrats have voiced strong opposition to the emergency declaration. In a letter to party members this week, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, D-Calif., said the president’s decision to move the military funding “goes outside the bounds of the law to try to get what he failed to achieve in the constitutional legislative process.” Some Republicans, too, have raised objections. On 16 FEB the top Republican on the House Armed Services Subcommittee on Strategic Forces, Rep. Mike Turner, acknowledged there are portions of the border where migrants are crossing unimpeded, but said Trump still needs to make a case to Congress that the situation on the border constitutes a national emergency. “It is not a national emergency just because Nancy Pelosi says no,” Turner said. “If the president declares this a national emergency and begins to take funds that have been validly appropriated for other security issues without the debate in Congress, without the approval of Congress, then Congress’s authority has been usurped.”

The use of military construction funds is a political hot button. Most of those projects are the result of military communities’ elected officials lobbying — sometimes for years — for new buildings, gyms and housing that are viewed as critical quality-of-life projects. They are also sometimes seen as insulation against base closure. That same funding also supports operational needs, such as the construction of new aircraft hangars. For example, if MILCON is tapped, some of the potential projects that could be targeted include: a new vehicle maintenance shop at Camp Arifjan in

Kuwait, dry-dock repairs at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam in Hawaii, F-35 hangar improvements at Luke Air Force Base in Arizona, ongoing hospital construction at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center in Germany, and new family housing builds in South Korea, Italy and Wisconsin.

The White House has identified \$3.6 billion in military construction funds for DoD to potentially tap, as well as \$2.5 billion in drug interdiction funds. Section 2808 of Title 10 of U.S. Code allows military construction funds to be reprogrammed to support other activities, such as Trump’s national emergency declaration, if there is a determination they are “necessary to support the use of the armed forces,” the Pentagon said in a statement. Shanahan said this weekend that he thought it was unlikely that construction funds from military housing projects would be used. A second U.S. official said that the Pentagon was considering using the \$2.5 billion in drug interdiction funds first, because it did not require the additional justification, and those funds are more closely aligned with the U.S. military’s current border deployment. However the first U.S. official said even the drug interdiction funds may have limitations, such as the type of barrier they can be used to construct. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Tara Copp , Leo Shane III , and Joe Gould | February 21, 2019 ++]

Border Wall Update 10 ► Looking at Months to the Point of Initial Construction

More troops are heading to the US border with Mexico, Pentagon officials said on 22 FEB. That brings the number deployed from the current 5,000 to about 6,000, even as the Pentagon considers transferring close to \$4 billion to support the Border Patrol and build infrastructure. About 2,100 of the troops deployed currently are National Guard, the other 3,000 or so active-duty regulars. While the troops will be on the move, it will still be “months” before the Pentagon can begin spending any of that money, even without the entanglements of multiple lawsuits already working their way through the court system.

A defense official speaking on the condition of anonymity told reporters at the Pentagon Friday that no money will be moving any time soon. “We talking a matter of weeks for the [initial] assessment leading up to a decision” by acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan, the official said. “And we’re looking at months for the actual implementation to the point of construction — breaking ground. And we’re talking longer than months for the completion of the construction.” That vague sketch of a timeline is as close as we’ve been able to come to understanding how long the process might take for the Pentagon to funnel military construction funds toward roads, fencing, and lighting along the southern border.

The \$3.6 billion identified will not come from military family housing budgets, but would instead be pulled from “unawarded projects, recapitalization projects that update or replace existing structures,” the official said. Asked what military construction projects could lose funding, the official said they would likely be pulled from projects slated to begin later in the fiscal year, and then only those that would have “minimal impact on readiness or operations.” It is unclear what effect this might have on the 2020 budget request — the money apparently would come from multiple fiscal years — and Pentagon officials have declined to comment on the subject. The Pentagon budget is slated to be released on 11 MAR.

As for where things stand presently, the Joint Staff is studying an initial request from DHS outlining what kind of support it needs, after which Pentagon lawyers will have a go at it, followed by the Comptroller. If Shanahan then decides to move forward, the Army Corps of Engineers will be briefed. Only then will the Army start to coordinate with DHS how the Pentagon can help. Then comes potentially the trickiest — and most political — part of the whole thing: The Pentagon will notify legislators of its plans to transfer funds, plans which Congress could try to override. [Source: Breaking Defense | Paul McLeary | February 22, 2019 ++]

Pentagon Debt Collection ► GAO Says Procedures Need Overhaul to Protect Troops

A congressional watchdog has criticized the Defense Department’s debt collection procedures, saying it needs to do a better job of informing servicemembers of their rights when told they owe the government money — often through no fault of their own. The Government Accountability Office found problems in a review of dozens of debt notification letters sent to military personnel, according to a report published last week. Letters did not explain servicemembers’ right to a review and written decision on the matter, or their right to inspect and copy records related to the debt, among other issues, the report said. Often, the military services’ policies and procedures involving debt collection were not current, complete or clear, and were inconsistently applied, the GAO stated. As a result, servicemembers “may not have been properly notified of their debt, their rights to dispute it, or the potential consequences of inaction, such as involuntary payroll deduction,” the report says.

Last year, Congress tasked the GAO to study the Pentagon’s process for recouping overpayments made to military personnel. The direction came after the Pentagon decided to waive more than \$190 million in disputed enlistment bonuses and other payments for California National Guard members. About 17,500 soldiers were faced with paying back hefty bonuses given to them in error between 2004 and 2010 by recruiters under pressure to meet enlistment goals during the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. The Pentagon said at the time it would review its process for collecting erroneous payments, after it was criticized for using tax liens, wage garnishments and other aggressive tactics to try and get the money back. The GAO didn’t review the California Guard incident, but noted the Pentagon’s acknowledgement that trying to collect overpayments has placed an undue burden on servicemembers and their families, including financial hardship, garnishment of wages and damage to credit scores.

For its audit, GAO examined 49 debt notification letters sent by the department’s various collection offices to military personnel between January 2016 and May 2018. It found that 45 of the letters were missing key information required by DOD’s own debt collection regulations. More than 40 letters did not include a statement that repayments would be promptly refunded if later waived or found not to be owed; others did not inform the servicemember of the right to inspect and copy DOD records related to the debt or include a statement regarding the right to request a debt remission. Some letters did not advise servicemembers that pay would be deducted if repayment was not received within 30 days, according to the report.

GAO recommended several revisions to the Pentagon’s debt collection process, such as updating debt notification letter templates to include all required information and ensuring DOD regulations and websites clearly state whether and when collection should be suspended during the review process for servicemembers who dispute their debt. The Pentagon agreed with all recommendations. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Jennifer H. Svan | February 19, 2019 ++]

USS Fitzgerald (DDG-62) Update 20 ► CNO Defends Hiding Report on Collision From Public

The Navy’s top officer 15 FEB defended the decision to keep from the public eye a damning internal report by Rear Adm. Brian Fort on the 2017 warship Fitzgerald collision that killed seven sailors. Speaking to reporters after his appearance at the U.S. Naval Institute’s West 2019 conference here, Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson said much of the report overlapped with what the service publicly released. But much of the probe overseen by Rear Adm. Brian Fort portrayed a far grimmer picture of what the crew of the guided-missile destroyer faced. It also prompted hard questions about the actions taken by the Fitz’s squadron and Navy officials back in the United States.

First revealed by Navy Times, the Fort report chronicled details that Richardson, other Navy leaders and their public reports never mentioned, such as specifics about the destroyer’s brutal operational tempo, officers who didn’t trust each other, radars that didn’t work and sailors who didn’t know how to operate them. The investigators also portrayed the warship’s chiefs mess as ineffective and their sailors plagued by low morale in the months leading up to the June 17, 2017, collision. Reporting by ProPublica this month offered further insight into the Fitzgerald tragedy, renewing debate

about the decisions made in the highest ranks of the Navy, including those by Richardson both before and after the collision.



CNO defends hiding scathing internal report on Fitzgerald collision from public

Richardson stood by his decision to keep details from the public, insisting that the Fort report's status as a dual-purpose investigation meant it was "locked up in other litigation." "I think what you'll find is that if you take a look at what we did release, that there was a tremendous overlap and there's not a lot of difference in terms of actionable information between what we released and what you released," Richardson told Navy Times. Richardson said the Navy released the entirety of its comprehensive review and strategic readiness review, calling it "the appropriate amount of information" and later adding that it provided "a sufficient level of actionable details." Richardson declined to answer a question about comments made at a U.S. Senate hearing this week by fellow four-star Phil Davidson, the head of U.S. Indo-Pacific Command.

When pressed by Maine Sen. Angus King about readiness in the surface fleet, Adm. Davidson said that while the Fitzgerald and its fellow destroyer John S. McCain suffered fatal collisions in 2017, "280-odd other ships weren't having collisions." "I think that any high performing organization needs to be focused on really fixing every possible defect. These are the characteristics of high-performing organizations," Richardson said in response to a question about Davidson's comment. "The United States Navy is a high performing organization and so we're going to continue to be focused on eliminating problems wherever we find them." A reporter noted that Richardson did not answer the question about Davidson's statement. "That's the answer you get," Richardson told the reporter. "High performing organizations focus on fixing problems," he repeated. "We're going to remain focused on fixing the problems."

The Navy has addressed 80 of 111 reform recommendations laid out in the comprehensive and strategic readiness reviews and "the rest are on track" but some will take longer, Richardson said. "The idea of changing the culture, particularly in the surface force to be one of standards and assessments and those sorts of things," Richardson said. "You can start to see that culture change ... moving the team more towards a culture of rigor and standards for material training, certifications, enhancing the career path to do more training, get more experience, more assessments, again, so I think that you're starting to see all those things moving in the right direction."

Sen. King told Davidson at this week's hearing that he wasn't getting enough hard data charting how the surface fleet reforms were progressing. "I would like to see specific data on where we stand with issues like certification of sailors and personnel on the ships, maintenance status of the ships, training rules, staffing levels, and I want real numbers," King said. "I don't want general 'We're working on staffing' or 'We're working on more training.'" Richardson told reporters that he will make sure King gets whatever information he wants.

Asked about the status of the Navy's probe of hundreds of officers suspected of infractions in the so-called "Fat Leonard" scandal, Richardson declined to set a deadline for when the sea service wraps up its reviews. "Every time I make a prediction, I end up being inaccurate, so I'm hesitant to make any kind of an end date prediction," Richardson said. He added Navy leaders need to properly propagate lessons learned along the way. The U.S. Justice Department is prosecuting the most severe allegations in the West Pacific public corruption cases involving scores of Navy officers,

including members of the admiralty, but it passed hundreds of lower-level cases to the Navy for final adjudication. [Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | February 16, 2019 ++]

U.S. Space Force Update 11 ► Space Policy Directive 4 Signed by Trump

President Donald Trump on 19 FEB signed SPD-4, a directive to establish a new branch of the military dedicated to space but instead of being a fully independent department it will remain part of the Air Force to assuage concerns in Congress. The presidential directive, formally called Space Policy Directive 4, will set the groundwork for a subsequent legislative proposal for Congress, which will have the final say over what has been a signature military objective since Trump announced his intentions nearly a year ago. The U.S. Space Force would be the first new military branch since the U.S. Air Force was established out of the Army Air Corps in 1947 — and it will be structured similarly to how the Marine Corps falls under the Department of the Navy.

The initial startup cost for the Space Force is expected to be less than \$100 million, the official said. It will include a four-star general as its chief of staff, who will also serve on the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and its top civilian will be a new undersecretary for space. The approach falls short of Trump's earlier claims that the Space Force would be co-equal with the Army, Navy and Air Force. However, the White House still hopes to achieve that goal. "We didn't see a way to go there in one step," a White House official said. "The thought was to leverage the facilities and functions already within the Air Force since that's where the bulk of space capabilities really are." "We're trying to moderate things and respond to some congressional concerns," added the official, who agreed to preview the directive on condition he not be identified.

The official predicted that a full-fledged Space Force won't become reality until at least sometime in a Trump second term — after lawmakers have seen the current model function for a couple years. The administration maintains a Space Force will help counter threats in space from adversaries like Russia and China, which according to a recent report from the Defense Intelligence Agency is pursuing anti-satellite weapons. "As their actions make clear, our adversaries have transformed space into a warfighting domain already. And the United States will not shrink from this challenge," Vice President Mike Pence said at the Pentagon in August. "Under President Trump's leadership, we will meet it head on to defend our nation and build a peaceful future here on Earth and in space."

Trump last June called for the Pentagon to stand up a military branch focused on space and has since made it a major applause line at his raucous rallies and other public events. "We are going to have the Air Force and we are going to have the Space Force: separate but equal, it is going to be something so important," Trump said in June. But the directive only orders the secretary of defense to periodically review whether a fully separate department is needed. In the meantime, the president is calling for all military and civilian personnel now working on space operations to be folded into the new Space Force. Excluded will be the National Reconnaissance Office, a joint agency run by the Pentagon and intelligence agencies that builds spy satellites, as well as civilian space agencies such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration or NASA.

What the Space Force's uniforms will look like is also still up for debate. "It's probably not wings and squadrons or battalions and brigades," the official said. "Uniforms reflect ranks and ranks reflect structure. ... It might look more like ship departments in the Navy." Yet it will ultimately be up to Congress to decide whether a new space service becomes reality and what it looks like. Leading lawmakers like House Armed Services Chairman Adam Smith (D-WA) have expressed concern about creating an expensive new bureaucracy without making military space operations more effective. "We've heard them very clearly about what their concerns are," said the official, describing recent informal conversations with congressional leaders about the proposed structure. "They're pleased we're taking it seriously and that we're flexible on this." But even if it is not everything Trump wanted initially, he added, he would still be achieving his biggest goal: "The president's top priority was a separate armed service."

SPD-4 stipulates that all uniformed and civilian personnel currently supporting space operations will funnel into the Space Force. That means that certain Army and Navy personnel could find themselves in a new service under the discretion of the Air Force. “We don’t anyone to be hurt if they transfer over into the Space Force,” the administration official said. “We’ll be moving, I think, fairly slowly, focusing on the headquarters functions to begin with, and then there will a lot of activity that will simply be moved over for people doing space operations. Then we will be laying out career tracks for people farther up.” One of the biggest congressional critics of a separate space service, Rep. Mike Turner (R-OH) released a statement seemingly in support of SPD-4. That would be a massive reversal from his previous stance, which saw Turner trying to block legislation to stand up a Space Corps in 2017. [Source: POLITICO | Jacqueline Klimas | February 18, 2019 ++]

DoD/VA EHR Update 03 ► Still Working Out How to Create Single EHR

The Departments of Defense and Veterans Affairs are still trying to figure out how to best align their agencies’ respective plans to create a common Cerner electronic health record system. Speaking on 13 FEB at the HIMSS19 conference in Orlando, DoD and VA program officials said coordinating their activities to ensure interoperable EHR systems is a work in progress, emphasizing that the agencies continue to discuss an optimal organizational design that will facilitate coordinated decision-making and oversight when it comes to governance.

Toward that end, the DoD and VA Interagency Program Office is working to establish joint EHR modernization governance bodies to foster coordination and improve communication between the departments. “We can’t talk enough about the work that the Interagency Program Office has done to ensure that the DoD and VA are aligning around commercial standards and to also be able to provide a consolidated input between basically the two largest federal healthcare providers,” Stacy Cummings, program executive officer for Defense Healthcare Management Systems, told a HIMSS audience.

Cummings noted that late last year Defense Secretary James Mattis and VA Secretary Robert Wilkie signed a joint statement committing to the implementation of a single, seamlessly integrated EHR that “maximizes commercial health record interoperability” by sharing data between the two agencies as well as community healthcare providers. The purpose of the document signed by Mattis and Wilkie was to “demonstrate the commitment of both the DoD and the VA to the success of this electronic health record deployment,” according to Cummings. To make decisions and execute them jointly, she added that the agencies have put together a working group to create synergies and efficiencies. “We’re making great progress—we’re looking at risk and technical and programmatic functions,” she said. “Having greater synergy will reduce the risk to both of our programs.”

While DoD and VA have “spent a lot of time” sharing information and lessons learned, Cummings acknowledged that the two agencies “can benefit from being even closer than we are today.” Last year, the VA awarded Cerner a \$10 billion EHR modernization contract—one of the largest IT contracts in the federal government—to replace the agency’s decades-old Veterans Health Information Systems and Technology Architecture. In 2015, DoD awarded a \$4.3 billion contract to prime contractor Leidos to modernize the military’s EHR system with Cerner’s Millennium platform. According to Cummings, the two agencies will share a data center hosted at Cerner’s Kansas City headquarters in a “single instance” enclave, with the VA taking advantage of investments DoD has already made in that commercial data center.

DoD’s Cerner system—called MHS GENESIS—has so far been deployed at four military sites in the Pacific Northwest. The VA’s planned acquisition calls for aligning, as much as possible, the deployment and implementation of its EHR system with ongoing DoD rollout activities in order to achieve efficiencies. “In our deployment schedules, we’re looking to be as coordinated as possible where it makes sense,” said Cummings. “But, at the same time, I don’t think either one of us is interested in slowing down our plans to deploy on our timelines.” In December, DoD authorized MHS GENESIS to proceed with six “waves” of deployment, starting in the fall of 2019. Wave 1 sites include Naval

Air Station Lemoore, Travis Air Force Base, Mountain Home Air Force Base and the U.S. Army Health Clinic Presidio—all of which are the first military facilities to field the standard baseline of MHS GENESIS.

Cummings observed that one of the biggest lessons learned from DoD’s deployment of MHS GENESIS to initial operational capability sites was that “this is not an IT implementation—this is a change management program.” “DoD has already gone live at facilities—we are still educating our clinicians, and that’s a tough chore,” said John Windom, executive director of the VA’s Office of EHR Modernization, at the HIMSS19 conference. “We want to make sure we’re judicious in the way we move forward such that our change management strategies that we’re both employing will take hold as appropriate. This is about the end user—the person that’s required to use Cerner Millennium.”

“It’s a hard sell because people are used to what they’re used to, regardless of how arduous it may be to use or how cumbersome,” added Windom, referring the VA’s legacy VistA system which is popular with the agency’s clinicians. At the same time, Windom pointed out that DoD and VA have “two different patient populations” that the agencies are trying to both serve using a single, seamlessly integrated EHR. “That’s a tremendous challenge that we don’t take lightly,” he concluded. [Source: HealthData Management | Greg Slabodkin | February 14, 2019 ++]

Exchange/DeCA Merger Update 03 ► Task Force Backs A Merger of the Military's Stores

The Defense Commissary Agency and the military’s three separate exchange services should be consolidated under a single resale enterprise for the purpose of streamlining above-store and back-of-store operations, says a business plan report the Defense Department is expected to endorse and send to Congress next month. The single governance structure envisioned for military resale is laid out in a business case analysis developed over the last half of 2018 by a task force of retail executives headed by retired Army Maj. Gen. Keith Thurgood. The task force was heavily supported by Boston Consulting Group, whose reform recommendations adopted for commissaries in 2016 have so far failed to reverse a steady and worrisome decline in sales at on-base grocery stores.

Thurgood served as chief executive officer of the Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES) from 2007 to 2010 and held executive positions in the health care and retail industries. He would become interim director and CEO of the consolidated resale system if the task force recommendations advance. Then-Deputy Defense Secretary Pat Shanahan ordered the task force created last May to develop a business case to support consolidating military resale systems. It therefore surprised no one when the report concluded consolidation would produce attractive savings. The estimate is \$700 million to \$1.3 billion over the first five years, less about \$500 million in implementation costs, but then \$400 million to \$700 million a year in recurring savings after full transformation.

Every exchange service reacted to the task force findings with frank critiques, attacking how it used their staffs and data, and warning of deepening risks to the shopping benefit if the proprietary industry “benchmarks” of Boston Consulting Group, used to estimate merger efficiencies, turn out to be wrong. Still, the Army and Air Force concurred with the task force findings. The Navy initially did not, with Undersecretary Thomas Modly, in a 6 DEC memo, describing the results as “less than convincing.” Five weeks later, however, Modly switched the Navy position to “concur” but continued to insist the task force had “overstated” many “estimated efficiencies,” adding four pages of comments and concerns.

In a recent joint interview, Thurgood and Lisa Hershman, acting chief management officer of the Department of Defense, discussed the task force findings, the criticisms they have sparked, challenges facing the shopping benefit and new authorities Congress would have to provide if full consolidation is to occur. “This is about enhancing this benefit,” said Thurgood. “Now, can we do that while taking costs out of the system? Yes, we can. But that’s not the endgame. The endgame is creating a new business model that really changes the future trajectory” of military resale, which has lost ground to commercial competitors.

Task force guiding principles included maintaining exchange profits so they continue to produce “dividends” to fund on-base Morale, Welfare and Recreational activities, and protecting average commissary shopper savings of 23.7 percent. “That means you have to do things fundamentally different than we are doing today,” Thurgood said. “As you know, revenue is down across the board [for] the resale entities.” Falling commissary sales “is particularly acute for a variety of reasons: changing demographics; generational buying patterns. The market is tough anyway in the food world. It’s a very small margin game.”

Commissaries and exchanges would stay separate stores on base, Thurgood said. Consolidation would focus on a new central governance structure and squeezing efficiencies and achieving synergies by merging back office and “above store” functions that customers don’t see, he said. “This would not be about divesting or closing,” Thurgood added. The task force plan targets portions of current resale operations for modernization and others for unification, Hershman added. But there also would be “no-touch zones,” to include AAFES, Navy Exchange and Marine Corps Exchange storefronts, branding, labeling and their operational responsiveness to needs and directions of their service secretaries. “At the very minimum,” said Hershman, “we want to maintain, and if possible, improve that [shopping] experience.”

Decline in commissary sales has been steady for almost four years. Critics maintain it persists despite recent reforms recommended by Boston Consulting, including introduction of lower-priced private label products, adoption of variable pricing based on store locale, and the intentional reduction in number of brand items sold as way to negotiate better prices from manufacturers. Representatives of brokers and manufacturers doing business with exchanges contend that most of the efficiencies identified by the task force are linked to price negotiation techniques that have failed to reverse sliding commissary sales or to reduce significantly reliance on tax dollars to maintain grocery discounts.

Exchange systems criticized the task force for relying on unverifiable industry benchmarks from Boston Consulting Group to calculate efficiencies, one contending forecasts of savings are six to nine times higher than are likely to be realized. Thurgood disagreed. He said benchmarks “are not aggressive” but “right in the middle” of industry norms. “And yeah, they are proprietary because when you hire a consultant to give you advice and counsel, it’s their information. But if you do the math ... these are by no means outside of normal bounds here.” To mitigate the risk of overstating efficiencies, Thurgood added, the task force projected cost savings only from consolidating merchandising operations, organizational structures and non-direct spending, ignoring potential savings from data consolidation, the streamlining of the supply chains and other functions. “If you look at some of the studies our own resale folks have done in the past, the numbers are the same. They are not out of range here,” Thurgood said. “I reject the idea that it’s somehow super aggressive.”

The Defense Department has authority under existing law to merge exchange services to whatever degree it desires. To consolidate exchange systems with commissaries, however, would require that Congress amend current law. Hershman said she hasn’t decided for certain to endorse the task force’s call to replace four retail systems with one. She will make that decision soon and advise David Norquist, who is performing the duties of deputy secretary of defense while the former deputy, Shanahan, serves as acting defense secretary. Last year’s defense authorization bill bans any spending on resale consolidation before 1 OCT of this year. It also required the department to deliver a report to Congress on feasibility of a single defense resale system by 1 JAN of this year. The department got that deadline extended, Hershman said, but the report will be delivered soon and will describe, as requested, options and plans for consolidating military retail activities while preserving military shopper discounts.

If task force recommendations are approved, Hershman said, she isn’t worried that risks to the shopping benefit will rise, given the “thoroughness” and “transparency” of work done to date and her own interactions with exchange and commissary “stakeholders” during final consideration of the task force report. “I didn’t want to have any judgment without all the information, and that would include the data as well as just talking to people” who feel passionately about the changes proposed, Hershman said.

Change is hard, Thurgood said, so he wasn’t surprised by critiques delivered by the military resale community. Because the task force’s work is far more detailed than previous studies that have urged military resale mergers over

last 30 years, the service critiques this time also are more detailed, he said. “Change fixes the past but transformation is about creating a new future. And that’s what this is about,” Thurgood said. “And to do that requires us to think differently, to act differently, to get focused on the customer and do the right kinds of things. And that is hard for people, both operationally and behaviorally.” [Source: Stars and Stripes | Tom Philpott | February 14, 2019 ++]

DoD Medication Safety Role ► Concerns

MOAA certainly is concerned regarding any issue associated with the safety of medications. Our awareness was heightened several months ago when the blood pressure medication valsartan was recalled off the market by the Food and Drug Administration (FDA). Our members called and voiced their worries too, especially since a probable cancer-causing chemical was identified to be in the active pharmaceutical ingredient and was traced back to the manufacturer in China. As this issue gained traction, the spotlight was shown on the nation's increased reliance on generic medications manufactured outside the U.S. Unfortunately, this reliance includes the associated medication manufacturing processes and the ingredients, which are not under the strict scrutiny of the FDA.

While there are many macro forces impacting our national industrial base, the risks to the pharmaceutical sector should come under closer examination. In regards to the DoD and the VA, a start could be to ensure:

- DoD is accountable for ensuring active duty and retired military personnel (and civilians) have an uninterrupted supply of quality medicines, and has authority to use all means necessary to do so.
- DoD and the VA know where medicines are made that active duty and retired military personnel, their families and veterans are taking, and diversify DoD and VA procurement away from countries who may cut off U.S. access or compromise quality.
- DoD recommends incentives for domestic manufacturing for strategically valuable medicines such as antibiotics required by the DoD and VA which are now procured from strategic competitors/adversaries.

These overarching recommendations are consistent with the September 2018 Defense Industrial Base Report, “Assessing and Strengthening the Manufacturing and Defense Industrial Base and Supply Chain Resiliency of the United States,” which analyzed broad sectors where the U.S. is dependent on strategic competitors for military equipment/components. [Source: MOAA Message | Kathy Beasley | February 21, 2019 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries & Burials ► Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2018 | Twelve

“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

-- **Army Air Forces Tech. Sgt. Alfred R. Sandini** was a member of 22nd Bombardment Squadron, 341st Bombardment Group, serving as a radio gunner aboard a B-25C aircraft. On Feb. 15, 1944, the aircraft crashed, near the Do Len Bridge in Thanh Hoa Province, French Indochina, now known as the Socialist Republic of Vietnam. Interment services are pending. [Read about Sandini.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Carlos E. Ferguson** was a member of Company L, 3rd Battalion, 23rd Infantry Regiment, 2nd Infantry Division, engaged in combat against the North Korean People's Army and the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces during the "Battle of the Soyang River." Ferguson was reported missing in action on May 18, 1951. Interment services are pending. [Read about Ferguson.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. James C. Rix** was a member of Company E, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. He was killed in action on Nov. 30, 1950, during heavy fighting between the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces and the 7th Cavalry Regiment in South Pyongan Province, North Korea. His remains were processed through a 7th Cavalry Regiment Collection Station and interred at the United Nations Military Cemetery Pyongyang, on Dec. 2, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Rix.](#)

-- **Army Master Sgt. Charlie J. Mares** was a member of Company C, 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, engaged in combat against the Korean People's Army. Mares was reported missing in action following the battle, fought near Kwonbin-ni, South Korea, on July 31, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mares.](#)

-- **Army Pvt. Winfred L. Reynolds** was a member of Medical Company, 32nd Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division, and attached to 2nd Platoon, Company C, 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, near Hwach'on Reservoir, South Korea. He was killed on April 26, 1951, while caring for wounded soldiers. Because of ongoing fighting in the area, Reynolds' remains were unable to be recovered. Interment services are pending. [Read about Reynolds.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. George R. Schipani** was a member of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 8th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. Early in the morning of Nov. 2, 1950, Schipani's battalion was struck by enemy units of the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces. After several days of intense fighting, survivors escaped to friendly lines. Schipani was reported missing in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Schipani.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Pvt. Waldean Black** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Black. Interment services are pending. [Read about Black.](#)

-- **Navy Electrician's Mate 3rd Class William A. Klasing** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Klasing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Klasing.](#)

-- **Navy Fire Controlman 1st Class Edward J. Shelden** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Shelden. Interment services are pending. [Read about Shelden.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Kenneth H. Sampson** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Sampson. Interment services are pending. [Read about Sampson.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Kirby R. Stapleton** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Stapleton. Interment services are pending. [Read about Stapleton.](#)

-- **Seaman 1st Class John A. Karli** was stationed aboard the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The battleship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Karli. Interment services are pending. [Read about Karli.](#)

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | February 28, 2019 ++]

* VA *



Fisher House Expansion Update 20 ► Ann Arbor, MI; Aurora, CO; and Omaha, NE

On 14 FEB the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that Fisher House Foundation plans to construct three new 16-suite Fisher Houses at VA campuses in Ann Arbor, Michigan; Aurora, Colorado; and Omaha, Nebraska; which will provide temporary accommodations for the families and caregivers of Veterans and active-duty military receiving care at the VA facilities. Construction for the new accommodations will begin within the next six months. “VA has a great and longstanding 25-year partnership with the Fisher House Foundation and is pleased to expand support of their important mission,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Since the first VA Fisher House was built in

Albany, New York, staff and volunteers serve passionately with gratitude in a welcoming ‘home away from home’ for families of Veterans undergoing critical care and treatment at VA.”

To date, Fisher House Foundation has built and donated 38 Fisher Houses to VA. Construction of a typical Fisher House takes approximately 12 to 15 months. Once the home is completed and ownership is transferred over to VA, the Fisher House becomes a federal building that is operated, maintained and staffed by the department. The VA Fisher Houses will support access to care for thousands of additional Veterans traveling to VA facilities for treatment. In 2018, VA Fisher Houses accommodated over 28,000 families, saving guests more than \$18 million in lodging expenses.

“In my life, there have been few things I have been associated with that bring more satisfaction than the Fisher House Foundation,” said Ken Fisher, Chairman and CEO of the Fisher House Foundation. “But we don’t do this in a vacuum; Fisher Houses are built on partnerships, and none are more important than our affiliation with VA.” The Fisher House program currently has 80 homes at VA and Department of Defense hospitals. Over the next several years, it anticipates expanding from 38 to at least 64 VA Fisher Houses. For more information, visit [VA Fisher House Program](#) or [Fisher House Foundation](#). [Source: VA News Release | February 14, 2019 ++]

VA Privatization Update 16 ► We Are Not Privatizing Says VHA’s Executive In Charge

Talk of the possible privatization of the Department of Veterans Affairs is a hot topic in the veterans community. But as far as Dr. Richard Stone – VA’s Executive in Charge of the Veterans Health Administration – is concerned, the department’s recent efforts are counter to any efforts at privatizing the health-care system. Stone said that although VA is working to provide veterans with more care choices, “We are not moving money to disassemble our health-care system. We are not privatizing,” Stone told The American Legion’s Veterans Affairs & Rehabilitation Commission on 25 FEB during the organization’s Washington Conference. “We believe the future of the VA health-care system should be in the hands of veterans, and you should decide what we have.

“The accusation that we are privatizing – if I was privatizing, why would we be spending over \$10 billion to put into electronic medical records? Why would we be hiring more than 11,000 more employees than we had a year ago at this time? Why would we be working so hard to ensure your trust? If this is a model of privatization, we’re doing a pretty bad job of it. We think the future of this health-care system is strong, and is a model for all of American health care for access in most places.”

Stone said that VA also has focused on quality of care and restoring trust among its patients. “What you deserve in a health-care system as veterans is a health-care system that is reliable in the way it operates,” he said. “We have, therefore, just last week begun to roll out in the first 18 hospitals what we call our ‘Movement to Zero Harm.’ Humans make mistakes. Humans make errors. But they shouldn’t cause harm to patients. What we’re moving toward is a system in which we can really move to zero harm.” On the subject of veterans using the Choice program to seek health care outside VA, Stone said the numbers are both low and telling. “Anybody more than 40 miles away (from a VA facility), you could go out into the community,” he said. “Nine out of 10 (veterans) did not go out. Of the 1 in 10 who went out, 90 percent of those ... went out for one visit and then came back to us.”

VA Under Secretary for Benefits Dr. Paul Lawrence discussed VA’s new programs made possible by the current version of the GI Bill, the Harry W. Colmery Veterans Educational Assistance Act:

- The Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC), which is designed to give veterans an edge in the high-tech job market, and
- Additional benefits for STEM education, including up to nine extra months of benefits (not to exceed \$30,000) for veterans who meet the criteria.

“The GI Bills continue to become a wonderful program,” Lawrence said. “This works, and tens of millions of people have taken advantage of it.”

On the subject of legislation that would provide disability benefits to those Blue Water Navy veterans who claim to have suffered toxic exposure to Agent Orange during their service in the Vietnam War, Lawrence said a divide remains. In January, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled in favor of Alfred Procopio Jr., who served aboard USS Intrepid during the war. Procopio, 73, suffers from diabetes and prostate cancer, both of which are linked to Agent Orange exposure. “VA’s in the process of reviewing this decision and figuring out the response. That’s all I can really say,” Lawrence said. “The science isn’t there, from our position. I know we disagree on that, and that’s unfortunate. But one day, whatever happens, we won’t disagree, and we’ll be on the same side. When that happens, it will be our intention to execute whatever that results in as efficiently and as effectively as we can for veterans.”

Lawrence was also questioned about the current policy that requires veterans who receive both military retired pay and VA disability compensation simultaneously to waive part of their service retired pay. VA&R Commission Chairman Ralph Bozella called the practice “terribly unfair.” Lawrence agreed. “I understand that this is a legislative issue, and I certainly never want to give advice to congressional oversight people,” he said. “Having said that, I am an economist, and I do think about money things all the time. I’ll make the following observation: pension is deferred compensation. Payments for disability are the payments your country committed for the economic impairment you suffered under your time in the military. Those are two different things. That would be my statement.” [Source: The American Legion | Steven B. Brooks | February 25, 2019 ++]

VA Disability Claims Update 02 ► Priority Processing for Purple Heart Awardees

On 26 FEB at a congressional hearing before the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie announced that effective in April, VA will provide priority disability benefits claims processing for the initial claims from discharged combat Veterans who have been awarded the Purple Heart Medal. “Those who hold the Purple Heart, the recognition of wounds taken in battle, will now receive priority consideration when it comes to claims before the Department of Veterans Affairs,” said Secretary Wilkie. The Veterans Benefits Administration will amend its priority processing categories to include initial claims received from Purple Heart recipients on or after April 1, 2019.



Purple Heart recipients are already treated on a priority basis at VA hospitals and are exempt from co-payments for their medical care. The Purple Heart award is the oldest U.S. military decoration and is awarded to U.S. service members for wounds suffered at the hands of the enemy. General George Washington awarded the first purple-colored heart-shaped badges to soldiers who fought in the Continental Army during the American Revolution. In 1932, it was revived to commemorate Washington’s 200th birthday. [Source: VA News Release | February 26, 2019 ++]

VA Veteran Recreation Therapy ► Virtual Reality Rehabilitation Program

A double amputee Veteran looks through his special headset and suddenly is scuba diving under the sea, and sees fish swimming all around. Another Veteran in a wheelchair is mountain climbing and can see trails and wild animals along the way. And another Veteran suffering from chronic pain is fishing and can be seen casting his lines in the water. These are a few examples of how Veterans dealing with various injuries are experiencing a special virtual reality rehabilitation therapy program that is proving to be successful in helping them cope with their physical, cognitive and psychosocial issues.



In the photos above, Jamie Kaplan, a recreation therapist who oversees the virtual program at the James Haley Tampa VA Medical Center, helps guide Veteran Geoff Hopkins through his chosen virtual reality scenario.

The special program provides Veterans with varied medical issues resulting from traumatic brain injury, spinal cord injury, stroke, amputees, ALS or other similar areas with an alternative to the use of drugs such as opioids. They use a virtual reality headset or can watch on a large monitor screen to experience virtual scenic settings with music and narration individualized to each patient's interests. "Virtual reality is able to take the user someplace else they'd rather be," said Kaplan. "For example, virtual games and activities can allow the wheelchair user to experience freedom from the limitations they face in everyday life." Special apps and computer programs are utilized through virtual reality headsets in the Virtual Reality Clinic and at the patient's bedside. Veterans can choose from 20 scenarios, ranging from mountains and oceans. Veterans can fish, ski, go scuba diving or even play golf.

One of the main goals is to help Veterans who suffer from chronic pain reduce their reliance on medications, such as opioids. Relaxation and guided imagery programs are also used to address stress, anxiety, frustration, anger, and pain. Heart rate and self-reporting from the Veteran are used to determine effectiveness. The measures, taken at the beginning and end of each session, have proven to reduce an average of 5 to 7 heart beats per minute while pain levels dropped 2-3 levels during the 10-minute use. "What is truly exciting is that it is showing measurable results in helping reduce chronic pain while using the program," Kaplan said. Kaplan said the idea came about through his interest in computer-based video games. He extended the idea based on video games to develop the virtual reality scenarios.

At first, virtual reality was targeted for use by younger Veterans who are more proficient in the use of technology and social media. However, older Veterans are embracing its use as well. About 200 Veterans, both inpatient and outpatient, have gone through the program. The Virtual Reality program at James A. Haley VAMC is recognized as part of February's National Therapeutic Recreation Month. VHA has more than 900 recreation therapists and creative arts therapists serving Veterans.

"Recreation therapy and creative arts therapy provide a spectrum of services, opportunities, and choice for Veterans to maximize their rehabilitation potential, increase independence and sustain a healthy and meaningful leisure lifestyle," said Lucille Beck, Ph.D., VHA's Deputy Under Secretary for Health for Policy and Services. "These therapies provide opportunities to build confidence, develop coping skills, and integrate the skills learned in treatment

settings into community settings.” Guided imagery, meditation, and relaxation programs promote decreased muscle tension, stress, anxiety and blood pressures. This, in turn, can increase function abilities, decrease pain behaviors and increase activity. Refer to <https://www.prosthetics.va.gov/rectherapy> for more about VA’s Recreation Therapy Service. [Source: VAntage Point | William N. Outlaw | February 26, 2019 ++]

VA Veteran Community Care Program ► Proposed Rules Published

On 22 FEB the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the publication of a proposed regulation in the Federal Register for the new Veterans community care program, including access standards. The proposed regulation would establish new rules for the Veterans community care program required by section 101 of the VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act (MISSION Act) of 2018. Last month, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie announced its proposed access standards for community care and urgent care provisions that will take effect in June and guide when Veterans can seek care to meet their needs under the MISSION Act – be it with VA or with community providers.

Under the MISSION Act, signed by President Trump in June 2018, there are six different eligibility criteria for community care:

- Services unavailable
- Residence in a State without a full-service VA medical facility
- 40-mile legacy/grandfathered from the Choice program
- Access standards
- Best medical interest
- Needing care from a VA medical service line that VA determines is not providing care that complies with VA’s standards for quality

ACCESS STANDARDS

VA is proposing new access standards, effective when the final regulations publish (expected in June 2019), to ensure Veterans have greater choice in receiving care. Eligibility criteria and final standards as follows were based on VA’s analysis of all of the best practices both in government and in the private sector and tailored to the needs of our Veteran patients:

- Access standards will be based on average drive time and appointment wait times. \
- For primary care, mental health, and non-institutional extended care services, VA is proposing a 30-minute average drive time standard.
- For specialty care, VA is proposing a 60-minute average drive time standard.
- VA is proposing appointment wait-time standards of 20 days for primary care, mental health care, and non-institutional extended care services, and 28 days for specialty care from the date of request with certain exceptions.

Eligible Veterans who cannot access care within those standards would be able to choose between eligible community providers and care at a VA medical facility. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said, “Our medical services must meet our Veterans’ needs and reinforce the trust that forms the basis for every interaction with VA. Our new access standards are a vital part of this effort. b“Most Americans can already choose the health care providers that they trust, and President Trump promised that Veterans would be able to do the same. With VA’s new access standards, the future of the VA health care system will lie in the hands of Veterans – exactly where it should be.”

Secretary Wilkie’s full statement from Jan. 28 is [available here](#). . The proposed regulation (RIN 2900-AQ46) is currently available online at <https://federalregister.gov/d/2019-03030>. The proposed regulation was published in the Federal Register tomorrow on 22 FEB and VA encourages the public to provide input on the proposed regulation by

March 25, 2019, during the public comment period. For instructions on how to submit a comment, visit the Federal Register website at www.regulations.gov and search for RIN 2900-AQ46. [Source: VA News Release | February 22, 2019 ++]

VA Employment Update 06 ► Blasted Over Unfilled Health Care Positions | 49K Empty Posts

Federal union officials accused the Veterans Affairs Department of undermining its own health care system by not filling thousands of open department health positions while they push new rules covering more medical appointments at private-sector hospitals. But VA officials dismissed the criticism as unfounded, since the department completed more appointments than ever before last fiscal year and has kept staff vacancy rates below comparable industry standards. At issue are nearly 49,000 empty posts within VA, just under 12 percent of the 420,000-plus jobs there. Department officials said that vacancy rate is normal for the sprawling bureaucracy, noting that they had a net increase of more than 3,000 employees last quarter.

The current number of vacancies is greater than the approximately 35,000 positions that were open 18 months ago, when critics and lawmakers first accused department leaders of not doing enough to keep the agency fully staffed. It's also above the 45,000 unfilled slots reported last September. Union officials call the new figure "unconscionable" and part of a concerted effort by President Donald Trump's administration to drain resources from the VA. "The administration is setting us up to fail so they can dismantle veterans' preferred health care provider," said Alma Lee, National Veterans Affairs council president for the American Federation of Government Employees. AFGE leaders have fought with VA officials for years over efforts to expand outside health care options for veterans. President Donald Trump has said that doing so gives veterans more varied and convenient choices, while the union has labeled it an effort to privatize core VA responsibilities.

The department vacancies have played a significant role in that fight, because union leaders say hiring more health professionals would reduce wait times and appointment backlogs throughout the system. VA officials say they have worked to do that, but nationwide shortages in a host of medical professional specialties limit the effectiveness of that approach. They also argue that using existing private-sector infrastructure to help give veterans more options works in conjunction with the hiring push. Of the vacancies, almost 43,000 are in the Veterans Health Administration (11 percent of the total workforce). In the past, department officials have said many of those open jobs are part of the normal hiring process for any large organization and that comparable health care companies have vacancy rates of 20 percent or more.

VA spokesman Curt Cashour noted that the department hired an additional 1,045 mental health professionals in the last year. He also said the department's total number of full-time positions has grown steadily in recent years. "VA has more employees than ever before, its budget is bigger than ever before and the department is completing more internal medical appointments than ever before," he said. "Privatization is a myth that has been thoroughly debunked." Democrats in Congress have promised to force the hiring issue in coming months, as VA officials put into place new outside care rules authorized under the Mission Act, signed into law last summer.

Cashour noted that new employee recruitment is expected to grow during that period, as department officials increase hiring efforts in keeping with the Mission Act standards. Department officials have also said that the eased rules for outside care appointments will not increase the total number of veterans health care appointments in the private sector. In 2018, 34 percent of all VA appointments were outside the federal system, down from 36 percent in 2017. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | May 21, 2019 ++]

VA Nursing Home Care Update 03 ► Cost Could Top \$10 billion in 5 Years

More than one million veterans will be eligible for taxpayer-funded nursing home services within the next five years, according to the latest estimates from federal administrators trying to balance the costs of institutional care with alternative options allowing those individuals to stay in their homes. Already, the annual costs of nursing home care have risen to almost \$6 billion, Veterans Affairs officials told lawmakers at a congressional hearing last week. By 2024, that number could top \$10 billion, a significant portion of the department's overall budget. "As veterans age, approximately 80 percent will develop the need for some long-term services and support," Dr. Teresa Boyd, assistant deputy undersecretary for health at the Veterans Health Administration, told lawmakers. "The aging of the veteran population has been more rapid and represents a greater proportion of the VA patient population than in other healthcare systems."



Debra Reeser, an ophthalmology health technician at Mountain Home VA Healthcare System in Tennessee, conducts an eye exam on a veteran in February 2016

By law, VA officials must provide nursing home care for veterans with service-connected disabilities rated 70 percent or more. The department currently maintains 156 state homes across all 50 states. But a study by USA Today and the Boston Globe last fall found that about two-thirds of those facilities scored worse than private-sector nursing homes in a series of quality indicators last year. And VA officials acknowledge that many veterans are seeking options to remain at their own homes or with family caregivers rather than enter the institutions, a shift in cultural preferences in recent years. "There's an urgent need to accelerate the increase and the availability of the services since most veterans prefer to receive care at home," Boyd said. "And VA can improve quality at a lower cost."

Dr. Scotte Hartonft, acting director of VA's Office of Geriatrics & Extended Care, said programs like adult day care, home-based primary care and tele-health options have been extended significantly in recent years. He called those programs a win for both veterans and the department. "It provides (veterans a) choice, but it also is much less expensive than nursing home care," he said. Two years ago, VA officials launched the Choose Home Initiative to promote and expand more home care initiatives. Hartonft said five VA medical centers are running pilot programs related to that goal, with an eye towards expansion in coming years.

Lawmakers said that work is critical, not only for today's elderly veterans population but for the long-term issues facing the Iraq and Afghanistan war generation. "Looking forward to 2035, the veterans of Afghanistan and Iraq will be middle aged, they'll have health issues much like the Vietnam veterans experience today," said Rep. Sanford Bishop, D-Ga. "They have the co-morbidities of post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, palliative traumas. How is VA going to address this?" More information on VA long-term and geriatric care is available at [the VA web site](#). [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 20, 2019 ++]

VA Budget FY 2020 Update 01 ► Private Care | Vet Groups Propose Doubling 2019's

As the Department of Veterans Affairs works toward expanding its use of private-sector doctors, three veterans groups proposed this week that the White House and Congress approve a budget for private care in 2020 that's nearly double what was appropriated for 2019. The Veterans of Foreign Wars, Disabled American Veterans and Paralyzed Veterans of America suggested a community care budget of more than \$18 billion – up from the \$9.4 billion appropriated for fiscal year 2019, which ends 30 SEP 2019. Without an increase in funding, the groups are concerned money for private care could be stripped from the VA health care system.

The VA Mission Act, a law that expands veterans' access to private doctors, is set to go into effect in June. The veterans groups warned 14 FEB that the Mission Act "has created a financial obligation that, absent sufficient resources to fully and faithfully enact this legislation, could erode efforts to reform and modernize the VA health care system." The groups based their proposal on limited information available about the VA's proposed rules for its new community care program. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie unveiled 30 JAN his proposed rules that stipulate when veterans would be allowed to receive private-sector medical treatment – changes that he said would revolutionize the VA health care system.

Under the VA's proposed rules, veterans who must drive more than 30 minutes to reach their VA mental health or primary care providers – or wait longer than 20 days for an appointment – would be allowed to use a private doctor. The VA plans to post the proposed rules to the Federal Register, where members of the public will be allowed to provide input. Some lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have urged Wilkie for more transparency and collaboration about the access standards. Adrian Atizado, deputy legislative director for Disabled American Veterans, said the groups would update their budget proposal if they received more information from the agency, such as concrete cost estimates. "Part of the concern is there's not going to be enough information," Atizado said. "They may have some information, but very little budget justification... It's like a fortress over there."

For more than 30 years, the VFW, DAV and PVA have compiled and sent an annual report of VA budget and policy recommendations, known as the Independent Budget, to lawmakers and the presidential administration. In a break from their normal practice, the groups listed only one "critical" issue this year: ensuring the VA "fully and faithfully" implements the VA Mission Act. "[We] recognize that Congress and the administration continue to face immense pressure to reduce federal spending," the groups wrote. "However, we believe that the ever-growing demand for health care and benefits, particularly with more health care being provided in the community purchased by VA, certainly validates the continued need for sufficient funding." The VA budget more than doubled in the past decade from \$90 billion in 2009 to surpassing \$200 billion for the first time in fiscal year 2019. The \$200 billion includes \$88 billion in discretionary spending. The VFW, DAV and PVA proposed a \$15 billion increase of discretionary spending for fiscal year 2020, to \$103 billion. President Donald Trump is expected to release his budget request for fiscal year 2020 sometime in March.

One group that has gained more influence under Trump's administration is lobbying for cuts to the VA budget. Concerned Veterans for America (CVA), a conservative group backed by billionaires Charles and David Koch, listed "cost controls for the VA budget" as one of its priorities this year. "It doesn't make sense for the VA to continue to have these large budget increases," said Dan Caldwell, executive director of CVA. "It's going to be tougher with the new Congress. We don't think at this time there's an appetite for some of these reforms, if we're being honest, but we still need to have that discussion." The group is proposing the VA eliminate unused infrastructure, and it questions whether the agency needs to fill all of the tens of thousands of staff vacancies nationwide. CVA also wants the VA and Congress to consider introducing copays when veterans use private-sector care. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 15, 2019 ++]

VA Prosthetics Update 19 ► Eligibility to Receive

Veterans who receive VA care for any condition may also receive prosthetic appliances, equipment and services such as home respiratory therapy, artificial limbs, orthopedic braces and therapeutic shoes, wheelchairs, powered mobility, crutches, canes, walkers, special aids, appliances, optical and electronic devices for visual impairment and other durable medical equipment and supplies. Veterans who are approved for a guide or service dog may also receive service dog benefits including veterinary care and equipment.

Also, VA medical services include diagnostic audiology and diagnostic and preventive eye care services. VA will provide hearing aids and eyeglasses to veterans who meet the following conditions:

- Veterans with any compensable service-connected disability.
- Veterans who are former prisoners of war (POWs).
- Veterans who were awarded a Purple Heart.
- Veterans in receipt of benefits under Title 39, United States Code (U.S.C.) 1151.
- Veterans in receipt of an increased pension based on being rated permanently housebound or in need of regular aid and attendance.
- Veterans with vision or hearing impairment resulting from diseases or the existence of another medical condition for which the veteran is receiving care or services from VHA, or which resulted from treatment of that medical condition, e.g., stroke, polytrauma, traumatic brain injury, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, vascular disease, geriatric chronic illnesses, toxicity from drugs, ocular photosensitivity from drugs, cataract surgery, and/or other surgeries performed on the eye, ear, or brain resulting in vision or hearing impairment.
- Veterans with significant functional or cognitive impairment evidenced by deficiencies in the ability to perform activities or daily living, but not including normally occurring visual or hearing impairments. Note: Veterans with normally occurring visual and/or hearing impairments that interfere with their medical care are eligible for eyeglasses and hearing aids.
- Veterans who have vision or hearing impairment or combined visual and hearing impairments severe enough that it interferes with their ability to participate actively in their own medical treatment.

[Source: USVCP | June 5, 2018 ++]

VA.gov New Format ► Check It Out | Big Improvement

The U.S. Digital Service and the Department of Veterans Affairs launched an effort in March 2018 to redesign and streamline the [VA.gov](https://www.va.gov) website. They didn't change much actual content, but instead reorganized and reframed web pages to make it easier for veterans to find the information they needed. The project was completed in November 2018, and customer satisfaction with the altered web pages increased over 20 points in the months that followed. "The satisfaction went from a 55 to a 67 essentially overnight by providing customization, plain language, one version of any of the content or one version of the tool people were trying to get to, and overall people were much, much happier," Chris Johnston, product manager of digital service at VA, told Federal Times.

According to Marcy Jacobs, executive director of digital service at VA, that increased satisfaction also led to more veterans using online services, which both makes their lives easier and saves the agency money. "Aggregating that information and making it easier for people to find without changing the healthcare application — years ago we redesigned the healthcare application but we didn't do that on this launch, we just put it front and center on the homepage — that increased the traffic to the healthcare application by 52 percent," Jacobs told Federal Times. Use of

online forms for education benefits jumped by nine percent. “In the private sector even just nine percent, let alone 50 percent increase overnight in any transaction you were trying to improve, would be monumental,” said Johnston.

The project organized the many benefits veterans receive into eight content areas — healthcare, disability, education and training, careers and employment, pension, housing assistance, life insurance, and burials and memorials — plus a records section that helps vets find out what information the agency has on them. The site also gave users the ability to change their address information online, which could previously only be done over the phone.

- “You take people out of the call center lines, people who don’t want to call somebody but want to go just update their address online, which they previously couldn’t do but now they can do. That’s been the No. 2 called about thing. Maybe that’s a short call and it only costs \$8, maybe, but those were people that were getting out of that line, and to do it online, self-service is pennies,” said Jacobs.
- “You’re kind of the expert on where you live, so we should show you where we think you live and, if that’s wrong, let you update it. And not update it in the 87 places — not exaggerating — that it lives, but let you update it once, and then we take care of propagating that to all the other places.”
- According to Jacobs, the agency wastes a lot of money on unopened mail, approximately 40 percent of which is sent to the wrong address. Making it easier for someone to update their address themselves may significantly cut into that number.

Compared to most government software projects, the redesign of VA.gov was relatively fast — approximately eight months — and relied on a team of about 40 to 50 people at its largest, a small number compared to the 7,702 employees in the VA office of information technology. The project in total updated 200 to 300 of the site’s approximately 2,000 web pages, but that narrow focus was the key to its success. “I think that’s something that a lot of agencies struggle with, is that they try to do everything at once, they try to do too much at once. And I think that they end up going a mile wide and an inch deep, and they end up delivering nothing,” said Jacobs. “They write down requirements for two years, they try to write down every possible permutation, and then they try to do everything.”

According to Johnston, part of the problem is that the government’s mentality about building stuff is better suited for physical objects than software. “The government has a way of buying and building stuff. If you’re going to build a battleship, you’re going to make blueprints for it, you’re going to hire somebody to do that, and then you’re going to hire somebody to build the battleship ... and eight years later you’re going to have a battleship,” said Johnston. “Software is not the same. Software is almost a living thing that needs constant attention.”

According to Jacobs, USDS is one of the few government organizations taking such an approach to software, but their work is applicable across nearly all government agencies. “We’re kind of the only ones building the forms and building the functionality. But it certainly doesn’t need to be that way, and we don’t want to be the bottleneck.” The team is now planning to get to work on other pages of the website, improving the user portal and potentially creating a system that pre-fills forms for service members transitioning into veteran life.

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Here is the result of the streamlining project. Any veteran can now open VA.gov and the first thing they will see is one page with the below subjects to click on:

Health Care
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Refill and track your prescriptions• Send a secure message to your health care team• Schedule and view your appointments• View your lab and test results• Apply now for VA health care
Disability

- [Check your claim or appeal status](#)
- [View your payment history](#)
- [Upload evidence to support your claim](#)
- [File for a VA disability increase](#)
- [File a claim for compensation](#)

Education

- [Check your Post-9/11 GI Bill® benefits](#)
- [View your payment history](#)
- [Change your current education benefits](#)
- [Compare GI Bill benefits by school](#)
- [Apply for education benefits](#)

Records

- [Get Veteran ID cards](#)
- [Get your VA medical records](#)
- [Download your benefit letters](#)
- [Apply for a home loan COE](#)
- [Request your military records \(DD214\)](#)

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Jessie Bur | February 14, 2019 ++]

VA RAMP Update 03 ► **Program to End Ahead of Implementation of New Veteran Appeals Law**

On 14 FEB, the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced it will discontinue the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP), which provided eligible Veterans with early resolutions to their appealed claims, ahead of full implementation of the Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act of 2017 that takes effect Feb. 19, 2019. VA will not accept RAMP elections from Veterans with a legacy appeal after Feb. 15, 2019; however, RAMP claims pending on or after 15 FEB will continue to be processed until the inventory is complete.

Beginning 19 FEB, Veterans who appeal a VA decision will have three decision review choices: Higher-Level Review, Supplemental Claim, and appeal to the Board of Veterans' Appeals. VA will now offer Veterans greater choice in how VA reviews their claim is committed to ensuring the claims process is accurate, timely and fair. "VA has been preparing for full implementation of the Appeals Modernization Act over the past 18 months to ensure the new, streamlined process is available to Veterans who have long sought reform of the broken legacy system," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "We encourage Veterans whose appeal is currently in the legacy system to opt in to RAMP before February 15 to take full advantage of the benefits of the new process."

VA initiated RAMP in November 2017 to provide some of the benefits of the new law's streamlined process before full implementation. Participation in RAMP is voluntary. However, processing times under the program have been faster than legacy appeal processing times. Under the legacy process, decisions currently average three to seven years. Veterans who have a legacy appeal after Feb. 15 will be able to opt in to the process when they receive a Statement of the Case or a Supplemental Statement of the Case after the new law is effective 19 FEB.

Veterans who participate in RAMP can choose to have their VA decision reviewed in either the Supplemental Claim or Higher-Level Review lanes. In the Higher-Level Review lanes, a more experienced adjudicator will conduct a new look at the previous decision based on the evidence considered in the previous decision. Participants who select the Supplemental Claim option may submit new and relevant evidence, and VA will assist in developing new evidence

under its duty to assist. VA's goal is to complete Supplemental Claims and Higher-Level Reviews in an average of 125 days. For more information on Appeals Modernization, visit <https://benefits.va.gov/benefits/appeals.asp> and <https://www.bva.va.gov>. [Source: VA News Release | February 14, 2019 ++]

VA Home Loan Update 66 ► New Rule on Cash-Out Refinance Loans

On 19 FEB the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs announced that it has published an interim final rule relating to VA-guaranteed cash-out refinance loans to further protect Veteran home-loan borrowers from predatory lending practices. This rule implements certain provisions of the Economic Growth, Regulatory Relief, and Consumer Protection Act, and provides new regulatory safeguards relating to VA-guaranteed cash-out refinance loans. Such loans generally allow borrowers to convert home equity into cash. In many cases, the principal balance of the new refinance loan is larger than the payoff amount of the loan being refinanced. This means the Veteran will generally receive some amount of cash at closing. The cash can then be used at the Veteran's discretion to pay off debt, fund education, make home improvements and more.

VA's cash-out home-loan program can also be used to refinance a non-VA loan into a VA-guaranteed loan. Certain borrowers can use VA-guaranteed cash-out refinance loans to borrow up to 100 percent of the value of their home. "VA has taken significant steps to make the home-loan benefit the most competitive loan program available to Veterans," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "We want to ensure the home-loan program remains strong, attractive and accessible to all who are eligible, while creating a framework for lender accountability to Veterans and taxpayers."

The rule will help protect Veterans from predatory refinance practices and minimize risk to taxpayers and the secondary mortgage market. For example, the rule specifically requires that lenders disclose clearly, both at the time of application and again at closing, a plain comparison of the existing loan's cost with that of the new loan. These disclosures will help Veterans understand the impact of the refinance loan. This is in line with VA's current policy on Interest Rate Reduction Refinance Loans. Further, the rule imposes loan seasoning and "net tangible benefit" standards. To meet the seasoning requirement, at least 210 days must pass and six monthly payments must be made prior to refinancing an existing loan. The cash-out refinance loan must also provide the Veteran with at least one of eight "net tangible benefits" defined by VA in the rule.

Since 1944, VA has guaranteed over 23 million home loans worth more than \$2 trillion. Veterans with questions about the VA Home Loan Program should call 877-827-3702. For more information on the VA Home Loan program, visit <https://www.benefits.va.gov/homeloans>. [Source: Office of Public and Intergovernmental Affairs | February 19, 2019 ++]

VA Appeals Update 35 ► Appeals Modernization Act | Biggest Change in Decades

In what Department of Veterans Affairs officials are calling the biggest change to its appeals process in decades, the department is launching a new system in FEB for veterans challenging their disability claims decisions. The new process gives veterans three options for contesting their claims, with an eye toward drastically reducing the time it takes to receive a final decision.

At the height of the VA appeals backlog in 2013, some veterans had waited years for a decision and more than 610,000 claims sat adjudicated. To tackle the backlog -- defined as cases that weren't decided within 125 days -- the VA hired new employees, instituted mandatory overtime and introduced new processing systems. Still, the problem persisted with an average wait time for a decision reaching up to three years and the number of backlogged

appeals climbing to roughly 300,000 by 2017, when Congress passed the Appeals Modernization Act, or AMA. Under the AMA, veterans will have three choices if they want to appeal the decision on their disability compensation or other VA claim.

The first option is the "supplemental claim lane," in which they can introduce new evidence in their case and have a regional specialist review it and make a decision. Or they can choose the "higher-level review lane," in which they request that their case be reviewed by a senior adjudicator rather than the regional office. This review will consist largely of looking for errors or mistakes made in interpreting VA policies or laws governing the claim. If a problem is found, the senior claims adjudicator can require that a correction be made. And finally, they can appeal the decision to the Board of Veterans' Appeals -- basically the same as the current system, although there will be several paths to consider if they request a board review. These paths include:

- A direct review, in which they don't submit any additional information and waive their right for a hearing;
- Submission of extra evidence without a hearing;
- Or a full hearing, in which they can submit more evidence and testify before a judge.

When veterans receive their initial claims decision, they also will get a letter explaining the reasoning for it, as well as the appeal options "in clear language," said Cheryl Mason, chairwoman of the VA's Board of Veterans Appeals. "What the AMA was built and designed to do was create a simplified process for veterans. ... [Officials] realized that veterans were confused by the process; it was a complex system and it simply took too long," she said. The new system will be used throughout the VA for any claim that requires a decision, according to Dave McLenachen, director of the Veterans Benefits Administration appeals management office. This includes education and insurance decisions, vocational rehabilitation and caregiver benefits applications, he said.

VA leaders hope that the new system will reduce the time it takes for veterans to receive a decision on their appeal to 125 days. Currently, the VA's claims backlog is 265,000 cases, while an additional 136,000 cases are under review by the Veterans Board of Appeals, for a total of more than 400,000 cases. VA officials said Thursday that the goal is to clear the backlog by 2020. A pilot version of the new system, called the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program, or RAMP, was introduced shortly after the AMA was signed. According to McLenachen, more than 70,000 veterans with 84,000 claims appealed through RAMP. The VA has adjudicated 70 percent of those appeals, awarding about \$250 million in retroactive benefits, he added.

RAMP will stop accepting new appeals on 15 FEB. Veterans whose claims were filed through RAMP will continue to be processed. Veterans whose claims are currently in the system and who don't apply for a decision through RAMP by Friday can opt into the new system if they receive a statement of case from the VA or supply supplemental evidence and receive a supplemental statement from the VA.

Legislators and veterans service organizations helped craft the new system and have largely been supportive of it, although some have voiced concerns over legacy claims and the information technology infrastructure needed to support the new program. VA officials said they are ready, having hired 605 new employees to handle the appeals. Mason called the new system a "veteran-friendly change." "It gives veterans a choice and control over their process instead of getting stuck in the legacy system for three to seven years, on average," she said. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | February 14, 2019 ++]

*** Vets ***



UCMJ Update 05 ► Applicability to Retirees Upheld by Supreme Court

The U.S. Supreme Court has upheld the Defense Department's authority to prosecute retired service members for crimes they commit, even after retirement. The court on 22 FEB chose not to hear the case of a retired Marine who was court-martialed for a sexual assault he committed three months after leaving the service in August 2015. By not accepting the case, *Larrabee v. the United States*, the court upheld the status quo: that military retirees are subject to the Uniform Code of Military Justice. The denial of Larrabee's petition marks the high court's second rebuff in a year of a case involving a military retiree accused of non-military crimes in retirement.

Retired Marine Corps Staff Sgt. Steven Larrabee was convicted of sexually assaulting a bartender, the wife of an active-duty Marine, at a bar in Iwakuni, Japan, where he worked as a civilian. He had been retired -- technically, placed on the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve status list -- for three months. Following a general court-martial in which he wore civilian clothes, Larrabee was sentenced to eight years' confinement, a reprimand and a dishonorable discharge. In a pre-trial agreement, Larrabee's prison term was reduced to 10 months. Larrabee served his sentence but tried to have his conviction overturned on appeal, arguing that he should have been tried in a civilian court, as the offenses occurred after he was retired.

The case closely resembles that of retired Gunnery Sgt. Derek Dinger who, also while living on Okinawa and on the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve list and, later, the Active Duty Retired List, was found to be in possession of and producing child pornography. He was arrested and initially indicted within the civilian courts, but his case ended up in the military court system, where he was convicted and sentenced to nine years' confinement and a dishonorable discharge. Dinger appealed his discharge, arguing that the case should not have fallen under the military court system and that a dishonorable discharge should be reserved for "those who separated under conditions of dishonor." His challenge also was petitioned to the U.S. Supreme Court. It was denied last June.

Attorneys for both Marines argued that the cases should have been considered by the U.S. Supreme Court because they have far-reaching consequences for military retirees. The law stipulates that "retired members of a regular component of the armed forces who are entitled to pay" and "members of the Fleet Marine Corps Reserve" are subject to court-martial jurisdiction. The reasoning, the government argues, is that retirement is simply a change of military status and retired personnel are subject to recall should the need arise. But Stephen Vladeck, a University of Texas law professor who represented Larrabee, said that this argument no longer holds true with the rise of the reserve component. He called the idea that retirees are reserved for future service "anachronistic," adding that military retirees are no longer among the "pool of persons at the ready" and thus should not be subject to the UCMJ. "Increasingly, the function has been performed by reserves, not retirees," he said.

Furthermore, Vladeck said in an interview with *Military.com*, there are articles in the UCMJ that could place many military retirees at risk for arrest, and the U.S. Supreme Court has an interest in weighing in on how cases involving retirees are handled. He cited one provision in the UCMJ that makes "contemptuous words" used by a commissioned officer "against the president, the vice president, Congress" and others as punishable by court-martial. "From Adm. Bill McRaven to Gen. Michael Hayden and Gen. Martin Dempsey, some of President Donald Trump's more visible

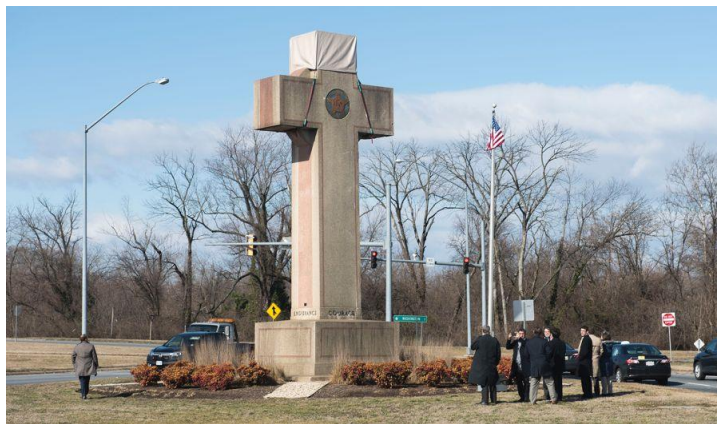
critics of late have been retired military officers. And a provision of federal law ... makes it a crime, triable by court-martial," he wrote in a blog post on Lawfare.

"But does the Constitution really allow the government to subject to military trial those who have retired from active duty -- in some cases, long ago -- even for offenses committed while they are retired?" Yes, it does, according to the Supreme Court, in its denial of Larrabee's and Dinger's writs of certiorari. Retired Maj. Gen. Charles Dunlap, former deputy judge advocate general of the Air Force, concurs. In a 16 FEB post on Duke University School of Law's Lawfire blog, Dunlap said Congress explicitly states that the UCMJ applies to retirees and that Vladeck's arguments about the impropriety of senior officers speaking out against the president, as well as the "anachronistic" idea that retirees can be recalled to active duty, aren't valid.

He added that the very act of receiving retired pay means that retired personnel are choosing to keep a relationship with the military and accept all that goes with the choice not to terminate their commission or request a discharge. "As a retired service member subject to military jurisdiction, count me among those of my comrades-in-arms who believe it a small price to pay to maintain the connection with the armed forces," Dunlap wrote. Meanwhile, the Supreme Court's refusal to hear the Larrabee case may not be the end of the legal road for the retired Marine. According to Vladeck, Larrabee may consider suing for back pay in the Court of Federal Claims. Vladeck believes his client is entitled to do so under the Military Pay Act. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | February 22, 2019 ++]

Bladensburg WWI Vet Memorial Update 07 ► High Court to Decide Fate 27 FEB

Steven C. Lowe says he has always thought that a 40-foot-tall concrete cross that stands on a large, grassy highway median near his home was odd. For years, he said, he didn't know that the cross in Bladensburg, Md., is a war memorial. A plaque on the base of the cross lists the names of 49 local residents who died in World War I, but it isn't easily read from the road and getting to the monument requires dashing across traffic. Lowe said he felt the cross implied that the city where it stands favored Christians over others. "It certainly made me raise my eyebrows," said Lowe, 68, who is retired from the telecommunications industry.



Visitors walk around the 40-foot-tall Maryland Peace Cross dedicated to World War I soldiers on Wednesday, Feb. 13, 2019, in Bladensburg, Md.

In 2014, Lowe, two other local residents and the District of Columbia-based American Humanist Association, a group that includes atheists and agnostics, sued to challenge the cross. They argue that the location of the cross on public land violates the First Amendment's establishment clause, which prohibits the government from favoring one religion over others. The group lost the first round in court, but in 2017, an appeals court ruled the cross unconstitutional. Now, supporters of the cross are asking the Supreme Court to overturn that ruling in a case the

justices will hear 27 FEB The memorial’s supporters would seem to have a good shot based on the court’s decision to take the case and the court’s more conservative makeup, seen as more likely to uphold such displays. Plus, even liberal Justice Stephen Breyer voted in a 2005 case to uphold a Ten Commandments display on public property.

Backers of the nearly 100-year-old cross, also called the “Peace Cross,” say if the justices rule against them, it could threaten hundreds of monuments nationwide. Opponents, for their part, say few memorials are truly similar. They argue the cross should be moved to private property or modified into a nonreligious monument such as a slab or an obelisk, a suggestion backers say would be desecration.

Arguing for the cross at the high court are The American Legion, which raised money for the cross and completed it in 1925, and officials with the state of Maryland, which took over managing the site in 1960. They have the support of the Trump administration and 30 states. Supporters say the cross is a fixture of Bladensburg, about 5 miles from the Supreme Court. Traffic reporters use it as a reference point in radio reports. Residents give directions that refer to it. Maryland officials argue that the cross doesn’t violate the Constitution because it has a secular purpose and meaning, honoring veterans, in an area where several other memorials to veterans stand. On the other side, the American Humanist Association says that using a cross as a war memorial doesn’t make the cross secular; it makes the war memorial Christian.

Similar monuments have met with a mixed fate at the high court. On the same day in 2005, for example, the court upheld a Ten Commandments monument on the grounds of the Texas state capitol while striking down Ten Commandments displays in Kentucky courthouses. Justice Breyer, whose vote made the difference in the outcome in both cases, said the history of the courthouse displays demonstrated a government effort to promote religion while the Texas display had a primarily nonreligious purpose. The American Legion, represented by lawyers with the Texas-based First Liberty Institute, says that a test the court announced in 1971 for use in such cases, which asks whether the government’s action has a secular purpose, advances or inhibits religion or fosters “an excessive government entanglement with religion,” has proved unworkable. They say that question the justices should be asking is whether the government’s action is coercive, which they say the cross is not. The court doesn’t have to rule that broadly, however, to side with the monument’s supporters.

The monument’s backers say they just want the cross left alone. Speaking recently at an American Legion post near the cross, member Stan Shaw said modifying the cross would be “a slap in a veteran’s face.” As for the suggestion the monument should be moved, Mike Moore, another member, said he’s “not sure how one could do it.” Add that to the fact that the monument is cracking and repair work has been on hold. Relatives of the men whose names are on the cross also asked the court to let it stand where it is. Mary Ann LaQuay, whose uncle, Thomas Fenwick, is listed on the cross, said it’s a way for her to remember her uncle, who caught pneumonia and died while fighting in France. His grave is in Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia, but LaQuay, 80, said she feels “like the cross represents his memorial.”

Those challenging the cross say they want to make clear that they aren’t against veterans or memorials to veterans. Fred Edwards, a longtime official with the American Humanist Association, said they just don’t think it’s right to leave the impression that only Christian soldiers are being celebrated. Lowe, who lives near the cross in the District of Columbia, said some people have asked him, “Why not just leave the cross alone?” “I think it was a violation of the Constitution when it was built,” he said. “The fact that it is old doesn’t make it right. It’s an old wrong.” [Source: | Associated Press | Jessica Gresko | February 25, 2019 ++]

Desert Storm Memorial Update 10 ► Marks an ‘Atonement’ for Vietnam War Mistakes

Though separated by a few hundred yards, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the recently dedicated site of the future National Desert Storm and Desert Shield War Memorial are “inextricably” linked. That was a message echoed

by speakers at the 26 FEB dedication ceremony of the patch of land within sight of the Lincoln Memorial and the Wall. Retired Air Force Gen. Charles Albert “Chuck” Horne, ar Vietnam and Desert Storm veteran, struck at a question that supporters have encountered since inspiration to undertake the project began in 2010 — why build a monument to such a short conflict? First and most obvious, said Horner, is to memorialize the sacrifice of those who served and especially those who died. But it’s also important to show that military force applied to the right ends with the right leadership could accomplish its mission. And that the American public can honor and respect its veterans.

He called it a monument to actions that led to the “atonement” for the disaster that led to the more than 50,000 names of the dead on the Vietnam Wall. “This monument should be a place that every president and secretary of defense should come and visit prior to committing our nation to war,” Horner said. The actual Desert Storm monument is at least a few years away, but the legislative and site approval hurdles have been cleared. Now the Desert Storm War Memorial Association needs to finalize the concept and design, and finish raising money to build the structure. The concept approval and design phases are underway. Association President and CEO Scott Stump said that they’ve raised \$2.5 million of the \$34 million they’ll need to build the monument. They hope to have the monument completed before Veterans Day 2021, which would mark 30 years since the conflict.

Former Vice President Dick Cheney, who served as defense secretary during Desert Storm, recounted how he and his wife came to the Vietnam memorial the morning of the day that combat operations commenced in Desert Storm. “I wanted to make sure we got it right this time,” Cheney said. In specific ways, the administration and Pentagon conducted that war very differently than how the Vietnam War unfolded. A coalition of 34 nations was put together. The United Nations security council saw a rare unanimous vote in support by all of its permanent members. “Desert Storm was so swift and certain in result that to some, in retrospect, it looked almost easy,” Cheney said. That, in some ways, has been the conflict’s own weakness in historical memory.

Stump, a Desert Storm Marine veteran, said it was in 2010 when it dawned on him that the conflict was in danger of becoming a historical footnote, sandwiched between Vietnam and the post-9/11 wars. Often discussions he had with non-veterans would fall into three areas, either people didn’t know anything about the war, or they thought it was a continuation of the post-9/11 Iraq invasion or they brushed it off as the 100-hour video game war in which nobody died. All three versions are wrong. Stump points to the differences in the missions. The Persian Gulf War was focused on liberating Kuwait, while the Iraq War was to topple dictator Saddam Hussein’s government. The air war went on for more than 40 days, laying the foundation for the brief ground combat portion. And despite efforts to avoid deaths, more than 300 coalition troops were killed; of those, 148 U.S. service members died in the operations.

Kentucky Lt. Gov. Jeane Hampton, an Air Force veteran of Desert Storm, envisions the monument in a place alongside the other war memorials. She’s taken part in multiple “honor flights,” bringing veterans here for a tour of memorials, specifically to the monuments to their conflict. “And, in time, this memorial will be part of that trek,” she said.

One veteran who’s likely to be in the front of the line when the monument is eventually built is John Schimpf, a Desert Storm Marine veteran who served with the 2nd Battalion of the 24th Marines, a reserve unit out of Illinois. Schimpf spent eight years in the Marine Reserve, from 1989 to 1997, and deployed twice, once for Desert Storm and once for a peacekeeping mission. He served in a time of limited operations and small conflicts in which many service members could spend an entire career without seeing combat or even deploying overseas. “As a Marine, that’s what you look for, being able to use your training,” he said. He and those he deployed with made a quick tradition of meeting up on the Wednesday before Thanksgiving every year. It’s a tradition they’ve stuck with since a year after they got home in 1992. “How it impacted me?” Schimpf said. “It was my honor that it was my time to be able to serve. What more can you say?”

[Source: Military.com | Todd South | February 26, 2018 ++]

Vet Presidents ► Who They Were | Majority Were Veterans

The majority of our nation's presidents hold the distinction of once being called a Veteran before they ever held the title of Commander-in-Chief. The following facts are being presented in observance of President's Day, which takes place this year on 18 FEB.



- Thirty-one of the 45 U.S. presidents have served in the U.S. armed forces, and 12 of them were general officers (O-7 to O-11 with one, at least in theory, O-12). The three presidents to hold the highest military ranks were: George Washington, Dwight D. Eisenhower and Ulysses S. Grant, respectively.
- Washington held the rank of lieutenant general which would put him at O-9 using today's existing pay grade scale for U.S. service members, but in 1976, then-president Gerald R. Ford posthumously appointed him to General of the Armies of the United States. The only other person to hold the same title was Gen. John J. Pershing, who retired on Sept. 13, 1924. Although both Washington and Pershing received the same appointment, Washington is considered the higher-ranking officer as President Ford specified he would rank higher than all officers past, present and future. While there's technically no extra star, it's the only rank above five-star general. This special appointment would theoretically make Washington a six-star general, or O-12.
- President Eisenhower reached the status of a five-star general while serving as Supreme Allied Commander in Europe during World War II (1942-1945). He is one of only nine U.S. officers to have worn the five-star insignia. In all, four Army generals, four Navy admirals, and one Air Force general have officially worn the five-star insignia.
- President Grant served as lieutenant general until congress enacted legislation authorizing the grade of General of the Army on July 25, 1866. Although that title is now associated with the five-star insignia, Grant held the position as a four-star general. He saw combat in both the Mexican-American War and the American Civil War.
- Presidents Benjamin Harrison, Chester Arthur, and Franklin Pierce were brigadier generals(O-7), while Presidents William H. Harrison, Rutherford B. Hayes and Andrew Jackson reached the rank of major generals during the 1800's. President Jackson became a national war hero after defeating the British in the Battle of New Orleans during the War of 1812. In addition to those who went on to achieve general officer ranks, ten of the presidents obtained the rank of colonel (O-6). A couple of those colonels were also two of our nation's Founding Fathers: Thomas Jefferson (third president) and James Madison (fourth president). Both were colonial militia men, which would be considered the earlier version of today's National Guard.
- Other presidents who served as Army colonels were Harry S. Truman and Theodore Roosevelt (26th president). During the Spanish-American War, Roosevelt helped organized and command the 1st U.S. Volunteer Cavalry Regiment, better known as the Rough Riders. As a former president, Roosevelt volunteered for service in World War I, however, then-president Woodrow Wilson, declined Roosevelt's offer. Teddy Roosevelt posthumously received the Medal of Honor in 2001.

- Two of the presidents reached the pay grade of O-5. One of those O-5s was our 36th president and former Navy commander, Lyndon B. Johnson. LBJ served during World War II and was presented a Silver Star medal by Army Gen. Douglas MacArthur for his role in a B-26 bomber mission. The other was President James Monroe (fifth president).
- Two other presidents who had notable military service in the Navy were John F. Kennedy and George H. W. Bush, our 35th and 41st presidents respectively. Both men achieved the rank of lieutenant (O-3) and both served during World War II. JFK earned a Purple Heart and a medal for heroism.
- Six out of the 45 U.S. presidents served as officers in the Navy. In military uniforms pictured from left to right top row are: John F. Kennedy, Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. (Photos courtesy of Library of Congress. U.S. Navy. U.S. Air Force graphic by Senior Airman Luis Loza Gutierrez)
- Six out of the 45 U.S. presidents served as officers in the Navy. In military uniforms pictured from left to right top row are: John F. Kennedy, Gerald R. Ford, Jimmy Carter, George H. W. Bush, Lyndon B. Johnson and Richard Nixon. (Photos courtesy of Library of Congress. U.S. Navy. U.S. Air Force graphic by Senior Airman Luis Loza Gutierrez)
- According to his Navy and Marine Corps Medal citation, Kennedy “unhesitatingly braved the difficulties and hazards of darkness to direct rescue operations, swimming many hours to secure aid and food after he had succeeded in getting his crew ashore.” At age 19 our 41st commander-in-chief, President George H. W. Bush, became the youngest person to ever at the time to become an aviator in the U.S. Navy after deferring his admission to Yale University in order to accept his commission. The former Sailor also earned the Distinguished Flying Cross for his actions during a mission. He completed his attack on Japanese military forces despite his aircraft catching fire and ultimately crashing.
- Like JFK, LBJ and George Bush senior, Presidents Richard Nixon, Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, have the distinction of being referred to as our Six Sailor Presidents.
- President Bush’s son, George W. Bush became the nation’s 43rd president, but not before serving as a pilot with Texas Air National Guard’s 147th Fighter Group at Ellington Field. He completed flight training, and served as an F-102 fighter pilot before he left the Guard in 1973 after obtaining the rank of first lieutenant. He is currently the only president to have served in the modern-day U.S. Air Force.
- Ronald Reagan the 40th U.S. president, was part of the Air Force’s early history. Reagan served as a captain in the U.S. Army Air Force (also known as Army Air Corps). He helped make more than 400 training films when he was assigned to the 1st Motion Picture Unit in Culver City, Calif. He was discharged from active duty in 1945, prior to the Air Force becoming its own separate military service in 1947.
- President George W. Bush completed flight training, and served as an F-102 fighter pilot before he left the Air National Guard in 1973 after obtaining the rank of first lieutenant. He is currently the only president to have served in the modern-day U.S. Air Force; however, Ronald Reagan, our 40th president was part of the Air Force’s early history. Reagan served as a captain in the Army Air Force [also known as Army Air Corps]. (Photos courtesy Texas Air National Guard. and Ronald Reagan Library. U.S. Air Force graphic by Senior Airman Luis Loza Gutierrez)
- President John Tyler and Abraham Lincoln, were captains in the Army as well. President Abraham Lincoln, was a private in the Illinois State Militia. He fought in the Black Hawk War, and although his military service was only three months, he was elected to the rank of captain by his militia company. According to Renee Hylton, a historian for the National Guard Bureau, election of officers within militia units was a common practice at the time.

- Lincoln's predecessor, James Buchanan, the 15th president, held the lowest rank among our Veteran U.S. presidents. He was a private (E-1) in the Army, and the only president who enlisted without becoming a commissioned officer. He saw combat during the War of 1812.

For more information about U.S. presidents, visit the official [White House website](#). For a complete list of U.S. Veteran Presidents, click on the following link to an official web page for [National Museum of American History](#).

[Source: Vantage Point | Luis Loza Gutierrez | February 14, 2019 ++]

GI Bill Update 279 ► New High-Tech Program Coming Soon | VET TEC

A new pilot program from the Department of Veterans Affairs aims to help student veterans enroll in non-traditional programs that teach high-tech skills. Dubbed the Veteran Employment Through Technology Education Courses (VET TEC) program, it was announced 13 FEB on the GI Bill website. The VET TEC program, set to start in April, focuses on high-tech skills that are in demand in today's workplace, the VA says.

According to the VA, VET TEC will pay you a housing allowance and take care of tuition costs just like the Post-9/11 GI Bill. The difference is that you have to take classes in one of five areas:

- Information science
- Computer programming
- Data processing
- Media applications
- Computer software

The primary difference between this program and the Post-9/11 GI Bill is that the classes are much shorter than regular college or vocational training, sometimes requiring only months or weeks to gain certification. Anyone currently eligible to use their GI Bill -- Montgomery or Post-9/11 -- is qualified for the program as long as they haven't passed the time limit to use their benefits and have at least one day of benefits remaining. Unlike most GI Bill programs, any training received as part of VET TEC will not decrease your GI Bill entitlement in any way. It is essentially free money.

VET TEC is designed to move veterans into the job force faster than a traditional college program. Acquiring essential skills in such a short time gives you the opportunity to advance your career sooner rather than later. Many of the "coding boot camps" and other high-tech training will be included in this new program. To combat fraud, waste and abuse, the VA will pay the training provider 25 percent of the course cost when you enroll. Another 25 percent will be paid when you complete the program. The remaining 50 percent of the cost of training will be paid to the provider only when you "secure meaningful employment in the field of study that you enrolled in." According to the VA, training providers can be listed as a "preferred provider" if they agree to return all money they got from the VA if you don't find meaningful employment within 180 days.

The program has just been announced and, according to the VA, an online application will be available soon. The GI Bill website will be updated with an application, as well as a listing of all approved places you can use the program. Just like any other program, applying doesn't mean you will be accepted. Schools may have certain qualifications or testing requirements you must meet before you can enroll.

Whether you need a guide on how to use your GI Bill, want to take advantage of tuition assistance and scholarships, or get the lowdown on education benefits available for your family, Military.com can help. [Sign up for a free Military.com](#) membership to have education tips and benefits updates delivered directly to your inbox. [Source: Military.com | Jim Absher | February 13, 2019 ++]

GI Bill Update 280 ► Reducing/Eliminating Student Loan Debt

Hundreds of thousands of veterans, service members and their families have student loans. But most of them have no idea how much help is available to get those loans reduced or even eliminated entirely. Surveys have shown that more than one-third of service members and half of junior enlisted service members have student loans. Even with their military education benefits, one-quarter of veterans using the Post-9/11 GI Bill have federal student loan debt when they graduate. Today, approximately 200,000 active duty members owe a collective \$2.9 billion in student loan debt. All told, student loan issues are quickly becoming a crisis in America. But there's good news. You probably didn't know that you can get your loans reduced simply if you are not making enough money to pay your loans. Following are some ways you can reduce or even erase your student loan debt

While you're enlisted

Your first chance at reducing or eliminating student loan debt is when you join the U.S. armed forces. There are service-branch-specific programs to help alleviate student loan debt before you join the military. Even if you can't take advantage of these programs, it helps to spread awareness of them to others. And be sure to ask your recruiter about them!

For anyone on active duty, and that includes National Guard and reserve members ordered to active duty, you have significant legal rights, as well. No lender — private or federal — can charge you more than a 6 percent interest rate while you're on active duty, and they must charge a 0 percent interest rate if you're serving in a hostile area. This is ironclad, protected by federal statute, and often overlooked by many service members; don't be one of them. Make sure your lender isn't charging you more than 6 percent while on active duty. If you decide you don't want to repay your loans on active duty then you're entitled to postpone your loan payments. In addition, branches have specific programs to help with student loans: For example:

- The Army Student Loan Repayment [Program](#) offers repayment assistance to people who hadn't enlisted previously.
- If you're in a qualifying Military Occupational Specialty, you could get assistance through the Army Reserve College Loan Repayment [Program](#).
- The Health Professions Loan Repayment [Program](#) for those joining the Army or Navy helps doctors, dentists, and other healthcare professionals on active duty or in the Army Reserve.
- If you join the [Air Force](#) Judge Advocate General's Corps, you could get up to \$65,000 in student loan repayment assistance.
- If you're in the [Navy](#), you could receive up to \$65,000 in student loan repayment assistance.
- Finally, Federal Perkins Loan [holders](#) who serve in the U.S. armed forces in a hostile fire or imminent danger pay area for a period longer than a year qualify for up to 50 percent loan forgiveness if their active-duty service ended before Aug. 14, 2008, or up to 100 percent if their active duty service includes or began on or after Aug. 14, 2008.

After you leave the military

The opportunity to lower or forgive your student loan debt doesn't end after you separate from the military. First off, anyone with student loan debt who isn't making much money can apply to get into "income-based repayment" programs at the U.S. Education Department. They have [four programs](#) to lower your monthly payments if the monthly payments are too burdensome in light of your income. Most students don't know about it! Only a small fraction of Americans even apply, and many more are eligible. We can help you with the paperwork. Also, you may have extra rights to loan forgiveness:

- If you are 100 percent disabled or individually unemployable, you have a lot of rights. We can help make sure your rights are honored. The Education Department is supposed to give you complete forgiveness of your loans, but we can help you make sure they honor your rights. If you're in default on your loans, call us right away because that means the Education Department is violating your legal rights and our free lawyers can make them stop.
- If you're working in a public interest job, like at a nonprofit, government or civilian military position, then you may be eligible for loan forgiveness under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness [program](#).
- If you [teach](#) for five consecutive years in a low-income school or educational service agency then you may have up to \$17,500 in student loan debt forgiven.

You also have rights if your school violated your legal rights. Our free lawyers can help you get your rights honored. For example, you have rights and options to reduce or eliminate your loans if a school took out [loans in your name](#) without your permission, [defrauded](#) or deceived you or [wrongly enrolled](#) you in a program you couldn't benefit from. Also, of course, you have lots of rights to get your loans erased and some of your GI Bill back if your [school closed](#). A word of caution though: beware of scams. Apply only through the programs and websites associated with the Education Department, the U.S. armed forces, and approved loan servicers here.

Veterans Education Success (*a nonprofit organization serving veterans' educational needs*) is available to protect vets on their path towards prosperity and wants every service member and veteran to know they have their backs when it comes to understanding their rights! If needed, free lawyers are available to help you figure out your rights and help you with the paperwork. Email them at help@veteranseducationSuccess.org. For more information about Veterans Education Success contact Mike Saunders at mikesaunders@veteranseducationsuccess.org. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Mike Saunders | February 19, 2019 ++]

GI Bill Update 281 ► Vet Groups Ask VA to Keep benefits away from deceptive colleges

Thirty-six advocacy groups sent a letter to the head of Veterans Affairs (VA) in FEB urging the department to increase oversight of postsecondary education programs that are approved for GI benefits. The groups — which include the American Legion, Blue Star Families and AMVETS — cited concerns over a recent audit by the VA Office of Inspector General that estimated the department will waste \$2.3 billion over the next five years by making improper GI Bill payments, including to colleges with potentially fraudulent practices. The letter singled out Career Education Corporation, a for-profit college operator that has been widely accused of misleading students, as an example of an institution that has received improper payments. Career Education has the third-highest number of veteran complaints against it at the VA, according to the letter.

The audit, which looked into state agencies in charge of program approvals, raised fresh concerns over the misuse of GI Bill benefits, especially at for-profit colleges. The probe found the agencies didn't always adequately review and monitor programs to ensure they met requirements for GI Bill benefits. Additionally, the auditors found the "risk of improper payments was particularly high at for-profit schools." Out of 35 programs flagged for being either "ineligible or potentially ineligible" for GI benefits, 83% were at for-profits.

Critics of for-profits note the embattled sector targets veterans because of a loophole in the 90/10 rule, which prevents the colleges from receiving more than 90% of their revenue from federal financial aid. However, tuition payments from GI benefits don't fall under the rule. As a result, veterans using their GI benefits are overrepresented at for-profit colleges, which often have lower graduation rates. Despite heightened scrutiny over for-profits, the U.S. Department of Education has made several moves to ease regulations governing the sector. For instance, Education Secretary Betsy DeVos has moved to roll back the gainful employment and borrower defense rules, two Obama-era regulations that some say helped shield veterans from predatory schools.

The move sparked objections from dozens of veterans advocacy groups. "Service members, veterans, and their families and survivors are specifically targeted for fraud and seen 'as nothing more than dollar signs in uniform' by unscrupulous colleges," several groups wrote in a letter urging the Ed Department to strengthen the two regulations. "Often, the lowest quality education programs are those that engage in the most consumer fraud of veterans." Meanwhile, only 10% of veterans who use their GI Bill benefits attend a high-graduation-rate institution even though they tend to perform better and graduate at higher rates, a recent Ithaca S+R report found. That's compared to 21% of all students who attend those institutions. To attract more student veterans, the report recommends colleges simplify the process for transferring credits; increase campus supports; and consider the value of military training during the application process. [Source: Education Dive | Natalie Schwartz | February 25, 2019 ++]

Vet Fraud & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 28 Feb 2019

Direct Express -- Jennifer Kreegar is a named plaintiff in a lawsuit just filed against Direct Express on behalf of benefit recipients. That's the same agency in charge of U.S. cybersecurity. Intelligence data is collected at the NSA to help the government counter foreign and domestic threats. Weeks ago she made a startling discovery the day after her monthly VA disability check was deposited. "All my funds were withdrawn," she revealed. It turns out, the government had failed to protect her and hundreds of other recipients from thieves siphoning their Department of Veteran Affairs and Social Security benefits. "It happens to you, and you're like this is really real," Kreegar said, describing the violation she experienced.

It all started in December when Kreegar went to check her deposit in the Direct Express payment program. Comerica Bank administers Direct Express, which provides electronic payments to 4.5 million Americans with no bank accounts who collect social security, disability and veteran benefits. One minute Kreegar's money was in her account. The next minute it vanished. "I was getting a little frantic when I seen my balance was at \$10," she said. She eventually found herself locked out of her account. "You put in your social security number, and they said that didn't match their records," she told TV 13 WTHR Investigates. Kreegar went on to explain what it felt like to lose control of her account and more importantly her money. "Panic!" she said. "You're trying frantically to get through on the line, but you can't talk to a person," she added.

Kreegar said she called Comerica, but her call was forwarded on to Conduent Business Services, LLC in Texas. Comerica Bank hired Conduent to provide customer service for the Direct Express Program. Kreegar said she soon discovered the scheme to steal her cash started three weeks earlier and without a single fraud warning. "So somebody had gotten in and changed my address on the 6th (of December)," Kreegar said. For most bank accounts a change of address would spark a call or an electronic alert to a cell phone to let the customer know someone had initiated a change to the account. But Kreegar said she didn't get that from Direct Express nor Conduent. She was left in the dark.

Twenty days after the address change, the thieves reportedly called again. This time they request was for a new card. The caller wanted it expedited and sent to the new address in a hurry. "Not notified. Nobody called me to ask me if I requested a new card," Kreegar said in disbelief. There was also a transaction fee for \$13.50. She decided to call Direct Express the next day. But before she could inquire about the fee, she saw her money disappear before her eyes. \$1,000 was taken in one single ATM transaction in Georgia. Worst yet, the thieves had total control of all her money. "They had changed my address, canceled that card (and) my account and issued themselves a new one, and it went to Georgia," she said. The first and only alert Kreegar received was the day after her money had been taken. She got a postcard in the mail informing her of an address change that took place weeks earlier.

"So outsiders can get into your account, take your money, leave you with nothing, and then you're trapped in the system," she said. Kreegar knows it's a big problem and discovered retirees and others on disability across the country sharing similar stories.



Direct Express online image (left) and map of the locations where cases of fraud involving Direct Express have been reported.

According to an investigation conducted by U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) at least 480 similar fraud cases involving Direct Express were reported in 2018. The amount stolen already amounts to about \$500,000. Sen. Warren's letter noted that Comerica failed to notify government officials about concerns about such fraud. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told Sen. Warren he was unaware of the security breaches until he received her letter. "It's Russian roulette.... It's going to happen. -Jim Simms, former private investigator "I've had 70 people contact me since last year, most of them since August," said Jim Simms, a former private investigator in Fresno, California and Direct Express victim.

According to Simms, he's worked with victims of fraud from at least a dozen states including: California, Washington, Idaho, Texas, Arkansas, Alabama, Georgia, Florida, South Carolina, Massachusetts, Illinois and now Indiana. Bottom line, Simms believes the security lapses inside the Direct Express program leave millions of taxpayer dollars vulnerable. "It's Russian roulette. It happened to me twice," he revealed. "If there were any security parameters on the card at all, the first piece of fraud would alert the card holder and the serial things wouldn't happen," he said accusing Comerica of malfeasance. The Direct Express website provides customers with suggestions for protecting their accounts. Still Comerica blames the fraud on outside hacks but refused to talk to 13 Investigates citing pending legal action. That action involves Kreegar.

Kreegar and six other victims from around the country want Comerica to pay for failing to stop the fraud. They have **filed a national lawsuit** seeking class-action status against Comerica and Conduent Business Services LLC doing business as Direct Express. At least one of Kreegar's fellow complainants lost \$30,000 that the companies have refused to refund. Kreegar told 13 Investigates she wants the government to find a company "that's credible" and is frustrated by the lack of oversight of the agencies in charge. She says "...it's hurting people that rely on this and not to mention that's taxpayers dollars being stolen." The Office of Inspector General for the Treasury confirmed it is conducting an audit and investigation into the Direct Express Program. The government is also soliciting new bids to possibly hire a new contractor in 2020 to take over and administer federal V.A. and social security benefits.

WTHR 13 Investigates has learned the State of Indiana is expanding a 10-year working relationship with Conduent. The company signed a \$232 million dollar contract with the Family and Social Services Administration to help process applications for state benefits like Medicaid, food stamps and temporary aid to needy families. Indiana inked its deal just days after Conduent agreed to pay \$235.9 million in Texas to settle allegations the company failed to perform strict preauthorization checks for orthodontic services for Medicaid patients. According to the Texas Attorney General, taxpayers were cheated out of millions of dollars for cosmetic tooth repairs that should not have been covered under Medicaid. As part of the settlement, Conduent admitted no wrongdoing.

There are options for those concerned about a Direct Express Account. Recipients can set up a direct deposit account at a bank or credit union that uses multiple security measures to stop criminals from authenticating and take control of private accounts. Many banks also provide a text alert system to make customers aware of unusual or suspicious purchases. The only drawback is those accounts might incur fees. Direct Express does not charge a fee. If your Direct Express Account is compromised:

- Call the number on the back of your card; Direct Express, 1-888-741-1115

- Contact Conduent Business Services LLC at 1-844-663-2638; [Report suspected Fraud to Comerica.](#)
- Complaints can also be filed with the Office of the [Inspector General of the U.S. Treasury.](#)
- File a complaint with the government's [consumer financial protection bureau.](#)

[Source: Indianapolis WTHR 13 | Sandra Chapman | February 26, 2019 ++]

Obit: George Mendonsa ► **17 FEB 2019** | **The Kiss Sailor**

The ecstatic sailor shown kissing a woman in Times Square celebrating the end of World War II died 17 FEB. George Mendonsa was 95. He fell and had a seizure at the assisted living facility in Middletown, Rhode Island, where he lived with his wife of 70 years, his daughter, Sharon Molleur, told The Providence Journal. Mendonsa was shown kissing Greta Zimmer Friedman, a dental assistant in a nurse's uniform, on Aug. 14, 1945. Known as V-J Day, it was the day Japan surrendered to the United States. People spilled into the New York City streets to celebrate the news. Mendonsa planted a kiss on Friedman, whom he had never met.



George Mendonsa posed in Middletown, R.I., on July 2, 2009 holding a copy of the famous Alfred Eisenstadt photo of Mendonsa kissing a woman in a nurse's uniform in Times Square on Aug. 14, 1945, while celebrating the end of World War II, left.

The photo by Alfred Eisenstaedt was first published in Life magazine and is called "V-J Day in Times Square," but is known to most as "The Kiss." It became one of the most famous photographs of the 20th century, and is a popular image used on posters. Several people later claimed to be the kissing couple. It was years before Mendonsa and Friedman were confirmed to be the couple. Mendonsa served on a destroyer during the war and was on leave when the end of the war was announced. When he was honored at the Rhode Island State House in 2015, Mendonsa spoke about the kiss. He said Friedman reminded him of nurses on a hospital ship that he saw care for wounded sailors. "I saw what those nurses did that day and now back in Times Square the war ends, a few drinks, so I grabbed the nurse," Mendonsa said, WPRI-TV reported.

Friedman said in a 2005 interview with the Veterans History Project that it wasn't her choice to be kissed. "The guy just came over and kissed or grabbed," she told the Library of Congress. She added, "It was just somebody really celebrating. But it wasn't a romantic event." Mendonsa died two days before his 96th birthday. The family has not yet made funeral arrangements. Friedman fled Austria during the war as a 15-year-old girl. She died in 2016 at the age of 92 at a hospital in Richmond, Virginia, from complications of old age. [Source: The Associated Press | February 18 2019 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs ► Scheduled As of 1 MAR 2019

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 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 | February 28, 2018 ++]

Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule ► As of 1 MAR 2019

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\vetans 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\vetans related events to the Events Schedule Manager, Milton.Bell126@gmail.com

[Source: Retiree\Veterans Events Schedule Manager | Milton Bell | February 29, 2018 ++]

Veteran State Benefits ► Indiana 2019

The state of Indiana provides several benefits to veterans as indicated below. To obtain information on these refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Vet State Benefits – IN**" for an overview of the below listed veteran

benefits/programs. They are available to veterans who have established residence in the state. For a more detailed explanation of each refer to <https://www.illinois.gov/veterans/Pages/default.aspx>.

- Housing
- Financial Assistance
- Employment
- Education
- Recreation
- Other State Veteran Benefits/Programs

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/indiana-state-veterans-benefits.html> | February 2019 ++]

*** Vet Legislation ***



Note: To check status on any veteran related legislation go to <https://www.congress.gov/bill/116th-congress> for any House or Senate bill introduced in the 116th 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.

VA Medical Marijuana Update 59 ▶ **H.R.1151/S.445 | Veterans Medical Marijuana Safe Harbor Act**

Sen. Brian Schatz (D-HI) and Rep. Barbara Lee (D-CA) reintroduced legislation to let Veterans Affairs doctors prescribe medical marijuana in the 33 states where it's legal. The bill also would direct VA to research how medical marijuana might help manage chronic pain and reduce opioid misuse. “There is now abundant evidence that, where medical marijuana is available, opioid abuse goes down,” Schatz previously told POLITICO's Sarah Oweremohle. “When I asked the VA administrator about that question, I was expecting resistance but I got the opposite — he agreed and believed that it was worth further study.” The bill has a chance to pass Congress: The Veterans Medical Marijuana Safe Harbor Act, (116) / H.R. 1151 (116), is also backed by numerous veterans organizations and pain groups. “It will be difficult for even the most ardent cannabis opponents to deny veterans access to cannabis, especially considering worries about opioid addiction,” Cowen analyst Vivien Azer wrote in a note to investors late last year. [Source: POLITICO Newsletter | February 14, 2019 ++]

SDVOSB Program Update 01 ▶ **S.492 | DRIVE Act**

U.S. Senators Gary Peters (D-MI), a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, and John Cornyn (R-TX) on 14 FEB reintroduced bipartisan legislation to increase the number of infrastructure projects awarded to small

businesses owned by veterans with a service-connected disability. The Disabled-Veterans Rebuilding Infrastructure to Vitalize our Economy (DRIVE) Act creates a goal that 5% of the funding allocated in the most recent highway bill be granted to **Service-connected Disabled Veteran Owned Small Businesses** (SDVOSBs). Currently, the highway bill only includes a contracting goal for disadvantaged businesses but omits SDVOSBs, despite the fact that there is a government-wide target for both categories.

The new SDVOSB contracting target would be in addition to the current 10% goal for transportation contracts awarded to Disadvantaged Business Enterprises (DBEs), which are small businesses owned and controlled by women and other members of socially marginalized groups. The Fixing America’s Surface Transportation (FAST) Act was signed into law in 2015 and allocated over \$305 billion through fiscal year 2020 for highway repairs, motor vehicle safety, public transportation upgrades, motor carrier safety, railways, hazardous materials transportation safety, and research, technology, and statistics programs.

There are over 4.5 million veterans with a service-connected disability in America, including over 105,000 living in Michigan. According to the Department of Veterans Affairs, there are more than 17,000 small businesses currently operating throughout the nation that are owned by veterans with a service-connected disability, including over 250 in Michigan. The DRIVE Act is supported by a number of organizations, including the Paralyzed Veterans of America, the American Legion, High Ground Veterans Advocacy, Vietnam Veterans of America and Veterans of Foreign Wars and the National Veteran Small Business Coalition. [Source: VFW Action Corps Weekly | February 22, 2019 ++]

VA Benefits Denials Update 02 ► S.____ | Legion Act

Sen. Kyrsten Sinema has filed a bill that could expand eligibility for American Legion membership to all veterans who served since World War II. The Legion Act, co-sponsored by Republican Sen. Thom Tillis of North Carolina and filed 22 FEB, would expand Legion membership to include honorably discharged veterans who served during unrecognized times of war since World War II.

The change would affect vets like Paul Laird, who spent a chunk of his military service cleaning up waste from nuclear testing on a chain of islands in the Pacific Ocean. He and other veterans who served during the Enewetak Atoll cleanup of the late 1970s have had a host of health issues that many attribute to cleaning up nuclear waste wearing little more than shorts and sun hats. The 60-year-old Army veteran has had cancer seven times. He’s undergone chemotherapy and numerous surgeries. About 4,000 troops assisted with the Enewetak Atoll clean up, some of whom never served during official war times. Unless an Enewetak veteran’s time of service crosses over into an official era of war, they aren’t eligible for American Legion membership.

“That restriction leaves out thousands of former American service members who signed up to defend our country,” a statement from Sinema says about her first piece of legislation filed as a senator. “Our legislation rights this wrong and ensures all veterans have the opportunity to join the American Legion. Laird says Enewetak veterans also have trouble accessing treatment. “We’ve been battling (Veterans Affairs) for recognition and compensation for our health issues and cancers due to our service cleaning up after 43 nuclear bomb blasts — to no avail so far,” Laird said. He and other Enewetak veterans have supported the Atomic Veterans Healthcare Parity Act H.R.3870, which would provide treatment for those who participated in the cleanup. The bill was introduced in the House in 2015 but so far, has gone nowhere and has not been reintroduced in the 116th Congress yet.

Laird hopes Legion membership would help raise awareness to the issues these veterans suffer. “It would definitely help these gentlemen get the exposure and be a part of the Legion, which does give a lot of the veterans a lot of help,” he said. “More exposure as far as what we’ve been through personally, what has happened, what has been done to us.” John Raughter, deputy director of the national American Legion headquarters, said the veterans organization has identified 1,600 service members killed or wounded since World War II during times not officially recognized as

periods of war. The Legion introduced a resolution in October 2018 that called for Congress to direct the Department of Veterans Affairs to consider all veterans who served honorably since the start of World War II, in 1941, as “war-time veterans.”

While new Sinema’s bill doesn’t go as far as the Legion’s resolution, allowing expanded access to Legion membership would be a step in that direction. American Legion service officers work to assist veterans regardless of membership status, but allowing more service members to join is a necessary change, Raughter said. “We do believe membership in the American Legion is important as far as camaraderie goes, as far as being able to participate in the activities of their post at a local level and just the pride in being a Legionnaire,” he said. Sinema introduced the legislation during the 100th anniversary of the American Legion, which Raughter said is significant.

Although the Enewetak veterans haven’t had much success getting changes they’re pushing for in Congress, Sinema doesn’t expect any opposition to the bipartisan bill. As a member of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, working on veterans’ issues is one of Sinema’s priorities, said Hannah Hurley, a spokeswoman. Sinema also worked on veterans’ issues during her time in the House, with bills such as the VA Mission Act, now law, which expanded access to healthcare for veterans who don’t live near a VA facility.

While this is the first bill Sinema has sponsored as a senator, she co-sponsored another bill in January aimed at helping veterans. The Retired Pay Restoration Act would expand veterans’ access to retirement pay and disability benefits. The bill hasn’t made a lot of progress yet because it comes with a price tag, says Nick Rawls, with Sinema’s office. But Sinema’s team hopes the Legion Act will make it to a vote next month. “Ensuring our veterans get the benefits they’ve earned is not a partisan issue, and I’m glad we have bipartisan support for this legislation,” Sinema said.

[Source: Arizona Daily Star | Danyelle Khmara | February 21, 2019 ++]

Vet Education Update 02 ► H.R.425/S.153 | Supporting Veterans in STEM Careers Act

A bill sponsored by north central Florida congressman Neal Dunn (R-FL-02) designed to help veterans build STEM careers has passed in the House of Representatives. The bill instructs the National Science Foundation to develop an outreach plan to give veterans a chance to explore different opportunities in the science, technology, engineering, and math (i.e. STEM) fields. The bill was approved by the House last year, but the Senate failed to pass it. This time Florida senator Marco Rubio (R-FL) has introduced a companion bill in the Senate.

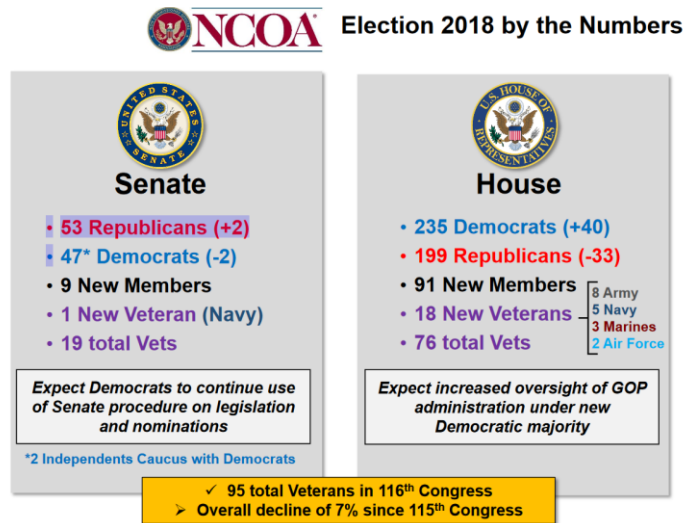
[Source: ABC 20 WCJB | Heaven Taylor-Wynn | February 26, 2010 ++]

VA Disability Rates 2019-2020 ► H.R.1200 | Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) Act

U.S. Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA-02), Chairwoman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs, introduced a Bill in 13 FEB to provide a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) to veterans, and dependents for 2020. The Bill would provide cost-of-living increases for wartime disability compensation; compensation for dependents; clothing allowance; dependency and indemnity compensation to surviving spouses; and dependency and indemnity compensation to children.

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | February 26, 2019 ++]

116th Congress ► By The Numbers



Non Commissioned Officer Association Congressional Objectives

- Congress supports the FY20 Budget Requests to enable effective and timely implementation of the VA and DoD Vision and Strategy.
- Congress sustains timely and sufficient funding to maintain the VA and DoD Readiness improvement trajectory.
- Congress fully funds VA Modernization priorities and supports future efforts.
- Congress continues to Audit, as the VA and DoD is a fiscally responsible steward of the resources provided.
- Congress supports VA Reform efforts including medical health system reforms.
- Supports DoD to improve Quality of Life for service members and their families and sustains the Commander’s essential role in the administration of military justice.

[Source: NCOA | Jon Ostrowski, Director Legislative Affairs | February 2019 ++]

* Military *



U.S. Coast Guard Funding Update 01 ► Challenges for Personnel and Their Families

Amanda Morales, a Coast Guard veteran said, "I have stood watch when the Coast Guard didn't have the budget to buy toilet paper, we had to bring our own from home." Doing more with less is something Coasties, as they call

themselves, simultaneously celebrate and bemoan. Their motto is "Semper Paratus," Latin for "Always Ready," though they joke that their motto is actually "Semper Gumby" — "Always Flexible." But when the longest government shutdown in history left the Coast Guard as the sole military branch without a paycheck last month, it pushed many families to their breaking points. Even as President Donald Trump was considering signing a bipartisan border security proposal that would keep the Coast Guard running after 15 FEB, the community fully expected they'll be staring down another funding lapse in the future. After all, this latest shutdown drama was the fourth threat to the Coast Guard's livelihood since the beginning of 2018.



It's time to bridge the military-civilian divide in the US

The United States coast Guard a branch of the military. "You would be surprised how many people don't know that," says **Amanda Gibbs**, whose husband has served for four years as an information technology specialist. The couple has five children. The Coast Guard evokes images of search and rescue operations, maybe during Hurricane Katrina, or guys jumping out of helicopters wearing snorkels and fins -- and that's accurate, but only part of the picture. The Coast Guard has a myriad of other roles: seizing drugs from smugglers, intercepting pirates, inspecting ships in ports, stopping illegal fishing in domestic and international waters and augmenting the US Navy during wartime, as well as all of the support staff it takes to pull off these wide ranging missions. And some of those rescue swimmers dangling from helicopters are now women.

Guardsmen can be at sea, or "under way," for months at a time, often with very limited communication with their families. Many of the cutters in the fleet are old and have limited telephone capabilities. Coast Guardsmen (as they're called whether they're women or men) are deployed all over the world and have fought and died in every war since 1790, when Alexander Hamilton created this seafaring force. The work is risky and their families worry they might not come home. **Stacey Benson** has been a Coast Guard spouse for 13 years, since her husband left the Army. Her husband, a chief petty officer, is a maritime law enforcement officer stationed in Astoria, Oregon. "When he deploys, his main job is to board vessels. He's looking for drugs. He's the first person on the boat (most) of the time. People driving the vessels may have guns or knives," she says. "You don't know if they're going to come home."

"When a tanker went down during a hurricane, my husband's ship was right there. I was sick with worry because they went into danger themselves to try to save others," says **Jessica Manfre**, who lives in Cape May, New Jersey. Her husband is a senior chief petty officer and has been in the Coast Guard for 18 years. "There's times I would pick him up from a long deployment and we'd be met with a Drug Enforcement Agency team at the pier, handcuffed drug dealers being escorted off as they caught them trying to bring in cocaine into our country."

The Coast Guard community, like other branches, is incredibly proud of its service "I've taken part in saving almost 1,500 lives," says Amanda Morales, who was first stationed on remote Kodiak Island in Alaska, serving as an operations specialist, answering distress calls from civilians on the water and monitoring rescue crews. "There aren't that many jobs out there that can give you that job satisfaction." "They selflessly risk their lives to make sure others have a chance at survival," says **Mary Nelson**, a spouse living in Jacksonville, Florida. Her eldest son is also in the Coast Guard. "They ensure the safety of complete strangers on a daily basis. What wife or mother wouldn't be proud knowing their husband or son is a true hero, day to day?"

With only 42,000 active duty members, the Coast Guard is not even a fourth the size of the next smallest branch, the Marines. Their budget is miniscule compared to the Army or Navy. And because the Coast Guard performs some domestic law enforcement functions, including boarding vessels in the US to inspect for and seize illicit drugs, it is funded by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Funding for DHS has been hung up repeatedly in Congress. The Army, Navy and Marine Corps, housed under the Department of Defense, are guaranteed pay in the event of a government shutdown. The Coast Guard is not. "We don't get the recognition I feel the service deserves," Morales says. "We joke that we are the redheaded stepchild." "We lost so much sleep," Mary Nelson says, anxiously eyeing the next potential lapse in funding on 15 FEB. "We also own a home at our previous duty station and our tenants are active duty Coast Guard as well, so the panic of needing to cover two mortgages with zero paycheck coming in was very real for us."

As members of the military, Coast Guardsmen are prohibited from wading into politics. Spouses, almost all women, have taken up the mantle of raising awareness about the financial strife caused by the shutdown. Though Morales left the Coast Guard, her husband is still on active duty and the couple has a 6-month-old daughter. She fires off stories of what families did to get by. She knows one career service member with a college education who took a second job delivering pizzas. Morale among service members, according to these spouses, plummeted as they worried about feeding their families — even as the Coast Guard, unpaid, broke ice to allow commerce on the Great Lakes, conducted rescues, seized millions of dollars in drugs, intercepted illegal migrants and responded to chemical spills.

"If you can imagine, we have five children and my husband is our sole provider," says Gibbs, which is common in the Coast Guard as one parent shoulders responsibility for the children while the other is deployed or at sea. Coast Guard spouses, like those in other branches, often struggle to find gainful employment while moving every few years. "My husband felt like he wasn't providing for us. His morale was rock bottom." Gibbs' husband has only been in the Coast Guard for four years, joining relatively late at the age of 31. His monthly income is \$2,000, she shares, noting that the pay scale for service members is public, and that it's important Americans realize that some members of the armed forces are living below the poverty line. "They still had to risk their lives for the rest of the nation on a daily basis and not even know how they'd be putting food in the mouths of their own family at the end of that same day," said Mary Nelson.

Stacey Benson organized a food bank in Astoria, serving, by her careful count, a total of 2,347 people in the two weekends it was open. That included furloughed federal workers as well as active duty and retired Coast Guard members. Jessica Manfre opened a food bank to serve local Coast Guard families in New Jersey, Delaware and the Philadelphia area. Amanda Morales crowdfunded \$25,000 for the relief organization that serves the Coast Guard community. These were the moments that brought these families a much-needed morale boost even as they watched what was happening in Washington with a mix of bewilderment and desperation. And now they're afraid they will be eventually affected by another shutdown. "I want members in Washington to know that we are real people," says Gibbs. "That we have lives. That we don't get paid hardly anything to do what we do and to take that away from us for their own agenda is devastating."

On 20 FEB, Coast Guard spouse Michael Little, is leading an effort to pressure Congress, visiting members' offices to deliver packages of letters from every major military and veteran service organization. "I want to tell the government why we need to make sure the Coast Guard is paid in shutdowns going forward," Little says. His wife is an active-duty hospital corpsman and he is a Navy veteran, now running a consulting firm and a nonprofit called the Sea Service Family Foundation.

Recently, a bill in the Senate and a bill in the House would have continued appropriations to the Coast Guard for pay and allowances for service members, civilian employees and contractors, retired pay, and the payment of a death gratuity, funeral travel and basic allowance for housing of members of the Coast Guard dying on active duty. In the House, the proposal hasn't made it out of a Transportation and Infrastructure subcommittee. In the Senate, Minority Leader Chuck Schumer (D-NY) blocked the bill, arguing it left federal workers out in the cold. "We could do a whole

lot more good by funding and opening up the government for everyone," Schumer argued. [Source: CNN Politics | Brianna Keilar | February 13, 2019 ++]

Navy Carrier Fleet ▶ USS Truman To Be Retired Early

Amidst rising anxiety over whether the US Navy's thousand-foot-long flagships could evade Chinese missiles in a future war, the Pentagon has decided to cut the aircraft carrier fleet from 11 today to 10. By retiring the Nimitz-class supercarrier USS Truman at least two decades early, rather than refueling its nuclear reactor core in 2024 as planned, the military would save tens of billions on overhaul and operations costs that it could invest in other priorities. But the proposal, part of the 2020-2024 budget plan due out mid-March, is sure to inspire outrage on Capitol Hill.



"I can't imagine this will go over well at all," one Hill staffer said. We're pressing congressional leaders for official responses, but the Pentagon decision seems to have blindsided them entirely. Navy officials have declined to comment. Congressional carrier advocates have:

- Enshrined a minimum force of at least 11 carriers in law,
- Repeatedly called for an increase to 12 flattops, a goal president trump once publicly embraced; and
- Resoundingly defeated the last attempt to cancel a mid-life overhaul, back in 2014–2015 when the Obama administration — admittedly less popular with congressional republicans than trump — tried to retire the USS George Washington early.

As the George Washington saga showed, "the mid-life overhaul has been used as a bargaining chip for a larger budget in the past," said retired Navy captain Jerry Hendrix. With Truman as with Washington, he said, "I doubt the Congress would allow it to go through."

The decision to cancel the mid-life overhaul was first reported by Washington Post columnist David Ignatius 26 FEB, as a one-sentence aside in a larger story, without naming the carrier. Breaking Defense has confirmed the ship is the Truman and that cancelling the overhaul would effectively retire the ship 20 to 25 years early, shrinking the carrier fleet from 11 to 10 in the mid-2020s. Over time, the Hill source said, as retirements outpace new construction, "not only would the fleet not reach 12 any time over the next 30 years, the carrier force would number nine ships for a majority of the 2040s." Ignatius mentioned an estimated \$4 billion in savings, but the real figure over time is likely to be much higher. The overhaul itself costs \$6.5 billion and operating the carrier thereafter costs about \$1 billion a year. So total savings could exceed \$30 billion, albeit spread out over decades.

Truman entered service in 1998 and was built to serve for 50 years, but like all nuclear carriers, it requires regular maintenance, periodic upgrades, and a major overhaul at mid-life when its reactor core runs out of uranium. The ship was scheduled to go into the Newport News shipyard in 2024 for a mid-life Refueling & Complex Overhaul (RCOH) ending in 2028. That's beyond the five-year budget plan about to be released, which therefore won't include the vast majority of the savings from the cancellation. (That probably accounts for Ignatius's estimate being too low). Cancelling the overhaul would let the reactor run down: Exactly how fast depends on exactly how hard the Truman has

used it over the years, and on how hard it's run in the future according to Hendrix. It would force the ship's retirement at some point in the mid to late 2020s, two decades ahead of the expected date of 2048.

Losing the \$6.5 billion overhaul would be a major blow for Newport News, the only shipyard on the planet capable of building a nuclear-powered aircraft carrier. Having thrived during the Reagan buildup, Newport now struggles to cover its massive overhead and retain highly skilled workers such as nuclear welders. That said, it would be even more painful to cancel construction of a new Ford-class carrier, valued at over \$12 billion. (That's the total price to the government, not just payments to Newport News, under a new contract that saved \$4 billion by bundling two ships together in a single buy). It's also possible for Newport to shift at least some workers to its rapidly growing nuclear submarine business, which some experts had worried would overwhelm the yard as the Navy ramped up production of both Virginia-class attack boats and the new Columbia-class ballistic missile sub.

"I don't want to speculate on what will be in the President's budget proposal," said Beci Benton, a spokesperson for the Newport yard's owner, Huntington-Ingalls Industries. "I can tell you that the mid-life refueling overhaul and maintenance availability of a Nimitz-class aircraft carrier produces a recapitalized carrier capable of supporting current and future warfare doctrine and continuing to operate as the centerpiece of our Navy fleet and our national defense for another 25 years." "An RCOH [Refueling & Complex Overhaul] is an extremely complex engineering and construction project which involves more than 680 suppliers from 40 states providing material and services critical to the overhaul process," Beci continued, a point that will certainly resonate in Congress. "The stability of this industrial base is critical to our ability to continue to build and maintain the navy fleet our Navy and nation needs."

"The three major components of [the shipyard's] business base are new carrier construction, carrier RCOHs, and submarine construction," said Ronald O'Rourke, a leading naval expert with the Congressional Research Service, which advises legislators. "Not doing the CVN-75 [Truman] RCOH would result in a roughly four-year dip in the RCOH component of that business base, and a resultant dip in employment... At the same time, however, [the yard] could experience an increase in the volume of its submarine-construction work, which might offset to some degree the dip in RCOH work and employment." Not overhauling an old carrier you already have may seem a less efficient way to cut costs than just not building a new carrier at all. But cancelling a carrier outright could make it much harder — even impossible — to build any carriers in the future, O'Rourke said

Cancelling an overhaul is much more manageable, though hardly painless. "If you want to reduce the size of the carrier force in the shorter term, this is often the way that people have discussed doing it," he said. "The principal alternatives would be to forego the construction of a new carrier, stretch out the intervals for building new carriers, or retire early a carrier that has already received an RCOH." All those alternatives have big problems. Retiring an already-refueled carrier would waste all the money spent to overhaul it. Cutting or even slowing production of new carriers would disrupt the shipyard so badly that future ships you did build would be much more expensive. Raise the price of the next ship too high, O'Rourke said, and you effectively lose the option to build a supercarrier ever again. "That part of the defense industrial base must be preserved as long as we continue to build supercarriers," Hendrix said. But do we want to?

The Navy has argued carriers are inherently flexible assets, mobile airbases with plenty of room to add new equipment or new airplanes to counter future threats. But as far as current budget plans go, Hendrix noted, the carrier will rely on relatively short-ranged fighters like the F/A-18E Super Hornet and the stealthy F-35C Joint Strike Fighter for its offensive firepower. That requires it to close to well within the range of Chinese land-based anti-ship missiles so the fighters can reach their targets. (Fighters can refuel in mid-air, but the slow, bulky tankers are extremely vulnerable and can't come any closer to enemy airspace than the carriers themselves). Hendrix has long advocated for longer-range aircraft, both manned and unmanned, to keep the carrier relevant and survivable.

"If the Navy continues to fail to invest in a new air wing that can do a long range strike," Hendrix said, "then the government may decide to stop building carriers in order to free money for other platforms that would be more relevant for the threat environment" — such as smaller surface ships and unmanned craft — "in which case stopping new

construction would be the best path towards a drawdown of the carrier force.” But that’s not a bridge anyone is willing to burn, just yet. [Source: Breaking Defense | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr. | February 27, 2019 ++]

Military Spouses ► **Survey Shows More Problems, Less Support During Deployments**

Some disturbing trends related to deployments have emerged from the most recent survey of military spouses, according to military family advocates. Just 19 percent of spouses indicated they had excellent or very good military support during their service member’s most recent deployment, lower than what spouses reported in 2015. The incidence of problems that spouses experienced during that most recent deployment were significantly higher in 2017 than in 2015, and 23 percent indicated difficult readjustments to their service member’s return from deployment, also higher than 2015. “What that tells me is that something’s going on in a bad way with the level of support offered families during deployments,” said Joyce Raezer, executive director of the National Military Family Association.

“When it comes to deployments, these spouses are the canaries in the coal mine,” she said. “We need to put deployment support back in the vocabulary.” At the height of the wars, it seemed everyone had someone deployed, and there was a lot of support from the military as well as the private sector. As deployments have gotten less common, “I think families get more isolated,” Raezer said. But it helps to connect with others who are going through the same experience, she said. “If everyone is going through the same thing you are, even though it’s rough, it’s a little easier to handle.” **As deployments have decreased, support programs have also diminished**, she said.

The survey was a scientific, random sampling of spouses, conducted by the Defense Department, and the results can be generalized to the entire spouse population. It explored topics ranging from spouse employment and child care to finances. Of the 45,077 active-duty spouses selected for the survey, 9,813 spouses completed the survey, or 17 percent. The survey indicated that loneliness was a problem during their service member’s most recent deployment, with 36 percent saying it was a problem to a large extent, and 44 percent to a small or moderate extent, which is higher than the 2015 spouse survey. That increasing sense of loneliness, and lack of connectedness, is a finding echoed recently in results from the 2018 Blue Star Families’ Military Family Lifestyle Survey.

A.T. Johnston, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy, said it struck her that nearly half of spouses of E1-E4 service members reported loneliness as a common problem during deployments. “And although 39 percent of spouses said they used other spouses as a source of support, 38 percent said they are unlikely to reach out to another military spouse because they either don’t know another spouse or they lack opportunities to connect with other spouses. “Helping our newest service members learn how to connect is one of the best things we can do to help with resiliency,” she said, during a Pentagon briefing about the survey findings. “Our challenge is to find new and better ways to connect these spouses to the military community and involve them in the many activities, programs and support services that are available, but they may not know about,” she said, adding that she is seeking ideas for how to do that. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 22, 2019 ++]

Military Spouse Employment Update 05 ► **Professional Relicensing Fees Reimbursement**

More than a year after the law was signed to allow the service branches to reimburse military spouses up to \$500 in professional relicensing fees when they move to a new state, the policies aren’t yet in place. The Air Force seems closer than the other services to implementing this pilot program, which aims to help spouses find employment after their family moves to a new location. Air Force officials expect the policy will be available to airmen this summer, said Air Force spokesman Maj. Nick Mercurio. But timelines were not available from the Army, Navy and Marine Corps. ‘

“This delay has been frustrating for spouses. As the only charity currently reimbursing spouses for PCS-related licensure expenses, we know the need spouses face,” said Joyce Raezer, executive director of the National Military Family Association. Each branch of service is currently developing a program to reimburse military spouses for these expenses, said Pentagon spokeswoman Air Force Lt. Col. Carla Gleason. “Because the individual military services are responsible for both the permanent change of station move and the related reimbursement, the services retain the discretionary authority for this payment,” she said.

Local and state-level licensing or certifications are required in a long list of professions, ranging from dental hygienists and accountants, to doctors, hairdressers, nurses, attorneys and teachers, to name a few. The requirements vary from state to state, and from one profession to another. The new Defense Department program provides reimbursement for up to \$500 in qualified costs, such as exam and registration fees, to help spouses get a new license in their same profession in the new state.

“At a time when they’ve just had to quit a job because their service member received PCS orders, when they’ve just incurred the costs of a move, they find they can’t get a new job in their field until they fork over money they may not have to take another class or test in order to get licensed in their new state,” Raezer said. “Congress understood this challenge and came up with a solution. Military leaders talk a lot about the need to support military spouses in meeting their career aspirations. By delaying implementation of the reimbursement, they’ve missed an opportunity to make that happen,” she said. The pilot program is authorized through Dec. 31, 2022, by the fiscal 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. The National Military Family Association will ask Congress to extend the pilot program beyond 2022, because of the delays in rolling it out, said Kelly Hruska, government relations director for the association. The law allows the services to reimburse spouses up to \$500 for relicensing and certifications required to work in their same profession. It’s unknown whether these reimbursements will be retroactive.

Army Secretary Mark Esper noted that the Army is working on its policy regarding reimbursement of licensing expenses, during a recent town hall meeting at the Association of the United States Army, but didn’t provide a timeline. He said he’s heard from spouses that they pay “significant fees” to transfer their licenses to their new state. In addition, he said, he’ll continue to work with lawmakers to seek a broader national policy relating to this issue. Meanwhile, officials in the DoD state liaison office have been working for years at the state level to bring attention to state lawmakers that transferring occupational licenses from previous states is an important issue for military spouses who want to be able to continue to work in their field. A number of states have adopted at least partial measures to provide some license portability, such as temporary licensure and streamlined processes. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 21, 2019 ++]

WWII Airmen Honored ► Ten Who Died Saving UK Children

U.S. and Royal Air Force warplanes roared over the English city of Sheffield 22 FEB to honor 10 American airmen who sacrificed their lives to save British children playing in a park beneath their crippled bomber during World War II. The fly-past brought tears to the eyes of 82-year-old Tony Foulds, for he was one of those children at that park. The spectacle over Sheffield’s Endcliffe Park was the culmination of decades of lobbying by Foulds, who wanted an aerial display befitting the young fliers who died that day. As thousands of spectators watched from the park below and the BBC broadcast live on its morning news program, the climax came when four U.S. fighters passed overhead, with one veering skyward in the missing man formation to honor the fallen.

F-15 Strike Eagles and a Typhoon from RAF Lakenheath and RAF Mildenhall also flew over the Cambridge American Cemetery, in Coton, just outside Cambridge, where three of the airmen are interred. "That was worth waiting 66 years for," Foulds said as he dabbed his eyes with a wadded tissue and recalled the dream he'd had since he was 17. The crowd burst into a cheer of “Hip, hip hooray!” for Foulds, who has tended a nearby memorial for the airmen for

decades, wracked with guilt because he believed he was responsible for the deaths of Lt. John G. Kriegshauser and the crew of the B-17G Flying Fortress nicknamed “Mi Amigo.”



Lt. John G. Kriegshauser (left) and the aircrew of the B-17G Flying Fortress nicknamed "Mi Amigo,"

Kriegshauser, a 23-year-old pilot from St. Louis, Missouri, was on his 15th mission on Feb. 22, 1944, when Mi Amigo was hit by enemy fire during a daylight raid on the Aalborg airfield in occupied Denmark, a key fighter base that protected Germany from Allied bombers. The crew nursed the damaged plane back across the North Sea, trying to reach their base in Chelveston, England. But the weather was poor, and when the plane broke through the clouds it was over Sheffield, 80 miles northwest.

Tony was almost 8 years old that day and had joined a group of children in Endcliffe Park, an oasis of green surrounded on three sides by terraced houses and dense woodland on the other. After five years of war, including German attacks on Sheffield's steel and armaments plants, the boys were accustomed to hearing planes. But the sound of this aircraft wasn't right. The plane circled over the stretch of green and one of the airmen waved his arms at the kids. They waved back, thinking he was being friendly. Years later, Tony realized he was trying to get them to clear the field. "No one will ever tell me any different: I killed these lads," Foulds told The Associated Press. "And that will always stay with me."

In January, BBC presenter Dan Walker chanced upon Foulds tending the memorial, as he does some 260 days a year, and took up his call for an aerial tribute. Walker started a Twitter campaign under the hashtag #gettonyaflypast. On Friday, another group of hashtags were trending on Twitter: #TonyGotAFlypast, #RememberTheTen, and #sheffieldflypast. "Tony has pretty much single-handedly spent the best part of seven decades ensuring the memorial in the park is kept up to standard, and ensured that the memory of the Mi Amigo and those brave crewmen is kept alive," said Lee Peace, a reporter at The Star newspaper in Sheffield. "Once people heard about the story, it just took off."



Tony Foulds (center) tends to the memorial honoring 10 U.S. airmen who died in a plane crash in Endcliffe Park, Sheffield, England.

Also in the crowd Friday were several family members of the crewmen. Kriegshauser's nephew Jim and a relative of 2nd Lt. Melchor Hernandez, the crew's bombardier, sat beside Foulds and both stretched out a comforting hand as he repeated his remonstrations of guilt. Hernandez's relative, Megan Leo, said he was the eldest of six children, a first-

generation American whose parents came from Mexico. She said the story of his sacrifice had always been told in her family. "I think for this story to now be capturing so many hearts, it just reminds me of how many other stories we don't know, of all the men who died back then and in the years after fighting for our countries and for peace," she told the BBC, as she thanked Foulds. "We've always remembered them, but to know that 6,000 miles away from my home there's a man who's dedicated his life to remembering them means so much. It's the most amazing thing."

As the jets roared into view, Foulds waved his arms over his head like a windshield wiper, hoping the pilots would see him. Painted on the sides of the planes were the names of the crew, young men from every corner of America. Even as his dream came true, Foulds refused to take credit for the fly-past, turning at one point to the crowd to say, "Thank you very much for coming, it's lovely see you." The people roared. But he kept reminding everyone — just as he has always done — that the event was not to honor him. "It's for them," he said. And then, when the jets cleared the horizon, he left the cameras and went back to the memorial, anxious to be with the lads. [Source: Associated Press | Danica Kirka & Jo Kearney | February 24, 2019 ++]

Selective Service System Update 29 ► Ruling | Men-Only Draft Is Unconstitutional

A federal judge has ruled that a men-only draft is unconstitutional, but he stopped short of ordering the Selective Service System to register women for military service. The Houston judge sided with a San Diego men's advocacy group that challenged the government's practice of having only men sign up for the draft, citing sex discrimination in violation of the Fifth Amendment's equal protection clause. "This case balances on the tension between the constitutionally enshrined power of Congress to raise armies and the constitutional mandate that no person be denied the equal protection of the law," wrote U.S. District Judge Gray Miller of the Southern District of Texas.

The lawsuit was filed in 2013 against the Selective Service System by Texas resident James Lesmeister, who later added San Diego resident Anthony Davis and the San Diego-based National Coalition for Men as additional plaintiffs. The two men had standing to sue the government because they were within the age range of 18 to 26 in which men in the United States are required to register with Selective Service. Coalition attorney Marc Angelucci said in a statement on 23 FEB that he is pleased with the court decision. "Forcing only males to register is an aspect of socially institutionalized male disposability and helps reinforce the stereotypes that support discrimination against men in other areas" such as divorce, child custody and domestic violence services, Angelucci said. "Women are now allowed in combat, so this decision is long overdue," he added. "After decades of sex discrimination against men in the Selective Service, the courts have finally found it unconstitutional to force only men to register."

The government asked the judge to dismiss the suit or stay a decision until a national commission studying the issue of women's draft registration reaches a recommendation. The judge noted that could take years, and even then Congress isn't required to follow the commission's findings. "Congress has been debating the male-only registration requirement since at least 1980," Miller wrote. The government pointed to a 1981 U.S. Supreme Court decision that the Military Selective Service Act was constitutional as written, to exclude women, because women restricted from combat were not offered similar opportunities that men had. Miller found that reasoning no longer applicable, since the Department of Defense lifted all gender-based restrictions on military service — including combat roles — in 2015.

The judge likewise disagreed with the government's position that drafting women would be an administrative burden and that far more women than men will be found physically unfit for service after being drafted. Congress has expressed few concerns about female physical ability, but did focus more on societal consequences of drafting young mothers to go off to war, Miller said. "If there was ever a time to discuss 'the place of women in the Armed Services,' that time has passed," Miller concluded. [Source: Sand Diego Union-Tribune | Pauline Repard | February 23, 2019 ++]

Union Jack ► Navy Will Return to Flying The “Union Jack” on 4 JUN

The resurgent “great power competition” at sea now officially trumps the Global War on Terror — at least on U.S. Navy ships. Starting with morning colors on 4 JUN, the Navy will return to flying the “Union Jack,” a small blue flag emblazoned with the stars of the 50 states (lower left) — identical to the top left corner of the national ensign — from their jackstuffs, small flagpoles mounted on the bows of all Navy vessels when in port or at anchor.



Announced in NavAdmin message 039/19 and a Navy press release on 21 FEB, the policy change returns the “First Navy Jack” — and its “Don’t Tread on Me” rattlesnake slithering across thirteen red and white stripes (upper right) — to its former role of signifying the oldest commissioned warship in the operational fleet. It currently flies from all Navy jackstuffs. “The Union Jack is deeply connected to our heritage and our rise as a global nation with a global Navy,” said Chief of Naval Operations Adm. John Richardson in his released statement. “The Navy is a symbol that projects American values to the world. Just as the Navy embodies the values and principles that we hold dear, our very appearance in port and at anchor communicates important messages.” The U.S. Navy’s Union Jack shouldn’t be confused with the United Kingdom’s national flag of the same name.

Richardson’s swap out wasn’t supposed to happen until the Global War on Terrorism ended. Then-Secretary of the Navy Gordon England ordered all U.S. Navy ships to fly the First Navy Jack starting on Sept. 11, 2002, the first anniversary of the terror attacks in the United States by Al Qaeda. But after more than 17 years of war and with the Navy shifting from supporting counterinsurgency operations in Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan, Somalia and other parts of the world to confronting rising rivals, especially in Asia and Europe, Richardson moved to refocus the symbolism of the flag, too.

The June 4th date to switch out the flags also is deeply meaningful to both the Navy and the nation it protects. This year, it marks the 77th anniversary of the beginning of the Battle of Midway. That victory over the Japanese turned the tide of World War II in the Pacific and restored America’s Navy as the dominant maritime force in the vast region. “Make no mistake: we have entered a new era of competition,” Richardson said in the release. “We must recommit to the core attributes that made us successful at Midway: integrity, accountability, initiative, and toughness.”

The Union Jack became the standard “Navy Jack” on June 14, 1777. And except for a symbolic 14-month period during the 1976 U.S. Bicentennial celebrations, it was in constant U.S. Navy service. The only change was a gradual expansion of the numbers of white stars on the banner as more states joined the union. As for the “rattlesnake jack,” come June 4 it will be proudly flown on the USS Constitution, the wooden-hulled frigate that’s the world’s oldest commissioned warship still afloat, and the Blue Ridge, the Japan-based flagship of the 7th Fleet. Before Gordon England’s 2002 policy shift, that honor fell to the now-decommissioned aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk. And Richardson’s message indicated that sailors will still be allowed to sport the First Navy Jack patch on the upper left sleeve of both the Type II and Type III Navy Working Uniforms.

[Source: NavyTimes | Mark D. Faram | February 22, 2019 ++]

Navy Fleet Size Update 15 ► Inactive Ships Will Not be Activated to Meet Goal

Inactive frigates, destroyers and other mothballed vessels won't be making their way back to the fleet, Navy leaders have decided, as they look to add dozens of ships to the service's arsenal in the coming decades. Navy leaders have wrapped up a review of the service's entire list of inactive ships, Vice Adm. Thomas Moore told reporters in Washington, D.C., on Tuesday, and decided against resurrecting any that are already decommissioned. Those ships are stored at the Navy's inactive ship maintenance facilities in Philadelphia; Bremerton, Washington; and Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. "I was just up in Philadelphia on 15 FEB, and we concluded that the cost of bringing them back was pretty expensive. But more importantly, the capability of the platform itself just didn't lend itself well," Moore said.

The Navy looked especially closely at bringing back frigates, Moore said. He told the Defense and Aerospace Report last year that bringing back any old ships would be difficult since they've been used as "spare-parts lockers" in recent years. Still, he said 19 FEB, officials gave every ship another look before ultimately deciding it wasn't the best way to build up the fleet. "It's not just about the numbers piece; it's also about having ships that can do what you need it to do," Moore said. Bryan Clark, a retired Navy officer and analyst with the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, told Defense News that resurrecting frigates would be expensive, and they'd still be capable of carrying out only low-end missions. "You're not getting a lot of capability; it's not going to be a ballistic missile defense shooter on patrol in the eastern Mediterranean," he told the paper.

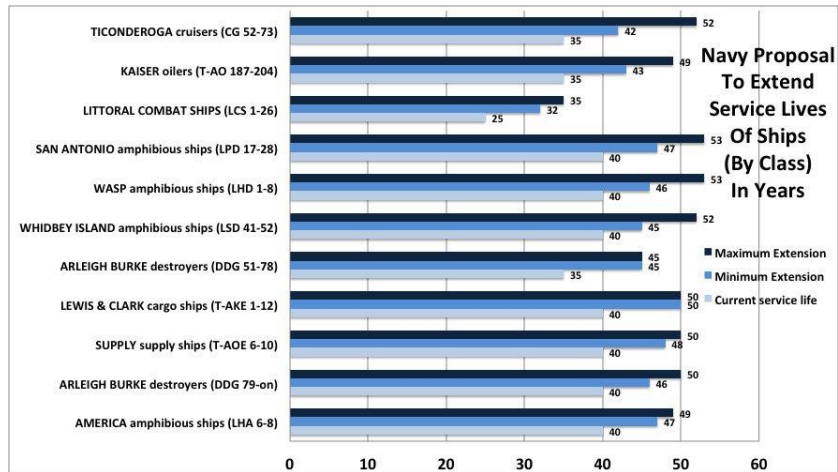
Now, the Navy is forging ahead with its plan that will extend the service lives of its existing fleet as it builds up to a 355-ship fleet. Doing so, Moore said, will allow the Navy to reach that size by the early 2030s. Destroyers, for example, would remain active for at least 45 years, he said. That's five or 10 years longer than their current shelf life. "With all the ships that we have, if you're willing to do the maintenance on them, you can keep them a little longer," he said. [Source: Military.com | Gina Harkins | February 20, 2019 ++]

Navy Fleet Size Update 16 ► Navy Wants Faster Ship Repairs; 70% Of Destroyer Fleet Late

If the Navy ever hopes to reach its goal of a 355-ship fleet, it won't be by simply building new hulls and launching them. Instead, the admirals have long recognized they'll have to extend the lives of dozens of ships already long in the tooth — and do so at a time when shipyard space is already stretched and less than half of its ships are able to complete scheduled maintenance on time. "We've really got to get better than what we're doing today," Vice Adm. Tom Moore, head of Naval Sea Systems Command, told the West 2019 conference last week. "We're digging out of a little bit of a maintenance backlog." Moore and other commanders at the annual event insisted that they were getting better at getting ships in and out of maintenance availabilities, but currently only about 30 percent of destroyers are able to leave the docks on time.

The Navy is working on a plan to improve those numbers, but wholesale change in how the service schedules and contracts for repairs is needed. Key to that is private industry investing in more workers to meet the increasing demand. "We've got to make a concerted effort on both the public side and the private sector side to work with industry if we expect to get better," Moore said. "If we don't solve that piece, at the end of the day, we're really not going to deliver the force to the combatant commanders that they need."

Speaking to reporters after his talk, Moore delved deeper into what it's going to take to move the needle and get ships in and out of repair availabilities on a more predictable schedule. The Navy has taken steps to increase the capacity of shipyards, and is working on ways to change the acquisition strategy to work with private shipyards to get even more capacity. Moore said that over the next six months, "you'll see some real sea changes in how we're going to contract for surface ship maintenance for the private sector that will incentivize them to build more capacity."



A 2018 Navy proposal to keep ships in service longer

Shipyards and companies in the private sector hire workers for specific projects, but the Navy usually issues a contract just a few months before a ship pulls in for work on a one-off contract, it doesn't provide the shipyards an incentive to think long-term. "Industry has got to hire more," Moore said. "We got to build a system that incentivizes industry to have the right people there, so I think you're going to see a real sea change in the way we're working to acquire repair work," that will give industry a longer view of the maintenance schedule.

Moore was asked about the Navy's push toward more secrecy as to when ships are coming and going, and the Dynamic Force Employment concept, which will see ships leave port, only to return early from a deployment, and then head out again at an unpredictable time. Wouldn't that cause havoc in the push for more predictability he had been talking about? "Operations come first," he said. "There are ways we can incorporate the thought process of dynamic force employment and still give industry enough predictability." But he recognized that the model of predictable unpredictability may be tough to square with the push on the back end for more predictability. "It's something that the maintenance community is going to have to wrestle with," he conceded. "We're going to have to think our way carefully though this."

Another big change the Navy says it wants to pursue is in how it monitors the readiness of the force, which is tied closely to refit and repair. The failures of keeping a ship's systems up and running was seen in the deadly collision of the USS Fitzgerald with a cargo ship in the Pacific in 2017, which killed seven sailors. We don't know enough about the USS McCain collision to say with certainty that maintenance was key. "We need some fundamental changes in how we approach readiness, how we generate it, analyze it, measure it, [and] integrate it," Fleet Forces commander Adm. Christopher Grady said at the conference.

Grady mentioned the possibility of bringing a chief readiness officer to manage all this, as well as standing up a Fleet Analytics Office to crunch the data and do analysis. "We also need to assess whether we have a modern IT structure in place to support these efforts across the Navy's readiness exercise," he said, including AI and other automated tools to "accelerate our decision-making by suggesting decision options that might not have been aware if we had relied only on human actions alone." Neither Moore or Grady offered any specifics to indicate where their initiatives may be headed. But it's clear that in the wake of the Fitzgerald and McCain tragedies, uncertainty over future defense budgets, and Navy CNO Richardson's comments recently that **he's rethinking the 355-ship-fee goal**, that the service's top admirals are putting everything on the table. [Source: Breaking Defense | Paul McLeary | February 21, 2019 ++]

USAF Deploy-Or-Out Policy Update 01 ► Officially Enacted on 19 FEB 2019

Airmen who haven't been able to deploy for more than a year: Your time may be up. The Air Force on 19 FEB officially enacted a policy — directed last year by former Defense Secretary Jim Mattis — that could lead to the separation of airmen who have not been able to deploy for at least 12 consecutive months. “We expect all airmen to exercise personal accountability for their deployability status and to take the necessary steps to maintain their readiness,” said Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, Chief of Staff Gen. Dave Goldfein, and Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force Kaleth Wright in a memo dated 30 JAN. “Commanders will ensure airmen understand what is required and ensure the necessary resources are available to achieve our goal of a 95 percent or higher deployable rate within their units. The defense of our nation requires airmen and the Air Force to be ready to deploy at all times.”

But not being deployable for a year or more won't necessarily mean the end of one's career. The Air Force is exempting several categories of non-deployable from separation. As for the others, the service says it will look — on a case-by-case basis — for ways an airman can still contribute to the mission, even if they can't go overseas. The strict new policy represents a major change in how the Air Force manages its airmen who have been unable to deploy for a lengthy period. The service has always been able to separate non-deployable airmen. But until now, it was up to commanders to decide when to separate them, which led to inconsistencies.

The 12-month rule is the first time the Air Force has set a standard length of time to determine when a non-deployable airman may need to be separated. It comes at a time when the Air Force is increasingly concerned about the strain that repeated deployments have placed on airmen who have gone overseas time and time again. The Air Force wants to make sure that burden is shared by as many airmen as possible. “We're burning out our people,” Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson said during a November 2017 news conference at the Pentagon, where she talked about meeting an airman who had recently returned from his 17th deployment. “At some point, families make a decision that they just can't keep doing this at this pace.”

The 19 FEB memo, signed by Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs Shon Manasco, said airmen who have been non-deployable for more than a year will be notified by their chain of command and evaluated for either a referral to the Disability Evaluation System, consideration for administrative separation, or a retention determination. The clock is already running, meaning that airmen who entered non-deployable status in February 2018 are now, or are on the verge of becoming, at risk of separation. It is unclear when the first airmen might be notified about their potential separation under the new policy. The memo said every airman must be “fit for duty and maintain a wartime mission-capable status,” an Air Force release said.

“Having a ready and fit force is very important,” Scott Brady, the assistant deputy for force management integration in the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs, said in a 19 FEB interview clarifying the policy. To qualify as wartime mission-capable, the Air Force said an airman must be able to meet individual medical readiness standards, including medical, dental and physical components. An airman must be able to carry out the wartime mission requirements of his respective career field, including technical, educational and physical proficiency. An airman also must be current on his fitness assessment, and if he is a Guardsman or reservist, he must “be considered a satisfactory participant” in his Guard or Reserve duties. “For some airmen, being fit for duty means deploying to an austere environment at a moment's notice,” the Air Force said in the release. “For others, it means being fit to execute wartime missions from home station. In both scenarios, commanders remain responsible for ensuring their airmen are fit for duty.”

It is not yet clear exactly how many airmen could be separated under this policy, but the Air Force said that about 0.5 percent of the roughly 500,000 total force airmen — which equates to roughly 2,500 active duty, Guard and Reserve airmen — have been non-deployable for at least a year. But the actual number of non-deployable airmen at risk of separation, even if they've been in that status for more than a year, will end up being less than that. Due to exemptions, the Air Force said that fewer than 1,000 airmen — not including those referred to the Disability Evaluation System —

are actually at risk of separation. The number of airmen referred to the Disability Evaluation System was not immediately available. Several categories are being exempted, including:

- Airmen who are pregnant or post-partum, in a training or transient status, deployable with limitations, or who are filling positions exempted by the secretary of defense.
- Airmen who are on a humanitarian assignment, such as those who cannot deploy because they have a seriously ill family member, are exempted.
- Airmen who have adopted children, are facing legal action, are under “sole survivor, surviving family member, or deferred from hostile fire zone” status, are conscientious objectors, are absent without leave, or are on pending administrative separation status are also exempt.

Overall, the Air Force said roughly 34,000 airmen on average were non-deployable for any length of time — mostly for medical reasons — during the last few months of 2018. Last year Air Force officials said it may have considered about 1,600 non-deployable active-duty airmen for separation, but the new numbers include Guard and Reserve airmen. Some airmen who sustained combat wounds that left them unable to deploy for more than a year will still be considered for a retention determination and could be separated, the Air Force said. But it will be up to the Secretary of the Air Force to make those decisions on a case-by-case basis. In all other cases, the Office of the Assistant Secretary of the Air Force for Manpower and Reserve Affairs will make the final decision on whether a non-deployable airman should be retained or separated.

But non-deployability will not necessarily mean the end of one’s career. Some airmen hold jobs that are “deployed in place,” such as nuclear missileers or many remotely-piloted aircraft pilots who stay stateside, and will be able to stay in the Air Force even if they can’t deploy overseas. Other non-deployable airmen could contribute to the Air Force in jobs that don’t require them to deploy, and could be retained. “It’s important to understand this is not an automatic separation policy,” Lt. Gen. Brian Kelly, the Air Force’s personnel chief, said in a statement last October. “It’s a process, similar to what we already do today, that allows us to evaluate our non-deployable airmen to determine if their continued service is compatible with and can meet the requirements the nation expects of us as an Air Force.” “In some cases, we’ll have airmen who can meet those requirements and fulfill requirements without being deployable,” Kelly continued. “The process we create will take care of all airmen while recognizing and ensuring we have a fair and equitable deployment process across our Air Force.”

Brady said the Air Force is taking a look at how other services handle non-deployability for inspiration on how it can better track and define its non-deployable population. The 19 FEB memo also goes further to describe how the process for deciding which airmen will be retained — or separated — will work. Each month, force support squadrons will receive a roster of airmen who have been non-deployable for at least 10 months, and will then distribute those rosters to the commanders they support. Those commanders will then tell airmen on those rosters about their status, and if they still aren’t deployable after the 12-month mark, will then be evaluated for separation or retention. If an airmen needs a retention determination, he must be notified by his chain of command. [Source: AirForceTimes | Stephen Losey | February 19, 2019 ++]

USCG Icebreakers Update 09 ► Trump Signs Bill for 1st in 40 Years

The bill that avoided a second government shutdown finally provided the \$655 million for a badly needed new icebreaker for the Coast Guard and \$20 million more for start of construction on a second one. "This is big, this is real, this is the largest single financial contribution to execution of our nation's Arctic strategy," Sen Lisa Murkowski (R-AK) said last week. Funding for the new icebreaker, to be called a "Polar Security Cutter," had been at risk of being diverted to construction of the southern border wall. But the bill signed into law last Friday by President Donald Trump earmarked money in the Department of Homeland Security's budget for a new ship to replace the Coast Guard's aging "Polar Star," the service's only functioning heavy icebreaker.

The legislation had "tucked away, where no one can get to it, a little pot of money, \$655 million dollars, to construct the first ever -- first ever -- Polar Security Cutter, and money to start construction on a second one," Murkowski said at the annual Armed Services YMCA Alaska's Salute to the Military in Anchorage. It will be the service's first new icebreaker in 40 years, according to Stars and Stripes. To underline the value of icebreakers, Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz sent out a tweet last week hailing the rescue by the Polar Star of fishermen stuck in thick Antarctic ice. The Polar Star "rescued 27 fishermen whose vessel became trapped in thick Antarctic ice 900 miles northeast of McMurdo Sound," the U.S. base in the Antarctic, Schultz wrote. "The crew broke through 150 miles of ice to reach the fishermen and to tow them to safety."

The Coast Guard views the appropriation by Congress as a down payment on an ambitious plan to boost the U.S. presence in the Arctic, and Antarctic, to counter Russia and China. "With the support of the administration and Congress, we plan to build a new fleet of six polar icebreakers -- at least three of which must be heavy icebreakers -- and we need the first new Polar Security Cutter immediately to meet America's needs in the Arctic," according to a Coast Guard statement to U.S. Naval Institute News. In one of a series of Christmas phone calls to service members worldwide, Trump likened the effort to secure funding for the new icebreaker to his difficulty in getting money for the border wall. "It's like the border wall. We still need a wall," he said in a phone call to Coast Guard District 17 in Juneau, Alaska, but added, "The ice is in big trouble when that thing gets finished. It'll go right through it. It's very expensive, but that's OK."

At a Navy League breakfast in late December, and in an interview with Military.com, Schultz said he expected a contract for the new icebreaker to go out in the spring. "We need it now," he said, but acknowledged that "it's probably six years from the contract award to splashing that ship." Schultz noted that the Polar Star was commissioned in 1976, and "that ship is tired." The 399-foot Polar Star has been assigned in recent years to the Antarctic, while the 420-foot medium icebreaker Healy, which was commissioned in 2000, has taken up Arctic duty. The Polar Star is capable of breaking through six feet of ice at three-to-four knots, and 21 feet by backing and ramming, Schultz said. The Healy is capable of breaking through about four feet of ice at three-to-four knots, and eight feet by backing and ramming, he added.

The melting of the polar ice cap, attributed by the vast majority of scientists and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to climate change, has resulted in vast stretches of open water in the Arctic for commercial exploitation and competition for mineral rights. Russia, which boasts of having at least 50 icebreakers, has increased military exercises in the region and heightened concerns at the Defense Department. China, which has two icebreakers and has announced plans to acquire more, has spoken in its official media of creating a "polar silk road" through the Arctic sea lanes.

In Anchorage on 16 FEB, Murkowski said funding for the new icebreaker is a first step in countering Russia and China. "So we're going to start a production line on icebreakers," she said. "You can call them Polar Security Cutters, or you can call them icebreakers, but we are beginning." The purpose of the new ships is "to provide the United States of America with access -- access to a changing Arctic; access that we need to protect a wide, wide range of interests, whether it's domain awareness, whether it's search and rescue, whether it's protection of U.S. economic interests," Murkowski said. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | February 20, 2019 ++]

Iron Dome ► Air Defense System | Army Intends to Purchase Some from Israel

In a de facto admission that existing US missile defenses just don't work the U.S. Army announced its intent to procure a limited number of Iron Dome weapon systems to fill its short-term need for an interim Indirect Fire Protection Capability (IFPC)," a US Army statement sent to Business Insider on 6 FEB. Israel's Iron Dome missile-defense system, indigenously designed with a \$429 million US investment backing it, represents the world's only example of working

missile defense. The Iron Dome Weapon System was developed by the Israeli firm Rafael Advanced Defense Systems to detect, assess and intercept incoming rockets, artillery and mortars. Rafael has teamed with Raytheon to produce Iron Dome's Tamir interceptor missiles to engage incoming threats launched from up to 40 miles away.



While the US, Russia, and China work on high-end missile systems meant to shoot down stealth aircraft in ultra-high-tech wars with electronic and cyber warfare raging along the sidelines, none of these countries' systems actually block many missiles, rockets, or mortars. On the other hand, Israel's Iron Dome has shot down more than 1,200 projectiles since going operational in 2011. Constant and sporadic attacks from Hezbollah in Lebanon and Iranian-aligned forces in Syria have turned Israel into a hotbed of rocket and mortar activity, and the system just plain works. Not only do the sensors and shooters track and hit targets reliably, the Iron Dome, unlike other systems, can tell if a projectile is going to miss a target and thereby save a \$100,000 interceptor fire. While the system does not run entirely without error, U.S. and Israeli officials consistently rate the dome as having a 90% success rate on the Gaza border, one of the most active places in the world for ballistic projectiles.

The US already has missile defenses for its forces. The 2019 Missile Defense Review said the U.S.'s Patriot Advanced Capability-3 missile-defense system has a "proven combat record," though US officials inflated its success rate during Operation Desert Storm. The U.S., unlike Israel, which is surrounded by enemies bent on its ultimate destruction, doesn't get many enemies firing ballistic missiles at its forces. Still, to protect its soldiers, the Army typically deploys Patriot defenses to its bases to protect against short-range missile attacks. In Iraq, the US Army also experimented with a Phalanx gun system that would rapid fire 20mm rounds at incoming rockets and mortars. But Saudi Arabia, a weaker U.S. ally, has put its Patriot defenses to the test and found them severely wanting either through user error or failings of the system itself. In repeated missile strikes from Houthi rebels using relatively unsophisticated Iranian ballistic missiles, the Patriot missile defenses have failed, sometimes spectacularly. [Source: Business Insider | Alex Lockie | February 6, 2019 ++]

Base Housing Update 02 ► Privatized Units | Withhold Rent Proposal Until Problems Fixed

Military spouses suggested to lawmakers one immediate way, for starters, to fix problems like mold, lead paint, termites, mice and other issues in privatized military housing: allow families to withhold rent payments until the issues are resolved. Spouses testified before senators 13 FEB, then watched as senators grilled company officials, and DoD and service officials, about the problems. All the officials admitted there have been breakdowns in the system, and assured senators they are making a commitment to address the systemic problems. Robert McMahon, assistant secretary of defense for sustainment, told the senators that what he heard from the spouses “reinforced what we already know, that we collectively have to do significantly better.”

McMahon said that working with DoD attorneys to look at possibly withholding rent payments to the companies “would be prudent, to ensure [privatization] partners respond rapidly.” The privatized housing rent payments are

generally the service member's Basic Allowance for Housing, paid by allotment. John Henderson, a retired colonel who is assistant secretary of the Air Force for installations, environment and energy, said he agreed that residents should have the ability to choose whether or not to pay their rent if they feel the landlord isn't giving them a safe place to live. "That makes the landlord responsive financially to the resident," he said. "I think there should rebates for untimely repairs, for power outages" and other issues, he said, adding that some privatized companies already do that.



This 111-home family housing development built in 2011 by a private developer at Trumbo Point, an annex of Naval Air Station Key West, is one of many military family housing communities managed by private companies around the country

Wednesday's hearing is the beginning of the Senate Armed Services Committee's efforts to address the problems. "Our service members and their families deserve high-quality, affordable housing. One mistake is too many," said committee chair Sen. James Inhofe, R-Oklahoma. He noted that the privatization initiative started in the 1990s as an effort to address housing managed by the government that was in disrepair. "We need necessary reforms to ensure accountability and excellence in privatized housing," Inhofe said.

The spouses testified about their difficulties in getting the companies to take their complaints seriously — even as black mold was growing out of walls, floors and ceilings, and entire families were getting sick. There was also difficulty determining who, if anyone, in the military establishment was holding the companies accountable. The families are left with no recourse. "I first became aware of the crisis-level military housing issues at Keesler Air Force Base where termites fell out of light fixtures into our beds," said Marine wife Crystal Cornwall. She said the housing office at Keesler in Mississippi told her that termites in her home are to be expected because of the region. "At Camp Pendleton, we lived with pervasive mold issues and unjustifiable move-out charges," she said, and were charged \$700 for carpet replacement. "The housing representative used a black light and moisture stick to find stains unseen by the naked eye. When I disputed the validity of these charges, I found no path to resolution with the housing company, Camp Pendleton, or with my husband's former command."

Sen. Martha McSally (R-AZ) said she was "infuriated" by what the spouses described. "This is disgusting," said the retired Air Force colonel. "Instead of being partners with our troops to make sure our way of life is kept safe and free, they left you hanging. They put you in harm's way. This is so wrong." She said the chain of command needs to be involved, be responsible "and has to be able to poke fingers in the chests of these companies and say, 'Fix it now, or you're done.'"

Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., questioned the companies, and DoD and service officials about the contracts and incentives, and how the military makes sure the companies are meeting their obligations. It's primarily through the surveys, although the Army and Air Force have initiated investigations into some aspects of the housing issues. "Those surveys did not alert you to the mice, the mold, the lead poisoning," she said. "These contracts are bad enough as they are, virtually guaranteed profit, in return for which they're supposed to provide decent housing. The one tool you've got is to say there's got to be some performance evaluation. To give away 95 percent of the performance based money at the same time that we're hearing from the people who live in this housing, that it's rat infested, it's dirty, that things leak... it's just not right not using the tools Congress gave to you on behalf of our service members." Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) told the company officials that the testimony suggested the system is broken, and that it is evident to the families, but not to the companies.

For their part, the companies said they are working on various initiatives such as setting up people and mechanisms to better interact with residents. For example, Balfour Beatty Communities has created new resident engagement specialist positions, to make sure residents' concerns are being heard, said Christopher Williams, the company's president. Recently they hired a nationally known environmental firm to review their mold and moisture inspection policies, and are taking steps to implement those recommendations. "Military families understand that quality housing does not mean entitlement to elegant mansions," said Marine wife Crystal Cornwall. "We simply ask for homes free of mold, pests, lead, and other hazards. As parents, we want safe places for our children to sleep at night." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 13, 2019 ++]

Base Housing Update 03 ► Privatized Units | Occupant Complaint Reprisals

In the face of reports of retaliation against military families for coming forward about their concerns about living conditions in privatized housing, senators strongly warned that they will not tolerate such reprisals. During a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing 13 FEB where military spouses testified, chairman Sen. James Inhofe (R-OK) reminded privatized company officials and defense and service officials that the witnesses' testimony and other communications with the committee are protected communication. "Any form of reprisal or threat should be immediately reported to this committee and will be immediately referred to the DoD Inspector General for swift action," Inhofe said. "Make no mistake. I will take any report of reprisal on military families directly to the secretary and chief of that specific service."



Eleven families from Keesler Air Force Base, Miss., have sued the companies that own and manage base housing there, due to an outbreak of mold that they claim has not been resolved. Some of the families live in the Bay Ridge community, shown here.

Senators extracted commitments from all the company officials as well as DoD and service officials that they would protect families from reprisal. Marine wife Crystal Cornwall testified that after hearing her concerns about the housing conditions, her unit's family readiness officer stepped in on their behalf, and was retaliated against by the base command. "He's since left the family readiness program because of this issue," she said. The family readiness officer had put her in touch with another military spouse at Camp Pendleton, California, who was also looking into issues, and they began working together. When the base command found out about it, she said, "the family readiness officer was told to stand down." "I believe the marriage between the [privatized housing companies] and the base commands is the biggest detrimental part of this issue," Cornwall said. "There's a marriage there and there's a certain kind of loyalty there that supersedes loyalty to military families."

The issue of retaliation was also raised in a recent online survey fielded by the Military Family Advisory Network (MFAN), which garnered responses from 14,558 current or recent residents of military privatized housing. "Families report attempts by housing company representatives and sometimes, military command to silence their complaints and several report receiving threats. Many fear retribution or negative impacts on their service members' military career," stated the MFAN report on preliminary findings. MFAN also spoke with several families who were unwilling to come forward publicly for fear of retaliation or negative impact on their service member. "One military spouse shared that their privatized housing company's community manager threatened to call the service member's commander if they continued to 'complain,' "according to the report.

One service member told MFAN that a garrison commander threatened him with a general officer memorandum of reprimand because the service member demanded that his family be moved out of their home when ticks began falling from the ceiling. A bat colony was living in their attic. Some families have reported rampant black mold, insect infestations, and a variety of other problems that made their homes unsafe. They've reported long-term health effects that they attribute to the mold and other conditions. But there are also financial implications; one spouse testified her family is now \$40,000 in debt because of issues related to mold, including replacing household items that could no longer be used.

Concerns about reprisals against military families for speaking out are not new to this issue. It's a long-standing concern in the military community — and service members have experienced reprisals in a variety of ways for a variety of reasons. Senators also stressed numerous times that military families should not hesitate to call their senators if they find themselves in situations with housing conditions they can't resolve. "I speak for every Senate member when I say, if you're living in military housing anywhere in this country, and you're not getting satisfaction from any of these vendors, call your Senate offices and we'll be in touch," said Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC). [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 13, 2019 ++]

Base Housing Update 04 ► Army Secretary Vows to Correct 'Unconscionable' Health Hazards

Deeply troubled by military housing conditions exposed by media reporting, the U.S. Army's top leadership vowed on 15 FEB to renegotiate its housing contracts with private real estate firms, test tens of thousands of homes for toxins and hold its own commanders responsible for protecting Army base residents from dangerous homes. In an interview, the Secretary of the Army Mark Esper said Reuters reports and a chorus of concerns from military families had opened his eyes to the need for urgent overhauls of the Army's privatized housing system, which accommodates more than 86,000 families.

The secretary's conclusion: Private real estate firms tasked with managing and maintaining the housing stock have been failing the families they serve, and the Army itself neglected its duties. "You've brought to light a big issue that demands our attention," Esper said on Friday morning at the Pentagon. "It is frankly unconscionable that our soldiers and their families would be living in these types of conditions when we ask so much of them day in and day out." The reporting described rampant mold and pest infestations, childhood lead poisoning, and service families often powerless to challenge private landlords in business with their military employers. Many families said they feared retaliation if they spoke out. The news agency described hazards across Army, Navy, Air Force and Marine Corps base housing communities.

"It's encouraging to see the Army taking action," said Eryn Wagnon, a director at non-profit the Military Officers Association of America. "We hope to see a collective solution come together consistently across the military services." Other military branches didn't elaborate on their plans on Friday, though the Navy said it would announce further actions soon. The reports have already spurred a raft of reforms and investigations. On 13 FEB, U.S. senators pledged more action to come during Senate Armed Services Committee hearings. Two days after those hearings, the Army outlined its immediate and longer-term plan of reform. "Our instinct is this is bigger even than what's been reported, and we want to get to the bottom of it, get to the bottom of it fast," said General Mark Milley, the Army's Chief of Staff. To do so, the Army said it will conduct an extensive survey of its family housing across the country to define the scope of potentially hazardous conditions. Reports in the past, provided by the private industry companies themselves, painted a "false picture," Milley said.

Army leaders singled out mold infestations as the leading cause of health concerns. On 14 FEB, the Army ordered its private partner at Maryland's Fort Meade, Corvias Group, to conduct air quality testing in the nearly 2,800 homes it operates there, and report back within 60 days. The Army expects Corvias to cover the costs, up to \$500 per home. The directive came after Army leaders visited Meade, hearing first-hand about pervasive mold and maintenance lapses. An

earlier media report described Meade families suffering from mold-related illnesses, ceilings collapsing in children's bedrooms, and maintenance neglect leaving families unprotected from hazards.



Mold damage is pictured in the house of senior airman Abigail Courtney at Tinker Air Force Base, Oklahoma, U.S. in this undated handout photo

In addition, the Army said it will begin renegotiating the 50-year housing contracts it has with its seven private housing partners, including Corvias. As previously reported, Corvias stands to earn more than \$1 billion in fees and other compensation from six of the 13 military bases where it operates. Its fees continued flowing even as maintenance lapses plagued service families. "Providing housing for our armed service members is a privilege and Corvias is making changes to meet the expectations," the Rhode Island-based company said in a statement.

When unsafe conditions persist, the Army will seek to reduce or withhold fees from its private partners. It is also examining ways to give service families more avenues to stop rent payments if problems are not quickly addressed, Milley said. The re-negotiation process could begin as early as next week, when Army Secretary Esper will start holding regular meetings with the CEOs of its private housing partners. Another problem the Army acknowledged: Military commands across the country, many times relying on the word of private partners, allowed housing hazards to fester. Now, Milley said, Army commanders will be tasked with greater oversight. "My son will not 'be all that he can be,' as the Army likes to say," said Darlena Brown, a colonel's wife whose son's development was stunted by lead poisoning in a Fort Benning home, and whose story was one of those profiled by Reuters. "But I believe Army leaders will do the right thing and now recognize how the housing has failed some of us."

The Military Housing Privatization Initiative, the largest-ever corporate takeover of federal housing, began in the late 1990s in an effort to rebuild an aging military housing stock by enlisting private developers and property managers. "Just because someone said it's privatized," Milley said, "doesn't wash our hands of the responsibility to take care of our soldiers and their families." Esper added: "We are acting now. More to follow."

The Army statements come on the same day that President Donald Trump declared a national emergency to obtain billions of dollars in funding for a border wall, a plan that could divert money from military construction budgets, including funds earmarked for government-owned military family housing. While the recent concerns have focused on privatized base housing, some lawmakers warned Trump's plan could exacerbate a housing crisis for military families. "They will be forced to remain in 'poor' or 'failing' conditions," Senator Tim Kaine, Democrat of Virginia, said in a statement on 15 FEB. The Army said it awaits details on how any shift in military construction funding would affect the largest armed service branch. In his on-camera interview, Shanahan suggested that military housing in particular would be protected, and a defense official after the interview confirmed Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan had communicated to concerned lawmakers that military family housing funds would not be touched. [Source: Reuters | Joshua Schneyer, Andrea Januta & Deborah Nelson | February 18, 2019 ++]

PFAS Toxic Exposure ► Formal Investigation Launched on Base Contaminations

The U.S. government is moving forward on a review of water contamination at military bases, a study that may one day help answer a heartbreaking question: Did exposure to DoD chemicals give troops or their family members cancer? The study, announced by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, will specifically look at the levels of per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, in people in the affected communities. PFAS are chemical compounds that were used in fire fighting foam on military bases and are also found in everyday household products. PFAS have been tied to cancers and developmental delays for fetuses and infants. The Pentagon released a review last year that found that scores of military installations had contaminated groundwater and well water.

This first study aims to set a baseline and “provide information to communities about levels of PFAS in their bodies.” That initial review will go through 2020 and be used support a follow-on, nationwide study “that will look at the relationship between PFAS exposure and health outcomes,” the agencies said in a statement. A total of ten locations will make up the initial review. The first two, comprising Bucks and Montgomery counties in Pennsylvania and Westhampton, N.Y., are already underway, due to state grants. The Pennsylvania sites include Naval Air Station Joint Reserve Base Willow Grove and Naval Air Warfare Center Warminster. The New York site includes the Francis S. Gabreski Air National Guard Base. On top of those two, the following eight communities will now be added:

- Berkeley County (W. Va.) near Shepherd Field Air National Guard Base
- El Paso County (Colo.) near Peterson Air Force Base
- Fairbanks North Star Borough (Alaska) near Eielson Air Force Base
- Hampden County (Mass.) near Barnes Air National Guard Base
- Lubbock County (Texas) near Reese Technology Center
- Orange County (N.Y.) near Stewart Air National Guard Base
- New Castle County (Del.) near New Castle Air National Guard Base
- Spokane County (Wash.) near Fairchild Air Force Base

“The assessments will generate information about exposure to PFAS in affected communities and will extend beyond the communities identified, as the lessons learned can also be applied to communities facing similar PFAS drinking water exposures. This will serve as a foundation for future studies evaluating the impact of PFAS exposure on human health,” said ATSDR director Patrick Breysse. The study participants will be randomly selected and will have their PFAS levels checked through blood and urine samples. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Tara Copp | February 21, 2019 ++]

Military Earplug Lawsuit Update 01 ► 100 Filed So Far Just Tip of the Iceberg



Hundreds of veterans are filing lawsuits against a government contractor that manufactured and sold defective combat earplugs to the military. The earplugs didn't maintain a tight seal and allowed dangerously loud sounds to slip through without the wearer knowing. The lawsuits allege that Minnesota-based 3M Company designed the earplugs in a defective manner and failed to warn users of the defect or to provide proper instructions for their use, according to a copy of one lawsuit provided to Military Times. The failure allegedly resulted in hearing loss, tinnitus and loss of balance in those who used 3M's trademarked, dual-ended Combat Arms earplugs during their military service between 2003 and 2015.

The lawsuits were filed in the United States District Court for the Western District of Texas — Waco Division. One hundred lawsuits were filed by two Houston-based law firms: Abraham, Watkins, Nichols, Sorrels, Agosto & Aziz and Bell, Rose & Cobos. "Due to the widespread damage caused to veterans by 3M's actions, these cases are just the tip of the iceberg of lawsuits that will be filed in order to hold 3M accountable," Mo Aziz, one of the attorneys involved, said in a statement. 3M previously agreed to pay \$9.1 million to resolve allegations that it knowingly sold its earplugs to the Defense Logistics Agency without disclosing defects that decreased the hearing protection, according to the Justice Department. The allegations by the U.S. government were brought against 3M through the enforcement of the False Claims Act.

Although that case has been resolved, all claims within the settlement were allegations only, and there was no determination of liability, the Justice Department said. That hasn't stopped veterans from lining up to seek punitive damages from 3M after developing hearing issues from 3M's "gross negligence," according to the lawsuit copy. "Since late 2003, 3M touted its Combat Arms earplugs as capable of allowing users to hear commands from friendly soldiers and approaching enemy combatants, unimpaired, in the same way as if they had nothing in their ears," the lawsuit reads.

The documents allege that 3M employees knew about the earplug defects as early as 2000. Although testing conducted by 3M found that the earplugs were defective, the company falsified certification stating that the testing complied with military standards, according to the lawsuit. "It is an absolute disgrace that 3M would purposefully provide defective equipment to U.S. service members, knowing that those service members would rely on that defective equipment in combat," Andrew Cobos, another attorney named in the lawsuit, said. "Their fraud resulted in lifelong injuries to America's warriors. 3M's actions cannot, and should not, be tolerated."

In 2006, the U.S. government entered into a contract with 3M, in which the company supplied an estimated annual quantity of 15,000 earplug packages, with 50 pairs per package, at a guaranteed price of at least \$9 million in sales for the year, the lawsuit states. The earplugs were sold to the military until 2015, when 3M discontinued the product. However, the defective pairs were not recalled and thus are still likely used by soldiers and sold by other vendors, according to the lawsuit. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Kyle Rempfer | February 14, 2019 ++]

Navy Terminology, Jargon & Slang ► Big Chicken Dinner thru Birds Tight

Every profession has its own jargon and the Navy is no exception. Since days of yore the military in general, and sailors in particular, have often had a rather pithy (dare say 'tasteless?') manner of speech. That may be changing somewhat in these politically correct times, but to Bowdlerize the sailor's language represented here would be to deny its rich history. The traditions and origins remain. While it attempted to present things with a bit of humor, if you are easily offended this may not be for you. You have been warned.

Note: 'RN' denotes Royal Navy usage. Similarly, RCN = Royal Canadian Navy, RAN = Royal Australian Navy, RM = Royal Marines, RNZN = Royal New Zealand Navy, UK = general usage in militaries of the former British Empire

Big Chicken Dinner – Bad Conduct Discharge. In many ways, equivalent to a felony conviction.

Bight – (1) A loop in or slack part of a line. (2) A curve or bend in a shoreline, or a small body of water formed by same. Bilge - (1) The area below the deck gratings in the lowest spaces of the ship, where things, especially liquids, tend to collect. (2) To fail or do poorly. "Poor Smitty bilged the quiz." (3) To name a classmate or shipmate involved in wrongdoing, or to identify a mistake made by someone else.

Bilge Diving – Working in the bilges of a ship, or cleaning same.

Bilge rat – Someone who works in the engineering spaces.

Bin Rat – (RCN) A person who works in Stores (supply).

Bingo - (1) Fuel level or status requiring either an immediate return to base or vector to a tanker, 'bingo fuel'. As a verb, the act of returning to base or a tanker because of low fuel state.

Binnacle – A pedestal which supports a compass. Typically found next to or in front of the ship's wheel.

Binnacle List – Sick list; a listing of the names of the men currently in sick bay and unable to perform their duties due to sickness or injury. This list was originally to be found attached to the binnacle.

Biologics – The sounds generated by sea life, when picked up on sonar.

Bird farm - Aircraft carrier.

Birds - (1) Term for the rank markings of a USN/USCGS Captain or USMC/USAF/USA Colonel (silver eagle, O-6 paygrade). (2) (RCN) Punishment consisting of confinement to the ship, base, etc., or sailors under punishment (derived from the slang term 'jailbird.') (3) Generic, airplane. (4) Missiles, especially in the surface community.

Birds Free - Permission has been granted to fire missiles.

Birds Tight – Permission to fire is refused.

[Source: <http://hazegray.org/faq/slang1.htm> | February 28, 2019 ++]

Warships That Will Change The Future ► HMCS Chicoutimi (SSK-879)



This submarine is a rare sight to behold. Not because it is a special model or anything, but because it was one of four submarines owned by the Royal Canadian Navy. Its primary objective was to search for and destroy enemy Soviet subs which were prowling up and down the coast of Canada. It is simply shocking that the country with one of the longest coastlines in the world only had four submarines. And we say “had” because now Canada only has three operating.

By the time Canada's submarines are fully ready for duty, they'll be due for retirement. Defense Minister Peter MacKay blames the Liberals for Canada's troubled fleet of second-hand Victoria-class submarines. It was the Liberals who purchased the four British-made vessels for the suspiciously low price of \$750-million in 1998. Yet it was none other than MacKay himself who, 10 years later, persuaded his Conservative colleagues not to scrap them. It was MacKay who signed taxpayers up for another \$1.5-billion worth of refits and repairs, thereby throwing good money after bad.

It was apparent long before 2008 that the submarines were deeply flawed. The diesel engines were designed for railroad locomotives and not the rapid stops and starts required of submarines. There were defects in the torpedo tubes, making it possible for both the inner and outer doors to be open at the same time, even while the subs were submerged. The subs were mothballed in saltwater for four years before Canada bought them, and years more before they took possession. They suffered serious corrosion — the diving depth of HMCS Windsor was restricted due to rust damage on the hull.

Shortly after Canada took possession, 1,500 litres of saltwater spilled into HMCS Corner Brook (SSK-878) because of a malfunctioning Submerged Signal Ejector — a device that is used to deploy decoys while submerged. HMCS Victoria (SSK-876) experienced serious problems with its cooling system. And a deadly fire broke out on HMCS Chicoutimi (SSK-879) when seawater entering through an open hatch caused an electrical short in wiring that had just one layer of waterproof sealant, instead of the three layers the construction specifications had required. In 2004, the electrical system on Victoria was destroyed when the submarine was hooked up to an on-shore electric supply. The Halifax Chronicle Herald reported that the Navy spent about \$200,000 after the accident “to buy old technology that mirrors what the sub's British builders used” – equipment that one of the Navy's own “electrical technologists” said “probably goes back to the '60s.”

In 2007, Windsor (SSK-877) entered a refit that was supposed to take three years but ended up taking six. Documents obtained by the CBC later explained that every system had major problems. Spare parts are also difficult to obtain. It was in this context that MacKay pushed for the \$1.5-billion refit and repair contract, a move rendered all the more perplexing by the fact that, by 2008, the submarines were already between 15-19 years old. This meant that the most one could hope for from the vessels, after their refits, was a single decade of service.

Chicoutimi has been out of the water since the fire in 2004, and was to remain in dry dock until at least the end of this 2014. Which was very long when you consider that, for the same amount of money, Canada could have procured between 3-4 brand new diesel-electric submarines based on proven designs from France or Germany. Five years after the \$1.5-billion contract, MacKay insisted the situation was improving. Which is true, if going from horrendous to bad counts as an improvement. Corner Brook was damaged in an accident in 2011 and put out of action until 2012. It was scheduled to return to dry dock for three years in 2014. In December 2012, a defect was discovered in one of Windsor's two diesel engines, which resulted in the submarine having to operate on just one engine. This put the sub on limited duty. She was to be taken out of service later this year so that the engine could be replaced. Chicoutimi had been out of the water since the fire in 2004, and would remain in dry dock until at least the end of 2014. Victoria, which emerged from six years in dry dock in 2011, was scheduled to return there for three years in 2016.

According to the Department of National Defense, Canada's four Victoria-class submarines accumulated a total of just 1,131 days at sea in the decade after 2003 — about 30 days per submarine per year. According to a FEB 2015 CNBC report Canada's Navy was marking what it called a milestone for its controversy-plagued submarine program. For the first time since Canada's four Victoria-class subs were purchased almost two decades ago, the navy said the fleet was now "operational", meaning three of the subs are able to conduct naval operations. Two of the subs, HMCS Victoria and HMCS Chicoutimi were to be in the water off Esquimalt, B.C. that week, while HMCS Windsor was currently operating out of Halifax. A fourth vessel, HMCS Corner Brook was in dry dock in Esquimalt in what the navy calls a period of "deep maintenance". **Note:** I was unable to find any information on Canada's current submarine fleet situation. [Source: <https://sundodgers.com/tag/hmcs-chicoutimi> | Feb 2019 ++]



Battle For The 1864 Presidency ► How Lincoln Was Able to Keep the War Going

A blizzard howled across Illinois, Indiana and Ohio on New Year’s Day 1864, sending temperatures plummeting 88 degrees to 30 below zero. It was a fitting beginning to a year in which bitter political winds battered Northern states. After nearly 30 months of civil war, the bones of thousands of Northern boys lay in Southern graves or decayed unburied in the thickets and swamps of Dixie. The war “has carried mourning into almost every home,” President Abraham Lincoln himself observed, “until it can be said that the ‘heavens are hung in black.’” The conflict was draining \$2 million a day from the federal treasury and in prosecuting the war Lincoln’s administration had trampled on constitutionally guaranteed rights like habeas corpus, freedom of speech and freedom of the press. Faith in the president was falling like the winter temperatures.

In February, Congressman Samuel Pomeroy, a member of Lincoln’s own party, circulated a document promoting Secretary of the Treasury Samuel P. Chase as a replacement for Lincoln in the November elections. Old Abe’s Emancipation Proclamation, which had gone into effect on Jan. 1, 1863, had pleased abolitionists, but many of them felt it didn’t go far enough. Other Northerners resented the proclamation, believing it turned a war to save the Union into a war to “free the Negro.” None of this boded well for Lincoln winning a second term, something no president had done since Andrew Jackson. The President had doubts. To read how events of the Civil War impacted on his assuming a second term refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, **“Battle for the 1864 Presidency”**.

[Source: Civil War Times Magazine | Gerald D. Swick | February 15, 2019 ++]

WWI U.S. Battle With Russia ► USA Invaded Russia and Fought The Red Army

The US Armed Forces and the Red Army, although great rivals, only once met in battle. Even though during the Cold War a number of conflicts were considered to be proxy wars between the two superpowers, it was during the Russian Civil War that the Soviets and Americans fought each other directly. On March 3rd, 1918, the Bolshevik government of Soviet Russia signed a separate peace treaty with the Central Powers, in Brest-Litovsk, thus leaving the war and closing the Eastern Front. Immediately, the Allies organized an expedition intended to regroup the Imperial Russian Army and subdue the Bolshevik revolution. Several contingents of Allied troops deployed to Russia.

The British regiment landed in Arkhangelsk, on the far northern tip of Russian coast on August 2nd, 1918, occupying the city and securing it as a base of operations for further actions. The city was of great importance, as it held many supplies sent by the Allies to support the last Russian offensive against the Germans in 1917. By the time

the British troops arrived, the supplies had been seized by the Bolsheviks, who engaged the Allies in combat almost immediately upon their arrival.



U.S. troops in Vladivostok, August 1918 (left), Czechoslovaks with armored train, Russia (center), and Polar Bear Monument in White Chapel Cemetery, Troy, Michigan (right)

In September that same year, a contingent of American troops was sent to Siberia as a peacekeeping force, but they never saw combat. Some 189 soldiers died from the cold or other causes. All operations in Russia conducted by the Allies were of an international character. Soldiers from different Allied countries were sent to aid the expedition or were already in Russia as part of the Entente war effort against Germany and Austro-Hungary. These included French, Belgian, Romanian, Greek, Polish, Canadian, Italian, Japanese, Czechoslovak, Yugoslav, and Australian soldiers. In fear of communism spreading throughout Europe, the Allies quickly agreed to provide open support for the members of the Tzarist White Russian movement, which hoped to restore the Russian Empire.

As the First World War was coming to its end, the Allied attention had shifted to the crisis in Russia. Some units, organized by volunteers and POWs from different ethnic backgrounds, were now stuck in a complicated conflict that was tearing Russia apart. The largest of these divisions was the Czechoslovak Legion, consisted of Czechs and Slovaks, who refused to serve, or deserted from, the Austro-Hungarian Army, in hopes of creating their own state after the war. One of the main concerns of Allied expeditions was the extraction of 40,000 members of the Czechoslovak Legion, who, at the outbreak of the civil war, assumed control over the strategically vital Trans-Siberian railway. At first, a verbal non-aggression pact existed between the Bolsheviks and the Czech Legion, but in 1918, the Legion became deeply involved in the conflict, siding itself with the White Russian movement.

The American contingent stationed in Arkhangelsk was dubbed the Polar Bear Expedition due to the position of the city near the Arctic circle. The freezing weather added up to the nickname, as the soldiers faced extremely low temperatures. Elements of the 85th division were sent by General Pershing to aid the British in Arkhangelsk. The main bulk of the American force was the 339th Infantry Regiment. There were also troops from the First Battalion of the 310th Engineers, plus a few other ancillary units from the 85th Division. The Americans arrived in Arkhangelsk one month after their British counterparts and joined the fight as the British fought their way through to reach the remnants of the Czechoslovak Legion. A far-fetched objective was to restore the Eastern Front with the help of the Czechoslovaks and White Russians as the war was still happening at that time.

War opened on two fronts, one along the Dvina river and another along the Vologda Railroad. Here, they engaged and pushed back the Bolshevik forces for the next six weeks during their autumn offensive. The fronts were becoming too long and far too difficult to supply. The vast plains of Russia weren't compatible with the trench warfare the army was accustomed to in Europe. In the east, cavalry still represented an important element of war, and a skilled rider was indeed a formidable foe. It was hard for the Americans to keep their front line and enemy raids began to disrupt their supply routes more frequently. Then the winter came. The Allies took on a more defensive attitude. They failed to mobilize the local population against the Bolsheviks, so it became harder and harder to see how the link up with the Czechoslovak Legion could be achieved.

Meanwhile, the Bolsheviks staged an offensive during the early winter months on the Dvina river front. They inflicted a severe blow to the Allied contingent, which caused the Allies to retreat and reorganize. Soon after, Germany

capitulated. The word spread that the Great War, the biggest of them all, was over. Everyone felt homesick and with a sense of pointlessness as the soldiers weren't fighting for the Allied cause in general anymore, but were becoming more and more involved in a complicated civil war. Also, the number of casualties was growing. Mutiny was in the air, as the men demanded to return to the USA. The port of Arkhangelsk froze over during the winter months of early 1919, and the soldiers were losing all hope of ever seeing home again. The men from the 339th Infantry Regiment were mostly from Detroit, Michigan.

Finally, in May 1919, 4,000 British volunteers were sent to relieve the American troops at Arkhangelsk. Soon, the US contingent was evacuated, together with the rest of the Allies stationed in Northern Russia, thus ending the intervention. A report dated October 1919 stated that there were 210 American casualties, including at least 110 deaths from battle, about 30 missing in action, and 70 deaths from disease, 90% of which were caused by the Spanish Flu. The number of wounded men from the Polar Bear Expedition was 305. The repatriation of the remains of American soldiers was a long and tiresome process because of the extremely difficult diplomatic relations between the USA and the Soviet Union, especially during the first years after the war.

The remains of 56 soldiers, the last to be returned home, were eventually re-buried in plots surrounding the Polar Bear Monument – made by sculptor Leon Hermant – in White Chapel Memorial Cemetery, Troy, Michigan. A ceremony was held on May 30, 1930, to commemorate the event.

[Source: www.warhistoryonline.com | Nikola Budanovic | November 17, 2016 ++]

Chosin Reservoir Update 01 ► How Tootsie Rolls Accidentally Saved Marines During War

On November 26, 1950, 10,000 men of the First Marine Division, along with elements of two Army regimental combat teams, a detachment of British Royal Marine commandos and some South Korean policemen were completely surrounded by over ten divisions of Chinese troops in rugged mountains near the Chosin Reservoir. Chairman Mao had personally ordered the Marines be annihilated, and Chinese General Song Shi-Lun gave it his best shot, throwing human waves of his 120,000 soldiers against the heavily outnumbered allied forces. A massive cold front blew in from Siberia, and with it, the coldest winter in recorded Korean history. For the encircled allies at the Chosin Reservoir, daytime temperatures averaged five degrees below zero, while nights plunged to minus 35 and lower.



Jeep batteries froze and split. C-rations ran dangerously low and the cans were frozen solid. Fuel could not be spared to thaw them. If truck engines stopped, their fuel lines froze. Automatic weapons wouldn't cycle. Morphine syrettes had to be thawed in a medical corpsman's mouth before they could be injected. Precious bottles of blood plasma were frozen and useless. Resupply could only come by air, and that was spotty and erratic because of the foul weather. High Command virtually wrote them off, believing their situation was hopeless. Washington braced for imminent news of slaughter and defeat. Retreat was hardly an option; not through that wall of Chinese troops. If the Marines defended, they would be wiped out. So they formed a 12-mile long column and attacked.

There were 78 miles of narrow, crumbling, steeply-angled road and 100,000 Chinese soldiers between the Marines and the sea at Hungnam. Both sides fought savagely for every inch of it. The march out became one monstrous, moving battle. The Chinese used the ravines between ridges, protected from rifle fire, to marshal their forces between attacks. The Marines' 60-millimeter mortars, capable of delivering high, arcing fire over the ridgelines, breaking up those human waves, became perhaps the most valuable weapon the Marines had. But their supply of mortar rounds was quickly depleted. Emergency requests for resupply were sent by radio, using code words for specific items. The code for 60mm mortar ammo was "Tootsie Rolls" but the radio operator receiving that urgent request didn't have the Marines' code sheets. All he knew was that the request came from command authority, it was extremely urgent and there were tons of Tootsie Rolls at supply bases in Japan.

Tootsie Rolls had been issued with other rations to US troops since World War I, earning preferred status because they held up so well to heat, cold and rough handling compared to other candies. Tearing through the clouds and fog, parachutes bearing pallet-loads of Tootsie Rolls descended on the Marines. After initial shocked reactions, the freezing, starving troops rejoiced. Frozen Tootsies were thawed in armpits, popped in mouths, and their sugar provided instant energy. For many, Tootsie Rolls were their only nourishment for days. The troops also learned they could use warmed Tootsie Rolls to plug bullet holes in fuel drums, gas tanks, cans and radiators, where they would freeze solid again, sealing the leaks.

Over two weeks of unspeakable misery, movement and murderous fighting, the 15,000-man column suffered 3,000 killed in action, 6,000 wounded and thousands of severe frostbite cases. But they reached the sea, demolishing several Chinese divisions in the process. Hundreds credited their very survival to Tootsie Rolls. Surviving Marines called themselves "The Chosin Few," and among themselves, another name: The Tootsie Roll Marines.

[Source: MCCS Forward | February 17, 2019 ++]

War Memorials ► World War II Memorial Indianapolis Indiana



One of the newest memorials in the plaza, the World War II Memorial is located just south of the American Legion national headquarters. The design of the WWII Memorial is similar to the Korean and Vietnam War Memorials, but it was made considerably larger to reflect the size and scale of World War II. LOCATED ON THE CONCAVE SIDE OF THE MEMORIAL is a weatherproof computer with a database of names of all the Hoosiers who lost their lives in WWII, as well as many veterans who returned home. The convex side features excerpts from Hoosier soldiers' letters home to friends and family.

Post WWII Photos ► Hiroshima Survivor



A survivor of the first atomic bomb ever used in warfare, Jinpe Teravama retains scars after the healing of burns from the bomb explosion, in Hiroshima, in June of 1947. (AP Photo)

Every Picture Tells A Story ► Luftwaffe Bomber Formation



If you read enough memoirs from Battle of Britain pilots, you will come across numerous descriptions of the standard Luftwaffe bomber formations that came across the Channel from France. They were often described as massive “stairs”, “escalators” or even “cascading waterfalls” with succeeding flights of bombers stepping up and back from the lead group over great distances. In the book *The Spitfire Luck of Skeets Ogilvie*, Ogilvie describes the formation being “all piled up like... the moving staircase at Piccadilly Circus”. This is sometimes hard to grasp, but this is the first photograph I have seen that illustrates this standard Luftwaffe formation perfectly. Viewing from the dorsal gunner’s position in a leading Heinkel He 111, we can find 20 aircraft in this one compact photograph. Can you find them all?

Military History Anniversaries ► 01 thru 15 MAR

Significant events in U.S. Military History over the next 15 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Military History Anniversaries 1 thru 15 MAR**. [Source: This Day in History www.history.com/this-day-in-history | March2019 ++]

WWII Bomber Nose Art [25] ► Full Boost



Medal of Honor Citations ► William George Harrell | WWII



*The President of the United States takes pride in presenting the
MEDAL OF HONOR posthumously
To*

William George Harrell

Rank and organization: Sergeant, U.S. Marine Corps, 1st Battalion, 28th Marines, 5th Marine Division

Place and date: Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, 3 March 1945

Entered service: Mercedes, Tex. On July 3, 1942

Born: June 26, 1922 in Rio Grande City, Texas

Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as leader of an assault group attached to the 1st Battalion, 28th Marines, 5th Marine Division during hand-to-hand combat with enemy Japanese at Iwo Jima, Volcano Islands, on 3 March 1945. Standing watch alternately with another marine in a terrain studded with caves and ravines, Sgt. Harrell was holding a position in a perimeter defense around the company command post when Japanese troops infiltrated our lines in the early hours of dawn. Awakened by a sudden attack, he quickly opened fire with his carbine and killed 2 of the enemy as they emerged from a ravine in the light of a star shellburst. Unmindful of his danger as hostile grenades fell closer, he waged a fierce lone battle until an exploding missile tore off his left hand and fractured his thigh. He was vainly attempting to reload the carbine when his companion returned from the command post with another weapon. Wounded again by a Japanese who rushed the foxhole wielding a saber in the darkness, Sgt. Harrell succeeded in drawing his pistol and killing his opponent and then ordered his wounded companion to a place of safety. Exhausted by profuse bleeding but still unbeaten, he fearlessly met the challenge of 2 more enemy troops who charged his position and placed a grenade near his head. Killing 1 man with his pistol, he grasped the sputtering grenade with his good right hand, and, pushing it painfully toward the crouching soldier, saw his remaining assailant destroyed but his own hand severed in the explosion. At dawn Sgt. Harrell was evacuated from a position hedged by the bodies of 12 dead Japanese, at least 5 of whom he had personally destroyed in his self-sacrificing defense of the command post. His grim fortitude, exceptional valor, and indomitable fighting spirit against almost insurmountable odds reflect the highest credit upon himself and enhance the finest traditions of the U.S. Naval Service.



In addition to the Medal of Honor, Sgt Harrell was awarded the Purple Heart; Presidential Unit Citation; Good Conduct Medal; American Campaign Medal; Asiatic-Pacific Campaign Medal with one bronze star; and the World War II Victory Medal.

After the war, Harrell worked for the Veteran's Administration. He specialized in helping other amputees. He married and had children. Sergeant Harrell died on August 9, 1964 in San Antonio, Texas, and was laid to rest in Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery, San Antonio.

The tragic circumstances surrounding Harrell's death remain a mystery. On the evening of August 8, 1964, Harrell had been at a party with friends. Sometime after midnight on August 9, in his own residence, Harrell shot and killed his friends, Edward and Geraldine Zumwalt, and then turned the gun on himself. The bodies were discovered the following morning by Harrell's family when they returned from an out-of-town trip. The motivation for the killings was never determined.

[Source: <https://history.army.mil/moh/wwII-g-l.html> | February 2019 ++]



Medicare Enrollment Update 03 ► Legislation Introduced to Allow Buy In at Age 50

Amid the hype over “Medicare for all,” Democrats’ likely health-care path in the new Congress is more akin to “Medicare for more” — allowing people 50 and older to buy into the government’s health insurance program for seniors. Key Democrats introduced legislation 13 FEB that would do just that, saying it can be implemented quickly and is sorely needed, as Americans aged 50 to 64 face pricey medical issues and get “knocked around” by private insurers. Some are even putting off an early retirement because they must cling to job-based insurance until they qualify for Medicare, said Sen. Debbie Stabenow of Michigan, who filed the bill with fellow Democratic Sen. Tammy Baldwin of Wisconsin. “So many people say they’re holding their breath until age 65,” she said. “I want people to be able to stop holding their breath.”

Democrats’ prized health-care law, the Affordable Care Act, extended coverage to roughly 20 million Americans, yet nearly 30 million remain uninsured. A debate over how to reach them has been raging for years, with the party’s left-wing ante known as “Medicare for all,” pushed by Sen. Bernard Sanders and several 2020 Democratic hopefuls. It would cover everyone by instituting nationwide government-sponsored coverage, but its defenders are being tripped up by questions about the fate of private insurance, which many Americans hold and like. That makes incremental plans such as Mrs. Stabenow’s more palatable to some Democrats.

Under the plan, consumers aged 50 to 64 could shop for Medicare coverage on the Affordable Care Act’s insurance exchanges, allowing them to compare the program’s offerings to plans already available to them under President Barack Obama’s program. It would be a version of the public option, which many Democrats had wanted as part of the original Obamacare framework. Consumers would buy the plans at full cost, so the legislation is scored as budget-neutral instead of increasing deficits — although customers eligible for Obamacare subsidies may use them to defray their Medicare buy-in premium. Sen. Sherrod Brown, an Ohio Democrat eyeing a presidential bid, has said it’s a practical stepping stone to more ambitious efforts. “This will help millions of people, strengthen the Affordable Care Act and get us closer to our goal of making sure everyone has health-care coverage,” he said.

Recent polling suggests Medicare-at-50 is a runaway hit. Nearly eight in 10 people think it’s a good idea, including almost seven in 10 Republicans, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation. “Medicare is the best ‘public option’ that already exists,” said Rep. Brian Higgins, New York Democrat, who is pushing for such buy-in plans to be added to Obamacare. Senate GOP leaders are likely to balk, however — government-oriented attempts to plug holes in Obamacare are a nonstarter for the party. The Partnership for America’s Health Care Future — a coalition formed to combat Democrats’ floated changes — urged Congress to reject government-based options. “A debate over government-run care will bitterly divide Americans at a time when they want bipartisan consensus on health care,” the group wrote. “Americans deserve better.”

The Kaiser poll found strong support for the full range of Democratic plans, but said that can be dented when told nationwide plans could replace private insurance and increase their taxes. “Single payer is a huge minefield for Democrats given that polling shows that support melts when voters are told they would lose their current private coverage,” said Robert Laszewski, a health policy consultant in Alexandria, Virginia. “That said, polls also say that

most voters want government to have a role in providing a better health-care safety net.” [Source: The Washington Times | Tom Howell Jr. | February 13, 2019 ++]

Organ Donors ► Walter Reed National Medical Center Needs 380 Kidneys

I don’t want to die.” Phyllis Obeng Dadzie said the words quietly, but with a slight chuckle, as though it was obvious. She was sitting with her husband, Navy Chief Petty Officer Charles Agyeilarbi, in a small room at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center, shivering under a pink winter coat that covered her small frame. Seven months ago, Dadzie, a native of Ghana, was a healthy 25-year-old, pregnant with the couple’s second child. But in August, complications during the third trimester and the birth of their son, Prince Charles, sent Dadzie into stage 5 kidney disease and, ultimately, to Walter Reed, where she now gets dialysis three times a week.

She’s fully aware of what could happen if she doesn’t get a new kidney soon, but she’s not ready to give up — not with a 2-year-old and a baby at home who need their mom. “I just want to get a new kidney and live (for) my kids again,” she said. “That’s all that I pray for every day.” Dadzie is one of about 380 patients at Walter Reed who are on the national kidney transplant list — from troops and military dependents in their young twenties to military retirees who’ve dedicated their lives to service. But with a national list 100,000 people long, getting a kidney that way could take years, said nurse Vilda Desgoutte-Brown, the hospital’s living donor coordinator. In the meantime, dialysis could cause heart, lung and thyroid problems, or other complications, such as diabetes. “A lot of people end up dying on the machine,” she said.

Touched by stories like Dadzie’s, Desgoutte-Brown is trying to spread the word about her beloved patients, in hopes that others in the military community would consider coming forward as potential donors. After all, you only need one healthy kidney to live a normal life, she said, pointing out that some people are only born with one and may never know it. “(Kidney donation) really doesn’t affect you unless you gain a lot of weight and stop taking care of yourself as before,” Desgoutte-Brown said. “It’s really no difference at all.”



Phyllis Obeng Dadzie with her two children (left) and retired Air Force Lt. Col. Ruth Grayson Scott (right)

Another Walter Reed patient, retired Air Force Lt. Col. Ruth Grayson Scott, was ready to be an organ donor herself 30 years ago when her brother needed a new kidney. But when subsequent tests revealed she, too, was born with the same genetic polycystic kidney disease that killed their father and uncle, she knew there was a possibility she’d eventually need a new kidney herself. But she expected to have more time — not for the disease to affect her liver, as well as her kidneys, by the time she was 44. She got a double transplant in April 2017, but 11 months later, her new kidney stopped working, started free floating in her abdomen and almost killed her. After that, her hopes were “completely destroyed,” she said — only to be dashed again recently when a potential donor was disqualified near the end of the matching process.

Like Dadzie, Scott also comes to the hospital three times a week for dialysis, traveling 30 miles each way to and from her home in Virginia. It’s not exactly the type of traveling she’d wanted to do with her husband in their retirement. “I really want a kidney,” said Scott, now 57. “This is not quite the life we planned.” Patients at Walter Reed have been

trying to help each other find donors, posting pleas to their followers on social media, said Dadzie. She’s been especially grateful for that, since her family lives in Ghana and the couple has no friends in Maryland, where they were transferred from Japan in November for Dadzie’s treatment.

Desgoutte-Brown said ideally, enough donors would come forward that the hospital could start an internal chain or swap. For example, if two patients have friends who are willing to donate kidneys but aren’t matches, the patients could potentially trade donors, depending on blood type and other factors. The main thing is that donors be healthy, with no history of cancer, diabetes and other diseases and genetic disorders that could be passed to a recipient, she said. “I think for me, just seeing these young people — mothers and soldiers and stuff like that — was really kind of touching to me,” said Desgoutte-Brown. “I was just like, ‘My God, we have to try to do something.’” Meanwhile, Dadzie is doing her best to cope with the difficulties and take care of her kids despite the constant pain. “I’m a strong woman,” she said. “We are just looking for a God-saving soul to just help me to live again.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Natalie Gross | February 26, 2019 ++]

MHS Nurse Advice Line ► Available 24/7

Sometimes you need a quick answer to a health question, and it helps to have an expert to turn to. With the Military Health System (MHS) Nurse Advice Line, you can get advice from a registered nurse anytime, 24/7. Whether you’re worried about your sick child, or need health care advice while traveling, the MHS Nurse Advice Line is only a click or call away if you are registered in DEERS. The registered nurse can:

- Answer your urgent care questions.
- Help you understand your symptoms and decide when to visit a provider.
- Find an urgent care or emergency care facility.
- Schedule an appointment within 24 hours at a military hospital or clinic, if available

You can reach a nurse online 24/7 using secure web chat and video chat. Connect at the MHS Nurse Advice Line website (www.mhsnurseadvice.com), or find all country-specific numbers listed there for a phone call. If you’re in the U.S., Guam, or Puerto Rico, you can call 1-800-TRICARE (1-800-874-2273) and choose option 1. Remember, the MHS Nurse Advice Line is only available to beneficiaries living or traveling in the U.S. or those living in a country with an established military hospital or clinic.

The MHS Nurse Advice Line isn’t for emergencies. If you have an emergency, call 911 or your local emergency service center, or go to the closest emergency room or facility. There is a different resource for you to use if you have the US Family Health Plan. The next time you need help making decisions about your immediate health care needs, don’t guess. Contact the MHS Nurse Advice Line and take command of your health. [Source: Health Matters Newsletter | Issue2019-1 ++]

TRICARE Marriage QLE ► Know Your Health Care Options

Getting married? Congratulations! You and your family members may experience changes in TRICARE eligibility and coverage after getting married. A change in family composition, such as marriage, is a TRICARE Qualifying Life Event (QLE). QLEs are certain life changes, like getting married, moving, giving birth, adopting a child, or retiring. QLEs may mean different TRICARE health plan options are available to you and your family. A QLE allows you to make changes to your health plan enrollment outside of the fall annual [TRICARE Open Season](#).

Following any QLE, you have 90 days to enroll in a new TRICARE health plan or change your health plan coverage, if you choose. New spouses have 90 days from the date of the marriage to enroll in TRICARE, if they choose. Otherwise, they can enroll following another QLE or during open season. A QLE for one family member creates a QLE for all family members. This means any new eligible family members can also make an eligible health plan enrollment change within 90 days of the QLE. That means stepchildren are also eligible for TRICARE benefits following the marriage and can now enroll within the same 90-day period. No matter when you initiate the health plan enrollment change following a QLE, coverage starts on the date of the QLE. Your health plan coverage will continue unless you lose eligibility or disenroll from the plan.

After you get married, register your new spouse in the [Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System](#) (DEERS). This step makes him or her show as TRICARE-eligible. You can go to any ID card office to add your spouse to DEERS. You'll need to bring either originals or certified copies of the following documents:

- Marriage certificate
- Spouse's birth certificate
- Spouse's Social Security card
- Spouse's photo ID

Your spouse's TRICARE [health plan options](#) will depend on your military status and your location. Use the [TRICARE Plan Finder](#) to see plans you and your new spouse may be eligible for. Keep in mind that different family members may be eligible for different plans. If your marriage changes your family composition in terms of children, your children are eligible for TRICARE until age 21 (or 23 if in college). At age 21 or 23, he or she may qualify to purchase TRICARE Young Adult. This includes unmarried biological children, stepchildren, and adopted or court-placed children. Sponsors don't always adopt their stepchildren. The marriage to the stepchild's parent is the QLE that will allow the stepchild to enroll.

To get TRICARE coverage for your kids, you must first register them in DEERS at your local ID card office. You'll need to show a certificate of birth or adoption and submit DD Form 1172-2. Find the form and other [required documents](#) to update DEERS on the TRICARE website. Once registered in DEERS, you may choose a TRICARE plan for your children. Remember, enrollment is required to participate in a plan. After registering in DEERS and choosing a plan, be sure to follow the steps to enroll your spouse or children in a TRICARE plan. If you have questions, call your regional contractor.

Whether you're engaged to be married or a newly married couple, don't wait to learn about your TRICARE health plan options after marriage. And don't forget about seeing which [dental](#) and [vision](#) coverage options your new spouse can purchase. Visit [Qualifying Life Events](#) to learn more about marriage and other QLEs you might experience in the future. Start your new life by taking command of your health. [Source: TRICARE Communications | February 21, 2019 ++]

Alzheimer's Update 18 ► **Chronic Lack of Sleep May Worsen the Disease and Memory Loss**

In addition to memory loss and confusion, many people with Alzheimer's disease have trouble sleeping. Now an NIH-funded team of researchers has evidence that the reverse is also true: a chronic lack of sleep may worsen the disease and its associated memory loss. The new findings center on a protein called tau, which accumulates in abnormal tangles in the brains of people with Alzheimer's disease. In the healthy brain, active neurons naturally release some tau during waking hours, but it normally gets cleared away during sleep. Essentially, your brain has a system for taking the garbage out while you're off in dreamland. The latest findings in studies of mice and people further suggest that sleep deprivation upsets this balance, allowing more tau to be released, accumulate, and spread in toxic tangles within

brain areas important for memory. While more study is needed, the findings suggest that regular and substantial sleep may play an unexpectedly important role in helping to delay or slow down Alzheimer’s disease.

It’s long been recognized that Alzheimer’s disease is associated with the gradual accumulation of beta-amyloid peptides and tau proteins, which form plaques and tangles that are considered hallmarks of the disease. It has only more recently become clear that, while beta-amyloid is an early sign of the disease, tau deposits track more closely with disease progression and a person’s cognitive decline. Such findings have raised hopes among researchers including David Holtzman, Washington University School of Medicine, St. Louis, that tau-targeting treatments might slow this devastating disease. Though much of the hope has focused on developing the right drugs, some has also focused on sleep and its nightly ability to reset the brain’s metabolic harmony.

In the new study published in *Science*, Holtzman’s team set out to explore whether tau levels in the brain naturally are tied to the sleep-wake cycle¹. Earlier studies had shown that tau is released in small amounts by active neurons. But when neurons are chronically activated, more tau gets released. So, do tau levels rise when we’re awake and fall during slumber? The Holtzman team found that they do. The researchers measured tau levels in brain fluid collected from mice during their normal waking and sleeping hours. (Since mice are nocturnal, they sleep primarily during the day.) The researchers found that tau levels in brain fluid nearly double when the animals are awake. They also found that sleep deprivation caused tau levels in brain fluid to double yet again.

These findings were especially interesting because Holtzman’s team had already made a related finding in people. The team found that healthy adults forced to pull an all-nighter had a 30 percent increase on average in levels of unhealthy beta-amyloid in their cerebrospinal fluid (CSF). The researchers went back and reanalyzed those same human samples for tau. Sure enough, the tau levels were elevated on average by about 50 percent. Once tau begins to accumulate in brain tissue, the protein can spread from one brain area to the next along neural connections. So, Holtzman’s team wondered whether a lack of sleep over longer periods also might encourage tau to spread.

To find out, mice engineered to produce human tau fibrils in their brains were made to stay up longer than usual and get less quality sleep over several weeks. Those studies showed that, while less sleep didn’t change the original deposition of tau in the brain, it did lead to a significant increase in tau’s spread. Intriguingly, tau tangles in the animals appeared in the same brain areas affected in people with Alzheimer’s disease. Another report by Holtzman’s team appearing early last month in *Science Translational Medicine* found yet another link between tau and poor sleep. That study showed that older people who had more tau tangles in their brains by PET scanning had less slow-wave, deep sleep².

Together, these new findings suggest that Alzheimer’s disease and sleep loss are even more intimately intertwined than had been realized. The findings suggest that good sleep habits and/or treatments designed to encourage plenty of high-quality Zzzz’s might play an important role in slowing Alzheimer’s disease. On the other hand, poor sleep also might worsen the condition and serve as an early warning sign of Alzheimer’s. For now, the findings come as an important reminder that all of us should do our best to get a good night’s rest on a regular basis. Sleep deprivation really isn’t a good way to deal with overly busy lives (I’m talking to myself here). It isn’t yet clear if better sleep habits will prevent or delay Alzheimer’s disease, but it surely can’t hurt. [Source: National Institute on Aging | Dr. Francis Collins | February 12, 2019 ++]

Detox Juices ► Are They worth It?

Are juices that promise “cleansing from toxins” or “detoxification” of our bodies considered healthy? Are these products worth it? Most likely not. If your body has been poisoned, detox juices and herbal products are not likely to help. The toxins they refer to are usually not real poisons like heavy metals or pesticides. They use the word toxin to grab your attention so you think there is something wrong and that buying their product will correct it. It is normal for

our bodies produce some of these substances that should not be stored. Fortunately, our kidneys and liver are designed to rid the body of these substances.



Another concern with juice detox products is the sugar content, which may be as high as the content of a regular soft drink. Some might be good sources of potassium and vitamin C, but can leave you feeling hungry later. This could lead to overeating and frustration surrounding your health goals. As an alternative, whole fruits have the same vitamins and minerals as juice, take longer to eat, and have fiber that’s lacking in juice to help you feel more satisfied.

We can’t talk about cleansing without mentioning the many colon cleanse products that are available. These products claim to remove “toxins” from your colon; however, most foods are absorbed in the small intestine, not the colon. It is important to note that many colon cleanse products contain some otherwise healthy ingredients like probiotics (often called “good bacteria,”), prebiotics (things that help probiotics grow, often called “resistant starch”) and fiber, but there are many foods that contain these same ingredients. Certain probiotics might also help people with constipation have more regular bowel movements; however, adding probiotics too quickly can also cause the opposite problem—diarrhea. Start with small amounts of probiotic foods (such as low-sugar yogurt with active cultures and sauerkraut with live cultures) and increase serving sizes slowly.

The best sources of prebiotics and fiber are fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and legumes. Getting the right amount of prebiotics and fiber in your diet might help you absorb a few less calories, feel fuller and allow you to eat less overall. To increase prebiotics and fiber in your diet, start with a couple small portions of these foods and increase the amount slowly so you don’t end up feeling bloated or uncomfortable. Also make sure to drink enough water! For more information on strategies to make healthy changes to your diet, contact your local VA registered dietitian. [Source: Vantage Point | Melanie Clemme | February 21, 2019 ++]

Health Care Reform Update 04 ► What Striking Down Obamacare Could Mean For Medicare

The recent decision by a federal judge in Texas to declare Obamacare unconstitutional is likely to become the center of a lengthy legal battle that could reach the Supreme Court. If the decision to strike down Obamacare is upheld, it could affect the coverage of the 60 million older Americans who get their healthcare coverage through Medicare, and that would result in Congress reconsidering healthcare legislation for better or worse. Based on information from the non-partisan Kaiser Family Foundation, striking down the 2010 Affordable Care Act (ACA) could be expected to affect Medicare in the following key ways:

- **It could increase Medicare Part A deductibles and copayments, as well as Part B premiums and deductibles paid by beneficiaries.** The ACA included provisions that adjusted the rate of growth in hospital payments and other healthcare providers. Government data indicates that healthcare costs, which included Medicare, have been growing more slowly since 2010 and this has resulted in slowing the growth rate of Part B premiums. From 2010 when the ACA was passed, to 2019, Medicare Part B premiums increased by 23%. During the decade prior to the passage of the ACA, from 2000 to 2009, Medicare Part B premiums increased almost five times faster — 112%. Should the ruling be upheld, provider costs could

be expected to resume growing at faster rates. Because the Part B premiums are set to cover 25% of overall Part B costs, and the deductible is indexed to grow at the same rate as Part B premiums, out-of-pocket costs could start climbing more rapidly for beneficiaries.

- **Medicare premiums would take a greater share of Social Security benefits.** Part B premiums grow several times faster than annual cost-of-living adjustments (COLAs), which in some years can mean less Social Security to meet other household budget needs. Worse, in years when there's been a low, or even no COLA, beneficiaries have seen little-to-no growth in their Social Security benefits as well. This flat growth in retirees' Social Security benefits could occur with increasing frequency if Medicare Part B premiums increase at rates greater than currently estimated, (about 5% per year) because the Congressional Budget Office estimates that COLAs are forecast to grow about 2.5% per year on average.
- **Increase cost-sharing for Part B preventive benefits.** The ACA included a number of provisions that provide free coverage for some preventive benefits, such as screenings for breast and colorectal cancer, cardiovascular disease, and diabetes. These free screenings could end; and beneficiaries would be expected to have higher costs in screening for these diseases.
- **Increase spending by Part D enrollees who hit the doughnut hole coverage gap.** Prior to passage of The Affordable Care Act, beneficiaries who had drug spending high enough to reach the Part D doughnut hole paid 100% of the full retail cost of brand and generic drugs until they spent the annual out-of-pocket threshold to qualify for catastrophic coverage. The ACA provided new 70% discounts on brand name drugs in the coverage gap, and slowed the growth in the out-of-pocket threshold required to qualify for catastrophic coverage. In 2019, that threshold is \$5,100, and beneficiaries who reach the doughnut hole, pay co-insurance of 25% of the discounted retail cost of brand name drugs, and 37% for generics in the doughnut hole. Should the Obamacare ruling be upheld, it could be expected that beneficiaries would be charged 100% of the undiscounted full retail price of their prescription drugs.
- **Ends new sources of funding for Medicare Trust Funds, giving tax cuts to high-salaried workers and drug manufacturers.** The ACA established a 0.9% increase in the Medicare payroll tax on earnings of high-earnings workers, who earn more than \$200,000 individually (and \$250,000 per couple). It also established a fee on manufacturers and importers of brand name drugs, which generated additional revenue for the Part B Trust Fund of \$3 billion in 2015 alone. Prior to passage of the 2010 ACA, the Medicare Trustees forecast that the Medicare Hospital Insurance Trust Fund would not have sufficient revenues to pay all Part A benefits by 2017. The current insolvency date is projected to be 2026, but if the ACA were overturned, the stream of revenue keeping the Trust Fund solvent today could cease.

If the ruling is upheld, Congress will be forced to re-examine Medicare changes that were made in the ACA. Most Medicare recipients already struggle to keep up with rising Medicare premiums and prescription drug prices, and all could see higher out-of-pocket costs for their healthcare, and Medicare would face almost immediate insolvency. The Senior Citizens League is keeping a close eye on the status of the Affordable Care Act in the days ahead, and continues to advocate on Capitol Hill for legislative solutions that would protect the Medicare benefits older Americans have earned and deserve. [Source: TSCL | Marisa Hicks | February 13, 2019 ++]

Vertigo ► **Why it Happens, Diagnosis and Treatment**

The first time you experience vertigo, it can be an unsettling – even scary – experience. A slight shift of your head and you feel as if you're wildly spinning, or the world is spinning around you. Patients are normally completely baffled and often worried they may be suffering from a serious brain disease. Fortunately, in most cases they are diagnosed with the most common cause of this spinning sensation: **benign paroxysmal positional vertigo**, or BPPV. This condition is called "benign" because even though it can be intense and upsetting – and even debilitating, for some

patients – BPPV is not life-threatening. "Paroxysmal" means it comes in sudden, short episodes, so the disorienting feelings generally subside pretty quickly, usually in less than a minute. "Positional" means it's triggered by certain head movements. And "vertigo" refers, of course, to that feeling of riding a wild merry-go-round.

So if you experience a very sudden attack of vertigo when you move your head up or down, or sit up in bed, which might be accompanied by nausea and feeling disoriented or unsteady on your feet, you most likely have BPPV, the most common disorder of the inner ear. While BPPV is most common in people over 60, it can occur in people of any age and is more common in women than in men. BPPV is sometimes associated with certain other occurrences or conditions – a bump on the head, migraine, other inner ear problems, diabetes, osteoporosis and lying in bed for long periods of time. But in the vast majority of cases there is no known cause. We do know that the condition arises when tiny calcium crystals (called otoconia) break loose from their normal location in your inner ear and disrupt the usual coordination between your brain and inner ear that makes you feel steady and balanced. But exactly why these particles get knocked off and start floating around can be a mystery.

Most cases of BPPV tend to resolve on their own within a few weeks, and the dizzy spells tend to become less severe over time. But some cases are more severe or persistent, and even mild cases of BPPV can recur at any time. The worry for many patients is that they'll have one of these attacks while doing something that absolutely requires their steadiness and full attention, like driving or holding a child. Because treatment is fast and effective in 80 percent of cases it's a good idea to see your doctor, both for the treatment and also to confirm that you have BPPV. Older patients, in particular, should see a doctor if they experience vertigo, especially if they have a history or fear of falling.

Diagnosis and Treatment

Since BPPV symptoms can be alarming, patients find it reassuring when other far less common causes of vertigo, any of a wide range of medical issues that can include diseases of the brain or more serious inner ear problems, are quickly ruled out. Diagnosis of BPPV is usually very straightforward. Lab tests and other diagnostic tools, like brain scans and X-rays, are unnecessary because they can't confirm the condition. Instead the doctor talk to you about your symptoms, take a medical history and perform a simple bedside test to confirm the diagnosis.

You may be asked to lie down, and then the doctor will move your head into a position that makes the crystals move and trigger BPPV symptoms. The most common exams are the Dix-Hallpike test and the supine roll test. These may include hanging your head a little off the exam table or rolling your head left and right while you're lying on the table. The doctor will also look for involuntary rhythmic eye movements called nystagmus that often (but don't always) accompany BPPV symptoms.

If initial testing indicates BPPV, the doctor sometimes proceeds with making specific head adjustments. Two of the most common are the Epley maneuver and the Lempert 360-degree roll maneuver. These help the particles float out of the part of the ear canal where they're causing problems. These treatments only take a few minutes and are sometimes performed immediately by your diagnosing physician; or, you might be sent to an audiologist. For the purpose of diagnosis, patients are typically not offered medications such as antihistamines or benzodiazepines to suppress the BPPV symptoms during the examination and treatment. These maneuvers usually resolve the problem right away, though sometimes patients need to be treated a few times. They can also be easily taught to do these movements at home, which is very helpful if your BPPV symptoms are persistent or if they recur. Additionally, you may be offered a physical therapy referral.

While most patients find success in managing their BPPV through these head reconditioning maneuvers, there are some who experience persistent symptoms despite therapy. It is recommended patients be reassessed within one month of treatment to document whether symptoms have resolved or still persist. If symptoms continue a further workup, often with the help of our neurology colleagues is considered, to rule out other causes of vertigo. Whether you suffer a single episode of BPPV, or find yourself managing the condition over months or years, it's important to take steps to avoid complications like falls. If you begin to feel dizzy, sit down immediately. Make sure you have good lighting in place if you get up at night and, if needed, use a cane or other assistive device to help with stability.

Some patients worry that vertigo is too trivial a problem with which to bother their doctor. They will think it's silly or too minor to be taken seriously. But physicians know how debilitating and frightening these episodes can be. And because they can help you feel better very quickly – and perhaps prevent accidents like falls, anyone suffering from vertigo is encouraged to see their doctor for diagnosis and treatment right away. [Source: U.S. News & World Report | Nitinkumar J. Patel, M.D. | February 5, 2018 ++]

Stress ► Coping Techniques to Help You Relax

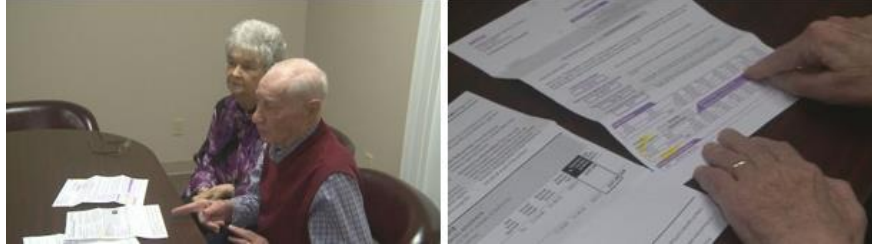
Your body knows when your mind is under stress. Whether you're stuck in traffic or racing to meet a deadline, your nervous system responds by releasing a flood of stress hormones. You may notice your heart begin to race, your blood pressure increase, and your breathing quicken. This isn't always a bad thing — these stress responses in your body can help you glean the strength to accomplish a task. Too much stress too often, however, can be harmful to your mental and physical well-being. Knowing how to cope with everyday tension is important to your overall health. Being conscious of the connection between your mind and body can help you throughout your day, whether at home, in your workplace, or even in traffic. Notice your stress triggers, and when you feel tension creeping in, use these tips from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention to help you keep your cool.

- 1. Move Your Body:** Get up, get out, and get moving. Exercise increases endorphin levels, “feel-good” chemicals that reduce stress and can give you a feeling of euphoria.
- 2. Find Something to Laugh About:** Lighten up. Humor, a positive attitude, and laughter can reduce anxiety. Find ways to keep upbeat, and make smiling and laughter a priority each day.
- 3. Eat Something Nutritious:** Nutritious foods will help keep your body healthy and your mind steady. Eat breakfast and keep a regular meal schedule. Fueling your body with fruits, vegetables, lean proteins, and grains will give you sustained energy throughout the day.
- 4. Share Your Feelings:** Don't isolate yourself or let your feelings bottle up. When you feel stressed, reach out to a friend or find a way to be with people. You don't have to carry the load alone.
- 5. Sleep:** Fatigue and stress go in hand. If you're overtired, a minor bump in the road can feel like a mountain. Adequate rest is key to your physical and psychological health.

The best ways to cope with stress vary depending on what you enjoy doing. Engaging in a hobby, getting together with friends, playing sports, or being in nature may help you destress. Investigate more ways that help you keep stress at bay at www.cdc.gov/bam/life/frazzled.html. You can also find helpful health and wellness tips on the TRICARE website at www.tricare.mil/healthwellness. Take command of your health and reduce the stress in your life in 2019. [Source: Health Matters Newsletter | Issue2019-1 ++]

Medicare Fraud Update 137 ► Disclosures 15-28 FEB 2019

Haughton, CA -- It's free. I won't cost you a cent. Medicare will pay for it all. That's what predators tell the elderly over the phone when they're trying to get them to accept something about which they have absolutely no knowledge. That happened to a couple in Haughton and while they may not have incurred any out of pocket expenses, they know what happened to them was wrong. “And that is why I'm proud to stand with my colleagues and friends and support Medicare for all,” said freshman U.S. Sen. Kamala Harris (D-CA). But maybe we already have Medicare for all. Sort of.



Eloise & James Keith and their Medicare Invoice

Consider the case of James and Eloise Keith of Haughton. Inundated by calls promising this: “They informed us they wanted to give us a back brace. They stressed the fact it was free,” James Keith said. The callers on the other end promised Medicare would pay for it; it wouldn't cost them a cent. Despite the Keiths’ protests, the calls kept coming. “They called me back again and wanted my blood count. I said, ‘You don't have to have a blood count for a back brace.’ And I said, ‘I've told you I don't want it. Don't mail it to me.’ And a few days after that, we got it at the post office,” Eloise Keith said.

Here's what the Keiths did. “I didn't even take it out of the post office. I said, ‘Return to sender. I do not want this,’” James Keith said. But the Keiths discovered the brace was already paid for. “And they billed Medicare on her summary for \$1,300 and Medicare approved \$1,100 something of it,” James Keith said. “My supplemental insurance stated they also filed and my supplemental insurance paid the \$230 something supplement.” They were also told that if they ever need a back brace Medicare would not pay for it since their records indicate they already received one. So now the Keiths had no back brace. But their insurance paid for it. The Keiths provided a copy of the transaction to KTBS to verify the amounts paid. To add insult to injury, since they returned it, the Keiths were told if Eloise Keith ever needed a back brace she couldn't get it because the records showed she already had one.

The back brace came from a company in Avondale, Ariz., they'd never heard of. And it was prescribed by a doctor in South Louisiana – Shannon Haas – also a mystery to the Keiths. “This seems to me like a scam,” James Keith said. So they called the Medicare fraud hotline. “Well, it wasn't the interest I thought it would be,” James Keith said. KTBS called the same number and got a repeated busy signal. So next on the Keiths’ call list was state Rep. Dodie Horton (R-Haughton), who immediately contacted the attorney general's office. “We certainly don't like what we're seeing. We certainly don't like the facts presented to us and so we do our best to connect them to the proper law enforcement agency in this particular situation. We've been happy to assist them in connecting directly with the inspector general's office,” Attorney General Jeff Landry told KTBS.

“If they tell you it's free, it's free, it's free. Of course, it's not. So hang up on them,” Horton said. Landry added: “Welfare fraud steals from the taxpayers and jeopardizes services for those in need. It's one of the worst forms of fraud out there.” “They wanted to make sure they did something to stop people who just prey on the elderly,” Horton said. The Keiths are still waiting to hear something from the attorney general's office. “It's wrong, it's wrong. We're Christian people and we, I may need that one day,” Eloise Keith said. And there's an interesting twist to this story. While the waiting continues and Horton tries to help the Keiths, here's what happened to her: “I found out today my own mother-in-law has been a victim of this scam and received her back brace today,” Horton said. Horton said the callers are intimidating and you have the right to hang up. It's apparently easy to scam the government, she said, adding something has to stop. [Source: WKBN-27 | February 07, 2019 ++]

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Midland, IL -- The Midland County Sheriff's Office posted a notice from Illinois' former attorney general, Lisa Madigan, on its Facebook page 20 FEB, warning the public about "spoof" phone calls that appear to be from the Midland County Health Department. According to the Facebook post, Medicare recipients are receiving calls from the health department's number, with someone claiming to be a representative of Medicare. The caller states that the

new Health Care Reform Law requires new Medicare cards to be issued to each recipient. To activate the cards, the caller is asking for bank account information. Capt. Tracy Thomas said he suspects a smartphone app was used to falsify the number, making it look more legit.

"You've got to use some common sense about making sure you don't give out your personal information, unless you are 100 percent sure you know who you're talking to," Thomas said. He said "cold calls" that come out of the blue should always be regarded as suspicious. Midland Facility Manager Kevin Beeson said the Midland County Health Department picked up almost 40 calls Thursday from people returning calls to the number that was displayed on their caller ID. Midland Facilities Management became involved only because the number being spoofed belonged to the health department, Beeson said. He then brought it to the attention of the Sheriff's Department. "Unfortunately, you can't get in front of that kind of stuff," Beeson said. "The best you can do is let people know that our health department - no health department - would call asking for that kind of information."

Beeson said these incidents serve as another reminder to be vigilant and watch for red flags when getting calls, especially if they ask for personal information. If you have fallen victim to this Medicare "spoofing" scam you can file a consumer fraud complaint by contacting the Illinois Attorney General's Senior Consumer Fraud Hotline at 1-800-243-5377 or 1-800-964-3013. [Source: Midland Daily Courier | Ashley Schafer | February 23, 2019 ++]

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Brooklyn, NY -- Brooklyn loses about \$600 million, more than any other county in New York State, to Medicare and Medicaid fraud every year, according to new FBI findings. A new report from Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand shows Brooklyn taxpayers lose an estimated \$629,127,548 annually from New Yorkers who scam the system and doctors who scam their patients. Embezzlers can potentially bilk millions from the system, according to officials prosecuting Farrah Rubani. The CEO of the Midwood-based health clinic Hopeton Care was recently charged with embezzling \$11 million by billing Medicaid for children's home care which she did not provide. FBI data shows such fraud costs New York City \$2.2 billion every year, New York State \$5 billion every year and the nation \$80 billion, according to the senator's report. Queens loses about \$595 million, Manhattan losing about \$485 million and The Bronx loses about \$385 million, the report found. In response, Adams announced 22 FEB he will form a Senior Medicare Patrol to educate older Brooklynites on Medicare or Medicaid abuse in Brighton Beach, a neighborhood he said has particularly high rates of Medicaid and Medicare fraud. [Source: Patch | Kathleen Culliton | February 22, 2019 ++]

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Manhattan, NY -- Attorney General Letitia James announced the guilty pleas of licensed pharmacist Hin T. Wong ("Wong"), 50, of Manhattan, and her companies New York Pharmacy Inc. ("NY Pharmacy"), NYC Pharmacy Inc. ("NYC Pharmacy"), and NY Healthfirst Pharmacy Inc. ("NY Healthfirst") in connection with a multi-million dollar Medicaid fraud scheme involving HIV drugs. "This Defendant, a licensed pharmacist, exploited some of our state's most vulnerable patients to steal millions of dollars reserved to provide New Yorkers with essential healthcare," said Attorney General Letitia James. Wong pled guilty in Manhattan Supreme Court before Justice Mark Dwyer to Grand Larceny in the First Degree, a class "B" felony. Wong will be sentenced to two to six years in state prison and will forfeit over \$3,600,000. All of her pharmacies, which are now closed, were also convicted:

In court papers, Wong admitted to paying or directing her employees to pay kickbacks to several undercover agents from the Attorney General's Medicaid Fraud Control Unit ("MFCU") in return for their agreement to fill their HIV prescriptions at her pharmacies. Wong's pharmacies then billed and were eventually paid over \$60,000 by Medicaid for refills on prescriptions that Wong's pharmacies either did not dispense to the MFCU undercover agents, a scheme known as "auto-refilling," or that were predicated on the payment of an unlawful kickback. State law strictly prohibits all medical providers, including pharmacies, from paying or offering to pay kickbacks to another person in return for the referral of medical services ultimately paid for by Medicaid.

The investigation showed that from January 2014 to August 2017, Wong's pharmacies did not purchase a sufficient inventory of medication from licensed drug wholesalers to account for the quantity of medication -- much of which

was for HIV drugs -- for which Wong's pharmacies billed Medicaid and Medicaid Managed Care Organizations ("MCOs"). Relying on thousands of false claims for payment filed by Wong's pharmacies, Medicaid and Medicaid MCOs paid Wong's pharmacies over \$3.5 million. In conjunction with the criminal case, the Attorney General also filed a civil asset forfeiture and New York False Claims Act action against Wong, her pharmacies and another entity owned by Wong, KT Studio Inc. a/k/a/ Dove Cat Studio a/k/a C'est La Vie Studio. As part of this action, the court approved the Attorney General's application to freeze Wong's assets, including several bank accounts, to preserve stolen money. Under the civil settlement, Wong will surrender over \$3,600,000 – including over \$700,000 in seized cash -- all of which will be returned to the New York Medicaid program.

Attorney General James reminds New Yorkers that fraud also causes bad healthcare. Here are some things to look out for when you receive Medicaid benefits and have a prescription:

- Did someone offer you money to send your prescription to a particular pharmacy?
- Did someone offer you money to not pick up a medications for which you had a prescription?
- Did someone offer to "buy" your medications from you?
- Have you ever been told by a pharmacy you chose that it couldn't fill your prescription because another pharmacy was billing your prescriptions?
- Did you receive medication after the expiration date on the label?
- Did your medication appear to be dirty or improperly stored?

New Yorkers can report suspected fraud to the Attorney General's toll-free Medicaid Fraud Hotline, at (800) 771-7755 or online at ag.ny.gov/medicaid-fraud/contact. [Source: NY Attorney General | Press Release | February 22, 2019 ++]

Earwax Update 01 ► Excess Symptoms and Recommended Removal Procedure

Earwax, also called cerumen, is normal and a natural part of your body's defenses. It protects and coats the outer ear canal by trapping and slowing growth of bacteria. The external ear is usually self-cleaning. The growth of skin outward carries the earwax to the opening of the canal. Earwax may thicken as a part of the aging process. Some people tend to produce excess cerumen. It may be prevented from passing out of the ear canal by hearing aids or earbuds.



One of the first signs an individual may have an earwax buildup is a feeling of fullness in the ear. This feeling of fullness is due to the earwax being compacted against the ear canal. The fullness may increase if pressure is placed on the outer ear. Muffled or decreased hearing is another sign there is an earwax buildup and potential blockage. Changes in one's hearing may onset suddenly and depend on the size of the blockage. Smaller blockages may result in only minimal hearing change while individuals with larger blockages may experience more moderate hearing loss. The depth of and recognizing the direction of sounds may also occur, as the non-impacted ear begins to work a bit harder. The sudden decrease in hearing can be overwhelming and frightening for some individuals. It is important to note the decrease in hearing is not indicative of inner ear damage, and hearing loss is typically temporary. Once the blockage has been removed, hearing should return to normal.

Never attempt to remove earwax yourself with cotton swabs (Q-tips) or other foreign objects. This can push the wax further into the ear. It can also cause injury to the ear canal or eardrum. Do not attempt to clean your ears if you have, or suspect to have, an eardrum perforation or have a pressure equalization tube in place. The recommended procedure to clean eardrums is:

- Put 2-4 drops of mineral oil or baby oil into one outer ear canal at bedtime. You can use an eyedropper. Place a cotton ball in the ear canal overnight to keep the oil in the ear canal. In the morning remove the cotton ball and shower with warm soapy water. Allow the water from the shower to flush your ear canal thoroughly. Then allow the ear canal to air dry or dry the ear canal carefully with a hair dryer held at arm's length for approximately 1-2 minutes.
- The mineral oil in your ear will soften the earwax and allow it to pass more easily through the ear canal.
- Use the oil in only one ear per night as it may decrease your hearing temporarily. Use the oil in the opposite ear the next night.
- Clean once a month, or as directed by your physician.

If you are unsuccessful at removing the earwax at home, contact your primary care provider to schedule an appointment for earwax removal. [Source: Scripps | February 8, 2019 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 489 ► TRICARE Health Matters Newsletter - Heart Health Month

TRICARE Health Matters Newsletter -- Are you stressed out? If you answer yes, check out the latest issue of the TRICARE Health Matters Newsletter for an article that includes tips to help you relax. The best ways to cope with stress vary depending on what you enjoy doing. Engaging in a hobby, getting together with friends, playing sports, or being in nature may help you destress. Learn how your body reacts to stress and things you can do to help keep your cool. The 2019 Issue 1 newsletter is available for download at www.TRICARE.mil/publications. In the newsletter, you'll also find articles about TRICARE enrollment changes, Qualifying Life Events, the pharmacy benefit, and more.

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Heart Health Month -- During Heart Health Month, get familiar with the risk factors of heart disease and take action to reduce your risk. Risk factors for heart disease include:

- High blood pressure
- High cholesterol
- High glucose levels
- Being overweight or obese
- Smoking, and;
- Diabetes

One simple way to lower your risk for heart disease is to visit your doctor regularly. Cardiovascular disease screenings are a part of your TRICARE benefit. Other things you can do is eat a healthy diet, exercise regularly, limit alcohol, and give up smoking.

According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, heart disease is the leading cause of death in the U.S. Heart disease is responsible for 610,000 deaths per year. Find more statistics and information about heart disease in the "Taking Care of Your Heart with TRICARE Benefits" article at www.TRICARE.mil/news.

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The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: <http://www.tricare.mil/podcast> | February 14, 2019 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 490 ► Explanation of Benefits - TRICARE Fraud - Marriage

Explanation of Benefits – If you’ve ever visited the doctor or hospital and used your health benefits, you’ve probably received an explanation of benefits, or an EOB. An EOB is sent after the claim for your visit is processed. It resembles a medical bill, but it’s not. It’s an itemized statement that breaks down the cost-shares and deductibles. Your EOB includes the date you received the medical treatment or service, along with several amounts. This includes the amount billed, the amount covered, and the amount paid by TRICARE, Medicare, or other health insurance. It will show any balance you owe your provider. It will also let you know how much has been credited toward your annual deductible and catastrophic cap.

TRICARE regional and overseas contractors don’t mail EOBs to you. EOB statements are available online on your TRICARE regional or overseas contractor website. You must first log in or register on the contractor’s secure portal to get access to your EOB statements online. If you see charges on your statement for services that you didn’t get, contact your primary insurance claims processor. For more information about your TRICARE explanation of benefits, including pharmacy and dental EOB statements, visit www.TRICARE.mil/eob. And check out the article, “Understanding Your TRICARE Explanation of Benefits” at www.TRICARE.mil/news.

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TRICARE Fraud – Fraud against TRICARE beneficiaries can happen. Protecting your personal information is vital to your privacy, and prevents abuse of taxpayer funds. Be safe; don’t share your military ID or other personal or family information with an unknown person. Fraudsters often target TRICARE beneficiaries, including active duty service members. Examples include fake surveys used to collect personal information or offering gift cards to get your information, then billing TRICARE for services you didn’t need or never received.

If you think you’re the victim of TRICARE-related fraud, you can report it to the Defense Health Agency at www.health.mil/reportfraud. You can also report cases where you think someone is trying to defraud TRICARE. For example, if your TRICARE explanation of benefits shows a bill for something you didn’t get, tell your TRICARE regional contractor. TRICARE usually doesn’t contact you asking for personal information, such as your military ID number or Social Security number. Only provide that information to a trusted entity, like your doctor, a claims processor, or your TRICARE regional contractor. Be wary of an unknown person offering a gift or reward in exchange for providing a health service. They may be trying to get your information to commit fraud

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Marriage - A change in family composition, such as marriage, is a TRICARE Qualifying Life Event, or QLE. QLEs are certain life changes, like getting married, moving, giving birth, adopting a child, or retiring. QLEs may mean different TRICARE health plan options are available to you and your family. It allows you to make changes to your health plan enrollment outside of TRICARE Open Season. Following any QLE, you have 90 days to enroll in a new TRICARE health plan or change your health plan coverage, if you choose. New spouses have 90 days from the date of the marriage to enroll in TRICARE, if they choose. Otherwise, they can enroll following another QLE or during open season. A QLE for one family member creates a QLE for all family members, including new stepchildren.

After you get married, register your new spouse in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, or DEERS. This step makes him or her show as TRICARE-eligible. Your spouse’s TRICARE health plan options will depend on your military status and your location. Use the TRICARE Plan Finder at www.TRICARE.mil/planfinder to see plans you and your new spouse may be eligible for. Remember, enrollment is required to participate in a

TRICARE plan. Visit www.TRICARE.mil/lifeevents for more information about Qualifying Life Events. And read the article, “Getting Married? Know Your TRICARE Health Care Options,” at www.TRICARE.mil/news.

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The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: <http://www.tricare.mil/podcast> | February 22, 2019 ++]

* Finances *



Identity Theft Update 16 ► Warning Signs of Being Victimized

Could you be a victim of identity theft? About 10 million Americans a year have their personal information compromised. Often, the stolen information is used to take over accounts, open credit cards or obtain medical care long before the theft is ever discovered. While many people first find out about identity fraud from their financial institutions, there are some red flags that indicate your personal information may have been stolen and used for fraudulent purposes. Every 2 seconds, an American becomes a victim. Watch for the following warning signs to make sure you don't fall prey.

- 1. Unexplained charges or withdrawals.** Check your financial account statements each month and be sure you recognize the transactions. Thieves will often make small test purchases first, so don't ignore small charges that seem unfamiliar.
- 2. Medical bills for doctors you haven't visited.** Likewise, if your health insurance carrier denies a legitimate claim, find out why. It's possible for a thief to use your identity to obtain medical care or max out your insurance benefits.
- 3. New credit cards you didn't apply for.** If you receive an unexpected credit card in the mail, contact the company issuing the card right away. Similarly, any statements that arrive for unknown accounts are a red flag.
- 4. Errors on your credit report.** Review your credit reports for any suspicious activity, such as accounts you didn't open. (You can review your reports for free once a year at annualcreditreport.com.)
- 5. Collection notices or calls for unknown debt.** Don't assume the information is an error. Find out what the debt is for. If you believe the debt isn't valid, send a letter via certified mail to the collection agency requesting proof of the debt and creditor within 30 days.
- 6. Your credit card or application for credit is denied.** If you haven't reached your credit limit or normally have good credit, ask the reason for the denial. An identity thief may be racking up debt on your behalf or ruining your credit score with unpaid bills.
- 7. Missing mail or email.** Haven't seen a monthly statement in a few months? A thief could be stealing your mail or may have changed the mailing or email address on the account to keep you from seeing fraudulent charges. Alternately, you may receive a notice from the post office that your mail is being forwarded to another address when you haven't requested a change of address.

8. Errors on your tax return or Social Security statement. The Internal Revenue Service may notify you that more than one tax return was filed in your name or that you have income from an employer you don't know. Check that the earnings reported on your Social Security statement (available at socialsecurity.gov/myaccount) match your actual earnings.

9. A warrant for your arrest. While it may seem extreme, it's possible for someone to impersonate you while committing a crime. You may uncover the warrant if you're stopped for another reason or involved in an accident, for example.

[Source: Navy Federal | February 14, 2019 ++]

Traffic Tickets Update 01 ► How Much They Will Hike Your Car Insurance Rates

Some types of traffic violations can drive your car insurance premium dramatically higher. Here's how much damage your bad behavior can do. Accidentally run a red light or drive a little too fast, and you may get a ticket. But that is just the start of your worries. Some traffic violations can drive your car insurance premium dramatically higher. In fact, the money you lose in higher policy costs can dwarf the expense of the ticket itself, according to a study from car insurance search engine [The Zebra](#). For example, blow through a red light, and your rate can be expected to jump by 22.7 percent. That could cost you an extra \$333 in your annual premium, the Zebra says in its 2019 State of Auto Insurance Report. Tickets for more serious offenses can prove especially costly. Below is a sample of nine violations and how much they might cost you in premium increases over the course of a year, according to The Zebra.

- **Failing to wear a seat belt:** 4 percent increase, extra \$59
- **Not-at-fault accident:** 6.7 percent increase, extra \$98
- **Texting while driving:** 19.7 percent increase, extra \$290
- **Failing to stop at a red light:** 22.7 percent increase, extra \$333
- **Speeding:** 23.2 percent increase, extra \$341
- **Improper passing:** 23.4 percent increase, extra \$344
- **At-fault accident:** 42 percent increase, extra \$617
- **DUI:** 73.9 percent increase, extra \$1,086
- **Hit and run:** 82.2 percent increase, extra \$1,209

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Chris Kissell | February 27, 2019 ++]

IRS Tax Deductions Update 02 ► 7 That Are Eliminated on Your 2018 Filing

It's been more than a year now since the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act became federal law, ushering in sweeping tax reform. But not until this tax season is it hitting home for many taxpayers. Most changes in the tax law enacted on Dec. 22, 2017, took effect in tax year 2018. So, your 2018 return — the one due in April — is the first you will file under a host of new rules. You will likely welcome some of these changes — like the five-figure standard deductions. At the same time, you might be surprised by the number of tax breaks that you won't be able to claim for 2018. The following tax deductions are among those to which you can say farewell, at least as far as your 2018 tax return is concerned.

1. Personal exemptions - For 2017, eligible taxpayers could claim an exemption for themselves and a spouse as well as exemptions for dependents. Each such exemption reduced taxable income by \$4,050. For 2018, however, there are no personal exemptions. Tax reform suspended them, basically meaning it made them temporarily unavailable. Specifically, personal exemptions and many other tax breaks that were suspended by the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act will be unavailable for tax years 2018 through 2025.

2. Moving expenses -- You cannot deduct moving expenses from your 2018 taxable income, either. The new tax law suspended this deduction for everyone except active-duty members of the U.S. armed forces who are ordered to relocate. “During the suspension, no deduction is allowed for use of an automobile as part of a move,” states IRS Publication 5307, which outlines how the tax legislation impacts individuals and families in tax year 2018. Tax reform also suspended the exclusion for qualified moving expense reimbursements for everyone but active-duty military members. So, if your employer reimbursed you for moving expenses in 2018, that reimbursement will be considered taxable income.

3. Casualty and theft losses -- The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act modified the deduction for net casualty and theft losses, making it available only to taxpayers who suffered such losses that were attributed to a federally declared disaster. Other requirements for this deduction remain in place, however. “The loss must still exceed \$100 per casualty and the net total loss must exceed 10 percent of your [adjusted gross income],” states Publication 5307.

4. Job-related expenses -- Previously, folks who itemized their tax deductions could write off what the IRS refers to as miscellaneous deductions to the extent that they exceeded 2 percent of such taxpayers’ taxable income. But miscellaneous deductions are among those that have been suspended. Miscellaneous deductions include unreimbursed employee expenses, such as Uniforms; Union dues; Business-related meals; Business-related entertainment; and Business-related travel. So, if you paid for such expenses out of your own pocket in 2018 and were not reimbursed for them by your employer, you cannot write them off on your 2018 tax return.

5. Tax preparation fees -- This is another miscellaneous deduction and thus has been suspended so, if you paid any of these expenses in 2018, you can’t write them off on your 2018 return. It includes:

- The cost of tax preparation software programs
- The cost of tax publications
- Fees for filing tax returns electronically

6. Certain investment expenses -- Investment expenses — such as investment management fees and even safe deposit box fees — are also miscellaneous deductions and thus unavailable for 2018. The same is true of fees associated with the collection of interest or dividends. This means fees that you pay to an agent such as a broker, bank or trustee to collect your taxable bond interest or stock dividends.

7. College athletic event seating rights -- As recently as tax year 2017, if you made a payment to or for the benefit of a college or university and in return received the right to buy tickets for an athletic event in school’s stadium, you could deduct 80 percent of that payment as a charitable contribution. This deduction has been repealed, however. So, starting with tax year 2018, no portion of such payments to a college or university can be considered tax-deductible charitable contributions.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | February 20, 2019 ++]

Home Inventory Update 01 ► Needed to Document Your Losses After a Catastrophe

It’s the one thing that every person who has been through a fire, flood, tornado hurricane or other major disaster wish they had. Every firefighter and first responder says that a home inventory is the most important thing a household can

do to plan for a total loss. To expedite your insurance payouts after damage or disaster you will need to provide proof of what you owned and what your personal effects are worth.

A home inventory is a list of what you own, which can include both paper and digital records including photos or video for added security. A comprehensive home inventory lists your belongings including make, model and serial number, when applicable, value and date acquired. Home inventory checklists can be downloaded online from the big home insurance company websites. A visual record of photos and a video walk through of your home is proof of ownership, and particularly important for more valuable items or things that would be hard to replace, such as art and antiques.

It's important to thoroughly document your belongings to help the claims process, should you have a loss. That will mean pulling items out of storage, if necessary, so this is a good task to plan along with your spring cleaning or when decluttering. Keep documentation like receipts, credit card statements, appraisals or other types of valuation documents together with your list, and make sure to update it as you acquire or get rid of items over time. Keep your inventory safe. Make a duplicate and store it somewhere off your property, such as a bank safe, deposit box or other secure location. [Source: TSCL | February/March 2019 ++]

Widow(er)'s SSA Benefits Update 04 ► TSCL Proposal to Increase

When a spouse passes away, widows are more much more vulnerable to poverty than married women. The poverty rate for widows ages 65 and up is three times higher than it is for married women — about 15%. A key reason why widows end up poor is the loss of Social Security income when the husband dies. Widows are entitled to receive a Social Security survivor's benefit that's equal to 100% of what her spouse received, or her own retirement benefit, whichever is higher. This policy cuts the couple's former Social Security benefit to as much as one-half.

High medical costs and bills frequently accompany this drop in income. A recent study by the Centers for Retirement Research at Boston College says that husbands of women who eventually become widowed, often reported poor health going back as many as 10 years before their death. Poor health is associated with reduced ability to work, meaning lower household income prior to retirement. Such households face higher-than-average medical expenses over many years, depleting retirement savings, and further contributing to poverty of widows.

Researchers found that one way to improve the adequacy of widow's benefits would be to increase the surviving spouse's benefit to 75% of the couple's combined monthly benefit when both spouses were alive. For a one-earner couple, the widow's benefit would increase from 67% to 75% of the couple's benefit. For a two-earner couple with similar earnings histories the surviving spouse's benefit would increase from roughly 50% to 75%. Sixty percent of participants in TSCL's 2018 Senior Survey support improving the adequacy of survivors benefits in this way. This type of change could be financed through making the Social Security payroll tax more equitable, and by applying the payroll tax to a greater portion of, or all, wages.

Have you experienced a loss of income when a spouse died? TSCL would like to hear about your experience. Your story can help inform the public and Members of Congress of the challenges facing today's older women when a spouse passes away. [Submit your comment here!](#) [Source: TSCL Benefit Bulletin | FEB/MAR 2019 ++]

Social Security Taxation Update 12 ► Deficit Reduction Option | Increase It

The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) recently reviewed a proposal that would boost the taxable amount of Social Security benefits, as one of the options for Congress to consider to reduce the federal deficit. The proposal, which the

CBO has reviewed in prior versions of its Options to Reduce the Deficit, would tax Social Security and Railroad Retirement benefits the same way that distributions from defined benefit pensions are taxed. This is expected to increase (perhaps considerably) the taxable income of older Americans.

Under current law, Social Security beneficiaries whose total income exceeds specific thresholds are required to claim a portion of their Social Security benefits as taxable income. Depending on income, as much as 50% to 85% of Social Security benefits could be taxable. A bulletin from the Social Security Administration estimates that the median share of benefits owed as tax for most retirees would be far less than that, however, remaining close to 12% over the period 2020 to 2050. The revenues raised from the taxation of Social Security benefits are used to pay Social Security and Medicare benefits. In 2017, the Social Security trust fund received \$35.9 billion of its \$825.6 billion in revenues from the taxation of benefits and the Medicare trust fund received \$24.2 billion of its \$299.4 billion in revenues.

The CBO option would change the taxation of Social Security to be more like distributions from defined benefit pension plans. Those distributions are fully taxable except for the portion that represents the recovery of “basis,” or what an employee paid in — that is, his or her after-tax contributions to the plan. Once the recipient has recovered his or her entire “basis” all subsequent pension distributions are fully taxed. The Joint Committee of Taxation estimates this option would increase revenues, in other words, raise your taxes, by \$411 billion from 2019 through 2028. The increase would be even greater after the temporary provisions of the 2017 tax legislation, that lowered rates and increased the standard deduction, expire at the end of 2025.

TSCL’s annual Senior Surveys indicate that roughly 56% of retiree households pay tax on a portion of their Social Security benefits. About the same number support reducing the taxation of Social Security benefits by lifting the threshold for taxation of Social Security benefits from \$25,000 to \$50,000 for single filers and from \$32,000 to \$100,000 for joint filers. The Senior Citizens League continues to monitor the CBO’s tax proposal. TSCL supports bills that would reduce the taxation of Social Security benefits while making Social Security payroll taxes more equitable through ensuring that all workers pay their fair share of taxes on all earnings. [Source: TSCL | February 13, 2019 ++]

Dynamic Pricing ► GOTCHA! Have You Been Duped With This

Ever see a price for an item online, then look again and see a different price, and think you were going crazy? Probably not. You were probably encountering some form of dynamic pricing, which retailers have quietly dabbled in for many years. Quietly, because every time consumers find out about it, there’s an uproar and they have to back off — as Target did in FEB when Minnesota TV station KARE 11 (KARE-TV) exposed the store for charging very different prices on its app and in its physical stores.

A shopper who claimed to have paid \$99 for a razor in-store, then spotted the same thing online for \$69, had tipped them off. The stations reproduced this pattern, with some striking results: “For instance, Target’s app price for a particular Samsung 55-inch Smart TV was \$499.99, but when we pulled into the parking lot of the Minnetonka store, that price suddenly increased to \$599.99 on the app,” [the station said](#). (Give ’em a click, read the whole report.) KARE shopped for more items, and found an even more intriguing pattern: Basically, the closer shoppers were to the store, the more the item cost. If you are near the store, you don’t need a price enticement, the logic goes. It also means Target is following you around, virtually, and knows where you are. And it’s looking over your shoulder to decide what price you deserve on an item. Spooky.

Target has changed its policies, according to KARE, in response to the story. MoneyTalksNews Bob Sullivan reached out to Target to see if the store wanted to offer additional explanation. Target sent him a full statement, a portion of which is below. It reads, in part, “We’ve made a number of changes within our app to make it easier to

understand pricing and **our price match policy.**” In essence, the firm has added language to its app that makes clear a price is valid in a store or online

... *“We’re committed to providing value to our guests and that includes being priced competitively online and in our stores, and as a result, pricing and promotions may vary. Target’s price match policy allows guests to match the price of any item they see at Target or from a competitor, assuring they can always get the lowest price on any item.”*

Sullivan saw something vaguely similar recently when he priced rental cars for a trip to Seattle. When he was logged in using my “discount code” and membership, he got higher prices than when he shopped as an anonymous user.

There’s nothing illegal about dynamic pricing, probably, even though it might seem unsavory or downright deceptive. It’s definitely a Gotcha. Why? Because the rules of this game are not transparent to you. And it takes advantage of people who might be too busy or distracted to play the “open another browser on another computer just to check” game when they are buying things. But Sullivan here to tell you: This is the only way to buy things in the 21st century. Shopping around used to mean driving around and getting different prices from different stores. Today, it means clicking around to make sure you aren’t being followed when you buy things. Every. Single. Time.

- Never make a hotel reservation without shopping both at an aggregator like Expedia and direct from the hotel. If you have time, call the hotel, too, and ask about the online price.
- When you are in a store, always pull out your smartphone and do a quick price comparison — not just at THAT retailer, but at Amazon, and at other shops. And now you know, it’s best to price the item before you get to the store, just in case you are being followed.

Christopher Elliott, travel deal expert at Elliott.org makes the point that software can help keep you from being followed by companies and dynamic pricing. “You definitely have to log in and out and search for prices,” Elliott says. “Also, consider using your browser’s incognito mode. Companies are trying to track you and may change prices based on who you are, or who they think you are.” You don’t always have to buy where the price is lowest; in fact, I’m against chasing every last dollar as a shopper. It’s OK to pay a little more if you want to support local businesses, and, often, people waste money and gas trying to save every last penny. That’s not the point here. You just want to make sure you aren’t getting ripped off. It’s a pain.. Sorry. That’s Gotchaland. And until some regulator forbids the practice, you have to live with it. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Bob Sullivan | February 16, 2019 ++]

419 (Advance Fee) Scams ► What They Are

If you're trying to extort money from people, there are probably better choices for a victim than William H. Webster. Back in 2014, Webster was called by a Jamaican man, 29-year-old **Keniel Aeon Thomas**, who was attempting to perpetrate the all too common advance-fee fraud scam (often known as the 419 scam, after the section of the Nigerian Criminal Code that addresses fraud). According to Thomas, Webster and his wife had won \$15.5 million and a Mercedes-Benz in the Mega Millions lottery, and the caller would be all too happy to release those funds, just as long as Websters first paid \$50,000 to cover taxes.

Over a number of weeks, Thomas, calling himself David Morgan, made a series of calls to the Websters, and they soon turned threatening: he described their house, and he said that if they didn't hand over \$6,000, he'd shoot them in the head or burn their house down, boasting that the FBI and CIA would never find him. But unknown to Thomas, William H. Webster is a man with a considerable past. He was director of the FBI under Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan (1978-1987), and then director of the CIA under Reagan and George H.W. Bush (1987-1991), making him the only person to have led both intelligence agencies. Now aged 94, he still works in government and has been chair of the Homeland Security Advisory Council since 2005. As such, he's a little better connected than most victims of

these phone scams, and both he and his wife Lynda swiftly took advantage of these connections. They reached out to contacts at the FBI, calling an agent while talking to Thomas so that the agent could listen in.

Though a criminal complaint was filed, no effort was made to extradite Thomas to bring him to justice. However, Thomas went on to enter the US of his own free will: he left Jamaica to visit a friend in New York in late 2017, at which point he was arrested and charged with extortion. He pleaded guilty and admitted that he threatened to kill the Websters. On 8 FEB, he received a sentence of almost six years, after which he'll be deported to Jamaica. The court heard that he'd successfully scammed more than 30 victims. According to prosecutors, one 82-year-old Californian paid more than \$600,000; another \$87,000.

These 419 scams have been extremely common since the 1970s, with scammers using faxes, emails, and phone calls to reach their victims as technology evolved. All throughout, such scams have often specifically targeted the elderly. Even recently, business appears to be booming: the FBI claimed that American victims lost some \$275 million in 2015, growing to \$675 million in 2017. Globally, billions of dollars are defrauded each year. Perhaps the best known version of the scam is that an African prince has inherited some vast fortune from a dead relative but needs a few thousand dollars to grease some palms or pay some taxes so that the funds can be released; the prince is reaching out to you personally because your reputation makes you trustworthy and honorable, and in return for your assistance you'll receive some fraction of the fortune. Winning a lottery that you never actually entered is a common variation, but in this case Thomas' luck seems to have been the exact opposite. [Source: ARS Technica | Peter Bright | February 13, 2019 ++]

Money For Nothing Scam ► Health Insurance Fake Account Tax Impact

Josette Cazzau filed her taxes and was hoping to get a refund, but instead, she got a letter saying she owed the IRS. As the Miami News 7 Nightteam's Patrick Fraser reported, it was the result of a scam they call "Money for Nothing." Many Americans are excited to file their tax returns knowing a refund is on the way. But then there some like Josette Cazzau who will be disappointed. For three straight years, she has not gotten a refund because of a health insurance scam.

The Health Insurance Marketplace is a state and federal program to help people afford health insurance. If you make below a certain income, the government gives you a tax credit to cover all or part of your insurance premiums, and that's where Josette got ripped off. She gets health insurance through her job and doesn't need the Marketplace, but someone claimed she didn't earn much money and enrolled her in the Marketplace in 2016 and 2017. She called the Marketplace and requested someone to look at the fraud, and nobody ever contacted her. The crook enrolled her again in 2018. Now, when she fills out her tax return, it will report her actual income, and for the third straight year, the IRS will seize her refund to recoup the costs for Marketplace insurance she did not apply for and didn't use. Because of her alleged enrollment she has to return about \$2,000 every year to the IRS.

Who would create these fake accounts for people who don't need them and won't use them? Crooks. Why do it? Because they get paid a couple of hundred dollars in commission each year for each person they enroll in the government-subsidized health insurance. Willie Holme of Secure and Reliable Insurance Solutions said it's been happening ever since he's been in the business." Holmes is one of the honest agents who said not only do the crooks create phony accounts, they also put his clients' names forms for insurance to take the commission away from him. Probably 50 to 100 different times throughout the years he's found someone else's name in there."

Miami News 7 tracked down the agent who submitted applications for Josette Cazzau. Jean, as he called himself, said he drops off blank forms at different businesses and picks them up when they are filled out. They wanted to interview him and said he was out of town but would call when he got back. He then stopped returning their calls.

Cazzau said she has never heard of Jean and didn't fill out the form. Proof? Her email address and Social Security Number are both wrong but apparently there was enough information on them for the IRS to tie the application to her. Miami News 7 contacted the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services (CMS) about people like Josette getting ripped off. A spokesperson wrote, "CMS will continue to monitor and remove any agents and brokers who are out of compliance with CMS rules from access to the Exchange and help all consumers affected."

Note that the Health Insurance Marketplace is not a government agency. I entered 'Health Insurance Marketplace' into my internet and a site opened up. It said,

"Compare 2019 Health Insurance Marketplace Plans in California

- Access the same pricing as brokers for 100+ plans
- Receive an instant quote report customized to you
- Get your questions answered by licensed brokers
- Secure the lowest prices & **enroll online or via phone**

HealthCare.com has helped over 3,000,000 people find better insurance. It is a privately-held website for healthcare consumers operating since 2007. **We're not the government marketplace."**

If you believe someone has signed you up for Health insurance or any other type of Medicare/Medicaid fraud you should either call the Office of Inspector General (OIG) National Fraud Hotline 1-800-447-8477 or visit their website <https://oig.hhs.gov/fraud/report-fraud/index.asp>. [Source: <https://wsvn.com/news/special-reports/money-for-nothing-south-florida-woman-loses-thousands-of-dollars-in-insurance-scam> | February 21, 2019 ++]

Amazon Refund Scam ► How It Works

Apparently scammers have somehow gained access to Amazon records that indicate an order has been placed with them. On my most recent order two days ago I received the following email:

Action Requested: unable to process your refund

Monday, February 25, 2019 2:33 PM

From: "Amazon.com" <refund.process@refund.amazo.ne>

To: undisclosed-recipients



Double Charge Notification

Due to a system error, you were inappropriately doubled charged for your last order,

A refund process was initiated but could not be completed due to an error with your billing information.

You are required to provide us a valid billing address and phone number to complete the refund process.

[Click Here to Update Your Details](#)

After your information has been updated you should get your refund within 3 business days

We hope to see you soon.

Amazon.com

This is an obvious ploy to obtain information from recipients and their computers to utilize in future efforts to rip them off. If you receive such a message highly recommend you do not respond. [Source: RAO Bulletin | James Tichacek | February 25, 2019 ++]

Tax Burden for Mississippi Retired Vets ► As of FEB 2019

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 Mississippi:

Sales Taxes

State Sales Tax: 7% (prescription drugs, residential utilities, motor fuel, newspapers, healthcare services, and payments made by Medicare and Medicaid are exempt).

Gasoline Tax: 37.19 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Diesel Fuel Tax: 42.8 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Cigarette Tax: 68 cents/pack of 20

Personal Income Taxes

Tax Rate Range: Low – 3%; High – 5%

Income Brackets: Three. Lowest – \$1,000; Highest – \$10,000

Personal Exemptions: Single – \$6,000; Married – \$12,000; Dependents – \$1,500.

Additional Exemption: 65 or older – \$1,500

Standard Deduction: Single – \$2,300; Married filing jointly – \$4,600;

Medical/Dental Deduction: Partial

Federal Income Tax Deduction: None

Retirement Income Taxes: Qualified retirement income is exempt from state income tax. Social Security is not taxed, regardless of total income. Retirement income from IRAs, 401s/403s, Keoghs and qualified public and private pension plans is not taxable. Interest income from federal securities and obligations of Mississippi and its political subdivisions are all exempt.

Retired Military Pay: Retired pay is exempt. The exemption is also available to the spouse or other beneficiary upon the death of the primary retiree. Widows' pensions received from the VA are not 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 and automobiles are both subject to ad valorem taxes – meaning that the tax is assessed in relationship to the value of the property. Single family residential property is taxed at 10% of its assessed value. All other personal property is assessed at 15% of its value. Motor vehicles are taxed at 30% of their value. The state offers a homestead exemption to all eligible taxpayers. Eligible homeowners should make application with the Tax Assessor in the county where the home is located. This application must be filed between January 1 and April 1. The maximum exemption for regular homeowners is \$300. For homeowners 65 years of age or totally disabled, there is an exemption on the first \$7,500 true value. You do not have to apply for homestead exemption each year. You should reapply if there were changes in your homestead status (marital, property, ownership, etc.). For additional information, call 601-923-7631 or <http://www.dor.ms.gov/Pages/default.aspx>.

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

There is no inheritance tax. An estate tax is imposed on the value of a decedent's estate when the total gross estate exceeds the federal exemption of \$1,000,000. The exemption amount will follow the federal exclusion under 26 USC 2010.

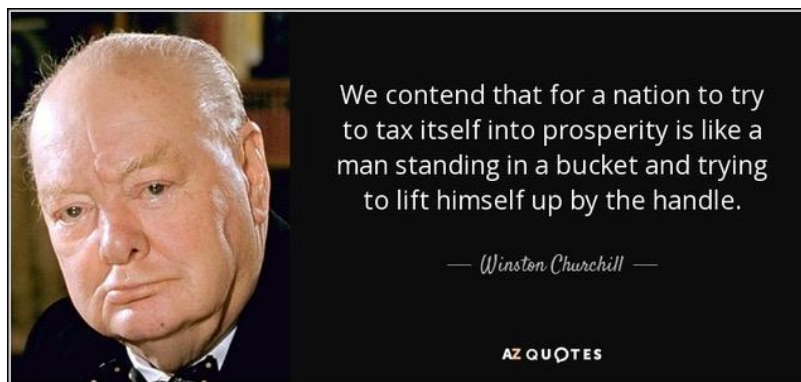
Other State Tax Rates

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 the Mississippi Department of Revenue site <http://www.dor.ms.gov> or call 601-923-7000 [Source: <http://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-kansas-new-mexico#MISSISSIPPI> | FEB 2019 ++]



*** General Interest ***



Notes of Interest ► 15 thru 28 FEB 2019

- **Cola.** The January 2019 CPI is 245.133, 0.5 percent below the FY 2019 COLA baseline. The Consumer Price Index for February is scheduled to be released 12 MAR. The CPI baseline for FY 2019 is 246.352.
- **Wife's Code.** If you are married and not a newlywed, you will most likely be able to relate to the comedy skit at <https://youtu.be/ccTYpVUP4kA>. It broke me up.
- **Daylight Savings Time.** Don't forget to reset your alarms on 10 MAR. (i.e. Spring forward and Fall back).
- **Reusable Chemlight.** The video at <https://youtu.be/crp3X1ywZ8c> covers a new chemical light stick replacement developed by the Air Force Research Lab. They have given the patent to a veteran-owned company for manufacturing and distribution.
- **July 4th.** President Donald Trump says he'll host a July Fourth celebration at the Lincoln Memorial. And though the event he's calling "A Salute to America" is months away, he's boasting it'll be one of the city's biggest Independence Day gatherings — ever.
- **College.** Louisiana Gov. John Bel Edwards and other state leaders have announced a plan to put a veteran center on every college campus in the state by fall 2019 to help veterans navigate campus life.
- **Base Housing.** The Air Force will reportedly prod Congress to pass a tenant bill of rights for military service members so they have more agency in breaking lease agreements or withholding rent in unsafe or hazardous living situations.
- **The Best of Times.** A great look back at the 1950's and 1960's that should bring back fond memories for anyone that grew up in that era at <https://youtu.be/sDc0ID6PJeg>.
- **2018 Tax Forms.** To access or download tax forms for 2018 go to <https://www.irs.gov/forms-pubs-search?search=1040+Instructions>. Note: Forms can be completed on line before downloading if desired. Also, the 1040A Form has been eliminated and incorporated into the 1040 Form.
- **Lawsuits.** The Virginia General Assembly passed a bill this week limiting the amount of money attorneys can charge military personnel when they are sued while deployed to \$125.
- **U.S. Navy.** A 132-foot-long self-driving trimaran ship made history last month by traveling thousands of miles from San Diego to Hawaii's Pearl Harbor and back again without sailors aboard to guide its way.
- **Not for Astronauts.** Check out this commercial at <https://www.youtube.com/embed/9WoM2bHfr48>
- **IRS Refunds.** To determine your refund status go to <https://www.irs.gov/refunds> and enter your Social security number or ITIN, your filing status, and your exact refund amount
- **Frightening.** Watch <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pIYh8Ce4yzg&app=desktop>. 41 million others have been watching it.
- **Illegals.** At <https://www.c-span.org/video/?c4351026/clinton-1995-immigration-sotu> can be heard Bill Clinton's views on illegal aliens expressed in his 1995 State of the Union address.
- **Women and Men.** At <https://biggeekdad.com/2012/12/women-and-men> can be seen a funny and interesting look at women and men's relationships and Why Woman Are Different From Men and vice versa from inspirational speaker Amanda Gore.
- **Movie of the Month.** The Pledge of Allegiance about the history of our nation's Pledge can be viewed at <https://cinecosmos.vhx.tv/screeners?code=371ac435> with screener code 371ac435.
- **Illegal Aliens.** Go to <https://freenorthcarolina.blogspot.com/2019/02/undocumented-numbers-by-state.html> and click on your state to see how much illegals burden you and your state.

- **Shrunken Clothes Tip.** To learn how to unshrink clothes them. Go to <https://youtu.be/vFC9Vk2LEu4> or <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=EDO3AiY8ZC4> or https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P_Iy_-A9U3k all 3 as each has a little different twist. . Does not work on wool items.
- **Teen Drivers.** Teenagers who reach for objects, such as food or makeup, while driving increase their risk of crashing nearly seven times, according to researchers at the National Institutes of Health. Their study, found that manually dialing, texting or browsing the web on a phone while driving doubled a teen’s crash risk. Motor vehicle crashes are the leading cause of death and disabilities among drivers aged 15 to 20 years, according to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration
- **Technology.** The painting below and at <http://cliptank.com/PeopleofInfluencePainting.htm> is truly remarkable. Even more amazing though, is that the canvas has been Digitized for computer display. When you click on the link below, a much bigger version of the computerized painting appears. Run your cursor over the people. The program tells you who they are - every single one of them. BUT click on a person and you obtain the individual’s life history.



High-Speed Rail Project ► Failed | Trump Wants CA Pay Back of Federal Money Spent to Date

The Trump administration announced that it was canceling nearly \$1 billion in grant money for California’s now-defunct high-speed rail project — and President Donald Trump is coming for the other \$2.5 billion. The \$2.5 billion has already been spent — but California has failed to deliver the high-speed rail (on time, or at all) as promised. Therefore, the Trump administration argues, the state has to repay federal taxpayers. The Los Angeles Times quoted Stanford law professor David Freeman Engstrom, a Stanford law professor, describing Trump’s effort as a “nuclear option.”

The practice of recovering money after a breach of contract, while common in the private sector, was virtually unheard of in government, he explained. “There is a reluctance to penalize misspending by local government agencies. ... Almost never do those violations result in terminations, in part because federal agencies are set up to distribute money, not take it back, and they also lack funding for strict grant enforcement,” the Times added.

Last week, newly-inaugurated California Governor Gavin Newsom announced in his “State of the State” address that the “bullet train” would no longer be built between Los Angeles and San Francisco because it “would cost too much and, respectfully, would take too long.” Newsom said the state would still build a portion of the high-speed rail project in the Central Valley in an effort to hold onto the federal funds that President Barack Obama’s administration had allocated to the project: “I am not interested in sending \$3.5 billion in federal funding that was allocated to this project back to Donald Trump, Newsom told legislators in the State Capitol in Sacramento.

But President Trump objected, demanding on Twitter: “California has been forced to cancel the massive bullet train project after having spent and wasted many billions of dollars. They owe the Federal Government three and a half billion dollars. We want that money back now. Whole project is a “green” disaster!” Newsom responded: “This is CA’s

money, allocated by Congress for this project. We're not giving it back." He also taunted the president, accusing him of "desperately searching for some wall \$\$," referring to Trump's barrier on the U.S.-Mexico border.

That did not impress the president. On 19 FEB, the Federal Railroad Administration of the U.S. Department of Transportation wrote to California's High-Speed Rail Authority, informing it that it had breached the terms of its contract with the federal government and that \$928,620,000 would therefore no longer be available to the project. Newsom objected, again: "This is California's money." He also claimed Trump was taking revenge for California's leading role in filing a federal lawsuit against Trump's national emergency declaration to build the "wall." But that may not matter.

The state had grown accustomed to leniency: the Obama administration modified the terms of the deal between the federal government and the state several times, because it was ideologically committed to high-speed rail. For example, in "the final hours of the Obama administration" in January 2017, the Los Angeles Times reported at the time, Obama extended the deadline for the high-speed rail project from 2018 to 2022, so that California might still access the nearly \$1 billion in transportation funds that the Trump administration is now "de-obligating." Trump is somewhat indifferent to high-speed rail: he favors infrastructure spending, but wants to see the projects built. And as a world-famous developer, he knows the rules of the game: deliver the project, or pay up. Legally California may have no choice. [Source: Brietbart News | Joel B. Poll | February 22, 2019 ++]

National Security Update 01 ► **Contaminated Medicine | U.S. Dependence on China's Medicine**



As USS Decatur (DDG-73) conducted a freedom of navigation operation patrol in the South China Sea in late September 2018, a Chinese warship came within 45 yards of the U.S. destroyer, provoking a near-collision. The previous month, a Navy P-8A Poseidon maritime patrol aircraft flying in international airspace in the same area was warned by Chinese military personnel to leave immediately. As U.S. servicemembers conducted missions defending the nation, back in Washington, the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) was investigating a probable cancer-causing chemical in a key ingredient made in China for a widely used medicine for high blood pressure and heart failure called valsartan.

People in 23 countries, including the U.S., had been taking the contaminated medicine. A change in the manufacturing process to boost profitability caused the contamination, which can inflict harm at very low levels. The product was recalled from the market. For generations, Americans have taken for granted that warriors stationed around the world and citizens at home will have an unfettered supply of medicines that meet the highest standards. The incident with this widely used prescription drug revealed an unacknowledged threat: The U.S. has become dependent on China for medicines and the components to make them

Drug Manufacturing Exodus

In the past 25 years, there has been an exodus of drug manufacturing to China and other countries, especially for generics, which account for nearly 90 percent of prescriptions, and the chemical building blocks and raw materials to make them. Antibiotics are a big casualty of offshoring to China.

- In the late 1980s, Tennessee's Oak Ridge National Laboratory had an emergency preparedness plan to ensure a continuous supply of antibiotics in case of an attack on the homeland. The plan contained addresses and contact information for every plant making antibiotics and meticulous instructions on how to repair and rebuild them.
- In 2004, the last penicillin fermentation plant in the U.S. ceased operations. China had invested heavily in large-scale penicillin fermentation factories, and its domestic companies flooded the global market with products. They undercut U.S. and other western producers on price, driving them out of business. After China gained a stronghold in the U.S. and world market, its companies raised prices.
- When the anthrax attacks occurred in September 2001, the U.S. government needed to buy 20 million doses of the antibiotic doxycycline, a treatment for anthrax exposure. It purchased the antibiotics from a European manufacturer who, in turn, obtained the active ingredient from a factory in China.

“If the enemy releases anthrax and they control the antidote, it would cause complete disruption to American society and to our national security,” says Brig. Gen. John Adams, USA (Ret), a MOAA Life Member and the author of a report on supply chain vulnerabilities in the defense industrial base.

Increasing Dependence

America's dependence on China for antibiotics and other medicines has been steadily rising. If China shuts the door on exports, military and civilian hospitals would cease to function within months. This dependence became evident when the FDA inspected a factory in China in 2015 that made multiple key ingredients for prescription drugs. Sixty-one complaints from commercial customers reported products lacked full-potency and contained impurities. FDA inspectors spent a week at the plant and ended up banning 29 products from the U.S. for serious breaches of standards. But because the FDA was so concerned about shortages of antibiotics and chemotherapies for cancer treatment, it exempted 14 products from its own ban.

Because of increased antibiotic resistance, superbugs are spreading. A last resort antibiotic for treating superbugs, vancomycin, sold by a prominent U.S.-based pharmaceutical firm, is made with a critical component from China. An FDA inspection of the Chinese manufacturing facility in 2016 revealed the quality control system could not produce accurate information to ensure the safety and effectiveness of the product it was making. As the U.S. loses control over the supply of its medicines, it also loses control over price. In the aftermath of the recalled blood pressure medicine, prices more than doubled. Congress and the White House have no leverage over Chinese producers, especially when they are the dominant or sole source supplier. American consumers, the Defense Logistics Agency, and the VA are at their mercy.

The FDA's Role

A former FDA official compared agency inspections to child-rearing, using the example of telling your children to clean their room; the room won't stay clean unless kids internalize the importance of picking up after themselves. Just a decade ago, the then-head of China's drug agency was executed for taking bribes from domestic companies. The absence of basic safety regulations and enforcement in China was on display when chemicals were improperly stored at a warehouse in the port city Tianjin. In August 2015, massive explosions occurred, and fireballs were detected by satellites in outer space. A toxic brew spewed across an 18-mile radius.

Four months later, the FDA found hydrogen cyanide, a chemical used in Nazi concentration camps, in a drug shipment to the U.S. from a company located in the affected area. The agency alerted U.S.-based companies buying pharmaceutical products from firms in the area that 40 different chemicals were discovered. The FDA urged them to make sure all shipments were free from contamination, a seemingly impossible task.

Profiteering and deception triggered the deliberate contamination of heparin, a widely-used blood thinner in U.S. hospitals. Enterprising minds used a cheap substitute instead of the authentic ingredient. The fake component so closely resembled the real ingredient that product testing did not detect it. The deaths of 246 Americans in 2007-2008 were associated with the lethal contaminant.

A Risk to National Security

China hasn't hesitated to leverage its dominant position in commodities, and its government has already threatened the U.S. with a drug shortage if the U.S. fails to agree to abide by its wishes. Tensions in the South China Sea could escalate and block trade routes, cutting off supply. In a global public health crisis or Fukushima-type event in China, the Chinese government would keep more of the medicines it makes for its people. The U.S. would stand in line behind other countries to buy essential drugs for its citizens. During conflicts, medicines could be weaponized by withholding them or degrading their potency. This would ultimately be as devastating as an adversary's military force.

[Source: MOAA | Rosemary Gibson | February 21, 2019 ++]

Iran Embassy Hostages ► Being Held Hostage Again by the USVSST

They were taken captive in Iran, where they endured mock firing squads and beatings. After their release, they spent decades fighting for compensation, first in U.S. courts, then through Congress and finally won a victory three years ago. But now, 40 years after the revolution that spurred their kidnapping, survivors among the 53 American hostages held after the U.S. Embassy was overrun say they are facing new frustrations. Legislation passed in 2015 granted them up to \$4.44 million each, or \$10,000 per day of captivity. But only a fraction of the money has come through. “They were heroes,” said Bryan Belk, son of former hostage William Belk, who recently died. “Our country was supposed to take care of them.”



A U.S. hostage is displayed to a crowd in Tehran on Nov. 9, 1979

The former hostages' struggle now is not with a foreign country or even their own government, but with another group of claimants — family members of 9/11 victims who have recently gained access to the fund. The Tehran hostages were not the only beneficiaries of the 2015 *United States Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Act*, which also allows payments to other Americans who win awards for damages in federal courts against countries that have been officially designated state sponsors of terrorism — North Korea, Sudan, Syria and Iran.

The hostages and their families say they were surprised to see relatives of 9/11 victims win judgments against Iran, despite the fact that the official report on the 2001 attacks “found no evidence that Iran . . . was aware of the planning.” Last year, for example, in a lawsuit filed on behalf of more than 1,000 relatives, a federal judge in New York ordered Iran to make payments ranging from \$12.5 million per spouse to \$4.25 million per sibling. “I haven’t read anywhere that 9/11 was caused by Iran,” said Kenneth R. Feinberg, the attorney who has been administering the USVSST payouts. But now, he says, he is faced with a “dilemma” as relatives of 9/11 victims apply for compensation from the USVSST fund, “filing claims saying, ‘I’m a sibling, a grandfather, a cousin.’ ”

The hostages emphasize they bear no ill will against the 9/11 families. Congress acknowledged that there were other mechanisms available for deserving victims, specifically referencing the 9/11 fund, said Stuart Newberger, a specialist in international law at Crowell and Moring. This legislation, said Newberger, was designed to compensate

people like the victims of embassy bombings in Africa whom he represents and the Tehran hostages who had no other means of collecting. The problem arose, Newberger said, when Justice Department lawyers interpreted the law to allow 9/11 family members to get a judgment against Iran and apply to the USVSST fund. “The careful balance that had been constructed to ensure all deserving victims and families receive compensation has been upended in a way no one anticipated three years ago,” he said.

To Barbara Rosen, wife of Barry Rosen, the embassy’s press attache, “It’s like saying that people who suffered from Catholic Church sexual assaults can sue Protestants.” The impact is evident in the shrinking payouts. There were 2,116 claimants for the initial round of payments in 2017. The former hostages received 13.66 percent of their award. Some took overseas trips with their families; others made plans to support philanthropic causes. The USVSST website lists an additional 3,743 for second-round payments. The payout rolled out in January is far smaller — at just 4.2 percent. “It doesn’t take a mathematical genius to figure out what’s happening,” said their attorney, Thomas Lankford, who argues that the hostages — the “oldest victims of modern terrorism” — should have been paid a lump sum. “The effect has been, if you please everyone, you please no one,” said John Limbert, 76, a former hostage who went on to become deputy assistant secretary of state for Iran.

The American hostages were captured by Iranian students, who stormed the embassy in 1979, prompting a diplomatic crisis between the two countries. Their 444-day ordeal captivated the world, as they were paraded, shackled, in front of cameras. Their release came in 1981 after Algerian diplomats brokered a deal on their behalf. But the agreement left them, unlike many victims of terrorism, unable to take legal action against Iran. The Algiers Accords required the United States to “terminate all legal proceedings in United States courts involving claims of United States persons and institutions against Iran.” Some victims of terrorism have won awards of hundreds of millions in U.S. courts, although collecting has often proved challenging.

The Tehran hostages received \$50 for each day of captivity after their release but were repeatedly rebuffed by the courts, with government lawyers arguing that the Algiers Accords were still binding. After failing in the courts, the former hostages turned to Congress, winning support from both Democrats and Republicans, including Sen. Johnny Isakson (R) of Georgia, the home state of three of the hostages. The 2015 law established a means for them to collect — not directly from Iran but from fines levied on organizations that do business illegally, including a portion of the \$9 billion penalty paid by the Paris-based bank BNP Paribas for violating sanctions against Iran, Cuba and Sudan.

Rodney “Rocky” Sickmann recalled driving through St. Louis when his car radio confirmed their compensation had come through. He stopped his car, overwhelmed with relief and joy. “I cried, thinking I was finally going to get some satisfaction,” the former marine recalled. Now those feelings have turned to disappointment. The hostages told Feinberg of their frustrations in a December conference call. “They took me to the woodshed,” said Feinberg, who has overseen payouts following many mass disasters including the \$10 billion September 11th Victim Compensation Fund, which was set up by Congress to compensate victims or their families who agreed in exchange not to sue the airlines. That fund plans to cut payouts by as much as 70 percent as it struggles with a surge of new claims, officials said 22 FEB.

Feinberg, who has announced his retirement from administering the USVSST fund, is sympathetic to the hostages’ concerns, as he is to 9/11 relatives, but bound by the letter of a law he did not write, he said. “Congress ought to fix it,” he said. An Isakson aide said the senator has serious concerns about whether the fund is being managed the way Congress intended. In an email, Isakson said he stood “ready to assist should any additional congressional action be needed to ensure the Tehran victims receive the compensation they are owed.” But with an average age of well over 70, some of the former hostages say it is hard to keep on fighting. “We have been slow-rolled by parts of the U.S. government for decades,” Limbert said. “It’s obvious what they were trying to do,” he said. “Wait us all out until we were all dead.”

Sixteen of the hostages did not live to see the 2015 legislation pass. Belk, the 17th, died in mid-December. His image — standing ramrod straight in a blindfold and handcuffs — came to symbolize their ordeal, and he never recovered from the trauma, according to his son, who is also pursuing efforts to have his father buried with full honors

at Arlington. "He would cover up windows in the garage," Bryan Belk said, "and not sit in a restaurant with his back to the door." The uncertainty irks even those who were surprised to receive any money at all. "When the award was made I was honored that Congress would consider us," said Kathryn Koob, one of two women to have been held for the full 444 days. Now, though, she has had to put plans on hold to fund a chair in world religion. "We are being held hostage again," she said. [Source: The Washington Post | Frances Sellers | February 23, 2018 ++]

Iran Military Update 01 ► First Indigenously Developed Sub Commissioned

The Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) officially commissioned its first indigenously developed Fateh-class submarine on 17 FEB. The ceremony was held at the Bandar Abbas naval base and was attended by President Hassan Rouhani. Defence Minister Amir Hatami was quoted as saying that the submarine weighs 600 tonnes and is capable of launching torpedoes and anti-ship missiles. The Iranian media also reported that it can dive to 200 m and has an endurance of five weeks. Photographs and television footage released for the event showed the boat out of the water at the Bostanu shipyard to the west of Bandar Abbas. It has four 533 mm torpedo tubes in its bow, but its propulsion system was covered up. Photographs were also released showing the boat's retractable sensors, including an electro-optical mast and what appeared to be an optical periscope. Others may include a radar and electronic intelligence sensors for target-acquisition purposes.



The existence of the Fateh-class programme was announced in September 2011, although this may have been a new name for the Qaem project announced in 2008. Commercial satellite imagery of the Bostanu shipyard in October 2013 confirmed that a new submarine with a length of more than 40 m had been launched. The boat was seen being launched in an Iranian television montage of military achievements broadcast in February 2014. In this footage it was seen with foreplanes mounted on its hull that were not present in the more recently released photographs.

Iran's semi-official Fars news agency reported 24 FEB that for the first time during an ongoing annual military drill in the Strait of Hormuz launched a cruise missile from its IRIN submarine released along with an image of a green submarine on the surface of the water launching an orange missile. It said other submarines have the same capability. It did not provide details on the missile's range. State TV showed a video of the launch in which a missile fired from a submarine hit a pre-determined target. Adm. Hamzeh Ali Kaviani, spokesman for the drills, said "by achieving various types of sub-surface missile and torpedoes, we have completed our chain of defensive power under water." Iran's navy has acquired two new mini submarines designed for operations in shallow waters such as the Persian Gulf, the Iranian state TV reported on 21 FEB.

Also on Sunday, the chief of the Revolutionary Guard's aerospace division, Gen. Amirali Hajjzadeh said that enemies of Iran have failed to sabotage the country's missile program. "They were trying to carry out sabotage in part by exploding missiles in the air, but they failed to do anything since we had predicted and secured," the program, he said. Iranian media said the missile was an upgraded version of the Nasr-1 missile the country had showcased in 2008. It was then described as an anti-vessel missile with a range of 35 kilometers (or 22 miles). Iran frequently touts its

military arsenal, much of which is manufactured locally because of international sanctions. The Strait of Hormuz, at the mouth of the Persian Gulf, is a crucial bottleneck for global energy supplies, with about a third of all oil traded by sea passing through it.

Tensions have risen since the U.S. withdrew from Iran’s 2015 nuclear agreement with world powers last year and restored wide-ranging sanctions. The U.S. is wary over Iran’s missile program that can target U.S. regional bases as well as Iran’s archenemy Israel. Submarines, warships, helicopters and surveillance planes participated in the three-day drill, dubbed “Velayat-97,” which concluded Sunday. On Saturday, Iran launched surface-to-surface missiles. [Source: Jane’s Defence Weekly & The Associated Press | Jeremy Binnie/Abu Dhabi & Nasser Karimi, | February 20 & 24, 2019| ++]

Russian Drones ► ARF Working to Create Arctic Zone Use UAVs

A recent report by TASS says the Advanced Research Foundation — essentially, Russia’s six-year-old counterpart to the Pentagon’s DARPA — is working to create materials, electronic components, engines, payloads, and efficient information collection and processing algorithms for use in the Arctic zone. The report also noted work on a drone that can fly for four straight days, as well as demonstrators for technologies that allow vertical and ultrashort takeoff and landing. The Russian government is also funding university-level research into UAVs that can operate in the harsh Arctic climate.

Moscow’s growing interest in cold-weather drones reflects its strategic interest in an Arctic region that climate change is making more accessible but which remains a remote and harsh operating environment. (The challenges were underlined in the deadly January crash of a Tu-22M3 bomber near Murmansk.) Russia is hardly alone in this: as the region becomes more contested, many nations are seeking to beef up their existing militaries for its unique weather conditions. But it does appear to be taking the lead in efforts to develop ways to monitor and observe vast northern reaches via unmanned technologies.

In December, the Kalashnikov Design Bureau announced the ZALA 421-08M and ZALA 421-16E drones for Arctic surveillance. Built to fly for up to 250 minutes in sub-zero temperatures, the drones carry a navigation system specially designed to work without GPS or its Russian equivalent GLONASS. Soon, this growing family of Arctic-proof UAVs will add another member. The Russian Helicopters Holding is currently conducting tests of the VRT300, a helicopter-style UAV intended to do reconnaissance or haul small cargo loads for either military or civil fleets in new northern sea routes. To provide stability in strong Arctic winds, the VRT300’s coaxial rotors rotate in opposite directions.

Other drones may eventually be modified for Arctic service. A January test flight of the 20-ton Ohotnik long-range combat UAV near Novosibirsk raised eyebrows because it took place in 10-degree Fahrenheit (-12° C) weather. The military-affiliated ZvezdaWeekly speculated that more Arctic testing may be on the way. Another potential Arctic UAV is the Triada tiltrotor, a vertical-takeoff, horizontal-landing aircraft that can fly from 80 to 160 kilometers in temperatures down to -58 Fahrenheit and observe and film objects out to five kilometers, ZvezdaWeekly wrote.

Meanwhile, the Russian military is already practicing to use drones in Arctic conditions. Last month, the Guards Tank Army of the Western Military District trained with Eleron-3 and Orlan-10 UAVs at low winter temperatures. In December 2018, soldiers in the Central Military District used the Granat-4 UAV while training near Novosibirsk. Other regiments near Tuva, also in southern Siberia, were training with the Orlan-10 around the same time. [Source: Defense One | Samuel Bendett | February 21, 2019 ++]

NASA Update 02 ► Mars Rover ‘Opportunity’ Bites the Dust

NASA’s Opportunity, the Mars rover that was built to operate for just three months but kept going and going, rolling across the rocky red soil, was pronounced dead 13 FEB, 15 years after it landed on the planet. The six-wheeled vehicle that helped gather critical evidence that ancient Mars might have been hospitable to life was remarkably spry up until eight months ago, when it was finally doomed by a ferocious dust storm. Flight controllers tried numerous times to make contact, and sent one final series of recovery commands 12 FEB, along with one last wake-up song, Billie Holiday’s “I’ll Be Seeing You,” in a somber exercise that brought tears to team members’ eyes. There was no response from space, only silence.



Thomas Zurbuchen, head of NASA’s science missions, broke the news at what amounted to a funeral at the space agency’s Jet Propulsion Laboratory in Pasadena, California, announcing the demise of “our beloved Opportunity.” “This is a hard day,” project manager John Callas said at an auditorium packed with hundreds of current and former members of the team that oversaw Opportunity and its long-deceased identical twin, Spirit. “Even though it’s a machine and we’re saying goodbye, it’s still very hard and very poignant, but we had to do that. We came to that point.”

The two slow-moving, golf cart-size rovers landed on opposite sides of the planet in 2004 for a mission meant to last 90 sols, or Mars days, which are 39 minutes longer than Earth days. In the end, Opportunity outlived its twin by eight years and set endurance and distance records that could stand for decades. Trundling along until communication ceased last June, Opportunity roamed a record 28 miles (45 kilometers) and worked longer than any other lander in the history of space exploration. Opportunity was a robotic geologist, equipped with cameras and instruments at the end of a mechanical arm for analyzing rocks and soil. Its greatest achievement was discovering, along with Spirit, evidence that ancient Mars had water flowing on its surface and might have been capable of sustaining microbial life.

Project scientist Matthew Golombek said these rover missions are meant to help answer an “almost theological” question: Does life form wherever conditions are just right, or “are we really, really lucky?” The twin vehicles also pioneered a way of exploring the surface of other planets, said Lori Glaze, acting director of planetary science for NASA. She said the rovers gave us “the ability to actually roll right up to the rocks that we want to see. Roll up to them, be able to look at them up close with a microscopic imager, bang on them a little bit, shake them up, scratch them a little bit, take the measurements, understand what the chemistry is of those rocks and then say, ‘Oh, that was interesting. Now I want to go over there.’”

Opportunity was exploring Mars’ Perseverance Valley, fittingly, when the fiercest dust storm in decades hit and contact was lost. The storm was so intense that it darkened the sky for months, preventing sunlight from reaching the rover’s solar panels. When the sky finally cleared, Opportunity remained silent, its internal clock possibly so scrambled that it no longer knew when to sleep or wake up to receive commands. Flight controllers sent more than 1,000 recovery commands, all in vain. With project costs reaching about \$500,000 a month, NASA decided there was no point in continuing. Callas said the last-ditch attempt to make contact the night before was a sad moment, with tears and a smattering of applause when the operations team signed off. He said the team members didn’t even bother

waiting around to see if word came back from space — they knew it was hopeless. Scientists consider this the end of an era, now that Opportunity and Spirit are both gone.

Opportunity was the fifth of eight spacecraft to successfully land on Mars, all belonging to NASA. Only two are still working: the nuclear-powered Curiosity rover, prowling around since 2012, and the recently arrived InSight, which just this week placed a heat-sensing, self-hammering probe on the dusty red surface to burrow into the planet like a mole. Three more landers — from the U.S., China and Europe — are due to launch next year. NASA Administrator Jim Bridenstine said the overriding goal is to search for evidence of past or even present microbial life at Mars and find suitable locations to send astronauts, perhaps in the 2030s. “While it is sad that we move from one mission to the next, it’s really all part of one big objective,” he said. [Source: Associated Press | Marcia Dunn | February 13, 2019 ++]

SSA Trust Fund Update 02 ► Can We Depend On It

Since enactment 84 years ago, Social Security has been the most reliable source of retirement income that most retirees have. That said, our current Social Security program has a funding imbalance that’s creeping forward. In 2018 the Congressional Budget Office reported that Social Security’s total **benefit costs exceeded its total income**, including (for the first time) the “interest” income on the special obligations bonds, or I.O.U.s that are held by the trust fund. According to the Social Security Trustees, from here forward, Social Security benefits will be financed with a combination of payroll taxes, revenues from the taxation of Social Security income, “interest” income from the special obligation bonds, and net redemptions of those bonds, until the reserves held from the Trust Funds are depleted.

Let’s consider what the I.O.U.s held by Social Security represent. The I.O.U.s are bookkeeping entries, a lot like entries in checking accounts, but are not represented by real cash sitting in a strong box anywhere. The U.S Treasury collects Social Security payroll taxes from employers. In turn, the U.S. Treasury issues I.O.U.s to the Social Security trust fund. In the meantime, those payroll taxes are immediately used for other federal budget operations. When more payroll taxes were collected than needed to pay benefits, that reduced the amount of borrowing from the public that was needed for the general revenues, and lowered taxes. Now, however, the situation has reversed, and the Treasury must increase borrowing from the public to redeem the I.O.U.s held by the trust fund in order to pay benefits. Increased borrowing, and the cost of interest on the debt, further drives up our federal spending. According to many economists, that can weaken our economy, and our nation’s ability to respond to a crisis.

Actuaries aren’t in agreement over how many more years of solvency Social Security has left. The 2018 Social Security Trustees Report estimates that the Social Security Trust Fund will become insolvent in 2034, about 15 years from now. The more pessimistic Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates the depletion date would be two years sooner in 2032, only 13 years away (CBO 2018 Long-Term Budget Outlook). If Congress does nothing, and allows the Social Security Trust Fund to become insolvent, the program could still pay benefits, but benefits would be cut to coincide with the amount of revenue received — by about 25%.

In 2018, 74% of participants in TSCL’s 2018 Senior Survey said to improve Social Security’s financing, they support applying the full 12.4% Social Security payroll tax to all earnings, rather than just limiting the amount of wages that are taxable, which is \$132,900 in 2019. Fifty nine percent of survey participants’ support very gradually raising the Social Security payroll tax by 1% each for workers and employers. TSCL is working to acquaint Congress with Social Security financing changes that have the broadest support among older Americans.

[Source: TSCL | Mary Johnson | February 13, 2019 ++]

Quotable Quotes 02 ► Things to Think About

~ **Timothy Jones**

Give a man a fish and you'll feed him for a day. Give him religion and he'll starve to death while praying for a fish

~ **Desmond Tutu**

When the white missionaries came to Africa, they had the Bible and we had the land. They said, 'Let us pray.' We closed our eyes. When we opened them, we had the Bible and they had the land.

~ **Zsa Zsa Gabor**

I've been married to a communist and a fascist, and neither would take out the garbage.

~ **Jeff Foxworthy**

You know you're a redneck if your home has wheels and your car doesn't.

~ **Emo Philips.**

A computer once beat me at chess, but it was no match for me at kickboxing.

~ **Robin Hall**

Lawyers believe that a man is innocent until proven broke.

~ **Jean Rostand**

Kill one man and you're a murderer, kill a million and you're a conqueror.

~ **Arthur C. Clarke**

I don't believe in astrology. I am a Sagittarius and we're very skeptical.

~ **Steven Wright**

If toast always lands butter-side down and cats always land on their feet, what happens if you strap toast on the back of a cat?

~ **Doug Hamwell**

America is so advanced that even the chairs are electric.

~ **Johnny Carson...**

If life were fair, Elvis would still be alive today and all the impersonators would be dead.

~ **Jimmy Durante...**

Home cooking. Where many a man thinks his wife is.

~**George Roberts...**

The first piece of luggage on the carousel never belongs to anyone.

~ **Jonathan Winters...**

If God had intended us to fly he would have made it easier to get to the airport.

[Source: Cane.com | Chris Cane | January 3, 2013 ++]

Interesting Ideas ► Need More light



One Word Essays ► Adventure



Have You Heard? ► Toilet Paper | Catholic Parents | Rocking Chair Thoughts

Toilet Paper

1. The first recorded use of toilet paper was in 6th Century China.
2. By the 14th Century, the Chinese government was mass-producing it.
3. Packaged toilet paper wasn't sold in the United States until 1857.
4. Joseph Gayety, the man who introduced packaged TP to the U.S. had his name printed on every sheet.
5. Global toilet paper demand uses nearly 30,000 trees every day
6. That's 10 million trees a year. California will ban Toilet paper in 2020 to save the trees.
7. It wasn't until 1935 that a manufacturer was able to promise Splinter-Free Toilet Paper.
8. Seven percent of Americans admit to stealing rolls of toilet paper in hotels.

9. Americans use an average of 8.6 sheets of toilet paper per trip to the bathroom.
10. The average roll has 333 sheets.
11. Historically, what you use to wipe depended on your income level.
12. In the middle ages they used something called a gompf stick which was just an actual stick used to scrape.
13. Wealthy Romans used wool soaked in rose water and French royalty used lace.
14. Other things that were used before toilet paper include: Hay, corn cobs, sticks, stones, sand, moss, hemp, wool, husks, fruit peels, ferns, sponges, seashells, knotted ropes, and broken pottery (ouch!).
15. 70-75% of the world still doesn't use toilet paper because it is too expensive or there is not sufficient plumbing.
16. In many Western European countries, bidets are seen as more effective and preferable to toilet paper.
17. Colored toilet paper was popular in the U.S. until the 1940s.
18. The reason toilet paper disintegrates so quickly when wet is that the fibers used to make it are very short.
19. On the International Space Station, they still use regular toilet paper, but it has to be sealed in special containers and Compressed
20. During Desert Storm, the U.S. Army used toilet paper to camouflage their tanks.
21. In 1973 Johnny Carson caused a toilet paper shortage. He said as a joke that there was a shortage, which there wasn't, until everyone believed him and ran out to buy up the supply. It took three weeks for some stores to get more stock.
22. There is a contest sponsored by Charmin to design and make wedding dresses out of toilet paper. The winner gets \$2,000.
23. There was a toilet paper museum in Wisconsin, The Madison Museum of Bathroom Tissue, but it closed in 2000.
24. The museum once had over 3,000 rolls of TP from places all over the world, including The Guggenheim, Ellis Island, and Graceland.
25. There is still a virtual toilet paper museum called Nobody's Perfect. <https://www.dailydot.com/unclick/virtual-toilet-paper-museum>
26. In 1996, President Clinton passed a Toilet Paper Tax of 6 cents per roll, which is still in effect today.
27. The Pentagon uses, on average, 666 rolls of toilet paper per day.
28. The most expensive toilet paper in the world is from Portugal. A brand called Renova.
29. Renova is three-ply, perfumed, costs \$3 per roll and comes in several colors including black, red, blue, and green.
30. The CEO of Renova came up with the idea for black toilet paper while he was at a Cirque du Soleil show.
31. Beyonce uses only red Renova toilet paper.
32. Kris Jenner uses only the black Renova toilet paper.
33. If you hang your toilet paper so you can pull it from the bottom, you're considered more intelligent than someone who pulls it from the top. Wonder how this was determined? They asked idiots. All TP with a design is made to go over the top.
34. Koji Suzuki, a Japanese horror novelist best known for writing The Ring, had an entire novel printed on a single roll of toilet paper.
35. The novel takes place in a public bathroom and the entire story runs approximately three feet long.
36. When asked what necessity they would bring to a desert island, 49% of people said toilet paper before food.
37. Queen Elizabeth II wipes her royal bottom with silk handkerchiefs. Wonder if the royal chambermaid gets to wash those??
38. Muslims wipe their bums with their bare hand--- always the left hand. They eat with their right hand. If you are caught shop lifting, your right hand is cut off forcing you to eat with your poopy left hand. This history was sent to you using my right hand

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Catholic Parents

Four Old Catholic men and a Catholic woman were having coffee in St. Peters Square.

The first Catholic man tells his friends, "My son is a priest, when he walks into a room, everyone calls him 'Father'."

The second Catholic man chirps, "My son is a Bishop. When he walks into a room people call him 'Your Grace'."

The third Catholic gent says, "My son is a Cardinal. When he enters a room everyone bows their head and says 'Your Eminence'."

The fourth Catholic man says very proudly, "My son is the Pope. When he walks into a room people call him 'Your Holiness'."

Since the lone Catholic woman was sipping her coffee in silence, The four men give her a subtle, "Well....?" She proudly replies, I have a daughter, she is SLIM & TALL

40 D Breasts

24" WAIST and

34" HIPS

When she walks into a room, people say, "JESUS"!

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Rocking Chair Thoughts

- I planted some bird seed. A bird came up. Now I don't know what to feed it
- I had amnesia once---or twice
- I went to San Francisco. I found someone's heart. Now what?
- Protons have mass? I didn't even know they were Catholic.
- All I ask is a chance to prove that money can't make me happy
- If the world were a logical place, men would be the ones who ride horses sidesaddle.
- What is a "free" gift? Aren't all gifts free?
- They told me I was gullible and I believed them.
- Teach a child to be polite and courteous in the home and, when he grows up, he'll never be able to merge his car onto the freeway.
- Experience is the thing you have left when everything else is gone.
- One nice thing about egotists: they don't talk about other people.
- My weight is perfect for my height--which varies.
- I used to be indecisive. Now I'm not sure.
- How can there be self-help "groups"?
- If swimming is so good for your figure, how do you explain whales?
- Show me a man with both feet firmly on the ground, and I'll show you a man who can't get his pants off
- Is it me --or do Buffalo wings taste like chicken?



Mexicans were asked what they thought of Trump's proposed wall. They replied, "We are very upset, but we'll get over it!"



I STILL HAVE A LANDLINE.
OR AS I LIKE TO CALL IT,
"A CELL PHONE FINDER."



The actual wall The Media is building.



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