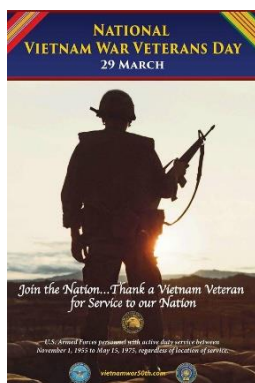


RAO

BULLETIN

15 March 2019



PDF Edition

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1. The page number on which an article can be found is provided to the left of each article's title
2. Numbers contained within brackets [] indicate the number of articles written on the subject. To obtain previous articles send a request to bulletin@veteransbulletin.com.
3. Recipients of the Bulletin are authorized and encouraged to forward the Bulletin to other vets or veteran organizations.

*** ATTACHMENTS ***

- Attachment – Kansas Vet State Benefits
- Attachment – Military History Anniversaries 16 thru 31 MAR (Updated)
- Attachment – Navy Dueling



Border Wall Update 11 ► No Military Construction Projects Will Be Canceled to Fund Wall

The Defense Department plans to "defer" spending on some military construction projects to fund a wall on the southern border of the United States and then ask Congress to give the money back in next year's budget, a top Pentagon official testified 27 FEB. "I want to assure you that no currently authorized military construction projects will be canceled to fund military construction projects supporting use of the armed forces at the southern border," said Robert McMahon, assistant secretary of defense for sustainment.



"Further, while some current military construction projects may be deferred, the fiscal year 2020 president's budget request will include a request for funds to replenish funding for these [deferred] projects," he said at a hearing of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies. McMahon, a retired Air Force major general, also sought to assure the subcommittee that no military construction projects for military family housing would be canceled or have their funding rolled over to next year to fund the wall.

Democrats on the subcommittee said they were in disbelief that the DoD and White House are asking Congress to provide money in the request for the fiscal 2020 budget, which is expected to be submitted next month, for projects that Congress already authorized and appropriated money for this year:

- "I'm flabbergasted with this whole enterprise," said Rep. Tim Ryan (D-OH). If former Presidents Barack Obama or Bill Clinton had made such a proposal, "people would be running around this town with their hair on fire," he said.
- "I'm still confused" as to how President Donald Trump could take money already appropriated by Congress and then come back to ask it to "appropriate those funds all over again," said Rep. Ed Case (D-HI).
- Florida Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz, the subcommittee's chairwoman, said McMahon is suggesting a "backdoor" way to get money for a border wall. She called the wall unnecessary, despite Trump's 15 FEB declaration of a national emergency at the border due to an "invasion" of undocumented immigrants.
- Rep. Sanford Bishop Jr., D-Georgia, said Congress is under no obligation to replenish the funds. "The president's budget request is not law," he said. McMahon replied, "You are correct, and we look forward to advocating for what it is we would push for" in the next budget cycle.
- Rep. Kay Granger, R-Texas, the ranking member of the subcommittee, said she backs Trump on the wall and border security, but added that funding should be allocated in a way that "does not impact on our military readiness."

McMahon stressed that Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan has yet to decide which military construction projects might be targeted for wall funding and is awaiting guidance from the Department of Homeland Security. He also said that the DoD has been told by the White House that the potential sources of wall funding will be used "sequentially."

In declaring the national emergency, Trump and White House officials said that up to \$8.1 billion would be spent on new construction for the wall. The sources are \$1.375 billion included in the bill to end the 35-day partial government shutdown; \$600 million from Treasury Department forfeitures; \$2.5 billion from military counter-drug operations; and \$3.6 billion from military construction projects. The \$1.375 billion approved by Congress would be spent first, then the total of \$3.1 billion from counter-drug funds and Treasury Department forfeitures, and then the \$3.6 billion from military construction projects, McMahon said. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | February 28, 2019 ++]

Pentagon Spending Update 02 ► Use-It or Lose-It | \$61 Billion In A Single Month Last Year

The federal government found a way to spend \$97 billion in a single month last year, of which more than \$61 billion can be attributed to the Pentagon. It's not a new phenomenon. In the last month of every fiscal year, federal agencies work to spend all that's left in their annual budgets. If they don't, the agencies worry they'll be appropriated a smaller share by Congress next year, hence the "use-it or lose-it" spending sprees. Rather than spend money on frivolous items, federal agencies like the Defense Department should admit their offices can be run on less, according to Adam Andrzejewski, founder and CEO of OpenTheBooks.



OpenTheBooks is a nonprofit aimed at bringing transparency and efficiency to the federal budget. They released a report this March detailing fiscal 2018 use-it-or-lose-it spending habits. The military spent the most, by far, which isn't surprising, Andrzejewski told Military Times. "Let me clear: Congress is the problem here, not DoD or other agencies," he said. "Historically, both parties tend to look the other way at Pentagon waste. This is a shame because the troops and taxpayers suffer. Lower priority items get funded while mission critical needs are short-changed." Andrzejewski calls the spending spree "Christmas in September" for the federal government. And last fiscal year was the worst his group has tracked so far.

One of the stand-out purchases by the Pentagon included a \$9,341 Wexford leather club chair purchased from the Interior Resource Group, according to the report. The DoD also bought \$32 million worth of batteries, \$4.3 million worth of books and pamphlets, \$220 million worth of furniture, \$7.6 million worth of workout equipment and \$786.3 million on "guns, ammunition and bombs." The Pentagon spent the most on five of those products: \$124.3 million on medium caliber ammunition, \$92.3 million for modification purposes, \$75 million on the Paveway family of laser-guided bombs, nearly \$54 million on M795 TNT, and \$2.8 million on 40mm ammunition systems.

Federal agencies also like to splurge on luxury food items before the end of the fiscal year, according to the report. The Pentagon spent \$2.3 million on crab, including snow crab, Alaskan king crab, and crab legs and claws, as well as another \$2.3 million on lobster tail. Federal agencies also spent \$293,245 on steak, to include rib eye, top sirloin and flank steak. Andrzejewski said that in some cases, like the surf-and-turf, the spending can actually trickle down to the troops. But that doesn't mean the dollars couldn't be better allocated on more necessary items at the beginning of the year if the funds are actually needed. "Our theory is that, in many cases, the people in charge of the accounts simply follow the path of least resistance," he said. "When faced with the structural use-it or lose-it deadline they spend as much as they can on whatever is easiest to spend money on. Again, Congress created this perverse incentive structure."

The DoD also spent big on public relations and marketing in September, inking \$153.3 million in contracts. The military also dropped \$86.5 million on transportation contracts, of which more than \$53.5 million went to passenger vehicles from Navistar Defense, the maker of Mine-Resistant Ambush Protected vehicles. Some of the big ticket spending items are attributed to the usual major defense contractors. The Pentagon spent \$8.1 billion on contracts with Lockheed Martin and \$5.1 billion with Boeing in September, for instance.

Some congressional leaders have shown an interest in reigning in this type of end-of-the-year spending, "but we need more," Andrzejewski said. "Senators Rand Paul, Mark Warner and Joni Ernst understand Congress needs to make structural reforms to get this problem under control," he added. Just prior to the spending spree kicking off, a bipartisan group of senators sent a letter on 29 AUG to the DoD's chief financial officer warning against the wasteful spending at the end of the quarter. "According to a recent report, with only limited time left in the current fiscal year, eight of the top 10 highest-spending federal agencies have not used as much as 40 percent of their budgets," the lawmakers wrote in August. "Some observers have raised concerns that this year's annual spending binge could be the biggest yet."

And big it was. The \$97 billion spent on contracts in September 2018 marks a 16 percent increase from fiscal 2017, and a 39-percent increase from fiscal 2015, according to OpenTheBooks. In the final week of the year, federal agencies spent \$53 billion, more than they spent in the entire month of August, according to the OpenTheBooks report. Given the odd spending habits, it's entirely fair to require agencies like the Pentagon to better explain their last-minute purchases, Andrzejewski said. "According to Pentagon disclosures captured by our auditors at OpenTheBooks.com, a large percentage of contract procurement on the year happened in the final month," he said. "Therefore, it's entirely reasonable to ask for justification and the fact that the Pentagon flunked their comprehensive audit only causes further concern." [Source: MilitaryTimes | About Kyle Rempfer | March 12, 2019 ++]

Burn Pit Toxic Exposure Update 64 ► DoD/VA Two-Day Closed Symposium

Defense Department and Department of Veterans Affairs officials are meeting this week in Arlington, Virginia, for a two-day symposium on burn pits and airborne pollutants but, as with previous Joint VA/DoD Airborne Hazard Symposia, the meeting is closed to the public and press. The symposium's purpose, according to documents from the first meeting in 2012, is to "provide an opportunity to discuss what we know, what we need to know and what can be done to study and improve care" for veterans and troops who "might have suffered adverse health effects related to exposure to airborne hazards, including burn pit smoke and other pollutants."

Attendance is tightly controlled, with Pentagon and VA officials convening to discuss topics such as a joint action plan to address potential health conditions related to exposure, the VA's Airborne Hazards and Burn Pit Registry, monitoring deployment environments and the impact of exposures on the Veterans Benefits Administration, according to a copy of the first day's agenda obtained by Military.com. Members of several veterans service organizations and advocacy groups have been invited to speak, including the Veterans of Foreign Wars, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Disabled American Veterans, American Legion, Burn Pits 360 and the Sgt. Sullivan Circle. But those

veterans' representatives are allowed to attend only a handful of sessions on the first day, 14 MAR, including opening remarks and segments on outreach and education, as well as a brown-bag lunch during which they can discuss concerns and issues. All events scheduled for 15 MAR remain unpublished. Neither the VA nor the DoD responded to requests for information on the event. Veterans advocates also declined to discuss the meeting or their participation, with some expressing concern that they would be prevented from receiving future invites.

Thousands of troops serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere were exposed to airborne pollutants while working and living near burn pits used to dispose of trash, medical waste and other types of refuse at area military bases. Some have developed a chronic lung disease, constrictive bronchiolitis, while others have developed skin rashes, autoimmune disorders and various types of cancer, including glioblastoma, a brain cancer rarely seen in young adults, that they believe are related to burn pit exposure. Veterans and advocates have pressed the VA for years to recognize these illnesses as related to burn pit exposure and want them to be considered "presumptive" conditions, a designation that would automatically qualify them for disability compensation and health services.

The VA says it lacks the scientific evidence to directly tie burn pit exposure to certain diseases but has granted service connection for several conditions associated with burn pits, deciding each claim on a case-by-case basis. In 2011, the Institute of Medicine reviewed all available studies, reports and monitoring data on burn pit utilization and combustibles exposure and concluded that there was not enough evidence or data to draw conclusions about the long-term consequences of exposure. More than 140,000 veterans have enrolled in the VA Burn Pit and Airborne Hazards Registry. From June 2007 through Nov. 30, 2018, the VA received 11,581 claims applications for disability compensation with at least one condition related to burn pit exposure. Of those, 2,318 had a burn pit-related condition granted, according to VA Press Secretary Curt Cashour. During the same time frame, the VA processed nearly 13.5 million claims; burn pit-related claims made up less than a tenth of a percent of those claims.

"VA encourages all veterans who feel their military service has affected their health to submit a claim, which will be adjudicated using the latest scientific and medical evidence available," Cashour said. The Pentagon and VA are developing a way to track environmental exposures in service members starting with the day they enlist. The Individual Longitudinal Exposure Record, or ILER, will record potential and known exposures throughout a service member's time on active duty. A pilot program is set to begin Sept. 30. But those who have suffered exposures in the past 30 years will need to rely on Congress to pass legislation to assist them, the Defense Department to continue researching the issues, and the VA to approve their claims.

Veterans of Foreign Wars, Vietnam Veterans of America, Wounded Warrior Project, IAVA, Disabled American Veterans, the Fleet Reserve Association, the Military Order of the Purple Heart and Military Officers Association of America all have made burn pit and toxic exposure issues a top legislative priority this year. Several lawmakers, including Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Rep. Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI) have introduced legislation that would require the DoD and VA to share information on troops' exposure to airborne chemicals and provide periodic health assessments for those who were exposed. The meeting is to take place at the Veterans Health Administration National Conference Center in Crystal City, Virginia. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | March 13, 2019 ++]

DoD/VA EHR Update 04 ► Senior Lawmaker Pushes on Access Issue

A top appropriator wants answers on how clinicians at the Department of Veterans Affairs will access information on the shared electronic health record system being implemented by the Department of Defense and VA. Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-FL) who chairs the Military Construction and Veterans Affairs subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee, said she's hearing about "huge access issues" related to the security authorization levels required to use the DOD's MHS Genesis system.

VA Inspector General Michael Missal, who testified at the panel's 13 MAR hearing, said the issue in part centers around differences in DOD and VA credentialing. Some accommodation must be made for the VA's use of the PIV card -- a personal identity verification system that contain employee data, biometric information and encryption key -- to access data in MHS Genesis. Currently MHS Genesis is configured to accept the DOD's CAC card credential. Additionally, even within VA, obtaining PIV credentials can be difficult. Missal said that medical residents who work in the VA system have a hard time obtaining PIV cards and use "workarounds" to get into the current Vista electronic health record system. "It's hard just to get into the VA system," Missal said. "If you increase security -- it's going to be that much more challenging."

David Norley, a spokesperson for the Defense Healthcare Management System, which is managing the initial rollout of the Cerner-based MHS Genesis system, told FCW in an interview that different security requirements isn't impinging on the ability of VA clinicians to access health data. "This is a non-issue," Norley said, noting that VA and DOD clinicians already routinely swap data using the Joint Legacy Viewer system that connects Vista with a host of DOD legacy systems and the new MHS Genesis record. "The technology is there. We just have to level the policies," Norley said. "We don't see that there's an issue that would put anything on delay."

Norley indicated that plans to configure the Cerner system to accept CAC cards and PIV cards were in the works. "The CIOs at DOD and VA are working to solve this problem," Norley said. He added that the problem is really one of layers upon layers of legacy requirements that are applied to all DOD business systems. "With MHS Genesis, because we're bringing another agency into it -- it means we find out our policies might be arcane or don't apply or need to be updated," Norley said. "In the process of bringing VA into the DOD health record, DOD is committed to doing that. We are all-in on the DOD-VA electronic health record, and we'll make the policy adjustments necessary to do that, provided it doesn't have a risk involved to patient data and confidentiality."

How those decisions get made is also an issue for Wasserman-Schultz and for Missal. "DOD has to sign off on any modifications that VA makes to the system," Wasserman-Schultz said in the hearing, adding that her sources tell her that "despite collaboration, DOD is the final decision maker." Currently VA and DOD are developing business process and clinical workflows through joint councils. But Missal said it's not clear where decisions are being made. He said that after the council process, decision-making "moves to a black box," and added: "That's where we're concerned -- like who's making the decision, what information are they getting ... we haven't seen that yet."

Acting VA Deputy Secretary James Byrne told the same subcommittee on 6 MAR that top officials were getting closer to naming a "**purple person**" to act as a decider in cases where lower-level councils can't come to an agreement on workflow or business process decisions. [Source: Federal Computer Week | Adam Mazmanian | March 13, 2019 ++]

DoD Illegal Migrant Housing ► Base Review to Accommodate Up to 5000 Children

The Defense Department is reviewing a number of military bases to find a location that can house up to 5,000 unaccompanied migrant children as the U.S. braces for a surge of people crossing the U.S.-Mexico border illegally this spring. The Department of Health and Human Services submitted the request for space late last week, as Homeland Security leaders warned that tens of thousands of families are crossing the border each month. That flow, said Homeland Security Secretary Kirstjen Nielsen, will grow worse this spring as the weather gets better.

The Pentagon last summer approved the use of Goodfellow Air Force Base near San Angelo, Texas, for an HHS request to accommodate up to 20,000 children. Legal and environmental requirements were finalized, but HHS never came back with a formal request to actually use the base. Officials said that the extra space wasn't needed, and there also were concerns that HHS didn't have the money to construct needed housing and other support facilities at the base. Army Lt. Col. Jamie Davis, a Pentagon spokesman, said 12 MAR that since this HHS request is smaller than

last year's, the department is doing another review. It's unclear if the Pentagon will once again propose Goodfellow as the location or if there is another military base that may already have facilities that could accommodate the smaller-sized group.

HHS Secretary Alex Azar addressed the issue of migrant children during a hearing 12 MAR before the House Energy and Commerce Committee. He said HHS is asking for \$1.3 billion in the 2020 fiscal year budget and the creation of a contingency fund of up to \$2 billion. "We have requested quite a lot, but at the rate we are going with the kids coming across the border, it is quite a burden financially," he said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Ricardo Alonso-Zaldivar | March 12, 2019 ++]

DoD Budget 2020 Update 02 ► \$718B | Shanahan's "Masterpiece" Document

The Pentagon's fiscal year 2020 budget request will include \$545 billion in base defense spending, \$164 billion in overseas contingency operations funding, and \$9 billion in "emergency funding" that could be used to cover funding gaps in military construction that result from President Donald Trump's use of an emergency declaration to fund a wall at the southern border. Sources with direct knowledge of the budget request told Defense News the president's budget request also will include an increase in research and development funds as well as a dip in funding for the European Deterrence Initiative, a program that bolsters the U.S. presence in Europe for security purposes. The overall national security budget is expected to be around \$750 billion dollars, of which the Department of Defense will make up \$718 billion.



President Donald Trump talks to journalists during a meeting with members of his Cabinet, including Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan (right), in the Cabinet Room at the White House on Jan. 2, 2019. The FY20 budget will be the first rolled out under Shanahan's guidance as the acting secretary.

The top line budget figures were expected to be released 11 MAR as part of the government-wide unveiling of the president's FY20 budget request. More specific numbers for the Department of Defense are scheduled to be released 12 MAR; however, numbers for the Future Years Defense Program and detailed breakdowns of individual programs are not expected to be available until 18 MAR, when the department-wide justification books are released. Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan has repeatedly referred to the fiscal 2020 budget as the "masterpiece" document and that it has been shaped by the conclusions drawn from a series of long-term strategies including the National Defense Strategy, Nuclear Posture Review and Missile Defense Review.

Sources said the overseas funding is split between \$66 billion in traditional OCO dollars for warfighting needs and \$98 billion in OCO-for-base funds — essentially, money that could be in the base budget but is classified as OCO for the purpose of skirting statutory budget caps imposed by the Budget Control Act. While Congress and the Pentagon have relied on such funding as a work-around for the budget caps in the past, the sheer size of the pot — roughly \$100 billion more than the department requested in FY19 — likely will meet resistance on the Hill.

Of the \$9 billion in emergency funds, the Pentagon had planned to use roughly \$2 billion to handle repairs and assistance needed in the wake of a series of major weather events that hit the United States in the last year. One source, however, says that number is expected to climb. The rest of the roughly \$7 billion is focused on needed military construction efforts, which is where the budget becomes entangled with the border issue. The Pentagon has been tasked to move \$2.5 billion into a counter-drug fund that Trump wants to use to build a border wall, with much of that expected to come from military construction projects. However, lawmakers have expressed concern about how Trump is going to get that funding, essentially by taking money already appropriated by Congress for programs, diverting that to the wall, and then telling DoD to request additional money. “We’re given the authority to appropriate, and the president is saying, essentially: I don’t like what you’ve appropriated, I’ll just take the money and move it elsewhere,” Senate Armed Services Committee ranking member Jack Reed, D-R.I., said this week. “We’re setting up for a constitutional issue of significant importance.”

One source confirmed to Defense News a Bloomberg report that said research and development funding in the FY20 budget will be at \$104 billion, a roughly \$9 billion increase over current year levels. That increase will largely go towards accelerating development of hypersonic weapons, artificial intelligence programs and space-based technologies. In a subscriber email, Roman Schweizer of Cowen Washington Research Group said that expected increase is tied to the National Defense Strategy towards great power competition and predicted that Congress may look to boost those funds over DoD requested levels, given past trends from the Hill.

Meanwhile, president’s budget request will include a drop in the European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) “moderately lower” than its previous enacted levels of \$6.3 billion, per the source. The EDI is a fund set up in the wake of Russia’s annexation of Ukrainian territory in 2014 to increase America’s presence in the region; the majority of the funding goes to Army programs, such as rotational brigades and military exercises. The EDI had grown dramatically in the first two years of the Trump administration. However, any cut will be unwelcome news for European nations who have looked to the EDI as hard proof that the Pentagon remains committed to its longstanding military relationships in Europe, despite sometimes heated rhetoric from the White House. The news follows a March 8 report that the White House is seriously considering requiring any nation that houses U.S. troops to cover all costs, as well as pay a 50 percent premium for the pleasure of having American military forces on its soil.

Last week, Gen. Curtis Scaparrotti, both head of U.S. European Command and the NATO Supreme Allied Commander-Europe, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that it will take more armored units and U.S. Navy guided-missile destroyers, carrier strike groups and amphibious strike groups to stay ahead of Russia’s growing and modernizing forces. [Source: DefenseNews | Aaron Mehta & Jen Judson | March 10, 2019 ++]

Navy Budget Request | 2020 ► Will Pass the 300 Ships Mark w/2020 Budget Submission

The U.S. Navy will pass the 300 ships mark for the first time since 2002, according to its fiscal 2020 budget submission, a big step toward its current goal of 355 ships and a sign the service, after decades of contracting, is growing yet again. The last time the Navy had more than 300 ships was in 2002, when it had 313, according to Naval History and Heritage Command. The Navy should be up to 314 ships by 2023, according to the Navy’s budget submission. In total, the Navy is requesting \$205.6 billion, which breaks out to \$160.8 billion in base funding and a staggering \$44.8 billion on overseas contingency operations funding. The OCO funding is up \$36.6 billion over last year’s request and is a gimmick to avoid budget caps. The budget will need to be hashed out in Congress through a spending deal.

The budget also marks a major step toward an unmanned future for its battle force, budgeting \$400 million in 2020 for two large unmanned surface vessels, or LUSV, and \$2.7 billion across the five-year projection known as the Future Years Defense Program, or FYDP. The budget calls for two LUSVs per year across the program. The budget also

calls for eight of its unmanned aerial refueling drones, the MQ-25 Stingray, with four per year starting in 2023. The service is also asking for \$359 million for unmanned undersea vehicles, which includes \$182 million for the newly awarded Orca extra-large unmanned undersea vehicle. In February, the Navy announced a \$43 million contract with Boeing to begin construction on four Orca XLUVs, which will be used for a variety of unmanned mission areas including countermine, anti-submarine and anti-surface warfare.

Submarines were a big winner in this year's budget submission, which sees the Navy planning for a third Virginia-class attack submarine in 2020 — a move long sought by lawmakers interested in boosting submarine numbers to avoid a shortfall in the 2030s. The Navy is facing a precipitous decline in attack boat inventories in the 2030s, during which the Navy is expecting to fall to 42 boats down from today's 52. FY20 also marks the first budget request since 2005 in which the Navy did not request a littoral combat ship, instead shifting its focus to the FFG(X) future frigate. The Navy asked for \$1.3 billion for the first FFG(X) hull in 2020.

The Navy plans to add 5,100 sailors over last year's request, 5,015 of which are enlisted billets. In total, the service wants 340,500 sailors in 2020. Today, end strength stands at 332,904 sailors in the active Navy. Reserve end strength will take a small cut of about 100 sailors. End strength for the reserve will drop from 59,100 to 59,000 year over year. More Navy budget highlights are as follows:

Aviation

- The Navy plans to buy 20 carrier-launched F-35C aircraft, with 120 budgeted over the Future Years Defense Program. The Marine Corps will get 10 more vertical-launched F-35Bs, with 82 programmed over the FYDP.
- The budget calls for 24 F/A-18 E/F fighters in 2020, with 84 programmed over the FYDP.
- The Navy requested six P-8A maritime patrol and reconnaissance aircraft, and is the last year of the program.
- FY20 calls for procuring 32 of the yet-to-be-named TH-57 Sea Ranger training helicopter replacement — 32, with \$261 million appropriated. That breaks out to \$8.15 million per helo. There are 109 programmed into the FYDP.

Ships

- The Navy is asking for three destroyers in 2020.
- The Marine Corps is interested in paying the bills this year, with the LPD-17 Flight II (formerly LX(R)) cut from the budget and eight ship-to-shore connectors axed from the budget.
- The LPD-17 Flight II changes its buying profile from zero in 2020, one in 2021, zero in 2022 and one in 2023, with two across the FYDP.

Missiles

- The Navy is asking for 90 Tomahawks, with an additional 20 of the new maritime strike variant. In total, the Navy has requested 375 maritime strike Tomahawks over the FYDP.
- In total, the Navy is asking for 258 Tomahawk upgrade kits in 2020.
- The Navy is asking for 18 naval strike missiles, the service's new over-the-horizon anti-ship missile destined for the littoral combat ship, with 101 programmed into the FYDP.
- The Navy is requesting 60 of the Evolved SeaSparrow Missile, which counter anti-ship missiles and can be quad-packed into a single vertical launch system cell, with 960 packed into the FYDP.
- The aviators are buying 48 long-range anti-ship missiles, with 48 per year programmed in the FYDP.

[Source: DefenseNews | David B. Larter | March 12, 2019 ++]

Army Budget Request | 2020 ► \$182B Geared to a Modernization Renaissance

The U.S. Army's budget request of \$182 billion in fiscal year 2020 holds steady with last year's top line, but is geared toward a "modernization renaissance" the service began with the 2018 establishment of a new four-star command dedicated to building a modern force by 2028. In addition to the \$182 billion top line, the Pentagon is requesting \$9.2 billion in emergency funding, which will be applied entirely to the Army budget, according to Defense Department budget request documents. The funds could be used to cover funding gaps in military construction that result from President Donald Trump's move to use an emergency declaration for a wall at the United States' southern border.

As Defense News first reported, the service's base budget request this year is \$151 billion with \$31.4 billion of that budgeted as Overseas Contingency Operations-for-base funding. For complete Pentagon budget coverage, click [here](#). The Army's end-strength numbers will slow in FY20 due to a bad recruiting year in FY19. While the service planned to grow the active force to 487,500, it closed out FY19 with 478,000 troops. The plan now is to increase the Army end-strength by 2,000 in FY20 and subsequent years, rather than the planned 4,000 per year, a defense official told Defense News ahead of the budget request release. The Army National Guard will grow by 500 in FY20 to 336,000 and the Army Reserve will grow by 250.

Operations and maintenance -- The operations and maintenance (O&M) account would grow by roughly \$1 billion in FY20 from \$40.8 billion in FY19 to \$42 billion in the new request. The funding is geared to achieving readiness objectives by 2022 by resourcing 25 Brigade Combat Team Combat Training Center rotations, improving BCT home station training, and increasing One Station Unit Training from 14 to 22 weeks for infantry soldiers. The funding will maintain 58 BCTs, six Security Force Assistance Brigades and 11 Combat Aviation Brigades. The funding also covers two major multi-lateral exercises in the Pacific and Europe — Defender Europe and Defender Pacific. The Army also plans to increase the flying hour program from 10.8 hours to 11.6 hours.

Research and Development

- The Army is seeking \$12.2 billion in research, development, test and evaluation funding and \$21.8 billion in procurement that aligns with the Army's six modernization priorities: Long-Range Precision Fires, Next Generation Combat Vehicle, Future Vertical Lift, the network, air-and-missile defense and soldier lethality.
- In order to fund its priorities, the service is divesting legacy platforms and systems over time. According to service documents, without going into specifics, the Army plans to eliminate 93 programs and delay or reduce 93 programs across the next five budget cycles. That effort will save the service \$2.5 billion. Not much clarity is provided in the Army budget documents in terms of what will be cut and what will be slowed, but according to a defense official, upgrade programs for the CH-47 Chinook cargo helicopter and the Bradley are at greatest risk of reductions in the near term.
- The Army is increasing its investment in the top six priorities over the next five years by \$32.8 billion from \$24.2 billion to \$57 billion. Near-term focus will be placed on 30 systems including the Army's Strategic Long-Range Cannon, the Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft, Mobile Protected Firepower, Unified Network, Indirect Fire Protection Capability, Assured Position, Navigation and Timing equipment, Integrated Visual Augmentation System and the Synthetic Training Environment One World Terrain.
- The service plans to spend \$387 million to develop its Optionally Manned Fighting Vehicle in FY20 to replace the Bradley. The funding will go toward a contract award for up to two vendors to provide prototypes as part of the program.
- A total of \$310 million is requested for the Mobile Protected Firepower program's competitive prototyping effort.
- The Army wants \$427 million for its Future Attack Reconnaissance Aircraft that would complete the competitive initial design phase in FY20.
- The Lower-Tier Air-and-Missile Defense program would receive \$428 million to initiate prototypes of systems.
- The Army is requesting \$243 million for its Indirect Fire Protection Capability Increment 2 program that will go toward the funding of an interim capability — said to be the Iron Dome system that the U.S. co-developed with Israel.

Procurement

- In its RDA procurement account, the service is requesting \$21.8 billion, which is a slight increase of last year's enacted funding of \$22.1 billion.
- The Army's is asking for less funding in aviation in FY20 — a total of \$3.7 billion — after receiving \$4.3 billion in funding in the prior year. The funding is intended to sustain AH-64 Apache attack helicopter and Chinook remanufacture efforts as well as an increase of 15 UH-60 Black Hawk utility helicopters — for a total of 73 — over last year's buy.
- The service plans to spend \$3.2 billion in missiles procurement, which is roughly the same amount of funding it received in FY19. Yet the budget boosts procurement for missiles like Hellfire and Guided Multiple Launch Rocket System rockets. The Army procured 2,309 Hellfire missiles in FY19 and is asking for 5,112 in FY20. The Army wants 9,570 GMLRS rockets in FY20 up from 7,818 in FY19.
- The Army is requesting \$4.7 billion in its FY20 budget for weapons and tracked combat vehicle procurement, only slightly more than it received last year in the same account. Procurement funding was increased specifically for the Bradley Fighting Vehicle, Stryker combat vehicle, Abrams tank and Paladin Integrated Management modernization. The service wants to upgrade 128 Bradley vehicles in FY20 and plans to upgrade 152 Strykers, up from 82 vehicles in FY19.
- The service cut its procurement of the Joint Light Tactical Vehicle by 863 vehicles. The Army procured 3,393 vehicles in FY19 in low-rate initial production but only plans to buy 2,530 vehicles in FY20. The Army had planned, in FY19, to buy 3,035 vehicles in FY20, according to last year's budget request. The reduction likely accounts for the delay of the JLTV's full-rate production decision that was pushed from December 2018 to May 2019 due to a number of changes to the vehicle the Army has decided to make as the result of soldier feedback, including a larger back window and the addition of a muffler. The approach is designed to minimize the cost and quantity of the vehicles that would need to be retrofitted, according the vehicle's program office.
- The Army also plans to increase funding for Mobile-Short Range Air Defense systems in order to equip the first four M-SHORAD battalions as planned.
- Additionally, the service plans to accelerate procurement of Manpack radios, Ground Soldier Systems and increase funding for the Signal Modernization Program in support of the Integrated Tactical Network.

Reform -- The Army also laid out its efforts to reform its business practices, policies and how it aligns funding with needed resources in its budget documents. The service notes that it saved \$277.9 million in FY20 through business improvements such as better contract management and its Command Accountability and Execution Review (CAER) program. Additionally, the Army saved \$177.9 million in FY20 dollars through policy reform associated with realigning its civilian workforce to establish Army Futures Command. An additional \$717.9 million was saved by streamlining and eliminating duplicative efforts in Army Logistical Support Operations.

[Source: DefenseNews | Jen Judson | March 12, 2019 ++]

Air Force Budget Request | 2020 ► \$165.6B for Readiness & Emerging Tech

The U.S. Air Force is requesting \$165.6 billion in fiscal 2020, an increase of about \$10 billion more than FY19 that the service intends to use to fund gains in readiness as well as spearhead technology development. The service's accounts for operations and maintenance (O&M) as well as research, development, technology and evaluation (RDT&E) each jumped by about \$5 billion compared to the FY19 budget, according to budget documents provided by the Air Force.

- For research and development, that increase helps fund a sharp increase in investments to the Air Force's next-generation fighter jet and nuclear modernization programs like the B-21 bomber and Ground Based Strategic Deterrent, the service's new intercontinental ballistic missiles.
- For O&M, much of the additional funding goes to sustaining legacy platforms, increasing flying hours and modernizing infrastructure.

The Air Force has yet to release its full budget documentation, which usually includes detailed funding information and a five-year projection of its spending. However, a few trends were immediately apparent:

- Procurement remained stagnant at \$25.9 billion, with the largest shift in that account impacting the service's fighter inventory. Instead of going all in on F-35 procurement, the Air Force's budget seeks funding for 48 F-35As at \$4.9 billion and eight new F-15EX planes for \$1.1 billion. Importantly, that's still far fewer fighters than Air Force leadership wants to buy per year.
- Both Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson and Chief of Staff Gen. Dave Goldfein have said the service should be buying 72 fighter jets in every budget cycle. The FY20 budget only calls for 56 jets, equivalent to the amount of F-35s appropriated by Congress last year. Instead of boosting F-35 procurement, the service appears to have expanded research and development funding for the program, hiking its investment in the Block 4 modernization program from \$504 million in FY19 to \$794 million in FY20.
- The Air Force also heavily invested in the development of its future aircraft. Funding for Next Generation Air Dominance — a portfolio of systems that likely includes a new air superiority fighter — skyrocketed from \$430 million to \$1 billion.
- In its procurement account, the Air Force slows down the procurement of KC-46 tankers to only 12 planes in FY20, making up for FY18 when Congress appropriated funds for 18 aircraft instead of the projected 15 per year. The service also would buy fewer MC-130Js this year — only including eight planes in its request, when its FY19 plans called for 13 aircraft in FY20. On the flip side, the service appears to be increasing the number of MQ-9 Reapers it plans to buy in FY20, going from the four aircraft predicted in the FY19 budget to 12 of the drones.
- Funding for the Air Force's B-21 bomber increased from \$2.2 billion in FY19 to \$3 billion in FY20, and the program is likely the recipient of other funding in the classified budget. The RDT&E budget also included \$348.5 million to continue the design of T-X trainer aircraft, and \$757.9 million for the development of new Air Force One planes. Meanwhile, hypersonic weapon prototyping remained stable at \$576 million.
- In its space portfolio, the Air Force asked for funding to buy four national security space launches and the first GPS III follow-on satellite. Overall, space procurement funding remained flat at \$2.4 billion. In addition to that, the service plans to spend almost \$1.4 billion in development funds toward its Overhead Persistent Infrared system, which will increase the service's ability to detect ballistic missiles from space.
- Other accounts also remained steady. The service included 12 combat rescue helicopters from Sikorsky for \$1.7 billion, as well as funds for one EC-37B Compass Call aircraft.
- Missile accounts increased slightly from \$1.7 billion in FY19 to \$2 billion. However, the service opted to double its buy of the Small Diameter Bomb II from 510 to 1,175 bombs.

[Source: DefenseNews | Valerie Insinna | March 12, 2019 ++]

Commissary Funding Update 31 ► 21 Percent Cut In Fiscal 2020

The commissary budget will take a 21 percent cut in fiscal 2020, if the Defense Department's budget request is approved by Congress. Defense officials are asking for \$995 million in taxpayer funding to operate the 236 commissary stores worldwide, down from \$1.27 billion in fiscal 2019, according to DoD budget documents released

Tuesday. Part of the reduction is likely due to an 11 percent decrease in the commissary work force. Those work force cuts in the Defense Commissary Agency started in fiscal 2019 and will carry forward into fiscal 2020 — going from 14,000 employees worldwide to 12,500 during fiscal 2020. Information was not immediately available about how those work force cuts affect the stores and customers.

The budget cut comes as the Defense Department is moving toward merging the three military exchange systems and the commissary system into one “defense resale enterprise,” in efforts to save money. But that proposal hasn’t yet been approved — at this writing it was awaiting approval by Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist. A report and legislative proposals will then be sent to Congress. In a memo signed 1 MAR, Lisa Hershman, acting DoD chief management officer, approved the business case for the merger. In order for DoD to fully merge those systems, some laws will have to be changed, such as the current law requiring separate commissary and exchange systems.

For a number of years, some within the Defense Department have floated proposals to reduce the commissary budget. The commissary proposed budget is about 0.13 percent of the overall defense budget request, which has increased this year. The budget overview states there’s a \$400 million net decrease from the fiscal 2019 funding for military family support programs, and that is driven by the commissary’s use of funds left over from the previous year and “military construction phasing of DoD school projects.” In its long-term effort to replace and renovate schools, the Department of Defense Education Activity is proposing to spend about \$150 million in 2020 on three schools and an administrative office; about \$218 million less than what they spent in fiscal 2019.

Funding for other programs in the “family support” category stayed the same, except for a \$100 million increase in warfighter and family support programs, to \$1.8 billion. Funding for child care and youth programs remained level at \$1.4 billion; and for MWR programs, level at \$1.6 billion. The budget proposal doesn’t specify how much taxpayer funding was left over in the commissary budget from the previous year, or why there were funds left over. But it doesn’t appear that those funds would offset the \$271 million decrease in the budget request, compared to fiscal 2019.

“I find it interesting that the budget briefing doesn’t mention reduced appropriations due to offsetting revenues derived from operational efficiencies, [such as] private label and variable pricing. You would think that would be something to tout,” said Tom Gordy, president of the Armed Forces Marketing Council. The commissary has introduced a number of private label products, and has gone from a system that sold all products at cost from the vendor, to a system that allows them to mark up or mark down prices. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | March 13, 2019 ++]

Wargames ► **The US Keeps Losing, Hard | \$24 billion Annual Fix Needed**

RAND analyst David Ochmanek said 7 MAR, “In our games, when we fight Russia and China,” “blue gets its ass handed to it.” In other words, in RAND’s wargames, which are often sponsored by the Pentagon, the US forces — colored blue on wargame maps — suffer heavy losses in one scenario after another and still can’t stop Russia or China — red — from achieving their objectives, like overrunning US allies. No, it’s not a Red Dawn nightmare scenario where the Commies conquer Colorado. But losing the Baltics or Taiwan would shatter American alliances, shock the global economy, and topple the world order the US has led since World War II. F-35 stealth fighters are hard to kill in flight, but lined up on the runway, they’re easy targets.

How could this happen, when we spend over \$700 billion a year on everything from thousand-foot-long nuclear-powered aircraft carriers to supersonic stealth fighters? Well, it turns out US superweapons have a little too much Achilles in their heels. “In every case I know of,” said Robert Work, a former deputy secretary of defense with decades of wargaming experience, “the F-35 rules the sky when it’s in the sky, but it gets killed on the ground in large numbers.” Even the hottest jet has to land somewhere. But big airbases on land and big aircraft carriers on the water turn out to be big targets for long-range precision-guided missiles. Once an American monopoly, such smart weapons

are now a rapidly growing part of Russian and Chinese arsenals — as are the long-range sensors, communications networks, and command systems required to aim them.

So, as potential adversaries improve their technology, “things that rely on sophisticated base infrastructure like runways and fuel tanks are going to have a hard time,” Ochmanek said. “Things that sail on the surface of the sea are going to have a hard time.” (That’s why the 2020 budget coming out next week retires the carrier USS Truman decades early and cuts two amphibious landing ships, as we’ve reported. It’s also why the Marine Corps is buying the jump-jet version of the F-35, which can take off and land from tiny, ad hoc airstrips, but how well they can maintain a high-tech aircraft in low-tech surroundings is an open question).

While the Air Force and Navy took most of the flak today at the 7 MAR Center for a New American Security panel on the need for “A New American Way of War,” the Army doesn’t look too great, either. Its huge supply bases go up in smoke as well, Work and Ochmanek said. Its tank brigades get shot up by cruise missiles, drones, and helicopters because the Army largely got rid of its mobile anti-aircraft troops, a shortfall it’s now hastening to correct. And its missile defense units get overwhelmed by the sheer volume of incoming fire. “If we went to war in Europe, there would be one Patriot battery moving, and it would go to Ramstein. And that’s it,” Work growled. “We have 58 Brigade Combat Teams, but we don’t have anything to protect our bases. So what difference does it make?” Worst of all, Work and Ochmanek said, the US doesn’t just take body blows, it takes a hard hit to the head as well. Its communications satellites, wireless networks, and other command-and-control systems suffer such heavy hacking and jamming that they are, in Ochmanek’s words, “suppressed, if not shattered.”

The US has wargamed cyber and electronic warfare in field exercises, Work said, but the simulated enemy forces tend to shut down US networks so effectively that nothing works and nobody else gets any training done. “Whenever we have an exercise and the red force really destroys our command and control, we stop the exercise,” Work said, instead of trying to figure out how to keep fighting when your command post gives you nothing but blank screens and radio static. The Chinese call this “system destruction warfare,” Work said: They plan to “attack the American battle network at all levels, relentlessly, and they practice it all the time.”

So how do you fix such glaring problems? The Air Force asked RAND to come up with a plan two years ago, and, surprisingly, Ochmanek said, “we found it impossible to spend more than \$8 billion a year.” That’s \$8 billion for the Air Force. Triple that to cover for the Army and the Navy Department (which includes the US Marines), Ochmanek said, and you get \$24 billion. Yes, these are very broad strokes, but that’s only 3.3 percent of the \$750 billion defense budget President Trump will propose for the 2020 fiscal year. Work was less worried about the near-term risk — he thinks China and Russia aren’t eager to try anything right now — and more about what happens 10 to 20 years from now. But, he said, “sure, \$24 billion a year for the next five years would be a good expenditure.

So what does that \$24 billion buy? To start with, missiles. Lots and lots of missiles. The US and its allies notoriously keep underestimating how many smart weapons they’ll need for a shooting war, then start to run out against enemies as weak as the Serbs or Libyans. Against a Russia or China, which can match not only our technology but our mass, you run out of munitions fast. Specifically, you want lots of long-range offensive missiles. Ochmanek mentioned Army artillery brigades, which use MLRS missile launchers, and the Air Force’s JAGM-ER smart bomb, while Work touted the Navy’s LRASM ship-killer. You also want lots of defensive missiles to shoot down the enemy’s offensive missiles, aircraft, and drones. One short-term fix there is the Army’s new Maneuver Short-Range Air Defense (MSHORAD) batteries, Stinger missiles mounted on 8×8 Stryker armored vehicles. In the longer term, lasers, railguns, and high-powered microwaves could shoot down incoming missiles much less expensively.

The other big fix: toughening up our command, control, and communications networks. That includes everything from jam-proof datalinks to electronic warfare gear on combat aircraft and warships. The services are fond of cutting corners on electronics to get as many planes in the air and hulls in the water as possible, Ochmanek said, but a multi-billion dollar ship that dies for lack of a million-dollar decoy is a lousy return on investment. In the longer run, Work added, you want to invest heavily in artificial intelligence: not killer robots, he said, but “loyal wingmen” drones to support manned aircraft and big-data crunchers to help humans analyze intelligence and plan.

Of course, you have to find the money for new stuff somewhere, which means either raising the defense budget even further — unlikely — or cutting existing programs. Ochmanek was unsurprisingly shy about specifics, saying only that the services could certainly squeeze out \$8 billion each for new technologies. Work was a little harder-edged. He said cutting a carrier and two amphibious ships over the forthcoming 2020-2024 budget “seems right to me.” He argued the US Army has way too many brigade combat teams — tanks and infantry — and way too little missile defense to protect them. And he bemoaned reports the US Air Force will retire the B-1 bomber, one of its few long-range strike aircraft: If the Air Force doesn’t want them, he said, give them to the Navy, revive the old VPB “Patrol Bomber” squadrons, and load them with Long-Range Anti-Ship Missiles to sink the Chinese navy.

Pentagon leaders should challenge the armed services to solve very hard, very specific problems, Work said: Sink 350 Chinese navy and coast guard vessels in the first 72 hours of a war, or destroy 2,400 Russian armored vehicles. Whoever has the best solution gets the most money. Those are hardly easy goals, Work said, but they’re also doable with technology now in development. The immediate problems could be fixed with technology already in production, Ochmanek said. For \$24 billion, “I can buy the whole kit,” he said. “It’s all mature technologies and it would scare the crap out of adversaries, in a good way.” [Source: Breaking Defense | Sydney J. Freedberg Jr. | March 07, 2019 ++]

PFAS Toxic Exposure Update 03 ► Evidence Suggests DoD’s Awareness Since 1980s

The Pentagon’s decision not to take action to protect military families from decades of exposure to cancer-causing chemicals until a 2016 Environmental Protection Agency warning did not sit well with members of Congress, who questioned Defense Department leadership on the issue at a hearing 6 MAR. “To put it charitably: it is unclear why DoD feels justified in passing the buck to the EPA,” said House Oversight and Reform subcommittee on the environment chairman Rep. Harley Rouda (D-CA) “Particularly in light of evidence suggesting DoD’s awareness of the toxicity of the chemicals since the early 1980s.”

Rouda and ranking member James Comer R-KY) heard testimony from EPA Assistant Administrator for Water Dave Ross and Maureen Sullivan, deputy assistant secretary of defense for environment. The perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl chemical compounds in question are found in everyday household items, but they were concentrated in firefighting foam the military used until just last year. But at least one other DoD installation, Fort Carson in Colorado, use of the chemicals was stopped in 1991 after an Army Corps of Engineers study looked at harmful chemicals at its installations. “Aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) is considered a hazardous material in a number of states,” the 1991 study, which was obtained by Military Times, read. “Firefighting operations that use AFFF must be replaced with nonhazardous substitutes.”

DoD has previously said that until the 2016 guidance from EPA on recommended exposure level limits, it did not know the severity of its exposure problem, which spurred it voluntarily providing filters and shutting some water sources, EPA’s guidance is not enforceable. In March 2018, at the direction of Congress, DoD published its first-ever assessment of each contaminated base where the compounds had been found in either on-base or off-base water sources. More than 126 locations were identified — some with exposure levels hundreds of times greater than EPA’s 70 parts per trillion recommendation.

Since the release of the list, scores of families and veterans have contacted Military Times with stories of families or neighbors with cancer, or children with birth defects. Hope Martindell Grosse, who attended Wednesday’s hearing, is one of them. Grosse grew up in a neighborhood that was across the street from the firefighting training center at Naval Air Warfare Center Warminster, in Pennsylvania. Her family and others in the neighborhood relied on their private well for water. Now, not only that well, but a public water well installed in the late 1990s is shut down — with remaining levels of PFAS at more than 1200 parts per trillion, Her father died in 1990 at age 52, from cancer. Three months later, at age 25, Grosse was diagnosed with cancer as well. She has successfully fought it since, but “anytime

something is wrong with my health — just about anything — I am immediately filled with a crippling fear that it is cancer,” she said in testimony submitted for the hearing. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Tara Copp | March 6, 2019 ++]

PFAS Toxic Exposure Update 04 ► Cleaning Up/Protecting U.S. Water Will Cost Billions

Cleaning up and protecting U.S. drinking water from a class of toxic chemicals used in many household items could cost in the tens of billions of dollars nationally, including \$2 billion for the Department of Defense alone, witnesses testified 6 MAR before a House panel urging the federal government to move more quickly on the cleanup. Rep. Harley Rouda, the California Democrat chairing the House Oversight and Reform environment subcommittee, told reporters after the hearing “it’s clear” the high costs were slowing any federal efforts to regulate and clean up the toxic chemicals, which are found in a range of goods, including nonstick pans, stain-resistant clothing, dental floss and food containers. They also are in firefighting foam used by the military to battle jet-fuel fires.

The compounds, called perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS, have been used for decades. Water sampling shows the contaminant — also called the “forever chemicals” because they will take thousands of years to break down — has seeped into many public water systems in the United States and globally, including around military bases and industries. Environmental Protection Agency chief Andrew Wheeler told reporters 6 MAR that the agency was moving toward establishing federal limits for some kinds of the contaminant in drinking water. States and local communities say they need a mandatory EPA limit to start full-scale cleanup and protections against the compounds. “There’s no indication of when the process might actually be complete,” Rouda told EPA and Defense Department officials testifying before the panel. In the meantime, military officials “are passing the buck to the EPA” rather than conducting a national cleanup of bases that have high levels of PFAS contamination, he said.

Democratic Rep. Dan Kildee of Michigan said veterans and families are increasingly fearful of PFAS contamination around bases. “The Defense Department in particular has so far failed to act with the required urgency to address this growing problem,” he said. The Trump administration has been under increasing pressure to start regulating the toxic class of compounds since last year, when a draft federal toxicology report found some kinds of the widely used chemicals were harmful at levels much lower than the federal government’s current advisory level. The federal Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry cited studies linking PFAS contamination to liver problems, low birth weight, some cancers and other health issues.

Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick, a Pennsylvania Republican and co-chairman of a congressional PFAS task force, called the forever compound “one of the most widespread public health crises” that the U.S. faces. But Fitzpatrick cautioned against setting any PFAS limits too low, saying it would cost tens of billions of dollars to bring water systems into compliance. David Ross, assistant administrator of the EPA’s water office, defended the agency’s decision to continue researching the compounds ahead of any formal regulatory moves. “The science to fully understand these chemicals ... is not yet as robust as it needs to be,” Ross said. He said resolving PFAS contamination was a national priority for the agency.

Communities and states say the EPA has done little concrete to start tackling the problem. In a tweet 6 MAR, Mayor Rob Allen of Hoosick Falls, New York, where industrial releases are blamed for dangerously high PFAS levels in water, evoked the compound’s nickname in saying “it will take ‘forever’ for EPA to act on its responsibility to regulate them.” The Defense Department has identified 401 military sites where PFAS was used, and found 24 U.S. military drinking-water systems around the world with PFAS levels above the current U.S. advisory level, Maureen Sullivan, the deputy assistant secretary of defense, told lawmakers. U.S. military officials at those bases were providing bottled water or other alternate water supplies, Sullivan said. Cleaning up bases contaminated by two of the best-studied versions of PFAS would cost about \$2 billion, she said.

Kildee, whose state of Michigan has been one of the most active in testing for PFAS and tackling contamination, said the Pentagon had yet to request the money for that cleanup. Some states and local communities hosting military bases accuse the military of using the lack of any mandatory federal limit for PFAS in drinking water as a reason to deny Pentagon responsibility for cleanup. New Mexico sued the Air Force on 6 MAR over PFAS contamination around two bases in that state. Sullivan said the Pentagon currently is discouraging the use of firefighting foam containing PFAS in training exercises on military bases. The Defense Department has yet to find a commercially available foam without PFAS that's effective enough in fighting aircraft fires, however, Sullivan said. [Source: The Associated Press | Ellen Knickmeyer | March 6, 2019 ++]

Kirtland AFB NM ► Jet Fuel Seeping Into The Ground For Decades

The U.S. Air Force has excavated thousands of tons of soil and treated millions of gallons of water contaminated by jet fuel at a base bordering New Mexico's largest city, but state regulators say the military still has more cleanup to do. The New Mexico environment department, which monitors the cleanup's progress, late last week released a draft of this year's strategic plan for addressing the contamination at Kirtland Air Force Base. The fuel leak — believed to have been seeping into the ground for decades — was detected in 1999. The greatest concern was potential contamination of drinking water wells in Albuquerque neighborhoods that border the base.

While state and military officials say drinking wells are now protected, community watchdogs argue that there are gaps in the data and are pushing for an independent review of the years long, multimillion-dollar cleanup project. "Much information has been administratively kept secret from the public to paint over serious technical problems about the jet fuel spill investigation and remediation efforts," said Dave McCoy, whose group Citizen Action New Mexico has sued over the years to try to get documents released on the spill and cleanup. McCoy and others said they have asked the state to establish a citizen advisory board and include details on the project's budget and spending for the next year. The state's draft does not address any spending, but officials have scheduled three public meetings this year and are planning to put out a more comprehensive proposal on public involvement this summer.

Environment Secretary James Kenney, who took over the state agency this year, said the U.S. Air Force has made strides in cleaning up the fuel spill but that the work is far from complete. He said the contamination remains a top priority for his office and that he's committed to holding the Air Force accountable. To keep the contamination from spreading beyond the boundaries of the base and toward drinking water wells, the Air Force installed a pump-and-treat system in 2015. So far, more than 585 million gallons (2.2 million liters) of have been extracted, treated to less-than-detectable concentrations of contamination and either used to water the Kirtland golf course or injected back into the aquifer. More than 4,200 tons (3,810 metric tons) of contaminated soil also was removed and vapor was pulled from the soil for over a decade.

The leaking fuel contained the additive ethylene dibromide, or EDB. While the effects on people haven't been well-documented, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency says animal studies indicate that chronic exposure may result in toxic effects to the liver, kidney and reproductive organs. Kenney said data gathered last year indicates the groundwater extraction and treatment is having a positive effect on the contamination. Under the draft plan, that work would continue along with more modeling and monitoring. The state also is requiring the Air Force to submit more data related to the soil vapor. The plan for the cleanup at Kirtland was released just days after New Mexico announced it was suing the Air Force over groundwater contamination at two other bases in the state. In that case, the contamination — linked to a class of chemicals known as perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS — resulted from past firefighting activities at Cannon and Holloman air bases. [Source: The Associated Press | Susan Montoya Bryan | March 11, 2019 ++]

Commissary/Exchange Merger Update 02 ► DoD Pushes Ahead to Merge

Defense officials are a step closer to merging the three military exchange systems and the commissary system into one “defense resale enterprise.” In a memo signed 1 MAR, Lisa Hershman, acting DoD chief management officer, approved the business case for the merger. The merger will require the approval of Congress and nothing is yet final. Current law requires the Defense Department to operate separate commissary and exchange systems, so that law would have to be repealed. Another law prohibits DoD from using any taxpayer dollars to implement consolidation of resale entities until 1 OCT, as lawmakers evaluate the proposal.

In the meantime, a task force will continue with planning efforts for a consolidated organization, stated Hershman, who is in the position that ranks third in the DoD hierarchy. The consolidation of the commissary and exchange systems also must be approved by acting deputy secretary of defense David Norquist. A source said he is expected to approve the proposal within days; a report and legislative proposals will then be sent to Congress. Officials have said that the first step would be to merge the exchange systems — Army and Air Force Exchange Service (AAFES), Navy Exchange Service Command and Marine Corps Exchange. It’s not clear whether officials have the authority to do that without legislation, but regardless, they can’t spend taxpayer dollars on any consolidation implementation before 1 OCT.

The draft report from the task force, which analyzed the business case for consolidation, said its analysis supports merging the above-store functions of the exchange systems entirely, along with the above-store functions of the Defense Commissary Agency, into a single organization, while keeping specific grocery functions separate. Hershman’s memo stated she will recommend that the Marine Corps Morale, Welfare and Recreation and Warfighter and Family Services operations under the umbrella of Marine Corps Community Services, or MCCA, also be included in the consolidation because of their operational model, which includes the Marine Corps Exchange. Marine Corps officials have previously pushed back against proposals to put MCCA under the control of the proposed new defense agency, citing these efforts are “viewed as an intrusion to Title X authorities.” The MCCA organization “provides the commandant of the Marine Corps an integrated system of community services to help care [for], equip, and train our warfighters,” officials said in a previous position paper.

The costs of implementing the consolidation is estimated to be \$457 million to \$570 million over five years, according to the business case analysis from the defense task force, completed in November. The task force stated DoD could “harvest significant savings” by consolidating commissary and exchange systems into one entity, and contends the benefits would “far exceed the costs.” Hershman stated she will also recommend that the deputy secretary authorize a new defense agency or expand the mission of an existing DoD component to assume jurisdiction over the defense resale enterprise. She’ll recommend that the new agency be placed under the authority of the Under Secretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness.

The task force report indicated that regardless of consolidation, the Defense Commissary Agency needs a full-time director, so that hiring process will begin, Hershman stated. While day-to-day operations of the separate resale organizations will continue, resale leaders must go to the task force director for approval before taking any actions that “could be inconsistent with or hamper consolidation,” Hershman wrote. “The department’s intent is to improve community services for our service members and their families, improve support to commanders, and fulfill its fiduciary responsibility” concerning taxpayer and non-appropriated, or MWR, funds, Hershman wrote. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | March 6, 2019 ++]

DoD Security ► Facial Recognition

Facial recognition using artificial intelligence may be coming to the gates at Air Force bases in the near future. The idea was put forth in January as part of an innovation campaign the Air Force started to crowd-source ideas from its airmen. Facial recognition could be of benefit to base defenders who often must manually sift through photos and video feeds of interlopers near military installations, according to Lt. Col. Carlos Hernandez, who submitted the proposal. “We had a perceived uptick in gate runners at different bases worldwide,” said Hernandez, a section commander at the Air Force Security Forces Center at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland, in a news release. “I just kept thinking about our processes and the approach we’re taking in responding to these types of situations. As such, I started to wonder if we could approach the problem from a proactive lens rather than reactive.”

Facial recognition works by identifying and sometimes verifying a person from a digital image or a video frame by matching facial features against a database of images. In this way, the technology works similar to other biometric scans like fingerprinting. Facial recognition is sometimes seen as non-invasive for travelers. In the case of people wandering around remote air bases, it could also identify individuals who were never met and questioned by security forces on the ground. However, it’s not without its ethical complications, not the least of which is how the technology encourages the facial scanning of people suspected of no crime and entering that information into a database.

The idea was chosen as one of eight finalists to be presented at the “Innovation Rodeo,” an Air Force event, sponsored in part by AFWERX, beginning 8 MAR in San Antonio. “We want to transition those ideas into the innovation ecosystem and AFWERX challenges so we can get those ideas into prototype and then the implementation phase,” Marc Vandever, the Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center’s chief innovation officer, said in the release. The facial recognition proposal would be meshed with what private industry has already developed and fielded to border control points and international airports.

Army Research Lab scientists have also developed technology that pairs artificial intelligence and machine learning to flesh out a face from the thermal image seen on many weapons sighting systems. Col. Jeffrey York, 31st Mission Support Group commander at Aviano Air Base, Italy, also noticed the need for facial recognition at U.S. air bases after traveling abroad and noticing an increase in the use of the technology at points of entry in the U.S. and several European countries. “When we were looking for ideas to improve access control and assist defenders, the idea of leveraging the technology of facial recognition used for border security seemed to be a natural area to explore,” York said in the release, noting that it was a collaborative effort. “Aviano [Air Base],” he added, “was facing the same challenges and concerns as other bases with respect to base security and the risk of unauthorized access.”

The U.S. already has facial recognition scanning in effect, mostly using driver’s licenses and ID photos. Roughly 50 percent of American adults are already in a law enforcement facial recognition network, according to a report by Georgetown University researchers entitled “Perpetual Lineup.” “At least 26 states (and potentially as many as 30) allow law enforcement to run or request searches against their databases of driver’s license and ID photos,” the report reads. The technology has the potential to drastically reduce the workload of security forces airmen defending U.S. air bases, but it could also provide complications with the local communities those troops live among if it’s used along base fence-lines and not restricted to a gate.

At many Air Force installations, a popular activity is watching takeoffs and landings around the runways. The idea of being subject to facial scans during leisure activities near bases may be unappealing to some aircraft watchers. Watching the long, snaking fence-lines of air bases is necessary, however, as exemplified by the arrest of a Chinese student who pleaded guilty to illegally taking photos of a U.S. military air installation in the Florida Keys. The student was sentenced to a year in federal prison after he walked into a restricted zone in September and took photos of sensitive areas and military hardware surrounding the Key West Naval Air Station. [Source: AirForceTimes | Kyle Rempfer | March 1, 2019 ++]

[Afghan Peace Talks Update 02](#) ► [New Pentagon Plan](#)

All American troops would withdraw from Afghanistan over the next three to five years under a new Pentagon plan being offered in peace negotiations that could lead to a government in Kabul that shares power with the Taliban. The rest of the international force in Afghanistan would leave at the same time, after having mixed success in stabilizing the country since 2001. The plan is being discussed with European allies and was devised, in part, to appeal to President Trump, who has long expressed skepticism of enduring American roles in wars overseas. The plan calls for cutting by half, in coming months, the 14,000 American troops currently in Afghanistan. It would task the 8,600 European and other international troops with training the Afghan military — a focus of the NATO mission for more than a decade — and largely shift American operations to counterterrorism strikes.

Various elements of the plan were shared with The New York Times by more than a half-dozen current and former American and European officials. It intends to help talks with the Taliban that are being led by Zalmay Khalilzad, the American special envoy. So far, the plan has been met with broad acceptance in Washington and NATO headquarters in Brussels. But American officials warned that Mr. Trump could upend the new plan at any time. And officials said that even if the peace talks broke down, the United States would go forward with shifting to counterterrorism missions from training Afghan forces. Until the final withdrawal, several thousand American forces would continue strikes against Al Qaeda and the Islamic State, including on partnered raids with Afghan commandos. The counterterrorism missions, and the military's dwindling presence, are also critical to allowing the C.I.A. to operate in Afghanistan.



Taliban officials in Moscow (left) and Afghan Army officers at a graduation ceremony (right) in Kabul this month. Taliban negotiators oppose the proposal for American counterterrorism troops to remain in Afghanistan for up to five years. Scaling back the training mission could leave the Afghan military at risk of fracturing.

Lt. Col. Koné Faulkner, a Pentagon spokesman, said no decisions had been made as peace talks continued. The Defense Department “is considering all options of force numbers and disposition,” Colonel Faulkner said. But European allies said they had been consulted about the proposal — a stark contrast to Mr. Trump’s surprise announcement in December to withdraw American forces from Syria. “The Europeans are perfectly capable of conducting the training mission,” James Stavridis, a retired American admiral and former top NATO commander who is now with the Carlyle Group private equity firm. “It is a smart division of labor to have the United States shift the bulk of its effort toward the Special Forces mission and having the Europeans do the training mission.” Mr. Stavridis said the two missions would be coordinated, including American logistical support and military backup for the European troops.

On 25 FEB, American diplomats met with the Taliban in Qatar in the highest-level negotiations yet, including the attendance of Gen. Austin S. Miller, the commander of the international mission in Afghanistan. The negotiations paused on Wednesday and are set to resume on Saturday. The two sides have sought to flesh out a framework agreement, decided in principle last month, for the full withdrawal of foreign troops and assurances by the Taliban to prevent terrorist groups that seek to attack the United States from using Afghan territory as a safe haven. The Afghan government has not been a part of the negotiations because of Taliban reluctance to talk to President Ashraf Ghani or his envoys.

The prospect of an American military withdrawal has raised fears across the world that it could lead to the fall of the Western-backed government in Kabul and a return to the extremist rule of the Taliban. Before it was ousted in 2001, the Taliban was accused of human rights abuses, prohibited girls from attending school and imposed harsh penalties on accused heretics. American officials have said any deal to withdraw international forces from Afghanistan must involve a cease-fire agreement and the inclusion of government leaders in the negotiations. In a speech on 28 FEB in Kabul, Mr. Ghani warned Afghan security forces to be prepared for possible Taliban attacks ahead of any peace deal. “Peace is not easy; it needs courage and bilateral honor,” Mr. Ghani said.

European officials have previously said they would rapidly pull their forces from Afghanistan if the American military was shorn too small to provide logistic support. American officials said enough troops would remain — even if they were cut to 7,000 — to continue the European training mission as outlined in the Pentagon’s plan. In some respects, the focus on counterterrorism missions in Afghanistan is an endorsement of a plan by Vice President Joseph R. Biden Jr. as the Obama administration debated its own war strategy in 2009. Mr. Biden’s proposal was ultimately rejected in favor of a counterinsurgency plan, which called for training local forces and a surge of American troops, as pushed by Gen. Stanley A. McChrystal, who was then the top commander in Afghanistan.

Taliban negotiators deeply oppose the proposal for American counterterrorism troops to remain in Afghanistan for up to five years, and officials were unsure if a shorter period of time would be accepted by the militants’ rank and file. Scaling back the training mission could leave the beleaguered Afghan military not just vulnerable to attacks, but at risk of fracturing. In January, Mr. Ghani announced that more than 45,000 Afghan troops had died since 2014; Pentagon officials have called their casualty numbers unsustainable. Despite pouring billions of dollars into the Afghan military for more than a decade, Pentagon audits show that a renewed effort to modernize the fledgling Afghan Air Force will most likely not be self-sufficient until the mid-2030s.

Speaking to lawmakers in December, the incoming commander for American troops in the Middle East, Lt. Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., said that Afghan forces could not sustain themselves without American and NATO support. “I do know that today it would be very difficult for them to survive without our and our coalition partners’ assistance,” he said. Current and former Defense Department officials said limiting American assistance to the Afghan military would require a delicate balance of providing just enough material support for the NATO training mission, known as Rolute Support, to ensure that Western allies remain invested without sacrificing counterterrorism operations. European allies cited General Miller as describing the reduced troop levels as about “doing more with less.”

One former Defense Department official with knowledge of the talks said more American support for the training mission could be based outside Afghanistan and flown in when needed. European countries have relied heavily on American bases, supplies and other logistics throughout the war. One German official, speaking on the condition of anonymity because of the sensitivity of the talks, underscored how reliant Berlin’s 1,300 troops are on medical evacuation aircraft and air support provided by the United States. British forces may take part in counterterrorism operations, but those missions are expected to nearly completely be under American command.

Laurel Miller, who was a top State Department official working on Afghanistan and Pakistan policy during the Obama and Trump administrations, said it was risky to change the military mission in Afghanistan without a peace plan in place. “The idea of scaling down to a small CT-only mission has long been discussed in the U.S. government,” she said. But, she said, “if you stop backing up Afghan forces in their main fight, you can’t very well keep working on your narrower priorities in isolation with Afghanistan falling apart around you.” It is also possible that international funding support for the Afghan government could end up going to the Taliban under a power-sharing agreement. But American and European officials called it critically necessary to continue funding Afghan security forces.

The track record for American-supported governments after peace treaties or troop withdrawals is shaky at best. American-trained South Vietnamese fell to Communist forces two years after the United States withdrew from the Vietnam War in 1973. Large portions of the Iraqi Army collapsed in the face of an Islamic State offensive in 2014, just three years after the withdrawal of the American military and its trainers, necessitating a return to Iraq by international forces.

Some officials believe continued funding for the Afghan military is more important than an enduring international troop presence for the survival of Afghanistan's government. "As long as we continue to provide funding to the Afghan security forces in the field, I think the security forces would be very capable of keeping order in the country, particularly in a scenario where the Taliban has come in from the cold," Mr. Stavridis said. [Source: The New York Times | Thomas Gibbons-Neff & Julian E. Barnes | February 28, 2019 ++]

U.S. Space Command ► Legislative Hurdle Delays Stand-Up

Pentagon leaders wanted U.S. Space Command, a new joint combatant command for space warfighting, up and running by the end of 2018. Two full months into 2019, Congress has yet to repeal a law that is preventing the command's creation, according to defense and Trump administration officials. Here's the problem. In the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act, lawmakers ordered U.S. Space Command to be subordinate to U.S. Strategic Command, the same way U.S. Cyber Command started out under STRATCOM. But the administration wants Space Command to begin its organizational life as an independent unified command.

"The President has sent a legislative proposal...to the Congress to eliminate that requirement and allow for the moving forward with the unified combatant command," a senior administration official said last week. On 8 JAN, Acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan asked for a "prompt repeal" of the law in a letter to Sen. James Inhofe, R-Okla., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee. "Building on the lessons learned from the establishment of U.S. Cyber Command, the department determined that establishing a unified command for space, rather than a subordinate command, is a necessary step to address serious and growing national security challenges in the space domain," Shanahan wrote. "A unified command will make our efforts in space more effective and focused, and will streamline command and control for time-sensitive operations."

Even though the President does not need Congress' approval to create Space Command, the NDAA language puts them in a tight spot, a defense official said. The Pentagon must still take a number of steps before it stands up the military's 11th combatant command. Among them, President Trump must nominate, and the Senate must confirm, a four-star general or admiral to lead the command. Right now, Pentagon officials are anticipating a confirmation hearing for the new commander in April and the command's formal establishment in May, one defense official said. A senior administration official said the White House anticipates sending Congress a nomination "soon."

Last August, Pentagon officials said they wanted U.S. Space Command up and running by the end of 2018. The creation of a new combatant command for space has been widely championed by Pentagon leaders, lawmakers and outside observers, since the idea was first floated in a Defense Department report to Congress a year ago. Air Force Gen. John Hyten, the STRATCOM commander, currently oversees military operations in space, in addition to the U.S. military's nuclear weapons. "I care desperately about space," Hyten said 26 FEB at a Senate Armed Services Committee hearing. "But as the commander of Strategic Command, space will never be my No. 1 priority." Hyten, who previously served as commander of Air Force Space Command, said space ranks third on his priority list, behind operating and modernizing nuclear weapons and nuclear command and control. "The importance of space in today's day and age, that's not good to have that priority," he said. "We need a command that focuses on that. The commander of that command...must have a focus on space 24 hours a day, seven days a week and that's why we're standing up a Space Command."

The location of the new command is still up in the air as well. Initially it will be located at Air Force Space Command at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado, but local politicians have championed other locations, including Huntsville, Alabama, home of the U.S. Army's Space and Missile Defense Command; and the Florida Space Coast, home of NASA's Kennedy Space Center and the Air Force's rocket-launching 45th Space Wing. "There will be an official [Defense Department] basing study that will be done to determine the final location of U.S. Space Command,"

the senior administration official said. Even after the new command is established, Hyten expects U.S. Strategic Command to continue space duties for a while. “Wherever it ends up, we’re going to continue to support that because we don’t know the final destination of where that’s going to be,” Hyten said. “We can’t break the mission because we have threats to deal with today.” [Source: DefenseOne | Marcus Weisgerber | February 28, 2019 ++]

U.S. Space Force Update 12 ► **Five-year timeline | \$2B Cost & 15,000 Personnel**

The Trump administration plans to spend \$2 billion in new funding over a five-year period to create its Space Force, during which roughly 15,000 space-related personnel will transfer from existing roles. Officials unveiled those details and the Pentagon’s legislative proposal for the new military service 1 MAR. Defense leaders sent the formal proposal to Congress 27 FEB after President Donald Trump ordered its creation in June. While many of the details have yet to be determined — will the service have a bootcamp (unclear), its own service academy (no), their own uniforms (possible) or recruitment centers (probably) — a Space Force would share resources such as an acquisition chief, general counsel and chaplains with the broader Department of the Air Force.

“Space is not just a support function. It’s a war-fighting domain. We have to be prepared to fight, deter and win,” a senior defense official said 1 MAR. “With these changes, we need to adapt.” “This is a good path forward, which allows us to deliver capabilities, faster, better, and stay ahead of the adversaries,” another defense official said. Details of the legislative proposal were first reported by Defense News in December but questions about personnel size and budget figures have remained open questions. In September, Secretary of the Air Force Heather Wilson floated a cost of \$13 billion for the Space Force, while an independent estimate from the Center for Strategic and International Studies put the additional costs at around \$550 million per year.

However, senior department officials said 1 MAR that the Pentagon plans to spend about \$72 million on setting up a headquarters for the service with about 200 staffers in fiscal 2020. As the force ramps up, those costs could rise to about \$500 million per year. Those costs are in addition to the roughly \$10 billion the Department of Defense already spends on unclassified space programs. An executive summary of the legislative proposal stresses that the \$2 billion represents “less than 0.05 percent” of the Pentagon’s expected budget during that five-year period, and adds that “more than 95 percent of the Space Force annual budget is estimated to consist of resources that will have been transferred from existing DoD budget accounts.”

“Additional resources will be dedicated to building out the Space Force headquarters and establishing and maintaining new support elements such as education, training, doctrine, and personnel management centers,” the summary continues. “Once the Space Force is fully established, these additive costs are estimated to be \$500 million annually, which would represent approximately 0.07 percent of the annual DoD budget.” In a statement released by the Pentagon, acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan called the legislative proposal a “historic moment for our nation” and “a strategic step towards securing America’s vital national interests in space.” Wilson added that “We will continue to be the best in the world at space and establishing a dedicated space force strengthens our ability to deter, compete and win in space.”

The legislative proposal offers up a rolling plan between FY20 and FY24 for how to phase in the new service. In FY20, DoD would create the initial Space Force headquarters. An undersecretary of the Air Force for space (who must be nominated and confirmed by the Senate) and the service’s Chief of Staff, a four-star position, would lead the organization. While reporting to the Secretary of the Air Force, the Chief of Staff will also serve on the Joint Chiefs, like how the commandant of the Marine Corps operates. Such a move would create “institutional advocacy and priority for that domain and it wouldn’t be subject to personalities,” a senior defense official said. Those initial Space Force personnel will be a “mix of military and civilian personnel with key military leadership positions filled by individuals from each Military Department,” per the summary. “Some personnel will be transferred from the existing Military

Services, some new personnel would be hired, and some personnel would be temporarily detailed to the Space Force to provide surge capacity and expertise during stand-up.”

In FY21 and FY22, the plan calls for the majority of missions transferred from existing space-related offices to the new service. “This will include relevant space operational elements, acquisition elements, training and education elements, and other identified space-specific entities,” per the summary. For example, the Navy’s Mobile User Objective System, a narrowband communications satellite system, or satellites in use by the Missile Defense Agency would likely shift to the Space Force, space officials said. The Secretary of Defense would sign off on those moves. In the following two years, FY23 and FY24, new units or organizations could be stood up, including potentially “activating additional operational, acquisition, and/or training units, as necessary to meet new mission demands and to establish organic space-specific capacity for doctrine development, intelligence analysis, education, etc.”

All told, roughly 15,000 “highly technical” personnel from existing offices will move under the aegis of the Space Force by the end of FY24. Those individuals may be transferred both voluntarily and involuntarily, and will move with the grade, rank, duty, and pay status they had previously. While in the past decade Air Force Space Command has been described as including as many as 40,000 employees, not all of those workers were strictly focused on space and may have provided support functions. Some new general officer roles will be required to fill out the Space Force, which requires Congressional authorization. Just how many is unclear, with the proposal promising a report to Congress on that issue sometime in FY20.

One challenge in setting up the Space Force during this period will be collaboration with the intelligence community, whose National Reconnaissance Office (NRO) will remain independent of the new military branch. The new service, along with its adjacent U.S. Space Combatant Command, will “place greater demand on the IC to better understand space threats and to provide intelligence support to planning, operations, and acquisition,” per the summary. “The Space Force, in collaboration with the IC, will identify, prioritize, and advocate for the intelligence capabilities, personnel, training, and organizational constructs necessary to provide intelligence support to DoD and IC space missions. Such intelligence support could include staffing a joint intelligence operations center; improving foundational military intelligence, including scientific and technical intelligence; and developing tasking, collection, processing, exploitation, and dissemination processes and capabilities.”

In addition, the Space Force will assume functions currently executed by Air Force Space Command elements within the NRO. Another uncertainty for the service is how the guard and reserve components will work. The legislative proposal essentially punts on that question, pledging a more detailed proposal for FY21. [Source: DefenseNews | Mike Gruss & Aaron Mehta | March 1, 2019 ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, & Abuse ► Reported 01 thru 15 Mar 2019

El Paso, TX -- A former and current explosive ordnance disposal specialist are each under indictment after they attempted to sell weapons to federal agents in November, according to court documents. Former Sgt. **Tyler Sumlin** and Sgt. 1st Class **Jason Jarvis**, of 52nd Ordnance Group, face conspiracy, possession and transportation charges stemming from their illegal business selling firearms, military equipment, C-4 explosives and detonators, according to a criminal complaint filed 15 NOV in Texas.

The day before, according to the document, the two met up with undercover Homeland Security Department investigators at an El Paso truck stop to make a deal to sell them some weapons that would be exported to Mexico. Jarvis rented a Chevy Tahoe in North Carolina, filled it with contraband and then drove to Inverness, Florida, to pick Sumlin up, according to a 12 DEC indictment. “Before traveling to El Paso, Sumlin and Jarvis met at an Airbnb in Florida and prepared the firearms for delivery and wipe the firearms to remove their fingerprints,” the complaint said.

Sumlin served in the Army from 2007 to 2017, an Army spokeswoman confirmed to Army Times on 1 MAR. Jarvis first enlisted in the Army Reserve in 1997, before coming on active duty in 2000.

“Due to the ongoing legal proceedings, it would be inappropriate to comment further on the case at this time. Please direct questions about the case to Homeland Security,” Cathy Vandermaarel said in a statement. Their charges include: Conspiracy to smuggle goods from the U.S.; conspiracy to deal firearms without a license; conspiracy to transfer a firearm out of state; conspiracy to transport explosive materials without a license; conspiracy possession of unregistered firearms; attempt to smuggle goods from the U.S.; having an unlicensed firearms business and transporting explosive material without a license, as well as separate counts for possessing unregistered silencers; a short-barreled rifle and a destructive device. The two pleaded not guilty in late December and are scheduled back in court on 17 APR, according to the West Texas U.S. district court. [Source: ArmyTimes | Meghann Myers Leo Shane III | March 4, 2019 ++]

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Norfolk, VA -- An ex-sailor was sentenced to two-and-a-half years in federal prison this week after prosecutors say he trafficked at least 60 firearms while in uniform, including several guns purchased at military exchanges. Although he lacked a federal firearms license, **Julio Fernando Pino**, 26, used his military discount to buy and resell guns from 2015 to 2017 while assigned to the aircraft carrier George H.W. Bush, according to the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Eastern District of Virginia and Navy records. Pino was indicted in May 2017 and arrested the following August while his Norfolk-based ship was in Jacksonville, Florida, according to a court filing submitted by his defense attorney, Keith Kimball.

Pino pleaded to one count of unlawful interstate transfer of a firearm on 22 OCT and exited the Navy as an aviation ordnanceman third class in December, according to court and military records. A sentencing memo penned by his attorney last month indicated that Pino received a general discharge under honorable conditions and that his wife remains a machinist’s mate in Navy. While he was a sailor, however, Pino resold at least 23 firearms — usually handguns — for profit by posting them on sites such as armslist.com and VAguntrader.com, according to court records. “The defendant bought and re-sold firearms so many times that, unsurprisingly, he sold some firearms to prohibited people, including a juvenile, a drug-addicted armed robber, a drug dealer trafficking in stolen firearms, and many others,” prosecutors wrote in pre-sentencing documents.

A Glock 23 pistol trafficked by Pino was “traced back to a string of armed robberies,” prosecutors wrote, but police uncovered no evidence the sailor knew the firearm was connected to those felonies. Another Glock that Pino moved was found in a home during a search by law enforcement after it had been brandished to threaten another person, authorities said. Pino got around gun laws by lying on forms he filled out at military exchanges when purchasing firearms, prosecutors wrote, and also lied to law enforcement. When agents at the U.S. Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives warned him to knock off the sales, “he continued to sell guns without a license, even after telling them that he would stop,” prosecutors wrote. “The defendant committed very serious crimes, enabled some very bad people to obtain guns, and put the community at serious risk.”

In his filings, defense attorney Kimball wrote that Pino “tried to be careful” about his clients but now realizes he “exercised extremely poor judgement by unlawfully selling firearms.” Kimball added that Pino made very little money on the illicit sales, usually between \$50 to \$100 on each transaction. “Whatever the total ‘profit,’ Mr. Pino more than recognizes that it was far from worth it. He is now a convicted felon and lost his Navy career,” Kimball wrote. At one point in 2015, Pino traveled to Maryland to meet a 16-year-old who contacted him through an online firearms marketplace, authorities said. Although Pino asked to see the teen’s identification, he was shown a credit card with another person’s name on it, the indictment states. “The defendant accepted the credit card, took a picture of (the teen) holding up the card, and sold the brand new, unused firearm for \$600,” prosecutors wrote.

In his legal filings, Pino’s attorney argued that his client been a good sailor who “received positive remarks from his supervisors and command representatives.” “Mr. Pino had planned to make the Navy a career but the instant offense ended his plan,” Kimball continued. “This prosecution has naturally caused some problems in Mr. Pino’s marriage

which led to a separation. They recently reconciled but the strain from this prosecution and Mr. Pino's potential incarceration remains." Kimball told Navy Times he's not sure where Pino will serve his sentence. [Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | March 6, 2019 ++]

-o-o-O-o-o-

Afghanistan -- A multi-agency probe of an Afghan contractor charged criminally with inflating prices for U.S. military supplies resulted in a \$25 million civil forfeiture, the Justice Department announced on 7 MAR. The combined settlement in U.S. District Court for the District of Columbia resolves a criminal case brought under the False Claims Act. The scheme was originally uncovered by the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. "This case involved fraud and corruption that exploited subcontracts designed to support American troops in a conflict zone," Special Inspector General John Sopko said. "I'm proud of the tenacity displayed by SIGAR special agents." Robert Higdon Jr., U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of North Carolina, added: "The success of our overseas war and reconstruction efforts is tied directly to the trust and respect established with the local populace. Corruption in our military operations undermines those efforts and cannot be tolerated."

From 2007-2012, the U.S. efforts to resupply military forces operating in Afghanistan tapped local Afghan-owned businesses as subcontractors to transport fuel and other supplies by truck to locations around the war-torn country. One was **Hikmatullah Shadman**, a young Afghan national who operated several companies, including Hikmat Shadman Logistics Services Company. According to court documents, from November 2010 to March 2012 Shadman charged the United States more than \$77 million for delivering supplies to U.S. service members.

The civil forfeiture case, initially filed on Nov. 20, 2012, focused on Shadman's fraudulent receipt of a disproportionate number of subcontracts for the transport of military supplies in Afghanistan, as well as his inflated prices. The result of his actions, Justice said in a release, was that the government "often paid Shadman for work that was never performed and for work other than that described in the documentation submitted. Through his companies, Shadman also charged the United States rates which were well above the average rate of his competitors," as determined by forensic analysis. In addition to the civil and False Claims Act charges, Justice also prosecuted Shadman's primary company, HSLSC. On Jan. 3, HSLSC pleaded guilty to a criminal information and one count of conspiracy to influence the award of the contract, by paying gratuities to two U.S. service members in Afghanistan. In this criminal case, HSLSC was sentenced to pay an \$810,000 fine and forfeit \$190,000, plus five years of probation.

"DCIS will aggressively investigate complex fraud and corruption that undermines the integrity of the Department of Defense no matter where it happens or how long it takes," DCIS Special Agent in Charge Robert Craig Jr. said. "We hope that this case demonstrates the commitment of DCIS and our law enforcement partners to use every available option to protect valuable DoD resources around the world and better enable our warfighters to accomplish our critical global missions." [Source: Government Executive | Charles S. Clark | March 7, 2019 ++]

-o-o-O-o-o-

Oxnard, CA -- A former procurement official for a Southern California naval base has pleaded guilty to accepting more than \$1.2 million in kickbacks. Prosecutors say 69-year-old **Fernando Barroso** of Oxnard entered pleas Thursday to federal charges of conspiracy and subscribing to a false federal income tax return. He could face up to eight years in prison and a \$500,000 fine. Authorities say Barroso, a civilian employee for Naval Base Ventura County, was the master scheduler for public works who took kickbacks from a local businessman in order to approve Navy work and purchase orders and payments for his businesses. Some of the work was never performed. The businessman, Theodore Bauer, pleaded guilty last year to conspiracy to commit bribery and awaits sentencing.

-o-o-O-o-o-

NCWGD -- A chief in the Navy's secretive world of signals intelligence and cyber operations is facing a court-martial trial over allegations that he faked a cancer diagnosis to skip work for nearly two years. Military prosecutors say Chief Cryptologic Technician (Collection) **John R. Errol** feigned stomach cancer from March 2016 to February 2018 to

avoid his job. He also allegedly took an unauthorized absence from Cryptologic Warfare Group 6, a cyber unit based out of Fort Meade, Maryland, from March 29, 2016 to June 12, 2018, according to charge sheets provided to Navy Times. In the Army, that's called going "AWOL" — absent without leave — but in the Navy and Marine Corps it's usually shortened to just "UA," unauthorized absence. Despite the allegedly long absence, however, he was not charged with desertion.

Errol, 50, told officers and senior chiefs he was terminally ill and had cancer on several occasions in 2017, claims that were "totally false," according to the charge sheets. He told an unnamed senior chief on July 23, 2017, that he "was going to a breathing treatment at John Hopkins," charge sheets state. "Sir, for the period requested I have been seeking private treatment," prosecutors allege he told a lieutenant. "I had frequent [appointments] for smoking, breathing treatment, and private issues." But Errol "was not receiving breathing treatment at a private hospital," the charge sheets state. That same day, a senior chief told Errol to provide his civilian medical records so they could be entered into the Navy's medical system, but he did not do so, according to charge sheets. Errol did not return a call seeking comment and requests for comment from Errol's attorney submitted through public affairs officials were not answered.

Errol's trial on malingering, absence without leave, insubordinate conduct and false official statements charges is slated to begin in May. Originally from Maryland, Errol enlisted in 1999 and made chief in 2012, according to Navy records. He reported to Cryptologic Warfare Group 6 in 2016 and served with Navy Information Operations Command before that. Errol served on board the guided-missile destroyers Howard and Spruance earlier in his career and was also stationed with the Navy Cyber Warfare Development Group. His rating involves collecting, analyzing and reporting signals data to provide critical intelligence, according to the Navy. That's why these sailors also must attain Top Secret/Sensitive Compartmented Information security clearance. Officials with U.S. Fleet Cyber Command, declined to say whether Errol was accounted for during his absence from duty or how officials caught on to the alleged chicanery, citing the ongoing nature of the proceedings. "He remains on active duty in the U.S. Navy," Lt. Cmdr. Ben Tisdale said. [Source: NavyTimes | Geoff Ziezulewicz | March 12, 2019 ++]

POW/MIA Update 121 ► Vietnam War Status as of February 26, 2019

1,589 Americans are now listed by DoD as missing and unaccounted-for from the Vietnam War: Vietnam - 1,246 (VN-452, VS-794); Laos-288; Cambodia-48; Peoples Republic of China territorial waters-7. (These numbers fluctuate due to investigations resulting in changed locations of loss.) The League seeks the fullest possible accounting for those still missing and repatriation of all recoverable remains. Highest priority is accounting for Americans last known alive. US intelligence indicates some Americans known to be in captivity in Vietnam, Laos and Cambodia were not returned at the end of the war. In the absence of evidence to the contrary, it must be assumed that these Americans could still be alive, and the US Government should not rule out that possibility.

Vietnam established comprehensive wartime and post-war processes to collect and retain information and remains; thus, unilateral efforts by them offered significant potential. Vietnam has since taken many unilateral actions that are welcome and appreciated, plus announced that there are no obstacles to full cooperation. Recently, Vietnam has increased implementation of commitments to provide long-sought archival records with relevant, case-related information, thanks in part to improvement of working-level efforts, but primarily due to increased bilateral relations across the board.

The January 2018 League Delegation brought commitments that offered real promise for increased success. First undertaken in northern Vietnam in 1985, joint field operations have dramatically changed and are now much more effective. Vietnamese officials are participating with greater seriousness and professionalism, achieving increased results, including both US-led Joint Excavation Teams and Vietnamese Recovery Teams (VRTs), led by Vietnamese and supported by a few US personnel. This formula allows a greater number of teams to "increase the pace and scope of field operations," as requested by Vietnam since 2009, unless budget reductions interfere. Due to increased

military-to-military cooperation, US Navy assets are now allowed to participate in underwater survey and recovery operations, when requested. These steps, long advocated by the League, are now coming to fruition and reportedly are raised by US officials at all levels.

After a rough period, joint field operations in Laos are now increasingly productive, even though more difficult than elsewhere. Accounting efforts had slowed due to Lao Government inflexibility, attempting to over-price payment for helicopter support and denying permission for ground transport to accessible incident sites. Recently, Laos is showing much greater flexibility, having again authorized an increased number of US personnel in-country simultaneously, allowing ground transportation to accessible sites, and reaching agreement for contracting a private company to provide reliable, smaller-scale helicopter support to access remote sites. When helpful, Vietnamese witnesses are also allowed to participate in joint US-Lao operations.

DIA's Stony Beach POW/MIA specialist is assigned full time in-country, and Lao officials are now approving field investigations outside the confines of scheduled DPAA field operations. A border dispute with Cambodia that was ongoing when the League Delegation visited in early 2018 continues to impede recovery operations in that area. The League urges officials in Laos and Cambodia to at least temporarily set aside their political disagreement and work trilaterally with the US to proceed on this humanitarian recovery, to end the uncertainty of the families.

DIA's Stony Beach Team: One Cambodia specialist works full time at the US Embassy in Phnom Penh, and research and field operations in Cambodia have received excellent support. Two Stony Beach personnel for years rotated on temporary duty in and out of Vietnam, collecting information via archival research and interviews of potential witnesses. DIA has now decided to permanently station one Stony Beach Vietnam specialist in Hawaii and one in Hanoi, to which Vietnam has partially agreed. Successive US Ambassadors have strongly supported this important move, and increases in bilateral military relations clearly contributed to overcoming past reluctance. US Ambassador to Laos Rena Bitter reportedly supports full use of DIA's Lao specialist. It is hoped that ever-expanding bilateral relationships with Laos and Vietnam will mean positive decisions and greater flexibility to expand. Stony Beach specialists are sorely needed to augment the investigation process while witnesses are still living and able to facilitate locating incident sites for follow-up.

The greatest obstacles to increased Vietnam War accounting efforts are too few qualified scientists and unreliable funding that has caused US cancellation of scheduled operations, thus sending negative signals to foreign counterpart officials, especially in Vietnam. Since over 80% of US losses in Laos and 90% in Cambodia occurred in areas where Vietnamese forces operated during the war, Vietnam's expanded provision of helpful records, improved and increased archival research, interviews and field operations are the core means to increase accounting results for Vietnam War missing personnel, America's UNRETURNED VETERANS.

Note: Refer to <https://www.pow-miafamilies.org/status-of-the-issue.html> to keep current on our POW/MIA recovery status. [Source: The National League of POW/MIA Families | Kathy Beasley | February 21, 2019 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries & Burials ► Reported 01 thru 15 MAR 2019 | Twenty Six

“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 as of FEB 2019 are: World War II 73,025 of which over 41,000 are presumed to be lost at sea, Korean War 7665, Vietnam War 1589 (i.e. VN-1,246, Laos-288, Cambodia-48, & Peoples Republic of China territorial waters-7), Cold War 111, 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 <https://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Year/2019> for a listing and details of those accounted for in 2019. 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 1st Lt. Burleigh E. Curtis** was a member of the 377th Fighter Squadron, 362nd Fighter Group, piloting a P-47D aircraft on a dive-bomb attack near Briouze, France, when his plane crashed. Witnesses reported that he was not seen bailing out of the aircraft prior to the crash. Interment services are pending. [Read about Curtis.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces 2nd Lt. Walter B. Stone** was a pilot in the 350th Fighter Squadron, 353rd Fighter Group, VIII U.S. Fighter Command. On Oct. 22, 1943, Stone was killed when his P-47 Thunderbolt aircraft crashed in northern France during a bomber escort mission. Because France was enemy-occupied territory at the time of the crash, search and recovery operations were not possible. Interment services are pending. [Read about Stone.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces Staff Sgt. Carl M. Shaffer** was a member of the 38th Bombardment Squadron, 30th Bombardment Group, stationed at Hawkins Field, Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Gilbert Islands, when the B-24J bomber aircraft he was aboard crashed into Tarawa lagoon shortly after takeoff. Shaffer and the nine other servicemen aboard the aircraft were killed. Interment services are pending. [Read about Shaffer.](#)

-- **Army Capt. Rufus J. Hyman** was an infantry officer with Company A, 1st Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. In July 1950, his unit was engaged in combat actions against the North Korean forces in the vicinity of Kwonbin-ni, South Korea. Hyman was declared missing in action on July 30, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Hyman.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Benjamin W. Scott** Company M, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. In July 1950, his unit was engaged in combat actions against the North Korean forces in the vicinity of Choch'iwon, South Korea. Scott was declared missing in action on July 12, 1950. Interment services are pending. [Read about Scott.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. John G. Krebs**, was a member of Company L, 3rd Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. On July 11, 1950, his unit was engaged in combat operations against the North Korean People's Army south of Chonui, South Korea, when he was declared missing in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Krebs.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Stephen P. Nemeč** was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion 5th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. In late 1950 his unit was engaged in heavy fighting against the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces at Turtle Head's Bend, near the village of Unsan, North Korea. Nemeč was killed in action on Nov. 2, 1950, and was buried at United Nation's Military Cemetery (UNMC) Pyongyang. Interment services are pending. [Read about Nemeč.](#)

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

-- **Army Pfc. Clifford M. Mills** was a member of the 319th Glider Field Artillery Battalion, 82nd Airborne Division, which participated in Operation Market Garden, the invasion of the German-occupied Netherlands. On Sept. 18, 1944, Mills was reported missing in action in the vicinity of Wyler and Zyfflich, Germany. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mills.](#)

-- **Army Pfc. James C. Williams** Medical Company, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, when he was killed in action near Taejon, South Korea. On July 20, 1950, eye witnesses stated that Williams was killed while trying to transport patients from the Taejon Air Strip. Despite multiple attempts to recover Williams' remains, he was declared non-recoverable on Jan. 16, 1956. Interment services are pending. [Read about Williams.](#)

-- **Army Sgt. Cread E. Shuey** was a member of Battery G, 60th Coast Artillery Regiment, serving in the Philippines, when Japanese forces invaded the Philippine Islands. Shuey was among those reported captured, and one of the thousands who were eventually moved to the Cabanatuan POW camp. More than 2,500 POWs perished in this camp during the remaining years of the war. Interment services are pending. [Read about Shuey.](#)

-- **Marine Corps. Cpl. Claire E. Goldtrap** was assigned to Company A, 2nd Amphibian Tractor Battalion, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force, which landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands. Over several days of intense fighting at Tarawa, approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed and more than 2,000 were wounded. Goldtrap died on the first day of the battle, Nov. 20, 1943, during the first wave of the assault. Interment services are pending. [Read about Goldtrap.](#)

-- **Mr. Edward J. Weissenback** an employee of Air America Incorporated, was piloting an Air America C-123K from Udorn Airfield, Kingdom of Thailand, headed for Xienhom District, Xaingnabouli Province, Laos. The aircraft was on a routine resupply mission for the U.S. Agency for International Development and was last heard from when they were northeast of Sayaboury, Laos. Search and rescue efforts were continued through Dec. 31, 1971, but no sign of the aircraft or the four crewmembers were found. Weissenback was subsequently reported missing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Weissenback.](#)

-- **Mr. George L. Ritter** an employee of Air America Incorporated, was piloting an Air America C-123K from Udorn Airfield, Kingdom of Thailand, headed for Xienhom District, Xaingnabouli Province, Laos. The aircraft was on a routine resupply mission for the U.S. Agency for International Development and was last heard from when they were northeast of Sayaboury, Laos. Search and rescue efforts were continued through Dec. 31, 1971, but no sign of the aircraft or the four crewmembers were found. Ritter was subsequently reported missing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Ritter.](#)

-- **Mr. Roy F. Townley** an employee of Air America Incorporated, was piloting an Air America C-123K from Udorn Airfield, Kingdom of Thailand, headed for Xienhom District, Xaingnabouli Province, Laos. The aircraft was on a routine resupply mission for the U.S. Agency for International Development and was last heard from when they were northeast of Sayaboury, Laos. Search and rescue efforts were continued through Dec. 31, 1971, but no sign of the aircraft or the four crewmembers were found. Townley was subsequently reported missing. Interment services are pending. [Read about Townley.](#)

-- **Navy Ensign Charles M. Stern, Jr.** 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 Stern. Interment services are pending. [Read about Stern.](#)

-- **Navy Fire Controlman 3rd Class Victor P. Tumlinson** 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 Tumlinson. Interment services are pending. [Read about Tumlinson.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Angelo M. Gabriele** was stationed aboard the USS West Virginia, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The ship sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly sink, but not capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 106 crewmen, including Gabriele. Interment services are pending. [Read about Gabriele.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Billy J. Johnson** 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 Johnson. Interment services are pending. [Read about Johnson.](#)

-- **Navy Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Archie T. Miles** 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 Miles. Interment services are pending. [Read about Miles.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class John O. Morris** was a member of Carrier Aircraft Service Unit (CASU) 17. In November 1943, American units landed against stiff Japanese resistance on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll of the Gilbert Islands, in an attempt to secure the island. On Dec. 16, 1943, Morris was killed during the test-firing of a machine gun. The weapon accidentally discharged, killing Morris. He was buried on the island, in Cemetery #33. Interment services are pending. [Read about Morris.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Journalist 3rd Class Raul A. Guerra** was a passenger on board an E-1B Tracer, en route from Chu Lai Air Base to the aircraft carrier USS Oriskany. On Oct. 8, 1967, radar contact with the aircraft was lost, and adverse weather hampered subsequent search efforts. Wreckage was spotted along a mountainside approximately 11 miles northwest of Da Nang. Because of the location and presence of hostile forces, ground recovery could not be conducted. Guerra, as well as the four other service members on board, were declared killed in action. Interment services are pending. [Read about Guerra.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Seaman 2nd Class Deward W. Duncan** was assigned to Aviation, Construction, Ordnance, Repair, Navy Fourteen, Standard Landing Craft Unit 4, when a Japanese air raid on Betio Island, Tarawa Atoll, Gilbert Islands, dropped a bomb near his tent. Duncan was killed Jan. 12, 1944, and was reportedly buried the same day in Cemetery #33. Interment services are pending. [Read about Duncan.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Seaman 2nd Class Ira N. Slaton** was stationed aboard the USS Colorado, which was moored approximately 3,200 yards from the shore of Tinian Island, Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands. Early in the morning, the USS Colorado came under attack by a concealed Japanese shore battery. From the attack, four crewmen were declared missing in action, and 39 personnel were killed, including Slaton. Interment services are pending. [Read about Slaton.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Ernest R. West** 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 West. Interment services are pending. [Read about West.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Hale McKissack** 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 McKissack. Interment services are pending. [Read about McKissack.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Oris V. Brandt** 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 Brandt. Interment services are pending. [Read about Brandt.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class David B. Edmonston** 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 Edmonston. Interment services are pending. [Read about Edmonston.](#)

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | March 15, 2019 ++]



National Vietnam War Veterans Day Update 01 ► VA Thank You!

On behalf of the Department of Veterans Affairs and the Veterans we are deeply honored to serve, the Secretary of Veteran Affairs Robert Wilkie at <https://www.military.com/video/2019-national-vietnam-war-veterans-day> says thank you to our country's more than six-and-a-half million living Vietnam Veterans and their families. [Source: Military.com | March 11, 2019 ++]

VA Appeals Update 36 ► System Is “Ancient” and “Inefficient” and In Need of Drastic Change

The retiring chief judge for the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims told lawmakers 12 MAR that the Department of Veterans Affairs appeals system is “ancient” and “inefficient” and in need of drastic change. While testifying before a House Appropriations subcommittee, Chief Judge Robert Davis said the pressure on VA employees to get through a large backlog of benefits claims leads to poor decision-making and a high number of appeals. Davis, a Navy veteran, has held a seat on the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims for nearly 15 years. The court, often referred to as “Veterans Court,” provides veterans an impartial review of decisions made by the VA Board of Veterans’ Appeals.

“I think it’s a tragedy, the way the system operates currently,” Davis said. “I think we’ve been tied to a structure that is ancient and inefficient. The sooner Congress and all of us in this area look at this system from a 50,000-foot level and say, ‘We need to make these kinds of adjustments,’ the sooner we’ll be able to meet the needs of our veterans in a much better way.” Davis has been critical of the VA system. The topic was brought up Tuesday by Rep. Matt Cartwright (D-PA) who cited an August article by the Wall Street Journal in which Davis criticized the appeals process as “horribly flawed. “We can’t ignore that when you come here to testify, chief judge,” Cartwright said. Davis elaborated Tuesday on his comments to the Wall Street Journal. He said he remains skeptical of a new law implemented last month that VA officials promised would allow veterans to receive decisions on their benefits claims in days or months, instead of years.

The new law, titled the **Veterans Appeals Improvement and Modernization Act**, was approved by Congress in 2017 and went into effect 19 FEB. It involves multiple avenues for veterans to appeal their claims, including an option to get a review from a higher-level adjudicator or go directly to the Board of Veterans’ Appeals. Under the old system,

veterans waited three to seven years to reconcile their appeals. The new one could get veterans through the process in as few as 125 days, VA officials vowed. Officials also said the new system would help cut down the backlog of appeals, which included 402,000 cases as of last month. "I'm cautiously optimistic that this modernization act may help the system, but in my view, congressman, it is tinkering around the edges, when a larger fix is needed," Davis said. "And it's a fix that might be viewed as radical by some."

When pressed for specifics, Davis suggested using mediation to negotiate a settlement between the VA and veterans or providing them general pensions. He said there were "a lot of possibilities" that he believed should be discussed with the VA secretary. Once he retires from the court, Davis agreed to discuss the issue further with Rep. Debbie Wasserman-Schultz (D-FL) who is chairwoman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies. Davis appeared before the subcommittee Tuesday to discuss the court's budget request for fiscal year 2020, which totals \$35.4 million. The proposed amount — released Monday as part of President Donald Trump's budget plan — didn't increase from the fiscal year 2019, though Davis said the court experienced a surge of work in 2018.

The court had its first surge in 2009, when its case load increased from about 2,000 cases each year to more than 4,000. That year, Congress temporarily approved two more judges to join the court, bringing it from seven judges to nine. Davis described a "second surge" last year, during which the case load rose from about 4,000 to more than 6,800. The VA touted last year that the Board of Veterans' Appeals had worked through a record number of cases — about 85,000, up from 52,000 cases the previous year. Davis attributed the surge at the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims to the board's increased pace.

He warned appropriators Tuesday that the court might soon need congressional approval for an additional two judges, bringing the total to 11. Of the nine judges now on the court, two — including Davis — are scheduled to retire at the end of their 15-year terms in December 2019. "We're watching our numbers carefully to track the very real possibility that nine judges may not be sufficient to keep pace with this growth trend," Davis said. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | March 12, 2019 ++]

VA Caregiver Program Update 52 ► Expansion Program Delayed to at least mid- to late 2020

The technology infrastructure that will support expansion of the Veterans Affairs Department's program for caregivers of injured veterans will not be ready until at least mid- to late 2020, delaying a program that would provide a stipend and health benefits to thousands who care for seriously injured pre-9/11 veterans. VA officials said 11 MAR that the information technology systems needed to widen the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers, which missed an Oct. 1, 2018 progress deadline, will not be certified by the congressionally required deadline of Oct. 1, 2019. Instead, VA is looking to the end of fiscal 2020 to have the system in place -- a requirement for expanding a program that has helped more than 38,000 injured post-9/11 veterans and their families.

The VA Mission Act of 2018 mandated that VA create and certify the IT system needed to support an expansion of the program to include veterans from earlier wars. Congress inserted the requirement into the law to prevent similar problems to those seen last year when thousands of veterans didn't receive housing payments related to the Forever GI Bill because of technology system challenges and an aging technology infrastructure at VA. This delay means that caregivers of veterans the Vietnam War and earlier will not be able to apply for the program as expected starting 1 OCT. By law, applications were to be phased in with those veterans eligible first. Those who served from May 1975 through Sept. 11, 2001 were to become eligible two years later.

A VA official said the department is "doing something no one else in the world has done for caregivers" and asked that veterans, caregivers and the public understand the scope of the effort. "My concern is that if the message out there is 'this is a delay in IT,' it infers that this is something easy to do ... this is a huge endeavor to expand this population as

wide as we are doing," the official said during a briefing on the budget with reporters. Caregivers enrolled in the VA program receive a stipend, health care coverage, training, counseling and access to respite care.

Last month, Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA) and 10 other Senate Democrats sent a letter to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie voicing concerns over the delay and issues with the current program, which, in the past several years, has seen many caregivers pushed out of the program or their benefits downgraded. Veterans and their caregivers had reported arbitrary dismissals and inconsistent applications of the law across the VA. VA is reviewing the program to ensure that it provides benefits to those who need them the most. It's also preparing for what could be an avalanche of applications. According to the VA, more than 38,000 caregivers have been helped by the program since it was established in 2011, at a cost of more than \$900 million a year.

In December, VA suspended all discharges and downgrades from the program to review how VA health care facilities manage and implement the program nationwide. The pause was the second since the program was created. In their letter to VA, the senators said they commended the department for suspending the discharges and downgrades, adding that it was Congress's intention for veterans whose independence improved to graduate from the program. But, they added, "documented evidence of wide-ranging inconsistency and clear inexcusable errors in VA's eligibility decisions must be corrected." The senators also asked for an update on the status of the information technology program for expansion and urged VA to consider using a commercial off-the-shelf program. "We urge you to immediately expedite these efforts," they wrote.

Murray said last week that VA had failed to respond. The VA's proposed \$220 billion fiscal 2020 budget includes \$8.9 billion to implement the Mission Act, to include providing community health care and urgent care for veterans as well as \$150 million to expand the caregiver program. The request fully funds the expected caregiver population once the IT is certified and ready, a VA official said. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | March 11, 2019 ++]

VA Hiring Update 13 ► Financial Incentives Being Offer

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has roughly 49,000 vacancies in its workforce. VA Secretary Robert Wilkie announced to Capitol Hill that the VA is combating this shortage by offering financial incentives to prioritize hiring professionals in mental health, women's health, and primary care. Wilkie chose to focus the agency's hiring efforts on mental health, women's health, and primary care because they are of the greatest demand in VA facilities. Each health care facility is in need of access to same-day mental health appointments and the population of female veterans is continuing to grow. An increase in the need for primary care professionals is being driven by newer veterans who are used to receiving urgent care.

With a tough labor market, the VA is offering financial incentives including relocation, bonus pay, and increased salaries. The VA has purchased commercial human resource management software so that the agency can better monitor openings within their workforce. Although 49,000 job vacancies is a concerning statistic, Wilkie is most concerned about wait times and their need to be reduced across the entire VA delivery system. Wilkie also outlined his vision of what the VA should aspire to achieve by 2030: a system that is easy to navigate and easy to enter as veterans' needs change and new needs arise. The VA should also aspire to adapt to demographics of veterans as those demographics continue to change. To learn more about how VA secretary Robert Wilkie is prioritizing job vacancies by offering financial incentives, visit <https://www.stripes.com/news/us/va-secretary-prioritizing-job-vacancies-offering-financial-incentives-1.570664>. For a step by step guide on getting a job check out "Getting Hired at VA" at <https://www.vacareers.va.gov/ApplicationProcess/NavigatingHiringProcess>.

[Source: Daily Nurse | Christina Morgan | Mar 11, 2019 ++]

VA Opioid Use Update 03 ► Higher Overdoes Risk for VA + Medicare Users

Many military veterans can get prescription opioid painkillers from both the VA and Medicare, putting them at nearly triple the risk for an overdose, new research warns. The finding could have implications for a huge number of vets: Roughly eight in 10 VA-covered patients have additional private or public health insurance coverage. About 51 percent have Medicare, and about one-third of those receive Medicare Part D drug benefits. But the problem may be more about poor oversight than addicted patients trying to game the system, noted study author Dr. Walid Gellad, a researcher with the VA Pittsburgh Healthcare System.

"Only in some limited circumstances -- and we don't know how many -- is this purposeful behavior by a patient to try and get additional opioids," he explained. "I would not think of this as 'double-dipping' or 'being caught,'" Gellad added. "In some cases, receiving opioids from both systems could have happened at different times, as veterans got care in one system first, and then in another system later, or they go back and forth between VA and the private sector. In some cases, the opioids are prescribed at the same time, sometimes unintentionally, and sometimes intentionally." Gellad and his team found that more than 3 million veterans filled at least one opioid prescription (either through the VA or another insurer) during the time period from July 2011 through December 2013.

To see how dual health insurance coverage might influence overdose risk, the team first examined the records of 215 veterans who died from an overdose between 2012 and 2013. Their average age was 57, most (90 percent) were male and most (84 percent) were white. All had both VA and Medicare Part D health care coverage for at least six months prior to their deaths. For comparison, the investigators also assessed opioid prescription patterns among a "control group" of more than 800 living vets of a similar age, race, health status and gender. About 28 percent of those who had died due to an opioid overdose had obtained their meds from both the VA and through Medicare Part D. This compared with just 14 percent of the control group, the researchers found.

Still, Gellad stressed that systemic changes that curtail getting opioids from multiple sources have been implemented by the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs since the study ended in 2013. For example, he noted that "the VA has instituted requirements to check prescription drug monitoring programs, which should alert physicians to instances when opioids are prescribed in different systems." But, "for this to work to reduce the risk of overdose, clinicians have to actually check, and they have to do something with the information when they find it," Gellad added. "Ultimately, I think we will see automated alerts that will alert clinicians to a medication prescribed in one system if it, or an interacting medication, is also being prescribed in another system," Gellad said. "But for that to have an impact, it has to alert at the point of prescribing, which is not possible yet within [the] VA or outside [the] VA."

The report was published online 12 MAR in the Annals of Internal Medicine. Dr. Carolyn Clancy, Deputy Under Secretary for Discovery, Education and Affiliate Networks with the VA in Washington, D.C., co-authored an accompanying journal editorial. Clancy pointed out that "because of VA's existing robust and extensive patient record system, the department has had significant success in reducing opioid use and overdose risk." The VA has been tracking problems related to dual access to medications "for some time," she said. "That's why the department is constantly working to improve coordination with community providers," Clancy noted. "Especially through the implementation of electronic health record modernization." And going forward, she said, the VA hopes to augment the current screening process afforded by state prescription drug monitoring programs, by "seeking to develop [its own] electronic system to automatically check all state prescription drug monitoring programs for each veteran to further improve care coordination."

[Source: U.S. News & World Report | Alan Mozes | March 11, 2019 ++]

VA Private Care Access Update 04 ► No Plan To Pay For It

The VA Mission Act passed into law with broad bipartisan support last year, but that unity began to wane immediately, when President Trump signaled after signing it that he wouldn't give it an additional stream of funding. The law expands a popular caregiver program and will examine VA's aging infrastructure. But the most controversial plank is a drastic increase in the number of veterans who will be eligible to use a private health care provider and bill the VA, in what's known as the Veterans Choice Program. The VA has been defensive about the program ever since; last month, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie pre-empted the release of new regulations for private care with a statement. "Although these new standards represent an important win for America's Veterans, they will not be without controversy. Some will claim falsely and predictably that they represent a first step toward privatizing the department," Wilkie said.

As predicted, the union representing VA workers did just that. "The Administration is setting us up to fail," said American Federation of Government Employees National Veterans Affairs Council President Alma Lee. "We believe that this push for further privatization cannot be allowed to happen, and the MISSION Act should not be implemented under the current schedule because the VA needs to do a thorough analysis of the huge impact it will have on veterans their receiving care here."

VA has been sending patients to outside specialists for years — but mostly that was VA doctors doing it for clinical reasons. VCP, which started in 2014, gave vets the option of choosing a private doctor if VA care was too slow or too far away. It has had mixed results, says Iraq vet Kayla Williams, who has been waiting for an appointment with a specialist. "I was notified recently that they have not been able to find any providers in the D.C. metro region who are willing to accept the Medicare rates that Choice uses," she said. VCP has gotten a reputation for paying providers late and confusing everyone with red tape. Williams' experience has been frustrating, even though she knows the ropes: She's not only a vet, but she's also a former official at VA and currently directs a program on veterans at the Center for a New American Security. Williams says that when the new expanded version of VCP goes into effect this June, there might not be so much choice to choose from, because health care is in heavy demand nationwide. "A lot of folks seem to believe that the capacity exists in the community, that providers are equally good. But that's not the data that I've seen," she says.

Studies show that VA care is on par or better than private care for speed and quality, in most regions. So even as it's about to expand private care, VA officials like Dr. Richard Stone, acting head of VA health, have been stressing that vets who try outside care usually return. "They have had a choice for years about where to go for health care. Ninety percent chose to stay with us. Of the 10 percent that go out to commercial health care providers, the vast majority go once and then come back to us," he said in a VA webcast last month.

But expanding the Veterans Choice Program could prove that wrong, says Dan Caldwell, an Iraq vet with the conservative advocacy group Concerned Veterans for America. "When you give veterans the ability to vote with their feet, you're going to see really how VA is performing and how veterans perceive the VA," said Caldwell. Caldwell's group, which is backed by billionaire conservative Charles Koch, advocates for all vets to have a choice between private care and the VA. He calls the new rules a good step in that direction. "We want to get to a place where veterans have the ability to access a private provider without prior authorization from the VA," said Caldwell. But critics say that would amount to privatizing much of the VA and, because private care is more expensive, would also bleed resources away from the department.

House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA) says the Trump administration hasn't been telling Congress how it intends to pay for it. "We don't know the cost, we don't know how they're going to pay for all those [patients]," said Takano, who says the VA has given "highly specious arguments about why they couldn't be more transparent with Congress." Takano signed on to a letter from Democratic and Republican committee chairs this month asking VA to collaborate more with Congress. Two days later, the VA put out a press release proclaiming "a

new and unprecedented level of transparency to lawmakers in Congress." But the lawmakers are still waiting for the information they requested.

For all the alarm about the new rules, they are something of a compromise, said Amy Fahrenkopf, former VA official in charge of the Veterans Choice Program. "My first impression is that this is not the giant step toward privatization that many were worried about or many were pushing for," she said. Fahrenkopf is a Republican who left the VA last year among an exodus of high-ranking officials during a period of leadership turmoil. She says she thinks the new rules could introduce an element of competition with VA, which could be good for the department. But Fahrenkopf also points out that by eliminating any need for co-pays, the new program could entice millions of veterans who currently get private health care from their employer to switch to VA. It could cost the department billions, at the same time as private providers are required to accept Medicare rates for their services.

"It's almost a Medicare-for-all type program," Fahrenkopf said, adding that she can't imagine why any fiscal conservative Republican would support it. [Source: NPR | Quil Lawrence | February 27, 2019 ++]

VA Private Care Access Update 05 ► VA Risks Repeating Mistakes of Failed Choice Program

A top official from the Disabled American Veterans service organization warns that the Department of Veterans Affairs risks repeating the mistakes of the failed Choice program with its proposed new rules for access to private health care. The proposed access standards for the Mission Act, to expand private health care options for veterans, were put forward arbitrarily and are "no different than what we had under the Choice program" in terms of improving care, said Randy Reese, executive director of the DAV's Washington headquarters.

"We have quite a chore ahead of us to understand the depth of those regulations and the actual impact" on veterans, he said 26 FEB at a joint hearing of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees on the DAV's legislative agenda. "And, unfortunately, with the absence of market assessments, we're not sure that the care would actually be there if veterans are referred" to private care, Reese said in response to questions from Sen. Mazie Hirono (D-HI). "Even if [veterans] are referred" to a private doctor, there are no assurances "that it's going to be the quality care that we have expectations of our VA to deliver," he said.

At another joint hearing of the veterans committees 27 FEB on the American Legion's agenda, Legion National Commander Brett Reistad said the VA "must live up to its mission of serving veterans, as opposed to serving private health care providers" under the Mission Act. He said the Legion generally supports the VA's intention to change the access rules for private care "based on actual drive times as opposed to straight-line mileage" to a VA facility. "The American Legion does not oppose choice" for veterans on whether to get their health care from the VA or the private sector, Reistad said, "but we adamantly oppose any plan that would gut the best health care system in our country."

The VA's proposed new access standards were published in the Federal Register last week. The period for public comment continues until 25 MAR. In a statement on the release of the new standards, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said, "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." He added, "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."

The Choice program, officially the Veterans Choice, Accountability and Transparency Act of 2014, was enacted in response to wait-times scandals and doctored records at the Phoenix, Arizona, VA Medical Center. Under Choice, veterans could have access to private care if they lived 40 miles from the closest VA medical facility or if they had been waiting 30 days or longer for VA care. With the proposed rules, the wait-times standards would be 20 days for primary and mental health care, and 28 days for specialty care from the date of request. The new rules would also be based on drive times rather than mileage. Veterans would be eligible for private care if they faced a 30-minute drive

to the nearest VA facility. The drive times go up to 60 minutes, and the wait times to 28 days, for certain types of specialty care.

At the joint hearing 26 FEB, Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT), ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, said the VA has yet to spell out how the Mission Act will be implemented or how the new access standards will impact quality care. "There is a very real concern that we cannot hold community providers to the same standards as the VA providers," Tester said, and "nobody can tell us how many veterans will be impacted by these access standards or how much it will cost." At the joint hearing 27 FEB, Sen. Johnny Isakson (R-GA), chairman of the Senate committee, said implementation of the Mission Act and access standards will be a main focus this year. "We'll make mistakes" along the way, but "we're not going to make the mistake of privatizing" the VA's health care system, he said.

At a separate hearing 26 FEB, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), chair of the Military Construction, Veterans Affairs, and Related Agencies Appropriations Subcommittee, also raised concerns about the implementation and funding of the Mission Act. "I absolutely do not want to see community care funded at the expense of traditional VA medical services," she said. "I am very concerned that the recent access standards announced by VA will ultimately send more veterans into the community," Wasserman Schultz said. "If there is not an intentional effort to privatize the VA, it sure seems like an effort to back it into it so that is the result."

Ahead of the release of the new access standards, Wilkie predicted that their publication would result in charges of privatization. "Although these new standards represent an important win for America's veterans, they will not be without controversy," he said in a January statement. "Some will claim falsely and predictably that they represent a first step toward privatizing the department." [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | February 27, 2019 ++]

VA PHASeR Testing Program ► Cancer Survivor Genetic Testing Pilot

On 12 MAR the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that, as part of an innovative partnership, VA and Sanford Health, one of the nation's largest nonprofit health care systems, will soon provide free genetic testing to some Veterans cared for by VA. The VA **PHarmacogenomics Action for cancer SuRvivorship** (PHASeR) testing program will begin a pilot program this year at the Durham VA Health Care System that will enroll all cancer survivors who receive treatment at the facility. The program eventually will expand to enrolling some 250,000 U.S. Veterans at 125 sites. A recent Dartmouth study found that VA medical centers "outperform private hospitals in most health care markets throughout the country."

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie lauded the partnership, and said relationships like this will continue to expand the department's delivery of world class health care. "This screening test will help providers at the VA prescribe the most appropriate medications at the right dose for cancer survivors," Wilkie said. "Our goal is to continue delivering the best care possible for our nation's heroes, and this partnership helps us do just that." PHASeR is funded by a \$25 million gift from philanthropist Denny Sanford, for whom the health system is named, and an effort by Sanford Health to raise matching funds. The test can help providers determine which medications will be most effective for patients, improving access to appropriate treatments and reducing adverse drug reactions, which research shows costs up to \$30 billion per year.

The test results will help with clinical decision making for all types of prescribed medications, including cardiovascular and mental health diseases and pain management. Veterans will be able to access the test at their local VA facilities, and Sanford Health will process the tests at its South Dakota-based Imagenetics facility. "We have seen firsthand how this testing can positively influence patient care," said Kelby Krabbenhoft, president and CEO of Sanford Health. "Through the generosity of Mr. Sanford, we are proud to join VA to make the test available to our nation's Veterans."

Sanford Imagenetics began in 2014, and more than 90 percent of patients who have been tested have been found to carry a genetic change that could affect medication selection or dosing. Test results are shared with physicians through the electronic medical record to ensure efficiency and accuracy in choosing treatments. For more information on the PHASeR testing program resources for Veterans visit <https://imagenetics.sanfordhealth.org/veterans-genetic-testing>. [Source: VA News Release | March 12, 2019 ++]

VA Women Vet Programs Update 35 ► More Female Vets Means More Challenges for VA

The number of women veterans is growing, but the availability of government health care services for them is not keeping pace. Of about 20 million American veterans, 10 percent are women, the Department of Veterans Affairs says. The Pew Research Center predicts women will make up 18 percent of veterans by 2045, per Military Times. The VA's women-specific health services funding has grown to more than \$500 million for fiscal year 2019, increasing 16 percent over the past five years, Military Times reports. That's not even 1 percent of total health spending for veterans, per Military Times, which notes that the number of women using VA services has tripled since 2001, and is expected to grow even faster coming years.



When it comes to accessing care, a study from The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine found that women veterans face unique barriers, largely due to “challenges associated with being a woman in a traditionally male-dominated system,” reports Stars and Stripes. Those often include having to prove their veteran status to VA employees, being cat-called at VA facilities, and having trouble finding childcare to attend appointments at the VA, per Stars and Stripes. A Congressional task force, led by Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA) has been created to confront barriers keeping women from accessing VA health care, reports Stars and Stripes. It will launch in coming weeks.

During a recent Congressional hearing, Dr. Patricia Hayes, the VA's chief consultant for women's health services, said the VA needs to bolster its efforts to assist women, and that means more resources. “It's not just about more money. It's making sure we are getting the right folks in there so we have people in there, providers really taking care of the women,” Hayes said. More than 57 percent of women veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have received healthcare through the VA. About one in five women seen at VA health facilities have experienced sexual trauma in the military. That issue was underscored this week with Arizona Sen. Martha McSally's testimony before the Senate Armed Services subcommittee about being sexually assaulted while serving in the U.S. Air Force.

Among women patients, the VA is seeing the biggest growth in the area of mental health services. The number of women veterans in need of behavioral health services has increased 154 percent in the last decade, Military.com reports. In the VA's system, more than 40 percent of female veterans have received a mental illness diagnosis. According to the NASEM study, Iraq and Afghanistan female veterans are more likely than their male counterparts to think they aren't eligible for mental health services through the VA, and they have a higher need for that type of care

than older female veterans. And many female veterans don't realize the VA offers women's health services. To change that, the VA's Women Veterans Call Center is contacting female veterans to inform them of their benefits, Military.com reports. On average, the call center receives 80 calls and makes 1,000 calls per day.

Hayes said all VA hospitals and almost all of its outpatient clinics have at least two specialists focused on women's health care, and the VA has expanded its mammography and maternity services, per Military Times. Hayes said female veterans overall wait longer for appointments than their male counterparts, and they're trying to address that problem, Military Times reports. One recent study found women with military-related risk factors like post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury are 50 percent to 80 percent more likely to develop dementia. Another study published in the medical journal *Circulation* notes cardiovascular disease is the leading killer of women in the U.S., and veterans experience it at an even higher rate than civilian women.

Women veterans have high rates of both traditional and non-traditional risk factors for cardiovascular disease, researchers say. More than 40 percent are obese, 40 percent have hypertension, and 27 percent have hyperlipidemia, meaning too many fat particles in the blood. Additionally, 40 percent have dealt with military sexual trauma, 32 percent have depression or post-traumatic stress disorder, and 10 percent are homeless. A recent poll of active duty and veteran military members found two-thirds of servicewomen have been sexually assaulted or harassed. Women veterans also experience more health care delays and less aggressive cardiovascular care than their male counterparts, researchers say. They're also less informed about cardiovascular disease. [Source: Bizwomen | Caitlin Mullen | March 8, 2019 ++]

VA Women Vet Programs Update 36 ► Medical Centers Struggling to Curb Harassment

Leaders at the Department of Veterans Affairs are working harder than ever before to make the VA a welcoming place for female veterans. But their efforts are being undermined, some female veterans say, by other constituents at the VA: male veterans who act like women don't deserve to be there, or who take advantage of their presence at medical centers to harass them. "They just don't think we're real veterans," retired Navy Lt. Cmdr. Robbin Alex said of the demeaning attitude behind the harassment female veterans sometimes experience in seeking Department of Veterans Affairs health care. Former Marine Maj. Kyleanne Hunter said she and other female veterans just want to be treated like everyone else at the VA. "I want them to realize that we are here to stay," said Hunter, who flew the AH-1 Super Cobra gunship in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Look at us. Treat us like you treat the other veterans. Treat us with respect."

From VA Secretary Robert Wilkie on down, the VA has recognized it has a problem with male veterans who refuse to accept that women have equal status in the military and as veterans. To curb harassment that can lead female veterans to go elsewhere for the health care they've earned, the department has embarked on a campaign to make medical centers nationwide more welcoming places for all veterans -- one that involves explicit warnings not to harass or assault other vets.

Retired Air Force Col. Ellen Haring said she first noticed the effects of the campaign in the form of a scrolling sign at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center (DC VAMC). "Catcalls and stares are not compliments. They're harassment," it stated. The DC center also put out on its Facebook page a list of behavioral "do's" and "don'ts" for veterans using the hospital. For instance, it is OK to talk about the weather, but "commenting on someone's body" is not OK. Next month, DC VAMC, in collaboration with the Veterans Mental Health Advisory Council, plans to convene a Military Sexual Trauma Summit at the hospital.

At the flagship Michael E. DeBakey VA Medical Center (MEDVAMC) in Houston last year, the slogan was, "There is no excuse for harassment." "Cat calls NOT welcome. Staring and whistling -- NOT okay at the VA," the Houston Medical Center said in a release. The "End Harassment Campaign" at MEDVAMC is aimed at "ensuring women veterans receive their health care in a safe and respectful environment, free of even the hint of sexual harassment."

Female veterans are urged to report incidents to hospital security. "When women feel uncomfortable in our medical center, they are less inclined to come in to receive the medical care they need," Dr. Rola El-Serag, director of MEDVAMC's Women's Health Program, said in the release. "This can have a hugely negative effect on their health, both mentally and physically," El-Serag said of the harassment. "The thought that a woman veteran who has experienced something like military sexual trauma or is suffering from something like post-traumatic stress disorder would not be comfortable coming to the VA is just unacceptable."

Sexual harassment and assault in the military have been the subject of numerous reports and congressional hearings, but reports of harassment at the VA have largely relied on anecdotal evidence, according to the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI) at the National Institutes of Health. In a January report, NCBI wrote, "Harassment of servicewomen during military service has been well-documented, but harassment of women veterans in Veterans Affairs (VA) health care settings has not been studied systematically." The conclusion of an NCBI survey was that "one-quarter of women veteran VA users experienced harassment in VA health care settings." "These experiences negatively impacted women's health care experiences and use," the survey's authors added.

The VA reported in 2015 that only the number of women who had used at least one VA benefit or services had grown steadily over the last decade, from 31.2 percent in 2005 to 41.1 percent in 2015. And with the population of female veterans poised to grow rapidly in coming years, that figure is set to increase. Per the 2015 data, however, male users still used VA services at higher rates; usage of at least one VA service increased for male veterans from 36 percent in 2006 to 45 percent in 2015. In a separate 2018 survey, NCBI compared the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender women and non-LGBT men in the routine use of primary care for post-traumatic stress and health care family services at the Veterans Health Administration. The report stated, "Compared with non-LGBT women, LGBT women were more likely to report harassment and feeling unwelcome at VHA. Some LGBT women reported delaying or missing needed care, primarily due to concerns about interacting with other veterans."

Retired Coast Guard Capt. Judy Keene said those who oppose the presence of women in the military and at the VA are going to have to come to the realization that society has changed since she first entered service. Keene, 59, of Hagerstown, Maryland, was in the class of 1977 at the Coast Guard Academy, the second service academy to accept women. "There was significant pressure on us" as women cadets to show that they were up to the mission, she said. "There was a significant part of the population that felt we didn't belong there [and] there was also another segment of the population that wanted us to succeed." Keene said she had encountered people who tried to make it more difficult for women in service. "I felt as though that reflected more on them than on me, when they were saying things like 'women belong barefoot and pregnant and in the kitchen,'" she said. "I felt that was more a reflection on them and their orientation to life versus me and the skill sets I possessed."

Alex, the retired Navy lieutenant commander, suggested that the negative attitude toward women is possibly more prevalent among the older generation of veterans. "It's a minority, not a majority," but it's there, said Alex, 60, who heads a chapter of the veterans advocacy group Team Red White and Blue. "They think they can say anything. You have to say that it's not appropriate." At the VA, "they'll ask you, 'Where's your husband,'" she said. "They think you're a caretaker. You have to tell them, 'We're veterans too.'"

Alex, Keene and Hunter spoke on the sidelines of an event 6 MAR honoring them and 12 other female veterans as "2019 Women Veteran Trailblazers" for their service and work in the community. The event was sponsored by the VA's Center for Women Veterans at the Women in Military Service for America Memorial. In her remarks at the event, retired Air Force Col. Pamela Powers, Wilkie's chief of staff, said that "doors are continually opening to women" through the trailblazers' example. "These women didn't sign up to break glass ceilings but, through their integrity, moral courage and determination, they did," Powers said. "You wanted to have the same opportunities as everybody else in the unit. And you wanted to stand out, not because of your gender, but because of what you did."

In her remarks, Anna Crenshaw, deputy director of the VA's Center for Women Veterans, said the VA is seeking to instill a "culture of transformation" across the agency to make it more accommodating to female veterans. "Cultural transformation is something the center is really striving for, something that has been needed for a long time. It's no

secret that women have served valiantly," she said. The transformation Crenshaw spoke about has been slow in coming at the VA, said Haring, the retired Air Force colonel and interim chief executive officer at the Service Women's Action Network. But she sees encouraging signs. "I believe there's an acknowledgment" at the VA of the harassment problem for women veterans, Haring said. "I think Wilkie recognizes that."

Last September, at the inaugural meeting of the Military Women's Coalition in Atlanta, Wilkie said, "My pledge to you is the VA will become a welcoming home for all those who have worn the uniform." He said the department is "on the cusp of great change" in services for women, and "in order to meet that change, we have to change the way of doing business." The numbers show that the change will have to come quickly in terms of access for female veterans seeking VA health care, officials said at a 28 FEB hearing of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, VA and Related Agencies.

The wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have resulted in an exponential growth in the number of female veterans now registered for treatment by the Veterans Health Administration, said Patricia Hayes, Women's Health Services chief consultant at the VA. "The number of women veterans using VHA services has tripled since 2001, growing from 159,810 to 500,000 today," she said in her testimony. Hayes said the VA is "strategically enhancing services and access for women veterans" through increased reliance on the private sector when treatment services in areas such as gynecology, maternity care, mammography and infertility treatments are not available at the VHA. However, Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), the subcommittee's chairperson, said, "Having women doctors and gender-specific care programs for women at every single VA facility is the absolute least we can do, and we are not currently providing it." [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | March 10, 2019 ++]

VA Budget FY 2020 Update 02 ► Trump \$220.2B Proposal | 9.6% Increase

President Donald J. Trump is proposing a total of \$220.2 billion in his fiscal year (FY) 2020 budget for the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA), a 9.6 percent increase above fiscal 2019. "The budget request will ensure the nation's Veterans receive high-quality health care and timely access to benefits and services," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. "The budget supports the most significant transformation of VA since its inception, positioning the department as the premier provider for Veterans' services and benefits. This is a significant increase in VA funding and demonstrates the administration's commitment to supporting our Veterans."

The FY 2020 budget includes \$97 billion (an increase of \$6.8 billion, or 7.5 percent) in discretionary funding, including resources for health care, benefit administration, and national cemeteries, as well as \$123.2 billion (an increase of \$12.3 billion or 11.1 percent) in mandatory funding above 2019 for benefit programs inclusive of Compensation and Pensions, Readjustment Benefits, Housing and Insurance. This budget provides robust funding for the secretary's top priorities.

MISSION Act: \$8.9 billion for implementation of the Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks Act of 2018 (MISSION Act) to provide greater choice on where Veterans receive their care, maintain care for current Choice Program users, provide a new urgent care benefit and expand the Caregivers program.

Electronic Health Record Modernization (EHRM): \$1.6 billion (\$496 million above FY 2019) to create and implement a single longitudinal electronic health record for military service members from their active duty to Veteran status, and ensure interoperability with the Department of Defense. The increase will support ongoing activities at the three initial deployment sites and the deployment to further sites, as well as additional site assessments.

Transforming Business Systems: Funds the continued deployment of a modern integrated financial and acquisition management system (\$184.9 million) and implementation of the Defense Medical Logistics Standard Support (\$36.7 million).

Improving Customer Service: \$8.1 million to maintain VA's trajectory of improving its customer service. The results of a recent customer-experience feedback survey of Veterans regarding their trust of the department's health care outpatient services showed "trust scores" for outpatient services increased from 84.7 percent in June 2017 to 87.9 percent in January 2019.

Preventing Veteran Suicide: \$9.4 billion (\$426 million above 2019) for mental health services, which includes \$222 million for suicide-prevention outreach, a \$15.6 million increase over 2019.

Women's Health: \$547 million (\$42 million above 2019) for gender-specific women's health care. This increase will help meet VA's goals of developing Designated Women's Health Primary Care Providers at every site where women access VA care, and improve the availability and quality of services to women Veterans.

Capital Investments: \$1.6 billion for major and minor construction, including \$410 million for the construction of a new hospital in Louisville, Kentucky, and \$150 million for the Manhattan, New York, medical center.

Budget materials are available here: <https://www.va.gov/budget/products.asp>. [Source: VA News Release | March 11, 2019 ++]

VAMC Leavenworth KS Update 02 ► Lung Cancer Diagnosis Delayed 10 Months

An inspection at the Leavenworth VA Medical Center found that a patient with a possible malignancy result was notified by a physician 288 days after the test was completed. Ten months after the initial CT scan, the patient was diagnosed with stage three lung cancer with the possibility of metastatic disease. The patient died in the summer of 2017, according to the Office of the Inspector General's report. The inspection was initiated after an individual made an allegation in November 2017 about delays in a lung cancer diagnosis and the reporting of an abnormal radiology test. The complainant also said a provider falsely documented the patient initially wasn't willing to have the test conducted. The OIG substantiated the claims, finding that the patient never refused the test or intervention. Three subsequent allegations were unsubstantiated.

The OIG conducted a site visit from June 4 to 7, 2018. The agency determined the patient's records weren't assigned the appropriate code for follow-up. Officials examined cases with the follow-up notification and found that 45 out of 249 veterans -- or 18 percent -- didn't receive communication of the results within the required timeframe or that the results weren't documented in their electronic health records. The OIG concluded there was evidence of ongoing care and the patients didn't suffer adverse outcomes because of the delays. According to the VA's policy, test results requiring action must be communicated in seven calendar days. Normal results must be communicated within 14 days. The inspection also found radiologists didn't receive training on new diagnostic codes or software that generates notifications.

Five recommendations were issued on training, timely communication and adherence to other VA policies. "We appreciate the inspector general's oversight, which in this case focuses on events that occurred in 2017," said Joe Burks, spokesman for VA Eastern Kansas Health Care System. "Since then, the Leavenworth VA Medical Center has taken steps to address and implement each of the IG's recommendations." Burks said the Leavenworth hospital has undergone changes to simplify diagnostic coding, train employees and update their policies to prevent similar issues in the future. According to the report, a team from the VA Eastern Kansas Health Care System met with the veteran's spouse and adult child and a full disclosure was given, as was an apology. The family also was notified of their right to seek legal advice under the Federal Tort Claims Act. [Source: The Topeka Capital-Journal | Katie Moore | March 11, 2019 ++]

VAMC Cleveland Update 03 ► Selected as 1 of 18 Pilot Sites for HRO Initiative

The Louis Stokes Cleveland VA Medical Center is taking part in an effort to **reduce deadly medical mistakes** in VA health centers across the country. The Cleveland VA Medical Center is among 18 medical centers selected nationwide to lead a new initiative for transforming VA health centers in to high-reliability organizations (HRO). High-reliability organizations use procedures and protocols that emphasize safety, reduce errors and prevent harm to patients. The VA's new initiative is a re-commitment to making patient safety the main focus, said Dr. Gerard Cox, deputy undersecretary for Organizational excellence for the Veterans Health Administration. He is based in Washington, D.C. Cox noted that the aviation and nuclear power industries, which use high-reliability organization principles, have extremely low error rates. "We are rededicating ourselves to achieving this for the veterans health care system," he said.

Cleveland was picked as a pilot site because it has stable leadership and high employee engagement, he said. "We felt Cleveland was one of the facilities most ready to undertake this transformation," Cox said. "Cleveland is very much at the forefront of this national journey." High-reliability organization principals will be placed in every VA medical facility in 2020, the VA announced. A February Leadership Summit kicked off the HRO journey and introduced high-reliability concepts and practices to pilot sites in New York state, Pennsylvania, Texas, Tennessee, Florida, California among others.

The national program on patient safety will make additional training and coaching available to staff at the 18 selected sites, including Cleveland, later this year, Cox said. Trainers will come from the VA's National Center for Patient Safety, and the VA Office of Systems Redesign and Improvement. Training will focus on ways to improve communication to ensure that precise information is passed between the emergency room and the operating room when a patient is transferred, and that family clearly understand a patient's discharge orders.

Cleveland's VA hospital is already a leader in patient safety, said Kristen Guadalupe, chief of quality management at the Cleveland VA Medical Center. A few years ago, the hospital saw a rise in the number of patients with a certain type of infection. An investigation traced the problem to a new cleaning product; testing found that it was less effective against that type of bacterial infection. Their findings were passed on to other VA medical centers, the cleaner's manufacturer and the Environmental Protection Agency, Guadalupe said. In 2016, the hospital started a hotline to collect employee questions and concerns about things that could turn into bigger problems. "They feel like their opinion matters," Guadalupe said. [Source: The Plain Dealer | Julie Washington | March 8, 2019 ++]

GAO High Risk List Update 01 ► VA Flagged Again

The VA has been flagged -- again -- as a "High Risk" agency for its health care delivery and the way it contracts for goods and services, according to a new Government Accountability Office report. "We keep finding the same problems over and over" going back years at the VA, Comptroller General of the United States and GAO head Gene Dodaro said in testimony on the report 6 MAR before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform.

GAO publishes a "High Risk List" on a biennial basis to identify programs and operations especially vulnerability to "fraud, waste, abuse and mismanagement," according to the organization. There are 35 entities on newly released 2019 list; VA acquisition management is a new addition for this year, although the 2017 report did identify VA health care as a high-risk area that needed attention. "[The VA has] a huge budget" at the VA, Dodaro said Wednesday. The VA budget totaled about \$200 billion for fiscal 2019. "It's not been for a lack of resources that they haven't addressed these problems, in my opinion," he said.

On health care, a GAO report released Wednesday said the VA needs to do a better job of oversight on how veterans enroll, which is generally the first step veterans take to enter the system. "Not all newly enrolled veterans have been

able to access primary care within VA, while other veterans experienced wide variation in the amount of time they waited for primary and specialty care," the report said. There were often major discrepancies in the wait times calculated by the Veterans Health Administration and the actual wait times experienced by the veteran, according to the findings. "To address this issue, VA needs to ensure the reliability of its data on veterans wait times, and ensure that VA medical facilities are consistently implementing its scheduling policy," the report said.

In a separate report, the GAO said the Department of Veterans Affairs was working off outdated regulations and policies on acquisition and contracting for goods and services, and lacked an effective strategy for procuring medical supplies. The VA "needs to improve its procurement processes and achieve cost savings by complying with applicable policy and regulation to obtain available discounts when procuring medical supplies," the report stated. The VA has "some of the most entrenched management problems I've seen" among government agencies in its acquisition process, Dodaro said at the hearing, in response to questions from Rep. Mark Green, R-Tennessee. "When they tried to launch purchasing agreements, they didn't involve the clinicians as much as they should have in deciding what to purchase," Dodaro said, adding that he was encouraged by VA Secretary Robert Wilkie's pledges to reform. "So they're revamping this and we'll see if they come up with a better approach."

The GAO report on problems with VA's policy on procuring goods and services echoed two scathing reports in 2017 and 2018 from the VA's Office of Inspector General about poor conditions at the Washington, D.C., VA Medical Center due to acquisition failures and poor management. The shoddy oversight of the medical supply system at the Washington hospital led to shortages in operating rooms, the IG's reports said. At one point, according to the reports, the operating room at the hospital ran out of vascular patches to seal blood vessels and ultrasound probes used to map blood flow. In addition, the hospital had to borrow bone material for knee replacement surgeries, and also ran out of tubes needed for kidney dialysis, forcing staff to go on emergency runs to a private-sector hospital to procure them, the report said.

In the 2018 report, VA Inspector General Michael Missal said that "failed leadership at multiple levels within VA put patients and assets at the DC VA Medical Center at unnecessary risk and resulted in a breakdown of core services." "It created a climate of complacency that allowed these conditions to exist for years," Missal said. Last April, the VA put out a release detailing initiatives and corrective actions to cut red tape and improve patient care in an effort to get off GAO's "High Risk" list. Wilkie, then acting VA secretary, said at the time that "we are serious about doing business differently to improve veterans care and we are holding ourselves accountable to the nation's veterans and to American taxpayers who entrust them to our care." The headline for the release stated: "VA Takes Decisive Actions to Move off GAO High-Risk List," but the GAO's latest reports said that problems persist. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | March 7, 2019 ++]

VA Vision Care Update 08 ► Technology-based Eye Care Services Program

Dr. April Maa is making screening for eye care much easier and more accessible for Veterans, especially Veterans living in rural areas. Working with the Atlanta VA Eye Clinic, she developed an eye-screening program called Technology-based Eye Care Services (TECS). TECS found possible vision-threatening disease in nearly one in three patients. This is a valuable advancement because Veterans are at high risk for eye disease than the average U.S. person. Access to eye care is challenging within the VA network of hospitals and clinics because it is VA's third busiest outpatient clinical service. TECS is being used at VA facilities across the country.

Rural veterans face many more barriers to accessing eye care because of distance, cost to travel, and difficulty finding care in the community as many live in medically underserved areas. And rural Veterans may be diagnosed in later stages of eye disease more often than their non-rural counterparts due to lack of access to specialty care. The most common eye problems Veterans get are cataracts, glaucoma, macular degeneration and damage to the eyes from diabetes.



Specialized camera (left) and machine to check vision and eyeglasses (right) help to provide screening eye care at a TECS site in Blairsville, GA.

After a Veteran makes an appointment, they go to their local Community-Based Outpatient Clinic where an eye technician performs the testing. With specially trained ophthalmology technicians at the Veterans primary care clinic, TECS uses state of the art eye equipment to perform a high-quality screening eye exam. The images are transmitted through the VA system to a doctor who reads images and prescribes the glasses which are mailed to the Veteran's home from the optical contractor.

With TECS, VA can now use technology to help triage patients into levels of need (basic, intermediate, advanced), tailoring the patient care experience to the appropriate provider while optimizing resources. TECS quality data showed that the program improved the ability of patients to get screening appointments and mitigated the distance traveled by Veterans and the time they spent trying to get eye care. While the program is not meant to replace an in-person eye exam, TECS also helped find possible vision-threatening disease in nearly one in three patients who were checked. The program is now being spread to other VA hospitals across the country with the continued goal of preventing blindness. [Source: Vantage Point | Hans Petersen | February 28, 2019 ++]

VAMC Louisville KY Update 03 ► New Hospital Funding in 2020 Budget Proposal

Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell said 6 MAR that President Donald Trump has personally assured him the money needed to fully fund a new Veterans Affairs hospital in Kentucky's largest city will be included in the White House's budget request to Congress. The president's commitment to include more than \$400 million for the new VA Medical Center in Louisville in his fiscal 2020 budget proposal puts the long-running project in a place where its supporters "can see a light at the end of the tunnel," McConnell said. The project has dragged on through all or parts of three presidencies since it was originally announced, he said. "It's not necessarily the end zone, but it's a milestone," McConnell said in announcing Trump's funding support. "This will be the first time any presidential budget has included full funding" for the new hospital. Trump's budget blueprint is expected to be released soon.

The Kentucky project's supporters already have secured about \$450 million — about half of the required funding, McConnell said. Groundbreaking on the new hospital could occur as soon as 2020, he said. The federal government paid \$12.9 million several years ago for a 35-acre (14-hectare), suburban site several miles east of downtown Louisville for the new hospital. It would replace the aging Robley Rex VA Medical Center, which opened in the 1950s east of downtown and serves veterans living in a large swath of Kentucky and portions of Southern Indiana. The new hospital's location was a running debate, with some advocating for downtown or other locations in Louisville.

McConnell never endorsed a specific location, focusing instead on getting the funding. The new hospital also will be named for Robley Rex, a veteran who later spent many years serving as a VA volunteer.

McConnell, a senior member of the Senate Appropriations Committee, said a president's budget proposal is a "starting place" when trying to secure funding for projects. But its inclusion gives its supporters an advantage as it competes for funding with other projects as Congress works on the budget, he said. "It makes it easier for those of us who are making a final decision to keep it in," the senator said. McConnell, who is gearing up for his next re-election bid in 2020, has long pointed to his ability to steer federal money to Kentucky in his past campaigns. [Source: Associated Press | Bruce Schreiner | March 4, 2019 ++]

VA Employment Update 07 ► Secretary Wilkie Concerned About Filling Job Vacancies

VA Secretary Robert Wilkie told lawmakers 27 FEB that the department is looking to hire medical professionals for primary care, women's health, and mental health needs, filling some of its nearly 49,000 vacancies. "I will be honest with you - yes, I am concerned," Wilkie said of the job openings during a House Veterans Affairs Committee hearing. "I would not be honest with you if I told you that my focus would be filling [all the] vacancies. I have to prioritize our efforts as to where we have the most need."

The VA has been scrutinized for its extensive vacancies, especially as long wait times for appointments have been reported in recent years. Wilkie said wait times have decreased, and he has sharpened his focus to fill vacancies based on the needs of veterans. The MOAA-supported VA MISSION Act included some new recruitment tools for VA officials, such as expanded programs to pay off education debt and a pilot program that would pay for a veteran to attend medical school in exchange for a commitment to work four years in a VA facility. "MOAA supports the VA's efforts to fill critical positions so veterans can receive the care they've earned in a timely fashion," said Cmdr. René Campos, USN (Ret), MOAA's senior director of Government Relations for veterans and wounded warrior care. "We will continue to work with Congress to give VA officials the proper resources and flexibility, and we'll listen to veterans to ensure hiring priorities match their needs and show results."

Rep. Conor Lamb (D-PA), a Marine Corps veteran, lauded VA officials for decreasing wait times, but said he's hearing from VA workers that shortages are affecting the quality of their work and their well-being. He asked Wilkie if he was instructed by the administration to leave any of the vacancies open; Wilkie said no. "The shortages are being felt by the people who are there, and I think we all need to work together to address that," Lamb said. The VA, which is the second-largest employer in the federal government (behind the Defense Department), reported 48,985 vacancies as of December out of an authorized workforce of about 420,000. More than 42,000 of those vacancies are in the Veterans Health Administration. DoD's medical staffing also has made headlines, as leaders at the Pentagon may slash as many as 17,000 uniformed medical corps billets across as services to align with the National Defense Strategy's push for a more lethal force.

"The focus of my efforts is to fill primary care, women's health, and mental health," Wilkie said. "Those are the greatest areas. Mental health goes without saying. Women's health, that's because ... the makeup of our veteran population has changed dramatically. And primary health, because newer veterans are used to urgent care." The VA's efforts to recruit professionals centers on increased salaries, bonus pay, and covering relocation expenses. Wilkie said Congress' funding to bump salaries has been vital in attracting talent to the VA. "And that is absolutely vital if we are going to continue to serve veterans," he said. Despite the vacancies, VA officials have said the best way to judge patient satisfaction and meeting needs is against wait times for appointments. VA officials said wait times have been reduced across the system, and every medical center has same-day access to mental health and primary care. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | Amanda Dolasinski | March 7, 2019 ++]

VA Individual Unemployability Update 06 ► Understanding New Verification Process

The VA recently began sending out letters to veterans in receipt of a total disability rating (100 percent) based on individual unemployability (IU) that detail the department's new process for verification of employment status. The letters include some confusing language that the VA is working to clear up. Previously, the VA sent VA Form 21-4140 (Employment Questionnaire) annually, asking veterans to report employment status in order to make a determination on continued IU eligibility. If a response was not received within 30 days, the VA would begin the process of discontinuation. If a response was received, the VA would determine action based on the information provided by the veteran.

Under the new process, the VA will use a data wage match with the Social Security Administration (SSA) to identify veterans in receipt of IU who also have earned wages above the poverty threshold, as defined by the U.S. Census Bureau, for the previous calendar year. However, this passage in the letter has created some confusion:

“Military Pay or Workers' Compensation: Your payment may be affected by the following, which you must bring to our attention: Receipt of armed forces service retirement pay, unless your retirement pay has already been reduced because of award of disability compensation.”

The form the VA requires for eligibility verification only requires the veteran to fill out the Employment Certification Section (II) or the Unemployment Certification Section (III). If employed, you must provide Employer Name/Address, Type of Work, Hours Per Week, Dates of Employment, Time Lost from Illness and Highest Gross Earnings Per Month for each employer during the past 12 months. The catch here is that the VA is really only interested in “earned income.” Military retired pay and Social Security benefits are not considered “earned income” and are not required to be reported on the questionnaire. The VA is in the process of rewriting the IU Eligibility letter, and thankfully the draft copy MOAA received no longer includes the confusing language on receipt of armed forces service retirement pay. [Source: MOAA Newsletter| Paul Frost | March 7, 2019 ++]

VA HRO Transition ► 18 Medical Centers Will Lead The Way

On 7 MAR the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the selection of 18 medical centers that will lead the way in the department's efforts to transform the nation's largest integrated health care system into a **High Reliability Organization** (HRO). Pioneered in highly complex environments, such as aviation and nuclear energy, HROs put procedures and protocols in place that maximize safety and minimize harm, which in the medical industry assures every patient receives excellent care, every time. “VA has been a leader in patient safety for years,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “Adopting high reliability principles more formally represents the next step for delivering the best health care to Veterans. “These principles align with our greater vision of transforming business operations and delivering exceptional customer service to Veterans,” Wilkie said. “Our culture is changing and pursuing HRO principles nationwide is our pledge to empower staff and keep Veterans the safest they can be on our watch.”

Research shows high reliability organizations experience fewer accidents despite being high-risk environments where small errors can produce catastrophic results. A February Leadership Summit kicked off the HRO journey and introduced high reliability concepts and practices to the 18 sites. Lessons learned from these 18 sites will guide a more impactful rollout across every Veterans Health Administration (VHA) medical facility in 2020.

The 18 sites selected are: Manchester VA Medical Center (VAMC) (N.H.); Albany Samuel S. Stratton VAMC (N.Y.); Erie VAMC (Pa.); Beckley VAMC (W.Va.); Durham VAMC (N.C.); Ralph H. Johnson VAMC (Charleston, S.C.); James A. Haley Veterans Hospital (Tampa, Fla.); James H. Quillen VA Healthcare System (HCS) (Johnson City, Tenn.); Louis Stokes Cleveland VAMC (Ohio); William S. Middleton VA Hospital (Madison, Wis.); Kansas

City VAMC (Mo.); G.V. Sonny Montgomery VAMC (Jackson, Miss.); Audie L. Murphy VA Hospital (San Antonio, Texas); Oklahoma City VA HCS (Okla.); Boise VAMC (Idaho); VA Sierra Nevada HCS (Reno, Nev.); VA San Diego HCS (Calif.); and St. Cloud VA HCS (Minn.).

The VHA journey to become an HRO is consistent with national safety goals set forth by the Joint Commission, an independent, nonprofit organization that accredits and certifies approximately 21,000 health care organizations and programs in the U.S. In addition to a safer environment focused on reducing errors and preventing patient harm, HRO principles and values call for deference to expertise; oftentimes, the patient's family caregiver is that expert. HRO will empower Veterans and their family caregivers, along with employees who work hands-on with Veterans, to make decisions and impact improvements that aim for excellent care for every patient, every time. [Source: VA News Release | March 7, 2019 ++]

VA EHR Update 14 ► VA Health Data to Transfer Easier Than DoD's to New EHR System

Rep. Phil Roe (R-TN), chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, returned from a recent visit to Fairchild Air Force Base, Washington, alarmed that the Department of Veterans Affairs might have made a bad decision in June 2017 to replace its legacy electronic health record system, VistA, with the same commercial off-the-shelf system that the military is adopting, starting with Pacific Northwest bases. "I came back blowing the bugle," said Roe, a physician, who saw staff at Fairchild's hospital frustrated at the MHS Genesis system in ways that recalled for Roe his experience years earlier shifting paper to electronic medical records.

In this case, however, Fairchild physicians were frustrated that only minimal patient data had transferred from the Defense Department's legacy system, ALHTA, into the Cerner Millennium architecture used in MHS Genesis. If VA adopted the same system, Roe remembered fearing, physicians would have to spend two to three additional minutes on each patient just looking into VistA data that Roe had expected would be transferred into the new record system. "If I don't have it all in front of me," Roe said, "you've just added another hour to my day. You ask doctors today what's frustrating them. It's the damn electronic health system. It takes part of the joy out of medicine."

Roe said he feared that a lot of the efficiency savings that VA expected to realize from modernizing electronic records would be lost by having to maintain the legacy system alongside the new system, perhaps for decades. That's why Roe sounded retreat, he said. He's put away his horn, however. VA Secretary David Shulkin, back in December, paused contract negotiations and plans to piggyback onto the deployment of MHS Genesis for reasons unrelated to physician frustrations Roe witnessed. In fact, Roe said, Shulkin soon reassured him that VA medical data won't face the same transfer challenges as military patient data stored on ALHTA. Shulkin told him, Roe said, that contracting officials expect to be able to transfer up to five years of VA medical records into the new system for every patient enrolled in VA health care.

"They should have everything pertinent in there," Roe said. "They will keep the rest of that information stored for legal purposes or, I guess, if they had to deep dive when somebody left information out or a disability claim that still needed to be data mined. But for the most part, if I'm a [VA] doc sitting in front of my screen, getting ready to see my patient, I'll have everything I need on one system." Roe remains concerned that the Department of Defense will have to keep ALHTA accessible to medical staff for years longer than VA will need to use VistA, even though VA's patient base is at least twice as large.

What Roe discovered at Fairchild, however, has been well known for years among architects of government electronic health records. Since at least 2009 when the Obama administration announced plans for a virtual lifetime record system using worldwide standards, the Department of Veterans Affairs has taken more care than did DoD to collect and store medical data in a common format, compatible with popular electronic record systems in the private sector. Defense officials knew they would face hurdles on data transfer when they signed the \$4.3 billion 10-year

Defense Healthcare Management System Modernization contract in July 2015, with Leidos Inc. tasked to deploy two popular commercial systems -- Cerner Millennium for medical records and Dentrix Enterprise for dental -- to modernize military health records.

"DoD does not concede this will be a problem for us," said Stacy Cummings, program executive officer for Defense Healthcare Management Systems. She acknowledged VA and DoD are modernizing different legacy models. DoD, in fact, has three legacy electronic medical record systems in AHLTA, Essentris and CHCS, each of which manages health data differently. "As we transition to MHS GENESIS," Cummings said, "we will sunset legacy tools locally -- at each medical facility -- and once we have fully transitioned we will sunset the legacy programs at the enterprise level." Health care providers at military facilities, meanwhile, will continue to view legacy health data through the Joint Legacy Viewer, a clinical application created years ago to allow "read only" access to medical records stored by DoD, VA and private sector partners who participate in the common data viewer.

MHS Genesis' rollout began in February 2017 at Fairchild and at Oak Harbor Naval Hospital in June. Madigan Army Medical Center on Joint Base Lewis-McChord and Naval Health Clinic Oak Harbor followed. Plans are to have the system fully deployed at these sites by 2019 and throughout the military by 2022. Further expansion at these bases is in a planned pause, for eight weeks, while managers review more than a thousand user complaints and make necessary adjustments to enhance the system, DoD and contract officials explained.

Shulkin paused VA contract negotiations with the Leidos-Cerner team in December so the not-for-profit MITRE Corporation could study the draft contract and identify issues. Roe said MITRE made many recommendations. One would direct VA, not Cerner, to own the connection portal, or API gateway, between, community providers and insurance companies. Another would require VA to create an external panel to conduct annual interoperability assessments to judge how effective the new system is in accessing and transferring medical data. Patrick Flanders, chief information officer for the military health system, said the requirement to keep medical records available through AHLTA, at least through full deployment of Genesis, is tied to it being "an old system" and with "poor" data.

Some of the frustration Roe heard from providers at Fairchild, Flanders said, are "part of just the growing pains" of using a new system installed at targeted sites for the purpose of achieving initial operational capability. Adrian Atizado, deputy national legislative director with Disabled American Veterans, has been studying VA plans to piggyback on the DoD plan for modernizing records, using the same contractors and architecture, applying DoD lessons learned and using the same staff that brings MHS Genesis to life. Atizado questioned whether the piggyback arrangement can be sustained for too long if, in every region of the country, VA can transition to the new health record system faster than DoD because of ease of medical data transfer.

If VA had followed DoD's lead into Washington state, for example, would VA have to delay its own progress modernizing records at VA facilities in state while DoD paused for weeks to fix user complaints at military hospitals, Atizado asked. "And if VA doesn't rollout behind them, but in front, what will that do to VA costs?" Shulkin was expected to announce resumption of contract negotiations soon. Roe applauded the secretary's caution on a contract estimated at \$15 billion. "You know this is the biggest electronic rollout that anybody's ever done. Biggest in the world," Roe said. "And VA doesn't have the greatest track record of rolling big stuff out on time and under budget. I can tell you that." [Source: Military.com | Tom Philpott | March 10, 2018 ++]

VA Facility Closures Update 02 ► Large-Scale Could Be Coming Sooner Than Expected

Veterans Affairs' version of a base closing round could start years ahead of schedule, department officials told Congress on 27 FEB. Under the VA Mission Act signed into law last year, the president is authorized to appoint an Asset and Infrastructure Review Commission for the department in 2022. To inform the group's work, VA officials were given three years to perform regional market assessments across the country to determine areas where there were

medical facility shortages, gluts and other challenges. On 27 FEB, VA Secretary Robert Wilkie said those assessments were delayed slightly late last year but could still be finished in the next 12 months. If so, that could create a problematic gap between collecting that information and starting evaluations in 2022.

“We’ll come back to you this summer and give you an assessment of where things are,” he said. “If we can, to meet the expectations of this committee and the changing need of veterans, we’re going to come to Congress and ask to move that timeline up.” The idea of a base-closing-style round for VA has been controversial for many advocates, including lawmakers who could see major hospitals in their districts closed due to dwindling patient numbers. But VA officials have repeatedly warned that their current national footprint includes hundreds of outdated or obsolete facilities, and department administrators have severe restrictions in managing those locations. They have also said that the asset review could mean more facility construction in certain areas, as department officials see regional population shifts for veterans.

Dr. Richard Stone, the executive in charge of the Veterans Health Administration, told members of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee that across his system today, about 63 percent of the our medical beds are filled. “That’s not an efficient use of the system,” he added. Committee ranking member Rep. Phil Roe (R-KY) said he is anxious to move ahead with the review work. “We know veterans are moving south and west,” he said. “VA needs to be more nimble with how it’s able to move. We can’t keep thousands of beds underutilized or not used at all.” Costs or savings for the asset review have not yet been determined. House Democratic leadership has not indicated whether they would support speeding up the timeline for the process, a change that would require congressional approval. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane II | February 27, 2019 ++]

VA Health Care Access Update 65 ► Durham VA Medical Center Issues

Some veterans are waiting six months – even a year – for a doctor's appointment, despite a program designed to speed the scheduling process at Department of Veterans Affairs hospitals nationwide. WRAL Investigates has spent five years tracking VA wait times, hearing from patients and tracking federal changes designed to get veterans faster health care. "I called them back in 15 days. They said they needed 15 more days. I got discouraged and didn't call back for 21 days. They said they needed 15 more days," said Robert Hatton, a Vietnam veteran who has undergone neck surgeries and needs regular treatment for diabetes and heart disease.

When Congress passed the Choice Act in 2014, Hatton was hopeful. The law allowed veterans to see outside providers if the VA couldn't get them an appointment within 30 days. "What it was meant to do, it's not doing," Hatton said. "Choice just got slower and slower." When it comes to the Durham VA Medical Center, he's right. Data show 86 percent of patients got appointments within 30 days before Choice, but this month, that number's down to 84 percent. In a statement, Durham VA officials blame the drop on a national patient care initiative launched in November." Full statement from Durham VA Medical Center –

Durham VA Health Care System did not anticipate the volume of consults that would be forwarded to the Durham VA [Care in the Community system] and lacked appropriate staffing to coordinate care for requested community services," the statement said. "As of today, we have nearly doubled our staff to more than 100 employees to address the high volume of care in the community consults."

WRAL Investigates also received internal reports and emails that appear to show trouble in the scheduling department. An internal metrics report from 11 FEB, for example, shows just 25 percent of outside appointment requests are active within 30 days, meaning they're scheduled or awaiting completion. The system's goal is 90 percent. The VA said those numbers, as well as action on new consults, improved recently. "On average, we receive 200 Care in the Community consults a day. Ninety-three percent are processed to active status within seven days," the statement said. That doesn't necessarily mean the appointment is within that 30-day goal, however.

A 2016 directive on patient consults from the Veterans Health Administration outlines the importance of using the Computerized Patient Record System, or CPRS, to better track patients in the system. Yet, an email from earlier this month provided to WRAL Investigates by a whistleblower says management requested staff members to not use CPRS to send alerts. Instead, they were to use email or instant messaging to communicate calls and requests from veterans. "We appreciate staff and WRAL bringing this to our attention. However, to our best knowledge, this is not true," the statement from Durham VA officials said. The whistleblower disagrees, saying the directive came from management and that bypassing CPRS could further delay care, leading to an adverse outcome, such as lost patient information, because the VA's instant messaging system doesn't archive conversation histories.

"It ticks me off, but it does not surprise me," Hatton said. "They're going to have to revamp the whole system." The whistleblower's complaints have prompted the VA's Office of Inspector General to open an investigation into the scheduling problems. The VA said veterans experiencing scheduling issues can call 919-286-6899 for the Durham VA Medical Center. [Source: WRAL | Cullen Browder | February 27, 2019 ++]

* Vets *



Vet Groups Update 04 ► 2019 Congressional Objectives & Priorities

Veterans groups have earned significant legislative wins for their causes over the last few years. With the major battles over, they plan to dedicate themselves in 2019 to implementing these hard-fought bills and finding solutions for problems that have arisen with some of their provisions. These 2019 legislative priorities include taking care of “blue water” veterans, ensuring that Congress implements the VA Mission Act, improving the Department of Veterans Affairs’ ability to accommodate the conditions of the Forever GI Bill, restarting the conversation about the toxic effects of burn pits and other organization-specific goals.

“We saw major legislative victories in omnibus bills that got passed in the last Congress,” said Melissa Bryant, chief policy officer for Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. “That was a good start ... But there’s still a lot that needs to be done with all those pieces.” Lauren Augustine, Student Veterans of America’s vice president of government affairs, said that with legislation like the Forever GI Bill and VA Mission Act passed, her group has been freed up to tackle smaller but still vital issues. “I think VA-wide, the community has seen some phenomenal landmark bills passed in the last couple of years,” Augustine said. “We’ve got some detail and less sexy work we can also do to make sure we’re really applying services for veterans. Now we have the time to do that now that the big landmark bills are behind us.”

Bryant said that one of IAVA’s most pressing concerns this year is providing “vigorous oversight” on the Forever GI Bill. The VA seems to be having trouble keeping up with the demands of that particular bill. “It just showed that there was so much put into the Forever GI Bill that VA infrastructure, frankly, couldn’t handle it,” Bryant said. “They were woefully ill-equipped to be able to handle the compensation and benefits.” Augustine agreed, saying that ensuring the VA “sticks to the plan” laid out in the Forever GI Bill is one of her organization’s top 2019 priorities.

Then there's the VA Mission Act, which Congress passed in summer 2018. It promised expanded health care options for veterans, though it did draw the ire of those who believed President Donald Trump was overreaching his authority in an effort to privatize VA health care. Carlos Fuentes, Veterans of Foreign Wars' national legislative service director, said the VFW will be monitoring how well that legislation is enacted and enforced. "We all worked very closely with Congress and the VA to craft the VA Mission Act," he said. "Congress will have to keep a close eye on implementation. We will do the same."

Another issue that Fuentes said has the VFW's attention is the plight of "blue water" Navy veterans. In early 2018, the House passed a bill giving disability benefits to Vietnam veterans exposed to toxic Agent Orange chemicals that has yet to be ratified into law due to roadblocks in the Senate. "The issue that we continue to hear about the most is 'blue water' Navy," Fuentes said. "And, frankly, it's just an injustice this issue has not been addressed ... Our view is that Congress could put an end to this discussion of whether 'blue water' veterans deserve benefits."

On a similar note, some of these groups also hope to tackle the dangers posed by open-air burn pits, exposure to which has been linked with fatal illnesses like cancer. In January, the Supreme Court rejected an appeal trying to hold private companies accountable for burn pits that allegedly gave more than 800 veterans health problems. Both Fuentes and Bryant said that the VFW and IAVA were going to work on behalf of veterans suffering from burn-pit-related diseases. "We recognize it as the Agent Orange of our generation," Bryant said.

Another common mission many of these organizations will attempt to complete in 2019 is expanding health care for female veterans. "We want to ensure that the VA, which was designed at first as an all-male care facility, is beginning to modernize its footprint for veterans," said Matthew Shuman, the American Legion's national legislative director. Shuman said the AL's other 2019 priorities included pursuing initiatives to curb the veteran suicide rate, launching a pilot program for veterans interested in starting small businesses and stopping the deportation of immigrant veterans.

For Augustine and the SVA, she is hoping to modernize how the VA approaches helping student veterans. That will consist of, among other things, improving the VA's work-study program, upgrading its IT capacities and increasing its ability to aid student veterans affected by natural disasters. The VFW, according to Fuentes, will do its best to help veterans past their five-year care window get the support they need and push for legislation that increases access to "concurrent receipt," or the ability of veterans to receive retirement payments and disability compensation at the same time.

Finally, Bryant highlighted other IAVA-specific priorities like mental-health awareness among veterans and putting their legislative clout behind the VA Medicinal Cannabis Research Act, which would force the VA to more thoroughly explore the possible benefits of marijuana for ailing veterans. Bryant summed up what's at stake for the large, diverse constituent bases of all these veteran-service organizations. "We represent an entire statistical generation at this point," she said. "We represent everyone from retirees to kids who were infants on 9/11. It's really heavy when you think about it from that context." [Source: Military.com | Joshua Axelrod | February 27, 2019 ++]

VA Blue Water Claims Update 66 ► Veterans Groups Appeal to Trump

Ten national veterans organizations pleaded with President Donald Trump on 12 MAR, asking him to direct the Justice Department not to appeal a recent federal court decision that could extend benefits to thousands of Vietnam War veterans. The Court of Appeals for the Federal Circuit ruled 9-2 in January that "Blue Water" Navy veterans, those who served aboard ships offshore during the war, are eligible for benefits to treat illnesses linked to exposure to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange. The Justice Department and Department of Veterans Affairs have until the end of

the month to seek a review of the case from the U.S. Supreme Court. VA General Counsel James Byrne said last month that the agency hadn't decided whether it would appeal but officials were "taking it under advisement."



Members of advocacy groups gathered on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on May 18, 2016, to promote the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act.

Veterans and lawmakers have asked VA Secretary Robert Wilkie not to contest the decision. On Tuesday night, 10 groups appealed directly to Trump. "On behalf of the undersigned veterans service organizations and our millions of members, we urge you to direct the Justice Department **NOT to appeal** the U.S. Appeals Court for the Federal Circuit decision," they wrote in a letter to the president. The court ruled in favor of Alfred Procopio, Jr., 73, who served on the USS Intrepid during the Vietnam War. Procopio is one of tens of thousands of veterans who served aboard aircraft carriers, destroyers and other ships and were deemed ineligible for the same disability benefits as those veterans who served on the ground and inland waterways. The decision came 10 years after the VA denied Procopio's disability claims for diabetes and prostate cancer.

At issue was interpretation of the current law, which allows easier access to disability benefits for veterans who "served in the Republic of Vietnam" and suffer from one of a list of illnesses linked to the Agent Orange. The herbicide has been found to cause respiratory cancers, Parkinson's disease and heart disease, as well as other conditions. The court determined territorial seas should be included in the definition of "Republic of Vietnam" – a point the government disputed. For Procopio and other Blue Water Navy veterans, the decision could result in thousands of dollars of disability benefits each month. John Wells, one of the attorneys on the case, estimated 50,000 to 70,000 veterans could become eligible for benefits.

The ruling followed a failed effort in Congress last year to approve the benefits. The House voted unanimously in favor of the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act last year, but the legislation stalled in the Senate after Wilkie voiced his opposition, citing high costs and insufficient scientific evidence linking Blue Water Navy veterans to Agent Orange. The House and Senate reintroduced the legislation at the start of the new congressional session. The top lawmakers on the veterans affairs committees – Sens. Johnny Isakson (R-GA), Jon Tester (D-MT), and Reps. Mark Takano (D-CA) and Phil Roe (R-TN) – said in February that they would attempt again to pass the legislation.

The 10 veterans groups argued Tuesday that the court decision authorizes the VA to make the benefits available now, without having to wait for legislation. "We call on you to direct [Wilkie] to immediately begin implementing this decision so that justice is finally provided to the men and women who served in Vietnam, suffered from the devastating long-term health effects of Agent Orange exposure, but who today are denied the benefits and health care they have earned," they wrote. The letter was signed by Disabled American Veterans, Veterans of Foreign Wars, The American Legion, Paralyzed Veterans of America, AMVETS, Military Order of the Purple Heart, Association of the United States Navy, Fleet Reserve Association, Vietnam Veterans of America and Military Officers Association of America.

"Mr. President, a veteran is someone who at one point in their life wrote a blank check made payable to the United States of America, for an amount up to and including their life," the groups concluded. "We ask that you and our

grateful nation take another step towards meeting that commitment.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | March 13, 2019 ++]

Vet Job Hunting Update 03 ► Six Tips

Ever thought your military experience made you the perfect candidate for a job, only to apply and get nothing but radio silence on the other end? You’re not the first veteran to go through that, and you won’t be the last. Here are some tips to help you make it through the job-search process without losing your mind, courtesy of five veterans who have been there.

1. Don’t rest on your military experience. By the time **Josh Horneck** was 22, he had traveled the world, deployed to a combat zone, learned how to make decisions in life-altering situations and established friendships that will last a lifetime — all thanks to the military. “All of this uniquely prepared me to be successful in any career I chose,” said Horneck, a former public affairs specialist in the Army Reserves and Michigan National Guard. But those and other experiences don’t neatly translate into a bulleted list on a resume, he said, and he found that most employers, even those claiming to be military friendly, didn’t understand them anyway. “The biggest help for me was to stop convincing myself that ‘U.S. Army - 8 years’ was going to land me a mid-level management job at a Fortune 500” company, he said.

Nathan Hilt, who served from 1996 to 2000, said he was told by recruiters and college professors to list only his service dates on his resume — but nothing more unless it directly correlated to a specific job he was interested in. In his case, that wasn’t much, since he was looking for a career more related to his microbiology degree than his Marine Corps infantry experience. He said he’d advise other veterans to do the same, and strip things like military accolades from their resumes altogether. “[You’re] not applying to the military, and those won’t mean as much as you think they do,” he said. And another thing? “Stop cussing and tone down your bravado. You might think being a shit-talking badass with confirmed kills is the pinnacle of the world, but it’s not, and most of the world doesn’t want that,” Hilt said.

2. Treat job searching like a full-time job. Tailoring your resume and writing a cover letter for each job you’re interested in takes time. “Finding a job is a full-time job,” said Army veteran **Maureen Elias**. “Treat it as such. Set aside dedicated time for the work it takes — writing thank you notes, searching online, making calls, and networking. Keep a spreadsheet of contacts and follow up.” Go to job fairs and do your research, she added. Be ready to give recruiters your resume and elevator pitch, and prepare for possible interviews. “Enlist the aid of a mentor or multiple mentors,” she said. “I call mine my personal board of advisors. They can help you realize what you want to do, prepare you for the journey and support you as you begin the work.”

3. Start early. “Start planning a year out,” said **Bridget Altenburg**, a former Army captain who runs the Chicago-based nonprofit National Able Network that helps veterans and others find employment. You don’t need to have everything nailed down before you get out, she said, but start figuring out where you’re going to live, what school you might attend and what jobs or industries you’re interested in. She recommends using resources, such as the Labor Department’s [My Next Move](#) website, to help you figure out what you want to do next.

4. Start networking ... yesterday. “I’d advise those that are still in the military to make as many connections as possible,” Horneck said. “Do it before you are unemployed. Develop a career passion and do everything you can to get your foot in the door — be it education, face-to-face meetings with people already in the field, online communities, friend-of-a-friend’s-dad’s-cousin interactions, etc.” After Horneck separated from the military in 2015, it took nearly two years for him to find a civilian job that matched his skills. He now works at a Denver-based consulting firm supporting crisis response and emergency preparedness training, a position he got based on a referral from an Army

friend, he said. She, too, had joined the company based on a referral from another employee. “Had I not kept up with a connection I never imagined would give me a career, I may still be on the job hunt,” he said.

Most jobs are gotten this way — through networking versus blindly applying for jobs, Altenburg said. “There’s a hidden job search that’s hard to tap into if you just wait to apply for job postings,” she said. “Figure out where you want to work, see who you know, and ask them to connect you to a decision maker.” Altenburg said the best time to start making connections is yesterday. “Whenever you meet someone professionally, connect to them on LinkedIn and via email,” she said. “Keep a list of who you know by location and industry so you can ask them to help you network. Join alumni and interest groups, and don’t be shy about asking for help.”

5. Take time for yourself — and others. “Here is what I would tell someone who is getting out of the service: Take a proactive break,” said Alberto Lopez, a Marine Corps veteran who separated in 2007. This means taking time to “recover” from service, but in a way that will benefit you in the future, he said. For some, this could mean physically relaxing. For him, it meant volunteering. “Volunteering allowed me to regroup from my service while researching and developing a plan for my future,” he said. And it also looked good on a resume, filling in gaps that may have otherwise been red flags and demonstrating a passion for serving others, he said. Now, Lopez is the founder of Phenix Legacy, a nonprofit organization in Illinois that serves members of the military community and first responders. Elias said it’s also important to remember to take time for self-care during the job searching process. “Being told no is hard on the self-esteem,” she said.

6. Don’t give up. As you search for a job, remember that many a resume you send will go into oblivion, and you’ll never receive a response. “For every military transition poster child, there are 1,000 empty inboxes, waiting for even a rejection email,” Horneck said. For 95 percent of the jobs he applied for, Horneck heard nothing. Hilt had a similar experience. He applied to hundreds of jobs and never heard back. “Do not ever give up,” he said. “You might not get that job you wanted or an interview may have went dreadful. Regroup, adjust and try again.”

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Natalie Gross | March 11, 2019 ++]

Military Records Correction Update 03 ► Should You Make One

During World War II the military began using products with asbestos in them. However, starting in the 1930s and continuing through the 1970s, the military used asbestos in almost all of their construction projects, maintenance and renovations. All transportation vehicles used by the military also contained asbestos, and lots of it. Asbestos-containing Products were used in the following:

- Brake and clutch pads on military Jeeps
- Tanks
- Electrical wiring insulation
- Aircrafts
- Housing units, barracks, dormitories
- Flooring
- Drywalls
- Insulation
- Plumbing
- Boiler rooms on naval fleets

Those that built and maintained warships were primarily at risk due to the asbestos exposure. The pipe-fitting and boilers on these ships contained enormous amounts of asbestos. Veterans who were not performing their duties in the ships' boiler rooms still dealt with the moving of the cargo. With the constant vibrations and simple corrosion over

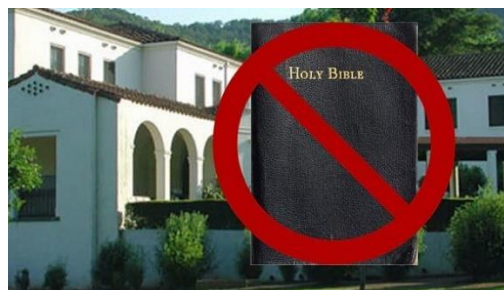
time, these invisible airborne asbestos fibers were easily inhaled by anyone who was aboard these ships during cargo movement. Even groups of veterans who worked on or near renovations and demolitions had a high risk of asbestos exposure since most of the building materials the military used contained asbestos in one way or another, and were being demolished, removed or renovated. Additionally, almost all of the buildings built on military installations prior to 1970 were built with asbestos infused in much of the building material.

The secretary of a military department, acting through a Board for Correction of Military Records, has authority to change any military record when necessary to correct an error or remove an injustice. A correction board may consider applications for correction of a military record, including review of a discharge issued by the courts. The veteran, survivor or legal representative must file a request for correction within three years after discovering an alleged error or injustice. The board may excuse failure to file within this time if in the interest of injustice. It is an applicant's responsibility to show why the filing of the application was delayed and why it should be in the interest of justice for the board to consider it despite the delay.

To justify a correction, it is necessary to show to the satisfaction of the board that the alleged entry or omission in the records was in error or unjust. One such omission could be assignment to a position/location where potential to exposure to asbestos was likely. Such an entry could make a veteran eligible for VA medical care as a service related condition. Applications should include all evidence, such as signed statements of witnesses or a brief of arguments supporting the correction. Application for correction to DoD is made with DD Form 149 which can be downloaded at <https://www.esd.whs.mil/Portals/54/Documents/DD/forms/dd/dd0149.pdf>. [Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | March 9, 2019 ++]

California Veterans Home Update 20 ► Yountville Home Bible Study Issue

An 84-year-old widow claims California officials are threatening to kick her out of a residence for veterans if she doesn't stop hosting a longtime Bible study. Artis Breau and her husband moved to the Veterans' Home of California in Yountville nine years ago. Breau's husband, who died a few years ago, served as a Merchant Marine, Army, in World War II and then, during the Korean War he served in the Air Force. The two met in the 1950s while she worked at the Pentagon as a civilian employee in the Office of the Chief of Staff of the Army.



She has been volunteering with the chaplaincy program and led Bible studies much of the last decade at an area of the residence known as the Holderman Building, which is a shared space for residents of the home. Recently, the California Department of Veterans Affairs (CalVet) notified Breau that she would face "involuntary discharge," or expulsion, from the home if she doesn't give up her status as a volunteer Bible study leader. "This shocking attack from the state against our client's exercise of religious convictions is deeply disturbing," said Brad Dacus, president of the Pacific Justice Institute (PJI), the firm representing Breau. "The state seeks to punish Artis based on non-existent directives, and deprive her of a personal ministry to the veterans who have benefited from her religious services for years. Artis isn't fighting just for herself, but for the Gospel and for the residents who are unable to fight for themselves against the state's attempted intimidation."

Breau came under fire for a discussion she had last September with another resident about heaven and hell that allegedly caused the man to lose sleep and was deemed "elder abuse, emotional abuse, and otherwise illegal," according to PJI. In December, the veterans home notified Breau that her volunteer status was being suspended indefinitely due to an ongoing investigation. She said she has not had an interview scheduled with CalVet officials about the alleged complaint.

Until last week, she was allowed to continue to lead the Bible study for some of CalVet's most elderly and mobility-challenged residents who have a hard time attending chapel services. But on 1 MAR, a CalVet attorney threatened Breau with expulsion if she didn't stop offering the voluntary Bible studies. The attorney claims the decision was for the "health and wellbeing" of the residents. "The safety, security, and wellbeing of all of our residents is our top priority. We are very proud of the religious services provided to all of our residents through our chaplaincy services. This investigation concerns the private conduct of an individual. Beyond that, we are unable to comment on an ongoing investigation," Lindsey Sin, deputy secretary of Women Veterans Affairs at CalVet, said in a statement.

Breau is an Evangelical Jew and believes in Jesus. She told Pacific Justice Institute she believes people have an issue with her religious beliefs. The California-based law firm is weighing all options on behalf of Breau. [Source: Fox News | Caleb Parke | March 6, 2019 ++]

WWII Vets 184 ► Willard H. Blevens Sr | Battle of The Bulge Participant



Willard H. Blevens Sr. was born in West Jefferson, North Carolina to a family of farmers. He later moved to Jarrettsville, North Carolina where he attended high school, graduating in 1942. That same year, Willard was drafted into the United States Army. He served in the European theater as a squad leader with the 357th Infantry Regiment, 90th Infantry Division of General Patton's 3rd Army. Nicknamed the "Tough 'Ombres," Willard and the 357th Infantry Regiment participated in some of the most infamous battles of World War II, including the Battle of the Bulge and the D-Day Invasions.

Willard's service in Europe began in March 1944, when he and the 357th Infantry Regiment boarded the QSMV Dominion Monarch troop transport ship bound for Liverpool, England. On June 10, 1944, four days after the initial D-Day landings, Willard and the 357th Infantry Regiment crossed the English Channel to join elements of the 90th Infantry Division in France. Soon after arriving, Willard and his regiment were tasked with taking the town of Pont-l'Abbé from German forces. During the battle for Pont-l'Abbé, Willard was struck by shrapnel from enemy artillery fire. After recovering from his injuries, Willard was able to regroup with his men at the front line and continued to serve with the 357th.

By December 1944, Willard and the 357th Infantry Regiment reached the Saar River. There, they were tasked with taking the French-German border town of Saarlautern. For several days they engaged in bitter house-to-house combat, successfully clearing the town of German forces. On 16 DEC, German forces began their last major offensive operation in what would become known as the Battle of the Bulge. For several weeks, Willard and the 357th Infantry Regiment held out against the desperate German counteroffensive. The success of the 357th and other Allied forces during the battle became a pivotal moment in World War II, marking the end of Germany's capacity to effectively

wage war. Later in life, Willard did not often speak of his experiences during the battle, remarking only that it was “very, very cold.”

By March 1945, Willard and the 357th made their way into Germany and up to the Rhine River. On their approach to the Rhine, they were attacked by German forces. After being engaged by the enemy, Willard and several other members of his regiment took up a defensive position in a nearby building. There, he and his fellow soldiers were struck by a German rocket launcher. Having been severely wounded in the attack, Willard was taken out of service and sent to the military hospital at Fort Story, Virginia. On May 8, 1945, while recovering at Fort Story, Willard received news that Germany had surrendered, marking the Allied victory in Europe.

Willard was discharged in October 1945 at the rank of staff sergeant and returned to his home in Hartford County. For actions during his service, Willard was awarded the Bronze Star for heroism and the Combat Infantryman Badge for participating in active ground combat. Willard also received two Purple Hearts in recognition of injuries sustained while engaged in enemy combat. After completing his service, Willard began working for the Hopkins Motor Company Auto Shop in Bel Air, North Carolina. He eventually started his own auto shop, Vale Body & Fender Shop, which he ran until retiring in 2015 at the age of 92. Throughout his life, Willard remained an avid baseball fan, coaching his children’s teams and serving as president of the local little league association. On Jan. 27, 2019, Willard passed away at his home in Fallston, North Carolina at the age of 95. We honor his service. [Source: Vantage Point | Nicholas Rogers-Dillon | March 7, 2019 ++]

WWII Vets 185 ► **Norma C. Tocci Kania** | WAC

Norma served from 1944 to 1947. She had less than a month left of high school but decided she was going to join the Women’s Army Corps before she graduated. She wanted to see the world and gain experiences she would not be able to have anywhere else. Norma chose the Army because they were given the opportunity to go overseas, unlike the other branches. Her parents thought she was crazy and were upset she joined, but Norma was determined. She went to Fort Des Moines for basic training, which lasted about six weeks. One night, Norma was on guard duty when she saw a large man walking near the camp. She tackled and handcuffed him, only to find out he was the camp commandant. Norma later went to Florida and learned how to use military weapons. She then went overseas to Wales.



In Wales, Norma was assigned to Air Transport Command. This unit was responsible for taking care of the wounded who were brought in by plane. There were about 75 women in the unit, and they were very tight-knit and worked as a team, helping each other complete their tasks. Norma had taken shorthand and typing in high school, so she did a lot of that type of work; however, she also did a variety of other jobs. She worked in the mess hall and was a switchboard operator. Norma also once fixed a broken mimeograph with a bobby pin. The colonel was grateful for this as the mimeograph was used to relay orders. Norma’s brother was a naval aviator, and he visited Norma once while she was in Wales.

Norma moved on from Wales to Hanau, Germany, where she got the opportunity to meet General Eisenhower. She then went to Orly Field in France to drive a school bus and work at Headquarters. Norma took leave when she was in France and was able to visit her grandparents in Italy. When Norma returned to the United States, she was assigned to Hamilton Air Force Base until she had to leave the Army when she got married, due to Army regulations at that time. Norma later joined the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the American Legion and an organization for Women's Army Corps Veterans. Noma passed away in 2015. [Source: Vantage Point blog | March 14, 2019 ++]

Burn Pit Toxic Exposure Update 63 ► What's Coming Next in Battle for Benefits.

House lawmakers on 5 MAR advanced legislation to improve tracking of troops' exposure to toxic chemicals from war zone burn pits, but the real political fight over how to help those ailing veterans is set for later this spring. A group of lawmakers led by California Democrat Rep. Raul Ruiz is planning a push to classify combat burn pit exposure as the presumed cause of a range of lung diseases for veterans who served in Iraq and Afghanistan, opening the door for easier access to medical care and disability benefits. The proposal is likely to face fierce opposition from VA leadership, which has emphasized the need for clear scientific links between war zone exposures and illnesses later in life before making large-scale benefits decisions. The department's official position is that "research does not show evidence of long-term health problems from exposure" to burn pits.

But advocates say those scientific shortcomings have more to do with poor monitoring than a lack of proof of the dangers that burn pits present. They point to a host of rare cancers, respiratory illnesses and other health problems among Iraq and Afghanistan veterans that cannot be dismissed as coincidental clustering. "The study for this illness ... can take up to 20 years," Ruiz said at a press conference with Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America before Tuesday's House vote. "We don't have the time for that. "There's no perfect study, but there is enough evidence to determine there is a high enough suspicion of a link. We have veterans who are dying, so we have to act on that suspicion."

In recent years, much of the focus in Congress on burn pits has centered on improving research to inform future benefits decisions. Tuesday's legislation — sponsored by Ruiz and Rep. Brad Wenstrup (R-OH) — would allow family members to submit information into VA's Burn Pit Registry, giving the department information on veterans who passed away from suspected toxic exposure illnesses or who are too sick to access the list themselves. Wenstrup said in a statement that the move will "ensure the VA has more accurate records for veterans exposed to burn pits, so we can better serve those with service-related illnesses." Sen. Tom Udall (R-NM) has introduced companion legislation in his chamber and called the idea a way "to gather more information so that veterans can receive the answers they deserve and the medical treatment they have earned."

Nearly 170,000 veterans and current service members have entered information in the registry since it was launched five years ago. Ruiz said that information is invaluable, but he warned that policy makers need to see that as a first step and not an end goal. Ruiz, a former emergency room doctor and medical school administrator, said his personal review of available research literature shows a clear connection between the burn pits and pulmonary issues, lung diseases and cancers. His proposed legislation would allow any veterans who can show burn pit exposure to receive "priority group 6" status for VA care — putting them ahead of veterans without any service-connected problems seeking appointments in the department's health system — and lessen the standard of proof to receive disability benefits for burn pit veterans with lung diseases. He compared the problem to the issue of Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War. The department took until 1991 to recognize exposure to the chemical defoliant in that war as the likely cause of a host of illnesses, and is still fighting the exposure claims of some sailors who served in ships off the coast there.

Melissa Bryant, chief policy officer for IAVA, said veterans from recent wars have already waited long enough on burn pit research and analysis. "We have known about his problem for years," she said. "We're going on almost two

decades already. We see this as our Agent Orange. And we know how long it took for that to be declared a presumptive condition. “We will not stand for that happening to our generation.” Moving vets exposed to burn pits to the front of the line for medical care may have only a nominal cost for VA, but making burn pit exposure a presumptive condition for disability benefits is likely to run into the billions of dollars. Ruiz said the costs of his proposal have not yet been finalized. But, like the scientific questions surrounding the issue, he called the cost concerns beside the point of the problem.

“VA has been really good at coming up with excuses as to why they shouldn’t be covering Agent Orange for so many years,” he said. “Our Vietnam veterans understand that song and dance so much. “For this generation, we have to stop it as soon as they start talking about excuses.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 6, 2019 ++]

Burn Pit Toxic Exposure Update 65 ► **House Passes Burn Pit Accountability Act H.R. 663**

The House of Representatives unanimously passed legislation 5 MAR that would allow relatives or a designee to report the death of a veteran on the Department of Veterans Affairs' Airborne Hazards and Open Burn Pit Registry. The measure, the Burn Pit Registry Enhancement bill, would give family members access to the registry to provide cause of death and note whether it was possibly related to burn pit exposure. Sponsored by Rep. Raul Rui (D-CA), the bipartisan bill was inspired by Air Force Staff Sgt. Jennifer Kepner, a resident of Cathedral City, California, who deployed to Iraq in 2006 and lived and worked for six months near the Balad Air Base burn pit, a 10-acre, open-air waste dump where everything from trash and medical waste to batteries, fuel and plastics was incinerated.

Kepner developed pancreatic cancer despite having no known risk factors, according to Ruiz, and her oncologist found "that the only probable and most probable cause of her cancer was exposure to burn pits." She died Oct. 18, 2017. "While Jennifer was fighting bravely against her cancer, she also had to fight tooth and nail to get the health care and benefits that she had earned," said Ruiz, a physician. More than 155,000 former service members have joined the burn pit registry, which was established in 2014 by Congress to encourage the VA to document the health of troops who were exposed to the pits and other airborne contaminants from oil well fires, soil or chemicals. When the registry was first established, advocacy groups criticized its structure, saying it did not have a way for family members of deceased veterans to contribute information -- a restriction they said would not provide the VA with a clear understanding of the scope of the issue.

If the bill, which is co-sponsored by Rep. Brad Wenstrup, an Army reserve podiatrist and Ohio Republican, passes in the Senate, it would allow an immediate family member, a person who lived with the veteran when they died, or a designee to access the registry and update the information. Sen. Tom Udall (D-NM) has introduced a similar bill (S.191) in the Senate. Rosie Torres, executive director of the advocacy group Burn Pits 360, on 13 MAR called Ruiz's bill a step in the right direction. But, she added, "it's unfortunate that family members who already have lost loved ones can't add their veterans to the list. "It's a great thing if it passes in the Senate and current families will have this. ... I still feel like we are so far behind on understanding the impact of toxic exposures, though," she said.

In addition to the bills sponsored by Ruiz and Udall, there are four other pieces of proposed burn pit legislation under consideration in Congress. One, by Rep. Joaquin Castro (D-TX) would allow family members of deceased veterans to register their loved ones on the VA database. Another, sponsored by Sen. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) would require the Defense Department and military services to evaluate whether members of the armed forces were stationed near burn pits or exposed to potentially hazardous chemicals and, if so, enroll those individuals on the registry, unless they opt out. [Source: The MOAA Newsletter | Patricia Kime | March 14, 2019 ++]

RIP Medical Debt ► Veterans Receive Golden 'Tickets' Canceling Their Medical Debt

It sounds crazy and looks like a scam: a golden envelope containing a letter that says part or all of your health care debt has been erased. But for thousands of veterans and family members, the mailings, which have been going out since 2016, have been the winning ticket for getting out from under a mountain of medical bills. In the past three years, RIP Medical Debt (www.ripmedicaldebt.org) has quietly erased roughly \$65 million worth of medical debt for veterans, family members, National Guard and reserve members, notifying them by mail of the action, according to retired Army Col. Mikel Burroughs, vice president of military and civilian debt acquisition and relief at RIP Medical Debt.



RIP Medical Debt's VP of Acquisition, Mikel Burroughs (left), and its Executive Vice President, Jerry Ashton

The random acts of kindness are not just reserved for former military service members. Since beginning its mission in 2014, the nonprofit has forgiven about \$435 million worth of medical debt for civilians with significant bills who are living at less than twice the poverty level, are insolvent or have more than 5 percent of their gross income going to health care debt. The idea began when two collections industry executives, Craig Antico and Jerry Ashton, decided to establish a nonprofit to provide a tax-deductible means for individuals and donors to give money to forgive unpaid medical debt for those in dire need.

RIP Medical Debt works like this: Donors and organizations raise the funds needed to purchase medical debt from the companies that hold it after hospitals, providers, ambulance companies and agencies have exhausted their efforts to collect payment. RIP buys the debt for a penny -- or less -- on the dollar, so if a philanthropist donates \$50,000, the non-profit can erase \$5 million in debt. Working with the debt holders, it finds patients in dire straits and gleans the list specifically to find veterans. Some of those get the yellow envelope.

Ashton, a Navy veteran, wrote in HuffPost last year that when they first started their nonprofit, they noticed "a surprising percentage of the people whose debt we were abolishing were active-duty military and veterans." "Like many Americans, I believed that America takes care of the medical needs of the men and women who have served our country," he said. Instead, he found that veterans may face mounting medical bills while waiting to get into the Department of Veterans Affairs system or they aren't eligible for care at the VA. Plus, Burroughs noted, they may get into debt because their family members aren't covered. "A lot of veterans just get stuck in the quagmire," Burroughs said.

Ashton cited the example of a 73-year-old veteran who went to a local hospital for cardiac arrest. While he was there, hospital staff notified the VA medical center that the veteran needed emergency bypass surgery. The VA center said it would send an ambulance to pick him up and transport him there, 75 miles away. But the veteran already was being prepped for surgery. The VA then declined to pay the veteran's outstanding \$36,000 bill, because, according to the VA, the veteran had "refused emergency transport." He depleted his savings and took out a loan but still couldn't pay off the debt, according to Ashton. "We are vigorously taking up causes as personal as this," he wrote.

The charity started off slow, running in the red through 2015 while setting up the mechanisms for executing the plan. It received a significant boost in donations and legitimacy in 2016 when John Oliver ran a segment on his HBO Last Week Tonight show about the debt-buying industry. In an attempt to highlight the dark side of the business, Oliver started his own company for \$50 and purchased \$15 million worth of medical debt for 9,000 patients, paying

roughly \$60,000 for the debt, along with the patients' personal and financial information, including their Social Security numbers. At the end of the segment, Oliver turned the debt over to RIP.

Those who receive yellow envelopes do not need to take any action, which means if someone mistakes the envelope for junk mail and tosses it, the debt is still abolished. The forgiven debt counts as a gift; those who receive the yellow envelopes do not have to pay taxes on it and it is not considered income. Also, under the requirements of the deal, the debt seller must notify all three major credit reporting agencies to ensure that the adverse information is removed or noted in the patients' files. Many of RIP's donations come from individual donors and corporations that raise money specifically for the charity. In January, the McClatchy Foundation launched a fundraising effort in more than 30 newspapers, raising enough money to forgive debt for at least 730 veteran and military families. NBCUniversal is also a major partner. Burroughs, who runs the veterans program at RIP, also is a donor. He will ride 7,727 miles this summer on his motorcycle to raise awareness and funds for the cause. His goal of \$50,000 will help clear \$5 million in debt.

In addition to working with debt holders, RIP Medical Debt officials have started reaching out directly to hospitals, physician groups and ambulance companies to offer their services. But they'd like to hear from them as well, Burroughs said. "They are sitting on inventory they will never collect, and this is a great opportunity for hospitals to bring some revenue back in and also do something for their communities," he added. Burroughs said one of the most difficult challenges of the program is having to explain to people that RIP Medical Debt simply can't pay the bills of individuals who reach out. He added that the organization is trying to figure out a way to help, but haven't yet "cracked the code."

"More than 10,000 people have contacted us saying they need help, but we can't do that at this point. We're working on it," he said. Burroughs estimated that RIP Medical Debt mailed out between 60,000 and 70,000 envelopes last year. He said that for many, they are "a lifesaver." "You can imagine that these veterans are getting hounded for financial debt, and they already have anxiety or depression or post-traumatic stress disorder or a traumatic brain injury. This is a big relief," he said. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | March 5, 2019 ++]

Veteran Service Organization Imposters ► HCVA Internet Bots/Trolls Investigation

The House Committee on Veterans' Affairs launched an investigation 5 MAR into "anonymous internet actors" impersonating congressionally chartered veterans service organizations in an effort to scam veterans and servicemembers. The committee chairman, Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA) announced the investigation. In a statement, he said foreign actors are using "shadowy practices" to disseminate false information to servicemembers, veterans and their families. "Our veterans served in uniform to guard against threats to our democracy just like those posed by these internet bots and trolls intent on sowing division and spreading misinformation," Takano said. "Congress has a responsibility to stamp out these anonymous individuals and protect our country from threats foreign and domestic."

The committee is in a fact-finding stage and is planning to hold meetings with stakeholders about the issue. Democrats, who now control the House, are focused on increasing transparency, accountability and "finding ways to protect democracy," said a committee staff member who spoke Tuesday on the condition of anonymity. "This is a theme running throughout the party right now," the staff member said. Vietnam Veterans of America has investigated the issue since 2017, when the organization discovered a Facebook page using its name and logo. The page posted politically divisive posts and was followed by nearly 200,000 people – tens of thousands more than the official VVA page. Facebook Inc. disabled the page after determining it violated VVA's intellectual property.

Kristofer Goldsmith, associate director for policy and government affairs at VVA, discovered the page in mid-2017. Since then, he's worked to shut down more fake accounts that target veterans and servicemembers with disinformation. Goldsmith argued Monday that foreign trolls were targeting the military and veterans community to

“weaponize and turn a profit off our patriotism.” “Veterans organizations have been forced to play defense against a deluge of anonymous overseas actors who work day and night to deceive Americans — stealing our names, logos and reputations to gain their trust,” Goldsmith wrote in an editorial published in Military Times. Goldsmith said 5 MAR that he’s “basically been playing a game of whack-a-mole,” in which he identifies an imposter account and has it disabled, only for it to be created again under a new email address.

During the past several months, Goldsmith has been updating House Democrats about his efforts. He shared with them more than 100 pages of notes and thousands of screenshots. “Doing it alone has been overwhelming, frankly, so I’m glad to know that [the committee] is going to be helping with this,” he said. “It’s a huge relief that at least I have somebody else’s eyes on this stuff.”

A study from Oxford University in 2017 found Russian operatives used Twitter and Facebook to disseminate “junk news” to veterans and servicemembers. Researchers with Oxford’s Project on Computational Propaganda, which is studying how Americans were affected by disinformation campaigns during the 2016 presidential election, found trolls and bots targeted military personnel and veterans with propaganda, conspiracies and hyper-partisan political content. The population of veterans and servicemembers contains “potentially influential voters and community leaders” because of the trust the public places in them, the study states.

Though the issue has the attention of the VA committee, Goldsmith argued the FBI needs to become involved to track and identify the people behind the fake accounts. “I believe an investigation by the FBI is appropriate,” he said. “Until we find the people behind the avatars and impose a cost on them, they have no incentive to stop.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | March 5, 2019 ++]

Merchant Marine Fleet Update 01 ► Trump Trying To Help Sailors Become Mariners

It probably shouldn’t have taken an executive order from the president to let experienced service members get merchant marine credentials, but that’s what finally happened on 4 MAR. By signing an executive order entitled “**Supporting the Transition of Active Duty Service Members and Military Veterans into the Merchant Marine,**” President Donald Trump indicated that helping veterans land good blue collar jobs at sea will strengthen national security, too. Trump’s declaration is designed to allow Navy, Coast Guard and Army Watercraft Systems personnel leaving active duty to apply their training and experience to land future careers in the maritime industry.

“It makes it easier for sea service veterans to get high-paying, high-skilled jobs as mariners by waiving government-issued licensing fees and by crediting military training in the National Maritime Center credentialing system,” said Peter Navarro, the director of the Office of Trade and Manufacturing Policy, during a conference call with reporters on Monday. A direct White House adviser to Trump, Navarro said that the executive order makes it easier for enlisted sailors and officers to qualify as “mates and engineers” under the Coast Guard’s civilian mariner licensing rule. Previously, sailors and other service members had to start over by enrolling in basic maritime classes, often paying \$25,000 to meet the requirements.

Trump’s executive order should allow service members on active duty to simultaneous earn qualifications at sea while also netting equivalent civilian licenses along the way, Navarro said. Those who already separated also could be fast-tracked to getting licensed, but Navarro said more work must be done there. Before all of this becomes a reality, the Navy first must work with the Coast Guard to get schools, qualifications and experiences certified for civilian licensing. The Army’s already done this for their active-duty mariners, said retired Navy Rear Adm. Mark H. “Buz” Buzby, the Maritime Administrator. “I think this is a huge step in the right direction and something the nation critically needs,” Buzby told Navy Times by telephone.

A graduate of the Merchant Marine Academy and career naval officer before joining the U.S. Department of Transportation Buzby led Military Sealift Command, the government’s largest employer of civilian mariners. Their

supply ships replenish the Navy’s fleet at sea and would be called upon to ferry materiel to Marines and soldiers fighting overseas in a ground war. And they depend on qualified merchant mariners, which is why Trump’s executive order is important to national security, too. On 24 APR, Buzby warned senators that an outbreak of war likely would find the nation with a "shortfall of 1,800 qualified mariners in the event of a full, prolonged mobilization" — and that’s assuming a best case scenario, with no losses of ships or personnel.

Only weeks earlier, he warned House lawmakers that dwindling numbers of commercial vessels and qualified crew members to man them might make the “surge” of sealift necessary to support operations difficult. “Because of the historically low number of ships in the U.S.-flag, oceangoing fleet over the past several years, I am concerned about the availability of a sufficient number of qualified mariners with the necessary endorsements to operate large ships (unlimited horsepower and unlimited tonnage) and to sustain a prolonged sealift mobilization beyond the first four to six months,” Buzby said. “Historically, the men and women of the merchant marine have always stood up in times of need to meet any task set for them and would likely extend their time at sea beyond normal tours if called upon to do so. However, it is critical to ensure we have enough qualified U.S. mariners to safely crew our government vessels so that the readiness of the force is not negatively impacted.”

What’s good for national security also is good for American workers, Navarro added during his round table with reporters. He pointed to the average annual wages paid to water transportation workers — \$65,720 per year, which is well above the national occupational average of \$50,620 — and members of the U.S. Merchant Marine routinely earn even more. “So this is a great opportunity for sea veterans to seamlessly transition into really good, high-paying jobs that will help our national security front,” Navarro said. [Source: NavyTimes | Mark D. Faram | March 4, 2019 ++]

Vet Suicide Update 24 ► White House Finalizes Plan To Stem Veteran Suicides



The White House is creating a new high-level task force on preventing veterans suicide which will include new community outreach grants aimed at former service members and expanded projects across a host of government agencies to coordinate research and prevention efforts. President Donald Trump signed a new executive order on the initiative — dubbed the **President’s Roadmap to Empower Veterans and End a National Tragedy of Suicide**, or PREVENTS — on 5 MAR at the White House. It’s the latest in a series of steps by his administration to address the problem, which claims an estimated 20 veterans lives every day. Last year, the president signed a separate executive order providing more counseling and mental health care for recently separated service members, who face a significantly higher risk of suicide than other military groups.

According to senior administration officials, the new order will give agency officials a year to develop plans for a more aggressive approach to suicide prevention, with a goal of more state and local community engagement. The task force will look to develop a new grant system for mental health support and outreach similar to the Housing and Urban Development-VA Supportive Housing program, which provides funding directly to local charities and city programs to help individualize assistance plans for veterans. Those HUD-VASH vouchers have been in use for a decade and are

widely credited with helping draw down the number of homeless veterans by half. Officials hope to replicate that model for suicide prevention, relying on local expertise and federal funding to reach more veterans.

Veterans Affairs officials estimate that of the 20 veterans a day who take their own lives, about 70 percent have little or no contact with the federal veteran system. That makes targeted community outreach to populations outside those systems critical to addressing the suicide problem. The White House has not put a price tag on the new grants yet, but is expected to work with Congress in coming months to set parameters and draft legislation on the idea. Meanwhile, the new task force will be charged with better coordinating existing research on suicide within federal systems. Already, the departments of Defense, Veterans Affairs and Homeland Security have a host of information on traumatic brain injury, post-traumatic stress disorder and mental health issues that could be indicators of suicidal thoughts.

Officials hope to use the Department of Energy’s expansive data collection and research systems to better analyze that existing data, providing new potential avenues for prevention efforts. The research work will also include pushing the Centers for Disease Control to provide more up-to-date information on veterans suicide research. Currently, the latest available data on the problem typically trails at least two years behind current efforts. Senior administration officials are hoping to cut that wait down to no more than six months. Suicide prevention has been a major focus of both Congress and the executive branch in recent years, but the rate of suicide has largely remained flat. White House officials are hoping the new task force will restart a national conversation on the issue, and bring in private-sector partners to help find new solutions.

Officials from the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee are scheduled to hold a roundtable with administration experts on the issue in early March. Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee ranking member Jon Tester (D-MT) introduced new legislation on the issue last week. In December, the Veterans Health Administration announced a new pilot program with the advocacy group The Independence Fund to reunite combat troops for group therapy sessions, in the hopes of using those common bonds to provide better mental health resources. Sarah Verardo, chief executive officer of the group, called the new White House initiative an important step forward in helping veterans. “We owe it to them to ensure they are not forgotten upon their return home,” she said. “They may have returned from the battlefield, but their war is not over. For many, their true battle begins when their purpose in the military ends.”

Veterans facing any type of mental or emotional distress can contact the Veteran Crisis Line at any time by dialing 1-800-273-8255 and selecting option 1 for a VA staffer. Veterans, troops or their families members can also text 838255 or visit www.VeteransCrisisLine.net for assistance. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 4, 2019 ++]

Texas Vet Tuition Program ► 150 Credit Hour Exemption w/Hazlewood Act

If you’re a veteran and a Texas resident who is unsure how to pay for your or your family’s education, the Lone Star State’s got you covered. Thanks to the Hazlewood Act, Texas veterans who have completed at least 181 days as an active-duty service member can apply for a tuition exemption that encompasses up to 150 free credit hours at a public Texas university. The tuition waiver covers veterans, their spouses and their children. But only one family member at a time can use the benefit, and the 150 credit hours must be divided up among family members — each person doesn’t get their own 150-credit-hour scholarship.

“In this day and age, when it comes to uncertain federal aid and scholarship opportunities, sometimes they’re plentiful and sometimes they’re few and far between,” said James Kumm, the executive director for veterans programs at the University of Texas, Arlington. “This is one of those guaranteed benefits.” Texas is a veteran-heavy state with plenty of public universities. Nine public Texas universities made the Military Times’ Best Colleges for Vets 2018 lists and 17 cities cracked our Best Places to Live 2017 rankings.

The Hazlewood Act dates back to the 1920s and is named after late Texas Sen. Grady Hazlewood. Its benefits extend to any veteran who currently lives in Texas and who either began their service in the Lone Star State or lived there before entering the military. Instructions on how to apply are available through the Texas Veterans Commission. Hazlewood works in tandem with a veteran's GI Bill to pay for tuition costs. You can stack both benefits together, meaning that whatever portion of a veteran's tuition that is left over after using one benefit can be covered by the other. A veteran could also use the GI Bill for him or herself, while passing along Hazlewood to a spouse or child.

According to the Texas Veterans Commission, more than 43,000 veterans and their family members took advantage of Hazlewood in fiscal year 2018, to the tune of almost \$238 million in tuition exemptions. "Just based on the utilization numbers, the reception has been great," said Sue Jevning, the TVC's veterans education program director. "The veterans are grateful for being able to get an education at reduced cost. We've had a great, warm reception across the board."

It has certainly helped veterans like Mark Barrow, a 44-year-old ex-Navy gunner's mate presently enrolled at Central Texas College, a community college in Killeen, Texas. He said that his only source of income is his VA disability compensation. Hazlewood is allowing him to pursue a degree in welding technology at Central Texas. "It's been a godsend," he said. "I'm a single parent, and it's been helping me out tremendously." Hazlewood also helped the family of Domingo Padron, a 54-year-old who spent 28 years in the Texas National Guard. He was looking for a way to fund his three daughters' college educations. His brother told him about Hazlewood, and he went down to UT-Arlington's veterans success center where a social worker helped sign Padron up. "I was disappointed that I couldn't give my daughters anything with my benefits," he said. "And [the social worker] goes, 'Yes you can.'" Padron said that his eldest daughter has already used up her share of the credit hours, while his middle child is now working through hers.

Barrow and Padron are just two of the many students at these universities receiving help with their education through Hazlewood. A Central Texas representative said via email that 644 veterans and 563 eligible family members were using their Hazlewood benefits at that school. "The numbers just seem to be climbing every year," said Annabelle Smith, the school's associate dean of financial aid and veterans services. Kumm said that 1,152 veterans, spouses and children used Hazlewood in the fall 2018 semester at UT-Arlington. Of that group, 587 were children of service members. "It's one of those great ways that they can show that their father or mother served their country," he said. "This is something they were able to pass on to them."

Kumm and Smith said that Hazlewood is almost universally appreciated by the veterans who take advantage of it. That's a big deal, as veterans routinely debate which benefits are the most useful, according to Padron. "We talk about how the benefits are working for each of us," he said. "Someone will start complaining about a benefit, and another guy will come in and say, 'You know, I did this.' We share information to try to make it work to our advantage." So far, he said he has no complaints about Hazlewood. "I think it's a great benefit for us who enter the military in Texas," he said. "It makes a big difference." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Joshua Axelrod | March 1, 2019 ++]

Obit: Dorothy Holmes ► 17 FEB 2019 | 1st Female Chief Master Sergeant

Retired Chief Master Sergeant Dorothy Holmes blazed many trails during her three decades in the Air Force. She was the first black woman to reach the Air Force's highest enlisted rank. She was the first woman to retire with 30 years of continuous service in the Air Force. And she was the first female chief master sergeant to be assigned to the Air Force Academy. But a friend, retired Army Master Sgt. George Smith, remembers her as a wonderful person who was fun to be around — but one with little patience for nonsense, who could grab people's attention with her commanding voice. "She would tell it like it is, and whether you would like to hear it or not, she would tell it," Smith said in an interview Friday. "She had a lot on the ball."



Holmes as a senior master sergeant (left) and holding a copy (right) of the tribute Colorado Rep. Ed Perlmutter read to her on the floor of the House in 2014.

Smith, who worked with “Dottie” Holmes at The Retired Enlisted Association in the 1980s, remembered how they would visit lawmakers on Capitol Hill to urge them to introduce or vote for pieces of legislation that would help seniors and veterans. And, he said laughing, if one of those lawmakers seemed dismissive of their concerns, Holmes would put him in his place. “Sometimes, that congressman would say, ‘Well, you know, that thing is not important,’” Smith said. “And she would hop on something like that — ‘What do you mean it’s not important?’ And you’d find that congressman kind of crawfishing a little bit: ‘Well, er, um, I didn’t mean it that way, Ms. Holmes.’ Later, when we’d get back together, we would laugh about it, how it appeared that she was just a little kind lady, but when her time comes to talk, she wouldn’t hesitate.”

She was born in Philadelphia on Aug. 1, 1927, and joined the Air Force in May 1949. She began her career in Texas, but spent time in places such as Germany, Japan, Thailand, Puerto Rico, Louisiana, Washington, DC, and South Dakota over the next three decades. She played a crucial role in integrating female cadets into the previously all-male Air Force Academy at Colorado Springs. In 1976, Brig. Gen. Stanley Beck, who was then the academy’s commandant of cadets, personally asked for Holmes to come help with the integration. Rep. Ed Perlmutter, (D-CO), paid tribute to Holmes on the floor of the House of Representatives in 2014, and said she “serve[d] as a role model and mentor for the first class of female cadets.”

She became deputy assistant to the superintendent for plans, programs and policies and “strove to make her job one that helped all cadets.” Holmes was key in helping establish female cadets there, and setting up equal opportunity programs at the academy, her obituary states. She also was a guest lecturer many times in classes there, in addition to her administrative, counseling and mentoring duties. “Through her courageous service, Chief Holmes charted the path for future generations of women to serve in the military,” Perlmutter said in 2014.

When Holmes retired after almost three years at the academy, former Colorado Gov. Richard Lamm issued an executive order declaring May 31, 1979, as Chief Master Sergeant Dorothy W. Holmes Day. She continued to volunteer at Peterson Air Force Base in Colorado, not far from the academy, in retirement. She also served as president of the Women in the Air Force Association for 25 years, according to her obituary. From 1948 to 1976, Women in the Air Force pushed to expand the opportunities for women in the service. In 2016, Holmes attended a reunion of nearly 70 members of the Women in the Air Force program at Joint Base San Antonio-Lackland in Texas. And she served two terms as national president of The Retired Enlisted Association.

She treasured her time in the Air Force, Smith said, and often looked back fondly on those days. If anybody said anything bad about her beloved service, she’d challenge them immediately, he added. She received the Legion of Merit for her work at the academy, and her other decorations included the Meritorious Service Medal and the Air Force Commendation Medal. The Air Force in 2009 posted online a photo of Holmes visiting Peterson at a retiree recognition reception. She told the airmen at Peterson during that visit that she hadn’t intended to make an entire career out of the Air Force when she joined, but she stayed because she loved her assignments and her work. Holmes passed away on 17 FEB at the age of 91, and a memorial service was held for her 2 MAR at the Angelus Chapel Funeral Directors in Colorado Springs Colorado. [Source: AirForceTimes | Stephen Losey | March 1, 2019 ++]

Obit: Ralph Hall ► 7 MAR 2019 | 12 Term Congressman & WWII Navy Pilot

Former Texas Rep. Ralph Hall, the oldest-ever member of the U.S. House and a man who claimed to have once sold cigarettes and Coca-Cola to the bank-robbing duo of Bonnie and Clyde, has died at age 95. The Republican and World War II pilot died at his home in Rockwall on 7 MAR, said Ed Valentine, Hall's longtime strategist. Asked about a cause of death, Valentine simply cited Hall's age, saying he hadn't been suffering from any known long-term health problems.

Hall was 91 when he left the House after being defeated in a 2014 Republican primary runoff election by John Ratcliffe. The former U.S. attorney was less than half Hall's age and well-schooled in digital and data-heavy campaigning. An avid jogger, Hall marked Memorial Day 2012 — when he was 89 — by skydiving to honor American service members. That Christmas, he became the oldest member of Congress' lower chamber, breaking the record set by North Carolina Rep. Charles Manly Stedman, who died in office when he was 89 years, 7 months and 25 days old. "I'm just an old guy — lived pretty clean," Hall said after breaking the record. "I have no ailments. I don't hurt anywhere."



U.S. Rep. Ralph Hall with President Bush in Mar 2004 (left), then a Democrat from Texas speaking a hearing before the House Science & Technology Committee regarding NASA's budget on 16 Feb 2006 in Washington (center), and with his wife Mary Ellen Murphy (Hall) during World War II (right)

Getting ousted by his own party in 2014 came a decade after Hall became a Republican as Texas moved further to the right. He served 12 terms in Congress as a Democrat but announced in January 2004 that he'd made the switch, backed by his friend, then-President George W. Bush. In a statement 7 MAR, Bush said "Ralph Hall epitomized decency, class, and patriotism." Republican Texas Gov. Greg Abbott said the former congressman "distinguished himself as a fiercely independent voice who put the needs of his constituents above all else." Hall, who flew Hellcat fighters during World War II, was known in Congress for promoting NASA and energy production. Hailing from Rockwall, east of Dallas, he was fond of saying that he voted with his party often but always voted with his district. He was probably most popular for mailing or personally handing out pennies fitted with a special silver band bearing his name.

Only three U.S. senators were older than Hall while still serving in Congress: South Carolina Republican Strom Thurmond, who was 100 when he retired in 2003; Democrat Theodore Francis Green of Rhode Island, who left the Senate at age 93; and West Virginia Democrat Robert Byrd, who died in office in 2010 at age 92. Hall stuck to retail politicking, preferring to greet voters personally rather than organize formal campaign stops. That was enough to retain his House seat in 2012, when he bested a tea party primary opponent. But in 2014, Ratcliffe painted his opponent as a Washington insider, noting that Hall had represented the district long enough to have an airport, lake and highway named after him. Hall tried to modernize, joining Twitter in 2013 and marking former President Ronald Reagan's 102nd birthday with his first Tweet. But that proved no match for Ratcliffe, who ran unopposed in the deeply red district in the November 2014 general election.

Ralph Moody Hall was born on May 3, 1923, in the Dallas suburb of Fate. He attended Texas Christian University and the University of Texas before earning a law degree at Southern Methodist University in 1951. While working in

a pharmacy in his hometown as a boy, Hall said then-fugitives Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker used curb-side service. Hall said they bought “two cartons of Old Golds, two Coca-Colas and all the newspapers we had.” "He was a funny looking little guy. She was acceptable looking," Hall said in 2014. "I saw them. But I don't think it's that unusual. They were a lot of places." Hall joined the Navy at 19. He married Mary Ellen Murphy in November 1944, while serving in Pensacola, Florida. The couple had three sons: Hampton, Brett and Blakeley.

After World War II, Hall practiced law in Rockwall County, where he served as a judge from 1950 to 1962. He was elected the following year to the Texas Senate and ran unsuccessfully in the 1972 Democratic primary for lieutenant governor. Winning a U.S. House seat in 1980, Hall was among the Democratic conservatives who sided with President Ronald Reagan on budget issues. He voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement and was an original co-sponsor of bills to repeal the estate tax and the marriage tax penalty. After becoming a Republican, Hall leaned heavily on Bush, a former Texas governor. In 2009, he opposed the federal bailout of the financial industry and the economic stimulus package, and was a harsh critic of federal health care reform when it was debated and ultimately approved by Congress in 2010. Two years later, Hall was appointed chairman of the House Science, Space and Technology Committee.

After the primary defeat to Ratcliffe, Hall injured his hip in car crash, and was away from Washington convalescing for much of the remainder of his final term. Hall is survived by his three children. His wife died in 2008 at age 83.

Navy Times note: Lt. Ralph Moody Hall volunteered for the Navy in 1942 when he was 19 and flew with VF-100 during World War II. Piloting both the F6F Hellcat and F4U Corsair planes, he served on board the aircraft carrier Ranger in the Atlantic Ocean and in the Pacific Ocean on board the escort carriers Corregidor and Copahue.

[Source: The Associated Press | Will Weissert | March 7, 2019 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs ► Scheduled As of 15 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 | March 15, 2019 ++]

Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule ► As of 15 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\vetterans 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\vetterans related events to the Events Schedule Manager, Milton.Bell126@gmail.com

[Source: Retiree\Veterans Events Schedule Manager | Milton Bell | March 15, 2019 ++]

Vet State Benefits ► Kansas 2019

The state of Kansas provides several benefits to veterans as indicated below. To obtain information on these refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Vet State Benefits– KS**” for an overview of the below benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the following refer to <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/kansas-state-veterans-benefits.html> and <http://kcva.ks.gov> .

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

[Source: <https://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/kansas-state-veterans-benefits.html> | March 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.

Afghan Victory Declaration Proposal ► **S.J. Res 12 | 2019 (AFGHAN) Service Act**

Senators Rand Paul and Tom Udall are proposing giving all Iraq and Afghanistan veterans a one-time \$2,500 payout and declaring victory in Afghanistan in what they are billing a cost-saving move for America. “It’s important to know when it’s time to declare victory and leave a war,” the Republican said in a Facebook video posted 5 MAR. “I think that time is long past.” Paul, a Republican lawmaker known for his libertarian views and tense relationship with party leadership, said the payout to veterans would cost taxpayers more than \$7 billion, but it would also be “an immediate savings of 83 percent when compared to the current yearly cost of nation building.”

Pentagon estimates put the total costs of the war in Iraq and Afghanistan since 2001 at around \$6 trillion. Paul said ongoing overseas missions in the global war on terror total more than \$50 billion annually. “We don’t need to be wasting that \$50 billion, and there is no doubt much of it is wasted,” he said. “When are they (the Afghanistan government) going to pay for their own stuff? Why does Uncle Sam have to be Uncle Sap and pay for everything?” Senator Paul introduced the **2019 American Forces Going Home After Noble (AFGHAN) Service Act** on 5 MAR. The idea follows calls from President Donald Trump in the State of the Union to begin a drawdown of U.S. forces in Afghanistan, arguing that “great nations do not fight endless wars.”

About 16,000 U.S. troops are still deployed to Afghanistan in support and training roles. Pentagon leaders have said that too quick a drawdown from the nearly 18-year-old war could destabilize the region and allow terrorist groups to regain a foothold in the country. More than 2,400 U.S. military personnel have died since the initial invasion of American forces in 2001. Paul said under his plan the “peace dividend” bonus for veterans would be required to be paid out within one year of the official end of the war. More than 3 million Americans served in the two wars. He also said that the annual savings from cutting off the war funds should be used for domestic infrastructure projects and other priorities. He called spending American money overseas “incredibly insulting” to taxpayers. “It’s time to declare our mission over and the war won,” he said. “It’s time to build here and not there.” You can listen to them discuss the issue on you tube at <https://youtu.be/XqnwoFliAc>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 5, 2019 ++]

POW/MIA Flag Update 01: **H.R.____/S.____ | National POW/MIA Flag Act**

The POW/MIA flag would be displayed more prominently along with the U.S. flag on federal properties under a plan proposed 7 MAR by a bipartisan group of lawmakers. The lawmakers said the National POW/MIA Flag Act would ensure the iconic banner is prominently displayed at the U.S. Capitol, the White House, the World War II Memorial, the Korean War Veterans Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and every national cemetery. It would also be seen at the offices for cabinet secretaries, major military installations, Department of Veterans Affairs medical centers and U.S. Postal Service outlets. “Honoring our servicemembers who have fought courageously and honorably for our country’s freedom is so important,” Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., said in a statement reintroducing the legislation.

Warren and Sens. Tom Cotton (R-AR), John Thune (R-SD), and Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) are sponsoring the measure in the upper chamber, while Reps. Chris Pappas (D-NH) and Jack Bergman (R-MI) have introduced the House companion bill. The lawmakers said in a statement that they introduced the bill to honor more than 82,000 Americans listed as prisoners of war, missing in action, or who are otherwise unaccounted for from past wars and conflicts. Under current law, the POW/MIA flag is required to be displayed on certain federal properties during six

holidays a year: Armed Forces Day, Memorial Day, Flag Day, Independence Day, National POW/MIA Recognition Day and Veterans Day, the lawmakers said.

“The POW/MIA flag is representative of the courage and sacrifice members our armed forces have given on behalf of this nation throughout our history,” Pappas said in a statement. “By putting the flag on full display outside of prominent federal buildings, memorials, and national cemeteries, we are reaffirming our commitment to the more than 82,000 servicemembers who remain unaccounted for.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Claudia Grisales | March 7, 2019++]

VA Medical Marijuana Update 60 ► H.R.1647 | Authorize VA to Provide Recommendations

Veterans would have greater access to medical marijuana under a bipartisan-supported proposal reintroduced in the House of Representatives recently, and more than a dozen members of Congress have already backed the bill’s latest version. Filed 8 MAR, H.R. 1647, would “authorize Department of Veterans Affairs health care providers to provide recommendations and opinions to veterans regarding participation in State marijuana programs,” according to its language. It was introduced by Rep. Earl Blumenauer, Oregon Democrat, and is currently co-sponsored by 12 colleagues, including four Republicans.

“For too long, our veterans have been denied access to highly effective medical marijuana treatment for conditions like chronic pain and PTSD,” Mr. Blumenauer said in a press release, the Marijuana Moment website first reported 11 MAR. “Medical marijuana has shown proven benefits for treating these conditions and denying our veterans access to them is shameful. “This simple bill would align veterans VA treatment with their very popular state laws, usually approved by the voters,” he said. Thirty-three states have passed laws legalizing the medicinal use of marijuana to varying degrees, effectively allowing qualifying patients in most of the country to legally acquire pot with a licensed physician’s approval. Marijuana is illegal under federal law, however, so physicians employed by the VA are prohibited from recommending it to patients.

“VA has not taken a position on the bill, but marijuana is illegal under federal law, and until federal law changes, VA is not able to prescribe it,” a VA official told The Washington Times on Tuesday. Mr. Blumenauer, co-founder and chair of the Congressional Cannabis Caucus, has unsuccessfully proposed similar versions of the bill during the 113th, 114th and 115th Congresses. His previous version, the Veterans Equal Access Act offered in 2017, ultimately garnered the support of 30 co-sponsors prior to stalling during the last congressional sessions. Several other bills currently pending on Capitol Hill could similarly broaden medicinal marijuana access to military veterans if passed by effectively abolishing the federal prohibition on pot, meanwhile. [Source: The Washington Times | Andrew Blake | March 12, 2019 ++]

Vet Missing Alert System ► S.699 | The Green Alert Act of 2019

Two senators introduced legislation 9 MAR that would create a Green Alert public notification system to find veterans when they go missing. Sens. Maggie Hassan (D-NH) and Joni Ernst (R-IA) sponsored The Green Alert Act of 2019. They said the system would be similar to the Amber Alert system for missing children or the Silver Alert system to locate senior citizens, especially ones with Alzheimer’s disease or dementia. Many veterans go missing because of stress and trauma associated with their military service, said Ernst, who is an Iraq War veteran who served for more than 20 years in the Army Reserve and Army National Guard. “As a combat veteran, I understand how important it is for our veterans to have access to the support and care they have earned,” she said in a statement.

Last year, Wisconsin became the first state to implement a public notification system for missing veterans. The Milwaukee Journal Sentinel reported the system was created after Air Force veteran Corey Adams, a Milwaukee resident diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, went missing and was found dead 18 days later. His family struggled to get police to search for him. Retired Army Brig. Gen. Donald Bolduc, the former commander of Special Operations Command-Africa, has led efforts to take the Green Alert system nationwide. He resides in New Hampshire and inspired Hassan to take up the issue. "For a variety of reasons, far too many veterans go missing for long stretches of time before someone finds them," Bolduc said. He believes the system would help "better locate veterans and give them the appropriate care they need when they disappear."

The Green Alert Act would create a commission comprising representatives from the departments of Justice, Transportation, Veterans Affairs and Health and Human Services, as well as state and local officials. The commission would be tasked with developing best practices and technical assistance to help states develop the system. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | March 7, 2019 ++]

SSIA Update 06 ► H.R.553/S.622 | Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act

Sen. Doug Jones (D-AL) introduced legislation 29 FEB to end the deduction of Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) annuities from Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) paid to survivors of fallen servicemembers, also known as the "widows tax." MOAA has long supported repeal of the widows tax, backing similar legislation from House Rep. Joe Wilson (R-SC) and others. The change would mean that in cases where military service led to the death of a servicemember, DIC would be paid in addition to the SBP annuity.

About 67,000 military survivors would benefit from this legislation, with the current offset costing them about \$12,000 annually. "The SBP-DIC offset remains grossly unfair to the members of the military community who deserve our support the most," said Lt. Gen. Dana T. Atkins, USAF (Ret), President and CEO of MOAA. "We thank Sen. Jones for his leadership on this issue, and we encourage their fellow legislators to join the fight. "The need to solve this inequity is uniformly agreed-upon throughout Congress, but they haven't found the political will to resolve it," Atkins said. "The 116th Congress has an opportunity to be known for getting this done."

Jones' new legislation -- S. 622, the Military Widows Tax Elimination Act - already has 31 Senate cosponsors from both sides of the aisle as of March 5, including 28 original cosponsors. Wilson and Rep. John Yarmuth (D-KY) introduced a similar bill, H.R. 553, in the House earlier this year. In April, as part of its annual Storming the Hill event, MOAA plans to bring in chapter leaders from across the country to meet with lawmakers to find a permanent end to the widows tax. While previous efforts to eliminate the widows tax have generated support from lawmakers, most civilian constituents remain unaware of the financial penalty. MOAA encourages its members to share this information with civilians in their communities, both geographical and online.

Act now to send your House and Senate elected officials an editable MOAA-suggested message urging them to end the widows tax. To so go to <http://takeaction.moaa.org/app/write-a-letter?6&engagementId=495393>. [Source: The MOAA Newsletter | March 7, 2019 ++]

Bankruptcy Update 02 ► S.___ | Haven Act Would Prevent Vet Loss of Disability Benefits

Two senators just introduced a bill designed to shield veterans' disability benefits from debt collectors. When a disabled vet declares bankruptcy currently, the law allows debtors to count a veteran's disability benefits as disposable income, allowing them to seize the benefits. Yet Social Security disability benefits are exempted by law from being

lumped into a person's disposable income in bankruptcy filings, and disability benefits in any form aren't taxable and therefore generally not considered disposable income.

The **Honoring American Veterans in Extreme Need** (HAVEN) Act seeks to create the same immunity in bankruptcy cases for benefits provided by the VA and Department of Defense to disabled veterans and their surviving spouses. Sen. Tammy Baldwin (D-WI) and Sen. John Cornyn (R-TX) introduced the bill, which has already been endorsed by 10 Republican and 10 Democratic senators. It has also earned the support of organizations like the American Legion, Disabled Veterans of America and the American Bankruptcy Institute, among others. "Right now, veterans and their families are forced to dip into their disability-related benefits to pay off bankruptcy creditors," said Baldwin during an unveiling event for HAVEN in her Senate office. "And that's not right. This reform will protect veterans' disability benefits when they fall on hard times."

Supporters of the legislation say it's unfair that veterans may be forced to give up their disability benefits when declaring bankruptcy, while the general population receiving similar benefits through Social Security does not. "The effect is to shove veterans out of the protections that every other disabled American gets," said Holly Petraeus, a HAVEN supporter and former assistant director of the Consumer Financial Protection Bureau. "We knew that was not right and were sure that was not intended with the original legislation, but that was the effect that it had." Matthew Shuman, the American Legion's national legislative director, felt similarly. "So often we find that veterans and service members and their families are exempted because they do great things," he said. "It's not often that we find the other way around."

Baldwin and others involved with HAVEN say the bill could also help veterans' mental-health issues by easing their financial burdens. John Thompson, a veteran and bankruptcy lawyer with the ABI, brought up "startling statistics" surrounding veteran suicides. "We know that one of the single greatest contributing factors to that is financial distress," he said. "And this is going to go a long way to easing that financial distress for many American veterans." A few of the bill's supporters made the point that bankruptcy isn't inherently a bad thing and, in fact, can allow a veteran to start over financially. Jay Bender, an Alabama lawyer and ABI member, said that the fear of losing their disability benefits to creditors might deter veterans from filing for bankruptcy. "There's benefits to going through bankruptcy, to get the fresh start," he said. "We should remove the impediment that currently exists that restricts this access for disabled vets."

Baldwin agreed, adding that fewer barriers for veterans to file for bankruptcy creates more opportunities for them to turn their lives around and resume their contributions to the economy. "When somebody has financial woes that are so significant that they have to declare bankruptcy, if given a second chance they have a much more promising path to becoming taxpayers again," she said. "If not given that chance, people are not necessarily going to resume a productive job. We like to create new taxpayers." Shane Liermann, Disabled American Veterans' assistant national legislative director, highlighted what's truly at stake for veterans who face the prospect of having their disability benefits snatched away by debtors in a bankruptcy scenario. "Disability compensation for many of our veterans is the difference between being able to provide the necessities for their family and not," he said. "The notion that disability compensation can be considered disposable income is outrageous." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Joshua Axelrod | March 6, 2019 ++]

Joint Resolutions ► **What They Are**

In the United States Congress, a joint resolution is a legislative measure that requires approval by the Senate and the House and is presented to the president for approval or disapproval. Generally, there is no legal difference between a joint resolution and a bill. Both must be passed, in exactly the same form, by both chambers of Congress, and signed by the President (or, re-passed in override of a presidential veto; or, remain unsigned for ten days while Congress is in session) to become a law. Only joint resolutions may be used to propose amendments to the United States

Constitution and these do not require the approval of the President. Laws enacted by virtue of a joint resolution are not distinguished from laws enacted by a bill, except that they are designated as resolutions as opposed to acts.

While either a bill or joint resolution can be used to create a law, they are used differently in current usage. Bills are generally used to add, repeal, or amend laws codified in the United States Code or Statutes at Large, provide policy and program authorizations and twelve annual appropriations bills. Joint resolutions are generally used for, among other things:

- To authorize small appropriations;
- For continuing resolutions, which extend appropriation levels adopted in a prior fiscal year, when one or more of the twelve annual appropriations acts have been temporarily delayed from becoming law on time;
- To create temporary commissions or other ad hoc bodies (e.g., the 9/11 Commission);
- To create temporary exceptions to existing law, such as joint resolutions providing a day other than January 6 for counting electoral votes or providing for a Saxbe fix reducing the pay of an office so that a member of Congress may avoid the Ineligibility Clause;
- To declare war.
- To terminate a national emergency declaration.
- To amend the Constitution of the United States.

[Source: Wikipedia | March 7, 2019 ++]

*** Military ***



Military Retirement System Update 32 ► Only 25% of Army BRS Eligible Joined

The window to opt in to the military's new Blended Retirement System (BRS) shut at the end of 2018, with only about 25 percent of eligible soldiers deciding to forego the standard 20-year retirement benefits for a new plan that more closely mirrors the 401(k) plans that many companies offer. It was the lowest turnout among the services, with the Marine Corps coming in the highest at about 60 percent. It came up 27 FEB during a congressional hearing, when the Army's top enlisted soldier was testifying on Capitol Hill. "When asked, the overwhelming majority of the response was, 'I plan to stay 20 years, and I feel as if the traditional retirement system will benefit me better in the future', " Sergeant Major of the Army Dan Dailey told Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC), chair of the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on personnel.

In an Army Times poll, more than half of respondents indicated they planned to serve at least 20 years. About 800,000 soldiers, with fewer than 12 years in service, were eligible — mostly junior enlisted and noncommissioned officers. "Our mid-grade NCOs felt they were too far into their careers to be able to capitalize on the full investment of their blended retirement contributions," Dailey said. The Defense Department automatically contributes the equivalent of 1 percent of a soldier's pay into the Thrift Savings Plan. If the soldier chooses to make his or her own contributions, DoD will match up to 4 percent through 26 years of service. If they choose to leave before 20 years, any of that saved up money is theirs to keep, or roll over into an Individual Retirement Account, then start drawing from once they reach

retirement age. And if they stay longer, they get to keep their saved money and receive a smaller monthly benefit on top of it.

The delay in access to the saved funds was the difference-maker for some, Dailey said. “Largely, they have to take that compensation to invest in one thing that most American families do throughout their lives, and that’s a home,” he said. With most enlisted soldiers signing up between the ages of 17 and 24, it could be decades after a 20-year retirement until they are able to access their savings without a penalty, versus an immediate defined benefit under the traditional system. That could put a snag in plans to settle down after decades of moving around every few years. “I don’t think it’s negative,” Dailey said. “I think that the soldiers who come in now understand the value of investment.”

The BRS might create an issue in the future, though, he added, because the matching contributions stop at 26 years. Some senior NCOs and officers will stick around for almost a decade longer than that, which can take a chunk out of their savings potential. “I can’t predict that, but I think that may be a challenge for the future that we’ll have to deal with,” Dailey added. [Source: ArmyTimes | Meghann Myers | February 28, 2019 ++]

Military Pay Raise 2020 ► White House Proposes 3.1% Pay Raise

Service members would see a 3.1 percent pay raise next January and the military would add about 30,000 more active-duty and reserve troops under President Donald Trump’s fiscal 2020 budget proposal released on 11 MAR. For junior enlisted troops, a 3.1 percent pay hike would to about \$815 more a year in pay. For senior enlisted and junior officers, the hike equals about \$1,500 more. For an O-4 with 12 years service, it’s more than \$2,800 extra next year. In his budget announcement, Trump said the 3.1 percent increase was “the largest increase in a decade.” According to the Pentagon’s records, service members received a 3.9 percent pay increase in 2009 and a 3.4 percent increase in 2010. The size of each year’s raise is linked to private sector wages, as measured by the Employment Cost Index.



The proposed \$750 billion defense budget is dependent upon Congress supporting an additional \$164 billion in overseas contingency operations spending, or OCO. It would be the largest OCO amount requested since the Obama administration requested \$167 billion at the height of the surge in Afghanistan, and \$194 billion in 2008 at the height of the Iraq surge. That request, however, is likely to be challenged by House Democrats who object to increased military funding while domestic programs face sharp cuts. The document highlights a host of administration priorities for the Defense Department, including personnel policies. In the budget, officials said their plan “builds on steady gains that have restored military readiness, enhanced lethality, and increased force size” in recent years. The plus-up of personnel would increase military end strength to 2,140,300 active and reserve military personnel, according to the budget documents.

White House officials said extra troops are needed “to achieve the objectives in the National Defense Strategy.” Details on which services will gain forces are expected in the coming days. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III and Tara Copp | March 11, 2019 ++]

Military Opioid Use ► Preventing Painkiller Abuse

Virginia doctors using a statewide drug-monitoring program now can see whether their patients have gotten prescriptions — including for opioids, benzodiazepines and stimulants — filled at military hospitals and clinics. Though the prescription-painkiller-abuse epidemic has raged for years, the Department of Defense just launched its own system in December for controlled substances and how they're given to military patients. The program tracks quantities and strengths of medications. With the Virginia and military systems connected, officials said, doctors and pharmacists have a more complete picture of patients' prescription histories. Having such information could prevent the overprescribing of addictive drugs and dangerous drug combinations, they say. Police and medical licensing boards also can use the data to support investigations into doctor shopping and other criminal activity.

Though several other states and Puerto Rico have followed suit, Virginia was the first to go “live” with its connection to the military's electronic database, said Diane Powers, a spokeswoman for the Virginia Department of Health Professions. The state was eager to lead the pack, officials said, because it has the third-largest military population. David Bobb, chief of the Defense Health Agency's pharmacy operations, said the department has been wanting to help states in their fight against the opioid crisis for a while, but there were challenges. Each state has its own regulations for its prescription-monitoring program, and some have had to take a closer look at their policies to make sure sharing the information is legal. The department also has had security concerns. “We didn't want to share it in such a way that an enemy could get tipped off that ... maybe there's going to be a movement of personnel or something like that. It took a while to come up with a solution,” Bobb said, “and that's why I think ... we were a little bit behind times in making this operation.”

Prior to launching the military's electronic database, department officials kept an eye on their own prescribers and pharmacists internally. They could monitor when patients received controlled substances at military treatment facilities and through its mail-order program. But they didn't know if a patient went to a retail pharmacy and paid cash. Connecting with state programs gives the department that capability. Ralph Orr, director of Virginia's program, said in a news release that the additional information will “help save more lives.” The state's database connects with 32 jurisdictions, including Washington, D.C. In January, it began communicating with North Carolina's system, joining the program with all neighboring states.

USMC Tuition Aid Update 03 ► Minimum Time In Service Requirements Scrapped

Now is the time for Marine Corps personnel to start applying for those college classes. The Corps just announced that it is scrapping minimum time service requirements to use tuition assistance, or TA. Not only have the time constraints been removed, but Marines who are in the status of “awaiting training” can also start to use TA, according to a recent Marine administrative message posted Monday. Prior to the announcement on 11 MAR, first-time TA users in the Corps had to wait 18 months, a policy change that just had been implemented in May 2018. The Corps chopped the minimum in service requirement for TA down six months from the previous wait of two years. “Command approval of TA is contingent upon the command's anticipated mission requirements and individual Marines' eligibility to participate in the program,” the new MARADMIN reads.

Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Ronald L. Green hinted changes to the Corps' professional and military education system were coming at the Navy League's annual Sea-Air-Space exposition in early April 2018. Green had recently made a trip to Air Force's Air University located aboard Maxwell Air Force Base in Alabama to gauge how the Air Force credentials and educates its airmen. Various education incentives and changes to military education have already started to roll out over the past year. Some of these changes are part of modernization and professionalization of the Corps as the force overhauls its Marines for a fight with near-peer rivals.

The Corps is seeking thinkers on the battlefield, and in the future fight the Marines may need to rely on noncommissioned officers to fill the roles of military officers and com Shawn Snow manders. Some changes have included renaming the Enlisted Professional Military Education Directorate to the College of Enlisted Military Education and adding a week to the resident Sergeants School. The Corps is also streamlining its curriculum to make translating college credit to civilian universities more palpable. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | Shawn Snow | March 11, 2019 ++]

Base Housing Update 05 ► Groton Naval Submarine Base Conditions

Navy families say they have experienced heating issues, unanswered maintenance requests and overpriced units among other problems at privately managed military housing in Connecticut. Groton’s local newspaper (The Day) reported that residents aired their grievances during a public meeting 4 MAR about housing near the Naval Submarine Base in Groton. Fifteen-year Navy veteran Kevin Groover said he expected a better standard of living when he returned from serving overseas with his wife in 2016. However, he said he was disappointed. "We're in the Navy," he said. "This is not how it's supposed to be." Some residents complained about bathroom mold, while others questioned whether the units were worth the \$1,800 or \$2,000 housing allowance they received.

The meeting came after Congress asked for more information about reports of substandard living conditions for military families across the country. Base commanding officer Capt. Paul Whitescarver said Monday the Navy is looking to identify systemic issues and is concerned about conditions that jeopardize the safety of residents. He said housing is vastly improved from what it was two to three decades ago before the Navy privatized housing. Balfour Beatty Communities has a contract with the Navy to provide housing in the area. About 40 people out of the 1,041 military families living in homes managed by Balfour attended the meeting. Yearly surveys by Balfour show general overall satisfaction with the living conditions in Groton. [Source: The Associated Press | March 5, 2019 ++]

Base Housing Update 06 ► Non-Disclosure Agreements Revealed

Privatized housing companies that are asking service members to sign agreements promising to keep silent about their poor housing conditions must immediately stop, Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC) told the service secretaries and service chiefs during a hearing 7 MAR. “These organizations wave a non-disclosure agreement in front of them and say, if you sign this agreement, there may be a bonus or payment you’ll be entitled to if you don’t bring up what may be inadequate housing,” Tillis said, during a hearing of the Senate Armed Services Committee. “I can’t imagine on any level why it would make sense to have a new tenant, these young kids, sign an agreement, not understanding the implications of it,” Tillis said, noting it could well be the first lease that service member has ever signed.



The service secretaries and service chiefs testified before the Senate Armed Services Committee on March 7, as the committee examines problems with privatized military housing for service members and their families.

Non-disclosure agreements, or confidentiality agreements, are legal contracts that outline information that will be kept secret. “I’ve been a landlord before and it never would have occurred to me to say I want you to sign away your right to say you’re living in inadequate conditions,” Tillis said. Senators have been exploring issues with housing that some military families have faced with black mold, pest infestations, water leaks, and other problems, and their inability to get satisfactory responses from their privatized housing managers. “If any of these are enforced, I expect them to be rescinded over the next 30 days,” Tillis said. “And over the next 30 days, if they’re not rescinded, I want to know what housing company wants to come before me and tell me why it makes sense. Tell me the business reason why it makes sense. Tell me the reason why it’s for the good of the tenant. I’d love to have that conversation. “But I’ll guarantee you, this has got to stop.”

Tillis said he learned about the agreements from families at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, when he and Army Secretary Mark Esper visited there recently. Esper said that was the first time he’d heard about the agreements, too. “I don’t understand it, I’ve never heard of it before in my life. ... We’ve definitely got to dig into this,” Esper said. “There’s no reason why people should be signing [nondisclosure agreements].” Officials at Corvias Military Living, which is the property manager at Fort Bragg, couldn’t immediately be reached for comment.

- Navy Secretary Richard Spencer said he planned to call all of the chief executive officers at the privatized housing companies the afternoon following the hearing. “If they have any of these documents in their files, they are to be accounted for, and we’re going to talk about them this afternoon.”
- Air Force Secretary Heather Wilson, who announced her resignation Thursday, said in her visits to bases, “I did not come across anyone who told me about one of those, but we’re going to go back and check.” Wilson visited MacDill, Tinker and Shaw Air Force bases in recent weeks to explore residents’ issues with privatized housing.

One military spouse said the privatized housing company at MacDill Air Force Base asked her and her husband, an Air Force master sergeant, to sign a different sort of non-disclosure agreement in January – when they moved out. Traci Lenz and her husband had complained to the company about mold problems in their house, and moved off base after living there for just six months, because of concerns for their children’s health. Traci Lenz said the company, Harbor Bay, wanted them to sign an agreement that would also release the company from claims – meaning the Lenzes, their children and heirs – wouldn’t file lawsuits or initiate any other legal actions. In return, the company would waive the two-month early termination fee of \$4,524 because the Lenzes were breaking their lease early.

According to a copy of the unsigned agreement provided by Traci Lenz, the agreement would have required the Lenzes to keep the agreement secret, and to “refrain from making or encouraging any negative, adverse, or disparaging statements, comments, or remarks, whether oral or written and including all media, internet, and social media” about the company. The agreement specified the payment was not to be considered an admission of liability, and the company denies any liability. In the Lenzes’ efforts to get their concerns addressed, Harbor Bay management denied there was mold, and stated that it was safe for occupancy. Harbor Bay maintenance had hired a third-party company to inspect the house; the Lenzes also hired a third-party company. The results differed. The Lenzes refused to sign the agreement. Traci Lenz said ultimately the company did agree to waive the two-month early termination fee. “They stated it was ‘an accommodation’ after we involved media and filed a congressional,” she said.

Ron Hansen, president of Michaels Management Services, the property manager for Harbor Bay, said these non-disclosure agreements are not common, and are triggered only when the tenant involves an attorney or discusses attorney involvement. “In the past 20 years, I think I’ve been involved in four” related to military privatized housing, he said. It’s a condition of a settlement when legal is involved, he said. “Where legal is involved, 100 percent there will be a non-disclosure agreement. “In our case, we referred it to Harbor Bay’s attorney, who said if we do have a settlement, we have to have a non-disclosure agreement.” Just as in the Lenzes’ case, he said, no one is required to sign the agreement.

Hansen said his company doesn't use non-disclosure agreements in other situations, and has responded with that information to some CEOs of other housing projects on Navy installations. Those CEOs contacted him in the wake of Navy Secretary Spencer's comment that he would be calling those CEOs about the agreements. Although his company doesn't operate any Navy projects, he said, those CEOs wanted to ensure Hansen's projects at other installations don't use them with their tenants, because some sailors and Marines live in some Michaels Management properties at other services' installations. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | March 8, 2019 ++]

PFAS Toxic Exposure Update 01 ► 16 Cancer Cases in One Family

Former Army reservist Spc. Mark Favors comes from a military family who has lived for generations near Colorado Springs' Air Force and Army installations. It's taken a severe toll, he said. Favors, 50, can count at least 16 relatives from the area who have been diagnosed with cancer; 10 have died. Six of those relatives have died since 2012, including his father at age 69 and two cousins, ages 38 and 54. "In my family alone, we have had five kidney cancer deaths," Favors said. "And those people only lived in the contaminated area."



An air force water quality test.

Many of Favors' relatives lived near Peterson Air Force Base, where scores of both on-base and off base water sources have tested significantly above the Environmental Protection Agency's recommended exposure of 70 parts per trillion of perfluorooctane sulfonate (PFAS) or perfluorooctanoic acid (PFOA). The compounds were part of the military's firefighting foam until just last year. The compounds have been linked to cancers and developmental delays for fetuses and infants. Peterson's contamination ranges from 79 to 88,400 parts per trillion in its on-base wells and 79 to 7,910 parts per trillion in public and private drinking wells off base.

Questions of whether groundwater contaminated by the chemical compounds from military firefighting foam caused cancer clusters around installations continue to gain traction in Washington. In March 2018, the Pentagon released its first-ever assessment of the extent of the contamination. The last two defense bills have provided funding to assess the impact of PFAS and PFOA at 10 military communities; that study is now underway. On 6 MAR, before the House Committee on Oversight and Reform subcommittee on the environment, Favors and others will testify in a hearing with Maureen Sullivan, deputy assistant secretary of defense for environment. "In my family there are at least seven military veterans who themselves, along with their spouses and children's drinking water had been contaminated without their knowledge, while they were on active duty in the U.S. Army and/or deployed to Iraq," said Favors, in testimony he provided to Military Times in advance of the hearing.

DoD previously said it was not until the EPA published its 70 parts per trillion guidelines that it understood how harmful exposure could be and voluntarily took action; something Favors doesn't buy. The issue has been explored in-depth by the Colorado Springs Gazette, which produced a timeline dating back to the first concerns about the foam — in 1962. What's more, nearby Fort Carson stopped using the chemicals in 1991, after an Army Corps of Engineers Study looked at harmful chemicals at its installations. "Aqueous film forming foam (AFFF) is considered a hazardous material in a number of states," the 1991 study, which was obtained by Military Times, read. "Firefighting operations

that use AFFF must be replaced with nonhazardous substitutes.” To Favors, that admission means the Pentagon knew the foam was harmful, and he wants to know why it didn’t take action earlier. “We’re trying to get justice,” Favors said.

So far, there’s been no easy help. Peterson Air Force Base addressed its drinking wells in 2016, the year the EPA published its exposure guidelines. DoD provided drinking water and installed filters for families in the area, even though EPA’s guidelines were not enforceable and the Pentagon faced no penalty if it did not take action. Relatives of Favors’ deceased family members could have sought remedy from the state. But Colorado has a two-year statute of limitations, and those family members found out about the potential cancer links too late to sue. Some communities are taking action on their own. In Florida, the state health department has collected data on cancer clusters around Patrick Air Force Base. DoD was also directed in the 2019 National Defense Authorization Act to:

- Conduct an analysis "that considers the current scientific evidence base linking the health effects of PFAS on individuals who served as members of the Armed Forces and were exposed to PFAS at military installations.
- Provide an estimate of the number of members of the Armed Forces and veterans who may have been exposed to PFAS while serving in the Armed Forces.
- Develop a process that would facilitate the transfer — between the Department of Defense and the Department of Veterans Affairs — of health information of individuals who served in the Armed Forces and may have been exposed to PFAS during such service
- Generate an estimate of the amount of funding that would be required to administer a potential registry of individuals who may have been exposed to PFAS while serving in the Armed Forces.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Tara Copp | March 4, 2019 ++]

PFAS Toxic Exposure Update 02 ► New Mexico’ U.S. Air Force Lawsuit

New Mexico on Tuesday sued the U.S. Air Force over groundwater contamination at two bases, saying the federal government has a responsibility to clean up plumes of toxic chemicals left behind by past military firefighting activities. The contamination — linked to a class of chemicals known as per- and polyfluoroalkyl substances, or PFAS — was detected last year in groundwater on and near Cannon and Holloman air bases. Similar contamination has been found at dozens of military sites across the nation, and growing evidence that exposure can be dangerous has prompted the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to consider setting a maximum level for the chemicals in drinking water nationwide. Currently only non-enforceable drinking water health advisories are in place.

New Mexico regulators first issued a notice of violation to the Air Force last year for failing to properly address the contamination at the base near Clovis. They followed up earlier this year on Holloman, saying that base had violated its state permit and had yet to respond to concerns about the pollution near Alamogordo. The state considers the contamination "an immediate and substantial danger" to surrounding communities. "In the absence of cooperation by the Air Force, the New Mexico Environment Department will move swiftly and decisively to ensure protections for both public health and the environment," Environment Secretary James Kenney said Tuesday. Aside from violating state environmental laws, Kenney also suggested that the Air Force violated the public's trust. "Today we begin holding them accountable," he said.

The Air Force declined to comment on the lawsuit but argued that its response to PFAS contamination in New Mexico and elsewhere has been aggressive. Mark Kinkade with the Air Force Installation and Mission Support Center said the military has provided alternate water to those in areas where Air Force activity likely contributed to the contamination. He said officials also have been working with the communities and regulators to identify and implement long-term solutions to prevent exposure. Beyond firefighting foams, PFAS are used in nonstick coatings on things ranging from pans to fast-food wrappers. Some states and cities have sued the manufacturers of the firefighting foams,

saying the companies should have known the chemicals could post a threat to public health and the environment. New York is among them, having spent tens of millions of dollars in state funds to investigate and clean up contamination linked to the chemicals.

According to a report from independent federal investigators, the U.S. military as of 2017 had spent about \$200 million on environmental investigations and other responses related to the chemicals at 263 installations around the country. The U.S. Department of Defense has said it could take years to determine a total price tag for PFAS contamination at military sites. New Mexico Attorney General Hector Balderas said in his drought-stricken state, access to clean water is vital and any amount of contamination is of great concern for residents.

Cannon Air Force Base is located on the edge of Clovis, a community of about 39,000 people that relies on the Ogallala aquifer for its drinking water. The underground supply is already under pressure drought and growing demands along the Texas-New Mexico border. Sampling had detected PFAS in some off-base wells, which provide drinking water and irrigation water to local dairies. At the Highland Dairy, a half-mile from the base, Air Force sampling showed levels more than seven times the EPA advisory. Sampling by the dairy showed significantly higher concentrations. Holloman borders Alamogordo, where 31,000 residents rely on groundwater within the Tularosa Basin. Base officials there identified five known sites where the chemicals were released. State regulators and Air Force officials say sampling is ongoing to determine the extent of the contamination plumes and their migration beyond base boundaries. [Source: The Associated Press | Susan Montoya Bryan | March 5, 2019 ++]

Navy Amphibs Update 02 ► Two Cut From 2020-2024 Budget Plan

Wary of bringing big, expensive warships full of sailors and Marines in missile range of hostile coastlines, the Pentagon plans to cut two new amphibious warships out of the 2020-2024 budget plan to be released later this month, defense officials confirmed. The decision to delay the planned purchase of two San Antonio-class Flight II landing dock ships, known as LPDs, out past 2024 is part of a much wider reevaluation of naval warfare. Under high-level pressure to build a fleet better able to face Chinese and Russian precision missiles, the Navy is reducing its investment in large but potentially warships like amphibians and carriers so it can free up money for more offensive weaponry on smaller surface ships, submarines, and aircraft.



San Antonio-class Flight II landing dock ships (left) and the Marine Corps Amphibious Assault Vehicle (right).

The Navy is set to make the request in its fiscal 2020 budget set to be delivered to Congress on 12 MAR, which will also include a controversial plan to cut the mid-life refueling of the USS Harry S. Truman aircraft carrier, essentially retiring the flattop two decades early. The current LPDs can carry several hundred Marines who can climb down to the well deck, open to the water, to embark on aging amphibious vehicles, or climb up to the flight deck and board helicopters or tilt-rotors to race to a disaster zone, hostage rescue, or raid target. According to Marine Corps leadership, the ships as they're currently constituted will have difficulty in a future where the US will have to "fight to get to the fight," as Lt. Gen. David Berger, the head of the Corps' combat development office, said recently at an Amphibious Warship Industrial Base Coalition breakfast on Capitol Hill.

But moving the build of the new “Flight II” variant of the ships — which promises to cut costs in some areas while upgrading radar, among other improvements — into the future would likely make that mission even harder, while calling the overall amphibious mission into question. If the plan makes it through Congress, it would likely also delay the Navy’s ability to reach its goal of 38 amphibious ships from the current 32. “The fact that the Navy wants to push a couple of these past the FYDP [the 5-year Future Year Defense Plan] is not a good sign,” said Dakota Wood, a former Marine officer now at the Heritage Foundation. “They’re not going to be ready to come into the fleet to offset to loss of current capabilities” as older ships retire, which will mean a loss of training opportunities for Marines and operational assets for commanders.

The proposed pushback of the Flight II LPDs would also likely effect the refit of the aging Whidbey Island-class dock landing ships, currently scheduled to be replaced by the Flight IIs beginning in the 2020s. Gen. Berger said that he has been pushing for “accelerating buys and looking at two-ship buys” for the Flight II ships so the Navy can spend on buying new, modern ships instead of keeping older hulls in operation. “Flight II procurement cannot be pushed out into the future,” he said. “There’s an industrial capacity portion of that, but frankly, selfishly, there’s a warfighting part that says we can’t take a hiatus for two or three years. We cannot do that. It’s too important.”

But Bryan Clark, a retired naval officer and analyst at the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, said the deferment of the Flight II makes sense from a strategic and budgetary perspective. “This is going to be a strategy-driven budget, and here’s where you see the strategy coming though,” he said. The imperative to increase “lethality” — hammered home by then-Defense Secretary Jim Mattis and picked up by acting SecDef Patrick Shanahan — in many ways supports moving some LPD money into more deadly surface combatants that can both defend themselves and strike distant enemies. But, Clark added, “the Navy is doing these things driven by strategy — with knowledge that Congress will likely want to put them back in and add more money.” Even if that doesn’t happen, with budgets being finite, the Navy appears to have made a decision to “press hard on the undersea and surface combatant force, and take reductions in the part of the force that needs to make some changes in order to contribute to the strategy.”

One thing that may have worked against the Flight II ships is the fact they’re being contracted on a one-by-one basis, as opposed to the block buys the Navy has recently undertaken on the Ford-class carriers, Virginia -class submarines, and the Littoral Combat Ships, among other programs. Those block buys offer the Navy savings in return for committing itself to years of purchases, so shipbuilders can start planning and buying material years before construction begins. Without a similar contractual lock-in, the Flight IIs are easier to defer, simply because the up-front investments have been smaller. But those investments still matter immensely to thousands of voters. Retired Adm. Terry McKnight, chairman of the Amphibious Warship Industrial Base Coalition, told me Thursday that the amphibious warship industrial base includes more than 850 companies spread across 250 congressional districts — something the Navy and Congress both well know.

Last year, Congress boosted the Navy’s shipbuilding account by \$2.2 billion, a 10 percent increase over the \$21.9 billion originally requested. A not insignificant \$350 million of that was earmarked for the accelerated acquisition of the LPD-17 Flight II. The Hill clearly is interested in the ship. That interest will be tested next month, after the 2020 budget drops on Capitol Hill. [Source: Breaking Defense | Paul McLeary | March 01, 2019 ++]

[Afghan Failures Update 04](#) ► The Forever War | Spouse Done Waiting

Rebecca Yarros, whose husband Jason is a soldier of 22 years, is done waiting for the forever wars to end, and not even \$105,000 will change her mind. Yarros is a blogger and an author who just recently released her 10th book, *The Last Letter*. She comes from a military family — both her parents are retired Army officers. And on February 21st, she published an open letter to the Army, explaining why she and her husband would be turning down his offer for a \$105,000 bonus in exchange for three more years of service. Long story short, she doesn’t see the Army coming up with an exit strategy in Afghanistan any time soon. So she’s using her own.

During her husband's first couple of deployments — he has five under his belt — Yarros was the "shiny, wear-the-unit-sweatshirt" Army wife, she wrote in her letter. She told Task & Purpose that there was an "air of excitement" during the first deployment ceremony, a "we've-got-this" kind of spirit. But that dwindled over the years, as the war dragged on and the deployments kept coming. "When Iraq first happened, we never saw this coming," Yarros told Task & Purpose. "And I don't think anyone does. And I think anyone who says, 'Well you knew what you were getting into' — I grew up in the military, but we never went through an 18-year war. This wasn't normal."

If given the chance, Yarros said she would tell Army leadership that she understands military leaders are not politicians, and they can't decide to declare the war over. But the volume of deployments just isn't sustainable. She said leaders need to look at the number of divorces in Army families as "another casualty of what this 18-year-old war has done." And as for what she'd tell the politicians: "I would say there's a fine line between what is good for national security and regional stability, and our own pride. And that they're going to cripple their forces."



CW3 Jason Yarros (left) meeting his then-foster daughter for the first time, after returning home from his fourth deployment and (right) the Yarros family, just before he left for his fifth deployment.

Jason Yarros, an Army Chief Warrant Officer 3 who flies Apache helicopters, was seriously injured on his first deployment — and still agreed to deploy another four times. As Yarros wrote in her letter, they've been "cut down like the Giving Tree, and have nothing else to give." Her children, like so many others, have never known anything else. She told Task & Purpose that their oldest son was five-and-a-half-weeks old when Jason left for his first deployment. When the pair told their children that he would be deploying again, their second son joked, "Well does that mean I get to be the man of the house this time?" Their oldest son responded, "Nope, that's been my job since I was six weeks old," and walked out of the room.

The Yarros family is, unfortunately, in good company. The war in Afghanistan has been going on for so long that children who weren't even born on September 11th are now able to enlist. An entire generation of children don't know anything but a country being at war. And if you read the comments on Yarros' blog post, she is far from alone in feeling fed-up. But the military knows how important it is to keep families happy. Support from a spouse is one of the key factors that helps the military retain troops, according to a 2017 DoD survey. That same year, around 21,290 of 689,060 married troops divorced, according to Military.com. And Yarros, in a moment of frustration after her husband told her about the bonus, threatened exactly that.

She describes her marriage as "frighteningly strong," but she told Task & Purpose she couldn't "put [her] kids through it anymore." So while the money could have made a difference — that kind of money could always make a difference — the costs it came with just weren't worth it. "I wasn't sure that I would not begin to resent him instead of his job, and there's a difference there," Yarros said. "Once you resent the man, there's not a lot of coming back from that." Yarros wants the Army to know, however, that it hasn't all been bad. She said they've loved their time as a military family, and that they've "loved serving our nation." She told Task & Purpose she would never tell anyone not to marry a soldier, and that she has no regrets. But after 22 years, it's time for her husband to come home. [Source: Task & Purpose | Haley Britzky | March 01, 2019 ++]

Security Clearances Update 03 ► Inadequate Drug Test Reporting

A Navy audit that concluded in 2017 found the Marine Corps was not adequately reporting positive drug test results of Marines who occupied job fields that required a security clearance to access classified information. The audit looked at Defense Manpower Data Center drug test sample data from fiscal year 2013 and found the Marine Corps did not report nearly 66 percent of positive drug tests to the Department of Defense Consolidated Adjudications Facility, or DoD CAF.

DoD CAF is the entity responsible for determining eligibility for access to classified information for non-intelligence agency DoD personnel. The audit was obtained by Marine Corps Times through a Freedom of Information Act request. “Headquarters Marine Corps Plans, Policies and Operations [PP&O] is aware of issues with inadequate reporting of positive incidents of drug testing and are addressing them with commanders and security managers,” Capt. Karoline Foote, a Marine spokeswoman, told Marine Corps Times in an emailed statement. “We rely on unit leadership and security managers to meet this obligation and are committed to providing oversight and education to help them fulfill this requirement.”

The audit looked at a sample of 110 Marines with 157 confirmed drug test incidents out of a total sample size of 1,557 Marines in fiscal year 2013 who had positive drug tests. Out of that pool, the audit found that various Marine Corps commands did not adequately report 104 of 157 confirmed positive drug test incidents, or about 66 percent. Those 104 positive drug tests involved 80 Marines. “We were unable to determine if another 14 of 157 incidents (9 percent) were reported as required,” the report states. The report further noted that the sample of 110 Marines occupied 85 different job fields, and 73 of those had a prerequisite for a security clearance.

“Because confirmed positive drug test incidents were not reported to DoD CAF, DoD CAF was not able to adjudicate the information,” the audit reads. “As a result, Marines who tested positive for illegal drugs could have obtained/retained or could now have clearance eligibility necessary to serve in positions and have access to classified information,” the report states. The Corps is working to ensure reports of positive drug tests that have not made their way to DoD CAF are appropriately reported. “Additionally, as part of the Automated Continuous Evaluation Program, HQMC [headquarters Marine Corps] receives weekly reports from the newly established Defense Vetting Directorate (DVD) that includes positive urinalysis reports that have not been reported to the DoDCAF. HQMC contacts the command to ensure this is done and follows up as necessary,” Foote explained.

Furthermore, the Corps says that all positive drug test results are being reported to unit commanders via the Internet Forensic Toxicology Drug Testing Laboratory portal. Individual commanders then can use that information for legal and administrative action. Marines are usually separated from the Corps following reports or positive drug tests. “The commander via his or her security manager is responsible for reporting the positive drug test results to DoD CAF,” Foote said. “This item is inspected in annual reviews at the command level. “ Moreover PP&O reviews this issue every three years, according to Foote. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | Shawn Snow | March 1, 2019 ++]

Navy Carrier Fleet Update 01 ► Early Truman Decom a Non-Starter w/HASC

The head of the House Armed Services Committee’s seapower subcommittee told Defense News 28 FEB he would block the early decommissioning of the aircraft carrier Harry S. Truman when it comes before congress this spring. Rep. Joe Courtney (D-CT) told reporters he there was no chance the measure would be endorsed in his subcommittee this year during the 2020 National Defense Authorization Act markup. “This is really a 2021 issue in terms of timing, when the Truman has to go into its refueling,” Courtney said. “So I think in terms of it getting any endorsement in the seapower mark this year I think is zero.”

Courtney's comments come on the heels of a Breaking Defense report that the Pentagon was planning to cancel the Truman's planned 2024 mid-life refueling and decommission the carrier in an effort to save \$30 billion over 25 years. The Navy has to plan for major carrier midlife overhauls years in advance. If the Navy were going to cancel Truman's overhaul, the service would have to make the decision soon. But the Truman is too young to pull out of service, Courtney said. "The Truman is only about 25 years old which in [terms of] an aircraft carrier is actually pretty young," he said. "So, we just approved a two-carrier block buy in September. So to do that and then reduce the size of the carrier fleet seems like a contradictory policy, as far as I'm concerned."

This is the second time in the past decade the Navy has tried to cancel a mid-life reactor refueling. During the Obama administration, the Navy tried to decommission the carrier George Washington when it returned from its forward deployed status in Japan. That effort died after the White House backed down from the plan in 2014. The proposal came about as a result of across-the-board spending cuts in 2013 mandated by the Budget Control Act. At the time, the move faced fierce opposition from Capitol Hill. The Navy was already seeing record deployment lengths due to standing carrier presence requirements, and removing a carrier from the inventory would have only exacerbated the problem. Lawmakers also argued that giving up a carrier would signal a retreat from American seapower.

Courtney noted that a few years back, then Congressman Mick Mulvaney, now President Trump's chief of staff, introduced a measure to reduce the number of carriers required by law from 11 to 10. That move became a point of contention with the late Sen. John McCain, then head of the Senate Armed Services Committee, who refused to back Mulvaney as Trump's budget director, in part due to the carrier measure. [Source: DefenseNews | Joe Gould & David B. Larer | February 28, 2019 ++]

Navy Carrier Fleet Update 02 ► Fight Against Navy Plan to Buy More Carriers

Last year, then-Secretary of Defense James Mattis and his staff had a bitter argument with U.S. Navy leadership over an issue that cuts to the very core of America's maritime force: the future of the aircraft carrier. The bruising debate over the most tangible symbol of U.S. military dominance pitted die-hard carrier advocates—who believe the flattop and its tactical aircraft are key to projecting power—against those who, like Mattis, believe that the days of the carrier are over as Russia and China develop long-range missiles and sophisticated overhead satellites.

"It was like a mini civil war over the future of the carrier," said one U.S. defense official. Navy leadership was pushing hard for a \$24 billion dollar plan to buy two new Gerald Ford-class carriers from Huntington Ingalls Industries, the United States' largest military shipbuilder and the sole builder of nuclear-powered aircraft carriers. Several lawmakers also backed the plan as part of President Donald Trump's effort to build a fleet of 12 aircraft carriers and 355 ships. The U.S. Navy currently has 11 carriers and 285 ships overall. "The Navy wanted to do this two-carrier buy, and Mattis and the [Office of the Secretary of Defense] staff said, 'No way,'" the official said.

Ultimately, the Navy got its two-carrier deal, but at a heavy price: It agreed to defer the midlife refueling of an older, Nimitz-class nuclear-powered aircraft carrier that participated in the U.S. wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria. Two U.S. defense officials confirmed to Foreign Policy that the aircraft carrier in question was the USS Harry Truman; experts say the move would be akin to retiring it. "Mattis essentially told everybody they had to 'shut up and color,'" said a former U.S. defense official with direct knowledge of the discussions, using a common military term to tell people to get on with the task at hand.

Retiring the Truman would reduce the number of U.S. aircraft carriers in operation around the world from 11 to 10 in the mid-2020s, a move that is sure to stir outrage from lawmakers. The two new carriers are not planned to be operational until 2027 and 2030, respectively, and, if history is any guide, they will likely be delayed. The refueling, which is necessary for the ship to serve its full, 50-year operating lifespan, is a massive, years-long undertaking that involves replacing the ship's nuclear core. Bryan McGrath, a retired Navy commander who is now with the Hudson

Institute, explained that if the ship's refueling is delayed by more than a few years, its fissile material will run out. "This is in essence retiring it," McGrath said. The move to defer refueling the USS Harry Truman potentially saves as much as \$4 billion, according to the Washington Post, which first reported news of the deal without naming the carrier. Breaking Defense first reported that the carrier in question is the Truman.

But ultimately the decision was not about the money, the defense official said. "It's really about, do you believe in the year 2040, 20 years from now, that carriers are still going to be relevant?" the official said. "It really wasn't about the refueling per se or the two-carrier buy. ... Those were the proxy decisions to have a discussion on the future of the carrier." Already, Rep. Joe Courtney, the Democratic chairman of the House Armed Services subcommittee on seapower, has voiced his opposition to the plan. His subcommittee would play a critical role in authorizing such a move in the annual National Defense Authorization Act, which sets defense policy. "It's a shortsighted ... and unwise move on [the Pentagon's] part," McGrath said. "Tactical aviation is an incredibly important part of our warfighting kit, and there are a lot of scenarios that I could think of where there simply will not be big chunks of land to fly tactical airplanes off of. "If you value tactical aviation in high-end warfights, it is going to get there on an aircraft carrier."

Now that Mattis is gone, Acting Secretary of Defense Patrick Shanahan has apparently taken up his mantle. Sources say Shanahan also pushed the decision, relying on the advice of so-called carrier skeptics in the Defense Department. "Shanahan is still very, very new, even wet behind the ears in terms of the Pentagon, and now with Mattis's departure he's in an even more awkward position," said one congressional source. "There are career people that are nestled inside [the Pentagon] that he has grown to trust ... they want to see that money go to submarines, hypersonic, cyber, and AI."

The deal echoes a similar Navy proposal in 2014 to retire the USS George Washington, an older Nimitz-class carrier, instead of completing its midlife refueling due to budget cuts. The Congressional Budget Office estimated at the time that the elimination of the carrier and its air wing would save \$7 billion from 2016 to 2021. The delay in the George Washington's refueling had a significant impact on the workforce—Huntington Ingalls laid off 1,200 workers. Congress eventually fully funded the overhaul, keeping the carrier from early retirement, and lawmakers are likely to do so again with the USS Harry Truman. But the move has already done significant damage—and the Pentagon has not kept Capitol Hill in the loop, the former defense official said.

"There are a lot of hurt feelings in Navy uniforms about this," the official said, but noted that: "The strategic environment is driving a decision about the carrier right now, and there is no way to get out of the way." Details of the Pentagon's budget are subject to change until it is submitted to Congress, an event that is tentatively planned for 11 MAR. [Source: Foreign Policy | Lara Seligman | March 1, 2019 ++]

USCG Icebreakers Update 10 ► USCGC Polar Star 10 FEB Fire

The crew of the Coast Guard's last heavy icebreaker battled a nighttime 10 FEB blaze for almost two hours before it was extinguished, officials announced 1 MAR. The fire erupted in the Polar Star's garbage incinerator room about 650 miles north of McMurdo Sound, Antarctica. "It's always a serious matter whenever a shipboard fire breaks out at sea, and it's even more concerning when that ship is in one of the most remote places on Earth," said Vice Adm. Linda Fagan, commander of the U.S. Coast Guard's Pacific Area, in a written statement emailed to Navy Times. "The crew of the Polar Star did an outstanding job — their expert response and determination ensured the safety of everyone aboard."

No one was injured and the cause of the blaze remains under investigation but the fire was another mechanical woe stacked atop an aging breaker that's annually tasked to perform their part of Operation Deep Freeze, a mission by the Air Force, Navy, Army and National Guard to support the National Science Foundation's Antarctic operations. After sailing from its Seattle homeport on 27 NOV, the Polar Star began crunching a channel through 17 miles of ice

measured at 6- to 10-feet thick to McMurdo Station, the main logistics hub for U.S. personnel in Antarctica, including researchers at Amundsen-Scott South Pole Station and remote field camps.



On 30 JAN, the icebreaker escorted the container ship Ocean Giant, toting 500 containers loaded with 10 million pounds of supplies, to McMurdo Station. The cutter refueled and 11 days later, the incinerator room burst into flames. While the crew contained the fire damage to the incinerator housing, the water used to cool the nearby exhaust pipe flowed into several electrical systems and the insulation. Cangemi told Navy Times that the only problem for the crew is that they can't burn their trash on their way home from a port call in New Zealand. He praised the "time and the dedication they show to keep that ship going." Officials vowed to have the repairs completed before next year's 11,200-mile journey to the bottom of the world.

While sailing to Antarctica, the crew fixed one of the electrical systems that began to smoke, damaging a switchboard. Two of the cutter's evaporators that make drinking water failed. A leak also sprang from the shaft that drives the ship's screw. After parts arrived during a port call in Wellington, New Zealand, the crew fixed the electrical wires and the evaporator system but they couldn't resume icebreaking operations until scuba divers could brave the frigid water to mend a seal around the shaft. A hyperbaric chamber loaned to the Coasties by the U.S. Navy allowed them to make the emergency repairs and inspect the hull at sea.

While breaking ice, all power in the ship cut off and the crew had to spend nine hours shutting down the power plant and rebooting the electrical system to mend that, officials added. If the crew couldn't mend the ship, it might've become an international embarrassment. Although the Coast Guard also maintains a medium breaker, Healy, for North Pole patrols, the United States has no self-rescue capabilities for Antarctic ice. Another nation, maybe a rival such as Russia, would have to rescue the Coast Guard crew. Moscow boasts a fleet of at least 40 icebreakers and plans to add even larger vessels to the frozen flotilla.



A contractor and a Polar Star crew member assess progress being made reassembling the cutter's port side hub while the cutter underwent extensive repairs at a dry dock facility in Vallejo, Calif., on Oct. 3, 2018.

When the Polar Star isn't at sea for Operation Deep Freeze, it's in dry dock, undergoing repairs. "Unfortunately, there have been a number of engineering casualties and other problems in recent years. We're talking about a 43-year-old ship," said Coast Guard spokesman Senior Chief Public Affairs Specialist Nyx Cangemi. "Age and the importance of the mission, Operation Deep Freeze, mean that when the Polar Star spends much of its time away from McMurdo Station getting repaired."

Commissioned in 1976, the Polar Star is 13 years past its intended service life. A slightly younger sister, Polar Sea, got knocked out of service in 2010, when pistons in five of the six main diesel engines welded to their sleeves. In early 2017, it was marked by the Coast Guard as a "parts donor" — which means crews began cannibalizing it to keep the Polar Star running. On 14 FEB, President Donald J. Trump signed a bill that earmarked \$655 million for the design and construction of a new icebreaker, plus \$20 million for materials necessary to start on a second vessel.

But Coast Guard officials say that they need six new Polar Security Cutters to patrol the Arctic and Antarctic regions. "While we focus our efforts on creating a peaceful and collaborative environment in the Arctic, we're also responding to the impacts of increased competition in this strategically important region," said Coast Guard Commandant Adm. Karl Schultz in a prepared statement. "Our continued presence will enable us to reinforce positive opportunities and mitigate negative consequences today and tomorrow." [Source: NavyTimes | Carl Prine | March 1, 2019 ++]

Navy Terminology, Jargon & Slang ► Bitchbox thru Blivet

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

Bitchbox – (USN) Intercom or amplified circuit used to communicate between spaces of the ship.

BITCHING BETTY – The (usually female-voiced) cockpit warning system of many aircraft today.

Bitter End – Properly, the free or loose end of a line. Originally, the bitter end of a mooring line was taken to the bits to secure it. Bittersweet - A radio call signifying that friendly aircraft are in danger from a surface AAW missile launch, or that the presence of friendly aircraft is preventing a missile shot.

Bits – A shipboard mooring fixture, comprised of cylindrical posts similar to BOLLARDS, mounted in pairs.

Black and Bitter – Coffee, no sugar or cream added.

Black and Sweet – Coffee with sugar.

Black Cat - During World War Two, a PBY Catalina which was painted black and used for night reconnaissance patrol.

Black Cat Merchant - (RN) Someone who is always exaggerating.

Black-Hand Gang - See SNIPE. Older (ca. WW II), less politically-correct form is 'Black Gang.' Originally, it referred to the appearance of men who had been handling or working around coal, but the term has come to refer to the engine room crew. During WWII, members of the Black Gang were issued black "Dixie Cups" instead of white ones, and were therefore sometimes called "Black Hats."

Black-shoe - Member of the surface or submarine community. Until recently, the only approved footwear for these communities was black in color. More recently, brown footwear is optional, but seldom seen due to tradition.

Black Water – Sewage.

Blank flange - (1) A plate bolted onto an open pipe to prevent flooding or leaks while work is performed on a piping system. (2) Pancakes. (3) Someone who acts like an idiot (aka 'blank file').

Bleed Air – In gas turbine engines, compressed air that is removed ('bled') from the compressor section at various points. Can be used for various applications, such as maintaining clean airflow in the engine, anti-icing, air conditioning, or to provide start air to another engine.

Blivet - (1) Traditionally, "Ten pounds of shit in a five-pound sack." (2) A rubber fuel bladder. (3) A modified droptank (may be purpose-built or a field modification) used to haul small cargo, especially in tactical aircraft, or used to haul dangerous or toxic cargo outside of the aircraft.

[Source: <http://hazegray.org/faq/slang1.htm> | March 15, 2019 ++]

Warships That Will Change The Future ► INS Mysore (D60)



This is the Indian guided missile destroyer, the INS Mysore. It is the most famous vessel in the entirety of the Indian navy, even more famous than its aircraft carrier. This is because the INS Mysore follows the Indian prime minister wherever he goes in the world, helping to provide security for the head of the world's largest democracy. The INS Mysore also took part in evacuating Indian citizens from Iraq as ISIS began taking over.

Three warships make up the Delhi-class surface destroyer group of the modern Indian Navy - INS Delhi (D61), INS Mysore (D60) and INS Mumbai (D62). The class was adopted to succeed the older Rajput-class boats but have been superseded themselves by the newer Kolkata-class. Nevertheless, all three ships remain in active status with the Indian Navy. INS Mysore, the second ship of the group, was officially commissioned for service on June 2nd, 1999 and fighters under the motto of "Always Fearless".

As built, the warship displaces 6,835 tons and has a length of 535 feet, a beam of 56 feet and a draught of 21 feet. Power involves 2 x AM-50 gas turbines of 54,000 horsepower coupled with 2 x Marine diesels outputting 10,000 horsepower driving 2 x Shafts astern. The gas turbines are used for additional boost power while the diesels offer the needed cruising power. This powerplant mix maximizes fuel efficiency. Speeds can reach 32 knots and range is out to 5,000 miles. Aboard is a crew of 360. A pair of medium-lift helicopters (and applicable aircrew) are also supported thanks to the hangar/helipad combination seen at the stern of the vessel. The warship carries all-modern radar, communications and sensor equipment as well as hull-mounted and variable-depth sonar systems.

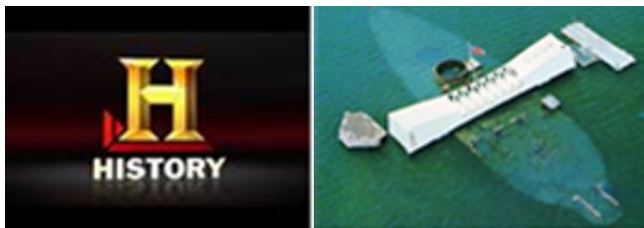
The idea behind modern guided-missile destroyers is hunting enemy vessels (including submarines) while also supporting the main surfacing fleet - as such, INS Mysore is designed to operate independently of the main fleet or with it and can tackle a range of mission types. Armament includes a mix of missile- and projectile-minded weaponry.

4 x Quadruple launchers serve the 16 x SS-N-25 Surface-to-Surface Missile (SSM) stock and 2 x SA-N-7 Surface-to-Air Missile (SAM) launchers counter inbound aerial threats at range. There is a traditional 100mm turreted deck gun set over the forecastle and 4 x 30mm AK-630 series Close-In Weapon Systems (CIWSs) featured. Additionally the warship is outfitted with 2 x RBU-6000 Anti-Submarine ROcket (ASROC) launchers and 5 x 21" (533mm) torpedoes set within quintuple launchers.

The warship's profile is consistent with the class with much of the primary armament featured towards the bow. The bridge section takes its normal place in the design behind and above the forecastle and the main mast is integrated into its lines. Aft of this is the first smoke funnel and this is of a low-profile design. The secondary mast is featured at midships with the second smoke funnel aft. At the extreme end of the destroyer is the hangar and flight deck area offering an obstructed approach for helicopters. One helicopter can be featured on the helipad at a time with a second specimen housed in the hangar. These aircraft can be outfitted with Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) / Anti-Ship equipment and provide an eyes-in-the-skies capability to the ship. Additionally, the systems can help resupply the warship while at sea.

Notable actions involving INS Mysore have been ongoing since 2008 and she has served in the security/deterrence and anti-piracy roles for the Indian government. In 2011 she was used to relocate Indian nationals out of the Libyan warzone following the start of its civil war. Again the warship was used in this fashion during the 2014 anti-ISIS actions in northern Iraq and operated from the Gulf of Aden. [Source: <https://www.militaryfactory.com/ships> | March 2, 2019 ++]

* Military History *



China Marines ► **Highly Coveted Tour Of Duty 1927-1941**

A little-known chapter of U.S. military history is the story of the China Marines, who were stationed in Shanghai throughout the latter half of the 1920s stretching right up to 1941. With the onset of civil unrest and the nationalistic Kuomintang marching on Shanghai the U.S. powers decided to send in troops to protect American interests and citizens. On January 28, 1927, the 4th Regiment of the United States Marine Corps was ordered to the Far East. Their mission: to protect the lives, property and commerce of American citizens in the International Settlement of Shanghai. The International Settlement was an enclave for foreigners, also made up of British, Japanese, Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Dutch communities. Chinese sovereignty was theoretically intact, but in practice the settlements were self-governing and needed independent protection.

Shanghai became a highly coveted tour of duty. With a currency exchange rate of about 20 to 1 the troops lived well. Chinese labor was cheap so the servicemen were well taken care of. They spent their earnings on silk, ivory and other goods, which they often shipped home. They even had their own club, fitted out with several bars, a bowling alley, theater, restaurant, library and ballroom. But this golden age was not to last. In 1931 the Japanese Army began invading Manchuria. The Chinese retaliated, and fighting broke out between Japanese troops guarding their settlement

in Shanghai and Chinese troops at Chaipei, a district to the north of the International Settlement. The 4th Marines – also known as the China Marines - sprang into action, maintaining a defensive perimeter and protecting the settlements.

Peace returned and for the next six years the China Marines continued their comfortable lifestyle. Shanghai in the 1930's was an exciting place to be. There were 45,000 foreigners in the International Settlement and another 16,000 in the nearby French concession. By 1932 there were also approximately 25,000 Russians who had fled their country's Bolshevik Revolution. They included top class ballerinas, musicians, and performers who transformed Shanghai into one of Asia's premier artistic centers. They opened clubs and restaurants and organized literary discussions.

Chinese and Japanese relations remained tense and the serenity was again disrupted in 1937 with the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. For several months the Chinese area of Shanghai was controlled by the Japanese Army. The Chinese withdrew in November 1937, though many Chinese residents remained in the International Settlement. While the Japanese military could not seize the International Settlement, they maintained pressure on the remaining foreign delegations through intimidation. By 1940, with Europe again at war and tensions between Japan and the United States steadily increasing, the situation for the 1000-strong garrison of China Marines become even more difficult. Other foreign nations were withdrawing their troops from the area, while the Japanese military increased their numbers to nearly 500,000 troops. The China Marines began making plans in preparation for the imminent hostilities. Fortunately there were only a few minor skirmishes.

Finally, in November, two weeks before Pearl Harbor, the Americans withdrew their forces from Shanghai. The 4th Marines headed for the Philippines, many of them doomed to be captured by the Japanese and perish in POW camps, an outcome that has forever marked the former China Marines regiment. [Source: KPBS History Detectives | March 5, 2019 ++]

Operation Crossroads ► That Time the US Dropped an Atomic Bomb on a Fleet of 95 Ships

In 1946, French fashion designer Jacques Heim released a woman's swimsuit he called the "Atome" (French for "atom") – a name selected to suggest its design would be as shocking to people that summer as the atomic bombings of Japan had been the summer before. Not to be outdone, competitor Louis Réard raised the stakes, quickly releasing an even more skimpy swimsuit. The Vatican found Réard's swimsuit more than shocking, declaring it to actually be "sinful." So what did Réard consider an appropriate name for his creation? He called it the "Bikini" – a name meant to shock people even more than "Atome." But why was this name so shocking?

In the summer of 1946, "Bikini" was all over the news. It's the name of a small atoll – a circular group of coral islands – within the remote mid-Pacific island chain called the Marshall Islands. The United States had assumed control of the former Japanese territory after the end of World War II, just a few months earlier. The United States soon came up with some very big plans for the little atoll of Bikini. After forcing the 167 residents to relocate to another atoll, they started to prepare Bikini as an atomic bomb test site. Two test bombings scheduled for that summer were intended to be very visible demonstrations of the United States' newly acquired nuclear might. Media coverage of the happenings at Bikini was extensive, and public interest ran very high. Who could have foreseen that even now – 70 years later – the Marshall Islanders would still be suffering the aftershocks from the nuclear bomb testing on Bikini Atoll?

According to the testing schedule, the U.S. plan was to demolish a 95-vessel fleet of obsolete warships on June 30, 1946 with an airdropped atomic bomb. Reporters, U.S. politicians, and representatives from the major governments of the world would witness events from distant observation ships. On July 24, a second bomb, this time detonated underwater, would destroy any surviving naval vessels. These two sequential tests were intended to allow comparison of air-detonated versus underwater-detonated atomic bombs in terms of destructive power to warships. The very future of naval warfare in the advent of the atomic bomb was in the balance. Many assumed the tests would clearly show that naval ships were now obsolete, and that air forces represented the future of global warfare.



People wave farewell to their Bikini Atoll home from a Navy LST transporting them to a new home on Rongerik Atoll 109 miles away (left), atomic cloud formation from the Baker Day explosion over Bikini Lagoon (center), the cruiser Pensacola's afterdeck, looking forward, showing damage inflicted during the Operation Crossroads atomic bomb tests at Bikini, in July of 1946 (right).

But when 30 JUN arrived, the airdrop bombing didn't go as planned. The bomber missed his target by more than a third of a mile, so the bomb caused much less ship damage than anticipated. The subsequent underwater bomb detonation didn't go so well either. It unexpectedly produced a spray of highly radioactive water that extensively contaminated everything it landed on. Naval inspectors couldn't even return to the area to assess ship damage because of the threat of deadly radiation doses from the bomb's "fallout" – the radioactivity produced by the explosion. All future bomb testing was canceled until the military could evaluate what had gone wrong and come up with another testing strategy.

The United States did not, however, abandon little Bikini. It had even bigger plans with bigger bombs in mind. Ultimately, there would be 23 Bikini test bombings, spread over 12 years, comparing different bomb sizes, before the United States finally moved nuclear bomb testing to other locations, leaving Bikini to recover as best it could. The most dramatic change in the testing at Bikini occurred in 1954, when the bomb designs switched from fission to fusion mechanisms. Fission bombs – the type dropped on Japan – explode when heavy elements like uranium split apart. Fusion bombs, in contrast, explode when light atoms like deuterium join together. Fusion bombs, often called "hydrogen" or "thermonuclear" bombs, can produce much larger explosions.

The United States military learned about the power of fusion energy the hard way, when they first tested a fusion bomb on Bikini. Based on the expected size of the explosion, a swath of the Pacific Ocean the size of Wisconsin was blockaded to protect ships from entering the fallout zone. On March 1, 1954, the bomb detonated just as planned – but still there were a couple of problems. The bomb turned out to be 1,100 times larger than the Hiroshima bomb, rather than the expected 450 times. And the prevailing westerly winds turned out to be stronger than meteorologists had predicted. The result? Widespread fallout contamination to islands hundreds of miles downwind from the test site and, consequently, high radiation exposures to the Marshall Islanders who lived on them.

Three days after the detonation of the bomb, radioactive dust had settled on the ground of downwind islands to depths up to half an inch. Natives from badly contaminated islands were evacuated to Kwajalein – an upwind, uncontaminated atoll that was home to a large U.S. military base – where their health status was assessed. Residents of the Rongelap Atoll – Bikini's downwind neighbor – received particularly high radiation doses. They had burns on their skin and depressed blood counts. Islanders from other atolls did not receive doses high enough to induce such symptoms. However, as I explain in my book "Strange Glow: The Story of Radiation," even those who didn't have any radiation sickness at the time received doses high enough to put them at increased cancer risk, particularly for thyroid cancers and leukemia.

What happened to the Marshall Islanders next is a sad story of their constant relocation from island to island, trying to avoid the radioactivity that lingered for decades. Over the years following the testing, the Marshall Islanders living on the fallout-contaminated islands ended up breathing, absorbing, drinking and eating considerable amounts of radioactivity. In the 1960s, cancers started to appear among the islanders. For almost 50 years, the United States government studied their health and provided medical care. But the government study ended in 1998, and the islanders

were then expected to find their own medical care and submit their radiation-related health bills to a Nuclear Claims Tribunal, in order to collect compensation.

By 2009, the Nuclear Claims Tribunal, funded by Congress and overseen by Marshall Islands judges to pay compensation for radiation-related health and property claims, exhausted its allocated funds with \$45.8 million in personal injury claims still owed the victims. At present, about half of the valid claimants have died waiting for their compensation. Congress shows no inclination to replenish the empty fund, so it's unlikely the remaining survivors will ever see their money. But if the Marshall Islanders cannot get financial compensation, perhaps they can still win a moral victory. They hope to force the United States and eight other nuclear weapons states into keeping another broken promise, this one made via the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons. This international agreement between 191 sovereign nations entered into force in 1970 and was renewed indefinitely in 1995. It aims to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and work toward disarmament.

In 2014, the Marshall Islands claimed that the nine nuclear-armed nations – China, Britain, France, India, Israel, North Korea, Pakistan, Russia and the United States – have not fulfilled their treaty obligations. The Marshall Islanders are seeking legal action in the United Nations International Court of Justice in The Hague. They've asked the court to require these countries to take substantive action toward nuclear disarmament. Despite the fact that India, North Korea, Israel and Pakistan are not among the 191 nations that are signatories of the treaty, the Marshall Islands' suit still contends that these four nations "have the obligation under customary international law to pursue [disarmament] negotiations in good faith."

The process is currently stalled due to jurisdictional squabbling. Regardless, experts in international law say the prospects for success through this David versus Goliath approach are slim. But even if they don't win in the courtroom, the Marshall Islands might shame these nations in the court of public opinion and draw new attention to the dire human consequences of nuclear weapons. That in itself can be counted as a small victory, for a people who have seldom been on the winning side of anything. Time will tell how this all turns out, but more than 70 years since the first bomb test, the Marshall Islanders are well accustomed to waiting. [Source: Georgetown University | Timothy J. Jorgensen | March 7, 2019 ++]

Profile in Courage ► Lloyd Leslie Burke

Lloyd Leslie Burke was a soldier in the United States Army during the Korean War where he received the Medal of Honor for his actions on October 28, 1951. In 1943, Burke was eighteen years old when he dropped out of Henderson State College now Henderson State University in Arkansas. He joined the United States Army and served two years during World War II with combat engineers in Italy. After being discharged, he joined the ROTC when he returned to Henderson State College, where the ROTC program today is nicknamed "Burke's Raiders." There he became a member of Phi Sigma Epsilon fraternity.

In 1950, he graduated as a Distinguished Military Graduate. After accepting his commission, he was dispatched to Korea five months later. He became the commanding officer of Company G, 2nd Battalion, 5th Cavalry Regiment. When Chinese forces crossed the Yalu River, he managed to lead his platoon to safety and out of range from the Chinese troops. As a result of his action, he was awarded the Silver Star, which was later upgraded to the Distinguished Service Cross and two Purple Hearts.

In October 1951, he turned his company over to another Captain and was preparing to leave Korea. In his pocket was a plane ticket and an eagerness to see his wife and infant son. But two miles away, his former company was in trouble as it was preparing to cross the Yokkpk-chon River. The company was hindered by a large and well-entrenched Chinese force entrenched on Hill 200. For the next two days, the battle raged as the 2nd Battalion's attacks were constantly repelled. At first, Burke kept up with the reports. Eventually, he could no longer tolerate what was going

on and decided to enter the front lines. As he himself stated, "I couldn't see leaving my guys up there without trying to do something."

When he was at the base of Hill 200, he was shocked to witness his company's strength reduced to thirty-five traumatized survivors. He described the condition of his company clearly: "These men were completely beat. They lay huddled in foxholes, unable to move. They all had the thousand-yard stare of men who'd seen too much fighting, too much death." Burke dragged up a 57 mm recoilless rifle and shot three rounds at the closest enemy bunker. The bunker itself was a wooden-fronted structure covering a cave, which was dug into the overall hillside. The Chinese that were still alive crawled out of their trenches and attacked the American troops by hurling grenades. Burke aimed his M1 rifle at the trench line and shot at every Chinese soldier that rose to throw a grenade. Unfortunately, the Chinese were still throwing grenades. After having used an eight-round clip, Burke decided to take more drastic measures. As he recalled, "I considered myself a pretty fair shot, but this was getting ridiculous. I had to do something."

After laying down his rifle, he took a grenade and ran approximately thirty yards to the Chinese trench line. He avoided enemy fire by hurling himself at the base of a dirt berm that was two feet high. When the Chinese momentarily stopped firing, Burke jumped into one of the trenches with a pistol in one hand and a grenade in the other. He shot five or six Chinese soldiers in the forehead. He also fired at two Chinese soldiers from further down the trench. Afterward, he threw his grenade in their direction, jumped out of the trench, and placed himself against the dirt berm. The Chinese were aware of his location and began throwing grenades at his position. Most of the grenades thrown rolled down the hill and harmlessly exploded. Some of the grenades, however, did explode near his position. Burke himself managed to catch three grenades and tossed them back at the Chinese. At the same time, troops from Burke's company threw grenades with some of them exploding near him.

Burke abandoned the dirt berm by crawling off to the side, where he found cover in a gully. The gully itself ended further up Hill 200 at a Korean burial mound. After having edged his way up the hill, Burke peeked over the top of the burial mound. He saw the main Chinese trench, which was approximately 100 yards (100 m) away. The trench was covered in enfilade, was curved around the hill and contained many Chinese troops. Surprisingly, the Chinese were relaxing, with some of them talking, sitting, and laughing, while others were throwing grenades and firing mortars. Burke went down the gully to Company G's position and told Sergeant Arthur Foster, the senior NCO, "Get them ready to attack when I give you the signal!" Burke then dragged the last functioning Browning model 1919 machine gun and three cans of ammunition back up the hill.

On top of the burial mound, he mounted the machine gun, set the screw to free traverse, and prepared his 250-round ammunition box. He began firing at the nearest part of the Chinese trench where the mortars were located. After Burke shot at all the Chinese mortar squads, then fired upon a machine gun emplacement. Burke then fired up and down the trench at Chinese soldiers too shocked to react. Eventually, the Chinese fled down the trench in a panic. Burke continued to fire until his Browning jammed. While he attempted to clear his weapon, an enemy soldier started throwing grenades at him. He not only ignored this, but he also ignored the grenade fragments that tore open the back of his hand. Eventually, he was able to clear his weapon and kill the Chinese grenadier.

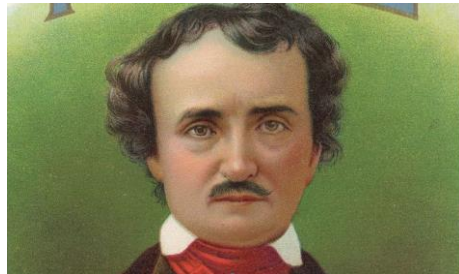
Meanwhile, Sergeant Foster led a small group to Burke's location and was told by him to provide extra firepower. Burke and the others were convinced that they were under siege from a full-sized force instead of a few adamant skirmishers. As the Chinese retreated, Burke wrapped his field jacket around the Browning's hot barrel sleeve and tore the 31-pound weapon off its tripod. He then wrapped the ammunition belt around his body, walked towards the trench, and fired upon retreating units. Sergeant Foster and his men followed him. When Burke ran out of Browning ammunition, he used his .45 automatic and grenades in order to clear out bunkers. At Hill 200, Burke managed to kill over 100 men, decimate two mortar emplacements, and three machine-gun nests. For his actions, he was awarded the Medal of Honor at a White House ceremony on April 11, 1952



Burke also served during the Vietnam War until a helicopter he was flying in was shot down. This forced him to return to the United States and undergo hospitalization for a long period of time. Overall, he spent thirty-five years in the U.S. Armed Forces, served as the Army's liaison officer to the United States Congress, and retired with the rank of full colonel in 1978. He died on June 1, 1999, at the age of 74 in Hot Springs, Arkansas. He is buried at Arlington National Cemetery. [Source: Together We Served | Roll of Honor | February 2019 ++]

Edgar Allan Poe Military Career ► How He Got Himself Kicked Out of the Army

On January 28, 1831, a court-martial tried a young cadet at the U.S. Military Academy on charges of gross neglect of duty and disobedience of orders. Sergeant Major Edgar Allan Poe was found guilty of both charges and discharged from the service of the United States only six months after he had arrived at the academy. This is the story of how the author's military career went so wrong, so fast.



Edgar Allan Poe's return to Richmond after his first semester at the University of Virginia at Charlottesville in December 1826 was not the joyous reunion with family and friends that most college freshmen experience. Poe's friends avoided him. He discovered that his sweetheart, Elmira Royster, had gotten engaged in his absence. A two-year feud between Poe and his foster father, John Allan, erupted in an argument that sent Poe packing.

Eighteen-year-old Poe moved to Boston three months later and quickly arranged the publication of his first book, a collection of poems under the title *Tamerlane*. Calvin F. S. Thomas published the book, but Poe piled the publication costs on top of the significant gambling debts he'd accrued in school. Despite his investment in the book, Poe didn't put his name anywhere in it and instead simply gave author's credit to "A Bostonian," perhaps hoping that the book would get more attention since Boston was then a literary mecca. Poe's money and effort went down the drain when the book received poor distribution and was not reviewed by the local papers. With only a year of higher education, and skill in a single trade that cost him the last of his savings, Poe was broke and essentially unemployable. Like other young men faced with similar situations both before and after him, Poe turned to the government for help.

He enlisted in the Army on May 26, 1827, under the alias of Edgar A. Perry, claiming to be a twenty-two-year-old clerk from Boston. He first served at Fort Independence in Boston Harbor and was later moved to Fort Moultrie in Charleston, South Carolina, and then Fort Monroe, Virginia, usually earning around \$5 a month. Poe excelled under

military discipline and set himself apart from his peers in the eyes of their superiors. Officers at Fort Monroe described Poe as “good, and entirely free from drinking” and “highly worthy of confidence,” and he was soon promoted to “artificer”—a tradesman position that involved preparing artillery shells—and later, sergeant major for artillery.

Poe's fast success didn't mean he was happy with army life. On the contrary, after two years of a five-year commitment, he badly wanted out, having served “as long as suits my ends or my inclination.” An early discharge would have been difficult to secure, so he approached his commanding officer, Lieutenant Howard, for advice. He disclosed his real name and age to the lieutenant and gave him the rundown of his troubled life. Howard took pity on Poe and agreed to arrange a discharge on one condition: Poe had to reconcile with his foster father, John Allan.

Howard took a crack at Allan first, writing to him to suggest a family reunion and reconciliation with Poe, who would then be able to come home. Allan responded to say that Poe “had better remain as he is until the termination of his enlistment.” Undaunted, Poe next wrote to Allan himself, describing at length how he had changed and was inspired to make something of himself at the United States Military Academy. Allan did not reply to that letter, or several others that Poe subsequently sent. Even if the letters went unanswered and unread, the universe forced a reconciliation between the two men. In February, 1829, Fanny Allan, John's wife and Poe's foster mother, fell ill and died. Both Poe and Allan were grief stricken and the latter was softened enough that he agreed to help Poe end his enlistment and go to West Point the following year.

While Poe found that the amount of studying required at West Point was, in his words, “incessant,” he flourished at the Academy just as he did during his enlistment. He excelled in mathematics and language, placing seventeenth in his math class and third in French. He even found time to write a few new poems. But things went downhill when Poe learned that John Allan had fathered illegitimate twins and married a woman 20 years his junior. Poe worried that this meant his foster father would shut him out. These fears were confirmed in late 1830, when Allan wrote to say that he no longer wished to communicate with Poe.

Furious, Poe sent Allan a long letter and revealed all his long-suppressed anger. He told Allan he didn't have the energy or the finances to stay at the academy and wished to leave. Since the academy required Allan's permission for Poe to withdraw, he promised that if Allan did not release him, he would get himself kicked out. Allan did not respond, and Poe did as he promised, racking up an impressive disciplinary record. He earned 44 offenses and 106 demerits in one term and topped the offender's list the following term with 66 offenses in one month. (There is no mention in West Point's official records, however, of Poe reporting for drills in a belt, a smile and nothing else, as has often been rumored and given as reason for his expulsion).

By the end of January, he was tried and discharged. But before he left, he squeezed a little more use out of the army. He had persuaded 131 cadets to each give him a dollar and a quarter to finance the printing of a new volume of his poems. When he arrived in New York in February 1831, he released the book, simply called *Poems*, and dedicated it to his fellow cadets. [Source: Mental Floss | Matt Soniak | July 30, 2013 ++]

Navy Dueling ► Back When Military Officers Settled Beefs By Shooting Each Other

Dueling came to the United States from Europe as a gentleman's tradition and a way to protect one's honor. It's no wonder that the Navy took so readily to it, as the strict hierarchy resembled its own aristocracy within the new democratic country. As time passed, American military men and civilians alike began to duel with pistols instead of swords. Proficiency with a sword takes years, and only the nobility had the time to devote to the art. Guns were easy to master, inexpensive and easy to obtain. Americans rejected nobility for meritocracy and in the process rejected the trappings of nobility. They usually used large-caliber smoothbore flintlock pistols with limited accuracy, though duelists sometimes chose shotguns, carbines or rifles.

Most duels involving naval officers used pistols, as they were common to the officers. The emphasis was on courage, not on killing. Naval officers lived and often died by virtue of their bravery and pride. Ducking an affront was considered cowardly, whether it was a verbal insult at a social gathering or a cannon barrage from an enemy ship — the officers stood on deck, and to flinch at the incoming lead was to lose face. So to succeed in a duel, one needed to show up and not flinch at the sound of gunfire and the possibility of being wounded or killed. By 1800, the Navy was losing many men to duels, two-thirds as many as were lost in sea battles. To read more about the history of dueling in the Navy centered around Stephen Decatur’s experiences, refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Navy Dueling**”. [Source: Military History Magazine | Janine Peterson | January 3, 2019 ++]

War Memorials ► D.C. WWI War Memorial



This circular, open-air memorial commemorates the 26,000 citizens of Washington, DC who served in World War I. The structure is made of Vermont marble and is large enough to accommodate the entire U.S. Marine Band.

Post WWII Photos ► Tokyo Housing Shortage Solution



Disabled buses that have littered the streets of Tokyo are used to help relieve the acute housing shortage in the Japanese capital on October 2, 1946. Homeless Japanese who hauled the buses into a vacant lot are converting them into homes for their families. (AP Photo/Charles Gorry)

Every Picture Tells A Story ► Pivot Point



There is a moment in battle, a breathtaking pivot when pilots move from getting to the target to attacking it—a moment when they change from drifting albatrosses to swooping hawks. It is a dramatic moment, which today we can see in a battle break over an airfield where warbirds or modern fighters are arriving. A peacetime break over the field enables wide separation between landing aircraft as they enter the downwind leg of the circuit—it’s called “coming off the perch”. In battle, aircraft come off the perch one right after the other without pause and it always makes for a determined and dramatic warrior moment—the battle engaged, the lives put on the line, the avenger come down to mete out punishment. Here, four (five if you count the camera ship) Messerschmitt Bf 110 G-2 Zerstörers roll into the attack on the Russian front in 1943, loaded for bear with nose cannon, massive 21 cm. rocket tubes and belly panniers with machine guns. What a frightening sight these would have made, coming toward you as you huddled nearly frozen to death in your trench

WWII Bomber Nose Art [26] ► Booby Trap



Military History Anniversaries ► 16 thru 31 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 16 thru 31 MAR**.” [Source: This Day in History www.history.com/this-day-in-history | March 2019 ++]

Medal of Honor Citations ► James L. Harris | WWII



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

To

James L. Harris

Rank and organization: Second Lieutenant, U.S. Army, 756th Tank Battalion.

Place and date: At Vagney, France, 7 October 1944

Entered service: Hillsboro, Tex.

Born: June 17, 1916 in Hillsboro, Texas

Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at risk of life above and beyond the call of duty on 7 October 1944, in Vagney, France. At 9 p.m. an enemy raiding party, comprising a tank and 2 platoons of infantry, infiltrated through the lines under cover of mist and darkness and attacked an infantry battalion command post with hand grenades, retiring a short distance to an ambush position on hearing the approach of the M-4 tank commanded by 2d Lt. Harris. Realizing the need for bold aggressive action, 2d Lt. Harris ordered his tank to halt while he proceeded on foot, fully 10 yards ahead of his 6-man patrol and armed only with a service pistol, to probe the darkness for the enemy. Although struck down and mortally wounded by machinegun bullets which penetrated his solar plexus, he crawled back to his tank, leaving a trail of blood behind him, and, too weak to climb inside it, issued fire orders while lying on the road between the 2 contending armored vehicles. Although the tank which he commanded was destroyed in the course of the fire fight, he stood the enemy off until friendly tanks, preparing to come to his aid, caused the enemy to withdraw and thereby lose an opportunity to kill or capture the entire battalion command personnel. Suffering a second wound, which severed his leg at the hip, in the course of this tank duel, 2d Lt. Harris refused aid until after a wounded member of his crew had been carried to safety. He died before he could be given medical attention.



Harris was drafted into Army from his birthplace of [Hillsboro, Texas](#) in March 1941,^[2] eventually receiving a [battlefield commission](#) in March 1944. For the above actions, Harris was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor six months later, on April 23, 1945. Harris, aged 28 at his death, was buried at Ridge Park Cemetery in his hometown of Hillsboro, Texas.

[Source: <https://history.army.mil/moh/wwII-g-l.html> | March2019 ++]

* Health Care *



Reproductive Medicine ► Post-Mortem Sperm Removal

The parents of a 21-year-old West Point cadet fatally injured in a skiing accident raced the clock to get a judge's permission to retrieve his sperm for "the possibility of preserving some piece of our child that might live on." U.S. Military Academy Cadet Peter Zhu was declared brain dead 27 FEB, four days after the California resident was involved in a skiing accident at West Point that fractured his spine and cut off oxygen to his brain. "That afternoon, our entire world collapsed around us," Monica and Yongmin Zhu of Concord, California, said in a court petition. But they saw a brief window to fulfill at least part of Peter's oft-stated desire to one day raise five children.



The parents asked a state court judge 1 MAR for permission to retrieve his sperm before his organs were removed for donation later that day at Westchester Medical Center. They argued the procedure needed to be done that day. "We

are desperate to have a small piece of Peter that might live on and continue to spread the joy and happiness that Peter brought to all of our lives," read the parent's filing in state court in Westchester County. The first documented post-mortem sperm removal was reported in 1980 and the first baby conceived using the procedure was born in 1999, according to medical journals. Usually, the request comes from a surviving spouse.

The parents told the court that Peter is the only male child of the Zhu family and that if they don't obtain the genetic material, "it will be impossible to carry on our family's lineage, and our family name will die." The judge later that day directed the medical center to retrieve the sperm and ordered it stored pending a court hearing March 21 regarding the next steps. The Zhu's attorney declined comment, saying the case remains pending. "As you would expect, it is a very bittersweet result for the family and, out of respect for their privacy, we cannot discuss further at this time," attorney Joe Williams said in an email. There was no immediate comment from Westchester Medical Center.

Such requests by parents are rare, but not unheard of. In 2009, 21-year-old Nikolas Evans died after a blow during a bar fight in Austin, Texas. His mother, Missy Evans of Bedford, Texas, got permission from a probate judge to have her son's sperm extracted by a urologist, with the intention of hiring a surrogate mother to bear her a grandchild. In 2018, the American Society for Reproductive Medicine issued ethical guidelines for fertility centers on posthumous collection of reproductive tissue. It said it's justifiable if authorized in writing by the deceased. Otherwise, it said, programs should only consider requests from the surviving spouse or partner.

Peter Zhu was president of the Cadet Medical Society and was planning to attend medical school at the Uniformed Services University of Health Sciences. "Peter was one of the top cadets in the Class of 2019, very well-known and a friend to all," Brig. Gen. Steve Gilland, commandant of cadets, said in a release on Friday. "He embodied the ideals of the Corps of Cadets and its motto of Duty, Honor, Country and all who knew Peter will miss him." A memorial for Zhu will be held at West Point was held 5 MAR and a funeral service was held 7 MAR at the academy's cemetery. [Source: The Associated Press | March 4, 2019 ++]

Prescription Drug Costs Update 25 ► Will Washington Finally Do Something

If people in this polarized nation can agree on one thing, it is that prescription drug prices are too high, and that the federal government should do something about it. But it seems unlikely that Congress or the administration will do enough this year to satisfy an enraged public. In the end, if Washington doesn't overcome industry resistance to reform — in particular, letting the government negotiate the price of drugs purchased by Medicare — whatever actions it takes will be seen as too little, too late by American voters in 2020.

The reasons why incumbents can be expected to pay a price at the polls are no surprise. A new survey by the Kaiser Family Foundation finds that one in four people taking prescription drugs say they have difficulty affording their medication. What is more, 79 percent see the current costs of drugs as unreasonable. Another poll released last fall by NORC at the University of Chicago and my organization (the non-profit and non-partisan West Health Institute), found that 78 percent of the public name high health-care costs as its highest priority. Fewer than 25 percent of voters approve of the ways the Trump administration and Congress are handling the high cost of prescription drugs.

But so far, this firestorm of public indignation has not been enough to rally Congress to swift and decisive action. A hearing last week in which the Senate Finance Committee heard testimony from seven pharmaceutical industry CEOs and leaders came off with a few whimpers, but not a bang. There was none of the confrontational cross-examination seen in the famous congressional grilling of tobacco executives at a hearing a quarter century ago. Last week's hearing was a case in which the watchdog didn't bark. There are some proposals from the administration and before Congress that stand a reasonable chance of passage in this session. The Trump administration has several proposals that ostensibly would offer lower out-of-pocket costs for American consumers, which include changes to Medicare Part D and Part B.

The CREATES Act, sponsored by an array of Republicans and Democrats, would create a speedier and stronger legal process for generic manufacturers to challenge branded drugmakers that withhold drug samples in order to obstruct generic competition. These proposals benefit from the fact that they are not the most vociferously opposed by Big Pharma. They are like chicken soup to treat a cold: they certainly won't hurt and they might even help. But these solutions are by no means the strongest medicine available.

Democrats running or eyeing a run for the White House are offering ideas that are far less accommodating of Big Pharma. They are unlikely, however, to become law without a Democratic Congress and administration in power. For example, Sen. Bernie Sanders (I-Vt.) is proposing that drug prices in the United States be tied to an index of drug prices in foreign countries, where drugs are sold at lower costs. Sen. Elizabeth Warren (D-MA) has proposed a bill that would effectively create a government-run pharmaceutical manufacturer to mass-produce generic drugs and bring down prices. Sens. Jeff Merkley (D-OR) Kamala Harris (D-CA) and Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) introduced the CURE High Drug Prices Act, which would allow the federal government to block price increases on certain drugs.

There is a litany of other bills. Among them are a bill that would allow the importation of drugs from Canada, another that would force price transparency on drug middlemen, and another that would force drugmakers to justify dramatic price increases. Then there is the elephant in the room. President Trump repeatedly promised in 2016 to rein in runaway drug costs by letting Medicare negotiate prices with pharmaceutical companies. Allowing Medicare to seek lower prices is a no-brainer. As the single largest payer for health care in the United States, Medicare is the gateway to a vast marketplace of nearly 60 million people who happen to be the highest consumers of pharmaceuticals. But with the pharmaceutical industry's main trade group spending more than \$50 million in the past two years alone on lobbying, its passage into law this year seems highly unlikely.

There is, however, one key finding in the Kaiser Family Foundation survey that should weigh heavily on every member of Congress and the administration. Ninety percent of Democrats, 87 percent of Independents and 80 percent of Republicans want to allow the government to negotiate lower prices for Medicare drugs. Big American drug companies have not been using profits from high prices to ramp up investment in drug development. According to William Lazonick, pharmaceutical companies in the S&P 500 distributed over 100 percent of their combined profits to shareholders in buybacks and dividends — 12 percent more than they spent on research and development. “With most of their compensation coming from exercising stock options and stock awards, senior executives benefit immensely,” the two scholars recently wrote in *The New York Times*. “In 2017, 28 drug executives in the top 500 (S&P 500 companies) averaged more than \$41 million in total compensation, with 83 percent in stock compensation.”

In 2020, if politicians insist on giving priority to the greed of the drug industry over the pleading of voters, they could pay an enormous price at the polls. To fix the \$3.5 trillion-dollar quandary that is what America spends on health care — with its spiraling costs, opaque pricing and lack of accessibility to services for millions — we need vision, leadership and bold action from a Washington willing to take on special interests. Right now, that is sorely lacking. [Source: *The Hill* | Shelley Lyford | March 12, 2019 ++]

Tricare Breast Feeding Coverage Update 03 ► Revised After \$16M in Over Expenditures

The Defense Health Agency (DHA) has updated its Tricare policy manual to clarify what types of breast pumps and supplies are covered by the Defense Department's health program. The changes affirm coverage of breast pumps for new mothers and adoptive mothers, an initiative that began in late 2014, and allow expecting moms to access the benefit starting at the 27th week of pregnancy, or when the baby is born, if premature. But the revised policy, announced 11 MAR, limits coverage of breast pump kits to one per birth and excludes those considered to have luxury features, such as smartphone connectivity, expanded rechargeable batteries, fancy tote bags, car adapters and more.

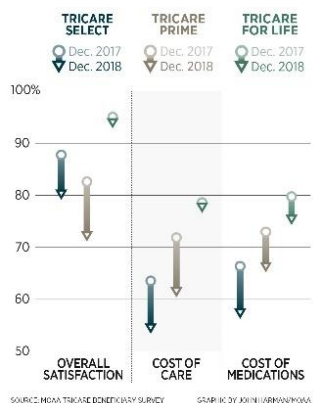
The change follows a Defense Department Office of Inspector General report released last April that found the department paid \$16.2 million more than it should have for electric breast pumps and replacement parts. In some cases, the DHA had paid as much as \$1,400 for a breast pump that could be purchased in a store for less than \$200. The overages occurred, the IG found, because the Tricare policy allowed users to order a pump directly from a medical supply company and bill Tricare, or to buy a pump at a store and submit the receipt. The investigation noted that the DHA should have required Tricare contractors to use suppliers with fixed, negotiated rates.

Now, pumps must be purchased from a Tricare-authorized provider and only replacement supplies considered essential for breastfeeding will be reimbursed. Patients can still purchase their own breast pump and supplies and request reimbursement, but there will be a maximum reimbursement rate, to be listed in the Tricare Reimbursement Manual. Also, under no circumstances can patients purchase a breast pump kit that includes a pump and all supplies and submit reimbursement claims for individual components, according to the new policy. "Unbundling of a breast pump kit for the purposes of billing items individually to maximize reimbursement is considered an abusive billing practice," the policy states.

According to the IG, the Pentagon overpaid for breast pumps more than 90 percent of the time under the old policy, 54,006 out of 59,241 purchases. It overpaid 57 percent of the time for replacement parts. Failure to heed the new policy could result in out-of-pocket expenses for families, according to the policy update. The new policy allows only the breast pump and the following replacement parts without an additional prescription: two bottles and caps or locking rings once a year after a birth event; one replacement power adapter per birth event and none within the first 12 months; 12 valves or membranes; one set of flanges per birth event; one set of tubing; and 90 breast milk bags every 30 days after the birth. The caps placed on breast pump purchases by Tricare are as follows: for personal use, \$312.84 in the U.S. and \$500 overseas; for hospital grade (as required by a doctor), \$1,501.65 in the U.S. and \$3,003.30 overseas. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | March 11, 2019 ++]

TRICARE Cost Survey ► Beneficiaries Say They Are Paying More And Receiving Less

MOAA asked, and you answered: Over 8,000 military beneficiaries responded to their most recent health care survey, which ended in January. And they heard an earful! The trends noted in last year's survey have shown even greater increases and continue to indicate TRICARE beneficiaries are dissatisfied with certain aspects of the TRICARE program. Of those who responded to the survey, 68 percent received their care with a civilian provider and 16 percent through a military treatment facility. This graphic shows changes between the December 2017 and December 2018 surveys:



Tricare-Satisfaction-Graphic-Cropped

Key Findings Include:

- A notable decrease in overall program satisfaction experienced by beneficiaries using both TRICARE Select (a decrease of 10 percent) and Prime (a decrease of 12 percent). TRICARE for Life beneficiaries continue to maintain high levels of satisfaction.
- Most beneficiaries continue to be less satisfied with the cost of their care. TRICARE Select beneficiaries lead the way with 45 percent of respondents indicating some level of dissatisfaction. Changes to the TRICARE Pharmacy program have also impacted beneficiaries' satisfaction with the cost of their medications. All beneficiary categories show significant decreases.
- Active duty families were more likely to defer or cancel appointments and medications due to cost concerns than average. While 90 percent of respondents had never canceled an appointment or prescription, 81 percent of active duty families had.

A small representation of close to 4,000 write-in survey comments reveal a sense of anxiety and frustration many beneficiaries feel about the changes they have incurred with TRICARE fees and access to care:

- “Access to same day appointments unavailable at Eisenhower GA so families are forced to visit civilian Urgent Care at a \$30 copay. Access to routine appointments that should be within 7 days take 3-4 WEEKS - cost-shares of appointments such as speech went up from \$12 to \$30. Forced us to cancel MANY appointments for our daughter! Unable to afford Urgent Care appts AND speech appts AND pay for medications needed in retail pharmacy.”
- "Can NEVER get a timely appointment at our military treatment facility - Referral cost increase -- \$12 to \$30 -- ridiculous; basically a tax hike.”
- "Tricare Prime costs went up which is fine but access to care went down. We basically have to pay more for less. Can't afford therapies and medications. Skip appointments and no longer refill medications because we can't afford them."
- "\$30 each visit to physical therapy. Adds up when 15-20 visits required!! Also adding to cost is the \$35/month MEDICARE increase.”
- “\$41.00 cost per any referral out to specialist is absurdly high any prohibits me from making MANY necessary appointments. 10 physical therapy sessions in one month means I have to pay \$410 out of pocket that month and I cannot afford it. Second, those are preventative medicine/therapy. That means when I don't do them, I am ultimately just making things worse down the road. It would be cheaper for me to just have surgery.”



Tricare-Prescription-Costs-Graphic

MOAA has surveyed the military beneficiary population for over a year. Analyzing the data shows a majority of beneficiaries view their TRICARE benefit as one for which they are paying more and receiving less. Forgoing needed medical care and medications is not the health care benefit they thought they were getting. These surveys allow MOAA to accurately portray the effects these policies will have on beneficiaries. MOAA will continue its outreach and continue pressing for changes, while fighting any new disproportionate cost shares. [Source: The MOAA Newsletter | March 07, 2019 ++]

Staff Infection ► Cause and Preventive Measures to Minimize

Nearly 120,000 people contracted bloodstream staph infections in the United States in 2017, most of them in health care facilities – and nearly 20,000 died. Progress against the most dangerous antibiotic-resistant staph infections in hospitals stalled after dropping an average of about 17 percent per year from 2005 to 2013, according to data released 5 MAR by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Staph is a common bacteria found on the skin and in the noses of one in four healthy people. It's usually harmless. But if the skin is damaged or cut, it can cause infection. The World Health Organization recommends that all patients be screened for the Staph aureus bacteria before surgery. The United States doesn't require screening for MRSA (Methicillin-Resistant Staphylococcus Aureus), and has not developed plans to manage the infection. Staph infections can be reduced and even eliminated.

MRSA is the result of decades of often unnecessary antibiotic use. For years, antibiotics have been prescribed for colds, flu and other viral infections that don't respond to these drugs. Even when antibiotics are used appropriately, they contribute to the rise of drug-resistant bacteria because they don't destroy every germ they target. Bacteria live on an evolutionary fast track, so germs that survive treatment with one antibiotic soon learn to resist others.'



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MRSA, the more dangerous antibiotic-resistant staph infection, can be spread by bed linens, medical equipment or health care workers if they don't wash their hands properly between patients. MRSA can cause life-threatening pneumonia and bloodstream infections, which can lead to sepsis and death. Staph skin infections, including MRSA, generally start as swollen, painful small red bumps (above left) that might resemble pimples or spider bites. The affected area might be warm to the touch, full of pus or other drainage, and accompanied by a fever. These can quickly turn into deep, painful abscesses that require surgical draining. Sometimes the bacteria remain confined to the skin. But they can also burrow deep into the body, causing potentially life-threatening infections in bones, joints, surgical wounds, the bloodstream, heart valves and lungs.

The most recent data from the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services shows that 249 U.S. hospitals had no cases of MRSA during the 12 months from April 2017 through March 2018, according to an analysis by the hospital

rating organization Leapfrog Group. But they're the exception. "Unfortunately, only a small fraction of hospitals do great and the vast majority are not doing as well as they should be," says Joe Kiani, CEO of the medical equipment company Masimo and chairman of the board of the Patient Safety Movement Foundation. Veterans Affairs medical centers reduced staph infections by 43 percent from 2005 to 2017 by implementing a broad MRSA prevention program, the CDC reported. The program included MRSA screening, gloves and gowns on workers, and an increased emphasis on hand-washing and other ways to prevent infections.

Dr. Kevin Kavanagh, founder of the patient safety advocacy group HealthWatch USA, says the VA results show that more can be done. He notes that the standard of care in England is to search for people who have MRSA but are not sick and to decolonize them. Dr. Anne Schuchat, CDC's principal deputy director, said the slowing of progress might indicate that hospitals are "wondering whether it's worth their trouble" to take precautions against infection. But she stopped short of calling for requirements that hospitals screen for MRSA. "There's always a balance between intervention and effect," she told reporters 5 MAR. CDC "strongly recommends" hospitals use precautions to prevent the spread of MRSA, and take additional steps when "declines slow or progress is not continuing." "We don't have a one-size-fits-all and everybody-has-to-do-everything" recommendation, Schuchat said.

MRSA is categorized as either HA (hospital associated) or CA (community associated). Prevention measures for HA-MRSA in the hospital include:

- People who are infected or colonized with MRSA often are placed in contact precautions as a measure to prevent the spread of MRSA.
- Visitors and health care workers caring for people in isolation may be required to wear protective garments and must follow strict hand hygiene procedures.
- Contaminated surfaces and laundry items should be properly disinfected.

Prevention measures for CA-MRSA include:

- Wash your hands. Careful hand washing remains your best defense against germs. Scrub hands briskly for at least 15 seconds, then dry them with a disposable towel and use another towel to turn off the faucet. Carry a small bottle of hand sanitizer containing at least 62 percent alcohol for times when you don't have access to soap and water.
- Keep wounds covered. Keep cuts and abrasions clean and covered with sterile, dry bandages until they heal. The pus from infected sores may contain MRSA, and keeping wounds covered will help prevent the bacteria from spreading.
- Keep personal items personal. Avoid sharing personal items such as towels, sheets, razors, clothing and athletic equipment. MRSA spreads on contaminated objects as well as through direct contact.
- Shower after athletic games or practices. Shower immediately after each game or practice. Use soap and water. Don't share towels.
- Sanitize linens. If you have a cut or sore, wash towels and bed linens in a washing machine set to the hottest water setting (with added bleach, if possible) and dry them in a hot dryer. Wash gym and athletic clothes after each wearing.
- Don't inject illicit drugs. Intravenous drug users are at risk of many types of dangerous infections, including MRSA, human immunodeficiency virus (HIV) and hepatitis C.

With so much known about how to prevent MRSA, Leapfrog CEO Leah Binder says, hospitals have to make fighting infection "the absolute priority." "Too often they get distracted by other issues," she says. "MRSA infections can be truly monstrous, and people live in fear of hospitals because MRSA can thrive there." Kiani hopes the research will prompt hospitals to adopt protocols and checklists to prevent MRSA. Zero infections isn't "something you hope happens," he says. "You plan for it to happen." He recommends tying employee bonuses to infection reduction. Leapfrog says hospitals should keep MRSA patients separate from other patients and require providers and visitors to wear gloves and gowns around them. "Anyone who says MRSA can't be prevented need only look at the hospitals

with zero MRSA infections," says Binder. "Imagine how many lives would be saved if every hospital could get to zero, or even close." [Source: USA TODAY | Jayne O'Donnell | March 5, 2019 ++]

Patient Advocacy Groups ► Big Pharma Gave Money To Groups Opposing Medicare Changes

Dozens of patient advocacy groups, like the Bonnie J. Addario Lung Cancer Foundation and the National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship, recently appeared in national advertisements objecting to a Trump administration proposal that could limit drugs covered by Medicare providers. But a Kaiser Health News analysis found that about half of the groups representing patients have received funding from the pharmaceutical industry. Drugmakers funneled more than \$58 million to the groups in 2015 alone, according to financial disclosures in KHN's "Pre\$cription for Power" database, which tracks the little-publicized ties between patient advocacy groups and drugmakers. As patient organizations gain ground lobbying Congress and the administration, experts have begun to question whether their financial ties could push them to put drugmakers' interests ahead of the patients they represent.



The advertisement above, which ran in national newspapers, attacked proposed changes to Medicare Part D's "protected" drug classes, which require that "all or substantially all" drugs must be covered by all insurers. The medicines involved include oral cancer drugs, HIV medicines and antipsychotics. The protection can have the effect of guaranteeing sales to Medicare patients no matter the price tag.

"It's wrong and it will put patients' lives at risk," reads the ad paid for by the American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network above a list of 56 other patient advocacy groups who presumably agree. Underneath, a link directs readers to an online form to send pre-written emails to members of Congress and the administration. The Cancer Action Network's six-figure ad buy ran for three weeks starting Jan. 17. It appeared in print and online in The New York Times and The Washington Post, as well as local publications in Washington, D.C., according to Cancer Action Network spokeswoman Alissa Crispino. About 4,500 people used the online email tool.

Big Pharma Donations To Patient Advocacy Groups Listed In Ad

American Autoimmune Related Diseases Association	\$152,500
American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network	\$671,500
American Heart Association	\$15,797,138
American Kidney Fund	\$257,484
American Lung Association	\$1,178,765
Bladder Cancer Advocacy Network	\$343,160
Bonnie J. Addario Lung Cancer Foundation	\$713,011
Cancer Support Community	\$1,011,429
Colorectal Cancer Alliance	\$61,913
COPD Foundation	\$928,975

Deadliest Cancers Coalition*	\$1,619,292
Epilepsy Foundation	\$66,228
Fight Colorectal Cancer	\$333,060
FORCE: Facing Our Risk of Cancer Empowered	\$324,699
International Myeloma Foundation	\$1,575,050
Lung Cancer Alliance	\$1,278,395
LUNGevity Foundation	\$1,073,283
Lupus Foundation of America	\$681,405
MAPRx Coalition*	\$9,256,264
Metastatic Breast Cancer Alliance*	\$16,002,326
METAvivor Research and Support	\$15,000
Movement Disorders Policy Coalition*	\$250,346
National Blood Clot Alliance	\$155,258
National Brain Tumor Society	\$82,280
National Coalition for Cancer Survivorship	\$591,700
National Hemophilia Foundation	\$533,999
National Kidney Foundation	\$2,021,818
National Organization for Rare Disorders	\$893,255

The proposed rule would give insurers more opportunities to instead steer patients toward lower-cost therapies and generics using prior authorization or step therapy, in which patients must try cheaper drugs before they can switch to options that are more expensive. It would also allow protected drugs to be left off Medicare Part D formularies when price hikes exceed inflation or new formulations of drugs don't offer a "significant innovation" over existing versions. The government proposal's goal, however, isn't to end coverage for drugs in protected classes, said Rachel Sachs, an associate law professor at Washington University in St. Louis who specializes in health care. Its goal is to give plans more leverage to bargain for better discounts. If there's a chance an insurance plan won't cover a drug, the provider has more negotiating power.

It's important to make sure cancer patients can get "cutting-edge" treatments, said Keysha Brooks-Coley, vice president of federal affairs for the Cancer Action Network. "This is really an access issue," she said. The lobby for brand-name drugmakers, the Pharmaceutical Research and Manufacturers of America, takes the same stance, according to its submitted comments on the proposal. But access to drugs means more than insurance coverage, said Karuna Jaggar, the executive director of Breast Cancer Action, a patient group that was not invited to be listed in the ad and hasn't accepted corporate funding for two decades to avoid the appearance of bias. "If people can't afford it, the reality is they cannot access it." Given the ad's selective understanding of "access" to exclude cost and the patient groups' industry ties, she asked, "Can we trust them?"

The American Cancer Society Cancer Action Network communicates with its funders, which include drugmakers and others, but the group sets its own agenda, Brooks-Coley said. KHN launched its Pre\$cription for Power database in spring 2018. It now includes nearly 14,000 transactions, totaling \$163 million in donations from 26 drugmakers to 650 patient groups, in 2015. The patient groups often don't disclose their donors, so the information comes from drugmakers' financial disclosures, some of which are voluntary. Not all companies publicly disclose their charitable giving, so KHN estimates are likely low. Although there are occasions when what's best for patients is the same as what's best for drugmakers, people should consider patient advocacy group statements with a "skeptical eye" if groups have financial ties to the pharmaceutical industry, said Matthew McCoy, a medical ethics and health policy assistant professor at the University of Pennsylvania.

Drugmakers and patient advocacy organizations have fundamentally different missions, he said. One wants to make money for shareholders. The other wants to serve patients. Since their goals will inevitably diverge, it's important that patient groups aren't swayed by their funders, he said. It can be easy to view a pharmaceutical company as an ally when its contributions help keep the lights on, McCoy said. "I think we have a lot of evidence from research on financial conflicts of interest in other areas of health care to know that the influence often is unconscious to the people

who are actually experiencing it.” Still, Sachs said she can understand why patient advocacy groups oppose changes to the six protected classes, even if they lead to lower drug prices. “The question is, what happens if negotiations between pharmaceutical companies and the Part D plans fail?” Sachs said. “In at least some cases, the Part D plan will be able to say simply it’s going to exclude you from coverage because of the price of the drug.” [Source: Kaiser Health News | Sydney Lupkin, Elizabeth Lucas, and Victoria Knight | March 4, 2019 ++]

Irritable Bowel Syndrome Update 01 ► When to See a Doctor

Irritable bowel syndrome is the most common gastrointestinal disorder in the U.S., and one area that merits further study is why veterans seem to have such a high incidence of IBS-like symptoms. Two studies from Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles indicated that we might be getting closer to an answer. One confirmed earlier research that IBS is linked to an overgrowth of bacteria in the gut, noted a Cedars-Sinai news release. A separate study revealed through a mathematical model that IBS can be an outcome of food poisoning; in fact, military personnel commonly serving under high-stress situations with unpredictable meals and water supplies are at a much higher risk for IBS than the rest of the population.

An estimated 20% of the American adult population has IBS, according to the National Digestive Diseases Information Clearinghouse. Symptoms include abdominal pain or cramps, excess gas or bloating and stomach distention. Patients’ conditions might fall into one of three categories: diarrhea-predominant, constipation-predominant, or diarrhea and constipation in an alternating pattern. The second study used data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and other researchers to conclude that food poisoning, or gastroenteritis, might account for the majority of IBS cases. In addition, the mathematical model predicted that higher risk populations, such as military personnel, would have a greater incidence of IBS and in some cases would develop it faster than those with a genetic predisposition.

Everyone wants to be regular. But the definition of regular is different for everybody. For some, it’s several times a day. For others, it could be several times a week. If you are having fewer than three bowel movements a week, that’s a sign you may have constipation. But is it occasional or chronic? If the symptoms of your constipation are sudden or last for a short time, it may be occasional constipation. If the symptoms keep coming back and seem to last for a long time, it may be chronic constipation. If you describe your symptoms as belly pain associated with your constipation, you could be suffering from Irritable Bowel Syndrome with Constipation (IBS-C). IBS-C is defined as belly pain (abdominal pain) associated with constipation. The symptoms of IBS-C are defined as long-lasting and keep coming back. Those suffering from IBS-C also have hard or lumpy stools at least 25% of the time, and loose or watery stools less than 25% of the time.

Causes -- The precise cause of IBS isn't known. Factors that appear to play a role include:

- Muscle contractions in the intestine. The walls of the intestines are lined with layers of muscle that contract as they move food through your digestive tract. Contractions that are stronger and last longer than normal can cause gas, bloating and diarrhea. Weak intestinal contractions can slow food passage and lead to hard, dry stools.
- Nervous system. Abnormalities in the nerves in your digestive system may cause you to experience greater than normal discomfort when your abdomen stretches from gas or stool. Poorly coordinated signals between the brain and the intestines can cause your body to overreact to changes that normally occur in the digestive process, resulting in pain, diarrhea or constipation.
- Inflammation in the intestines. Some people with IBS have an increased number of immune-system cells in their intestines. This immune-system response is associated with pain and diarrhea.
- Severe infection. IBS can develop after a severe bout of diarrhea (gastroenteritis) caused by bacteria or a virus. IBS might also be associated with a surplus of bacteria in the intestines (bacterial overgrowth).

- Changes in bacteria in the gut (microflora). Microflora are the "good" bacteria that reside in the intestines and play a key role in health. Research indicates that microflora in people with IBS might differ from microflora in healthy people.

Possible Contributing Factors -- Although precise cause of are unknown, researchers believe there may be several factors involved:

- Sensitive nerves: The nerves in the intestines may be extra sensitive, causing sufferers to feel more belly pain or discomfort than those who do not have IBS-C.
- Fluid absorption: The colon may be absorbing too much fluid from the stool, or the muscles in the colon may be moving too slowly. This can cause the stool to become dry, hard, and difficult to pass.
- Brain-bowel connection: There could be miscommunication between the brain and the bowel (gut), which may cause belly pain, discomfort, and a change in bowel movements.

Triggers -- Symptoms of IBS can be triggered by:

- Food. The role of food allergy or intolerance in IBS isn't fully understood. A true food allergy rarely causes IBS. But many people have worse IBS symptoms when they eat or drink certain foods or beverages, including wheat, dairy products, citrus fruits, beans, cabbage, milk and carbonated drinks.
- Stress. Most people with IBS experience worse or more frequent signs and symptoms during periods of increased stress. But while stress may aggravate symptoms, it doesn't cause them.
- Hormones. Women are twice as likely to have IBS, which might indicate that hormonal changes play a role. Many women find that signs and symptoms are worse during or around their menstrual periods.

Risk factors -- Many people have occasional signs and symptoms of IBS. But you're more likely to have the syndrome if you:

- Are young. IBS occurs more frequently in people under age 50.
- Are female. In the United States, IBS is more common among women. Estrogen therapy before or after
- Have a family history of IBS. Genes may play a role, as may shared factors in a family's environment or a combination of genes and environment.
- Have a mental health problem. Anxiety, depression and other mental health issues are associated with IBS. A history of sexual, physical or emotional abuse also might be a risk factor.

Prevention -- Finding ways to deal with stress may help prevent or ease symptoms of IBS. Consider trying:

- Counseling. A counselor can help you learn to modify or change your responses to stress. Studies have shown that psychotherapy can provide significant and long-lasting reduction of symptoms.
- Biofeedback. Electrical sensors help you receive information (feedback) on your body's functions. The feedback helps you focus on making subtle changes, such as relaxing certain muscles, to ease symptoms.
- Progressive relaxation exercises. These exercises help you relax muscles in your body, one by one. Start by tightening the muscles in your feet, then concentrate on slowly letting all of the tension go. Next, tighten and relax your calves. Continue until the muscles in your body, including those in your eyes and scalp, are relaxed.
- Mindfulness training. This stress-reduction technique helps you focus on being in the moment and letting go of worries and distractions.

When to see a doctor -- See your doctor if you have a persistent change in bowel habits or other signs or symptoms of IBS. They may indicate a more serious condition, such as colon cancer. More-serious signs and symptoms include:

- Weight loss, Diarrhea at night, and/or Rectal bleeding
- Iron deficiency anemia
- Unexplained vomiting
- Difficulty swallowing
- Persistent pain that isn't relieved by passing gas or a bowel movement

Hypertension Update 06: ► What It Is and Does

Air Force Lt. Col. Bryan White says he's passionate about educating people on hypertension, the clinical term for high blood pressure. "Forty percent of all heart disease can be attributed to hypertension," said White, a cardiologist at Nellis Air Force Base in Nevada, citing statistics from the American Heart Association, or AHA. "And lifestyle choices people make when they're younger may play a huge role in the development of high blood pressure later in life."

To understand the role hypertension plays in poor heart health, it's helpful to understand some basic human anatomy and physiology. The heart pumps blood to cells and tissues, carrying oxygen and nutrients and removing waste materials. Arteries are the vessels that carry that oxygenated blood from the heart to the rest of the body. The artery walls expand when the heart beats; they contract between beats, when the heart is at rest. As blood flows through the arteries, it exerts pressure against the artery walls. When the arteries sense too much pressure, the walls respond by pushing back. Over time, this action thickens the arteries, causing them to narrow. Arteries become less flexible which limits blood flow. Meanwhile, blood pressure builds, causing damage to the arteries. Because this process is gradual, people may be unaware until a heart attack or other medical crisis occurs. Heart disease is a leading cause of death in the United States, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, or CDC.

Blood pressure is expressed as two numbers referring to millimeters of mercury, or mmHg. The first number, or systolic, is the measure of the pressure of the blood against artery walls when the heart is beating. The second, or diastolic, indicates the pressure against artery walls between beats, when the heart is at rest. The first number measures the pressure in your blood vessels when your heart beats; the second number measures the pressure in your vessels when your heart rests. According to the CDC, a blood pressure reading is considered normal when the first number is less than 120 and the second number is less than 80 mmHg. People are considered at risk for hypertension when their blood pressure falls in the range of 120-139/80-89 mmHg. High blood pressure is 140 or higher/90 or higher mmHg.

Hypertension may be hereditary, White said. According to the AHA, more than 40 percent of African-Americans in the United States have hypertension, which may develop earlier in life and become more severe. Health care experts say high blood pressure can also be caused by unhealthy lifestyle habits, including smoking, lack of exercise, and a diet heavy in saturated fats and salt. About 25 percent of Americans ages 25 to 45 have hypertension, according to the AHA. The prevalence increases to 45 percent of people 45 to 65 years old, and 80 percent of Americans older than 65. "It's primarily an age-related disorder," White said. However, a study of approximately 3,800 young U.S. service members wounded in the Iraq and Afghanistan wars found that severe injuries and chronic post-traumatic stress disorder were risk factors for hypertension.

Air Force Lt. Col. Ian Stewart, a physician at Travis Air Force Base in California, was senior author of the study, which was published in the AHA journal *Hypertension* in March 2018. The average age of the service members when they were wounded was 26, Stewart said. "We've done previous work demonstrating that the severity of combat injury is associated with hypertension," Stewart said. "But we found that both injury severity and PTSD increased the risk of hypertension independently from one another," he said. "These findings suggest that caring for veterans requires a holistic approach that encompasses physical as well as mental health."

TRICARE covers blood pressure screenings for adults to check for cardiovascular disease at least every two years. Also, getting blood pressure checked is a routine part of every visit to a medical clinic. However, there's often not enough time to follow suggested protocol for the most accurate reading, White said. That includes the patient sitting calmly for five minutes before a blood pressure check, and checking the blood pressure three times. The recorded

blood pressure should be an average of the three readings, White said. Further, a diagnosis of hypertension shouldn't be made until at least two office visits where high blood pressure is recorded using this method.

Medications to control hypertension have risks for kidney and liver damage and may affect deployability, White said. So for patients 45 or younger, he first prescribes six months of lifestyle changes including increasing exercise, eliminating smoking, and eating a heart-healthy diet. "A lot of hypertension is linked to people simply not taking care of themselves," White said. "There's so much people can do to prevent its development." [Source: Health.mil | March 8, 2019 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 491 ► Filing Claims - National Nutrition Month - Overseas Pharmacy Benefit

Filing Claims -- If you visit a TRICARE network provider, in most cases, your provider will file a claim for you after the visit. In some cases, you may have to pay for health care services upfront and file your own claim to get money back. So, it's important to know when you need to file a claim and how to do so. A claim is a request for payment from TRICARE that goes to your regional contractor after you get a covered health care service. If you also have Medicare, the claim will go to a Medicare contractor.

If you're enrolled in TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Prime Remote, you usually don't need to file claims for health care services. Your provider will file claims for you in most cases. If you're enrolled in TRICARE Select, network providers will file claims for you. But if you get care from a non-network provider, you may have to file your own claims. You should also expect to file your own claims if you have TRICARE Overseas Program Select. You don't need to file claims when using the US Family Health Plan.

For all stateside claims, download and submit your completed medical claim form, which is DD Form 2642, and supporting information to your TRICARE regional contractor. For [overseas claims](#), submit the claim form and [proof of payment](#) to the TRICARE Overseas Program [claims processor](#) in the region where you received care. You should file claims as soon as possible to help avoid delays in payment. In the U.S. and U.S. territories, you must file your claim within one year of the date that you received medical services. Overseas, you must to file your claim within three years. You may file overseas claims online through the secure claims portal on the TRICARE overseas website at www.tricare-overseas.com. Learn more about how to file [medical claims](#) and check the status of claims at www.TRICARE.mil/claims.

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National Nutrition Month -- March is National Nutrition Month—the perfect time to assess and adjust your healthy living goals and behaviors. Whether you're just trying to firm up, eat a more balanced diet, or lose weight, the results make a big impact on your overall health. TRICARE offers healthy living tips to help you stay on track with your nutrition and fitness goals. It's recommended to eat more fruits, vegetables, whole grains, and lean proteins. And eat less sodium, saturated fats, and sugar. Learn more about nutrition and wellness at TRICARE.mil/healthwellness .

Remember, TRICARE covers preventive services, like screenings, vaccines, and physical exams to help you stay as healthy as possible. You can find a list of covered preventive services on the TRICARE website at www.TRICARE.mil/coveredservices as well as guidelines that apply.

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TRICARE Pharmacy Benefit Overseas -- The TRICARE Pharmacy Program provides the same prescription drug coverage with most TRICARE health plans. If you use the US Family Health Plan, you have a separate pharmacy coverage. In the latest issue of the TRICARE Overseas Program Health Matters Newsletter, you can read about the TRICARE pharmacy benefit and your options for filling prescriptions overseas. Express Scripts is the TRICARE

Pharmacy Program contractor. Express Scripts will help you with coverage reviews, filing claims, and other pharmacy needs.

Drugs that are covered by TRICARE are grouped into four tiers: generic, brand-name, non-formulary, and non-covered drugs. These groups are based on the medical and cost effectiveness of a drug compared to other drugs of the same type. You have four options for filling your prescriptions overseas: military pharmacies, TRICARE retail network pharmacies, TRICARE Pharmacy Home Delivery, and overseas pharmacies. The home delivery option is not available in Germany. For all other overseas countries, you may order your prescriptions online at www.express-scripts.com. TRICARE retail network pharmacies are only available in the U.S. and U.S. territories.

Overseas pharmacies are non-network. You must pay the full price when you fill prescriptions at an overseas pharmacy and file a claim with your TRICARE Overseas Claims Processor for reimbursement. If you live or travel in the Philippines, you're required to use a certified pharmacy. To learn more about your pharmacy benefit and cost information, visit TRICARE.mil/pharmacy. And for more information about your benefit overseas, check out the latest TRICARE overseas newsletter at www.TRICARE.mil/publications.

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The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: <http://www.tricare.mil/podcast> | February 27, 2019 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 492 ► Qualifying Life Events - Loss of Eligibility - Updating DEERS

Qualifying Life Events -- Did you know that outside of TRICARE Open Season, you can only enroll in or make changes to your TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Select plan following a Qualifying Life Event, or QLE? A QLE is a certain change in your life, such as marriage, birth of a child, change of address, or retirement from active duty. Different TRICARE health plan options may be available to you and your family members after a QLE. Following a QLE, you and your family members have three options depending on your situation:

- If you wish to continue your current coverage following a QLE and remain eligible for your current health plan, you don't need to take action. Your coverage will continue uninterrupted.
- If you want to make a change to your health plan enrollment, you have 90 days following the QLE to make any eligible changes.
- If you're eligible for TRICARE but not enrolled in a TRICARE plan, you have 90 days following the QLE to enroll in a health plan. If you or your family members aren't enrolled in a health plan and don't enroll in one within 90 days of a QLE, you'll only be eligible for care at a military hospital or clinic if space is available.

With any QLE, the first step is to update your information in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, or DEERS. Once your change shows in DEERS, you can enroll or change your TRICARE coverage. For more information about QLEs and QLE examples, go to the Qualifying Life Events page on the TRICARE website at www.TRICARE.mil/lifeevents. Also, check out the article, "What is a TRICARE Qualifying Life Event?"

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Loss of Eligibility -- When you lose eligibility for TRICARE, each member of your family will get a termination notice stating that you're no longer covered by TRICARE. However, there are some temporary health care options available. You may qualify for the Transitional Assistance Management Program, or TAMP, which offers 180 days of transitional health coverage. After TRICARE or TAMP ends, you can purchase the Continued Health Care Benefit Program, which offers an additional 18 to 36 months of coverage. You may also choose to use an employer's

sponsored health insurance, Medicaid, or any other plan offered through the Health Insurance Marketplace. Learn more about coverage after loss of TRICARE eligibility at www.TRICARE.mil/losseligibility.

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Updating DEERS -- Is your information current in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System, known as DEERS? Always be sure you and your family's information is up to date and correct. Incorrect information in DEERS can cause problems with TRICARE claims and other health care benefits. To remain eligible for TRICARE coverage, you must keep your information up to date in DEERS.

For example, if you experience a Qualifying Life Event, or a QLE, update DEERS. A QLE is a certain change in your life, such as marriage, birth of a child, or a child going away to college, which may mean different TRICARE health care options are available to you and your family. Therefore, it's essential to update and verify your information in DEERS anytime you experience a QLE. Make sure your Social Security number and the Social Security numbers of all of your covered family members are in DEERS.

You can make changes to your information in person, by phone, online, or by mail. To add or remove family members, you have to visit a local ID card office. Find more information about DEERS at www.TRICARE.mil/deers.

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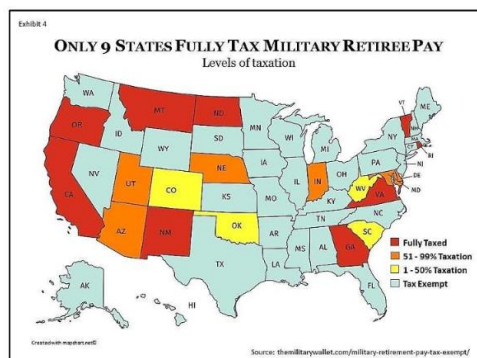
The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: <http://www.tricare.mil/podcast> | March 8, 2019 ++]

*** Finances ***



Military Retirement Pay Taxation Update 03 ► California AB 427

California is home for 146,000 military retirees. According to a study by the San Diego Military Advisory Council, California is one of only nine states that fully tax the pay of its military retirees. From 2000 to 2016, the nation's population of military retirees increased by 17%, yet during that time span California saw a decrease by 17%. The Governor's Military Council states that many veterans will leave California based on concerns about our state's cost of living. They are also attracted to incentives provided by other states, like whether or not a state taxes their military pension benefits. State leaders should explore appropriate ways to incentivize veterans to stay in California.



To incentivize more veterans to keep their excellent skills here in California, such as, leadership, teamwork, and a high aptitude for technology, AB 427 authored by Asm. Brough would exempt military retirement pay from state income tax for veterans who are residents in California. This bill sunsets these provisions on January 1, 2030. To offset initial revenue loss to the state, the implementation of exempting full retirement pay would be tiered for each retiree:

- Taxable years 1 & 2, 50% of retirement pay is exempt
- Taxable years 3 & 4, 75% of retirement pay is exempt
- Taxable year 5 and each year after, 100% of retirement pay is exempt through the sunset

Ending military pension taxation would yield significant benefits. It would raise the number of military retirees choosing to reside in California and also diminish the current declining trend over time. The economic benefits would be tangible and significant in terms of jobs, total personal income, GSP, and total business sales. California should do its part to not only give back to our veterans, but to attract future veterans to keep their skills here in the Golden State. Background. Readers are encouraged to forward the below sample email to the California Assembly Committee on Revenue and Taxation in support of AB 427:

<p>Sample Email</p> <p>Send to kawika.nunenkamp@asm.ca.gov , I will hand it to the committee:</p> <p>Dear Chairwoman Burke and Members of the Assembly Committee on Revenue and Taxation,</p> <p>I write in support of AB 427 introduced by Assemblymember Brough. California is home for 146,000 military retirees. According to a study by the San Diego Military Advisory Council, California is one of only nine states that fully tax the pay of its military retirees and that policy is steering veterans away. From 2000 to 2016, the nation's population of military retirees increased by 17%, yet during that time span California saw a decrease by 17%. The Governor's Military Council believes state leaders should explore appropriate ways to incentivize veterans. 31 other states do not tax military pensions; AB 427 is an important step to keep veterans' excellent skills, such as, leadership, teamwork, and a high aptitude for technology here in California.</p> <p>Sincerely,</p> <p>NAME City, State, Zip code</p>

[Source: Legislative Director, Assemblyman Bill Brough | February 28, 2019 ++]

Military Consumers ► **Lose Significantly More Money to Scammers than Non-Military Consumer**

According to the recently published [2018 BBB Scam Tracker Risk Report](#), military consumers lose significantly more money to scammers than non-military consumers. When exposed to a scam, military consumers lost money at about the same rate (30.0% compared with 29.5%). When they do fall victim, however, the losses are greater at \$200 vs. \$150—a 33% difference. The 2018 Risk Report included more than 4,700 reports from active-duty military personnel, military spouses, and veterans submitted to [BBB Scam TrackerSM](#). They compiled these reports to see if military consumers are more likely to fall victim to scammers, and if they lose more than their civilian counterparts.

They then applied the BBB Risk Index, which calculates risk based on exposure, susceptibility, and median loss, to determine which scams were riskiest for military consumers. The three riskiest scams for military consumers were exactly the same as 2017: employment, home improvement, and online purchase. Across these three riskiest scams, the trend of similar susceptibility and higher median losses was relatively consistent. Susceptibility was within 1% when comparing military consumers and non-military consumers for employment and online purchase scams; however, military consumers reported losing money more often to home improvement scams (59.7% compared with 51.7% for non-military consumers).

Median loss was higher for all three of the top scams, especially employment scams. In 2018, military spouses and veterans reported a median loss of \$2,460 to employment scams— more than double the losses reported by non-military consumers. This increased loss is staggering, and consistent with BBB’s reporting in an earlier article ranking employment scams as #1 riskiest over time. Education and prevention are critical to fighting back against these scammers. On March 6th, 2019 BBB released the full 2018 BBB Scam Tracker Risk Report. This publication shares with consumers and thought-leaders which scams are most affecting consumers across North America, how scammers are changing their tactics, and what red flags of fraud to be most aware of. You can help BBB empower all consumers, but especially military consumers, to take action on scams by:

- Downloading the report: www.BBB.org/RiskReport
- Sharing scam-prevention tips: www.BBB.org/ScamTips
- Reporting scams to: www.BBB.org/ScamTracker

[Source: BBB Military & Veterans Initiative | March 7, 2018 ++]

Elder Vet Abuse Update 07 ► Financial Exploitation

Financial institutions are seeing vast numbers of their older customers fall prey to financial exploitation by perpetrators ranging from offshore scammers to close family members—and they’re filing hundreds of thousands of reports with the federal government about these suspicions. On 27 FEB the Bureau released a report about key facts, trends, and patterns revealed in these Suspicious Activity Reports—or SARs—filed by banks, credit unions, casinos, and other financial services providers. The Bureau analyzed 180,000 elder financial exploitation SARs filed with the Financial Crimes Enforcement Network (FinCEN) from 2013 to 2017, involving more than \$6 billion. This first-ever public analysis provides a chance to better understand elder fraud and to find ways to improve prevention and response. What they learned:

- SAR filings on elder financial exploitation quadrupled from 2013 to 2017. In 2017, financial institutions filed 63,500 SARs reporting elder financial abuse. Yet these SARs likely represent only a tiny fraction of the actual 3.5 million incidents of elder financial exploitation estimated to have happened that year
- Elder financial exploitation isn’t just happening at banks or credit unions. Money services businesses, used by many people to wire money, have filed an increasing share of these SARs (58 percent in 2017).
- Older adults ages 70 to 79 lost on average \$43,300. And when the older adult knew the suspect, the average loss was even larger—about \$50,000.

While financial institutions are increasingly filing elder financial exploitation SARs, they often do not indicate that they reported the suspicious activity directly to first responders. Fewer than one-third of elder financial exploitation SARs specify that the financial institution reported the activity to adult protective services, law enforcement, or other authorities. If the financial institution is not reporting to these authorities, this is a missed opportunity to strengthen prevention and response.

Speak up about elder financial exploitation

- If you believe that you or someone you know is a victim of financial exploitation, contact your local adult protective services (APS) agency. You can find out how to reach your APS office from the Eldercare Locator at <https://eldercare.acl.gov/Public/Index.aspx> or by calling 1-800-677-1116.
- At <https://www.ftccomplaintassistant.gov/#crnt&panel1-1> report scams or fraud to the Federal Trade Commission
- Share a Money Smart for Older Adults guide with those in your community. Money Smart for Older Adults is an elder financial exploitation awareness and prevention program the Bureau created with the FDIC at

https://files.consumerfinance.gov/f/documents/201703_cfpb_money-smart-for-older-adults-resource-guide.pdf.

[Source: Consumer financial Protection Bureau | Naomi Karp & Hector Ortiz | February 27, 2019 ++]

Facebook Charity Scam ► Watch Out for Facebook Con with a Charity Twist

Scammers often take advantage of social networking sites, earning victims' trust by pretending to be someone they already know. BBB Scam Tracker has received recent reports of a Facebook impersonation scam with a charity-focused twist.

How the Scam Works

- You are scrolling through Facebook when a message pops up in Facebook Messenger. It's your friend, family member, or neighbor. You can tell by their photo.
- From here, the scam goes one of two ways. In one version, your "friend" tells you about a charity that's giving out grants, and you qualify for the program. All you have to do is pay a smaller amount to cover processing fees and taxation. In another version, the "friend" claims to be raising money for a charity and asks you to make a donation. In either case, you'd normally be suspicious of an offer of free money or an unknown charity. But the message is coming from someone you know and trust. Or is it?
- In both cases, scammers are hijacking a person's Facebook profile image and sending these messages to all their friends. The charity doesn't exist, and if you pay, you will have lost your money.

How to Protect Yourself from Grant Scams

- Be wary of online messages. A person may be trustworthy in real life, but online accounts can be hacked, and sometimes friends share things without checking them out first. Take a closer look before sharing, applying, or donating.
- Do some research. Ask for the charity's name and look it up. If you can't find a website, it's most likely a fake. If you can find a website, look for contact information (no contact info is a red flag)
- Press for details. Ask questions to confirm you are actually talking to someone you know. Then, find out who runs the grant, where it's from, how it works, and why you qualify. If your "friend" can't give you straight answers, beware.
- Report suspicious activity to Facebook. You can report scammers to Facebook to help protect your real friends and family from a scam. You can reduce the risk of having your profile impersonated by tightening up your privacy settings and hiding your Friends list. Do a "Privacy Checkup" by clicking on the question mark at the top of your Facebook home page.

For More Information

To learn more about avoiding scams, read BBB's article [10 Steps to Avoid Scams](#). To learn about online charity fundraising, [check out these tips on Give.org](#). Also, see Give.org's [Giving Guidance & Tips](#). If you've been the victim of a grant or charity scam on Facebook, spread the word by reporting your experience in the [BBB.org/ScamTracker](#). Your experience can help others to spot a scam.

[Source: BBB Scam Alert | March 1, 2019 ++]

Romance Scam 3 ► Tips On Protecting Yourself

Don't let your quest for love blind you to the realities of romance scams. Online dating and social media have made it easier than ever to meet new people and find dates. Unfortunately, it has made scammers' work simpler, too. Con artists create compelling backstories, and full-fledged identities, then trick you into falling for someone who doesn't even exist. This form of deception is known as "catfishing." Sometimes a catfisher is simply a lonely person hiding behind a fake persona. But often it is the first step in a phishing scheme to steal personal information or a romance scam to trick you out of money. In some cases, victims have been tricked into moving illegal money from other scams ("money mule"), which is potentially a crime. Read more in "[Online Romance Scams: A BBB Study on How Scammers Use Impersonation, Blackmail, and Trickery to Steal From Unsuspecting Daters.](#)"

How the Scam Works:

- Most romance scams start with fake profiles on online dating sites created by stealing photos and text from real accounts or elsewhere. Scammers often claim to be in the military or working overseas to explain why they can't meet you in person. Over a short period of time, the scammer builds a fake relationship with you, exchanging photos and romantic messages, even talking on the phone or through a webcam.
- Just when the relationship seems to be getting serious, your new sweetheart has a health issue or family emergency, or wants to plan a visit. No matter the story, the request is the same: they need money. But after you send money, there's another request, and then another. Or the scammer stops communicating altogether.

Tips to Spot This Scam:

- Too hot to be true. Scammers offer up good-looking photos and tales of financial success. Be honest with yourself about who would be genuinely interested. If they seem "too perfect," your alarm bells should be ringing loud.
- In a hurry to get off the site. Catfishers will try very quickly to get you to move to communicating through email, messenger, or phone.
- Moving fast. A catfisher will begin speaking of a future together and tell you they love you quickly. They often say they've never felt this way before.
- Talk about trust. Catfishers will start manipulating you with talk about trust and how important it is. This will often be a first step to asking you for money.
- Don't want to meet. Be wary of someone who always has an excuse to postpone meeting because they say they are traveling or live overseas or are in the military.
- Suspect language. If the person you are communicating with claims to be from your home town but has poor spelling or grammar, uses overly flowery language, or uses phrases that don't make sense, that's a red flag.
- Hard luck stories. Before moving on to asking you for money, the scammer may hint at financial troubles like heat being cut off or a stolen car or a sick relative, or they may share a sad story from their past (death of parents or spouse, etc.).

Protect Yourself From this Scam:

- Never send money or personal information that can be used for identity theft to someone you've never met in person. Never give someone your credit card information to book a ticket to visit you. Cut off contact if someone starts asking you for information like credit card, bank, or government ID numbers.
- Ask specific questions about details given in a profile. A scammer may stumble over remembering details or making a story fit.
- Do your research. Many scammers steal photos from the web to use in their profiles. You can do a reverse image lookup using a website like [tineye.com](#) or [images.google.com](#) to see if the photos on a profile are stolen from somewhere else. You can also search online for a profile name, email, or phone number to see what adds up and what doesn't.

To report a scam, go to [BBB Scam Tracker](#). To learn how to protect yourself, go to “[10 Steps to Avoid Scams](#)”.

[Source: Better Business Bureau | January 28, 2019]

Employment Scams ► The Riskiest Cons Of 2018

Employment scams were the riskiest con of 2018, according to the latest report from the Better Business Bureau. These scams topped the list for both men and women, three of BBB's six age brackets, and for both students and veterans, according to data from the BBB Scam Tracker Risk Report ([BBB.org/RiskReport](#)).

How the Scam Works:

- In 2018, job scams often impersonated Amazon. The reason why? Amazon was frequently in the news with its high-profile search for a second headquarters. In 2017, only 24 BBB Scam Tracker reports were employment scams that mentioned Amazon. In 2018, that jumped to 564.
- Amazon scams and other employment cons typically follow the same patterns. Scammers contact victims by finding resumes posted online, posting phony job listings, or cold emailing targets. In most versions, the target starts corresponding with the "business" about a job opening. The pay is good, you can start immediately, and they don't even require an in-person interview! The catch of course is that job doesn't really exist. The scammer may ask you to pay upfront for training or a background check. In other versions, the con artist asks you to deposit a (fake) check and wire back part of the money. They may even get *your* bank account number to "direct deposit" your paycheck.

How to Spot a Job Scam:

- *Be very cautious of any job that asks you to share personal information or pay money.* Scammers will often use the guise of running a credit check, setting up direct deposit, or paying for training.
- *If a job looks suspicious, search for it online.* Google the title and company name. If the result comes up in many other cities with the exact same post, it may be a scam.
- *Check out the business' website.* Scammers often falsely use the names of real businesses. Check on the business's site or give them a call to confirm the position exists.

For More Information

Check out [BBB.org/RiskReport](#) to learn more about the top scams of 2018 and [BBB.org/EmploymentScam](#) to learn more about spotting job scams. To learn more about scams in general, go to [BBB.org/ScamTips](#). If you've been targeted by this scam, help others avoid the same problem by reporting your experience on the [BBB.org/ScamTracker](#).

[Source: BBB Scam Alert | March 8, 2019 ++]

Tax Burden for Montana Retired Vets ► As of MAR 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 **Montana**.

Note - This state has a statutory provision for automatic adjustment of tax brackets, personal exemptions or standard deductions to the rate of inflation.

Sales Taxes

State Sales Tax: No general sales tax. A 3% tax on accommodations and campgrounds is added to the 4% tax on rental vehicles.

Gasoline Tax: 46.15 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Diesel Fuel Tax: 52.9 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Cigarette Tax: \$1.70 cents/pack of 20

Personal Income Taxes

Tax Rate Range: Low - 1%; High – 6.9%

Income Brackets: Seven. Lowest – \$2,999; Highest – \$17,900

Personal Exemptions: Single – \$2,440; Married – \$4,880; Dependents – \$2,400

Additional Exemptions: None

Standard Deduction: Single – \$4,580, Married filing jointly – \$9,160. Montana filers' standard deduction is 20 percent of AGI. For single taxpayers, the deduction must be between \$2,000 and \$4,510. For married taxpayers, the deduction must be between \$4,000 and \$9,020.

Medical/Dental Deduction: Federal amount

Federal Income Tax Deduction: Full. All of federal income tax paid to be deducted from state taxable income.

Retirement Income Taxes: Montana taxes all pension and retirement income received while residing in Montana to the extent it is taxable on the federal return. Tier I and Tier II Railroad Retirement benefits are 100% exempt from Montana income tax. The state allows a pension and annuity income exemption of up to \$4,070 per individual, if certain income limitations are met. Early distributions from an IRA do not qualify for this exemption. Social Security benefits taxable in Montana may be different from what is taxable federally. You will need to complete Worksheet VIII – Taxable Social Security Benefits to determine your Montana taxable Social Security.

Regarding interest income earned, there is a partial interest exemption for taxpayers age 65 or older. If you are single and age 65 or older at the end of the calendar year, you can exempt up to \$1,600 of the interest income that you reported in your federal adjusted gross income. If you are married and filing a joint return with your spouse and at least one of you is age 65 or older at the end of the calendar year, you can exempt up to \$1,600 of the interest income that you reported in your federal adjusted gross income. If you are married and filing your return separately and are age 65 or older at the end of the calendar year, you can exempt up to \$800 of the interest income that you reported in your federal adjusted gross income. Please note, however, that you are not allowed to exclude interest income earned by and reported by your spouse. For the purpose of this exclusion, when you determine the amount of your interest income, you should consider distributions commonly called dividends on deposits or share accounts as interest. Under no circumstances can you exclude more interest income than what you have reported in your federal adjusted gross income.

Montana taxes some retirement benefits. If you have reported taxable retirement income on the federal income tax return, you may be entitled to a partial exemption of this income. Also, if you have received a disability pension, which is identified as a distribution code 3 on your 1099R, you should use the state's Disability Pension Worksheet to determine your deduction instead of the retirement income exclusion.

If you have received retirement income other than Tier II Railroad benefits, you should complete state form W, Worksheet IV in order to determine the amount of your exclusion. Additionally, for taxpayers with adjusted gross income of less than \$25,000 for single filers or \$32,000 for joint filers, all Social Security retirement income is deductible. For taxpayers above those limits but below \$34,000 for single filers or \$44,000 for joint filers, half of Social Security retirement income is deductible. Above those second-level limits, 15% is deductible.

Your retirement exclusion is limited to the lesser of your taxable retirement income that you received or \$4,070, as long as your federal adjusted gross income is \$30,000 or less and you are filing a single return, filing jointly with your

spouse and only one of you have taxable retirement income, or you are filing as head of household. If both you and your spouse have received retirement income and you are filing jointly with your spouse, and your federal adjusted gross income is \$33,910 or less, you both can exclude the lesser of your taxable retirement income that you receive personally or \$4,070 each for a maximum of \$8,140. If you are filing your income tax return separately on the same form, or on separate forms, the lesser of your retirement income or \$4,070 applies separately to both spouses as long as your separately state-federal adjusted gross income is \$33,910 or less.

Retired Military Pay: See above. Survivor benefits are taxed following federal tax rules.

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

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

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

Property Taxes

All property (real or personal) is subject to state and local taxes. The assessed valuation of real property is based on 100% of its fair market value, then reduced by a phase-in factor and taxed as a percentage thereof. The state established the tax rate to determine the assessed valuation while local taxing units establish the mill levies to determine the property tax. Personal property is also taxed, the most common being motor vehicles. All residential properties receive a 34% exemption but residents must file for the exemption. Residential property of certain disabled veterans, and the spouses of deceased veterans, is exempt from property taxation. Montana property owners can have their property taxes reduced if they meet certain qualifications. Any homeowner or renter age 62 or over can apply for a credit if they have lived in Montana for 9 months, occupied a residence for 6 months, and had a gross household income of less than \$45,000. For a better understanding of property taxes, refer to <http://ravalli.us/196/Property-Tax>. For more information on property tax relief programs refer to <http://revenue.mt.gov/property-assessment>.

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

There is no inheritance tax and no estate tax. For more information on inheritance and estate taxes refer to http://revenue.mt.gov/home/individuals/estateinheritance_taxes.

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

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 [Montana Department of Revenue](http://mt.gov) site. If you are thinking of moving to Montana, refer to <http://mt.gov>

[Source: <http://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-kansas-new-mexico#MONTANA> | MAR 2019 ++]



Notes of Interest ► 01 thru 15 MAR 2019

- **COLA.** The February 2019 CPI is 246.218, 0.1 percent below the FY 2019 COLA baseline. The Consumer Price Index for March is scheduled to be released April 10. The CPI baseline for FY 2019 is 246.352.
- **USS Arizona Memorial.** Walk-on access to the USS Arizona Memorial won't be restored by the end of March, as previously announced by the National Park Service, and it may be many more months before access resumes, officials said.
- **Economy.** The U.S. economy completed one of the best years of a nearly decade-long expansion, growing at a modest 2.6% pace in the fourth quarter despite slowdowns elsewhere in the world, turbulent financial markets, trade disputes with China and a partial government shutdown late in the year.
- **TV.** HBO offers a lot of content for free on its website <https://www.hbo.com/watch-free-episodes>. This is typically limited to premiere episodes, so you'll get hooked. That said, it's a good way to get a taste of what HBO has before signing up for a full-fledged subscription (or trial).
- **VA.** Secretary Wilkie delivered his State of VA to House Committee on Appropriations on 26 FEB. The hearing can be watched in its entirety on the House Appropriation Committee's YouTube channel. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r_ARyQvw0Y0&feature=youtu.be.
- **Ants.** Spring is getting closer, and that means ants will soon visit your home. To see how to get rid of these pesky insects and keep them at bay, check out <https://youtu.be/cWyWnA3GojI> for seven ways to banish them from your home.
- **China.** China to raise defense spending by 7.5%, lower than 2018. Beijing is working to provide the two million-strong People's Liberation Army with state-of-the-art hardware, spending heavily on stealth warplanes, aircraft carriers and other weaponry.
- **Virginia Property Taxes.** 100% service connected disabled veterans' spouses no longer have to pay real estate tax to their municipalities if they move to another residence. Owners of \$200K homes at Virginia Beach could save more than \$1,700 annually.
- **Chicago.** Anna M. Valencia, City Clerk of Chicago, signed an administrative rule effective 2/1/19. City stickers are now free for regular veterans, disabled veterans, former Prisoners-of-War and Purple Heart recipients. The city sticker code is NFV.
- **John Wayne.** At https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=f9dp_hwld4U you can listen to John reciting the good things and watch as he aged. You can also go to <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hIf76KbdM8w> to watch a mini documentary of his life.
- **Did You Know.** Even after the symptoms of a flu have gone away, you may still be contagious for up to one week? So it's a good idea to limit contact with others during this period – for instance, by working from home if possible.
- **How The Tax system Works.** Go to <https://youtu.be/BomQxCG5VG4> and watch the beer analogy of how the higher income payers impact lower income payers.
- **Teacher Salaries.** Go to <https://www.moneytalksnews.com/slideshows/heres-how-much-teachers-earn-in-every-state/?all> to see how the teachers in your state compare to other states on their annual salaries.

- **National Guard.** National Guard troops helped with the arrest of 23,034 illegal immigrants and the seizure of more than 35,000 pounds of drugs in the roughly six months they were deployed to the border in fiscal 2018, according to U.S. Customs and Border Protection.
- **KV Missile.** The Pentagon’s next-generation interceptor warhead to kill ballistic missiles, the Redesigned Kill Vehicle (KV), is at least two years away from working out its issues, despite years of development. That pushes back the fielding of the last pieces of a \$40 billion dollar missile defense system that has struggled since the late 1990s.

DACOWITS ► 2018 Report on Women In Service Recommendations

Providing female servicemembers with properly fitted protective equipment and encouraging the Department of Veterans Affairs to change its motto are among the recommendations laid out in an annual report to the secretary of defense. The Defense Advisory Committee on Women in the Services (DACOWITS), an advisory panel of civilian women and men, submits recommendations in an annual report on policies and issues affecting women in the military. Its 2018 report, released 11 MAR, had nine recommendations and identified one topic of continuing concern.

This year, the group recommended that the secretary of defense encourage the VA to reconsider its department’s motto to be more gender inclusive. “The continued use of this motto undermines VA efforts to provide support and resources to servicewomen transitioning out of the military because its gender-specific language sends an unwelcoming message of exclusion,” the report says. Adopted in 1959, the VA motto is a quote from President Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address from 1865: “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow and his orphan.” Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America has pushed the VA since 2017 to change the motto to reflect female veterans, but the department has said that it wouldn’t be changed.

The committee also recommended that the services give female servicemembers personal protective equipment and gear that fits them properly. Currently, units scheduled to deploy are given priority when it comes to receiving newer equipment, including gear that is more fitted for female body types. “Poorly fitting equipment is a leading cause of injury in servicemembers. Given that most traditional [equipment] was designed to fit men, women are the most likely to suffer from injuries as a result of incorrectly fitting gear,” the report says. With all military occupations open to women, the need for female servicemembers to have access to properly fitted equipment is growing, the committee explained. “Properly fitting equipment is essential to the success of individual Service members as well as the military as a whole. Moreover, Service members need to be familiarized with their combat gear to be fully prepared in the field,” they wrote.

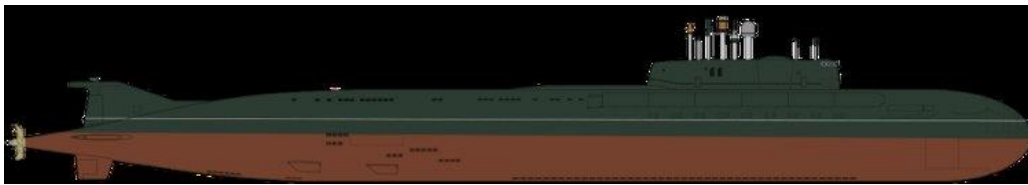
Another recommendation was for the secretary of defense to mandate that all services provide 21 days of parental leave to “secondary caregivers,” which used to be called paternity leave. The 2017 National Defense Authorization Act increased the leave from 10 to 21 days, but the Navy and Marine Corps only provide 14 days of leave. “Authorizing servicemembers the maximum allowable 21 days of nonchargeable secondary caregiver leave will afford equitable opportunities to all military members, enabling them to best care for their families and promote retention,” the committee wrote.

In addition to the recommendations, the committee noted a “continuing concern” in the report: the Marine Corp’s separate training of female recruits. The Marine Corps is the last service to not completely train male and female recruits together. While the group “is encouraged with the progress the Marine Corps is making, the Committee remains dedicated to ensuring that gender integration continues to progress in Marine Corps’ recruit training,” the report says. “The Committee believes integration across all training units, military positions and occupations will promote a culture of inclusion.”

Other recommendations made by the committee are to require services to focus marketing efforts on realistic portrayals of female servicemembers; to have the Marine Corps eliminate a pregnancy status code used in the weight section of its performance evaluation form; and to expand an Air Force program to all the services to help transitioning female servicemembers learn about VA resources. Go to <https://dacowits.defense.gov> to access the 2018 Annual report. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Caitlin M. Kenney | March 11, 2019 ++]

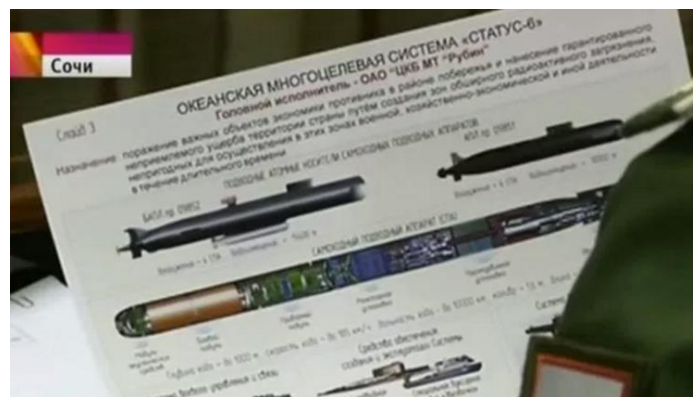
Russia Nuclear Weapons Update 01 ► Poseidon Nuclear-Powered Torpedo

Russia will deploy what's been described as the deadliest nuclear weapon ever aboard mysterious submarines by 2020, Russian state media said, citing a Russian defense-industry source. The "Poseidon" nuclear-powered torpedo — reputed to carry a 100 to 200 megaton nuclear warhead and meant to erupt underwater for maximum effect — will reportedly deploy aboard the Project 09852 sub Belgorod, which is a converted nuclear-powered cruise-missile sub expected to go on combat duty in 2020. The Russian state news agency TASS said the new Belgorod subs could carry six of the Poseidon nuclear torpedoes, which are sometimes described as drones. But Russia will reportedly not operate the mysterious submarine alongside its regular armed forces or other nuclear-powered subs. The Main Directorate of Deep-Sea Research will run the ship, according to H.I. Sutton, who said the Belgorod would conduct covert missions with a smaller submarine in tow.



Silhouette of soviet Oscar-II class SSGN guided-missile submarine, or Project 949A, "Antey."Mike1979 Russia/Wikimedia Commons

"Russia operates a small number of very small, nuclear-powered submarines that are capable of diving in excess of several thousand meters," Andrew Metrick, a research associate in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, said in 2016. "It's probably the most shadowy part of the Russian undersea apparatus," he added. The new Belgorod submarine is "not operated by their navy. It's operated by a separate branch of their ministry of defense," Metrick said. In addition to six Poseidon torpedoes that experts say could wipe out almost all life on earth, Metrick and Sutton speculated the Belgorod could carry a smaller sub that could dive deeper to cut undersea cables and dramatically disrupt international communications and national economies.



A briefing slide of the alleged Status-6 nuclear torpedo seen on Russian television in 2015.BBC

Russian President Vladimir Putin initially announced the Poseidon in a March 1, 2018, speech, in which he said US defenses could not stop it. Of course, the US has no defenses against any full-scale Russian nuclear attack, but in

the case of undersea defenses, the US appears not to have even explored this avenue. In that speech, Putin confirmed the existence of the Poseidon, which has horrified experts since images of it first leaked in 2015. The US and other countries field nuclear-powered submarines capable of firing nuclear missiles, but the Poseidon represents a unique danger to life on earth. Most nuclear weapons seek to minimize radioactive fallout and simply destroy military targets. Russia took the opposite approach with the Poseidon.

The weapon is said to use a warhead, perhaps the strongest ever, designed to come into direct contact with water, marine animals, and the ocean floor, kicking up a radioactive tsunami that could spread deadly radiation over hundreds of thousands of miles of land and sea, and render them uninhabitable for decades. In short, while most nuclear weapons can end a city, Russia's Poseidon could end a continent. Russia has also repeatedly threatened the US and Europe with the weapon, which it said it could park off a coast and detonate at a time of its choosing. Malcolm Davis, a senior analyst at the Australian Strategic Policy Institute, previously told Business Insider that rather than a first- or second-strike weapon, he sees Russia's new torpedo as a "third-strike vengeance weapon" designed to shatter NATO.

While a nuclear exchange between the US and Russia would cause incredible death and destruction, and plunge much of the world into the dark ages, a stealthy submarine designed to launch six "doomsday" devices would be the most deadly weapon in human history and pose a direct threat to life on earth. The inclusion of a mini-sub, which experts speculate could destroy vital undersea cables and is operated by a shadowy branch of Russia's military, suggests another clandestine purpose for this weapon.

[Source: Business Insider | Alex Lockie | March 13, 2019 ++]

U.S. Troop Host Charge ► Trump's Cost + 50 Plan

President Donald Trump wants foreign allies to cover all the costs of hosting American troops at overseas bases plus pay an additional premium for the privilege of having them there, according to a Bloomberg News report citing numerous administration officials. The move has the potential to further test the United States' already strained relationship with European and Pacific allies, many of whom Trump has blasted for not doing enough to shoulder the costs of security missions worldwide. According to the report, administration officials have begun drawing up plans for countries like Germany, Japan and other allies to pay the full price of American troops stationed there plus an additional 50 percent fee for the privilege of their presence.

Bloomberg said individuals briefed on the idea say Pentagon leaders have already been asked to calculate the costs involved while the specific proposals are being finalized. The news comes just days after the administration cancelled annual large-scale military exercises with South Korea, activities that Trump has repeatedly decried as too expensive for the United States even as Pentagon officials have defended their value. Last month, officials in South Korea agreed to increase their share of the costs to station about 28,500 U.S. troops there, up more than 8 percent to nearly \$1 billion. Trump has repeatedly criticized NATO members for not investing enough in defense, even as multiple NATO countries have increased their military spending in recent years.

Last month, following a summit with North Korean leader Kim Jong Un in Vietnam, Trump complained that the United States spends "hundreds of millions of dollars on exercises and we don't get reimbursed" from allies. "We're spending a tremendous amount of money on many countries, protecting countries that are very rich that can certainly afford to pay us and then some," he said. "Those countries know that it's not right, but nobody has ever asked them before. But I've asked them and we're gaining a lot of money." Officials did not give any timeline when the new troop costs policies may be formally announced. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | March 8, 2019 ++]

Taiwan-China Dispute Update 05 ► Fleet of New Fighters U.S. Requested From

Taiwan has requested a fleet of new fighters from the United States, but it didn't specify a type, leaving it up to the U.S. to recommend an option, according to defense officials. Taiwanese Deputy Minister of National Defense Shen Yi-ming told reporters that the request for new fighters had been submitted, with the U.S. to advise on the type and number of fighter jets that would be required to meet the country's operational needs. Speaking at a separate event, the head of the Taiwanese Air Force Command Headquarter's Planning Division, Maj. Gen. Tang Hung-an, confirmed this, citing for reporters the recently submitted letter of request to the U.S. to buy a batch of fighter jets. He was quoted by news outlet Focus Taiwan as saying that "the F-15, F-18, F-16 and even the F-35 are all among our options, as long as the jets help to strengthen our air defense capabilities."

The defense officials were responding to an article in the Chinese language newspaper Apple Daily, which claimed that the request was to purchase a fleet of 66 Lockheed Martin F-16V fighter jets at a cost of \$13 billion, as part of a package that would include missiles and related logistics, as well as the training of pilots and maintenance personnel. The unusual nature of the request puts the onus of the decision on the U.S. and is likely designed to ensure that any Taiwanese request for new fighter jets is not rejected like previous requests, partially out of wariness of angering China, which views Taiwan as a renegade province and has not ruled out the use of force to take back the island. Previous requests include one for 66 new F-16s, which was rejected by the Obama administration. The White House at the time instead offered to upgrade Taiwan's existing fleet of about 140 F-16A/B Block 20 aircraft, the first of which have been delivered to Taiwan's Air Force. However, Tang has noted this process is behind schedule.

Taiwan has also expressed interest to the U.S. government for the Lockheed Martin F-35 Lightning II, but this was also reportedly rejected over fears the jet's sensitive technology could fall into Chinese hands. China is said to be running an espionage operation on Taiwan, and there have been several high-profile cases where Taiwanese military personnel were charged with spying for China. China's recent efforts at modernizing its military is slowly but surely eroding Taiwanese local superiority, and its economic and diplomatic clout is making countries wary of selling arms to Taiwan for fear of angering China, essentially placing the self-governing island under an arms embargo.

The U.S. is bound by the 1979 Taiwan Relations Act to "make available to Taiwan such defense articles and defense services in such quantity as may be necessary to enable Taiwan to maintain a sufficient self-defense capability." In addition to its F-16s, Taiwan's Air Force is operating the French Mirage 2000 and the locally made AIDC F-CK-1 Ching-kuo fighters, although all three types date from the 1990s and are due for replacement soon, even after upgrades. [Source: DefenseNews | Mike Yeo | March 11, 2019 ++]

Nuclear Submarine Lease ► Russia to India | \$3B for 10 Years



India on Thursday signed a \$3 billion contract for the lease of an Akula-1 class nuclear-powered attack submarine from Russia for a period of 10 years. An agreement was signed between India and Russia after two years of

negotiations on the price and various other aspects of the deal. Under the pact, Russia will have to deliver the Akula-1 class submarine, to be known as Chakra III, to the Indian Navy by 2025. It will be the third Russian nuclear attack submarine to be leased to the Indian Navy. A senior Indian Navy official said the deal includes refurbishment of the submarine with Indian communication and sensor systems, spares support and training technical infrastructure for its operations.

The INS Chakra III will not be equipped with long-range nuclear missiles because of international treaties and because it is not meant for deterrence patrols. Its armaments include conventional land-attack and anti-ship missiles and torpedoes. The Indian Navy already operates one Russian nuclear-powered attack submarine, INS Chakra, that was taken on lease for a period of 10 years at a cost of around \$1 billion in 2012, and its lease is now expected to be extended for three more years. The service acquired its first nuclear attack submarine, a Charlie-class boat from the Soviet era. The sub served in the Indian Navy from 1988 to 1991. The Indian Navy also operates the home-built, nuclear-propelled submarine INS Arihant, which is equipped with nuclear ballistic missiles. A second nuclear submarine, INS Aririghat, will be commissioned later this year, with two more currently under construction. [Source: DefenseNews | Vivek Raghuvanshi | March 8, 2019 ++]

US Immigration Update 01 ► McCarran-Walter Act

After several terrorist incidents were carried out in the United States, the current President was severely criticized for suggesting that the U.S. should limit or temporarily suspend the immigration of certain ethnic groups, nationalities and even people of certain religions (Muslims). The criticisms condemned such a suggestion as, among other things, being un-American, dumb, stupid, reckless, dangerous and racist. Congressmen and senators swore that they would never allow such legislation, and our former president called such a prohibition on immigration unconstitutional. As Gomer Pyle would say, "Well, surprise, surprise!" It seems that the selective immigration ban is already law and has been applied on several occasions.

Known as the McCarran-Walter Act as it was introduced by representatives Pat McCarran (D-NV) and Francis E. Walter (D-PA). The **Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952** (H.R.5678) allows for the suspension of entry or imposition of restrictions by the president, whenever the president finds that the entry of aliens or of any class of aliens into the United States would be detrimental to the interests of the United States. "The president may, by proclamation and for such a period as he shall deem necessary, suspend the entry of all aliens or any class of aliens, immigrants or non-immigrants, or impose any restrictions on the entry of aliens he may deem to be appropriate." After passing the House and Senate President Harry Truman vetoed it but his veto was overridden in both houses allowing it to become law on 27 June 1952.

President Jimmy Carter was the last President to use this process less than 37 years ago in 1979 to keep Iranians out of the United States. But Carter actually did more. He made ALL Iranian students, already in the United States, check in with the government. And then he deported a bunch of them. Seven thousand were found in violation of their visas and a total of 15,000 Iranians were forced to leave the USA in 1979. So, what do you say about all of the criticism the current President received from the Congress and the Obama Administration? Additionally, it is important to note that the McCarran-Walter Act also requires that an "applicant for immigration must be of good moral character and in agreement with the principles of our Constitution." Therefore, one could surmise that since the Quran forbids Muslims to swear allegiance to the U.S. Constitution, technically, ALL Muslims should or could be refused immigration to OUR country. [Source: Wikipedia & VFW Post 10132 | Dick McMeekin | March 9, 2019 ++]

Diego Garcia Naval Base Update 01 ► Future Could Be In Jeopardy

Recent skirmishes between India and Pakistan in Kashmir have brought the two nuclear-powered nations closer to conflict than any time in recent memory. The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) is losing its last patches of territory in Syria, which likely means its remaining fighters will spread out across the Middle East and beyond. Sino-Indian rivalries in Maldives and other South Asian states is heating up as China projects power in the Indian Ocean region in unprecedented ways. Peace is elusive as ever in war-torn Afghanistan. All of these regional hotspots have one thing in common for the United States: Diego Garcia.



The US coordinates most of its military operations in the Middle East and Afghanistan from the sub-equatorial atoll. It also uses Diego Garcia to monitor strategically important sea lanes between Asia, Africa and Europe. But that remote and strategic outpost could face an unanticipated threat if a recent International Court of Justice (ICJ) advisory opinion eventually leads to a legally binding ruling. The ICJ said in late February that the UK's expulsion of people on the then Chagos Islands, including Diego Garcia, contravened international law and recommended that the UK "end its administration of the [archipelago] as rapidly as possible." The Chagos Archipelago, now known as the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), is the UK's last possession east of Suez. It was separated from the British colony of Mauritius in 1965, three years before the island nation became independent.

Between 1967 and 1973, the BIOT's entire population of between 1,500 and 2,000 people, mostly a Creole speaking mix of Indians and Africans who survived by growing coconuts and collecting guano, was deported to Mauritius or Seychelles, both situated more than 1,000 miles away. US military personnel arrived on the main atoll of Diego Garcia in March 1971, bringing with them earth-moving gear, building materials and workers, of whom many were Filipinos, to build a military base which is now among its most important worldwide. In 1966, the UK and US signed an agreement known as the "Availability of Certain Indian Ocean Islands for Defense Purposes" that did not specify the nature of activities that would be conducted on the islands.

According to David Vine, an American academic, the agreement was signed "under the cover of darkness" without congressional or parliamentary oversight. It soon became clear, however, what the agreement was all about. Diego Garcia surrounds a lagoon that is 24 kilometers long, 6.4 kilometers wide and nearly ten meters deep. With some dredging and digging, a deep-water harbor was built. Modern houses connected by paved roads were built next on the atoll, as was a runway long enough for huge military aircraft to land. Diego Garcia quickly began to resemble other foreign US military bases, though without a potentially restive local population nearby.

The choice of Diego Garcia was in line with a US policy known at the time as the "Strategic Islands Concept", which aimed to establish military bases away from populous mainland areas where they could be exposed to anti-Western local opposition. It was later revealed that the UK had agreed in 1966 to lease Diego Garcia to the US for 50 years. That agreement expired in 2016, but the UK opted to grant the US a further 20-year lease for Diego Garcia. There are between 3,000 to 5,000 soldiers and civilians based there at any given time. While Diego Garcia is smaller than America's bases in South Korea, Japan and Germany, its strategic importance is likely greater due to its location

to key regional hotspots and China's rising forays into the Indian Ocean region. No outsiders are allowed to enter the base, which reports indicate resembles an American suburb, with well-stocked supermarkets, hamburger joints, beer bars, tennis courts, jogging tracks and satellite TV.

Diego Garcia earned notoriety during President George W Bush's so-called "war on terror" when it was revealed as one of the "black sites" where terror suspects, including from Afghanistan, were detained and interrogated. The Qatar-based news organization Al-Jazeera reported that Diego Garcia had in 2002 and 2003 been used for what was euphemistically called "extraordinary rendition", or the transfer of detainees without legal process, with the full cooperation of British authorities. Reports of torture of detainees on Diego Garcia also later emerged.

But a problem unforeseen in the 1960s has cropped up from the people who were forcibly expelled from the islands and resettled in Mauritius and Seychelles. While they were given monetary compensation at the time, many are fighting for their right to return home. The Chagossians, now numbering about 6,000 including descendants of the original inhabitants, have won the sympathy and support of global human rights groups, with some now providing legal assistance to raise the issue in international courts and fora. The Chagossians' cause has evolved into a major international issue involving British courts, the United Nations, the European Court of Human Rights and the Permanent Court of Arbitration at The Hague, among others.

Mauritian politicians have also started to grandstand on how their predecessors were forced to give up the Chagos Archipelago, in what some now view as the UK using political blackmail to win control of the islands. Information revealed in the ICJ's advisory opinion revealed that the British told local leaders that they would not be allowed independence if they did not agree to cede the Chagos Archipelago. In June 2017, the UN General Assembly voted 94 to 15 with 65 abstentions to ask the ICJ to issue an "advisory opinion" on whether the UK had lawfully adhered to the decolonization process when it separated the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius.

The opinion, announced on 25 FEB, is non-binding but urges the UK to give up the BIOT, which, in effect, would mean returning the islands to Mauritius. It seems likely that the aggrieved Chagossians will press their case further, though the ICJ has not released a timetable for legal procedures. The British Foreign Office said it would "carefully" look at the ICJ's advisory opinion while noting that it is "not legally binding. It noted that the defense facilities maintained their "help to protect people here in Britain and around the world from terrorist threats, organized crime and piracy." The ICJ's judges said as part of their advisory opinion that all UN member states, including the US, are obliged to "cooperate to complete the decolonization of Mauritius."



Protesters calling for the return of the Chagos Archipelago back to Mauritius

It's not entirely clear how that may play out. Mauritius Defense Minister Anerood Jugnauth said at a hearing last year that his country "recognizes [Diego Garcia's] existence and has repeatedly made it clear to the United States and the administering power that it accepts the future of the base." While such assurances may have been welcomed in

Washington, the US would no doubt prefer to maintain its prevailing tried and trusted arrangement with the UK on its remote and isolated base. [Source: Asia Times | Bertil Lintner & Chiang Mai | March 8, 2019 ++]

Surviving Spouses ► Is Yours Prepared If You Should Die First?

The death of a loved one is a tumultuous life transition. To prevent their spouses from suffering the consequences of being unprepared when dealing with the numerous details associated with a loved one's passing, MOAA current and potential members are encouraged to understand the tools and subject-matter experts available to them. MOAA is aware of the limited assistance provided to military retirees and surviving spouses in these situations. Many military bases have Retiree Activity Offices (RAOs) that do their very best to assist. However, these facilities are staffed mainly by volunteers and are severely under-resourced. In these austere times, improvements to RAO services are unlikely. Additionally, many survivors do not reside anywhere near a military installation. Following are several MOAA resources that can help:

- **Member Service Center:** The Member Service Center, (800) 234-MOAA (6622), is staffed from 8 a.m. to 6 p.m. Eastern time with dedicated professionals who have an affinity for assisting the military community. They have been expertly trained to provide or pursue answers to the wide array of questions. If our member service representatives cannot adequately address an issue, they will connect a member or survivor to one of two staff subject-matter experts. These retired military officers possess a combined 50 years of active duty service and have gained in their post-military experience expertise and accreditation as financial and benefits counselors and educators. They routinely advise MOAA members on the full range of military and federal benefits - TRICARE, Medicare and TRICARE For Life, Social Security, VA benefits, and the Survivor Benefit Program, to name a few.
- **Publications and Guides:** MOAA has an array of publications designed to assist paid members and their survivors. Most publications can be accessed online. Copies of printed publications can be obtained via U.S. mail by calling the Member Service Center. The following publications pertain to military survivor issues:
 - *Help Your Survivors Now: A Guide to Planning Ahead.* This guide can help you prepare, make decisions, and ease the financial, medical, and property transition for your family after you're gone.
 - *Survivor's Planning Guide.* Following the death of a loved one, it can be overwhelming to keep track of what arrangements need to be made, who needs to be contacted, and notes on important phone calls. Designed by surviving spouses, this handbook is intended to help you do just that.
 - *Survivor's Checklist: First Steps for Moving On.* Keep this essential checklist on hand to refer to when dealing with a death in the family.
 - *Turning the Corner.* Losing a loved one is never easy, and each person's experience is different. This publication is meant to help you recognize and understand some of the aspects of the grieving process and help guide you through this difficult time.
 - *Your Guide to Military Burials.* Use this resource for planning and decision-making regarding military burials and rights and to create a plan for the future.
 - The other publications in MOAA's library include topics such as personal finance, military benefits, transition, spouse and family, and MOAA chapters. The most popular publications include *Aging Into Medicare and TRICARE For Life* and *Survivor Benefit Plan: Security for Your Survivors*.
- **Surviving Spouse Membership:** Finally, MOAA will transfer a member's Life Membership into a Surviving Spouse Life Membership for the surviving spouse or the remaining time of a premium membership into a Surviving Spouse Premium Membership. Additionally, we invite all survivors to join our Surviving Spouse Virtual Chapter, which provides a common space for surviving spouses across the country to connect

with one another and communicate about challenges of adjusting to a new life and the resources available. You can reach out to this virtual chapter by emailing mssvc02@gmail.com. Survivors also might be interested in joining a local MOAA chapter. Local chapters frequently can provide assistance with issues members and survivors face or offer some like-minded camaraderie. Locate your nearest local MOAA chapter.

[Source: MOAA Newsletter | March 7, 2019 ++]

Combat Obscura ► **War Documentary the Marine Corps Doesn't Want You to See**

The film jumps around, seemingly without structure. At times Marines are patrolling, other times they are sitting against walls, smoking, waiting. There are brief moments of combat, and then down moments of boredom. Titled *Combat Obscura*, it offers no timeline to follow, and gives little thought to the strategic outlook of the Afghan War, which was just a quaint nine years old in 2011 when footage was first shot by Marine Lance Cpl. Miles Lagoze, then a 21-year-old combat cameraman attached to 1st Battalion, 6th Marines. Yet it gives perhaps the most raw and realistic look at what an infantry Marine sees while on a combat deployment overseas.

It looks nothing like the recruiting pitch being sold to American teenagers, which is probably why the Marine Corps itself wanted nothing to do with it. "The actions depicted in the film of these few betrayed the trust and safety of their fellow Marines; they selfishly put their own self-interests over their unit, and by doing so put their entire team at risk," said Maj. Brian Block, a Marine Corps spokesman. Although the Corps previously threatened legal action against the Marine veteran — since he used government-issued equipment to capture much of it — Block now says Lagoze is in the clear. "While we contend that at least some of the content of the film — produced with Marine Corps equipment, during a Marine Corps deployment, and not cleared for public release by any official release authority — is rightly the property of the U.S. Government, we do not plan to pursue any legal action against Mr. Lagoze at this time," said Block. "That definitely is a weight off," Lagoze told *Task & Purpose*, which first informed him the legal threat from Marine officials had been dropped on Thursday.

For more than a year, Lagoze had the threat looming over his head after his film premiered on the festival circuit. *Obscura* received even more attention from Marines young and old after *Task & Purpose's* James Clark offered a review. The reason why the Corps was so pissed at the hour-long documentary could perhaps be found within the opening moments of the film, as grunts wait for an airstrike on a compound. "Bout to have a drop right here, yeahhh!" one Marine says, as a camera focuses on an Afghan compound. Then seconds later, a blast is heard, and the camera turns to a house hundreds of meters away. "Holy shit. That's the wrong building. Holy shit! Yeah boy!" It's just one of many scenes that upend the spit and polished image the Marine Corps wants to convey to outsiders. But as most Marines know (including this writer), the reality is much more than dress blues, marching in formation, and love of country. "We knew it was kinda bullshit when we were out there. We knew we weren't making that much of a difference," Lagoze said.

Among the scenes you definitely won't find airing on AFN are Marines packing their own cigarettes with hash or others smoking marijuana while pulling security at their patrol base — most notably, a grunt fashions a bong out of an empty Pringles can. There are Marines being wounded and evacuated. Another scene shows Marines aiming their weapons at an unarmed Afghan man, who is made to strip naked in order to be checked for weapons. Naturally, the scene is cut right after a Marine says in an interview ready-made for public affairs release that their mission was to "build relationships with the locals." "There's been so many fake depictions of the war, that it's worse not to show what it was actually like," said Lagoze. "People are really sick of the hero worship and stuff like that. [These Marines] were in a fucked up situation. This is more real."

As a videographer for the Marine Corps, Lagoze's job was to accompany the grunts out on patrol and back at base, interviewing them and shooting footage of what they were doing on a daily basis. But what they were really doing was not what the brass wanted to see. He was told to film the "hearts and minds stuff of the war" — handing out candy to Afghan children, grunts patrolling with the Afghan Army, and interviews with Marines that could be released to the public showing they believed in the mission and were happy with what they were doing — all of which is standard fare that is uploaded daily to the Defense Department's imagery portal. But he was given limits: Don't capture footage with grunts smoking or using profanity — which is almost a prerequisite to being an infantryman. No casualties. And whatever you do, don't shoot videos of anyone without their full gear on. "That was actually a big one," Lagoze said. "If they were running around without their helmets on, their proper protective equipment, someone was gonna flip out."

In one instance, Lagoze said, there were videos that ended up being released that "got a lot of flak" from higher-ups because some of the infantrymen were seen during a firefight wearing only green t-shirts underneath their body armor. Others were only in flip-flops. You can imagine the theoretical ass chewing to come later: In combat, gentlemen, you will be fully dressed before returning fire to the enemy. But as Lagoze states in the opening moments of the film with text appearing on screen, a rare moment of narration, "we filmed what they wanted, but then we kept shooting." The Corps took issue with Lagoze retaining footage he and others shot while overseas that was used to make the film, which Block said could "set an unfortunate precedent." He went on to say that Marines on deployment should be focused on their mission, and not their "personal ambitions" — in other words, not going into the Marine Corps and gaining unfettered access to its personnel, solely for their personal benefit later.

But Lagoze rejected that line of reasoning, telling Task & Purpose that he never thought about making a documentary until he had entered film school and started looking back through his old footage. He also brought up the mission of combat camera, which is to produce imagery for public consumption and to document for historical purposes. "I can only film what's happening around me. If they're looking for only certain things that fit into that historical documentation, then I see that as problematic," he said, adding: "I was providing an outlet so that these guys' stories wouldn't get lost and whitewashed in the sanitized version the Marine Corps wanted to perpetuate. It wasn't personal ambition." As for the alleged criminal activity depicted in the film — Marines taking drugs, for example — the statute of limitations has long since passed. And Block stressed that the film does not represent the "experience or attitudes of the vast majority of Marines who deployed and served with honor and distinction in Afghanistan."

But it does provide a snippet, a brief moment in time, when there was still hope for a "win" in Afghanistan. It gives a window into the fucked-up and un-sanitized world of the Marine infantry in combat, where a grunt's sanity is often tested by the thought that the next step could be their last. This fear, usually unspoken among men whose leaders sometimes call them modern-day Spartans, is best captured in the film when one Marine is interviewed just moments after a Taliban attack on their compound. His head bandaged after taking shrapnel, which he initially brushes off as a "boo boo," and with one Marine being taken away for medical evacuation in a helicopter, the facade of toughness finally breaks down: "I don't, uh. I don't want any more combat. I think I'm good after this." "You're ready to go home, aren't you?" "Yeah." "I'm scared. I'm fine now, but when it was happening, it was like, fuck, I never thought they'd get that close. I never thought they'd hit us in the compound."

More broadly, *Combat Obscura* gives people a look at the real-world consequences that can be wrought by generals who believe that "muddling along" in Afghanistan is a viable strategy. And that, at least, has to be worth something. "You can get your legs blown off or your head blown off at any moment," said Lagoze, a Purple Heart recipient. "It's a little unrealistic to expect 19-year-old kids to be these perfect soldiers, these perfect human beings, especially in as fucked up a situation as Afghanistan." "You can shit on the guys on the ground out there, but who's running the war? Who thought what we were actually doing was going to work? That's what I think we should be more focused on than kids smoking hash." You can go to <http://combatobscura.oscilloscope.net> to view a trailer of the film which hits theaters on 15 MAR.

[Source: Task & Purpose | Paul Szoldra | March 01, 2019 ++]

Border Wall Update 11 ► Illegal Crossings Expected To Surge After Cold, Busy FEB At Border.

In a dusty lot along the U.S.-Mexico border fence, a single Border Patrol agent was stuck with few options and falling temperatures. A group of 64 parents and children had waded through a shallow bend in the Rio Grande to turn themselves in to the agent on the U.S. side. He radioed for a van driver, but there were none available. By 2 a.m., the temperature was* 44 degrees. The agent handed out plastic space blankets. The group would have to wait. Mothers and fathers swaddled their families in the silvery, crinkling sheets and clustered with them on the ground, shushing the children. They shivered in the cold wind, and the sound of crying carried on, like a broken alarm.



Groups like this arrived again and again in February, one of the coldest and busiest months along the southern border in years. U.S. authorities detained more than 70,000 migrants last month, according to preliminary figures, up from 58,000 in January. The majority were Central American parents with children who arrived, again, in unprecedented numbers. During a month when the border debate was dominated by the fight over President Donald Trump's push for a wall, unauthorized migration in fiscal 2019 is on pace to reach its highest level in a decade. Department of Homeland Security officials say they expect the influx to swell in March and April, months that historically see large increases in illegal crossings as U.S. seasonal labor demand rises.

The number of migrants taken into custody last year jumped 39 percent from February to March, and a similar increase this month would push levels to 100,000 detentions or more. It was a surge in the border numbers in March 2018 that infuriated Trump and launched his administration's attempt to deter families by separating children from their parents. Trump stopped the separations six weeks later to quell public outrage. But the controversy the policy generated - and its widely publicized reversal - is now viewed by U.S. agents as the moment that opened the floodgates of family migration even wider, worsening the problem it was meant to fix. While arrests along the border fell in recent years to their lowest levels in half a century, they are now returning to levels not seen since the George W. Bush administration, driven by the record surge in the arrival of Central American families.

For U.S. border agents, the strain has grown more acute, as they struggle to care for children using an enforcement infrastructure made in an era when the vast majority of migrants were Mexican adults who could be quickly booked and deported. The Central American families - called "give-ups" because they surrender instead of trying to sneak in - have left frustrated U.S. agents viewing their own role as little more than the facilitators for the last stage of the migrants' journey. They are rescuing families with small children from river currents, irrigation canals, medical emergencies and freezing winter temperatures.

"We're so cold," said Marlen Moya, who had left Guatemala with her sons six weeks earlier and crossed the Rio Grande with the group of 64. Moya's son Gael, 6, was sick with a fever and moaning, his face streaked with tears. "In Juarez, we were shoved and yelled at," she said, looking back across the river to Ciudad Juarez, Mexico. "We slept on the street." Asked why she didn't cross during the day, when temperatures were mild, Moya said she worried that Mexican police would stop them. "We've already come this far," she said. Much of the attention last fall was focused

on caravan groups, mostly from Honduras, as they reached Tijuana, Mexico, not far from San Diego. Then concern shifted to Arizona and New Mexico, where groups of rural Guatemalan families began showing up at remote border outposts. Two Guatemalan children died in December after being taken into U.S. custody, as Homeland Security officials declared a humanitarian and national security crisis.

The border deal Trump and Democrats reached last month includes \$415 million to improve detention conditions for migrant families, including funds to potentially open a new processing center in El Paso. But in the meantime, families continue to arrive in groups large and small, in faraway rural areas and right in downtown El Paso. "The numbers are staggering, and we're incredibly worried that we will see another huge increase in March," said a Homeland Security official who spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the unpublished figures.

The group by the river had landed on the no man's land between the Rio Grande and the tall, steel American fencing. They were on U.S. soil, a place that already has a border wall. The lone U.S. agent with the group was the only one available along that span. Drug smugglers have been using the groups as a diversion, so the agent couldn't leave the riverbank. No vans or buses arrived to pick up the families. Other agents were busy at the nearby processing center because so many groups had arrived in El Paso that night, and still others were at the hospital, where they were helping parents and children receive treatment for severe flu symptoms.

Homeland Security officials have been urging lawmakers to grant them broader powers to detain and quickly deport families in a search for deterrent measures. Their attempts to crack down using executive actions have been blocked repeatedly in federal court. The Trump administration has begun sending some asylum-seeking Central Americans back to Mexico to wait while their claims are processed, but so far that experiment has been limited to California's San Ysidro port of entry. About 150 migrants were sent back across the border in February, according to Mexican authorities, but that is a small fraction of the more than 2,000 unauthorized migrants coming into U.S. custody on an average day. Homeland Security officials said 1 MAR that the pilot program, which they call Migrant Protection Protocols, will expand to El Paso and potentially other locations in coming weeks, predicting that the number of Central Americans sent back would grow "exponentially." Some of the cities where they will wait are among the most dangerous in Mexico.

Mexican officials are cooperating by providing general assistance and job placement for those sent back to wait, but privately they have warned the Americans that their capacity to take parents with children is extremely limited, especially families that need welfare assistance and enrollment in already-crowded public schools. U.S. court restrictions on the government's ability to keep children in immigration jails - and the sheer volume of people arriving - have left Homeland Security agencies defaulting increasingly to the overflow model Trump deplores as "catch-and-release."

Volunteer workers from religious charities were visible at the El Paso airport last month, guiding newly arrived Central American families through the terminal, directing them like a tour group. The adults wore GPS monitors on their ankles and carried manila envelopes with instructions telling them when to appear in court for their asylum claims. Some were traveling in premium seats, the only last-minute tickets available when their families arranged the flights. It was the first time many of the migrants had been on an airplane. For Dionel Martinez, it was the second. The 48-year-old Guatemalan came to the United States three decades earlier, working as a landscaper until he was deported - his only other time on a plane. "We're going to Pennsylvania," he said. A friend had arranged a job at a pizzeria there.

With the savings from his first stint in the United States as a young man, Martinez was able to buy some land in his home country and start a family. But a drought this year had left them hungry. "There was no harvest," he said. "Not one grain of corn." His son Darwin, 13, came with him to the United States this time. The boy fainted during the journey, his father said, when they had to stand for hours in the back of a cattle truck. Martinez said he paid 30,000 Guatemalan quetzals, about \$2,500, to a "coyote" smuggling guide. It was a cheap rate, but it meant that he and his son traveled through Mexico in trucks, like cargo. Across rural Guatemala, Martinez said, word has spread that those who travel with a child can expect to be released from U.S. custody. Smugglers were offering two-for-one pricing,

knowing they just needed to deliver clients to the border - not across it - for an easy surrender to U.S. agents. "If this continues, I don't think there will be anyone left in Guatemala," Martinez joked. The men from his village near the town of Chiquimula were all leaving, he said, bringing a child with them. Martinez said he used the family home as collateral. He had four months to pay off the \$2,500. "I need a way to feed my family, and this is it," he said.

Not all Central American families are economic migrants. Others, especially from Honduras, arrive with stories of gang threats and violent attacks. After crossing the border, a U.S. asylum officer performs a preliminary screening to determine whether their fears of persecution are credible enough to deserve a hearing with an immigration judge. The problem, Homeland Security officials say, is that a growing portion of those who pass the initial screening never appear in court. They know asylum standards are tightening. Or, like Martinez, they have a prior deportation from the United States that all but disqualifies them from getting asylum. Once released into the U.S. interior, some shed their monitoring bracelets and slip into the shadows to remain in the United States, a country where wages are 10 times higher than in Central America.

The saturation at the border means that it matters little whether a parent's story of persecution is sufficiently credible; the United States has just three detention facilities appropriate for families, with about 3,000 beds, and those are full. The pipeline backs up into Border Patrol stations that were never designed for long-term detention, let alone children, many of whom arrive sick after days in cramped quarters. The tiny, remote Antelope Wells, New Mexico, border crossing, where 8-year-old Jakelin Caal arrived in December before falling fatally ill, is now staffed with a team of medically trained Border Patrol agents. But that crossing has gone quiet in recent weeks, as more large groups turn up on El Paso's riverbanks.

For families too poor to hire a smuggler, it was the only place to cross, converging with others who sought safety in numbers. Carlos Guevara, 35, said he and his son had wandered the streets of Juarez with nowhere to sleep, then spotted the crowd heading for the river. "I want to give my son a better life," he said. Guevara said he earned about \$6 a day for farm labor in Honduras, and left a month earlier with, Carlitos, 7, en route to Michigan. "I can't stand being poor anymore." Swathed in plastic, his son approached the headlights of an agent's Border Patrol truck, its idling engine offering some warmth. Other children in the group were still crying and calling out. Ramiro Cordero, a Border Patrol official assigned to accompany reporters, called on the radio, and said he would go back to the nearest station and get a van himself. "This is what's happening on a daily basis," Cordero said. "You've got to understand that we have to take care of everyone that comes across. And this requires transportation and a lot of logistical support." "Hopefully the vans can get here to transport them to one of the processing facilities," he said. "But for right now, this is where we stay."

He lined up the parents and children to issue bracelets to each one with a number corresponding to their arrival group. "They will be provided with basic needs, whether it's water, juices, warm meals," Cordero said. They would also get a medical screening. Two blue-uniformed customs officers, summoned to help the Border Patrol agents, arrived with a van after 3 a.m. The agents loaded the families into the vehicle, needing three trips to transport the entire group. The crying had stopped. On the radio, a dispatcher said there were already 607 migrants in custody at the processing center where they were headed, more than twice its capacity.

In the interim the Health and Human Services Department has asked the Pentagon for space to house up to 5,000 illegal immigrant children this year and is planning to transfer or reprogram nearly \$400 million to pay for the surge of juveniles, known as Unaccompanied Alien Children or UAC in government-speak. The Obama administration made similar requests for fiscal years 2015, 2016 and 2017 — although the last military facility used to house UAC closed in February 2017, just after the Trump administration took office. Unaccompanied children are those who cross the border without parents. Under current law, most of them must be quickly transferred from Homeland Security to HHS, which holds them in dorm-like shelters until they can be placed with sponsors — often parents already living illegally in the U.S. The phenomenon began in earnest in 2013, peaked in 2014, dropped to lows in early 2017, and has surged again in recent months. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Frances Sellers | March 4, 2019 ++]

Afghan Taliban Update 02 ► Leader Allegedly Lived in Walking Distance of US Forward Base

Mullah Mohammad Omar, the one-eyed Taliban leader who served as the group’s figurehead prior to the [U.S. entrance into Afghanistan](#) until his death in 2013, reportedly lived no more than three miles from a major coalition military base that intermittently housed U.S. and British special operations forces, as well as conventional coalition troops. Omar apparently lived for more than a decade in a shack near a well-patrolled route, where he would often hear coalition troops being ambushed by insurgents, warplanes flying overhead and U.S. forces on patrol. The claim comes from a new book entitled “[Searching for An Enemy](#)” by Dutch journalist Bette Dam.



Afghan President Ashraf Ghani’s deputy chief of staff, Haroon Chakhansuri, said the president’s offices “strongly reject” Dam’s book, calling it a “delusional claim” that Omar lived and died in Afghanistan. “We see it as an effort to create and build an identity for the Taliban and their foreign backers,” Chakhansuri said over Twitter. “We have sufficient evidence which shows he lived and died in Pakistan. Period!” In response to the book, Taliban spokesman Zabihullah Mujahid reiterated the militant group’s long-held position that Omar lived and died in Afghanistan. However, the Taliban hid the fact that Omar had died for two years, before being discovered by Afghan intelligence in 2015.

Dam defended her work over social media 11 MAR, saying that she doesn’t “think [her] work is pro-Taliban, or anti U.S.” “It’s an attempt to crosscheck narratives,” Dam said. “If we hear only a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding.” Omar, who had a \$10 million bounty placed on his head by the U.S. government, lived out his life in Zabul province, within walking distance of Forward Operating Base Wolverine, Dam alleges. The U.S. intelligence community had long thought that Omar had escaped over the mountains to Pakistan and remained in hiding there until his death like al-Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden.

The new research also runs counter to the Taliban’s own narrative, which maintained that Omar remained in control of the insurgency for the rest of his life. Omar refused to go to Pakistan due to a “deep-seated mistrust of that country,” Dam wrote. And while he lost operational control over the insurgency, he remained the focal point of Taliban propaganda for religious and cultural reasons familiar to southern Afghans, including a perception of other-worldliness and selflessness. Dam wrote that this was in contrast to bin Laden, who was known for fiery edicts and a more vocal charisma. “In this sense, the story of Mullah Omar shows us just how different the Taliban and al Qaeda really are,” Dam wrote. “Today, as the prospect of peace hinges, in part, on trusting whether the Taliban can indeed split with al Qaeda, understanding Mullah Omar’s story is more crucial than ever.”

Dam lived in Kabul from 2009 to 2014 and said that she interviewed dozens of Taliban leaders. She also said she interviewed Afghan and U.S. officials before getting an interview with the man who guarded Omar for 12 years in December. That guard is currently in the custody of Afghanistan’s national intelligence agency.

Several months after the onset of the U.S. invasion, the Taliban had been broken by U.S. special operations forces, the CIA and local “Northern Alliance” allies. Many senior leaders of the militant group wanted to surrender, according to the new book. In early December 2001, Omar summoned Taliban leaders and agreed to relinquish power to a deputy

commander in order to surrender to the newly installed Afghan president, Hamid Karzai, Dam wrote. Karzai then announced amnesty for the Taliban not long after, but he remained committed to tracking al-Qaida, according to the BBC Pushto Service and Pakistan’s Dawn News. “But the United States felt otherwise,” Dam wrote. “Washington considered the Taliban a serious threat, and Mullah Omar was still the most-wanted terrorist after bin Laden. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld called Karzai and demanded he renounce his media statement and withdraw amnesty for Mullah Omar.”

Omar allegedly escaped to Zabul province and went into hiding, while many other senior Taliban leaders fled to Pakistan. Omar lived in a small shack that soon found itself a one-hour walk away from FOB Wolverine. The base, equipped with a gym, mess hall and offices, played host to Lithuanian troops training local Afghan police, U.S. Navy SEALs, British Special Air Service operators, and other forces. Omar and his guard would often hear U.S. aircraft flying overhead, troops walking by and even Taliban attacks on passing coalition convoys. “Fearful he would be caught, Mullah Omar often hid in one of the irrigation tunnels,” Dam wrote. “Sometimes there was only a table width between us and the foreign military,” Omar’s bodyguard told Dam in an interview.

Karzai reportedly received intelligence from Afghan operatives that Omar was indeed in Zabul province, but Dam wrote in her book that the U.S. government continued to believe he fled to Pakistan based on a misunderstanding of Omar’s allegiance and relation to Pakistan’s intelligence service. Dam’s book alleges that the Pentagon and CIA had little knowledge of Omar’s whereabouts, as evidenced by high profile leaks by former U.S. contractor Edward Snowden in 2013. “In the documents leaked by Edward Snowden, ‘BLANCO’— the call sign the military had assigned to Mullah Omar — appears only a couple of times, and the mentions reveal no details about his location or activities,” Dam wrote.

The book does confirm some details that align with the official narrative. In April 2013, Omar died of an illness believed to be tuberculosis. He was then buried in a nondescript grave without a coffin, according to Dam. Akhtar Mansour had been the operational leader of the Taliban at the time of Omar’s death, and he continued to lead the group privately until Omar’s death was made public in 2015 by Afghan intelligence. Mansour then became the public leader of the group. Mansour was killed in May 2016 by a U.S. drone strike in Pakistan. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Kyle Rempfer | March 11, 2019| ++]

California Burger Police ► What’s Next



The blue, California Burger Policeman above is yelling a list of War Against Burgers issues that vets face when they go out to eat in “The Goldin State”. Here’s what the burger policeman is yelling about ...

Only small cups for soda!

The California legislature is expected to pass a bill soon that will limit restaurant sales of sugary drinks, like Coca Cola, to small sized cups only. A punitive tax on sugary drinks is also expected to pass statewide, following a similar

measure in the city of Berkeley that is seen as successful because it has succeeded in getting poor people to drink more water instead of more expensive soda.

Use this paper straw!

Plastic straws are being banned throughout California, replaced by paper straws that get soggy quickly.

Pay an extra waiter surcharge!

The City of San Francisco has passed a law requiring restaurants to pay underpaid waiters much more. Most restaurants have passed the increased costs on to customers by raising food prices, but many San Francisco restaurants have added a separate surcharge to the bill to account for the extra cost.

Did you request this straw first? NO? Then FIRE the waiter!

Some jurisdictions in California, including Los Angeles, have new laws that impose severe penalties on restaurants that give straws to customers who didn't ask for a straw first. There are inspectors who go to restaurants to check on compliance with the straw law, and if they find a customer didn't ask for a straw before the waiter gave out a straw, they sock the restaurant with a big fine –this leaves restaurants in the position of mitigating the risk of big fines by clamping down on employees. The cartoonist went out to dinner at the Olive Garden last week and the waitress told him that the staff was warned that if they ever handed out a straw, without the customer asking for it first, they would be fired on the spot. Of-course, the law doesn't require that waiters be fired, but the penalties are so severe that restaurants threaten the waiters with similarly severe penalties to strike the fear of non-compliance in the waiters.

Free the chickens!

California passed a law not long ago, that requires better living conditions for chickens, who can no longer be kept in small, efficient cages, thereby giving the chickens a better, and more costly, free-range lifestyle.

Cow Farts, Styrofoam and Banning Beef

These issues transcend California, so no explanation here.

[Source: <https://darylccagle.com> | Daryl Cagle | March 6, 2019 ++]

LSD ► Entry Into World As A Hallucinogenic

In Basel, Switzerland, Albert Hofmann, a Swiss chemist working at the Sandoz pharmaceutical research laboratory, accidentally consumed LSD-25, a synthetic drug he had created in 1938 as part of his research into the medicinal value of lysergic acid compounds. After taking the drug, formally known as lysergic acid diethylamide, Dr. Hofmann was disturbed by unusual sensations and hallucinations. In his notes, he related the experience:

“Last Friday, April 16, 1943, I was forced to interrupt my work in the laboratory in the middle of the afternoon and proceed home, being affected by a remarkable restlessness, combined with a slight dizziness. At home I lay down and sank into a not unpleasant, intoxicated-like condition characterized by an extremely stimulated imagination. In a dreamlike state, with eyes closed (I found the daylight to be unpleasantly glaring), I perceived an uninterrupted stream of fantastic pictures, extraordinary shapes with intense, kaleidoscopic play of colors. After some two hours this condition faded away.”



After intentionally taking the drug again to confirm that it had caused this strange physical and mental state, Dr. Hofmann published a report announcing his discovery, and so LSD made its entry into the world as a hallucinogenic drug. Widespread use of the so-called “mind-expanding” drug did not begin until the 1960s, when counterculture figures such as Albert M. Hubbard, Timothy Leary and Ken Kesey publicly expounded on the benefits of using LSD as a recreational drug. The manufacture, sale, possession, and use of LSD, known to cause negative reactions in some of those who take it, were made illegal in the United States in 1965. Hoffman Did at the age of 102 in Basil Switzerland on 28April 2008. [Source: <https://www.history.com> | March 10, 2019 ++]

Interesting Ideas ► Fresh Egg?



One Word Essays ► Companionship



Have You Heard? ► Firearm | Worms | I Wish You Enough

Firearm

A woman pulled into the gas station to get some gas and went to pay inside. As she was walking in, she noticed these two cops watching a customer who was smoking while pumping gas. She saw him and thought, "is this man drunk, stupid, or just crazy?!! With the police standing right there! Anyway, she went inside and paid. As she was walking out, she heard someone screaming, looked and saw the man's arm was on fire! He was swinging his arm and running around going... crazy! She went outside, and the two officers literally had to take him to the ground and they put the fire out! Then they handcuffed him and threw him in the police car. Being the person that she was she asked the cops what they were arresting him for. This cop looked her square in the eyes and said ... "WAVING A FIREARM IN PUBLIC"

-o-o-O-o-o-

Worms

A minister decided that a visual demonstration would add emphasis to his Sunday sermon using worms. He placed four worms into four separate jars.

The first worm he put into a container of alcohol, the second into a container of cigarette smoke, the third put into a container of chocolate syrup, and the fourth into a container of good clean soil.

At the conclusion of the sermon, the Minister reported the following results:

- The first worm in alcohol . . . Died.
- The second worm in cigarette smoke . . . Died.
- Third worm in chocolate syrup Died.
- Fourth worm in good clean soil . . . Alive and thriving

So the Minister asked the congregation, "What did you learn from this demonstration?" Maxine sitting in the back quickly raised her hand and said . . . "As long as you drink, smoke and eat chocolate, you won't have worms!"



That pretty much ended the service!

-o-o-O-o-o-

I Wish You Enough

A soldier returning to duty in Afghanistan overheard a mother and daughter in their last moments together at the airport. They had announced the departure. Standing near the security gate, they hugged and the mother said, "I love you and I wish you enough". The daughter replied, "Mom, our life together has been more than enough. Your love is all I ever needed. I wish you enough, too, Mom". They kissed and the daughter left.

The mother walked over to the window where he was seated. Standing there he could see she wanted and needed to cry. He tried not to intrude on her privacy but she welcomed him in by asking, "Did you ever say good-bye to someone knowing it would be forever?" Yes, I have," he replied. "Forgive me for asking, but why is this a forever good-bye?"

"I am old and she lives so far away. I have challenges ahead and the reality is - the next trip back will be for my funeral," she said. "When you were saying good-bye, I heard you say, 'I wish you enough'. May I ask what that means?" She began to smile. "That's a wish that has been handed down from other generations. My parents used to say it to everyone". She paused a moment and looked up as if trying to remember it in detail and she smiled even more. "When we said, 'I wish you enough', we were wanting the other person to have a life filled with just enough good things to sustain them". Then turning toward him, she shared the following as if she were reciting it from memory.

- I wish you enough sun to keep your attitude bright no matter how gray the day may appear.
- I wish you enough rain to appreciate the sun even more.
- I wish you enough happiness to keep your spirit alive and everlasting.
- I wish you enough pain so that even the smallest of joys in life may appear bigger.
- I wish you enough gain to satisfy your wanting.
- I wish you enough loss to appreciate all that you possess.
- I wish you enough hellos to get you through the final good-bye.

She then began to cry and walked away. They say it takes a minute to find a special person, an hour to appreciate them, a day to love them but then an entire life to forget them.

Thought of the Week

It is unfortunately true that our generation and that of your parents have left you with a big mess that will now be yours to clean up: wars, budget challenges, pollution, global warming, battles of health care, natural disasters. They're all there for you. We're willing those to you. Are you ready? -- John Morgridge

Amazing new lipstick that helps you lose weight...



Oh dads...



Why science teachers should not be given playground duty.



Trump should have the wall built and then fine the people who don't like it \$800 each. You know like Obama did with Obamacare



I'd rather argue against a hundred idiots, than have one agree with me.

— Winston Churchill —

AZ QUOTES

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RAO Bulletin Editor/Publisher:

Lt. James (EMO) Tichacek, USN (Ret) Tel: (858) 842-1111 Email: raoemo@sbcglobal.net
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RAO Baguio Director:

SSgt Terrance (Terry) Parker, USAF (Ret), PSC 517 Box 4107, FPO AP 96517-1000, Tel: Smart 0921824728 or Globe 09454073380, Email: rao.dir.baguio@gmail.com

RAO Baguio Office: Mountain Lodge, 27 Leonard Wood Road, Baguio City, 2600 Philippines
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