

RAO BULLETIN

1 March 2021

PDF Edition



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2. To read the articles open the website and slew to the page number of the article you are interested in.
3. Numbers contained within brackets [] indicate the number of articles written on the subject. To obtain previous articles send a request to raoemo@sbcglobal.net 'or' raoemo77@gmail.com
4. Recipients of the Bulletin are authorized and encouraged to forward the Bulletin articles to other vets or veteran organizations

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* DoD *



Japan-U.S. Support Agreement

Update 01: Extended One Year

Washington and Tokyo have decided to extend an agreement on Japanese financial support for approximately 54,000 U.S. troops in the country, Japan’s government said Wednesday. A Ministry of Foreign Affairs statement confirmed a 18 FEB report by the Kyodo news agency that said the agreement, which had been due to expire next month, would be extended for a year. Under the deal, Japan will pay roughly \$1.91 billion toward the cost of utilities, labor and training for American military personnel during the coming fiscal year, on par with the current level, according to Kyodo. Cost-sharing talks will resume in April, after Japan’s fiscal year 2021 begins, the report said. Former President Donald Trump had demanded Japan pay \$8 billion a year for hosting U.S. troops in the country, former national security adviser John Bolton wrote in his memoir, “The Room Where It Happened,” published in June. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Seth Robson |: February 17, 2021++]

DoD Budgets

Update 01: Process Too Slow To Beat China, New Report Says



A new report argues for a sweeping overhaul of the Pentagon's 60-year-old defense budgeting and appropriations process, so it can match the fast-moving commercial sector and outpace China's technological development. The paper, scheduled release 25 FEB, argues that numerous acquisition policy reforms over the years have failed to get the best results because the Planning, Programming, Budget and Execution, or PPBE, process has eluded change. The authors, former Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Industrial Policy Bill Greenwalt and the Hudson Institute's Dan Patt, recommend the U.S. consider more agile defense budgeting. "Specifically, the U.S. needs the ability to launch and terminate new development efforts more quickly, to pivot the direction of ongoing investments, and combine the outputs of multiple efforts at various levels of maturity in such a way as to force competitors to respond to U.S. initiative," they write.

The paper, obtained by Defense News, comes as policymakers worry the Pentagon isn't investing to develop the advanced technologies that are considered crucial to future warfare. The report is timely, as Senate Armed Services Committee Chairman Jack Reed, D-R.I., said Tuesday at a hearing on emerging technologies that PPBE process is "one of those relics of days gone by," and asked how it could be changed to provide better "organizational responsiveness."

Similarly, former Google CEO Eric Schmidt told the panel that Congress and the Defense Department need to collaborate on steps beyond acquisition reform. "The DoD's problem is not innovation, but innovation adoption," he said. "It's outdated, industrial-age budgeting process creates a valley of death for new technology, allowing basic research funding and also procurement of weapons systems, but preventing the flexible investment needed in prototypes, concepts, and experimentation of new concepts and technologies like AI." Schmidt lamented that the budgeting process requires American defense planners to lock-in programmatic decisions more than two years in advance.

Amid evermore complex and predictive program requirements, the time it takes the Pentagon to go from identifying a need to making a contract award has increased from about one year in 1950 to seven years, according to the report. Meanwhile, program timelines for new start systems have increased by a factor of four for aircraft and two for ship hull and machinery from 1970 to 2020. The authors make several recommendations:

- Congress and the Pentagon should launch a pilot project around one or two pressing operational challenges using an alternative resource allocation process aimed at fostering adaptability in capability delivery.
- They should also sponsor a commission of expert stakeholders to study changes to the PPBE and appropriations processes that balances America's need to compete and Congress' constitutional role.
- The policy and research community should conduct comparative analyses of the bureaucratic research allocation processes between the U.S. and China.

Chinese budgetary, requirements, and acquisition processes for defense are ripe for study, they write. It appears that Russia and China take more adaptive, more iterative development approaches to field systems more rapidly — and that the Chinese military lacks the constraints of the American military's multi-year budgeting process. The United States military used to be more adaptive. After World War II, the B-52 bomber saw 13 design iterations in 12 years, with thrust increasing by a factor of four. When the B-52H's

arrived, “the design had iterated and evolved into a robust vehicle with the longest planned service life of any military aircraft,” the authors write.

“The history of the B-52 can foreshadow a radically different future for U.S. defense acquisition, where we focus less on performance against prediction, and more on the speed of capability delivery and learning,” they wrote. “This approach presents a path to reverse the Chinese advantage in systems fielding timelines, and a scheme to continuously force their hand and expenses in responding to a breadth of fast-paced U.S. developments.” Over time, an emphasis on “cost, price, technology maturity, fairness, socio-economic factors, and perceived efficiency,” has “deemphasized the significance of time as an incentive to invention.” The paper delves into alternative processes like portfolio-based budgeting or a venture capital-based model that prize adaptability over stability.

On 23 FEB, Schmidt said that in the area of artificial intelligence, the United States is “one or two years ahead of China, not five or 10.” A co-chair of the National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, Schmidt called for an urgent new national competitiveness approach in the areas of AI, 5G networking and hypersonic weapons. “We can’t spend 15 years building the first hypersonics while China and Russia are already working on it. We need a different methodology,” he said. Forthcoming recommendations from the AI commission will include accelerating several key technologies using iterative design approaches. “You’re wasting money with existing design cycles, it’s not helping with preparedness,” Schmidt said. [Source: DefenseNews | Joe Gould | February 25, 2021 ++

DoD/VA Concurrent Receipt

Update 11: Fight For CRSC Presses On



Retired Army Maj. Richard Star, 51, passed away early the morning of 13 FEB after a years-long battle with lung cancer linked to burn pit exposure on deployments. A former combat engineer with multiple overseas tours, Star spent the last months of his life advocating for disabled and medically retired veterans. “Rich Star saved countless lives by clearing roads in Afghanistan of IEDs, and now in his legacy he’s still working to clear the road for concurrent receipt for his fellow servicemembers,” said retired Army Lt. Col. Mark Belinsky, director of currently serving and retired affairs for the Military Officers Association of America.

Chapter 61 retirees, like Star, are service members who were medically retired due to injuries sustained on duty prior to achieving 20 years in service. Under current laws, such retirees are not eligible for concurrent receipt, meaning their military longevity pay is reduced by the amount of VA disability compensation they receive. Service members have earned both their retirement pay and their disability compensation, Belinsky said, and having one shouldn't mean receiving less of the other.

The **Major Richard Star Act**, introduced by Rep. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) on Feb. 27, 2020, would have secured the right of concurrent receipt for approximately 43,000 Chapter 61 retirees injured in combat zones. Although it received support in both houses of Congress, the act failed to pass last year. Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) alongside Reps. Raul Ruiz (D-CA) and Bilirakis plan to reintroduce the Major Richard Star Act on 22 FEB, according to Belinsky. Chapter 61 retirees injured in a combat zone make up only a small portion of the total veterans ineligible for concurrent receipt, however. "The whole concurrent receipt problem has an estimated \$33 billion price tag on it," said Belinsky. "So, the smallest increment to chip away at the larger concurrent receipt injustice is the Major Richard Star Act, which is targeting those injured in combat."

Star joined the Army in 1988. His first deployment was in support of Operation Desert/Desert Storm. He later deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan, performing road construction and IED clearance operations. On his last deployment, Star began having difficulties with breathing and coughing blood. Doctors in Kuwait downplayed his health issues and blamed them on air quality and asthma. When he returned stateside in 2018, Star discovered that he had stage four lung cancer. While going through surgeries and chemotherapy, he learned that he would not concurrently receive his retirement and disability pay through the DoD.

"When we lose somebody to combat, that's one thing, but to lose somebody to negligence, to medical malpractice that's easily preventable... is shameful and an injustice in itself," said Natalie Khawam, Star's lawyer. Khawam worked in 2019 to pass the SFC Richard Stayskal Military Medical Accountability Act, which secures active-duty service members the right to compensation for medical malpractice in military facilities — medical malpractice like downplaying respiratory issues. Star and his lawyer had filed claims under the act, but the Defense Department has delayed the creation of rules and processes to adjudicate and pay claims under the act, according to Khawam.

Such rules were initially expected on Jun. 30, 2020, but the DoD has repeatedly extended its deadline, blaming the COVID-19 pandemic and presidential transition for the delays. Khawam was outraged to see Star pass away before compensation could be secured for his wife and family under the SFC Richard Stayskal Military Medical Accountability Act. "Their negligence has cost these service members their health, their lives. They have a duty to fix it, and now there's no accountability for the accountability," she said. "What are you saying when you delay somebody's right to be made whole, when you deny somebody's claims and their compensation?" Both Belinsky and Khawam assured that their fights are far from over. "It was an honor to represent [Richard] and serve him, but his passing isn't the end of my job, it's just the beginning," said Khawam. "It's given me more reason and ambition to fight for what they deserve."

(Note: New legislation S.322 has been introduced. Refer to Update 12) [Source: MilitaryTimes | Harm Venhuizen | February 13, 2021 ++]

DoD Housing Program

Improved Oversight to Cost Taxpayers \$120M Annually

The Pentagon said it's made major strides toward adding more accountability and oversight to the military's privatized housing programs. But keeping housing companies honest will apparently come at a significant cost: DoD believes it will need to spend an additional \$120 million per year to staff new programs to inspect and oversee those projects.

After the crisis in housing conditions on military bases became apparent to policymakers, Congress allocated nearly \$200 million over the past two years to help boost DoD's oversight over private housing providers. The goal of the increased oversight: to ensure that problems ranging from health-threatening mold infestations to routine maintenance issues were actually being addressed by the private firms who now control most of the military's family housing, and to fix the most serious problems right away. The military services are still assessing exactly how many staff they'll need to conduct that oversight at each installation, but so far, they've hired about 500. DoD wants to turn those new staff into a permanent workforce of civilian employees who are trained to do the job and who will accumulate expertise over time.

"Those employees are doing activities that we, quite frankly, were not doing prior to 2018," Paul Cramer, the deputy assistant secretary of Defense for installations told the House Appropriations Committee this week. "Those things had languished, and we had not put emphasis at the installation housing offices that we have today. They're doing occupancy maintenance inspections ... they're being advocates for the families that may not received a quality move-in experience, or just can't get issues resolved between themselves and the property manager. We're doing increased advocacy, and we're starting to see dividends, so continued funding at the same level is appropriate." And Cramer said even as DoD expands the government housing staff on each installation, the department is making clear that their primary job is to hold private housing providers accountable for delivering and maintaining homes that are up-to-standard.

Previously, the relationships between installation-level government employees and housing providers had gotten perhaps a bit too cozy, with government staff sharing office space with the employees of the same private firms they were ostensibly meant to oversee. "We ended up with more of a friendship agreement, and that existed across-the-board," he said. "And with friendship, they then tended to cover for one another. We're now improving back to a partnership agreement. The offices have been separated out. In some cases, we have relocated the DoD employees into a separate building from the privatized housing entity. In other cases, we have created a firewall so there are at least separate doors. We've implemented those across the board."

Going forward, the duties of the on-base government staff go well beyond serving as ombudsmen and resolving disputes between renters and landlords. They're also charged with physically inspecting every housing unit at regular intervals. That process began in the summer of 2019, when then-Defense Secretary Mark Esper ordered the military services to inspect every privatized housing unit. Once that process was done, the services decided it made sense to conduct those inspections every time a tenant moved out, and before a new family moved in.

Cramer said they've since adapted the process to visit tenants 30 days after their initial move-in, giving them time to discover deficiencies in their new housing. "That way it's not a situation where someone

signs their lease and we tell them to call us if they have any issues. The military departments are proactive in going out to the houses, knocking on doors, and asking if there are any issues,” he said. “They’ve also implemented an annual inspection requirement. Some families may not let you in the house, but we’re going to the door to say, ‘Hey, it’s been a year since we last talked,’ and it’s a dialogue between the staff on the government side and the residents to ask whether there are issues with their housing or not.” Meanwhile, the department is looking at ways to do more in-depth inspections of its privately-owned housing stock, so that government oversight staff aren’t just looking for obvious or cosmetic problems during those periodic checks.

At Fort Belvoir, Virginia, the Army has launched a pilot project to start examining all of its on-base homes with the same standards that private inspectors use outside the fence line. “The standard they’re using at Fort Belvoir is the code that exists in Fairfax County and in the Commonwealth of Virginia — we use it to go through and identify where there are maintenance deficiencies or structural issues with the home,” Cramer said. “We’re going to set a baseline, and the pilot at Belvoir will inform us as we go forward. The other thing we’ve done is train the new employees on what the expectations are so that we have consistency across all the military departments.”

As part of the 2020 Defense authorization bill, enacted in December 2019, Congress enacted a “bill of rights” for military housing tenants. But DoD has only fully implemented 15 of the 18 rights in that law so far. The ones that remain unresolved are requirements for housing providers to give tenants a seven-year maintenance history for their homes, the ability for tenants to withhold rent when required maintenance isn’t done, and a new dispute resolution process. Cramer said the new requirements are easy enough to implement for new housing projects. DoD can also impose them more-or-less unilaterally when a private provider wants to modify its current agreement with the government — for example, when it’s time to build new homes on a base.

But for existing agreements, enforcing the new bill of rights is difficult unless housing providers voluntarily consent to modify the terms of their contracts with the government, which typically last for 50 years. Even the oldest of those contracts still have 30 years before their expiration. “It’s been a back-and-forth dialogue with the existing project companies to ask them to adopt them retroactively on their current projects,” Cramer said. “But we’ve gotten agreement from all but three companies to do that. I think we’ll eventually get them all on board. We’ve asked them to have those rights available for existing projects by the first of June.” [Source: Federal News Network | Jared Serbu | February 18, 2021 ++]

Military Treatment Facilities

Update 02: DHA Set To Take over All Military Hospitals by End of 2021

After a tumultuous year of pauses and reconsiderations, military hospitals and clinics are still on track to move under the management of the Defense Health Agency by the end of the year. How that will affect patients of those facilities may change from the original plan though, after the military’s centralized medical administrator was forced to rethink what role private health care providers can play in the plan after COVID-19. “We are absolutely on track to meet our timelines and that’s our expectation with us,” Dr. Brian Lein, DHA assistant director for healthcare administration, told Federal News Network.

The transition includes 721 military treatment facilities (MTFs) and 174,000 health care personnel including active-duty service members, civilian employees and contractors, which provide care to 9.5 million TRICARE beneficiaries. The facilities are clustered into 21 large markets that encompass about two-thirds of patient interactions. The rest are in 16 small market regions or stand-alone hospitals and clinics — think rural areas with a large military presence. Congress initiated the transition in the 2017 National Defense Authorization Act as a means to better integrate health care instead of continuing the decentralized system of each military service overseeing its own MTFs.

As part of that transition, DHA planned on “rightsizing” its markets to increase readiness. “What we found in our review is that many of these facilities do not have the type of patient case load, volume, acuity that we need for our providers to be proficient in what they do downrange,” Thomas McCaffery said in early 2020 when he was the assistant secretary of Defense for Health Affairs. “And so by limiting the scope of services, it will allow us to take some of those providers and place them at other MTFs that do have that direct match for their readiness requirements.” The plan would have closed about 50 MTFs and moved approximately 200,000 patients from getting care on base to using their TRICARE insurance to get assistance from private providers.

Even before coronavirus there was skepticism around whether those 200,000 would have the access to care they needed, however the pandemic exacerbated the issue. “The markets in some of the areas changed significantly, just like you saw in the newspaper and elsewhere, a lot of providers closed up their doors, and a lot of access went away,” Lein said. “The United States lost a lot of hospitals, and hospital capability, especially in some smaller communities, where it couldn’t support those hospitals in terms of finances.” DHA is now in the process of reconsidering its rightsizing plan and taking into account the changing medical communities. Lein said DHA has not yet come up with a number of how many patients will be offloaded from MTFs and how many MTFs will close.

“Were the assumptions and the facts that we found in 2017 still true? Do the communities still have the capability to take care of our people? Do the communities downsize? Do the communities get bigger, but their hospitals didn’t get bigger? We’re working through all of that right now,” Lein said. “COVID taught us a tremendous amount. It also really energized and developed a lot of synergies between our local MTFs and the markets. Every day in many of our markets, they were having conversations with the leaders of the civilian healthcare organizations, about bed status, about treatment capabilities, ICU status and emergency room status.”

In the beginning of the pandemic the Government Accountability Office released a report stating that DHA’s original assessment of the civilian marketplaces did not consistently account for provider quality and that inaccurate information was used to calculate how far patients would have to drive to get healthcare. “MTF officials we interviewed also expressed concerns that the assessments did not account for traffic, including bridges and tunnels that create traffic chokepoints. In other words, they believed that even providers that appeared to be within drive time standards based on mileage could actually exceed the standard depending on their location and time of day,” the report stated.

Last August, the military service chiefs called for a halt in the transition. “The DHA end-state, as designed, introduces barriers, creates unnecessary complexity and increases inefficiencies and cost,” the military officials wrote. “Service command and control of the MTFs as military units, through our direct support, was critical to commanders’ operational response [to coronavirus] and swiftly adjusting resources

across the enterprise.” DHA halted its transition and worked with the service chiefs. Congress told the services in the 2021 National Defense Authorization Act that the show must go on.

“The conferees restate that DOD must continue on the path required by law to eliminate the inefficient, stove-piped Military Health Service structure that inevitably leads to turf wars among the services and the DHA, while simultaneously paralyzing decision-making and stifling healthcare innovation,” lawmakers wrote. Congress did allow military services to hold on to their medical research arms a little longer, however those much fully transition to DHA by 2025 under the 2021 NDAA. [Source: Federal News Network | Scott Maucione | February 23, 2021 ++]

AAFES

Update 02: Will Offer Chiropractic Services at Select Locations

The Army and Air Force Exchange Service, or AAFES, is opening more dental and medical equipment service centers on military installations in 2021. And in a first, it will also bring chiropractic services to selected locations in the U.S. Currently, AAFES offers wellness services on several military locations worldwide, including:

- 139 optical and optometry clinics
- 17 durable medical equipment shops
- 9 dental offices

AAFES is planning to open seven additional durable medical equipment shops and eight dental offices at locations worldwide this year. New to the exchange wellness program in 2021 will be six chiropractic clinics, slated to open at [Fort Campbell](#), Kentucky; [Fort Carson](#), Colorado; [Fort Stewart](#), Georgia; [Joint Base Lewis-McChord](#), Washington; [MacDill Air Force Base](#), Florida; and [Nellis Air Force Base](#), Nevada. Check out what services are available and which locations are served by the exchange's wellness program at <https://publicaffairs-sme.com/Community/wellness>.

All exchange wellness locations accept Tricare and most private insurance programs. "With exchange wellness offerings, service members and families can get what they need without having to go off the installation," said Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Kevin Osby, exchange senior enlisted adviser. "The exchange remains committed to making life better for military communities throughout 2021." The services are available to all authorized exchange customers including active-duty members, retirees, family members and all disabled veterans. [Source: Military Officers Association of America| February 17, 2021 | ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, & Abuse

Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2021

Yokohama, JP -- Three Japanese contractors were indicted by a federal grand jury 16 FEB on charges they defrauded the Navy in a 13-year scheme to illegally dump untreated ship wastewater they were hired to decontaminate, according to the U.S. Justice Department. **Sojiro Imahashi**, president and CEO of the

Yokohama, Japan-based Kanto Kosan Co., and two employees, Tsuyoshi Ifuku and Yuki Yamamiya, were charged Tuesday in Washington, D.C., district court with one count of conspiracy to make false claims and commit ocean dumping and major fraud against the United States; four counts of major fraud against the U.S.; and six counts of submitting false claims, according to a Justice Department statement Thursday.

From 2007-2020, Kanto Kosan received about \$120 million in Navy contracts, “tens of millions of which related to the removal, treatment, and disposal of contaminated oily wastewater generated by U.S. Navy ships” at bases in Yokosuka, Sasebo and Okinawa, according to the statement. But instead of treating the wastewater according to Japanese environmental standards, the company allegedly dumped it into the ocean, according to the statement. The indictment alleges Kanto Kosan would “minimally treat” the oily wastewater to remove visible contaminants and then discharge the water into the ocean, according to the Justice Department.

The wastewater was contaminated with oil, firefighting foam, chemicals and other contaminants associated with ship operations, according to the indictment. Not only could releasing untreated water cause environmental issues such as pollution, but “the appearance of U.S. Navy ships dumping wastewater into Japanese waters would have undermined the U.S.-Japan strategic relationship,” according to the indictment. The Navy in March 2018 started an investigation of Kanto Kosan that was later joined by the Justice Department and FBI, according to The Japan Times and Wall Street Journal in 2019. Three former company employees said Kanto Kosan failed to treat the wastewater as contracted and falsified records and test samples, the reports said. The company at the time dismissed the allegations as groundless, according to The Japan Times.

Kanto Kosan is also accused of deceiving the Navy into believing the company was properly treating the wastewater, according to the statement. The indictment also alleges the defendants directed environmental testing personnel to sample water from tanks filled with tap water rather than wastewater during semiannual tests, according to the statement. “Kanto Kosan employees also added [wastewater] to the tanks filled with tap water on occasion to avoid exposing the scheme,” the Justice Department said in the statement. If convicted, the defendants will be required to pay back the government for funds fraudulently taken in addition to any other punishments, according to the indictment. Court dates had not yet been set as of 19 FEB, according to court records. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Caitlin Doornbos | February 19, 2021 ++]

Military Extremism

A ‘Threat,’ the Pentagon Is Not Sure How to Address

The sea of protesters-turned-rioters massing near the Capitol on Jan. 6 carried with them pro-Trump signs, American flags and an array of political banners. Also among the crowd were many emblems of the military community: Some waved Marine Corps flags, many sported military tactical gear, even specific unit patches signifying their time in service. Those affiliations were real. More than two dozen people who were later charged in crimes stemming from the attack on the Capitol had military ties, including a Virginia Army National Guardsman, a Navy officer and one retired Air Force lieutenant colonel, dressed in military gear, holding zip ties on the Senate floor. Another veteran is accused of being the leader of the far-right, anti-government extremist group Oath Keepers.

Not all of those who stormed the Capitol that day were military or veterans, but so far, authorities estimate that 1 in 5 of those who've been charged criminally were either currently serving in the military or had once worn the uniform. The links between the insurrection on Capitol Hill and the military community seemed shocking to many leaders and the public overall. But maybe they shouldn't be. For decades, domestic extremists have flaunted ties to the U.S. military, seeking to claim the status, credibility and effective tactical training that military service entails. And for decades top leaders in the military have promised to go after domestic extremists — like militia groups, white supremacists and those who advocate violence against the government — when discovered in the ranks.

Yet past efforts focused on disciplining individuals rather than addressing a broader problem across the military. Despite finding recent evidence of troops with known ties to extremist groups like the Atomwaffen Division or Identity Evropa, military leadership's response has never drawn as much institutional support as other high-profile problems like sexual assault, suicide or hazing. Even today, as the attack on the Capitol has heightened concerns, the Pentagon cannot say how many service members in uniform may have ties to extremist ideologies that are a threat to both the military and the nation at large. The Defense Department has no central tracking of allegations or disciplinary actions related to extremism, and regulations allow for extremist affiliations and rhetoric, as long as a service member doesn't act upon them.

In the past, defense officials have downplayed the issue, claiming the numbers were low and that mere membership in such organizations is not a crime, making it difficult to track. Yet internally, the concerns were evident long before the attack on the Capitol. Extremism inside the military is a "threat" of unclear proportion, not only because of possible violence but also because it endangers morale, according to a Pentagon report quietly delivered to Capitol Hill this fall. "Despite a low number of cases in absolute terms, individuals with extremist affiliations and military experience are a concern to U.S. national security because of their proven ability to execute high-impact events," the report stated. "Access to service members with combat training and technical weapons expertise can also increase both the probability of success and the potency of planned violent attacks."

Military leaders note, correctly, that the effort to tackle the problem aggressively is fraught, because the Constitution protects freedom of speech and the law prohibits criminalizing affiliations that may be deemed fundamentally political in nature rather than a threat to harm the public. But others who study the problem say much more can be done, and the military's ability to enforce standards for good order and discipline gives commanders and senior leaders powerful tools to send a message and remove or punish service members who are identified as a problem. "The military has unique abilities to set boundaries on conduct that other parts of government don't have," Katrina Mulligan, the managing director of national security and international policy at the Center for American Progress, told Military Times. "But they have been unevenly applied."

That may soon change. The spate of arrests and investigations involving dozens of current and former service members involved in the Capitol riots has drawn a spotlight to the problem of the military community's ties to domestic extremism. The new defense secretary, retired Army four-star Gen. Lloyd Austin, vowed at his confirmation hearing in January to "rid our ranks of racists and extremists, and to create a climate where everyone fit and willing has the opportunity to serve this country with dignity." He soon acted on that promise. "Extremism has risen to a top priority as the new secretary called in the service secretaries and Joint Chiefs of Staff in early February, directing them to conduct a 60-day stand-down for

leaders to speak with troops about the problem and “get a sense from them about what they’re seeing at their level,” Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters 3 FEB.

But it won’t be easy. As a practical matter, monitoring the activities of 1.3 million active-duty service members is challenging. Culturally, it’s not a problem leaders have prioritized over the years. And legally, it’s difficult to distinguish between the casual gestures of some troops and the real warning signs of potentially illegal extremist activity by others. Tougher enforcement is now under consideration at the highest levels of government. Some measures under consideration include: better vetting of incoming recruits, monitoring social media for those in sensitive positions, adding questions about extremism to command climate surveys, a tattoo database so commanders know what to look for, increased training and an accountability mindset that encourages reporting. Cumulatively, the impact would be swift, with career-ending discharges for anyone involved in extremist activities.

Advocates who support a more aggressive crackdown inside the military point to the era of “don’t ask, don’t tell” to show that the military has the capability to police personal behavior among troops. “The military put a lot of effort ... I think ridiculously, trying to find homosexuals,” former Air Force chief prosecutor Don Christensen, who now heads the advocacy group Protect Our Defenders, told Military Times. “If they wanted to stop something, they can. The question is, how much effort are they putting into investigations?” he said. Christensen pointed to the services’ task forces for child pornography and said they should set up the same for extremism. “They already know how to do it,” Christensen said. “I think any military leader, if asked, would admit that white supremacy, extremism would be a threat to good order and discipline, and you would have a legitimate reason for doing this.”

Why this time is different

The commander in chief is already talking about the problem. President Joe Biden said in his inaugural address that the “rise of political extremism, white supremacy, domestic terrorism,” were threats the nation must confront and defeat. More specifically to the military and the Pentagon’s response will be the new defense secretary. Austin, an African American who grew up in the Deep South, graduated from West Point in 1975 and spent 41 years in the Army, brings a personal perspective to the problem that could have a far-reaching impact.

During his January confirmation hearing, Austin recalled his time as a lieutenant colonel in the 82nd Airborne Division. In 1995, racist paratroopers in the unit murdered a Black couple near Fort Bragg in North Carolina. A subsequent investigation uncovered nearly two dozen skinheads in the division and sparked a global review of extremism in the Army’s ranks. “We woke up one day and discovered that we had extremist elements in our ranks, and they did bad things that we certainly held them accountable for,” Austin said. “But we discovered that the signs for that activity were there all along,” he added. “We just didn’t know what to look for or what to pay attention to — but we learned from that.” There were warning signs, Austin said, but leaders didn’t see them. “I can tell you that most of us were embarrassed that we didn’t know what to look for, and we didn’t really understand that being engaged more with your people on these types of issues can pay big dividend,” Austin said. “We can never take our hands off the wheel on this,” he said. “This has no place in the military of the United States of America.”

After the Capitol riot, Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) sent a letter to Biden, Austin and Director of National Intelligence Avril Haines, asking the Pentagon to begin screening social media accounts of service members with sensitive roles for any white supremacist or extremist ties. She asked the president to elevate white supremacy and violent extremism as a critical threat, which would raise scrutiny during the security

clearance background checks. She urged Austin to direct the services to review standards for social media activity of recruits to help identify such activity.

Events pre-dating the Capitol attack signaled an appetite for countering extremism. Last year, the services banned display of the Confederate battle flag in public places. Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger led the way when he directed that all Confederate-related paraphernalia be removed from Marine bases, saying that the symbol has, “the power to inflame feelings of division.” The other services have since followed with similar actions. Days before the Capitol riot, Congress passed a law ordering DoD to rename military installations that currently honor the Confederate States of America. The legislation passed Jan. 1 will create a commission to rename, within three years, the military installations and Navy ships that commemorate anyone who served in the Confederacy.

Weeks before the Capitol riot, then-acting defense secretary, Chris Miller, directed Pentagon officials to toughen policies and regulations banning extremist activities among troops, and update the Uniform Code of Military Justice to specifically address extremist threats. A former top official at the Pentagon told Military Times that the latest comments from both the commander in chief and the new defense secretary hold promise. “We all know that personnel issues do not normally rise to the level of attention that they sometimes deserve. However, the events of the last few years, culminating with the Jan. 6 attack on our Capitol, have revealed to America, military included, that we have serious issues that must be addressed,” said Todd Weiler, a former assistant defense secretary for manpower and reserve affairs during the Obama administration. “There is no doubt that these issues will garner the attention of the new administration and I am confident that they will be addressed,” he said.

Why it won’t be easy

The thicket of laws and politics that the Pentagon will have to navigate will not be easy. Some monitoring of social media is allowed under military policies and regulations, but it will be tricky to strike the right balance between increasing enforcement without veering into an overly aggressive surveillance effort that critics will call a witch hunt, legal experts say. It’s unconstitutional to make mere membership in an organization a crime, said Eugene Fidell, Yale Law School military law expert. But that can be discouraged by other means; for example, officials could bar enlistment or revoke a security clearance, which could end a career without using the UCMJ, he said. “For First Amendment reasons, mere ‘paper’ membership in an organization, whether it be the Communist party during the McCarthy era or, today, a gang or a group that believes in white supremacy, is not a crime. Taking a leadership role in such an organization is another matter,” Fidell said.

The Army, for example, prohibits collecting, recording or reporting “information concerning purely political activities and personalities, or disorders in which no crime is indicated or suspected” by its criminal investigators, according to Army Regulation 195-2. However, there is precedent for this kind of easily shared data. The 21st Century Sailor office, in the Navy’s chief of naval personnel office, keeps a spreadsheet of hazing reports from around the service. “I don’t think it’s rocket science, it’s a commitment to be able to do it. If you can screen for psychological and health concerns, you can screen for signs of radicalization,” Lecia Brooks, chief of staff for the Southern Poverty Law Center, told Military Times.

While the president and defense secretary have pushed the importance of combating extremism, the groundwork falls to individual services and unit leaders to identify bad behavior and for commanders to respond to it. And to do that effectively will require resources — specifically more money and people. “We get a lot of help from external law enforcement agencies with these sorts of things because of the

domestic nature” of the offenses, outgoing Army Secretary Ryan McCarthy said during a 18 JAN interview. “But do we have enough resources in place to truly get after this in the appropriate way? We’re looking at that, too.”

How big is the problem?

Last year the FBI notified the Pentagon that it had opened criminal investigations that involved 143 current or former service members. Sixty-eight of those involved domestic extremism and the vast majority involved veterans, not active-duty troops, a defense official told Military Times. Unlike suicide and sexual harassment or sexual assault, neither the Pentagon nor the services centrally track extremism, whether its links to domestic terrorism or the white supremacist ideology that often overlaps with it. In the case of military suicide, Congress directs the Pentagon to produce a yearly report on its suicide fatalities, including research on the demographics affected most.

The DoD also uses the Rand Military Workplace Study to gather anecdotal data on toxic command climates and sexual harassment. No similar tracking exists for extremism. The Pentagon reported in 2020 that 21 service members had been disciplined or discharged over the previous five years for extremist activities. Anti-extremist groups say they find higher results on an annual basis through publicly available online research. Many experts are skeptical that this data reflects the true scope of the problem.

UCMJ and other tools

Step one will be for the military to find and identify those involved in extremist groups and activities. Past efforts don’t leave much room for optimism without increased tools, training, resources and priorities. Scott Barfield was working as a military police investigator at Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, in 2002 when his supervisor assigned him to work with local civilian police on gang cases. It wasn’t until they taught him what to look for, and where to look for it, that Barfield started finding soldiers who were linked to white supremacists or involved with gangs and other extremist groups. Over the next five years, Barfield identified about 80 soldiers at JBLM with links to extremist or white supremacist group members. Those numbers, at one Army installation, were nearly five times what the Army said it saw across the entire force for the same period.

But Barfield met resistance from top Army officials, who denied the military police investigator’s claims that the problem was so widespread. Barfield resigned from his civilian investigator job when he was told he’d be transferred to the traffic division. He now works in civilian law enforcement. “There’s no way in my mind that I can fathom that the problem has disappeared or severely reduced since I left,” Barfield said in a recent interview with Military Times. He recalled that some commanders took the issue seriously and punished the soldiers with ties to extremism, while other commanders said they needed the guys for deployments, taking little or no action. Barfield faulted the high turnover of most military police and a lack of training and lack of coordination with local law enforcement.

In February 2020, at a hearing on Capitol Hill about white supremacy in the military, some lawmakers called for adding a standalone UCMJ article addressing extremism. But legal experts say that may not be necessary. Existing articles and regulations cover extremist activities — it’s a matter of enforcing them. “In fact, a host of formal and informal sanctions are available, including administrative reprimands, reenlistment, promotion, performance evaluations, duty assignments, special training and various kinds of privileges,” Fidell said. Prosecutors can pursue criminal charges if troops serve in leadership roles in a hate group or anti-government group or if they commit crimes through their conduct with that group.

Recruiting

The threat of extremism poses major threats to military recruiters. One concern is that the perception that parts of the military are sympathetic to extremist views could corrode the military's culture and hurt the Pentagon's efforts to recruit a more diverse force. "If the military starts looking like it's exclusively a good old boys network of soon-to-be KKK members, we're going to have a tough time recruiting in the future," Marine veteran Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ) said during a hearing on recruiting last year.

Another risk is that the recruiting process, which brings more than 200,000 young people into the services every year, could be inadvertently welcoming extremists who could fuel the problem inside the military and, at the same time, gain valuable military training that could be used later in life to support extremist activities. In the age of social media, the Pentagon is trying to create a "multitiered screening process" that will enable "a holistic view of each applicant," according to Stephanie Miller, who was the Pentagon's director of accessions last year. In 2020, the Pentagon launched a centralized screening capability that vets all new recruits to identify and resolve "indicators of questionable allegiance," Miller said during a February 2020 House Armed Services Committee hearing. "We believe we have been effective at screening for individuals that have extremist ideologies or support extremist groups, but we continuously review our policies, our practices, and our methods for improvement," Miller said.

At the same hearing, Garry Reid, the Pentagon's then-director for defense intelligence, said the department was still developing the tools to review social media information during every background investigation, but warned that there are a number of pitfalls to such an approach. A 65-page report by the defense undersecretary for personnel and readiness sent to Congress in October laid out ways in which the Pentagon could incorporate FBI data and resources to do deeper screenings of military recruits when they join. Report authors recommended the FBI share information in its tattoo and symbols database, develop an unclassified version of their ethnically-motivated violent extremist training and provide services to research tattoos and symbols not easily identifiable with the database.

The report also recommends adding clearer questions to the background screening form, such as whether the applicant had provided money to groups, attended extremist group meetings, received training or other prohibited activities. The Pentagon noted in the report that it had already begun to implement six of the seven recommendations. The final item involved adding a separation program designator to a military discharge that indicated domestic extremism was involved in the discharge. Currently only the Navy requires such a designator on the DD 214.

Veterans

While current service members spouting hate-filled rants online or participating in the Capitol riot or other plots is troubling, the bulk of those found with a military connection in extremist causes are veterans. For military leaders, those veterans are out of reach of military discipline of the UCMJ, unless they are retired, in which case the military can pursue a court-martial and go after their benefits. Nevertheless, veterans create both an image problem for the services and a real danger to the larger community with their tactical know-how and outsized influence among extremist groups.

Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America CEO Jeremy Butler told Military Times there's no doubt extremism and racism are problems within military and veteran communities. But for too long the problems of extremist behavior both in the ranks and among veterans has been overlooked or diminished by those veterans group leaders, Butler, a Navy reservist, said. "Too often veterans groups are reluctant to

do that. They don't want to anger some of their membership," he said. "We as leaders of veterans groups can't be shy about speaking out, condemning veterans or military who take part in those things."

Chris Purdy, an Army veteran and project manager for Veterans for American Ideals, echoed concerns. The VFAI aims to have its members and other veterans serve beyond their time in uniform, he said. And part of that is holding other veterans accountable. "The only people veterans are going to listen to are other veterans," Purdy said. VFAI recently formed two task forces to fight the problem, one to track online hate among purported veterans and another to make recommendations to counter extremism among veterans. Even though numbers of extremists might be small when compared to the vast majority of service members and veterans, Butler said that calling it out will make a difference. "You have to be open about acknowledging those problems if you're going to fix those problems," Butler said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Todd South | February 21, 2021 ++]

Military Extremism

Update 01: Sailors Must Reaffirm Their Oaths



The Navy will require its sailors to reaffirm their oaths to the Constitution during daylong unit stand-downs ordered by the defense secretary to address extremism, including white supremacy. Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. John Nowell Jr. ordered the renewed oaths 21 FEB in a message to the fleet detailing the Navy's plans for the stand-downs that each service must complete before 2 APR. Both military and civilian personnel are required to participate. "As public servants, we took an oath to the Constitution and we will not tolerate those who participate in actions that go against the fundamental principles of the oath we share, particularly actions associated with extremist or dissident ideologies," Nowell said in the message.

Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin on 3 FEB told each service branch to conduct 24-hour operational pauses to address extremism. His order followed the 6 JAN insurrection at the Capitol by supporters of former President Donald Trump that included more than two dozen military veterans and at least one current service member, Pentagon spokesman John Kirby told reporters at the time. In a video message 19 FEB, Austin encouraged service members in all branches to "revisit the oath that you took" when they joined the military. "Read those words again; consider what they really mean," he said. "And think about the promise that you made to yourselves and to your teammates and to your fellow citizens."

The Pentagon does not know how many service members are involved in extremist activity, Kirby said at a press briefing 22 FEB in Washington. Collecting that kind of information is difficult, he said. The

defense secretary, Kirby said, “very much would like to have a better sense of the data. We need to have a better understanding of how broad and deep the problem is.” Some commands have already held their stand-downs, Kirby said. Others are waiting on training materials being prepared by the Pentagon. During the Navy’s stand-downs, commands must discuss the oath’s meaning, “including what we protect (Freedom of Speech/Assembly) and the limits on these rights for service members,” according to Nowell’s message. Personnel must also review prohibited activities, including “political activity and social media dos and don’ts.”

Each stand-down must include a listening session, something the Navy has been pushing since last summer. Discussions on racism in the service were encouraged after the civil unrest across the country last year following the death in Minneapolis of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man killed by a white police officer who knelt on his neck. “Every commander or commanding officer will continue to conduct listening sessions and get it into their battle rhythm,” Nowell said in the message. “This is where the hard work of establishing trust and connectedness starts.” Kirby on 22 FEB told reporters he did not expect information on numbers of service members involved in extremism to come from those sessions, but “clearly it’s about trying to get a better grasp of the degree to which the problem exists.”

Nowell in his message said the initiative is meant to “ensure service members and civilian personnel clearly understand the damaging effects of extremism and begin developing more effective, sustainable ways to eliminate the corrosive impacts extremist activity can have on our force.” In a Facebook video posted 20 FEB, Nowell said Navy personnel may be participating in extremism just by posting, retweeting or liking an offensive post on social media.

“Extremism often breeds hatred and if left unchecked, it can erode the trust in connectedness, something that is so vital to our operational readiness,” he said in the video. “You may not personally know any shipmates with extremist beliefs, but I assure you that those forces of darkness are among us.” He cited two recent instances of extremism “that highlighted the fact that we still have work to do here.” Nowell did not elaborate on the incidents, but hate symbols were found this year inside the guided-missile cruiser USS Lake Champlain and aircraft carrier USS Carl Vinson, Reuters reported on 10 FEB. In the Lake Champlain case, a noose was left on a Black sailor’s rack, the report said. The Carl Vinson’s case involved hate speech graffitied on a bathroom wall. “As sailors, we must strive to be inclusive, creating an environment where every individual understands that they are a valued member of the Navy team,” Nowell said.

[Source: Associated Press | January 31, 2021 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries & Burials

Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2021 | Nine

“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> for a listing and details of the 141 accounted for in 2005. 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 Cpl. Paul Mitchem, 20**, was a member of Company K, 3rd Battalion, 34th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on July 7, 1950, after his unit sustained heavy casualties while defending against the North Korean army's advance near Ch'onan, South Korea. His body was not recovered because his unit was forced to retreat, nor were any remains found that could be identified as Mitchem. Interment Services are pending. [Read about Mitchem.](#)

-- **Army Cpl. Paul W. Wilkins, 19**, of Bellwood, Pennsylvania, was a member of B Company, 1st Battalion, 21st Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on July 11, 1950, when his unit was fighting enemy forces near Choch'iwan, South Korea. He was never found, nor were any remains recovered that could be identified as Wilkins. The Army declared a presumptive finding

of death for Wilkins on Dec. 31, 1953, and he was declared non-recoverable on Jan. 16, 1956. Wilkins will be buried in his hometown. The date is yet to be determined. [Read about Wilkins.](#)

-- **Navy Boilermaker 1st Class William E. Blanchard, 24**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Blanchard. Interment services are pending. [Read about Blanchard.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class James W. Davenport, Jr., 21**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Davenport. Interment services are pending. [Read about Davenport.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class William D. Tucker, 19**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Tucker. Interment Services are pending. [Read about Tucker.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Wallace G. Mitchell, 20**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Mitchell. Interment services are pending. [Read about Mitchell.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class David Clark, Jr., 18**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Clark. Interment services are pending. [Read about Clark.](#)

-- **Navy Ship's Cook 3rd Class Robert Goodwin, 20**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Goodwin. Interment services are pending. [Read about Goodwin.](#)

-- **U.S. Army Pfc. Michaux Turbeville, 31**, was a member of Headquarters and Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Dec. 1, 1950, after his unit was attacked by enemy forces as they attempted to withdraw near the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Interment services are pending. [Read about Turbeville.](#)

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | February 2021 ++]

Chinese Tech Removal

Struggle to Figure out How to Eliminate Hardware/Software



More than two years after Congress passed two laws to strip Chinese hardware and software from US defense and telecommunications supply chains, industry is struggling to figure out how. “No one really has the answers on some of this stuff,” Nick Jones, director of regulatory policy at the National Defense Industrial Association (NDIA), said in an interview. One key problem, Jones explained, is that neither DoD nor the [FCC](#) have issued lists of what equipment is banned by the laws. “Good national security intentions, but poor execution thus far,” one telecoms expert summed up.

The [2019 National Defense Authorization Act \(NDAA\)](#) included section 889 which prohibits the federal government, contractors, and federal grant/loan recipients from buying or even *using* “covered telecommunication equipment or services” from Huawei, ZTE, Hytera, Hikvision and Dahua and their subsidiaries as a “substantial or essential component of any system, or as critical technology as part of any system.” It also allows the Defense Secretary, the Director of National Intelligence and/or the FBI Director to [“add to the list at anytime.”](#)

DoD, the General Services Agency (GSA) and NASA in July 2020 issued a Federal Acquisition Regulation (FAR) [“interim rule”](#) to implement the provision, and followed up with [a second one](#) in late August aimed at helping companies through the process of certifying compliance. Congress in 2019 also passed the [Secure and Trusted Communications Networks Act of 2019](#) directing the FCC to figure out how to remove and replace Chinese equipment from US telecoms networks, known as the “rip and replace” program. The bill also provided \$1.89 billion in FCC funds to help small and rural broadband providers comply. The FCC issued a [new draft rule](#) 18 FEB that would expand the pool of potential aid recipients — upping the cap from firms with 2 million customers to those with 10 million. While the FCC rules do not directly affect most of the defense industrial base, DoD is working closely with affected commercial telecoms providers to speed [5G wireless connectivity](#) to military users at home and abroad.

For example, [DoD in October awarded some \\$600 million in contracts](#) for 5G experiments at five bases belonging to the Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corps. Joseph Evans, technical director for 5G in the DoD under secretariat for research & engineering, said the awards involve “over three dozen contracts [with] prime contractors [and] over 100 total companies, over half of them non-traditional” – that is, commercial tech companies rather than longstanding defense contractors. (Awardees range from telecoms giants AT&T and Nokia to the tiny Shared Spectrum Company that has 14 employees.)

It is the second part of the 2019 NDAA Section 889 (Part B) — which covers third-party providers of systems, parts and services — that is causing the most trouble for defense contractors, Jones explained.

Smaller firms in particular are struggling, he added, since they don't have the resources the big primes do to engage legal and regulatory expertise to help. Part B "has caused greater headaches for US Government contractors because of its broader reach," stated a November [blog post](#) by law firm Baker MacKenzie. "It is not necessary that the Covered Equipment be used as part of the contract with the US Government to fall within the scope of the prohibition; rather, it is sufficient only that the offeror uses Covered Equipment as part of its overall business, making the breadth and applicability of this rule quite wide."

For example, corporate leaders are scratching their heads over whether Chinese-made cameras for facility security are barred by Section 889, and what can be bought to replace the prohibited gear, Jones said. "You know, security cameras looking at parking lots. So we've had people just rip those out, or turn them off," he elaborated. "And there's no replacement lists anywhere. Also cameras for things like simulation training and simulation applications that may have some of these [barred] components in there, and again, there's no list." "The guidance/law is at the policy level and implementation is going to be hard, in part because nobody was watching too closely to see just how far these Chinese components and hardware have infiltrated U.S. businesses," the telecoms expert said. "It's going to take a while, and cost a lot, to purge them and I doubt it will be effective."

"Chip-level compromises, at the nation state level, are very hard to defeat and imposing this on industry without specific guidance makes it harder. It's also imposing real costs on industry, which only makes sense if enforcement / market compliance incentives will follow," the expert added. Interestingly, the FCC regulations might actually help defense contractors implement Section 889, Jones noted, because the FCC is actually required to publish a list of barred equipment — a list that is expected to be released sometime next month. Further, that list will be based in part on determinations by DoD and the Intelligence Community as to what specific equipment should be deemed high risk, [according to the FCC](#).

Tracking down the hundreds of subsidiaries for the five Chinese firms blacklisted in the NDAA also is a Sisyphean task, Jones said. While DoD has provided some guidelines for how contractors should conduct a "reasonable inquiry" into whether they (and their suppliers) are complying with the law, he explained, the Pentagon hasn't actually name names of blacklisted subsidiaries. (Nor has the FCC provided a subsidiary list in its regulations implementing the rip and replace law.) [Source: Breaking Defense | Theresa Hitchens | February 22, 2021 ++]

* VA *



VA Moratoriums

Eviction, Foreclosure, Loan Forbearance, Overpayment & Copay Extensions

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will extend the existing moratorium on evictions and foreclosures, as well as extend VA loan forbearance requests, to 30 JUN, because of COVID-19. The current moratorium extensions for evictions and foreclosures were set to end March 31. "We will do

everything in our power to help Veterans, their families, survivors and our caregivers get through this pandemic,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “The department’s moratorium and forbearance extensions support President Biden’s 22 JAN Executive Order to deliver economic relief to Americans amid the COVID-19 crisis by addressing economic hardships the Veteran community faces, through no fault of its own, during the ongoing pandemic.”

Also, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) reaffirms its commitment to extend debt relief for Veterans through 30 SEP for collection on all Veteran benefit overpayments and medical copayment debts incurred after April 1, 2020. VA is suspending this debt collection to provide veterans continued financial relief due to the COVID-19 pandemic. To assist with making informed choices for their situation, VA will notify Veterans of the existence of their current debt and available [expansive relief options](#). These options include making payments, extending repayment plans, waivers, compromises and temporary hardship suspensions. Veterans and beneficiaries with questions regarding benefit overpayments can see [frequently asked questions](#), go online to [submit requests](#) or call 800-827-0648. Call volume is generally lower Tuesday-Friday. For [health care co-payment debts](#), Veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 866-400-1238 for payments. [Source: VA News Release | February 16 & 18, 2021 ++]

VA Funding Needs

Update 04: HVAC Advances American Rescue Plan | \$15B

The House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs advanced a proposal 18 FEB that would allot more than \$15 billion to the Department of Veterans Affairs under President Joe Biden’s coronavirus relief plan. Biden’s plan, which he’s titled the American Rescue Plan, totals \$1.9 trillion and aims to help Americans affected by the economic fallout of the coronavirus pandemic. It includes stimulus checks for many Americans and aid for the unemployed and hungry. If approved, it would add to the \$3 trillion coronavirus relief bill approved in March and the \$900 billion bill from December.

The committee discussed the parts of the plan 18 FEB that would affect veterans and the VA. After more than four hours, the committee advanced the proposal with a vote of 17-12. It sent its recommendations to the House Committee on the Budget. “We need to act with urgency to provide relief for veterans and all Americans,” said Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA) the committee chair. “The American Rescue Plan is critical to ensure veterans and the health system they rely on can continue to meet their needs and succeed in their role as the backup to America’s overwhelmed health care systems.”

All Republicans on the committee voted against the measure. Rep. Mike Bost (R-IL) the ranking Republican on the committee, said the action to advance the bill was “reckless” and “irresponsible.” “It’s the very first time our committee has met this Congress,” Bost said. “We’ve only been organized for five minutes. Many members are new, and we haven’t heard a single hearing or heard from a single witness. And yet, the Biden administration and a Democratic majority in Congress are rushing through a vote to spend \$1.9 trillion.” Bost noted that each year, the VA continues to receive record-breaking levels of funding.

Multiple Republicans said during the hearing that they didn’t know why the department needed more money. In addition, the influx of funding was “ripe for waste, fraud and abuse,” Bost said. “We don’t know

why it's needed, what it's going to be used for or if veterans are going to be better off by it," Bost said. In December, Richard Stone, acting undersecretary of the Veterans Health Administration, asked the Senate for more funding to handle coronavirus treatment and vaccine distribution. Under the CARES Act, a coronavirus relief package approved by Congress in March, the VA health care system received \$17.4 billion. Stone estimated the VA would use the rest by the end of the fiscal year, and he predicted unforeseen costs with distributing and administering coronavirus vaccines. Stone, who led the VA's vaccine distribution plan under President Donald Trump, was retained in his role by Biden.

According to the new legislation, most of the money — \$13.5 billion — would go to the VA for veterans' health care, staffing, suicide prevention, research and women's health, as well as expanding telehealth, serving homeless veterans and improving medical facilities. It allows up to \$4 billion to be spent on private-sector health care for veterans. Of the remaining amount, \$100 million would go toward processing veterans' claims for benefits. The VA has been working through a backlog of hundreds of thousands of benefits claims after the process was paused at the start of the pandemic.

State-run veterans' homes, some of which experienced deadly outbreaks of the coronavirus, would receive a total of \$750 million under the bill. Of that, \$500 million would be made available for construction projects that would enhance the safety of the homes. The remaining \$250 million would be one-time emergency payments to homes that need help with cleaning, obtaining personal protective equipment or hiring staff during the pandemic. More funding, about \$10 million, would be allotted for the VA Office of Inspector General to conduct oversight, and \$100 million would be set aside for improvements to the VA's supply chain. About \$400 million would go to the VA's rapid retraining program, to assist veterans who are unemployed because of the pandemic. The legislation waives copayments for VA patients through Sept. 30. It also allows the VA to reimburse veterans who already submitted copays made since April 6, 2020.

Thursday's vote was the first action taken by the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs during the new congressional session. The committee met for the first time earlier Thursday. Nine Democratic lawmakers returned to the committee, and eight are new to it. For Republicans, five members returned and eight are new. Among the new members of the committee is Rep. Ruben Gallego (D-AZ), an outspoken Iraq War veteran elected to Congress in 2015. Rep. Raul Ruiz (D-CA) is also joining the committee. Ruiz, a physician, has long been focused on the effects of toxic exposures, such as burn pits, on the veteran population. The other new Democratic members are: Frank Mrvan of Indiana, Anthony Brown of Maryland, Lois Frankel of Florida, Elissa Slotkin of Michigan, David Trone of Maryland and Marcy Kaptur of Ohio.

A new congresswoman, Rep. Nancy (R-SC) joined the committee. In 1999, she became the first woman to graduate from the Corps of Cadets program at the Military College of South Carolina. Rep. Madison Cawthorn (R-NC) also joined the committee for the new session. Cawthorn, 25, is the youngest member of Congress and the first born in the 1990s. He applied to the U.S. Naval Academy in 2014 but was involved in a car crash the same year and was left paralyzed. During his campaign last year, he was the subject of multiple controversies around sexual misconduct and racism, all of which he denied. The other new Republic members are Greg Murphy of North Carolina, Tracey Mann of Kansas, Barry Moore of Alabama, Nancy Mace of South Carolina, Troy Nehls of Texas, Matt Rosendale of Montana and Mariannette Miller-Meeks of Iowa.

Mrvan, as well as returning members Rep. Mike Levin (D-CA), Rep. Elaine Luria (D-VA), Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA) and Rep. Chris Pappas (D-NH) were assigned to lead subcommittees. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | February 2, 2021 ++]

VA OAWP

New VA Secretary Inherits an Oversight Office That's Seen As Dysfunctional



As he led the security team that protects senior officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs, **Anthony Everett** reported what he viewed as an ethical breach and misuse of taxpayer money by two top Trump political appointees. He reached out to an office created by President Donald Trump to root out waste and corruption in VA's top ranks. His disclosure in October was supposed to be kept confidential. But three hours after he pressed the send button on his computer, Everett, a disabled Army veteran, was ordered demoted by one of the officials he had complained about, losing half of his responsibilities. He was given no reason.

Everett's case, described by six current and former VA officials, is but one in a long list of alleged reprisals against employees who reported misconduct to the troubled **Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection** (OAWP). Its disarray, one of the challenges confronting newly confirmed Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough, represents an unkept promise by a president who proclaimed he would drain the swamp of corruption — especially at the long-troubled bureaucracy of close to 400,000 employees that cares for veterans. To many in the department, the veterans community and both parties in Congress, the unusual program created to stop corruption has only carried out more of it.

Trump appointees cycled in and out of leadership roles, hiring unqualified friends and producing substandard inquiries of senior leaders' misconduct, VA's inspector general found. Two of three directors in four years had no investigative background. Instead of acknowledgment, whistleblowers faced reprisal. With more than 3,400 complaints logged since 2017, an annual budget of \$23 million and a staff of 100, the office recommended discipline against just 32 of thousands of senior leaders through mid-January, a number that struck some lawmakers as disappointingly low. It's unclear how many managers were actually disciplined. "The bottom line is that OAWP passively has shielded accountability at an agency that desperately needs it," said Tom Devine, legal director of the nonprofit Government Accountability Project, a whistleblower-protection group. He called the record of discipline recommendations "indefensible."

"We've arrived here today with very little to show for it," said Rep. Chris Pappas (D-NH), who leads an oversight panel on the House Veterans' Affairs Committee that has scrutinized the office. He blamed the failures on VA political leaders: "We never had leadership at the top who appreciated the core mission it was tasked with." The official who ordered Everett's demotion, former acting deputy secretary Pamela

Powers, said in an interview that she did not act in response to his complaint but declined to give an explanation for the timing. This account is based on interviews with 15 current and former VA officials who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly.

Terrence Hayes, the current VA spokesman, declined to comment, saying it would be inappropriate to weigh in publicly on the previous leadership. McDonough said at his confirmation hearing in January that he would fight to improve veterans' access to care, a goal widely viewed as out of reach unless senior officials are held accountable.

Former spokeswoman Christina Noel wrote in an email that in the final two years of the Trump administration, the accountability office "filled the vast majority of its key leadership positions and hired qualified investigative supervisors to ensure a robust investigative and oversight capacity." She wrote that it "has taken several steps to ensure that whistleblower identity is protected." Asked why so few senior leaders were disciplined, Noel said that was largely out of the office's control because it was set up to recommend discipline, but not to impose it. "I thought I was starting a job that was going to do good things for veterans," said Mike Booher, a retired Army veteran hired last year as a human resources supervisor. The accountability office "should have been an example for the entire VA," he said, "but it set the opposite example." Booher quit after three months.

Anthony Everett, 53, a former criminal investigator in the Army who later led security details for four high-ranking Pentagon leaders, was a division chief at VA's law enforcement training center in Arkansas when he was recruited to Washington in 2018. The agency wanted him to clean up the executive protection division, which was troubled by overtime and travel abuses documented by the inspector general. Two years into his tenure, though, Everett grew alarmed when Powers, who had recently become acting deputy secretary of the department, wanted to fly first-class on a trip with Karen Pence, the vice president's wife, according to Everett's complaint, portions of which were reviewed by The Washington Post and confirmed by two VA law enforcement officials. The flight ended up being canceled.

The complaint also said Powers demanded a larger permanent security detail than a threat assessment justified, with four agents and two vehicles. Everett turned down both requests because guidelines did not warrant them, the complaint and officials said. But he was overruled by another political appointee, Daniel Sitterly, then chief of human resources. With Powers traveling little and making few public appearances during the pandemic, several agents on her security detail were idle for long periods, the officials said. One agent assigned to the detail was an out-of-town VA police officer whose monthly lodging, meals and other expenses cost taxpayers more than \$9,000.

Seeing no reason for what he regarded as an excessive use of taxpayer money, Everett turned to the accountability office, filing complaints against Powers and Sitterly. Within three hours, Everett's boss, the agency's chief security officer, informed him in an email that the executive protection division was being reorganized "effective immediately." Everett was no longer division chief and would not oversee Powers's security detail. He kept his full salary. Powers said in an interview that she had Everett removed from her detail because she questioned his competence. "I didn't feel comfortable around him," Powers said, adding that she had "no idea" Everett had filed a complaint about her conduct. Everett declined to comment.

Powers denied requesting a higher level of protection and said she "used less security than is authorized." She also denied ever proposing to fly first-class while at VA. The Post confirmed the existence

of documents Everett provided to investigators with details of the flight and expanded security detail. Everett received ratings of "outstanding" — the highest in government — in each of the past three years, according to performance appraisals reviewed by The Post. Outgoing VA Secretary Robert Wilkie gave him a commendation in January for "outstanding contributions" during the pandemic. In his most recent review, Everett's supervisor wrote, "Mr. Everett has done an exceptional job ensuring the protection of the VA Secretary and Deputy Secretary" during the pandemic.

The accountability division, separate from the inspector general's office, was established by the Accountability and Whistleblower Protection Act of 2017, approved by a bipartisan vote in Congress. VA was given new authority to speed up dismissals and discipline against high-ranking officials. At the time, the agency was struggling to regain its footing after an Obama-era scandal over wait times for medical appointments. "We are sending a strong message: Those who fail our veterans will be held, for the first time, accountable," Trump said at the bill signing. The office was not structured to be fully independent, an issue that drew criticism from whistleblower advocates. Its director is a political appointee who reports to the secretary. Agency attorneys, whose role is to defend managers, review recommendations to discipline them.

Many of the first hires, including those at senior levels, had no investigative background. Almost immediately, complaints of favoritism, mismanagement and retaliation against whistleblowers began pouring into lawmakers' inboxes and the inspector general's office, which opened an investigation. Inspector General Michael Missal reported in late 2019 that "misdeeds and missteps" by the office's first two leaders had nearly crippled its operations. Investigators found skimpy training of investigators, a misunderstanding of the mission, a failure to discipline senior leaders, inferior work that failed to withstand legal scrutiny and other failures that left the office "floundering" in its duty to protect employees who reported wrongdoing. By the time the report was completed, the accountability office was on its third director, a former House investigator who became its first Senate-confirmed leader.

When Tamara Bonzanto arrived in early 2019, the staff had received no formal training. The operation lacked basic standard operating procedures. Some investigators were handling just two cases as a backlog of almost 600 complaints mounted. Bonzanto promised to improve the culture, increase training, bring oversight to investigations, hire new staff and set up training for VA employees in whistleblower rights. Her tenure cleared up many issues — but led to new ones. Whistleblowers and others who raised concerns about the management of the office said they faced swift reprisals.

Brandon Coleman, who in 2014 disclosed lapses in care for suicidal veterans in Phoenix, said he was reassigned in July 2019 and found himself with no meaningful work for 18 months after Bonzanto eliminated his fledgling program to mentor former whistleblowers. In complaints to Congress, he called the office a "dumpster fire." In an interview, he said Bonzanto did not respond to his repeated efforts to meet with her. "I watched paint dry on my walls," Coleman said, estimating his hours of productive work in 2020 at about 100.

Another staffer, a retired Army colonel hired as a supervisory investigator in 2018, lasted eight months before his firing, which came within days of telling his bosses he was speaking with the inspector general's office about what he called a "toxic stew" of mismanagement and a "paucity of any actions" against senior leaders involved in misconduct. The staffer, who spoke on the condition of anonymity because an appeal

of his firing is pending, said he had little recourse because he was still on probation. "I was naive about the internals at VA," he said. "It was bereft of professionalism."

House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA) told Bonzanto at a hearing before his committee in the fall of 2019, "If I'm approached by a whistleblower from my district, I cannot in good conscience direct them to work with your office." Bonzanto had long chafed at what she believed was inappropriate interference from the secretary's office in her hiring and management decisions, said three current and former VA officials. Powers and Sitterly, the human resources chief, inquired with her several times to learn about pending investigations and the names of employees who had made disclosures, according to current and former agency officials. They wanted to know whether the secretary's team was targeted. Bonzanto told them the information was confidential and could not be released. "That organization was not succeeding," Powers said. "We tried to give her the tools to help it succeed." Bonzanto declined to comment.

Secretary Wilkie appointed Sitterly as the accountability office's second-in-command in November, returning him to a career role from a political appointment. There was no open competition for the job, and Bonzanto was not informed beforehand, officials said. Sitterly retired unexpectedly on 29 JAN. He did not respond to requests for comment. Coleman said he met with Bonzanto before she left office and now has a new assignment, reporting to his ninth supervisor in three years. Everett, people who know him say, is still waiting to find out if he will get his full responsibilities back. The Biden administration has informed him that his case would soon be under review.

[Source: VA News Release | February 2, 2021 ++]

VA Transgender Policy

Secretary Denis McDonough Orders Review to Root out Vet Barriers

The Department of Veterans Affairs will review its policies and determine how to make the agency a more welcoming and inclusive place for veterans and employees. VA Secretary Denis McDonough issued a memo 23 FEB about the policy review. He said during a news briefing that it would be finished by March 30. "My goal as secretary is to make sure VA is welcoming to all veterans, including our transgender veterans," he said. The review falls in line with an executive order President Joe Biden signed during his first day as president. He directed the head of each federal agency to assess whether underserved communities face barriers at those departments.

Disabled American Veterans, a national veterans' organization, praised the review, calling it a proactive approach to reform the culture within the department. "DAV believes every veteran who has honorably served this nation is entitled to safe, welcoming and dignified care that meets their individual needs," said Butch Whitehead, national commander of the group. McDonough vowed 23 FEB to focus on inclusivity, diversity and equity under his tenure as VA secretary. He said he would put that into practice when choosing his leadership team, though he had no updates about who would join him to lead the department. "That will be a really important piece of demonstrating my seriousness about diversity and inclusion," McDonough said. "Our political appointees to date reflect that, and that's intentional."

He also said the department would focus on diversity and inclusion when recruiting workers to fill job vacancies. McDonough promised to address racial inequity at the agency. Last year, a group of Black VA employees organized to voice their experience with racism, which they said was made worse by leaders who refused to address it. “Confronting this question of racial inequity will be a fundamental part of my tenure here, not least because the president is demanding it,” McDonough said.

The VA’s motto will also be the subject of review, he said. Some advocates and lawmakers have pushed for the department to change the motto to be more inclusive of veterans’ families and women who have served. The VA motto is a quote from President Abraham Lincoln’s second inaugural address in 1865: “To care for him who shall have borne the battle and for his widow, and his orphan.” “Obviously, that’s something that came up in my confirmation hearing and in my conversations” with veterans’ service organizations, McDonough said. “I’m not in a position to announce anything on that, but we’ll be looking at it.” [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 23, 2021 ++]

VA Agent Orange Benefits

Update 07: Urgency Promised In Implementing New Presumptive Rules

Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough on Tuesday promised an “urgent” review of new rules regarding presumptive benefits status for Vietnam veterans suffering from serious illnesses related to toxic chemical defoliant exposure, but offered no specific timeline for when veterans may see those changes put in place. “We’re under the gun on this, and I think that’s a good thing,” McDonough told reporters during a press conference on 23 FEB. “I feel some urgency on this ... and we are trying to get spun up on it.”

In January, officials from President Donald Trump’s VA leadership team said it could be months or years before veterans suffering from bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinson’s-like symptoms — three new conditions added presumptive benefits list by Congress last year — would see any benefits from the change in law. Veterans’ advocates for years have fought for years to force the change, which would give about 34,000 Vietnam veterans a faster path to receiving disability benefits. Past VA officials have argued against the move in part because of lingering questions about connections between the illnesses and chemical defoliant exposure (although National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine officials have said the science linking the two is conclusive) and in part because of the potential cost of the move, estimated at about \$8 billion over the next 10 years

But Congress sided with the veterans’ advocates, putting language in the fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act forcing the change. Following the bill’s passage, VA officials said the regulatory process to implement the new rules can take up to 24 months. McDonough indicated he hopes to move much quicker. “So many of the vets have been waiting while on this,” he said. McDonough also promised to re-examine a related issue: the connection between hypertension and Agent Orange exposure, one that medical experts have said is strong but not as conclusive as the other approved illnesses. Adding high-blood pressure to the presumptive list could potentially more than double the cost to VA, and benefit as many as 160,000 veterans. “People often are inclined to focus first on the cost,” McDonough said. “I want to focus first on the facts and on the data.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 23, 2021 ++]

VA SAH

Update 11: Specially Adapted Housing Changes



Did you know that there's more to the VA home loan than just the loan guaranty? In fact, the program has additional help for Veterans with serious, service-connected disabilities. One of those programs is the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) program. SAH grants assistance to the most seriously disabled service members and Veterans to pay for life-changing and independence-enhancing modifications and adaptations to their homes and residences. New changes to the laws that govern the administration of the SAH program offer an even greater opportunity for VA to fund these adaptations.

SAH grants are allocated by VA to very seriously disabled Veterans or service members who meet narrow eligibility criteria for funding to adapt their homes to accommodate their special needs. There are three adapted housing grant types: Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant, the Special Housing Adaptation (SHA) grant, and Temporary Residence Adaptation (TRA). Each grant type has different criteria for determining eligibility for the grant award. Eligibility criteria for these grants can be found at <https://www.va.gov/housing-assistance/disability-housing-grants>.

In August 2020, Public Law 116-154, the "Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019" was enacted. This law makes significant changes to the SAH grant program and enhances access to important funding for Veterans with serious and very specific service-connected disabilities. Changes to the SAH program under PL 116-154 include:

- Veterans rated with a service-connected blindness disability – without a loss, or loss of use of a lower extremity – are now eligible for the SAH grant. Statute now reflects that all SAH-qualifying disabilities must be permanent. These changes became effective August 8, 2020.
- The lifetime grant usage is no longer limited to three uses for each individual. Eligible service members and Veterans are now able to use the grant a total of six times.
- VA is authorized to approve up to 120 grants per year, an increase from the previous statutory limit of 30 per fiscal year for Veterans and service members who experienced the loss or loss of use of one lower extremity after September 11, 2001.
- The aggregate limit amount for the SAH grant has been raised to \$100,896, and the SHA grant has been increased to \$20,215.

VA encourages all Veterans, as well as those who know of seriously disabled Veterans who may meet eligibility criteria for these specialized grants, to become familiar with the SAH grant program. VA is available to serve those who have served our country, and that is especially true for those who can benefit from the SAH program. Key takeaways from the passage and signing of The Ryan Kules and Paul Benne Specially Adaptive Housing Improvement Act of 2019 (PL 116-154) can be found at

<https://benefits.va.gov/BENEFITS/factsheets/homeloans/SAHFactsheet.pdf>. For more information about the Specially Adapted Housing (SAH) grant program at VA, visit: <https://www.va.gov/housing-assistance/disability-housing-grants>. For more information about the VA Home Loan Program, visit <https://www.va.gov/housing-assistance/home-loans>. [Source: Vantage Point Blog | February 18, 2021 ++]

VA Covid-19 Vaccines

Update 01: Current Policy for When Eligible Patients Refuse Shots

The Department of Veterans Affairs has immediately enrolled veterans into its health care system in areas where eligible VA patients have refused coronavirus vaccines. In one area of New York, about 1,000 veterans over age 75 refused to be vaccinated, said Dr. Richard Stone, acting undersecretary for health. Stone has advised local VA leaders to enroll eligible veterans “on the spot” in those situations so the vaccines don’t go to waste. Stone mentioned the issue during a hearing 19 FE of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction, Veterans Affairs and Related Agencies.

Stone did not say how many veterans have been offered vaccines and refused them, or how many veterans have enrolled in the department solely to be vaccinated. “We do recognize areas of the country where veterans are not coming in to get their vaccines,” Stone said. “In one area of New York alone ... 1,000 veterans over 75 said, ‘No thank you.’ That surprised us.” Rep. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL) said veterans in her state have been turned down for vaccinations from the department because they’re not enrolled in VA health care. In response, Stone said that the VA’s first focus is on its current patients, because of the limited vaccine supply in most locations.

More than 9 million veterans are enrolled in the VA, but only 6 million actively use the VA for their health care. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Department of Health and Human Services has allotted the VA 6 million vaccines for its patients, as well as 400,000 for VA employees and 23,000 for Department of Homeland Security workers. “So, for those that are enrolled and have depended on us as a safety net for them, they are our first priority,” Stone said. As of 19 FEB, the department operated 215 sites that had distributed at least one dose of the vaccine to 1.9 million veterans, VA employees and DHS employees. The agency receives about 140,000 doses each week. Stone said the sites were distributing all doses within days of receiving them.

However, the agency has experienced trouble getting vaccines to veterans in rural places. In a few cases, the department has flown vaccines on small aircraft into rural areas in Montana and Alaska. Yesterday, the VA sent a plane to a small island in Alaska, where health care workers vaccinated 50 veterans. “We are not doing as well reaching rural veterans as we would like to,” Stone said. “This is tough, herculean effort.” The department is keeping track of “vaccine hesitancy,” said Dr. Kameron Matthews, assistant undersecretary for health. Rural areas are where veterans are refusing vaccinations the most, she said. Black and Hispanic veterans are accepting vaccines at higher rates than white veterans, Stone said.

Several lawmakers expressed frustration 19 FEB about the limited supply of vaccines and how far the VA still must go to immunize its patients. Wasserman Schultz encouraged the department to “think creatively” to reach as many veterans in America as possible, despite many not being enrolled in VA health care. “I think some of the frustration you may feel from members of the committee are a lot of people aren’t

getting vaccinated yet,” Rep. Charlie Crist, D-Fla., said. “My plea, my hope, my prayer is we can get more of these doses administered in a more rapid fashion as soon as possible.” [Source: Stars& Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 19, 2021 ++]

VA Covid-19 Vaccines

Update 02: Supply Remains Biggest Hurdle

The Department of Veterans Affairs has managed to fully vaccinate a significant portion of its health care workforce, but reaching the broader population of veterans has and will continue to be a challenge. The Department of Health and Human Services has so far allotted roughly 6 million doses to VA for veterans and 400,000 doses for the agency’s employees, as well as additional doses to vaccinate roughly 23,000 employees at the Department of Homeland Security. VA receives those supplies in weekly shipments of roughly 140,000 doses, Richard Stone, VA’s acting undersecretary for health, told members of a House Appropriations subcommittee Friday.

The department began vaccinating some DHS employees in early January. The two departments signed an inter-agency agreement, which allows eligible DHS employees to visit a nearby VA hospital to receive their COVID-19 vaccine. To date, VA has administered more than 1.3 million doses of the COVID-19 vaccine, according to the department’s public data source. Of that total, 259,905 employees at the Veterans Health Administration have received at least one dose, with 220,034 employees having received both doses. Some VA hospitals have vaccinated up to 90% of their workforces, which Stone said has freed up more personnel to care for and inoculate more veterans.

On any given day prior to vaccination, VHA had 5,000-to-6,000 employees who couldn’t come to work during the pandemic, either because they had been exposed to, or had COVID-19 themselves, he said. Today, there are 1,300 people across the VHA health care system who can’t come to work due to potential exposure or illness. “Our health care workers, both clinical and non-clinical, are coming to work at higher rates than they ever have,” Stone said. “The amount of vacation taken is at unprecedented and historic low rates, especially in areas that are getting hit hardest by the pandemic.” Fewer VHA employees have retired during the last year, as well, he added. Still, the last year has been difficult for the workforce.

“The effect on the employees hasn’t been just the disease,” Stone said. “It’s been the changes in what’s happening to their families. It’s been about moms who are struggling in caring for their children who aren’t in organized school all day. Everybody’s lives have been turned upside down. It’s the inability to take care of elderly family members because you just can’t get in to see them at an institution.” While VA has been relatively quick to inoculate its health care workers who were first priority under the department’s vaccination plan, reaching the broader veteran population has and will continue to be more difficult with limited supply.

More than 1 million veterans have received at least one dose of the COVID-19 vaccine, according to VA’s public data. When it comes to vaccinating veterans, VA is focused on the 9.3 million who are enrolled with the department to receive health services. “For those who are enrolled that have depended on us as a safety net for them, they are our first priority,” Stone said. “We do recognize however that there are substantial areas of the country where veterans are not coming in to get their vaccinations. In one area of

New York alone in a single catchment area, over 1,000 veterans over age 75 said ‘no thank you.’ That surprised us. We do have some supply. Therefore, we are enrolling veterans on the spot.”

Still, VA doesn’t have the supplies to vaccinate the broader population of veterans who aren’t eligible for VA health care at this time, Stone said. Debbie Wasserman Schultz (D-FL), chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction and Veterans Affairs, urged VA to find a way to reach this group. “There are ways that VA can meet the needs of this population, without Congress stepping in and making any statutory change,” she said. “We want you to think creatively and explore all the options to reach this population.” Stone said VA is actively discussing options with HHS and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The department could, as both Stone and Wasserman Schultz mentioned, work with FEMA to designate the task of vaccinating veterans who aren’t eligible for VA health care as a “fourth mission.”

In the meantime, VA is on the hunt for additional funding for its COVID-19 response. The Biden administration has proposed another \$17 billion for the department, which House Democrats are hoping to secure through the budget reconciliation process. Republicans in Congress, however, have been deeply skeptical of the funding request. Congress already gave VA more than \$19 billion last year through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The department obligated \$6.5 billion of that funding for COVID-19 response during the last year. It’ll commit the remaining funds during this fiscal year, Stone said. Additional funding would go toward healthcare costs and personal protective equipment, VA said, as well as several large-scale modernization efforts.

The Department of Veterans Affairs won’t require the COVID-19 vaccine as a condition of employment, at least not yet. Stone, said he had the authority to mandate the vaccine for employees at the Veterans Health Administration. “I have that authority, but I’m not going to use it,” he told the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee 24 FEB. “I’m not going to use it under the [Food and Drug Administration’s] emergency-use authorization. When there’s full licensure of the vaccine we’ll revisit that decision.” Stone didn’t have exact data on how many VHA employees had refused the vaccine. He said 73% of the VHA workforce had received the vaccine so far, including 90% of the department’s clinical personnel, though those numbers have likely changed in recent days. “Our employees are dramatically taking the vaccine,” he said. “This is much different than the commercial marketplace.” About 5,000 more people are coming to work at VA health facilities today as they were before vaccinations, Stone reiterated. Fewer than 1,100 employees are absent from work due to quarantine or illness related to COVID-19, he said. Those who have refused the vaccine were primarily non-licensed personnel at VA’s community living centers, Stone added.

The department does have memorandums of understanding to vaccinate frontline personnel at both the Department of Homeland Security and the U.S. Capitol Police, McDonough said. And Moran, the Senate committee’s ranking member, suggested more agencies were seeking VA’s services to reach their own employees. Meanwhile, Stone said VA was discussing how the department could initiate “fourth missions” with FEMA to vaccinate others, including the caregivers and spouses of veterans who have already been inoculated or are waiting for a dose. “We’re talking to a number of states about exactly that and are working with a number of states to try and get it in that manner and thus unload the rest of the state from the vaccine ... and protect veterans at the same,” Stone said.

“We have begun discussing exactly what the long-term effect of this pandemic means to us,” Stone said. “We know that there’s a huge impact on deferred and delayed care that will begin to come in. We know

that there's a huge effect on unemployment, where people lose their health insurance and come to us as a safety net. We know there's a huge effect on the modernization of our systems that have been so challenged. We operate a pretty old telephone system in many of the areas of the country. We need to modernize those phone systems." In addition, VA is also eyeing the extra funding as a way to better plan for future disasters — and make needed upgrades to its facilities. "We also need to recognize that there may be another pandemic," Stone added. "There may be a variant. There may be an earthquake. We need to begin to prepare ourselves to assure that we can not only complete our mission here but also pick up whatever this nation may need." [Source: Federal News Network | Nicole Ogrysko | February 19 & 225, 2021 ++]

VA Veterans Homes

Update 05: 35 State Run Homes Not Reporting COVID Deaths

Most state-run veterans' homes publicly shared data about coronavirus cases and deaths for the first time this month, but not all are complying to the new law. As of Feb. 7, 1,040 residents and 35 employees of state veterans' homes had died of the virus. Since the start of the pandemic, 8,581 residents and 6,094 staff have tested positive for coronavirus. However, some homes are withholding information, making it difficult to discern complete fatality and infection rates across the network of homes. According to the VA, there are 19,000 residents of the country's 158 state homes, but only 123 homes are reporting information about coronavirus infections.

A VA spokeswoman said 23 FEB that the department was working with the remaining 35 homes to help them report their data. The department did not share which homes have not reported the information. The reporting is required by law. Congress passed a bill at the end of 2020 mandating that state veterans' homes share weekly reports about their coronavirus cases and deaths with the VA and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The homes, some of which have experienced deadly outbreaks, were not previously required to share the information with the federal government. The new law requires the VA to publicly post the information on the department's website starting 4 FEB. The department began posting the information this month on its coronavirus landing page <https://www.publichealth.va.gov/n-coronavirus>.

A VA spokeswoman said the agency is working with the National Association for State Veterans Homes and the CDC to enroll all state veterans' homes into the National Healthcare Safety Network, an infection tracking system. The VA first held a town hall with the organizations 2 FEB to explain the new reporting requirements and instruct homes to enroll in the network. The homes were reminded 9 FEB. The VA held another town hall meeting 22 FEB to "walk those homes still encountering barriers through the enrollment process," the VA spokeswoman said. She did not say what kinds of barriers the homes were facing.

The outbreaks at state homes and the lack of information-sharing during the pandemic has drawn criticism from lawmakers and national veterans' organizations. Some have criticized the VA for not doing enough. States are in charge of operating the veterans' homes, but the federal VA leads their oversight. The facilities undergo yearly inspections by the VA to ensure they meet a list of VA-imposed regulations. The Government Accountability Office investigated the VA's oversight of state homes in 2019 and found that in some cases, the department allowed contracted inspectors to ignore deficiencies. At the start of the pandemic last year, the VA had not completed all the recommendations that the GAO made to improve inspections.

Rep. Ed Case (D-H) questioned VA officials last week about how the department’s role with state homes would change. “The relationship is one that needs to be continually strengthened,” said Richard Stone, acting undersecretary for health. “We need to make sure inspections are adequate and these inspections ... are communicated to the governors’ offices. The governors’ offices deserve to have our concerns reported directly to them.” In the VA’s official plan for vaccinating patients against the coronavirus, the department wrote that it is not responsible for providing vaccines to state-run veterans’ homes.

If state-run veterans’ homes want help vaccinating residents, they must request assistance through the Federal Emergency Management Agency. The VA could then be called on to provide help under its Fourth Mission to serve as backup for the American medical system. A VA spokeswoman said 23 FEB that no states had requested the VA to administer the vaccines at veterans’ homes. Some residents may have been vaccinated through their regular treatment at the VA, she said. [Source: Stars& Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 24, 2021 ++]

VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse

Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2021

Boston, Mass. — A Tewksbury woman was sentenced 24 FEB for diverting morphine while she was employed as a nurse in the hospice unit at the Veterans Affairs (VA) Medical Center campus in Bedford. **Kathleen Nofle**, 55, was sentenced to 40 months in prison and three years of supervised release. In October 2020, Nofle pleaded guilty to one count of tampering with a consumer product and one count of obtaining a controlled substance by misrepresentation, fraud, deception and subterfuge. On Jan. 13, 14 and 15, 2017, Nofle used her position as a nurse to obtain doses of morphine that were meant to be given to the veterans under her care in the hospice unit. Nofle admitted that she mixed water from the sink with a portion of the liquid morphine doses, and then administered the diluted medication to patients orally. Nofle then ingested a diluted amount of the remaining drug. United States Attorney Andrew E. Lelling and Christopher Algieri, Special Agent in Charge of the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, Office of Inspector General, Northeast Field Office made the announcement today. Assistant U.S. Attorney William B. Brady of Lelling’s Health Care Fraud Unit prosecuted the case. [Source: DoJ District of Massachusetts | U.S. Attorney’s Office | February 24, 2021 ++]

VA Musculoskeletal/Muscle Injury Claims

Revision to Rating Disability

The musculoskeletal and muscle injuries portion of the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) [VA Schedule for Rating Disabilities \(VASRD\)](#) has been revised to reflect updated medical information used to assess Veterans’ medical records and determine their VA disability rating. The revision, effective 7 FEB, ensures that this portion of the VASRD uses current medical terminology by removing obsolete conditions, clarifying ambiguities, and providing detailed and updated criteria for the evaluation of musculoskeletal and muscle injury disabilities, including adding conditions that previously did not have diagnostic codes.

“These changes were based on scientific and/or medical information and reflect cited, published materials available to the public,” said Acting VA Under Secretary for Benefits Thomas Murphy. “During the course of finalizing this rulemaking, VA received comments from various Veterans Service Organizations and Veterans to ensure fair evaluations are established. VA claims processors will use this update to make consistent decisions with greater ease.”

Claims for musculoskeletal and/or muscle injury conditions adjudicated after 7 FEB, but were pending on the effective date, will be considered under both the old and new rating criteria, and whichever criteria is more favorable to the Veteran will be applied. Claims filed on or after the effective date will be rated under the new criteria. At <https://www.benefits.va.gov/WARMS/bookc.asp> you can learn about the complete list of updates to the rating schedule. Veterans with questions regarding this VASRD update may contact VA at 800-827-1000. To learn more about VA benefits go to <https://benefits.va.gov/benefits>. [Source: VA News Release | February 24, 2021 ++]

* Vets *



Space Available Flight Eligibility

Update 02: Dependents of Permanently and Totally Disabled Vets Added

A recent regulations change allows dependent family members of permanently and totally disabled veterans to fly on space-available, or Space-A, flights. On Oct. 23, 2020, a change to DoDI 4515.13 updated the eligibility requirements for Space-A travel, adding dependents of permanently and totally disabled veterans. In 2019, those veterans became eligible to fly Space-A on regularly scheduled military passenger aircraft, joining retirees and their spouses; National Guard and Reserve members on the Active Status List; and surviving spouses of those who died on active duty. However, the dependents of those disabled veterans were not allowed to accompany them on Space-A flights.

The regulation change states that dependents of permanently and totally disabled veterans may accompany the veteran on flights within the continental United States (CONUS) or on flights between CONUS and Alaska, Hawaii or U.S. territories. Dependents cannot travel without the veteran sponsor. Space-available flights, also known as military hops, allow eligible passengers to fill unused seats on Defense Department-owned or -controlled aircraft. Space-A passengers can fly only after all the space-required passengers and cargo have been accommodated. Space-A passengers are then loaded by priority group; those on emergency leave are the top priority, or category 1, and retirees and disabled veterans are the lowest priority, or category 6.

Other categories of Space-A travelers include those on environmental and morale leave (EML), house-hunting leave, or other mission-critical or official travel. For up-to-date information and details, check out

the Air Mobility Command's Space-A travel website. <https://www.amc.af.mil/Home/AMC-Travel-Site/AMC-Space-Available-Travel-Page>. Note that Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, Space-A travel is strictly limited to official travel and to certain personnel in specific locations until further notice. [Source: MOAA Newsletter | February 24, 2021 ++]

Homeless Vets

Update 103: Amazon Donation Helps Connect 1,000+ Homeless Veterans

Recently, Amazon donated smartphones to more than 1,000 homeless Veterans, keeping them connected to valuable VA and community resources. Marine Corps Veteran Jason Maycumber, who lives in Santa Cruz, California, is one of them. Taking pictures of the ocean and surf while posting them for family and friends on social media allowed him to stay connected with family. Leveraging the capabilities of a smart device to take photos, connect over social media, have a video conversation or a virtual doctor's appointment might seem commonplace in this age of technology, but for some Veterans like Maycumber, this connection was only recently possible, thanks to the VHA homeless program office and a donation from Amazon.

So far, it has provided more than 1,100 cell phones to Veterans engaged in VHA's Homeless Programs, along with a term of pre-paid service that recipients could continue if they choose. The phones were distributed via VA Medical Centers in Battle Creek, MI; Boston, MA; Kansas City, MO; Las Vegas, NV; Palo Alto, CA; and Philadelphia, PA. Like many creative solutions, the cell phones program was born out of necessity: Veterans in community housing or other group environments were being relocated in quarantine to try to slow the spread of the pandemic, and VA providers and Veterans needed a way to stay connected.

man takes selfie

"During the COVID-19 pandemic, Amazon's donation made it possible for Veterans engaged in homeless programs to stay connected with their caregivers and support systems, particularly in instances where social distancing and quarantine limited access to face-to-face services and telecommunication resources," said Nicole Harelik, national coordinator, Office of Analytics and Operational Intelligence, VHA Homeless Program Office. "We've received so much positive feedback from frontline staff detailing how these phones have helped maintain linkages, lifted spirits, and in some cases, saved lives. The VHA National Homeless Program Office is extremely grateful for our partnership with Amazon and for their generosity to the Veterans we serve."

Peter Voystock, a homeless program case manager in Philadelphia who works with Veterans struggling with unemployment and mental illness, found the phones to be valuable in maintaining contact. Voystock was able to remain in constant contact with the Veterans who received these phones in order to support housing services and wellness checks. "It has been an incredible help that bridges communication barriers for some of our most vulnerable Veterans," he said.

Staying in touch with VA was certainly one of the goals of the program, but the additional impacts of being able to maintain connections during the pandemic have been immeasurable. Without access to these phones, the social connectivity provided by mobile devices and services would not be available to these Veterans in need. A senior Veteran receiving services from the Housing and Urban Development –

Veterans Affairs Supporting Housing (HUD-VASH) program in Philadelphia was “very grateful” to receive his phone, according to caseworker Jill Mullin. Living on his own for the first time in many years, he was nervous about not being able to contact anyone for assistance.

“When he found out he was able to receive a free phone, he was really appreciative. He actually got a little teary-eyed when saying ‘thank you’ and assured me, ‘I’m going to take good care of this,’” Mullin said. The donated phone helped reduce his stress, feelings of isolation, and provided a way for him to stay in touch with both his caseworker and family during his move. “I think it also helped him feel cared for,” Mullin added. The Veteran uses his smart technology-enabled phone to call and make appointments with VA, but also to stay connected to family and friends, like his son in Iowa and a cousin who he recently called via video. “I hadn’t seen her in 30 years!” said Maycumber. For more information about VA Homeless Programs and Services, click [here](#).

[Source: Vantage Point Blog | February 5, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 05: Retired USMC Officer among 5 Proud Boys Members Arrested



A retired Marine Corps officer was one of five people prosecutors have linked to a Kansas City metro chapter of the Proud Boys who were arrested 11 FEB on federal charges for their alleged roles in the deadly 6 JAN breach at the U.S. Capitol. A probable cause affidavit filed in the case alleges they conspired to impede certification of the Electoral College vote. **William Norman Chrestman** and **Christopher Charles Kuehn**, both of Olathe, Kansas, and **Louis Enrique Colon**, of Blue Springs, Missouri, were charged with conspiracy, civil disorder and obstruction of an official proceeding, among other charges. Chrestman also separately faces an additional charge of threatening to assault a federal law enforcement officer.

A probable cause affidavit alleges the three men wore tactical-style gear, including helmets and gloves. Chrestman also arrived with a respirator and a wooden club or axe handle disguised as a flag, and they had

a piece of orange tape affixed to a backpack or headgear to distinguish them in the crowd. Kuehne's father, Charles Kuehne, said his son was a 22-year Marine Corps veteran who was deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq and retired four or five years ago as a captain. He moved to Olathe to take a railroad management job but was laid off in May 2020. "That added a lot of stress to his life," the elder Kuehne said. He said he and his son never talked about politics before they and his mother had a disagreement in May 2020 about a family matter. They have not spoken since that disagreement, and Kuehne said he was shocked to hear of his son's arrest from an Associated Press reporter, adding, "I'm in tears right now." "I can't believe he went to DC," he said. "It's just unbelievable."

Also arrested on similar charges in Arizona were a brother and sister, **Felicia and Cory Konold**, who prosecutors contend conspired with the Kansas City chapter of the Proud Boys. The siblings, who live in the Tucson area, are accused of conspiring with Chrestman, Kuehne and Colon to interfere with police during the riot. It's unclear whether any of the suspects have attorneys. Messages left at telephone numbers for Colon and Kuehne were not immediately returned. Video footage captured Chrestman at one point turning to the crowd unlawfully assembled on the Capitol grounds, and shouting: "Whose house is this?" The crowd responded "Our house!" Chrestman shouted, "Do you want your house back?" After the crowd responded, "Yes," Chrestman shouted back: "Take it!"

The affidavit alleges Chrestman, and the Konold siblings were at or near the front of the crowd at the police barrier after the metal barricades were toppled. They also moved to the front of the crowd after the next police line was overwhelmed. At one point Chrestman removed the black helmet he was wearing and put on what appears to be a respirator, according to the affidavit. Felicia Konold then helped her brother put on Chrestman's helmet. Authorities say Cory and Felicia Konold and Chrestman used their hands to dismantle barriers officers were using to try to control the crowd. Once the five entered the Capitol, Felicia Konold, Chrestman, Kuehne and Colon allegedly took turns preventing metal security barriers in tunnels under the Capitol from closing.

Investigators say Felicia Konold later bragged about the attack in a Snapchat video, saying she had been recruited into the Kansas City chapter. In the post she claimed that even though she was not from Kansas City, she was "with them now." During a video post, she displayed a two-sided "challenge coin" that appears to have markings that designate it as belonging to the Kansas City Proud Boys, according to the affidavit. The FBI said cellphone data shows the suspects were in and around the Capitol during the insurrection. They say the Konold siblings at one point were seen walking with a group led by organizers of the Proud Boys. The FBI and U.S. Marshals Service in Arizona didn't immediately respond to a request for information about the arrests in Arizona. The FBI office in Kansas City said the three suspects arrested in their district were all taken into custody without incident.

The Proud Boys is known for violent confrontations with antifascists and other ideological opponents at protests. In a notable moment on the campaign trail last year, Trump told the group to "stand back and stand by" when asked at a September debate whether he would condemn white supremacist and militia groups that showed up at some protests last summer. Shortly before the Capitol riot, the Proud Boys' leader, Henry "Enrique" Tarrío, was arrested in Washington and ordered to stay out of the city after being accused of vandalizing a Black Lives Matter banner at a historic Black church in December.

[Source: The Associated Press | John Hanna, Roxana Hegeman & Jacques Billeaud | February 12, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 06: Marine Vet Nicholas Lentz Charged In Capitol Breach



A Marine Corps veteran and former Florida police officer has been charged with taking part in the 6 JAN insurrection at the U.S. Capitol. Court documents filed 21 FEB show that **Nicholas Lentz** was charged in a criminal complaint with illegally being in a restricted building and disruptive and disorderly conduct. Lentz, 41, is a former North Miami Beach police officer who also served with the Marines in Afghanistan and Iraq, according to an FBI affidavit. There have been numerous people affiliated with law enforcement and the military charged with participating in the riot.

Lentz was identified through Facebook posts, including by North Miami Beach Mayor Anthony DeFillipo. According to the FBI, Lentz was interviewed by agents last week at his home in Boynton Beach and admitted being at the Capitol on 6 JAN. A second Florida man, 54-year-old Graydon Young, was denied bail 22 FEB by a federal judge. Young is a member of the right-wing Oath Keepers organization, and the judge's order describes him as "dressed in military attire" at the Capitol and attempting to recruit others. Young was ordered to remain in jail until trial as a danger to the community.

"Lentz told the interviewing agents he had no intention of committing violence or destroying anything, and he claimed he did not do so," the FBI affidavit says. "He added he felt obligated to help control the crowd, believing the crowd was more likely to listen to him than a uniformed officer." But in his Facebook post, according to the affidavit, Lentz attended then-president Trump's speech near the White House before heading to the Capitol and made clear why the crowd was there. "America has spoken. You cannot stop millions of people. Cannot stop it. Can't. It's impossible. America has a voice. We give them the power," Lentz posted. "We're not here to hurt any cops of course," he added. "I love my boys in blue, but this is overwhelming for them. There's no way they can hold us back."

Like dozens of others across the country who attended the riot, Lentz is being prosecuted in Washington. Court records show Lentz was released on \$25,000 bail and has another hearing 26 FEB in Washington. Lentz was a North Miami Beach police officer from June 2016 until August 2020, according to the Miami Herald. He also worked for the Fort Pierce police department in St. Lucie County from 2014 to 2016. His attorney was listed as a federal public defender in court records, but no name was attached to it. [Source: The Associated Press | Curt Anderson | February 22, 2021 ++]

U.S. Capitol Riot

Update 07: Marine Vet Thomas Webster Arrested



A Marine veteran and retired New York Police Department officer was deemed a danger to the community and ordered held without bail 23 FEB after his arrest on charges that he attacked a police officer during the deadly Capitol attack in early January. Thomas Webster, 54, who runs a landscaping business, will remain jailed after surrendering to the FBI and appearing in White Plains federal court, where Assistant U.S. Attorney Benjamin Gianforti said video footage at the 6 JAN events showed Webster “clear as day” attacking an officer. Webster’s lawyer, James Monroe, said his client will plead not guilty to charges including assaulting or resisting officers with a dangerous weapon, obstruction of law enforcement during civil disorder, engaging in physical violence in a restricted building or grounds with a deadly or dangerous weapon, among other charges.

Gianforti said federal sentencing guidelines would recommend a prison term of at least five years in prison if Webster chose not to go to trial and pleaded guilty to the charges. If convicted at trial, the recommended prison term would be much higher, he said. The prosecutor said Webster used an aluminum pole that had carried a U.S. Marines Corp flag against an officer on 6 JAN in an attack captured on multiple video feeds, including bodycam footage from the officer. “We see the defendant clear as day ... attacking a police officer, first with that aluminum pole that I mentioned, and then with his bare hands,” he said. “You can see him ripping the officer’s protective gear off, the gas mask or the helmet that he was wearing at the time, which ... caused the police officer to choke. It cut off his air at least for a short period of time,” he said.

Gianforti said the videos also show “a look of pure rage on the defendant’s face.” “His teeth are gritted. This is a man who is about to unleash some kind of violence on somebody and, in fact, he did on that poor police officer,” the prosecutor said. Gianforti said Webster admitted carrying a gun to Washington but claimed he didn’t bring it to the Capitol attack. The prosecutor said authorities have “every reason” to believe Webster was armed. Monroe, though, described his client as a father of three children who never fired a shot during a 20-year police career. He said Webster was participating in first-ever protest and only engaged with the officer after he was punched by him. But Gianforti said a review of video footage in the 10 minutes before Webster’s attack did not show Webster being punched. He dismissed the claim as self-serving and “likely fabricated.”

In ordering detention for Webster, U.S. Magistrate Judge Andrew E. Krause said it appeared from bodycam footage that Webster came “running up” to the officer just before the attack began. He said he saw no evidence Webster was punched. Krause praised the right to free speech, but said “what we see in this video ... goes well beyond First Amendment speech and moves into criminal activity.” He called it “disturbing.”

[Source: The Associated Press Larry Neumeister & Tom Hays | February 24, 2021 ++]

Tuskegee Airmen

Update 01: Quarter Coin Sets Honoring Airmen Go On Sale at US Mint

A Tuskegee hometown hero has once again made it on the back of a United States coin. The Black World War II fighter pilots who completed 15,000 sorties in 1,500 missions throughout the Mediterranean, and even sank an enemy destroyer, have joined fellow hometown heroes Booker T. Washington and George Washington Carver as faces of commemorative U.S. currency. (Booker T. Washington was the first free Black person featured on legal tender when his image was placed on the silver half dollar coin in 1946). The Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site Quarter set went on sale 19 FEB. It’s the 56th and final release of the America the Beautiful Quarters Program that features designs capturing parks and sites of national significance. The first commemorative set was released in 2010.



The Tuskegee Airmen National Historic Site Quarter set is the 56th and final release of the America the Beautiful Quarters Program

While the front (heads) of the quarter features George Washington, its reverse (tails) shows a Tuskegee Airman pilot suiting up with an image of the Moton Field control tower in the background. Behind him, two P-51 Mustangs fly overhead. The inscription “THEY FOUGHT TWO WARS” arcs above his head in reference to 1942’s Double V campaign championed by Black journalists, members of the military and citizens. The campaign was grounded in the irony that Black soldiers were engaged in a war on two fronts: fighting fascism abroad and racism at home.

After World War I, the U.S. began investing in aviation training for civilians, but segregation laws excluded African American men from enrolling in these pilot training programs. After the NAACP filed suit against the U.S. government in 1941 it was forced to open the training program to Black pilots. Six historically Black colleges and universities were selected to begin training and Tuskegee was soon identified as the highest performing among the group. That year, the university was selected as the official site for the first Black training facility for an Army Air Corps unit. It was designated a national historic

site in 1998. Tuskegee Airmen quarter set sales started at 11 a.m. Central time on 19 FEB. Each set costs \$11.50.

[Source: Montgomery Advertiser | Safiya Charles | February 16, 2021 ++]

Gulf War Syndrome

Update 46: Study Concludes Depleted Uranium Doesn't Cause Gulf War Illness

In the decades since Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, veterans and researchers have strained to find a cause of the myriad symptoms known as Gulf War illness, with a strong suspicion that the depleted uranium used in armor-piercing rounds created a toxic exposure with long-term health consequences. A study released 18 FEB from the University of Texas and the U.K.'s University of Portsmouth found that inhaled fumes and dust from rounds and tank armor are not the culprit. "That depleted uranium is not and never was in the bodies of those who are ill at sufficient quantities to cause disease will surprise many, including sufferers who have, for 30 years, suspected depleted uranium may have contributed to their illness," researcher Randall Parrish said in a release.

Studies have shown up to 25 percent of the 700,000 troops deployed in that conflict have suffered symptoms including memory and concentration problems, chronic pain and nerve system dysfunction, as well as fever, night sweats and sexual dysfunction. The authors are instead inclined to believe that low-level exposure to sarin gas may be the cause, along with anti-nerve agent medication and pesticides troops were also exposed to during the 1991 Gulf War. "Finding causes is a nebulous game when you have so many options to blame," according to the release. "The Allies' own activities destroying an Iraqi nerve agent cache or spraying pesticides liberally on troops could be seen in hindsight as an inadvertent 'own goal' and one to be avoided in future conflicts. It is important to find causes for conditions like this, even if it takes a long time and the causes might be controversial."

While those toxins have also been under suspicion, depleted uranium has been of major concern, because the rounds and armor it's found in have continued to be used by troops up to and including during the current war on terrorism. The theory is based on past research that has found high levels of depleted uranium in troops with shrapnel injuries. Uranium is known to concentrate in the kidneys and bones and then leach out through urine over the years, but those studies were not done on Desert Storm veterans.

Parrish and his co-author, UT's Dr. Robert Haley, developed a test sensitive enough to detect low levels of depleted uranium, which they used to scan 154 diagnosed Gulf War illness patients.

"Having found no depleted uranium in any of those with the illness, and no difference between them and a control group, who weren't on the battlefield, alongside knowing how long the substance remains in the body and can be traced in the urine, proves depleted uranium is not linked to Gulf War illness," according to the release. Past research has shown that depleted uranium does live in the body for years, and that radiation and heavy metals are known to cause health issues, but there is no link when it comes to Gulf War illness.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Meghann Myers | February 18, 2021 ++]

Vet College Support Programs

Survey Says About 1 In 3 Colleges Have Cut Funding

About 30 percent of colleges and universities have reduced funding for veteran-support programs during the past year, and some schools have eliminated their support offices entirely, according to a recent study. The past year of coronavirus pandemic shutdowns and safety measures have created unprecedented challenges for veterans seeking college degrees, including problems related to funding and staffing, according to the study. The problems for veterans seeking to use their military education benefits has been compounded by cutbacks at schools that have reduced funding and support for veterans support services, according to a survey of military-connected students by Operation College Promise and the Texas A&M University System.

Nearly 40 percent of student respondents say they've seen a reduction in communication with school staff since the pandemic measures took hold last March. In the 2019-2020 school year, about 80 percent of schools surveyed said they had a dedicated office for military support, but over the past year that fell to about 72 percent, according to the survey. Schools that report having career counseling services for veterans fell from 66 in 2019-2020 to 58 this year, they survey found. The cutbacks come at a time when many veterans are also struggling to find employment. The veterans unemployment rate ticked upward to 5.5 percent in January.

Overall, student veterans say the coronavirus pandemic has negatively impacted them in numerous ways. Nearly 60 reported a financial impact; about 32 percent noted an impact on employment. A majority, 52 percent, noted mental health problems, according to the survey. The survey was conducted by Operation College Promise, a national policy, research, and education program based in Trenton, New Jersey, which supports veterans seeking to transition from the military to college. The survey included responses from 75 colleges and universities and 230 military connected students. [Source: MilitaryTimes | February 21, 2021 ++]

Burial At Sea

Update 07: How to Do It without the Navy' Help

For many, it will come as a surprise that it's so simple to bury a deceased loved one at sea, with little more than sail cloth and some weights. All you have to do is ensure you have all the necessary permits for transporting the human remains and a boat. When burying someone at sea, it's important to note that a military burial beyond what you can provide amongst your family and friends (or chartered boat service) isn't possible. You'll need the Navy's help to do that, but if you do family won't be allowed to be present. Refer to <https://www.wearethemighty.com/military-life/burial-at-sea-rules>.

The first step is getting familiar with the [Marine Protection, Research and Sanctuaries Act](#), which affords a general permit from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency for "dumping of certain materials that will have a minimal adverse environmental impact and are generally disposed of in small quantities." This general permit allows for the transport and burial of human remains in the ocean under specific

conditions. The remains have to be dumped at least three nautical miles from shore and you can dump things that won't decompose along with them. These are things like plastic flowers and wreaths. You'll need a permit to move the body to the boat (your funeral director can help with this part) and you'll need to prepare the body for sea by either using a non-plastic casket or some kind of natural fiber wrapping affixed to a weight for easy sinking.

If using a casket, a specific series of holes must be drilled so the box fills with water and offsets the buoyancy of the body. The casket must be wrapped with 5 steel bands or chains, four around the width of the casket and one wrapped lengthwise. Additional weight in sand or stone must be added so the entire casket weighs at least 300 pounds. In either case, remains must not be visible. The EPA also has some other, important regulations regarding civilian burials at sea.

- You cannot use a rocket or a balloon to transport the body. If using aircraft to dump the remains, the aircraft has to be able to land.
- Funeral pyres or uncontrolled burning boats are not permitted by the MPRSA general permit, so Viking funerals will require a special permit.
- The general permit applies to the ocean only. Lakes and other bodies of water are regulated by the states.

There is no form or application required for conducting your own burial at sea, but the EPA must be notified within 30 days of burial using the Burial at Sea Reporting Tool available by opening an account at <https://burialatsea.epa.gov>. [Source: We Are The Mighty | February 24, 2021 ++]

WWII Vets 249

Earl G. Anderson Jr | AAF POW



Earl G. Anderson Jr. voluntarily joined the Army Air Forces in February 1942, as he had an interest in being an aviation cadet. He first went to boot camp in Santa Ana, California, for approximately four months. This included aptitude testing to establish their roles. Anderson became a pilot and went for primary flight training in Oxnard, California. In December 1943, the Army Air Force Corps stationed Anderson in Manduria, Italy, with the 15th Air Force. He piloted B-24 aircraft on bombing missions in Italy and Germany.

On June 13, 1944, Anderson and nine other Airmen flew on a mission over Munich. After completing the mission, the enemy shot down the aircraft. They survived but the Germans captured them. They brought Anderson to a village jail. He then went to Frankfurt, where Germans interrogated him and placed him in solitary confinement. He then transferred to a prison camp in Sagan, Germany. The American

soldiers created their own structured group within the prison. In January 1945, the Germans transferred them to Moosburg, Germany. The conditions there were worse and there was less freedom than in the first prison. Anderson spent approximately three months there until April 29, 1945, when American ground-troops liberated the prison.

Anderson left active duty in 1946. He returned home to work as an engineer at General Motors and attend Northwestern University. Anderson remained in the Reserve until November 1961, attaining the rank of major. He received a Distinguished Flying Cross, an Air Medal with six clusters, and a Distinguished Unit Badge with one cluster. In his free time, Anderson enjoyed being part of the Indy Air Show. He was also the chairman of a charity golf tournament. He was named as the 2009 Indiana Aviator of the Year. Anderson and his wife Geraldine were married for 72 years and they had two children. Anderson passed away on Aug. 13, 2017, at the age of 97. We honor his service. [Source: Vantage Point | Isabel Nulter | January 21, 2021 ++]

WWII Vets 250

Leonard Tavern | PT Boat Sailor



Leonard Tavern was born Feb. 7, 1925, and grew up in West Terre Haute, Indiana. After high school, the Navy drafted him into service for World War II. From summer 1944 to fall 1945, Tavern served in the South Pacific. He worked on PT-328, which is an Elco Class Motor Torpedo Boat. Tavern said PT boats patrolled at night and the still waters were so quiet that they could hear the enemies having conversations. He also said they tried to rescue Japanese soldiers from the shark infested waters.

Tavern's squadron completed an operation Aug. 20, 1944, just 10 days after landing in the Philippines. According to the squadron journal, PT-328 stormed a bay and later fired upon an enemy barge. This barge had a load of gasoline and the journal accounts stated "a tremendous explosion occurred, rumbling across the ocean surface." A smoke screen allowed the PT to leave the Geelvink Bay. On Aug. 30, 1944, on the Island of Mios Woendi, entertainer Bob Hope, with Frances Langford, Jerry Kolona and dancer Peggy Ryan, entertained Tavern and other sailors. The squadron decommissioned in November of 1945 and Tavern honorably discharged Feb. 17, 1946.

In June of 1949, he graduated from Indiana State teacher's college with a B.S. in education and earned his M.S. in education in June 1955. He married his wife Marjorie Ruth on June 5, 1954 and had two children, Teresa Lynn Bailey and Richard Lee Tavern. He was involved with the Indiana Public Education

system for 35 years. During this time he spent 10 years as a wood shop teacher and 25 years in administration as a principal, an assistant superintendent and a superintendent. After retiring in 1985, he moved to Dallas, Texas, and lived there for 16 years. In 2014 he moved back to his hometown of Terre Haute, Indiana. He and his wife were married for 65 years. We honor his service. [Source: Vantage Point | Hannah Nelson | January 21, 2021 |++]

USS Pueblo

Update 07: Survivors and Families Awarded \$2.3 Billion in Damages



Captured crew of the USS Pueblo giving the “Hawaiian symbol for good luck,” 1968

Sixty-one crew members and 110 surviving family members of USS Pueblo (AGER-2) are entitled to more than \$2.3 billion in damages suffered in the capture of the intelligence-gathering vessel in 1968 in international waters off Wonsan, North Korea, a federal judge in Washington, D.C., ruled this month. Mark Bravin, lead attorney for the plaintiffs, told USNI News 25 FEB that the damages awarded are among the largest ever awarded in a state-sponsored terrorism case. “One of the most significant things, like the [Iran] embassy case after 30 years, the [crew and surviving family members] after 52 years will get relief” through a change in U.S. law.

“For years, the administration did nothing; the Congress did nothing. Then Congress did” in 2016, when it passed the Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act, allowing suits in both of these high-profile cases to move into federal courts. The money will be paid out of the special congressionally created U.S. Victims of State Sponsored Terrorism Fund that allows foreign governments to be sued in American courts. Money for the fund comes from fines collected and sanctions imposed on individuals and corporations in those states. In the case, John Doe A-1 et al. v. Democratic People’s Republic of Korea, a federal district court awarded the plaintiffs \$1.15 billion in compensatory damages and \$1.15 billion in additional punitive damages. “The last thing surviving crew members can hope for” is the return of the Pueblo hull itself. “It’s the number-one tourist attraction in Pyongyang,” Bravin said.

Pueblo was converted into an environmental research ship and commissioned into Navy service in 1967. The ship departed for its first deployment later that year, headed to collect intelligence in Asian waters. “While off Wonsan, North Korea, on January 23, 1968, Pueblo was attacked by North Korean forces and seized. In the process, one crew member was killed with the remaining eighty-two men taken

prisoner. North Korea viewed that the ship violated territorial waters. This claim was denied by the United States,” according to a U.S. Navy description of the event. “The crew was repatriated on December 23, 1968. Retained by North Korea, Pueblo was exhibited at Wonsan and Hungnam until relocated to be a museum at Pyongyang. Pueblo is still the property of the U.S. Navy.”

The Trump administration put North Korea on the list of state sponsors of terrorism in 2017, opening an avenue for surviving crew members and families to proceed with their legal case. It was also the mechanism the family of Otto Warmbier, a college student who was arrested in North Korea, used in pursuing their claim he was tortured and abused in North Korean custody before he died. Governments not designated as sponsors of terrorism can claim “sovereign immunity,” exempting them from civil suits. Iran, North Korea, Syria and Sudan are designated as states sponsoring terrorism.

“In this case, North Korea chose not to contest” the suit where the plaintiffs sought damages for hostage-taking, torture and personal injuries they suffered, Bravin told USNI News. Notice of the suit was served on its government in Pyongyang. “We followed the law exactly” in the case that began in 2018. He added the North Koreans “didn’t say anything” after being served there or in court. The facts in a 2008 federal case involving ship commander Cmdr. Lloyd Bucher and three crew members – where North Korea was found liable for their treatment – were used in this suit.

Bravin said he expected payouts in the Pueblo case from the U.S. Department of the Treasury to begin next year. Eighty-three crew members, “mostly USN and at least one Marine, some civilians,” were detained for 11 months following the ship’s seizure in international waters Jan. 23, 1968. North Korean warships and aircraft fired on Pueblo, killing one crewman. The rest of the crew was captured and detained. Chief Cryptologic Technician Don Peppard, a surviving crew member and president of the USS Pueblo Veterans’ Association, said in a press release from Bravin’s law firm, Mitchell, Silverberg & Knupp, “even though we didn’t expect anything, it is a relief to be recognized for what we went through. Maybe now it is finally settled, and we can move forward.”

Catherine Soto, the daughter of crew member HMC Herman Baldrige, who passed away in November at the age of 89, told the law firm that “my dad, and our whole family, suffered so much as a result of his captivity, and I wish he was still here for me to tell him that justice is served, and this is finally over.” [Source: USNI News | John Grady | February 25, 2021 ++]

Military Retirees & Veterans Events Schedule

As of 1 MAR 2021

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

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

- HTML: <http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs and Other Retiree-Veterans Events.html>.
- PDF: <http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs and Other Retiree-Veterans Events.pdf>.
- Word: <http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs and Other Retiree-Veterans Events.doc>.

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\veteterans related events to the Events Schedule Manager, Milton.Bell126@gmail.com [Source: Retiree\Veterans Events Schedule Manager | Milton Bell | February 28, 2021 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs

Scheduled As of 1 MAR 2021



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. To participate, sign up for the workshop in addition to registering (if indicated) for the hiring fairs which are shown on the Hiring Our Heroes website <https://www.hiringourheroes.org> for the next month. For details of each you should click on the city next to the date Listings of upcoming Vet Job Fairs nationwide providing location, times, events, and registration info if required can be found at the following websites. Note that some of the scheduled events for the next 2 to 6 weeks have been postponed and are awaiting reschedule dates due to the current COVID-19 outbreak. 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>

First Civilian Job

Forty-one percent of veterans surveyed indicated they left their first post-military job within one year. Another 31% indicated said they left their first civilian job to make ends meet and never intended to stay. Another 30% left as the result of finding a better job, while 19% left because the job did not align with their expectations. Only 12% left because the position was terminated or they were laid off. The reasons for staying at a job depend greatly on financial and long-term opportunities in the company. Sixty-five percent of veterans say they will stay at a company for better pay, while 55% stay for a clear path of career

growth. Other activities, like veteran resource groups and volunteer activities, seem to have less impact on whether veterans remain or leave their jobs.

[Source: Recruit Military, USCC, and American Legion | February 28, 2021 ++]

State Veteran's Benefits Wyoming 2021

The state of Wyoming provides a number of services and benefits to its veterans. To obtain information on these refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**State Veteran’s Benefits – WY**” for an overview of those in the below categories. They are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the below plus the state’s current position on veteran issues refer to **Veterans Benefit Book** & <https://www.moaa.org/content/state-report-card/statereportcard>.

- Housing
- Financial
- Employment
- Education
- Recreation
- Burial
- Driver and Vehicle Licensing

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/wyoming-state-veterans-benefits.html> | Feb 2021 ++]

* Vet Legislation *



DoD/VA Concurrent Receipt

Update 12: S.344 | Major Richard Star Act of 2021

Nine days after Major Richard Star, USAR, lost his battle with cancer from toxic exposure, Sens. Jon Tester (D-MT) and Mike Crapo (R-ID) reintroduced the **Major Richard Star Act (S.344)** with 42 Senators as original cosponsors. The legislation will authorize concurrent receipt of DoD retired pay and VA disability for those injured in a combat zone and forced to medically retire under Chapter 61. Before Star lost his long-fought battle with cancer, he wanted to make sure his fight for concurrent receipt continued. “He made

me promise him to continue to work with members of Congress to get this bill passed, and help the 42,000 families that would desperately benefit from it,” his widow, Tonya, said. “It is my honor to carry on this effort in his memory.”

Senators are growing bipartisan support for this legislation – part of an incremental strategy to chip away at the larger concurrent receipt problem that has an associated \$33 billion price tag. “When it comes to our nation’s disabled veterans, we’ve got to cut through the bureaucratic red tape that’s prevented them from getting the full benefits they’ve earned,” Tester said. “The Major Richard Star Act would fix the unfair offset that prevents thousands of veterans living with the wounds of war from accessing both their disability benefits and retired pay. And it honors the service and sacrifice of Major Richard Star, whose legacy lives on in our continued fight to ensure our men and women in uniform get the assistance they deserve.”

The House is on a different schedule than the Senate and will also reintroduce the Major Richard Star Act very soon. Reps. Gus Bilirakis (R-FL) and Raul Ruiz (D-CA) will champion the legislation again this year in the House. Last year, the bill ended in the 116th Congress with support from 101 representatives. Increasing support for this legislation is critical for the bill to pass – either as a standalone measure or as part of the National Defense Authorization Act.

All servicemembers, active and retired, “deserve to receive the full care and benefits they have earned, not just fragments offset by government red tape,” said Crapo. “The Major Richard Star Act will ensure medically retired and combat-injured veterans receive both military retired pay and disability compensation earned through their service to our nation. I join the nation in mourning the recent loss of Major Richard Star, and I remain dedicated to improving veterans benefits, including fixing unfair discrepancies such as this, to honor his legacy.”

There is a renewed support and a sense of urgency across military and veterans service organizations to advocate for concurrent receipt legislation. The Military Coalition, a group of 35 organizations (including MOAA) representing more than 5.5 million servicemembers, veterans, their families, and survivors, wrote a letter of support for the bill to the House and Senate Armed Services Committees. “An incremental approach to correcting this injustice should start with those injured in combat in recognition of their extraordinary sacrifices in defending our Nation,” the letter states. **Readers are urged** to ask their legislators to support concurrent receipt. You can easily do this by using the MOAA prepared editable message completing the mailing form, and allowing MOAA to forward it to them. Just go to <https://takeaction.moaa.org/app/write-a-letter?0&engagementId=510849>. [Source: MOAA Newsletter February 24, 2021 ++]

VA Covid-19 Vaccines

Update 03: H.R.1276 | Authorize VA Secretary to Furnish to Certain Individuals

Any veteran or their caregiver would be eligible to receive a coronavirus vaccine at Veterans Affairs medical centers under a new bipartisan proposal unveiled 24 FEB. But the plan doesn’t guarantee enough vaccines will be available at VA facilities for every veteran in America, which may limit its effectiveness. The legislation H.R.1276, introduced by House Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-Calif., and ranking member Mike Bost, R-Ill., would close a loophole in current rules which prohibit VA

officials from administering the vaccine to anyone except individuals already registered in department medical care programs.

“If we want to defeat this pandemic, we must vaccinate as many Americans as possible, and do it quickly,” Takano said in a statement. “VA is already well on its way to fully vaccinate more than one million veterans, but under its current authorities, millions more are still unable to receive lifesaving vaccines from them. VA should not have to turn away any veteran who walks through its doors to get a vaccine, regardless of whether they’re enrolled in or eligible for other VA healthcare services.” VA officials in recent months have said they expect to vaccinate more than 6 million veterans in coming months, a figure that includes most veterans currently enrolled in VA health care. About 19 million veterans are living in America today.

The new bill would extend the vaccine authorities to cover all veterans, and any caregivers who are providing assistance to veterans enrolled in department home-based and long-term care programs. Currently, only caregivers enrolled in VA’s Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers are eligible to receive the vaccine when the veteran in their care gets it. In addition, the legislation would allow VA to provide vaccine doses to veterans living abroad and receiving care through the department’s Foreign Medical Program. About 55,500 veterans are currently registered in the Foreign Medical Program, but VA officials said only about 4,500 were active users of the program in fiscal 2020.

“Simply put, our bill would mean more veterans and their caregivers can get vaccinated,” Boat said in a statement. “It will save lives.” However, even with the expanded authority, VA leaders will need additional vaccine doses from the federal government to cover the wider group of eligible individuals. Last week, acting Under Secretary for Health Richard Stone testified before the House Appropriations Committee that the department has been allotted about 6.5 million doses by the Department of Health and Human Services, with about 140,000 vaccines delivered to VA facilities each week. “Unfortunately, we do not have the supply to reach all veterans who are ineligible for care in the VA at this time,” he said. “Our ability to reach this veteran population is entirely based on the supply of the moment.” But Stone acknowledged that in some areas, local officials have surpluses of the vaccine. Takano and Bost said those should be given to other veterans if facility leaders deem that is the best use for the excess doses.

The bill does not mandate that VA medical centers supply a vaccine to every veteran who requests one, and allows local leaders to continue to make decisions about which priority groups should receive the vaccine first. But it would offer more flexibility in going beyond just the group of veterans actively using VA medical care. Takano and Bost said they hope to move the measure through Congress as quickly as possible. The House is currently considering a \$1.9 trillion coronavirus relief bill which would give another \$17 billion to VA for various medical and supply costs related to the pandemic. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 24, 2021 ++]

Note: To check status on any veteran related legislation go to <https://www.congress.gov/bill/117th-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. To read the text of bills that are to be considered on the House floor in the upcoming week refer to <https://docs.house.gov/floor>.



USSF

Update 27: Space Force Building Plan to Combine Active-Duty & Reserve Service

Space Force officials are fleshing out the details of a unique approach to military service that combines Active-duty and Reserve commitments, hoping that design will provide more flexibility for families and ultimately keep people in uniform longer. The service may decide to keep a separate Space National Guard as well, Lt. Gen. Nina M. Armagno, staff director at Space Force headquarters, said during a 10 FEB Space Foundation event. “We’re actually working on a dual componency, where instead of having Active, Guard, and Reserve, we have a combined Active and Reserve force, and then potentially a separate space Guard,” she said. “We’re really working on trying to figure out how to recruit the best and retain the best.”

The dual approach could particularly help women in uniform who see a stark choice between starting a family or continuing to serve, among other factors that lead female service members to separate mid-career. As the first armed force created since women were fully integrated into the military, the Space Force is looking to bake in structural measures to boost gender equity from the start. Nothing is set in stone yet, Armagno cautioned, though Chief of Space Operations Gen. John W. “Jay” Raymond has said the service will propose a new kind of Reserve this year. He told Air Force Magazine last fall he expected the plan to be approved by December 2020, signaling that coming to an agreement on the best force design is proving trickier than anticipated. “It’s really innovative,” Raymond said of reshaping the typical force structure. “That will require some legislative proposals to make that happen.”

Congress in the fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act fell short of creating a Space Force reserve component, but told the Defense Secretary to send lawmakers his recommendations of how such a plan might work. Capitol Hill also has been skeptical of the need for a Space National Guard, though proponents are quick to note that about 1,500 National Guardsmen now use military space assets for missions like wildfire tracking. Reservists are already part of the fight as well, handling ballistic missile warning to space weather monitoring during operations and training rotations that last 39 days a year. The trick is finding the “sweet spot” between full-time and part-time service, Armagno said. Under the dual-track idea, Space Force Guardians may be able to bank time to have a child or finish an educational degree program, she said. “Other times, life just kind of hits you,” Armagno said. “We want to be able to accommodate the various situations.”

Maj. Gen. DeAnna M. Burt, a top operations official in both the Space Force and U.S. Space Command, said that stability extends to single Guardians as well as those with partners or families. Someone without a spouse or kids shouldn’t be made to move every year, she said, just as the military should find ways to make assignments work for married couples. She indicated the Space Force may not require a family to

relocate while their child is in high school, a move that would avoid uprooting students in their crucial pre-college years.

Those considerations dovetail with the human capital strategy underway in the Space Force’s personnel office. Because the service is so small relative to the rest of the military—it’s expected to grow to 6,700 Active-duty troops this year, compared to the Marine Corps, which has the next-largest Active-duty force at around 181,000 members—leaders see it as a proving ground for better personnel policies. For one, the Space Force is adjusting to generational differences in how long employees want to stay in one job. Because younger workers are less likely than their parents and grandparents to remain at a single company for decades, the service is reviewing its rules around who can join and when, according to Chief Master Sgt. Amber B. Mitchell, the Space Force’s deputy personnel director.

Other changes in the works include a new approach to promotions and more opportunities for fellowships that let military and space industry employees learn about the other side. “We still have a lot of work to do to finalize that strategy and fill in some of the blanks,” Raymond said in December. “This will be the most important thing that the Space Force does in the next few months, because it’s going to provide us the means to recruit, attract, assess, develop, and retain a force that we need to be able to operate in space.” [Source: Air Force Magazine | Rachel S. Cohen | February 10, 2021 ++]

Military Sexual Misconduct

Update 02: Remove Handling from Chain Of Command Plan

The chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee said he is considering plans to establish an independent prosecutor to handle all sex crimes in the military, a potentially major change to the Uniform Code of Military Justice stemming from years of frustration over the Defense Department’s handling of the issue. “Over a decade or more we have tried different approaches to limiting sexual assault, sexual harassment and also retaliation, and we haven’t seen the progress that we hoped,” Sen. Jack Reed (D-RI) told reporters in a roundtable event 24 FEB. “And so I think the idea of separation is once again on the table.”

Advocacy groups and several congressional Democrats have pushed for the move for years, arguing that military commanders are inclined to overlook accusations of sexual misconduct in favor of keeping personnel in place. They say an independent prosecutor experienced in those cases would be more likely to file and pursue charges, especially in cases of repeat offenders. Military leaders have strongly objected to the idea, saying it would upend the current chain of command and remove the responsibility of addressing the issue from unit leaders. On the campaign trail, then presidential candidate Joe Biden also offered support for the idea of separate prosecutors for sex crimes in the military.

Last year the Pentagon’s Sexual Assault Prevention and Response Office unveiled that sexual assault reports increased 3 percent from fiscal 2018 to 2019, with more than 6,200 cases. But officials estimated that less than 40 percent of all assaults are reported. Meanwhile, fewer 200 of those cases resulted in convictions in fiscal 2018. Sen. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) — the chairwomen of the Senate and House Armed Services committees’ military personnel panels — earlier this

month labeled those results “a broken system that punishes victims while allowing most perpetrators to escape any consequences for their actions.”

In early February, Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin announced a new commission to evaluate sexual misconduct in the ranks over the next few months. Reed said the move is needed, but said that won’t be enough. “One of the ethical tenets of the military is you protect your subordinates ... sexual harassment and sexual assault is exploitation and can’t, can’t be tolerated,” he said. “It’s antithetical to the American military, and we’re going to be very serious about this.” Reed said he wants to focus more on prevention of sexual assaults and harassment in the military, but said that issue is interconnected with the prosecution of crimes that occur. If cases are properly investigated and prosecuted, “people will feel comfortable reporting people.” “If changes to the judicial system accelerate that progression, then it should be considered,” he said.

Members of Reed’s committee are expected to begin work on their draft of the annual defense authorization bill in coming months. In recent years, the issue of independent prosecutors for military sex crimes has been widely discussed during that debate, but ultimately defeated. However, Democrats control both the House and Senate this year, which could mean new momentum for the proposal if party leaders can convince their own members to support the idea. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 24, 2021 ++]

Base Housing

Update 20: Tenant Bill of Rights SITREP 4



Military families in privatized housing at the “vast majority” of installations should have their remaining four tenant rights by 1 JUN — including a process for resolving disputes with their landlords and way to withhold rent during those disputes, a defense official told lawmakers 16 FEB. The Defense Department has issued all the policy guidance necessary to fully implement those four remaining tenant rights, said Paul Cramer, principal deputy assistant secretary of defense for sustainment, in testimony before the House Appropriations Committee’s panel on military construction, veterans affairs and related agencies.

These last four tenant rights are among the most important for military families, who have expressed frustration in dealing with some privatized housing landlords and the military in their repeated efforts to get problems fixed involving mold, lead, water leakage and other problems. They’ve asked for that dispute resolution process, as well as a process for withholding their rent from the landlord, until issues are

resolved. The rent for privatized housing units is equal to the service member’s Basic Allowance for Housing. The other two remaining tenant rights are common forms and documents for all housing tenants; and access to the maintenance history of their housing unit. The seven-year maintenance history will help potential residents determine whether they want to live in that home, Cramer said.

Those four rights were required in the Fiscal 2020 National Defense Authorization Act, as part of 18 elements in a new tenant bill of rights. In June, 2020, defense officials announced that 14 of the 18 protections in the tenant bill of rights had been implemented in privatized housing communities. DoD officials have been in discussions with the privatized housing companies about these four remaining provisions, which are among the most important for military families. Because of the way these agreements are set up, DoD doesn’t have the authority to unilaterally change the terms of the agreements, Cramer said. These housing communities are financed primarily by private investments. The tenant bill of rights was required by law in the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2020 as part of comprehensive reform provisions to address pervasive issues with mold, rodents and other health, safety and environmental hazards in privatized military housing.

As far as the dispute resolution process, commanders at the O6 level on the installation will make decisions in an informal dispute process, and if the dispute can’t be resolved there, it will be elevated to a formal process where a flag/general officer will be the deciding official, Cramer said. He said defense officials are working to get all 14 privatized housing companies to agree to apply it to their collective 81 separate existing projects. He said DoD officials expect all but a few privatized companies to implement those dispute and rent withholding processes by this summer. “This represents a fundamental step in our ongoing effort to improve the department’s military housing program,” Cramer said [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 16, 2021 ++]

USERRA

Update 23: WA Employers Sued For Discrimination Based On Military Service

A Washington state firefighter and a U.S. Naval reservist are suing their employers for allegedly discriminating against them based on their military service. Brett Martinson, who joined the Washington Army National Guard in March 2002, has worked at Central Pierce Fire & Rescue for over 23 years. He contends fire department supervisors told him he was not selected for a promotion “due to your status in the military,” according to a complaint filed Jan. 13 in the U.S. District Court for the Western District of Washington. Central Pierce Fire & Rescue did not respond to The News Tribune’s request for comment.

Ana Lugo, a reservist in the U.S. Navy, says she was fired from her job as a teacher at New Start High School in the Highline School District in King County because of her military service. In August 2016, Lugo, says she was “interrogated” by her supervisor about her military service, according to court documents. The supervisor asked Lugo whether she wanted to teach at New Start or be in the Navy, saying “only one of these is your full-time job and it isn’t the Navy, this is your bread and butter, this is what pays your bills.” In a statement to The News Tribune, Highline School District said it supports employees’ commitment to military duty but disagrees with the allegations in Lugo’s complaint.

Firefighter’s complaint

Since 2002, Martinson has been deployed at least 10 times with the Guard, including a year-long deployment to Afghanistan. According to the complaint, Martinson met with Central Pierce human resources, payroll, the assistant chief of operations and emergency medical services and a union representative prior to his deployment to Afghanistan because he'd previously been denied an accommodation for the lieutenant's exam. "Given his prior experience regarding lieutenant testing, Mr. Martinson requested to take a make-up upon his return if there was testing held while he was on deployment," the complaint reads. While on deployment in 2016, at least six other employees were promoted to lieutenant. When he returned, Martinson was denied the chance to take a make-up exam, according to his lawsuit.

Martinson says Central Pierce Fire & Rescue violated the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act of 1994, which protects service members' civilian employment rights. Specifically, the act protects service members from discrimination based on their service and allows the employee to be absent up to five years for military service without retaliation. "People say they support the troops and aren't anti-military, but their tunes change when issues come up and people have to be absent for deployments," said Matthew Crotty, an attorney for Martinson. Martinson is seeking damages including service credits he says he should have accrued towards retirement and a trial by jury to determine whether Central Pierce Fire & Rescue violated USERRA.

Complaint against school district

Crotty and attorney Thomas Jarrard also are representing Lugo, who says Highline School District violated USERRA when it refused to reinstate her as a teacher at New Start High School. In June 2017, Lugo was put on active duty for 330 days. In 2019 her orders were extended through January 2020. When she told her employer she would be on an extended deployment, she was informed her employment had already been terminated for failing to maintain a teaching certificate in the state of Washington. "Washington state School districts in are prohibited from offering contracts to educators who do not have a current certificate," Catherine Carbone Rogers, chief communications officer for Highline Schools, told The News Tribune. "Certificates are issued by the state, and the process for maintaining the certificate is between the state and the educator."

When she asked for her job back upon returning from deployment, the district refused and said she'd have to apply for another open position. According to court documents, the district hired new teachers in 2020, but she was not reemployed. Before filing a lawsuit against Highline School District on Feb. 5, 2021, Lugo reached out the Employer Support for Guard and Reserve, or ESGR, an agency whose job is to provide resources for and resolve issues between employers and military reserve employees.

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Phil Sanders, the vice-chairman for ESGR in Washington, told The News Tribune about three-quarters of ESGR cases in 2020 were resolved without having to bring a lawsuit. "We're not attorneys out there advocating for service members," Sanders said. "Our job is to be a neutral party providing information. A lot of the time, these things amount to a misunderstanding or a misinterpretation of what the law requires." In Lugo's case, ESGR was unable to resolve the issue so she filed a complaint with the Department of Labor, Veterans Employment and Training Service who found that the district violated USERRA when they refused to reemploy Lugo. The district agreed to rehire her, but only if she waved her USERRA rights and agreed not to sue the school district. Lugo is seeking damages and a trial by jury to determine whether Highline violated USERRA. [Source: SMART Brief | Abbie Shull | February 12, 2021 ++]

Coronavirus Vaccines

Update 30: About A Third of Troops offered Them Have Turned It Down



Army Chief of Staff Gen. James McConville receives his first dose of the COVID-19 vaccine

The Defense Department has been reluctant to publicly announce how many troops have received a COVID-19 vaccination and how many have refused to get it, but senior Pentagon officials came prepared for questions to a House Armed Services Committee hearing on 17 FEB. Of about 916,000 doses administered to DoD personnel, 359,000 have received at least one dose, and 147,000 are fully vaccinated, according to Bob Salesses, who is performing the duties of assistant defense secretary for homeland defense and global security.

About a third of those offered the vaccine have turned it down, according to Maj. Gen. Jeff Taliaferro, the Joint Staff's vice director for operations. That's worrying to lawmakers. "With new variants popping up across the globe, I'm not sure we can wait two years," for full Food and Drug Administration approval, Rep. Mike Rogers (R-AL) said. "It's critical for our national security that every service member, as well as DoD civilian personnel and contractors, receive vaccines as soon as possible." Previously, the Pentagon had declined to detail how many troops had received vaccines and the overall take rate. A defense official told Military Times in early February that DoD's general counsel made that call.

Both the Pfizer and Moderna vaccines are under an emergency use authorization, which means they haven't completed all of the multiple rounds of rigorous testing required before the FDA clears them. Because it is federal law, department policy is that a vaccine under that authorization won't be mandatory, though service members are required to receive myriad other inoculations in order to serve.

The suspicion among service members closely mirrors that of the general U.S. public, according to a recent poll from the Associated Press. "What we're seeing right now is similar to what we're seeing across the entire United States, in that there's ... a higher percentage of people who are older who are opting to have the vaccine, and it trends down with age," Air Force Brig. Gen. Paul Friedrichs, the Joint Staff surgeon, told reporters 29 JAN.

The U.S. Navy is rolling out less-restrictive COVID-19 requirements for immunized sailors and fully vaccinated crews, policies that will lead to more port calls and less pre-deployment quarantines for those

who volunteer for the vaccine. Sailors who opt to get one of the voluntary COVID vaccines won't have to quarantine before deployment if they received their final dose within the past three months, according to updated COVID guidance sent 16 FEB by Vice Adm. Phil Sawyer, deputy chief of naval operations for operations, plans and strategy.

Fully vaccinated crews will be able to do away with restriction of movement, or ROM, sequesters and will be able to "relax health protection measures aimed at mitigating the spread of the novel coronavirus," the message states. Immunized sailors will also be able to get off the ship and enjoy expanded liberty in "safe haven ports" like Guam or Bahrain, and restriction-of-movement, or ROM, periods for vaccinated units in training or readying to deploy will be eased as well. Vaccines allow a path back to something that resembles normalcy, according to the Navy. "In short, fully immunized sailors will allow our Navy to begin to unwind the limitations that have been placed on our sailors at sea," the message states. "The higher percentage of the crew immunized, the less risk there is to a widespread outbreak."

The message also states that "nearly every ship in the Navy has had at least one case onboard." "In the majority of those cases, aggressive early action to isolate, quarantine, contact trace and continue strict health protection measures has contained the incidence rate onboard to well less than five percent, allowing those ships to fight through and remain on mission," according to the message. [Go here](#) to read the updated guidance. Tuesday's message also states that fully immunized crews will be able to "relax health protection measures" after a certain number of days onboard, depending on crew size. If the ship brings on any non-immunized individuals, such measures must be put in place again while those people are on board.

The message states that guidance will continue to be updated "as we learn more about the vaccines and the reduced risk it affords our sailors." "For crews who are a 100 percent immunized...modeling shows the risk of infection is extremely low," Sawyer wrote. Immunized sailors will be able to make port calls in overseas U.S. ports, including Guam, Bahrain, Yokosuka, Japan, Rota, Spain and Sasebo, Japan, but will be limited to base services, according to the message. The message states that the COVID-19 vaccines are now being "rapidly deployed across the fleet." Navy leaders have said in recent weeks that they expect to make the vaccine mandatory when allowed. "We cannot make it mandatory yet, but I can tell you we're probably going to make it mandatory as soon as we can, just like the flu vaccine," U.S. 2nd Fleet commander Vice Adm. Andrew Lewis told reporters last week. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Meghann Myers & Geoff Ziezulewicz | February 16 & 17, 2021 ++]

USMC Survival Training

Update 01: Pentagon Petitioned to Stop Cobra Blood Rituals

An animal rights group has petitioned the Pentagon to end the practice of Marines and soldiers decapitating snakes and consuming their blood during survival training at the annual Cobra Gold exercise in Thailand. U.S. service members gathering for a taste of cobra blood is "ritualistic rather than instructive" and may be a health risk, according to the plea 17 FEB from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin.

“Cobra Gold is not a practical sustenance procurement training exercise but rather a cruel method of attempting to build camaraderie among troops,” said the petition signed by PETA vice president Shalin Gala. A Pentagon spokesman reached 17 FEB said the department would not be able to respond until the following day. This is PETA’s second attempt to shut down that aspect of survival training. Last March, the organization wrote Marine Corps Commandant Gen. David Berger asking him to end the practice of killing cobras and other animals during Cobra Gold. The Marines did not respond at the time.



Cobra Gold is a multinational exercise co-hosted by the United States and Thailand. It is the largest joint military exercise in Southeast Asia and includes training in disaster response and cyber-threat response and humanitarian assistance. Part of its jungle survival training involves Thai military instructors preparing native insects and snakes for consumption. U.S. military photographers typically record the vivid scenes. “Despite the extreme cruelty inflicted during Cobra Gold, the photographs and videos document a complete indifference to the suffering of the animals,” the PETA petition said. “Instead, participants revel in the torture and deaths, in what can only be described as a party-like atmosphere.”

The exercise is usually staged in the spring, but with the coronavirus pandemic, Cobra Gold is postponed until fall, Indo-Pacific Command spokesman Army Maj. Randy Ready said 17 FEB. The command is still planning the exercise and figuring out what it will look like, he said. PETA also called attention to the potential health risk of drinking cobra blood, saying it “poses a zoonotic disease threat akin to the COVID-19 pandemic currently wreaking havoc across the world.” The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention said Feb. 10 that while the coronavirus originated in an animal, likely a bat, no current findings suggest that animals perpetuate the virus’ spread. “At this time, there is no evidence that animals play a significant role in spreading SARS-CoV-2, the virus that causes COVID-19, to people,” the CDC website says. “The first reported infections were linked to a live animal market, but the virus is now spreading from person to person.”

In 2011, the Marine Corps Mountain Warfare Training Center in California curtailed its use of live animals in survival training after discussions with PETA, the petition states. And prior to that, the U.S. Army Dugway Proving Ground in Utah did the same after PETA appealed to then-Secretary of Defense Les Aspin. As an alternative, PETA in its petition proposed virtual training or using plant-based foods in the survival food procurement portion of the exercise. [Source: Stars & Stripes | John Vandiver | February 1, 2021 ++]

USAF SHiELD Program

Air Force to Begin Assembly of Airborne Laser



The Air Force Research Laboratory is set to receive the first major assembly of one subsystem needed for its airborne laser, although it's pushed back the first test to fiscal 2024. The Self-Protect High Energy Laser Demonstrator (SHiELD) Advanced Technology Demonstration Program's goal is to build a laser weapon that can be installed on fighter jets to take out incoming missiles. The weapons system includes the laser under development by Lockheed Martin, a beam control system being developed by Northrop Grumman, and a pod to encase it all made by Boeing. Lockheed Martin was awarded a \$26.3 million contract to design and build the laser.

In a 23 FEB announcement, AFRL said that it is scheduled to receive the first major assembly of one of SHiELD's three main subsystems in February. The lab expects delivery of the other two subsystems in July. The delivery this month marks the end of development and production of the subsystems and the beginning of complete system integration, AFRL noted. "Over the last five years we have worked side-by-side with Lockheed Martin, Boeing and Northrop Grumman, advancing the technology that would make this system work," said SHiELD Program Manager Jeff Heggemeier in a statement. "To finally have the subsystems in the lab, will be a huge step forward in seeing the system to completion."

Still, a full system test is years away. Originally slated for 2021, in June AFRL pushed the flight demonstration back by two years — to 2023. Now, the lab says the first fully system test will be conducted in 2024. Tests of some of the enabling technologies have taken place, according to AFRL. The Air Force has successfully flown an F-15 with a laser test pod attached, and ground-based laser weapons have been used to shoot down air-launched missiles. "Those critical demonstrations show that our directed energy system is on track to be a game changer for our warfighters," AFRL Directed Energy Directorate Director Kelly Hammett said in a statement. "The ability to shoot down missiles in flight, and operate in denied environments, increases the advantage we have over our adversaries."

Even as the SHiELD program continues to make headway, high-level officials have questioned the practicality of airborne lasers. Perhaps most notably, then-Undersecretary of Defense for Research and Engineering Mike Griffin stated last year that the program's goal — shooting down missiles midair with an airborne laser — was unlikely to work. "I'm extremely skeptical that we can put a large laser on an aircraft and use it to shoot down an adversary missile, even from fairly close," said Griffin. "It has been done as an experiment, but as a weapon system — to equip an airplane with the kinds of lasers we think necessary, in terms of their power level, and all their support requirements, and get the airplane to altitudes where atmospheric turbulence can be mitigated appropriately — that combination of things doesn't go on one platform."

When asked to respond a month later, Air Force acquisitions chief Will Roper acknowledged that installing lasers on fighter jets for missile threats might not be the best option. Instead, he suggested that directed-energy technology could be repurposed to take out small drones — a growing concern for the Pentagon. The Air Force is working to develop that exact capability. In AFRL’s announcement, Heggemeier acknowledged that taking out surface-to-air or air-to-air missiles traveling at Mach speeds is difficult. “These are hard problems we are solving,” Heggemeier said. “Imagine the disturbances and stresses — wind speeds, turbulence, and quick aircraft maneuvers that a laser system would have to perform under. We had to solve those challenges first — and that took time.” [Source: C4ISRNET | Nathan Strout | February 23, 2021 ++]

B-1 Bomber

Update 06: The ‘Bone’ Heads to the Boneyard



The U.S. Air Force on 17 FEB began the process of retiring the B-1 Lancer, as the “Bone” bomber flew to the Air Force’s boneyard where divested aircraft are kept in storage. The Air Force plans to retire 17 of its 62 B-1s, as authorized by Congress in the fiscal 2021 defense policy bill. The service said divesting its most battered and difficult-to-maintain B-1s would free up maintainers to restore the health of the remaining Lancer fleet. Gen. Tim Ray, who leads Air Force Global Strike Command, described the retirement of the B-1 as “something we have been working toward for some time” to transition to the B-21 Raider in the mid-2020s. “Due to the wear and tear placed on the B-1 fleet over the past two decades, maintaining these bombers would cost 10s of millions of dollars per aircraft to get back to status quo,” he said in a statement. “And that’s just to fix the problems we know about. We’re just accelerating planned retirements.”

After a single B-1 was sighted flying around Arizona on Wednesday evening, an Air Force spokesman confirmed to Military.com that one B-1 from Ellsworth Air Force Base in South Dakota was making its way toward Davis-Monthan Air Force Base, Arizona. Davis-Monthan AFB is home to the “boneyard,” where the Air Force stores thousands of retired military planes, keeping aircraft safe so that parts can be harvested. Four of the 17 retired B-1s will be required to be maintained in “type 2000 recallable storage,” which would allow the Air Force to put those aircraft back into service if needed. Forty-five B-1s will be left in the active-duty inventory after the 17 bombers are divested. The B-1B has been flown hard in combat over the last two decades, and continued operations over the Middle East have “taken a toll on the airframe’s structure,” the Air Force said in a statement. Currently, a small portion of the B-1B fleet would require anywhere from \$10 million to \$30 million per plane to maintain the “status quo.”

In the FY21 National Defense Authorization Act, Congress prohibited the Air Force from reassigning any maintenance personnel currently working on the B-1, ensuring that maintainers can devote their attention to increasing the readiness of the B-1 inventory. “Retiring aircraft with the least amount of usable life allows us to prioritize the health of the fleet and crew training,” Ray said. “Our ability to balance these priorities will make us more capable and lethal overall.” The last B-1 is slated to leave service in 2036. [Source: DefenseNews | Valerie Insinna | February 18, 2021++]

Antisubmarine Warfare Navy Drone Program Involvement



Autonomous Sensor Gliders

The U.S. Navy is collecting proposals for a new autonomous glider drone that can collect data — such as water temperatures over time — as a way to improve how it hunts for enemy submarines. The system will be the next generation of the current Littoral Battlespace Sensing Glider, which generally deploys from one of the Navy’s five oceanographic survey ships. That glider became the center of an international incident in 2016 when China seized the drone, calling it a hazard to navigation. The Navy would use the drones for measuring water conditions in places where it might expect to need to hunt submarines in the future and help guide fleet operational planning.

The drone would need to be able to operate for 90 days at a time, dive to depths of up to 200 meters – or 657 feet – and take a sample every 2 seconds, according to documents posted to Naval Information Warfare Systems Command’s website. The Navy wants the drone to be able to loiter at depth or on the bottom, be able to transmit data when it surfaces via iridium satellite or a line-of-site datalink and be recoverable by either a survey ship or a vessel of opportunity. The drone should also be able to scuttle itself and erase the data if tampered with, a function that can be triggered by operators at a command center or if the machine is tampered with, the documents read.

The Navy has made anti-submarine warfare a major focus of its drone programs, with the medium unmanned surface vessel under development being considered primarily as an anti-submarine warfare asset. Having accurate data on water conditions over time is a critical piece of the puzzle that allows sub hunters to know how their instruments will behave, as well various depths where a submarine might try to hide from sonar. Creating that kind of picture below the water is as important for anti-submarine operations as checking the weather is for air operations, said Jerry Hendrix, an analyst with Telemus Group and a former naval flight officer in the P-3 community that specializes in ASW. “The first things we’d do on a mission would be to drop a [Bathythermograph sonobuoy] and update all our calculations based on that

data,” Hendrix said. “This technology gives you that as kind of a running total. It’s almost like a weather radar constantly updating you, and it’s absolutely critical to making sure your model is as accurate as possible.”

In 2016, about 50 miles from the Philippines in the South China Sea, a Chinese Navy submarine recovery vessel swiped one of the Navy’s Littoral Battlespace Sensing Glides, which prompted the Pentagon to demand the Chinese return it. China returned the unclassified drone, saying it had removed it as a “hazard to navigation.” The gliders are the product of Teledyne Brown Engineering, Inc., in Huntsville, Ala, and the company has delivered more than 180 to the Navy to date, according to its website [Source: Defense News | David B. Larter | January 19, 2021 ++]

Military Uniforms

Update 06: Snow Camouflage



A military camouflage uniform testing exercise held at Tobyhanna Army Depot last month will help ensure service members remain safe when engaged in future battles. The facility in Monroe County, Pa., was selected as a data collection site by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers after its analysis discovered the area's terrain closely resembles potential combat environments in the Baltic region of Europe, said Danielle Weinschenk, the depot's lead public affairs specialist. And the snow on the ground helped. The testing was part of an ongoing study to determine the effectiveness of military overwhite uniforms. The attire, also known as "snow camouflage," is designed to conceal soldiers from different types of night vision sensors. "The work we did will help us determine how we can improve our snow camouflage system for our soldiers," said Clay Williamson, future programs officer at PEO Soldier in Virginia.

Anabela Dugas, a textile technologist at the Army's DEVCOM Soldier Center in Massachusetts, stressed the findings will provide agencies with vital data to determine if the uniforms can be spotted in different environments. "They will do a probability of detection evaluation where they take all the images, calibrate them and go through a simulation-type database where soldiers look at different images to see if they are able to detect the garment under the conditions and backgrounds, and at what range," she said. The results from the study will also be used for future product development and procurement, Weinschenk said. Williamson lauded members of the depot's staff for their cooperation with the project. "We do testing at a

huge array of military installations, not just Army, and the support we got at Tobyhanna was top-notch," he said. "It was also the exact environment we needed and the weather was perfectly cooperative to accomplish our testing."

Representatives from the U.S. Army Combat Capabilities Development Command Soldier Center, Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, Product Manager Soldier Clothing and Individual Equipment and a Program Executive Office soldier participated in the study. Williamson added the Army is considering converting some conventional units into a Arctic-capable brigade to increase its presence in that region. "That highlights the importance of making sure we have good snow camouflage," he said. Although soldiers have been wearing snow camouflage for many years, Williamson noted the importance of continued testing. "As technology develops and proliferates across the battlefields, and becomes more prevalent in our enemy's hands, we need to make sure we're able to protect soldiers from detection by more advanced systems," he said. [Source: The Times-Tribune | Robert Tomkavage | February 21, 2021 | ++]

Rifle Optics

Marines Field New One for Better Accuracy, Hit Probability



The Marine Corps recently began fielding a new rifle optic to improve shooter accuracy at distances with both the M4 carbine and M27 Infantry Automatic Rifle. The **squad common optic** is a magnified day optic that has both an illuminated and nonilluminated aim point that's built to increase effective target acquisition and probability of hit, according to a press release from Marine Corps Systems Command. "The squad common optic provides an improved day optic to infantry and infantry-like communities, including reconnaissance units" Tom Dever, project officer for combat optics said in the release. "It's a system that improves situational awareness and decreases engagement times, greatly benefiting Marines."

The SCO will replace the rifle combat optic, and is a bit larger. The new scope weighs 31.5 ounces and is 10.5 inches long — making it nearly double the size of the nearly 6-inch and 10 ounce RCO. But with that size Marines are able to double their magnification, from the current four times magnification of the RCO to eight times with the SCO. The Corps chose the optic in a \$64 million contract with Trijicon, the Michigan-based company that builds both the RCO and SCO in February 2022. The initial order was for 19,000 devices, starting with both reconnaissance and infantry units. At the time, Dever previously told Marine Corps Times that the scope also comes with a continuously adjustable magnification range, which allows the user to move from one times to eight times magnification.

The SCO can be rail-mounted by hand, no tools required. And it can work with both M855 and M855A1 variants of the 5.56 mm round. The scopes began rolling out to Marines in January and are expected to complete full fielding by 2023. The lead engineer for the SCO program, Roger Boughton, provided further contrasts between the systems, saying in the release that the RCO has a fixed magnification but the SCO provides a variable power. This means Marines can use the SCO to identify targets at both close and far distances, providing twice the visual range of the RCO.

“Having an optic that can reach out to longer distances will ultimately make the Marine a more lethal first-shot shooter,” said Boughton. “This means they can use less rounds to overwhelm an enemy.” That option can buy time when selecting and engaging targets by providing more accurate round placement. “It’s all about making an accurate decision,” said Maj. Kyle Padilla, Systems Command optics team lead and an infantry officer. “The SCO gives squad leaders or individual riflemen more time to make a decision to eliminate that threat if necessary.” [Source: MilitaryTimes | Todd South | February 23, 2021 ++]

Navy Terminology, Jargon & Slang

‘Sea Lawyer’ thru ‘Shitcan’

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

Sea Lawyer – Someone who professes to have significant knowledge of the fine points of the rules and regs. This knowledge is often used for personal gain, or to claim why something cannot be done.

Sea Story – A tale of nautical or airborne derring-do. Differs from a fairy tale only in that while a fairy tale begins "Once upon a time," a sea story begins either "There I was," (aviation version) or "This is no shit," (seaborne version).

Sea Suction - Underwater opening in a ship's hull. May be several feet in diameter. Usually fitted with a grating to prevent the entry of large, unwanted objects such as divers and other sea life.

Semi – (UK) A member of the USN, or more generally, things American, e.g. "that semi destroyer." Originated in the proliferation of semi-automatic gear in the post-WWII US Navy, especially things that did not work so well. Pronounced "sem-eye."

Semi-Active Homing – A type of radar missile homing where the launch platform provides radar transmissions and the missile homes in on the radar energy reflected off of the target. Abbreviated as ‘SAH.’

Set and Drift – Refers to the behavior of a ship under the influence of wind and current; both deflect the ship from its intended course. ‘Set’ is the direction of that deflection, and ‘drift’ is the speed in knots of the displacement. A vector.

Sewer pipe - Submarine.

Shaft Alley - Engineering space aft of engine rooms, where propeller shafts pierce the hull. Location of shaft seals, etc.

Shellback - One who has crossed the Equator. Frequently modified with the adjective "trusty".

Shift Colors - When a ship moors, the national colors are broken on the stern, the Jack is broken on the bow, and the national colors ("steaming colors") are hauled down at the masthead, all at the instant the first line goes over. When the ship gets underway, as soon as the last line is cast off the dock, the Jack and colors are struck at bow and stern while the steaming colors are broken at the masthead.

Ship Over – Re-enlist.

Ship’s Company – Refers to the officers and men assigned to the ship, as separate from the AIRWING.

Shipshape – Also seen as "Shipshape and Bristol fashion." The desired condition of any ship or unit; the maintenance of seamanlike appearance. Every piece of gear stowed neatly, "a place for everything, and everything in its place."

Shitbird – A screwed-up person.

Shitcan - Trash can, or when used as a verb, to throw something away. Can be used to refer to people: "He was a dirtbag, so we shitcanned him to Surface Line."

[Source: <http://hazegray.org/faq/slang1.htm> | February 28, 2021 ++]

* Military History *



Eisenhower’s Threat to Quit

Disagreement with Churchill over Bomber Use

As the Supreme Commander of Allied forces in Europe and leader of the D-Day invasion, Gen. Dwight D. Eisenhower became legendary for his ability to get officers and armies from different nations to work together to defeat Nazi Germany. But if needed, he was also willing to take a more confrontational approach. In fact, just a few months before the critical D-Day invasion, Eisenhower threatened to quit his command and go back to the United States. Eisenhower had been in heated talks with British Prime

Minister Winston Churchill over a controversial plan to bomb the French railway and road system ahead of the Normandy invasion.

The so-called Transportation Plan, largely devised by British zoologist-turned-military strategist named Solly Zuckerman with the help of British Air Marshal Arthur Tedder, called for diverting Allied strategic bombers that had been hammering German industrial plants. Instead, Eisenhower wanted them to temporarily shift to a new mission—crippling the transportation infrastructure that the Germans might use to move troops and equipment to the coastal region, thus hindering them from rushing to counter the Allied invasion force. “Eisenhower wanted to use our heavy strategic bombers, the big four-engine planes that were built to destroy German cities and the economy, and send them to wreck the French roads and railway system,” explains Robert Citino, executive director of the Institute for the Study of War and Democracy and senior historian at the National World War II Museum in New Orleans.

For Eisenhower, the switch in bombing seemed like a no-brainer. He knew that landing a massive invasion force and overcoming the elaborate layers of defenses that the Germans had built along the coast would be an incredibly difficult task, and the consequences of a failure would be catastrophic. “He thought he had to do everything possible to make sure Rommel couldn’t kick them off the beaches,” explains military historian Carlo D’Este, author of biographies of both Eisenhower and Churchill. “The Transportation plan played into that. He probably thought, we’ve got to have every advantage we can get, to avoid a disaster.”

But Arthur “Bomber” Harris, head of the Royal Air Force’s strategic bomber command, and his American counterpart, Gen. Carl “Tooey” Spaatz, didn’t see it that way. They weren’t under Eisenhower’s command, and their crews were accustomed to attacking massive industrial plants and German cities, not railroad switches and stations scattered across the countryside. To them, it seemed like a waste of resources, a diversion from their real mission. “They wanted to keep bombing German cities,” Citino says. “They thought that was the quickest way to end the war. That might seem like the height of naivete today, but people believed it at the time. The air forces wanted to prove that they could win the war on their own. You want to bomb Berlin, and instead you’re being told to bomb some podunk French village because it’s got a railway crossing.”

“That was probably Eisenhower’s biggest frustration—his lack of control over the air forces, and their unwillingness to listen to him and desire to go their own way,” D’Este says. To make matters even worse for Eisenhower, the Transportation Plan had another, even more powerful opponent—Prime Minister Winston Churchill, who already was feeling uneasy about the invasion, since the depleted British army—“they were running on fumes,” D’Este explains—couldn’t afford another punishing setback. Added to that was another dilemma. Eisenhower wanted to drop bombs on France, an Allied country that the British and Americans were supposed to be liberating, and in addition to destroying the railroads, the raids ran the risk of inflicting casualties among the French civilian population.

While Churchill’s concerns about collateral damage were genuine, “to be honest, the humanitarian debate was very much second line,” Citino says. “The real question was who could win the war more quickly.” The strategic bombing brass insisted that Germany already was on its last legs, and that they could win the war in six months on their own. “They said, let us devise our own plan,” Citino explains. “We’ll bomb oil production facilities, chemical plants, ball bearings plants inside Germany. But it’s really about oil.” Eisenhower told his opponents that their Oil Plan, as they called it, wouldn’t do him much good. As historian Stephen E. Ambrose has written, Eisenhower argued that the Germans had hidden oil

and gasoline in camouflaged depots across France, so knocking out their plants in Germany wouldn't help the invasion that much.

On 22 MAR, Eisenhower dictated a memo that detailed the history of the dispute. By the time that he finished it, he was so irked that he bluntly stated that if his opponents didn't give in quickly, he planned "to take drastic action and inform the Combined Chiefs of Staff that unless the matter is settled, at once I will request relief from this Command." He made the threat more explicitly in a conversation with Tedder, the British officer who backed Eisenhower's plan. "By God," Eisenhower told him, "You tell that bunch that if they can't get together and stop quarreling like children, I will tell the prime minister to get someone else to run this damned war. I'll quit."

Apparently, the threat worked. The prime minister did express his misgivings in a subsequent meeting with the British War Cabinet, where according to Ambrose, he warned that Eisenhower's plan "will smear the good name of Royal Air Forces across the world." But eventually, he too decided to sign off on the Transportation Plan, though he tried to diffuse the responsibility by putting the question to President Franklin Roosevelt for final approval. FDR told Churchill that military considerations trumped the humanitarian question, and that the bombing should proceed. Eisenhower's gambit had worked. "Eisenhower, who always claimed not to know anything about politics, actually was a supremely political general," Citino says. "I think he knew exactly what impact his threat to resign would have."

D'Este concurs, noting that the incident showed how well Eisenhower understood Churchill. "If you go back to 1942 and look at the reasons that Eisenhower and Churchill hit it off, one of the reasons that Churchill liked Ike so much was that Ike was willing to stand up to him," D'Este says. "Ike knew that." Even so, according to D'Este, Eisenhower deftly avoided backing Churchill into a corner, by directly giving him an ultimatum that would have threatened him with loss of face. Instead, he made the actual threat to others, whom he knew would report back to the prime minister that Ike was at the end of his patience. "I don't think it would have been hard for Eisenhower's feelings to get back to Churchill." D'Este says.

Tedder, who had taken the risk of siding with Eisenhower—"he thought Churchill was going to sack him," D'Este notes—undoubtedly breathed a sigh of relief, before carrying out Eisenhower's plan. By D-Day, the Allies had dropped 76,000 tons of bombs—which Ambrose calculated was about seven times the explosive power of the Hiroshima A-bomb—on French railways. Though some accounts question the effect of the bombing, Citino has no such doubts. "It was extremely effective," he says. As a result, "the German army had a very difficult time getting around France." In the end, the way Eisenhower threatened to quit only showed the depth of his dedication to making D-Day a successful operation and defeating the Nazis. It also demonstrated the deft political skill that eventually would help him to reach the White House. [Source: www.history.com | Patrick J. Kiger | March 22, 2019 ++]

British WWI Blockade of Germany

Events It Led To

The British Blockade of Germany, or the Blockade of Europe, occurred from 1914 to 1919. It led to Germany declaring waters surrounding Britain to be a war zone, which led to the sinking of a US vessel and the entrance of the United States into the War.

While a so-called close blockade, where a belligerent stopped traffic with its enemy's ports by stationing ships within a three-mile limit, was considered legitimate, a distant blockade of the kind in which Britain was engaged was not. In a distant blockade, one side simply declares whole areas of the seas to be off-limits. In this case, the British mined the North Sea so that even neutral ships would travel in peril. So while an opposing force had the right to search ships carrying cargo to its enemy, British mines indiscriminately destroyed anything with which they came into contact. "By sowing mines in international waters," historian John Coogan explains, "Britain deliberately replaced the belligerent right of visit and search in the North Sea with a new rule: explode and sink."

Moreover, food intended for civilian use was not considered contraband by anyone—except Britain. But given the relatively mild international response to Britain's conduct, the British government concluded that "the neutral powers seem to satisfy themselves with theoretical protest." It was in that spirit that the Germans expected their submarine policy to be accepted as well—but in the case of President Wilson at least, they were in for a surprise. On February 4, 1915, the German government announced that it would retaliate against the illegal British blockade: All the waters surrounding Great Britain and Ireland, including the whole of the English Channel, are then hereby declared to be a war zone.

From 18 FEB onwards every enemy merchant vessel found within this war zone will be destroyed without it always being possible to avoid danger to the crews and passengers. Neutral ships will also be exposed to danger in the war zone, as, in view of the misuse of neutral flags ordered on 31 JAN by the British Government, and owing to unforeseen incidents to which naval warfare is liable, it is impossible to avoid attacks being made on neutral ships in mistake for those of the enemy.



The reference to "the misuse of neutral flags" recalled the occasional British practice of decorating their ships with the flags of neutral countries to shield them from attack. By early 1915 Churchill was encouraging such a policy, and crews were being urged to don civilian clothing in order to lure German subs to the surface—where they would then be destroyed. For that reason, and because of the general danger that always exists during wartime, even neutral ships could not be assured of their safety when traveling through the war zone. Thus both the British and, in retaliation, the Germans, were guilty of violating the rights of neutral nations.

By January 1917 the German situation was becoming more and more difficult, with the starvation blockade taking a terrible toll on civilians. The German military managed to persuade the civilian leadership that it was necessary to engage in unrestricted submarine warfare, even if it meant war with the United States. They believed that Germany could sink enough enemy shipping that the war would be won by the time the Americans could send an expeditionary force to Europe.

Not surprisingly, fewer and fewer American ship captains dared venture into the war zone, not wanting to be sunk by a German submarine. Now for those historians who, out of a misplaced devotion to Wilson's memory, try to claim that the president was a lover of peace who desperately tried to avoid American involvement in the war, it is difficult to account for what Wilson did next. Breaking with all previous American tradition, the president called for arming merchant ships with U.S. Navy guns and staffing them with Navy crews, and instructing them to fire on any surfacing submarine they encountered. Bearing such instructions, American merchant ships headed for the war zone. Four of them had been sunk by the time Wilson requested a declaration of war from Congress in April.

[Source: <https://www.historyonthenet.com/british-blockade-of-germany> | February 25, 2021 ++]

Civil War Harriet Tubman

Black Liberator and Union Spy



Under the cover of night on June 1, 1863, Harriet Tubman led Union troops from the Sea Islands up the black waters of South Carolina's Combahee River, with a plan to destroy bridges, raid Confederate outposts and rice plantations, cutting off supply lines to Confederate troops. While working as a spy for the Union Army, Tubman had slipped behind Confederate lines, gathering intelligence from enslaved Black people to obtain the coordinates of torpedoes planted along the river by Confederates.

That night, with Tubman leading the expedition, the Union gunboats quietly maneuvered, deftly avoiding each torpedo. The boats — the John Adams and the Harriet A. Weed — held Black soldiers as they moved up the Combahee, overrunning Confederate sentinels in a devastating raid. As the gunboats set anchor, Confederate guards fled. Union soldiers burned bridges, tore up railroads, set blaze to Confederate mansions and rice plantations. When the Union gunboats turned back down river, hundreds of enslaved Black people fled rice plantations, running as fast as they could for freedom. "Some had bags on their backs with pigs in them; some had chickens tied by the legs, and so children squalling, chickens squawking and pigs squealing," Tubman said later. "They all come running to the gunboats through the rice fields. They reminded me of the children of Israel coming out of Egypt."

With the raid's success, the Union was able to establish a blockade on the river and welcome at least 100 freed Black men to its ranks. And Tubman would go down in history as the first woman to successfully plan and lead a military expedition during the Civil War. Now, more than 150 years later, Tubman has been inducted into the Military Intelligence Corps Hall of Fame.

Most Americans know Harriet Tubman as the fearless woman who escaped slavery and then helped lead 300 other enslaved people to freedom as part of the Underground Railroad. Last month, the Biden administration announced that it will resume the effort to put Tubman on the \$20 bill as a tribute to her role as an abolitionist. But Tubman wasn't only a hero of the Underground Railroad. "What most Americans don't know is down in South Carolina, she was part of a small scouting unit that collected intelligence behind enemy lines on the Confederacy," said Christopher Costa, executive director of the International Spy Museum in Washington. "She was not only involved with spying and scouting, she almost operated like a Special Operations specialist. It is an extraordinary story."

Tubman was born enslaved around 1821 or 1822 on a farm owned by Anthony Thompson on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in Dorchester County. She was the fifth of nine children. Her parents — Benjamin and Harriet Green Ross — named her Araminta Ross. They called her "Minty." When she was 12 or 13, she was sent to a general store in Bucktown. Inside, a White overseer threw a two-pound lead weight, aiming at a young Black boy attempting to run away. The lead weight missed the boy but hit Minty in the forehead, nearly killing her. She would have seizures — "sleeping spells" — for the rest of her life.

In 1844, Minty married John Tubman, a free Black man. She changed her first name to Harriet — her mother's name — and took her husband's last name, Tubman. In 1849, worried that she and others might be sold, Tubman plotted her freedom. Unable to persuade her husband to leave with her, she escaped and made her way to freedom in Philadelphia. Despite risks of capture and death, Tubman returned to Maryland, often in disguise as a man or elderly woman, sometimes on foot, or by boat, horse or train. Tubman freed more than 70 Black people in Maryland, including her parents. She was so stealthy that enslavers in Maryland put a \$40,000 bounty out for her capture. But she was never caught, later declaring: "I was the conductor of the Underground Railroad for eight years, and I can say what most conductors can't say — I never ran my train off the track and I never lost a passenger."

After the Civil War erupted, Tubman traveled to South Carolina, where she worked as a nurse for wounded Black Union soldiers. "After her almost superhuman efforts in making her own escape from slavery, and then returning to the South nineteen times, and bringing away with her over three hundred fugitives, she was sent by Governor Andrew of Massachusetts to the South at the beginning of the War, to act as spy and scout for our armies, and to be employed as hospital nurse when needed," according to "The Moses of Her People," a biography of Tubman, written by Sarah Bradford. In South Carolina, Tubman was recruited by Union Major General David Hunter to become a spy and scout behind Confederate territory lines.

Tubman would "become a kind of guerrilla operative. The Union Army had barely begun admitting Black men, much less Black women, but Harriet would not be deterred," according to the National Abolition Hall of Fame and Museum. "She explained her sense of urgency by citing the Book of Exodus: 'The good Lord has come down to deliver my people, and I must go and help Him.' "She could not read, but she memorized information on the lay of the land and the movement of Confederate soldiers. Hunter asked Tubman to accompany several "gun-boats up the Combahee River," Bradford wrote, "the object of the

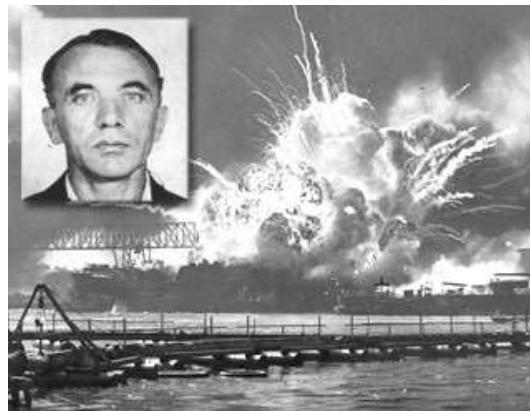
expedition being to take up the torpedoes placed by the rebels in the river, to destroy railroads and bridges, and to cut off supplies from the rebel troops."

Tubman said she would go on the expedition only "if Colonel Montgomery was to be appointed commander of the expedition," Bradford wrote. "Colonel Montgomery was one of John Brown's men, and was well known to Harriet." "She worked with Col. James Montgomery and he was a believer in guerrilla warfare," Costa said. "It was a mix of espionage, scouting and reconnaissance . . . This was a five-foot woman, but she was tough as nails. Not only were they collecting intelligence, but they raided the Confederacy. They swarmed from the rivers and raided and torched homes and warehouses that were Confederate supply depots."

The sight of the gunboats had an electrifying effect on the enslaved, who chased after them. "One woman brought two pigs, a white one and a black one," Tubman recounted later. "We took them all on board; named the white pig Beauregard, and the black pig Jeff Davis. Sometimes the women would come with twins hanging around their necks; pears like I never see so many twins in my life — bags on their shoulders, baskets on their heads and young one tagging behind." Bradford wrote that the gunboats became so crowded, "the oarsmen would beat them on their hands, but they would not let go; they were afraid the gunboats would go off and leave them, and all wanted to make sure of these arks of refuge. At length Colonel Montgomery shouted from the upper deck, above the clamor of appealing ones, 'Moses, you'll have to give em a song.' Then Harriet lifted up her voice and sang."

This night raid destroyed Confederate control of the Combahee River along with millions of dollars of Confederate property. Reporting on the raid to Secretary of War Edwin Stanton, according to Tubman's hall of fame biography, a Union general said, "This is the only military command in American history wherein a woman, black or white, led the raid, and under whose inspiration it was originated and conducted." [Source: The Washington Post | Deneen L. Brown | February 12, 2021 ++]

Pearl Harbor Spy **German Born Bernard Kuehn**



On February 21, 1942, just 76 days after the tragic attack on Pearl Harbor, German born Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn (pictured) was found guilty of spying and sentenced to be shot "by musketry" in

Honolulu. What was a German national doing in Hawaii in the days leading up to the attack? What exactly did Kuehn do to warrant such a sentence? Here's the story...

Bernard Julius Otto Kuehn (sometimes referred to as Kuhn) and his family were spies in the employ of the Abwehr for Nazi Germany who had close ties to Propaganda Minister Joseph Goebbels. In 1935, Goebbels offered Kuehn a job working for Japanese intelligence in Hawaii; he accepted and moved his family to Honolulu on August 15, 1935. The family included Dr. Kuhn, 41 years old; his wife, Friedel; a daughter, Susie Ruth (at 17, she was the former mistress of Goebbels);[1] and her two half-brothers, Hans Joachim, and Eberhard.

His daughter dated U.S. military personnel and opened a beauty parlor that offered the best and cheapest services in the city. Wives of high-ranking military personnel would spend hours gossiping about the comings and goings of their husbands and boyfriends. "They talked so much," she would later say, "that it was a relief when they left the place". Bernard Kuehn's son, Hans Joachim Kuehn was only 11 years old when he was trained by his father to ask precise questions about the ships and submarines. Young Hans was also trained to notice some critical areas on those ships and submarines. Every morning, Bernard would dress up young Hans as a U.S. Navy sailor to show their patriotism, and they would both go walk along the waterfront. The Officers would invite Hans into the ships and submarines and that is when Hans would start spying. His wife's job was to record all intelligence that the family obtained.

When Japanese master spy Takeo Yoshikawa arrived in Honolulu, Dr. Kuhn would flash coded messages from the attic of the Kuhn household—a system that went undetected until the end. Bed sheets on clothes lines. Lights in dormer windows. Car headlights. A boat with a star on its sail. Otto Kuehn had a complex system of signals all worked out. A light shining in the dormer window of his Oahu house from 9 to 10 p.m., for example, meant that U.S. aircraft carriers had sailed. A linen sheet hanging on a clothes line at his home on Lanikai beach between 10 and 11 a.m. meant the battle force had left the harbor. There were eight codes in all, used in varying combinations with the different signals.

In November 1941, Kuehn had offered to sell intelligence on U.S. warships in Hawaiian waters to the Japanese consulate in Hawaii. On 2 DEC, he provided specific—and highly accurate—details on the fleet in writing. That same day, he gave the consulate the set of signals that could be picked up by nearby Japanese subs. Kuehn—a member of the Nazi party—had arrived in Hawaii in 1935. By 1939, the FBI was suspicious of him. He had questionable contacts with the Germans and Japanese. He'd lavishly entertained U.S. military officials and expressed interest in their work. He had two houses in Hawaii, lots of dough, but no real job. Investigations by the Bureau and the Army, though, never turned up definite proof of his spying.

Not until the fateful attack of December 7, 1941. Honolulu Special Agent in Charge Robert Shivers immediately began coordinating homeland security in Hawaii and tasked local police with guarding the Japanese consulate. They found its officials trying to burn reams of paper. These documents—once decoded—included a set of signals for U.S. fleet movements. All fingers

pointed at Kuehn. He had the dormer window, the sailboat, and big bank accounts. Kuehn was arrested the next day and confessed, though he denied ever sending coded signals.

After volunteering valuable information about the Japanese and German spy networks, his sentence was commuted to 50 years hard labor instead of death "by musketry"—, but after the war he was deported to Germany. His daughter and wife also served time in prison and both went back to Germany on their release. Today, his story reminds us how much damage espionage can do to our country. And why the FBI continues to rank counterintelligence as a top investigative priority. [Source: <https://www.fbi.gov/history/famous-cases/pearl-harbor-spy> | February 21 2021 ++]

American Vets Recollections **Frank Devita at Omaha Beach**



Frank DeVita was in charge of lowering the ramp, the only thing shielding troops from the USS Samuel Chase from rapid enemy gunfire, during the first wave on D-Day. His chilling experience would haunt him for the rest of his life. Watch as he tells his remarkable story of service and sacrifice in the 38 minute video at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=leeB5EoQcIs&feature=emb_title.

[Source: American Veterans Center | August 25, 2020 ++]

Military History Anniversaries **01 thru 15 MAR**

Significant events in U. S. Military History over the next 15 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Military History Anniversaries 01 thru 15 MAR**". [Source: This Day in History www.history.com/this-day-in-history | February 2021 ++]

Every Picture Tells A Story

German Tankgewehr M1918



New Zealand Cavalry soldiers pose with a captured German Tankgewehr M1918, the world's first anti-tank rifle, 1918. New Zealand may be small but its soldiers are fierce. When the 2nd New Zealand Division was sent to Greece to defend the country from the German military in 1941 they fought admirably and destroyed the Aliakmon River to slow down Nazi forces. By taking on the Germans in Greece, these New Zealand soldiers were definitely at a loss. They didn't have home field advantage and they were severely outnumbered, but they still fought relentlessly. On April 12, the New Zealand forces fought against the German military with anti-tank rifles and positions that pinned down the Germans before retreating to the Olympus Pass. The group ended up continuing their battle with the Axis in Crete where they suffered major losses, with 61 men captured and 17 killed in the lengthy battle.

WWII Bomber Nose Art

[70] Ole Man Moe



Medal of Honor Awardees

John Kilmer | Korea



The President of the United States takes pride in posthumously presenting the

MEDAL OF HONOR

To

John E. Kilmer

Organization: U.S. Navy, medical corpsman with a Marine rifle company, 1st Marine Division

Place and date: August 13, 1952 Korea

Entered service: Aug. 16, 1947

Born: Aug. 15, 1930, in Highland Park, Illinois



Medics are vital members of the team when you're in battle. When casualties are mounting, their skills are crucial to helping service members survive. While serving as a hospital corpsman in Korea, Navy Petty Officer 3rd Class John E. Kilmer gave his life to save his comrades. He was only 21, but his effort and courage were unquestioned, and they led him to posthumously earn the Medal of Honor.

Kilmer was born Aug. 15, 1930, in Highland Park, Illinois, but his family moved him and his brother to San Antonio while they were still kids. Kilmer's teenage years unfolded during and directly after World War II. Patriotism was incredibly high at that time, so on Aug. 16, 1947 — the day after Kilmer's 17th birthday — he dropped out of high school to join the Navy. Kilmer, who went by the name Jackie, graduated from Hospital Corps School in 1948. When the Korean War broke out, his four-year stint as a sailor was almost up. But he wanted to put his medical training to good use, so he reenlisted in August 1951.

According to the Sextant, a Naval History and Heritage Command blog, Kilmer had an undisclosed dispute with a superior officer at some point after reenlisting. Because of that, he asked for a transfer to the

Fleet Marine Force, which provides support to Marines during action and reconnaissance operations. After completing Field Medical School, Kilmer was transferred to duty as a hospital corpsman attached to the 3rd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment, 1st Marine Division. Shortly after, they deployed to Korea.

On Aug. 12, 1952, U.S. Marines were involved in a bitter fight to take over an area called Bunker Hill, a crucial hill that was in the hands of Chinese enemy forces. If the U.S. took the hill, it would enable them to observe movement from far away. The Chinese were initially caught off guard by the attack. Kilmer's rifle company had dug in well forward of the main line of resistance early in the day, expecting a counterattack. It came later than they expected — in the early-morning hours of Aug. 13. Shortly after midnight, large swaths of enemy forces started assaulting the rifle company with mortar, artillery and sniper fire. Kilmer moved from one position to another, helping wounded Marines and carrying many men to safety, despite putting himself in harm's way.

Eventually, Kilmer noticed a seriously wounded Marine lying in a field, so he started to crawl toward the man. Another Marine saw the intensity of the gunfire and tried to stop him, but Kilmer pushed on anyway with only his duty on his mind. Halfway to the man he was trying to rescue, Kilmer was badly wounded by mortar fragments. However, he continued on, inching toward the man despite all the enemy shells falling around them. Kilmer started to give the Marine first aid when another barrage of fire exploded. Thinking only of his patient, Kilmer threw himself on the other Marine to form a human shield. In doing so, the young corpsman was hit by flying shrapnel. The Marine he shielded survived. Kilmer died just two days short of his 22nd birthday.

Kilmer's body was eventually returned home and buried in the family plot at San Jose Burial Park in San Antonio. For the extraordinary valor he showed during battle, Kilmer received the Medal of Honor. Navy Secretary Robert B. Anderson presented it posthumously to his mother, Lois Kilmer, during a Pentagon ceremony on June 18, 1953. Kilmer's legacy lives on. Many Navy hospitals, clinics and other medical facilities across the world have his photo placed prominently on walls they have as memorials. The Navy Inn at Naval Support Activity Mid-South in Millington, Tennessee, was named Kilmer Hall in his honor in 2003.

Every year, on the anniversary of the young corpsman's death, several instructors, staff and students from Joint Base San Antonio's Navy Medicine Training Support Center gather at Kilmer's gravesite. Along with local veterans' organizations, the crowd holds a remembrance ceremony to honor the brave soul who gave his life to save others.

[Source: DOD News & <https://www.cmohs.org> | Katie Lange | January 11, 2021 ++]

*** Health Care ***



Drug Cost Increases

Update 21: High Cost of Prescription Drugs – More than Just Prices

A new study has found that it is more than prices that are high when it comes to so many prescription drugs. According to Modern Healthcare newsletter, “A \$10.40 increase in out-of-pocket costs per prescription was associated with a 22.6% drop in consumption and a 32.7% increase in monthly mortality rates, an analysis of more than 358,000 relatively healthy 65-year-old Medicare beneficiaries found.”

"When we raise prices, they mess with people's ability to make good decisions about their health," said Ziad Obermeyer, co-author of the study and associate professor of health policy and management at the University of California at Berkeley. "Those decisions lead to more people dying—health costs need to be priced into these cost-sharing policies." The study, which was conducted by the National Bureau of Economic Research, found that a Medicare beneficiary paid 25% of the price of their branded drugs until they reached \$2,510 in total annual out-of-pocket spending. The patient then fell into the “donut hole” and had to pay for the full cost until they hit \$5,726, after which they were responsible for a 5% copay.

As a result, the highest-risk patients were not filling their medication after prices jumped. Those most vulnerable to a heart attack and stroke cut back more on statins and anti-hypertensives than lower-risk patients—irrespective of socioeconomic status. The riskiest one-third of patients were 280.6% more likely to drop cardiovascular drugs than the bottom two-thirds; there were similar results for those at high risk of diabetic and pulmonary complications. Rather than cutting back on one or two drugs, there was a large group that stopped filling most if not all their prescriptions as copays went up. And drug list prices continue to increase every year. As health insurers and employers pay more, they often pass those costs to consumers in the form of higher premiums, deductibles, and copayments.

Pharmaceutical manufacturers hiked the list price of a record 832 drugs last month —nearly 200 more than January 2020 and the highest since at least 2014. All but 10 were branded drugs and 175 of those were specialty drugs, according to the report. List prices increased by an average 4.6% in January, which is the largest amount in years. Most list price increases end up trickling down to patients in the form of higher cash and net prices, which is especially important for those who have high deductibles and the uninsured.

These price increases are very likely to block some patients from affording their medication, following instructions for taking the drugs, result in higher costs for treatment in the future because of not taking the prescriptions as directed, and cause higher incidents of additional health issues and death rates. Half of the medications that saw price hikes followed price increases in 2019 and 2020, according to the report. Fighting for legislation to lower the costs of prescription drugs is one of TSCL’s very top priorities this year and we will keep you informed as things progress. [Source: The Senior Citizens League | February 13, 2021 ++]

Medicare News

Update 03: New Concern About Cuts to Medicare

A report came out the weekend of 13 FEB about the possibility of new major cuts to Medicare. This could result because of Senate rules about how many votes it takes to pass legislation. Because just one Senator can stall legislation through what is known as a filibuster, it takes 60 votes to pass any bill unless it is

through a process called “reconciliation,” which then requires only a simple majority of 51. Rather than get into all the details of how this works, we will simplify it this way.

The Democrats now have the majority in the Senate because Vice President Harris can break tie votes, giving a majority vote of 51 to the Democrats. Democrats want to be able to pass President Biden’s economic stimulus/COVID-19 relief bill, but it is highly unlikely they could get 10 Republicans to vote for the bill. Therefore, they are considering using the “reconciliation” process because they would only need 51 votes. But if they do that, legislation passed over ten years ago dictates that they must either raise taxes or cut spending on current programs to pay for the new spending in the President’s bill. By using reconciliation, it would mean there would have to be billions of dollars cut from current spending programs, including Medicare.

Because Medicare is such a crucial program, most members of Congress usually stumble over themselves to protect it. However, if the situation ever presents itself, they will use threats to Medicare to bash the other party. In normal political times neither party would allow Medicare to be cut. But because of our current highly partisan times, it would require ten Republicans to join with Democrats to stop the cuts to Medicare with new legislation if reconciliation were used. However, right now there is no guarantee Republicans would do that, and instead, it is probable they would blame the Medicare cuts on the Democrats. This issue has just popped up and The Senior Citizens League will be in contact with members of Congress to do all we can to prevent these looming cuts and we will keep you advised as to how things are going. [Source: TSCL | February 13, 2021 ++]

Medicare Drug Procurement

Update 05: Medicare Pays More for Drugs than Medicaid

Last week the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) released a report that revealed Medicare outpatient plans are three times more expensive for the same drugs as those covered by Medicaid. According to Bloomberg News, “Budget officials analyzed prices of 176 popular brand name drugs and found the price for a 30-day supply of medication was \$118 on average through Medicaid and \$343 through Medicare Part D, which pays for prescription drugs in retail pharmacies. The government also paid twice as much on the same drugs through Medicare versus the Veterans Affairs program.” The report found similar price disparities in expensive specialty drugs that treat complicated conditions like cancer.

Why does that happen? Again, according to Bloomberg News, “Manufacturers have to offer Medicaid plans their lowest possible price under federal regulations in order to participate in other federal drug programs, which is likely why the Medicaid prices are so low.” In addition, the Secretary of Health and Human Services (HHS) is prohibited from negotiating directly with pharmaceutical companies on behalf of the more than 40 million Americans who get their prescription drug coverage from Medicare Part D. The Senior Citizens League strongly believes allowing the HHS Secretary to negotiate with the drug companies is one important way to reduce the costs of drugs for seniors.

Given the above about how Medicare users pay so much more for drugs than Medicaid users, could this be the year we finally win? According to an article in The Hill, a Washington, D.C., newspaper that covers legislative matters in Congress, it just might happen. Last year the House of Representatives, led by Speaker

Nancy Pelosi (D-CA) passed major drug legislation that would have allowed the government to negotiate directly with the drug companies, thus bringing the prices of drugs down. The major drug companies, and then-Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY), opposed the legislation and would not allow the House-passed legislation to even be considered.

There was also a bipartisan proposal from Sens. Chuck Grassley (R-IA) and Ron Wyden (D-OR) that gained support in the Senate but it did not include price negotiation, and again, McConnell refused to bring the bill to the floor in an election year. However, price negotiations could be included later this year in a reconciliation bill, a fast-track budgetary move that only needs 51 votes to pass the Senate and cannot be blocked using a filibuster. The Democrats are likely to use reconciliation to move President Biden’s COVID-19 relief measure through Congress while sidestepping a GOP filibuster. The new effort could be part of a second package later this year and TSCL will closely examine the legislation once it is finally developed to see if it accomplishes our goals and whether we can support it.

As TSCL supporters well know, Congress has not been able to accomplish significant legislative reform to the convoluted drug pricing system even though anger about high drug prices has been rising for a long time. With reconciliation, Democrats can pass a bill without any Republican votes so they are hoping to get a much more comprehensive bill than the Grassley-Wyden one. However, the pharmaceutical industry has spent billions of dollars over the years fighting this kind of legislation and passing it will not be easy. According to The Hill, the legislation would, “... completely change the way the U.S. pays for drugs, saving the federal government more than \$456 billion over 10 years, according to an analysis by the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office (CBO).

“The bill has been fiercely opposed by Republicans and the branded pharmaceutical industry, which would likely lose revenue if the bill passed, leading to 40 fewer new drugs coming to the market in the U.S. over the next two decades, according to the CBO estimate. But Democrats arguing for the change are pointing to rising costs of brand-name drugs and insurance plans that increasingly require patients pay more money toward their own care, forcing them to ration insulin and other drugs. They also note that H.R. 3 includes \$10 billion for biomedical research.”

The Senior Citizens League as a non-partisan organization, will work with any member of Congress and both political parties when they support legislation that they believe is in the best interest of America’s seniors and will be continuing efforts to get Congress to pass legislation that would make this possible. [Source: The Senior Citizens League | February 20 & 23, 2021 ++]

TRICARE Select

Update 10: What To Do If You Think You’re Still Covered | Warning!

An Army retiree’s wife has a warning for other retirees and their family members: Check to make sure you are still covered under Tricare Select — even if you set up payments for the new enrollment fees last year. “I would highly recommend anyone who believes they are enrolled in Tricare Select to verify their enrollment is active, or at least verify the monthly withdrawal is happening as expected,” said Constance Hathaway. On Feb. 8, the day before a scheduled medical procedure, she and her husband — an Army retiree — discovered they no longer had health insurance through Tricare West — although they had set up their automatic payment in October.

“My concern is that we thought we had done it all correctly and were never notified of the error. We ended up spending a month scuba diving without health insurance. “I’m sure there are many families who are finding the same problem,” she said. As of 1 JAN, working-age retirees in Tricare Select are required by law to pay new enrollment fees of \$12.50 per month for individuals or \$25 per month for family coverage. These retirees were required to set up a payment process by allotment, or automatic payments through electronic funds transfers from a bank account, debit card or credit card.

If they didn’t take that action before the end of the year, their coverage for themselves and family members was dropped. If beneficiaries have been dropped, their coverage can be reinstated through the end of June, as Defense Health Agency officials have extended the deadlines for the reinstatement period, through 30 JUN. If the beneficiary pays enrollment fees back to January, the coverage will be reinstated, and any previously denied, eligible claims will be paid back to 1 JAN. But advocates and some lawmakers have asked that the reinstatement period be extended to the end of 2021.

This new requirement affected some 876,531 working-age retirees and their family members enrolled in Tricare Select. As of 27 JAN, payments hadn’t been set up for about 14 percent of those beneficiaries, or 124,000 people. This doesn’t affect retirees who are in Tricare for Life, Tricare Prime, or those using a premium-based plan. Nor does it affect active duty families on Tricare Select, survivors of deceased active duty members, or medically retired veterans and family members. Hathaway said she and her husband were among those 124,000 and didn’t know it. “Not all retirees dropped hadn’t set up the automatic withdrawal. My husband and I were dropped in spite of setting everything up in October,” Hathaway said. She provided a copy of an email notification dated 21 OCT, confirming that their payment had been set up by way of their credit card.

The Hathaways set up the credit card withdrawals with the Tricare West contractor in October, to begin 1 JAN. The withdrawal process was approved, and confirmed by email. But the scheduled payment was never initiated by the contractor, and their coverage was terminated without notification, she said. I believe that there are always going to be some glitches whenever the government makes a change like this one. This is, however, people’s health and lives. Not something to be taken lightly,” Hathaway said. “This is something we’ve been concerned about” said Eileen Huck, government relations deputy director for the National Military Family Association. She said initially, not everyone who set up their payments got confirmation emails. “There’s always going to be some human error, and that’s something we’ve definitely been concerned about all the way through, that people would think it was taken care of, and for whatever reason, would find out it wasn’t.”

Huck said National Military Family Association has advocated for a longer reinstatement period. “We’ve been worried all along about people not realizing until after the end of the reinstatement period that they don’t have coverage, and then there’s really nothing that can be done until the next open enrollment period. That’s really not an acceptable outcome. “I do think the Defense Health Agency and the contractors are taking this seriously and are whittling down those numbers, and trying to be proactive about reaching out to people,” Huck said. “But it’s still something we’re watching closely and we’re concerned about.”

Health Net Federal Services, the Tricare West contractor, said the Hathaways’ problem is unique. “While we cannot comment on specific cases, the situation you are describing would be a unique circumstance and not something that is a recurring issue for our beneficiaries,” said Health Net Federal Services spokeswoman Caryn Schroeder. The contractor encourages beneficiaries to **verify Tricare**

eligibility through its online eligibility tool at www.Tricare-west.com or at milConnect, especially at the beginning of a calendar year,” Schroeder said. “Our customer service representatives are available Monday through Friday, 5 a.m.-9 p.m. Pacific time at 844-866-9378, should eligibility discrepancies need to be resolved.” She said Tricare officials recommend that beneficiaries have their payments deducted automatically by allotment, when feasible. For those who can’t pay by allotment, or choose not to, the recurring payments by bank account or a debit or credit card are still an option.

Hathaway said she and her husband initially set up their payment to go through a credit card, and the representative she talked to said that may have been part of the problem. So they set up the payment through an allotment from her husband’s retirement pay. “We were never notified our coverage had been dropped. That is the part I was most disappointed by,” she said. When they checked their records, they saw they payments hadn’t been taken from their credit card account, and made calls to Health Net in January and February, but received no information, she said. “Feb. 8 we discovered we no longer had any health insurance through Tricare West. The issue was handled over a lengthy phone call which was recorded by Tricare.

“The payment was changed from credit card to automatic withdrawal from retirement benefits via recommendation from the Tricare representative,” she said. Hathaway said Health Net reached out to her after being contacted by Military Times. “They have no explanation for the lack of contact when cancelling us, but [they] think there was a miscommunication related to our plan to move overseas later this month,” she said. “I am a little skeptical, but am willing to accept the explanation as long as they are following through with taking care of everyone who had this kind of issue.”

For beneficiaries who want to reinstate their Tricare Select coverage, Defense Health Agency directs them to www.tricare.mil/selectenrollmentfees. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 16, 2021 ++]

TRICARE Prime

Update 43: Patient Referral Requirement for COVID Vaccine Waived

The Defense Department has waived a requirement that Tricare Prime patients have a referral from their primary care doctors to get the COVID-19 vaccine outside the military health system. The waiver, to be published in the Federal Register on 23 FEB, allows Prime enrollees to receive the vaccine at any non-military facility, including non-network pharmacies or providers, without incurring any fees. While the vaccine is free to all Americans, some providers charge patients an administrative fee, much like a charge for a doctor's visit. The charges are reimbursable for those with medical insurance, but patients must file a claim with their insurers to recoup the payments.

The waiver will insure that Tricare Prime beneficiaries don't incur any charges if they get their vaccine from a location other than their military health provider. Ordinarily Tricare beneficiaries must get a referral for outside care through their primary care physician or pay point-of-service charges. Officials have encouraged Tricare beneficiaries to seek the vaccine through their local or state public health departments or at hospitals or pharmacies offering it, including Walgreens, which is in Tricare's retail pharmacy network, and the non-network CVS pharmacies. The waiver will remain in effect throughout the national emergency

declared for the coronavirus pandemic. The waiver does not apply to any other vaccines at non-network pharmacies.

As of 22 FEB, More than 75 million COVID-19 vaccines have been delivered to states, localities and federal entities nationwide, and 63 million doses have been administered, including nearly 19 million second doses. Across the Defense Department, 854,728 doses of the 1.18 million received by the department have been administered. Roughly 233,600 military-connected people have received their second dose -- namely active-duty personnel and civilian employees who work in health care, emergency services or billets of national security importance, and Tricare beneficiaries ages 75 and older. Some locations across DoD have started administering vaccines to those 65 and older, and those under 65 with underlying health conditions.

Roughly 250,000 of the nation's 28 million COVID-19 cases have been among active-duty service members, civilian DoD employees, family members or contractors. Among the military-affiliated cases, 288 have resulted in death. A Centers for Disease Control and Prevention report released last week found that the COVID-19 vaccines manufactured by Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna had relatively low rates of adverse events. Among the 13.7 million vaccines administered between Dec. 14 and Jan. 13, there were 6,994 adverse event reports filed with the agency, nearly 91% of which were categorized as "non-serious." The most common non-serious adverse events included headache, fatigue and dizziness, reported most frequently after the second dose.

The report also noted that, of the adverse events among those not living in nursing homes or other long-term care facilities, nearly 81% were reported from the Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine, while 19.2% were reported from the Moderna vaccine. There have been 113 deaths reported to the Vaccine Adverse Event Reporting System, roughly 65% of which occurred in long-term care facilities. However, the CDC said that information from death certificates, medical records and other resources did not link the vaccines as the cause of death. The rate of anaphylaxis -- a severe allergic reaction that remains a concern related to the new vaccines -- was 4.5 cases per million doses administered, or 62 patients. That includes 46 with the Pfizer vaccine and 16 from the Moderna vaccine. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | February 22, 2021 ++]

Dental Care

Update 05: How Much is Enough Calcium?

When it comes to taking care of your teeth, brushing and flossing are only half the battle. Making sure you're getting the right amount of calcium matters, too. Calcium is one of the most important nutrients for your teeth. It strengthens the tooth enamel—your teeth's defense against erosion and cavities—and helps hold your teeth in place. The amount of calcium you need depends on your age. The National Institutes of Health recommends that children ages 9–17 consume 1,300 mg of calcium per day by eating healthy foods.

What does that much calcium look like? Here are some examples of calcium-rich foods you can add to your diet:

- Fortified oatmeal: 1 packet contains 350 mg of calcium
- Cheddar cheese: 1 ½ ounces (shredded) contain 306 mg of calcium

- Milk (nonfat): 1 serving (8 fluid ounces) contains 302 mg of calcium
- Yogurt (plain, low fat): 1 serving (8 ounces) contains 300 mg of calcium
- Soybeans (cooked): 1 serving (8 ounces) contains 261 mg of calcium
- Orange juice (fortified with calcium): 6 fluid ounces contain 200-260 mg of calcium
- Salmon (canned with edible bones): 3 ounces contain 181 mg of calcium

Be sure to check the nutrition label of specific foods to see the recommended serving size and amount of calcium per serving. You can find many foods with high amounts of natural calcium. But there are others with an added boost. For example, fortified soy milk can be a great substitute if you don't drink milk or you're lactose-intolerant. Taking a vitamin supplement, like a multivitamin, may be another way to help you get the calcium your bones and teeth need. Want to learn more about calcium-rich foods and calcium intake? For more information, visit www.ods.od.nih.gov/factsheets/calcium-consumer. [Source: TRICARE Denial Program Newsletter | Issue 1 2021 ++]

Spices

8 With Health Benefits



Spices have long been used for medicinal purposes since ancient times, given their incredible healing powers. Different spices like cumin, turmeric, and cayenne don't just help make your food taste absolutely delicious, but they also offer numerous amazing health benefits as well. So many spices from all over the world have been celebrated throughout history for their medicinal properties and remarkable health benefits. Take a look at 8 of the most popular and the healthiest of all spices that you should incorporate in your daily food.

Cinnamon

Most people love a sprinkle of cinnamon on their bowl of breakfast oatmeal, but did you know that it is enriched with antioxidants that protect your body from illness and disease? Cinnamon has been shown to help reduce blood pressure levels in the body, enhance glucose sensitivity, and also fight inflammation.

Turmeric

The deep, bright yellow-ochre color of turmeric might come across as a little unsettling, but you ought to know that it is packed full of health benefits. One of its most active ingredients is called curcumin, which features antifungal, antibacterial, antiviral, and anticancer properties.

Cayenne Pepper

This is a delicious spice with a strong kick, but more than that, it contributes to weight loss, boosts circulation in the body, helps with digestion, and also comes with antibacterial properties. raw organic cardamom pods ready to use

Cardamom

Known as the world's third most expensive spice, cardamom is fully rich with vitamins A and C, zinc, iron, and calcium. These essential nutrients and fight depression. There are two types of cardamom – green and black. Green cardamom or *Elettaria cardamomum*, often called the true cardamom, is used for tea blends and for cooking. It has small green pods with seeds. Green cardamom has a very unique, spicy and slightly sweet flavor. It's available as:

- dried cardamom pods with seeds,
- extracted cardamom seeds without pods,
- fine powder,
- essential oil
- cardamom supplements

Studies showed that green cardamom may help lower bad cholesterol in blood to prevent blood clots. This spice if is often used for gastrointestinal problems. Studies showed that black cardamom may improve intestinal health to aid in digestion, and green cardamom may help relieve symptoms of irritable bowel syndrome such as stomach cramps and pain. Green cardamom may have a significant antibacterial activity, and may help fighting different strains of bacteria that are resistant to antibiotics.

Fennel

This spice originates from Southern Europe and offers a great amount of dietary fiber. It also contains large amounts of antioxidants that fight aging, remove harmful toxins from the body, and prevent the onset of degenerative neurological diseases.

Paprika

People love to sprinkle paprika on things like popcorn, salads, and fried rice. It isn't rich in flavor but comes with great many health benefits. It promotes healthy digestion in the body, helps maintain good eye health, and lowers blood pressure as well.

Cumin

This is one of the most commonly used spices in the culinary world, owing to its amazing flavor. Cumin contains antibacterial qualities that particularly help the digestive tract. Furthermore, cumin can also treat skin disorders, improve the immune system in the body, and prevent respiratory disorders.

Nutmeg

A popular spice used all over the world, nutmeg boasts a great reputation since ancient times for its amazing health benefits. It helps improve the texture of the skin, prevents bad breath, promotes a good night's sleep, and also cleanses the liver.

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Spices play a huge role in the culinary world and also in your overall health. Try to incorporate a mix of different spices in a variety of things such as a hot turmeric latte, coffee with cinnamon, and cardamom tea.

- Go to <https://youtu.be/AnUsXU8hHcI> to see how to make a Turmeric Latte. Also known as Golden Milk, Turmeric Latte is a warming, spiced alternative to coffee that's incredibly good for you.
- To make cardamom tea you will need either black or green cardamom pods. Cardamom has a very strong flavor, and often a few pods will be enough for a strong cup of tea. To get the most flavor out of cardamom pods, gently crush them first. Use about 3-6 pods per cup of water. In a small saucepan, bring fresh spring water to a boil. Add crushed cardamom pods, reduce heat and boil them for about 15 minutes. Strain, add sugar or honey if needed, and serve.

[Source: Aging Healthy Today | June 3, 2020 ++]

Eczema

Non-Contagious Skin Disease

Eczema is a chronic, non-infectious skin condition. The main symptom is a very itchy rash. Eczema is common in children. It often gets better over time and it may also go away for a while or disappear altogether. Eczema that is related to an allergy is called atopic eczema or atopic dermatitis. Eczema can greatly affect your quality of life. The itching can be especially bad, making it difficult to concentrate and sleep well. Many people who have eczema are ashamed of the visible rash. But it can usually be managed by taking good care of your skin, using medication and avoiding things that trigger the disease.

Symptoms

The main symptom of is unbearable itching. The severity of the rash that eczema causes depends on the stage of the condition:

- During an acute rash, the skin is reddish and very itchy. Blisters may form on the inflamed areas of skin. These can easily break open and then weep (leak liquid).
- The rash gradually gets better after the acute phase. The skin becomes dry and peels off.
- Over time, the affected skin may get thicker, rougher and crack.

You can also have acute and less acute rashes on different parts of your body at the same time.



Eczema usually comes and goes in bouts (flare-ups). This means that the symptoms sometimes get better and sometimes get worse. They can also go away completely for a while. The skin is only rarely permanently inflamed. In babies, eczema mainly appears on the cheeks and the outer surfaces of the arms and legs and – less commonly – on the back, tummy and chest. In children, teenagers and adults, it mainly

affects the hollows of the knees, the elbows and the back of the neck. The itchy rash may also occur on the palms of the hands and the soles of the feet. It rarely affects the face.

Causes

The skin consists of three layers: Outer layer (epidermis), Middle layer (dermis), and Inner layer (subcutis). The outer layer has different layers too: the basal layer, the spinous or prickle-cell layer, and the corneal or horny layer (enlarged in the diagram below). The corneal layer – the visible part of the skin – protects the body from germs. It renews itself constantly as new cells grow from the basal layer. In people with eczema, the corneal layer doesn't provide enough protection because it is damaged by the inflammation in the skin. That allows irritants, germs and substances that trigger allergies (allergens) to enter the body.

Eczema can also be caused by other things, including disorders of the immune system or the microorganisms ("bugs") living on the skin, as well as changes in certain genes – especially in one called the FLG gene. This gene inhibits the production of filaggrin, a protein that plays an important role in the growth of the outer layer of skin. Because there isn't enough filaggrin, the balance of fats in the skin changes, causing the skin to lose a lot of moisture. The significance of the different factors and how they affect each other isn't fully understood.

In about 30-40% of all people with eczema, it is related to an allergy (atopic eczema). They often have more severe symptoms, as well as hay fever or allergic asthma. In atopic eczema, the immune system reacts to allergens by producing antibodies that cause inflammations in the skin. These antibodies can be detected in the blood. Allergens that sometimes play a role in eczema include dust mites, pollen and foods such as milk, eggs, nuts or fish. The skin may also be irritated by environmental factors or other substances that are not allergens. Examples include rough fabrics (such as scratchy wool) in contact with the skin, cigarette smoke and extreme heat or cold.

Risk factors, Prevalence and outlook

Genes play a major role in someone's risk of developing eczema. But other factors have an influence as well. Eczema has become more common in recent decades, which shows that genes can't be the only explanation. Doctors think that pollution and increased hygiene also play a role. This theory is based on the observation that eczema is less common in children who have many siblings or a dog, or who spent time at day care from an early age. It is thought that these children are exposed to germs at an earlier age and that this helps to train their immune system.

About 10 to 20% of all children and an estimated 2 to 5% of all adults have eczema. It usually starts at a very young age, typically between the third and sixth months of life. It can also develop later. But it is quite rare for eczema to develop after the age of five years. A rash on a baby's scalp (sometimes called "cradle cap") may be an early sign, but it doesn't necessarily mean that the child will develop eczema. The further course of eczema depends on the age at which it first develops, among other factors. Children who develop eczema under the age of twelve months often grow out of it relatively quickly: Only half of them will still have it after three years.

Eczema is often more persistent in children who develop it between the ages of two and five years. It is estimated that eczema gets much better or goes away again in more than 80% of all affected children about ten years after it first appears. But some people still have it as teenagers. It can disappear for a while and then return in adulthood, most commonly on the hands. It is rare to first develop as an adult.

Effects and Diagnosis

A type of called Staphylococcus aureus sometimes causes an infection in the areas of skin affected by eczema. These bacteria can also be found on the skin of people who don't have it. They are usually harmless. But if they cause an infection, they can make eczema worse. That makes the skin turn very red, and it may weep (leak fluid), resulting in yellowish scabs. If the infection spreads, it will usually have to be treated with antibiotics.

When skin has changed and become inflamed due to eczema, it is also easier for herpes viruses to spread. Herpes infections usually occur on the face. Small blisters filled with clear fluid form and then burst a short time later. The blisters leave behind small dot-like crusts. The skin can become very sore and there may also be other symptoms like fever or tiredness. If a herpes infection spreads to other areas of skin, it's important to see a doctor quickly. Allergic eczema may be associated with hay fever or asthma. About one third of all children who have eczema also develop asthma or hay fever by the time they turn five.

Eczema is diagnosed by doing a physical exam. If you have an itchy rash on the parts of your body that are typical for eczema in a person of your age, and it lasts or keeps coming back for several months, a doctor will diagnose you with eczema. Other possible conditions such as psoriasis will be ruled out at the same time. Eczema is sometimes confused with seborrheic dermatitis, especially in young babies. But that condition hardly itches, and clears up on its own after a few weeks or months. If someone is believed to have allergic eczema, an allergy test might be done – either by testing their blood or doing a skin prick test. The blood is tested for specific antibodies that the body produces in response to allergens.

If the test results are normal, it's quite certain that the person doesn't have an allergy. Abnormal results are more difficult to interpret: They confirm that the body is overly sensitive but don't say anything about whether this reaction or the severity of the symptoms have anything to do with the eczema. That's why it's important to, for instance, use what is called a "challenge" test to find out whether the skin actually reacts to the allergen. Under the supervision of a doctor, you eat or drink a food that may possibly trigger an allergy in order to see how your body reacts. Because these allergy tests don't lead to clear conclusions, it's not a good idea to test for all different kinds of substances if there's no good reason to believe that they might be affecting your eczema.

Prevention

The risk of developing eczema is mostly hereditary – in other words, it runs in families. But it's never really possible to say exactly why a child has developed eczema because there are so many different factors involved. No treatments have been proven to prevent eczema. In large and good-quality studies, using skin care products in a child's first year of life wasn't found to lower babies' risks of developing eczema. Neither did early exposure to foods like peanuts, milk, eggs and wheat. Many other approaches and products are claimed to lower the risk of developing eczema, but it's not clear whether they work. These include the use of vitamins (for example vitamin D), omega-3 fatty acids, certain types of diets, measures to reduce dust mites and avoiding certain foods during pregnancy. Taking dietary supplements containing probiotic bacteria is the only thing that has been proven to prevent eczema, but the evidence is weak.

Breastfeeding possibly lowers the risk of eczema somewhat. The research results aren't clear here, though. Despite this uncertainty, the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that women fully breastfeed their babies for the first six months of their life if possible and then offer them both solid foods and breast milk. This is because breastfeeding strengthens the bond between mother and child, and offers

other health benefits for babies. It's also a good idea to have the child vaccinated against illnesses like chickenpox because those kinds of illnesses can be more severe in children who have eczema.

Treatment

Eczema is a chronic condition – in other words, **there is no cure**. But good skin care and medication can keep the itching and rash at bay. The main treatment options are:

- *Emollients*: Basic treatment with lipid-replenishing and moisturizing products. These are generously applied to the skin at least twice a day to stop it from drying out. This relieves symptoms like itching, protects the skin from germs and irritants, and prevents flare-ups.
- *Avoiding irritants*: The skin might be irritated by certain things, such as scratchy wool, cleaning agents and particular contact allergens (in people who have an allergy). It's helpful to avoid these kinds of irritants as much as possible. Extreme temperatures can affect the skin too.
- *Steroid creams*: Eczema flare-ups are treated with steroid creams. They can very effectively reduce the itching and inflammation. "Weekend treatment" (intermittent treatment) is one option for people who have frequent flare-ups. This involves applying a steroid cream to the affected areas of skin on two days a week in addition to the basic treatment. This approach can significantly reduce the frequency of flare-ups.
- *Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus*: Pimecrolimus and tacrolimus are two other medicines that can be used to treat eczema. These two medicines are applied to the skin in a cream or ointment, and can be used in the long-term treatment of sensitive skin on the face and neck, for instance.

Light therapy (phototherapy) with UV light is an option if these treatments aren't effective enough, for example if the eczema is very severe or covers large areas of skin. If that doesn't provide enough relief, then tablets can be taken to suppress certain immune system reactions. Allergy medicines (antihistamines) are sometimes used to relieve itching too. But research has now shown that they don't relieve the symptoms of eczema. People often try out plant-based products or dietary supplements, such as evening primrose oil, borage oil, vitamins and zinc. There is no scientific proof that these work either. That's also true of other treatments, like laser therapy or allergen immunotherapy. So they aren't recommended by medical societies.

[Source: Informed Health.org | February 25, 2021 ++]

Eczema

Update 01: Dealing with it in Everyday Life

It's easy to underestimate how difficult eczema can make your life. You need to be patient to deal with the daily challenges associated with and to find the right treatment for you. But many people manage to get their eczema under control. The itching can be especially unbearable. Scratching is a normal reaction, but it can increase the likelihood of complications and make the itching even worse. Most people who have eczema know that it's better to be careful because superficial scratches can become inflamed. But this is easier said than done. So there's no need to feel guilty if you do end up scratching your skin once in a while. Keeping children's nails cut short can help to stop them from scratching too much.

Eczema can also be hard on children, and some days will be testing for both the child and their parents. But periods of severe symptoms are usually followed by periods of milder symptoms. And the odds are that the eczema will improve on its own or even disappear altogether as the children grow up. Parents who have a child with eczema may feel unable to cope and helpless from time to time. Worrying about your child, keeping up the skin care routine, countless visits to the doctor and sleepless nights can be a great burden. Special eczema education courses have been developed to help parents, children and teenagers. The courses provide information on the treatment options and ways to avoid irritants. They also offer tips on coping with in everyday life. In Germany, these courses typically involve a total of six two-hour sessions held on a weekly basis. The costs are covered by many of the health insurers in Germany. If you have severe eczema outpatient or inpatient rehabilitative care may be considered too.

Parents and children often feel discouraged by how others react to eczema. Some people don't know much about the disease, which can easily lead to misunderstandings. For instance, they might think it's contagious or that the child's parents have been neglecting him or her. To prevent that from happening, it can be helpful to address the possible misunderstandings and stereotypes by talking openly about the condition and its effects. Support groups are one way to share your experiences with other parents in similar situations. [Source: Informed Health.org | February 25, 2021 ++]

Coronavirus Vaccines

Update 29: Impact on Pregnancy/Breastfeeding

You're pregnant, or you're breastfeeding. Should you get a COVID-19 vaccine? That's a question on the minds of many military frontline health care workers today. The short answer is that it's an individual's choice, and military health experts say the vaccine is well worth considering. As the COVID-19 vaccines continue to be administered across military hospitals and smaller clinics and outposts under Centers for Disease Control and Prevention guidance, the advice from the military and a multitude of national maternal and fetal health professional associations is the same: For most pregnant people, getting the COVID-19 vaccine as soon as possible is the safest choice based on the science to date.

The COVID-19 vaccines made by Pfizer and Moderna are mRNA vaccines. These vaccines contain no live viruses that could directly infect a mother or baby. "As of Jan. 21, more than 15,000 pregnant patients had received an mRNA vaccine," said retired Navy Capt. (Dr.) Margaret Ryan, medical director, Defense Health Agency Immunization Division, Pacific Region Vaccine Safety Hub, San Diego. "The experiences of these pregnancies are being followed very closely, and no specific safety concerns have been reported so far. "As COVID-19 vaccines were being developed, studies in the laboratory and animals showed no reproductive health problems," Ryan added. Pregnant people are entering clinical trials for COVID-19 vaccines "literally now and going into March, so more data will be known soon," Dr. Anthony Fauci, President Joe Biden's chief medical adviser on COVID-19, told a Blue Star Families virtual town hall 4 FEB.

Of the 15,000 pregnant people who have received at least one of the 32 million vaccinations in the United States, "there have been no red flags of adverse events. Many who are pregnant are health care providers who said the risk of getting COVID-19 from their patients was worse than that from getting the vaccine," said Fauci, director of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases at the National

Institutes of Health. Said Ryan: “Although it is unclear how pregnancy may affect infection risk, some women who have been infected with COVID-19 during pregnancy have experienced serious illness or death. COVID-19 infection in pregnancy also seems to increase risk of preterm birth.”

As for those who do not want to take the vaccine, “we know there are significantly increased risks for pregnant people who contract COVID-19, e.g., they are three times more likely to be admitted to the ICU and need breathing support,” said Navy Cmdr. (Dr.) Monica Lutgendorf, division head Maternal Fetal Medicine, Naval Medical Center-San Diego (NMCS), and chair, DHA Women and Infants Clinical Community. “People with comorbidities such as diabetes, Latinx, and Black people are also more at risk for COVID-19 and death. Therefore, it is often beneficial to get the vaccine, especially for pregnant or nursing individuals at increased risk of severe disease.”

Lutgendorf noted that although relative risks of COVID-19 are increased in pregnancy, this information should be provided in the context of overall low absolute risks for breathing support (2.9 per 1,000), heart and lung support (0.7 per 1,000), and death (1.5 per 1,000). Ryan went on to say that specialists from the CDC, American College of Obstetrics and Gynecology, and American Academy of Breastfeeding Medicine “all agree that breastfeeding should not be a barrier to receipt of a COVID-19 vaccine. Breastfeeding should never be equated to pregnancy in terms of health considerations for mother or child.”

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Those experiencing pregnancy who decide not to get vaccinated could likely want to track the results of a NIH funded study to evaluate **remdesivir** for those who contract COVID-19 in pregnancy. The study, which will be conducted at 17 sites in the continental United States and Puerto Rico, aims to determine how pregnant women metabolize the drug and whether there are any potential side effects. “Pregnant women with COVID-19 are at high risk for hospitalization, for intensive care admission and for needing ventilator support,” said Diana W. Bianchi, M.D., director of NIH’s Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD). “There is an urgent need to identify effective treatments for this population and to determine whether drugs prescribed for other adults are appropriate for use in pregnancy.”

Originally developed to treat Ebola and Marburg virus infections, remdesivir was shown in a NIAID-funded clinical trial to accelerate recovery in patients with advanced COVID-19 disease. Remdesivir has since been approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration for the treatment of COVID-19 in adults and children over age 12 years. Although it has not been approved specifically for use in pregnancy, remdesivir can be prescribed to pregnant women if their physicians believe the drug may benefit them. However, physicians currently lack scientific evidence for the safety and efficacy of remdesivir for treating pregnant women with COVID-19. Because pregnancy may influence a drug’s effects, IMPAACT 2032 will compare remdesivir use in pregnant and non-pregnant women of reproductive age who are hospitalized with COVID-19.

The study will evaluate remdesivir’s pharmacokinetics—how a drug is absorbed, moves through the body and is broken down and eliminated in pregnant women and nonpregnant women of childbearing potential who receive it as part of clinical care. For women who received the drug within five days of delivery, samples from the plasma and umbilical cord will be analyzed for insight into remdesivir’s pharmacokinetics in the placenta. Breast milk will also be tested for remdesivir among women who are lactating. Researchers will also document potential side effects and adverse events that could occur with use of the drug. Additional information about IMPAACT 2032 and a list of participating institutions is

available on ClinicalTrials.gov under study identifier [NCT04582266](#) and on the [IMPAACT Network website](#).

[Source: MHS Communications Office & NIH News Release| February 16 & 17, 2021 ++]

*** Finances ***



Employment Cost Index

Key Military Pay Indicator Is Bouncing Back

The Employment Cost Index (ECI) is a quarterly economic series published by the Bureau of Labor Statistics that details the growth of total private-sector employee compensation. The index is prepared and published by the [Bureau of Labor Statistics](#) (BLS), a unit of the United States Department of Labor. The ECI, a metric that guides future military pay raises, ticked up slightly in the first quarter of this calendar year – good news for servicemembers, but not a guarantee. The quarterly ECI of 2.8% was up from the 2.7% reported Oct. 30, 2020. That October figure is used yearly as a guideline in setting the military pay raise – the 2020 figure, for example, should offer a hint at the FY 2022 raise. And while the October number was down from 2018 and 2019 figures, it would still represent the third-largest raise in the last 12 years.

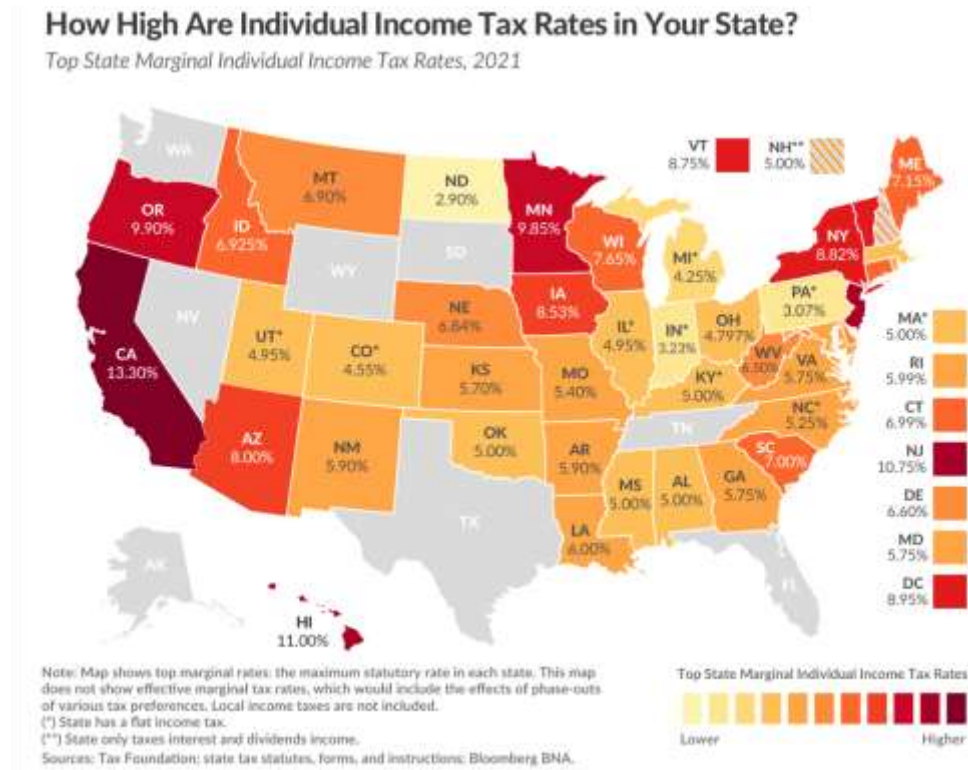
The 2.8% figure released in January sets a good trend for servicemembers, who could see future raises in line with a growing index. But those pay hikes aren't set in stone ... and that's a major reason why fighting for military pay raises remains a key MOAA advocacy mission. While the military pay raise has reflected ECI in every National Defense Authorization Act (NDAA) since the fiscal year 2017 version, there is no rule that Congress or the administration must tie proposals or the final raise to that figure. One doesn't have to look far into the rearview to see the administration ignored this guidance in the following NDAA's:

- ECI Q3 FY 2012: 1.8%, FY 2014 raise: 1.0%
- ECI Q3 FY 2013: 1.8%, FY 2015 raise: 1.0%
- ECI Q3 FY 2014: 2.3%, FY 2016 raise: 1.3%

Fiscal pressures could lead elected officials to seek savings in many corners of the budget. And while these figures may seem small to those outside the uniformed services community, MOAA and other groups are well aware of the damage undercutting military pay can do to those in uniform – not just meeting short-term financial obligations, but suffering from thousands in lost retirement funds as pay cuts ripple into the future. MOAA tracks these figures and others to ensure budgets are not balanced on the backs of the military community. But because ECI is a guideline, not a requirement, it's even more vital for MOAA to remain engaged with lawmakers to ensure military pay keeps pace with the private sector and remains an incentive to recruit and retain those who make up the all-volunteer force. [Source: Military Officers

State Income Tax

Update 03: Individual Income Tax & Brackets for 2021



Individual income taxes are a major source of state government revenue, accounting for 38 percent of state tax collections. Their prominence in public policy considerations is further enhanced in that individuals are actively responsible for filing their income taxes, in contrast to the indirect payment of sales and excise taxes. Forty-two states levy individual income taxes. Forty-one tax wage and salary income, while one state—New Hampshire—exclusively taxes dividend and interest income. Eight states (AK | FL | NV | SD | TN | TX | WA | WY) levy no individual income tax at all.

Of those states taxing wages, nine have single-rate tax structures, with one rate applying to all taxable income. Conversely, 32 states and Washington, D.C. levy graduated-rate income taxes, with the number of brackets varying widely by state. Kansas, for example, is one of several states imposing a three-bracket income tax system. At the other end of the spectrum, Hawaii has 12 brackets. Top marginal rates range from North Dakota’s 2.9 percent to California’s 13.3 percent. To see how your state treats single and married taxpayers on rates, brackets, standard deduction, and personal exemptions compared to other states refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**State Income Tax Rates & Brackets 2021**”. [Source: Tax Foundation | Katherine Loughead | February 17, 2021 ++]

Checking Accounts

Update 01: Is Writing a Check Still Safe?



Writing checks may seem like an outdated way to pay for things, but plenty of people still use them. More than 14.5 billion checks, totaling \$25.8 trillion, were written in 2018, according to the Federal Reserve's latest payments study. And while that number has decreased by about 7% every year since 2015, debit and credit card payments aren't as ubiquitous as many of us think. In an era of identity theft and bank fraud, American's long-standing relationship with their checkbooks begs the question: How safe is this 20th-century payment method? After all, when you pay by check, you're handing a slip of paper with your bank account number, and other personal details like your name and address, to another person (often a complete stranger).

Indeed, experts say, paying by debit or credit card tends to be the safer bet. Checks can be forged, and identity thieves could lift your personal and banking details straight from a paper check. Even payment apps like Venmo and Zelle have a leg up over paper checks these days. Derik Farrar, head of personal deposits at Truist Bank, says that in 2020, 83% more Truist customers used Zelle—which the bank taps for peer to peer transfers—than they did in 2019. (As COVID-19 spread through the country, he says, people avoided in-person banking by swapping checks for virtual payments). Here's what you need to know about writing a check in 2021 — and how to minimize your risk.

How safe are paper checks?

Banks use security measures like watermarks and gradient backgrounds to prevent checks from being reproduced by fraudsters, and to help financial institutions and businesses validate them easily. In 2018, measures like these prevented 90% of attempted fraud, according to the American Bankers Association. Still, check fraud—which includes forgery, theft and counterfeiting—accounted for \$1.3 billion that same year. “A paper check may be handled and seen several times before ultimately being deposited or cashed,” says Tara Alderete, director of enterprise learning at Money Management International, a nonprofit financial counseling and education organization. “And because paper checks include visible personal and financial information—your name, and bank routing and account numbers at minimum—they could put you at increased risk for fraud.”

The risk goes up if you don't specify a recipient on the check — if you write a check to “cash,” anyone who gets a hold of it could cash it. If you need cash, it's safer to use your debit card at an ATM or visit your bank and write a check out to yourself while you're there, Alderete says. People of all ages still write

paper checks, but older Americans are more likely to do so. Since elderly people are more likely to be the targets of financial fraud than the general population, check-writing can compound their risk.

How to protect your details — and your money

There are several steps you can take to safeguard your information and reduce your risk of fraud.

- For one, fill out the “payee” line and full, current date on every check you write. And always use ink.
- It’s wise to limit the information pre-printed on your check to just your name and address.
- Avoid including your birth date, telephone or driver’s license number. If a merchant requires these details, you can always write them in.
- Keep your checks in a safe place — not in your purse or briefcase, which can be lost or stolen.
- Monitor your bank account activity regularly, too. Balancing your checkbook often isn’t just a good financial habit. By keeping an eye on your finances, you also reduce your risk of fraud, Alderete says.

Don’t chuck your checkbook (yet)

Even if you prefer paying electronically, you probably shouldn’t write off checks altogether. Some small businesses still don’t accept debit or credit cards, and if they do, they might charge a fee for it. (Businesses are charged a processing fee for electronic transactions, so not accepting them helps keep costs down). Sometimes, paying by check is just easier — many people like to have their checkbooks handy to gift people money, or to pay for services like dog walking or yard work. Checks also offer a paper trail, so they’re usually the go-to payment for big purchases, like a down payment on a home or an IRS tax bill. And that’s a good thing: If a problem comes up, you’ll have a copy of the deposited check, and a track record of when the payment was made, received and applied. Still, Farrar says, “With proper handling, checks are an extremely safe method of banking, as they have been for hundreds of years.”

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Erica Sweeney | February 17, 2021 ++]

Sugar Taxes

SSBs Back on the Menu

After a few years without much attention, taxes on sugar-sweetened beverages (SSBs) are back in the headlines, with at least four states—Connecticut, Hawaii, New York, and Washington—considering such statewide taxes. Today, only localities (10 at the time of writing) levy excise taxes on sugary drinks in the U.S., but that could change this year.

- In **Hawaii**, Gov. David Ige (D) has proposed a rate of 2 cents per ounce tax on SSBs. The tax revenue would be allocated to the Healthy Ohana Special Fund, which is dedicated to supporting public health programs in the state. Hawaii’s rate of 2 cents per ounce would equal the highest currently levied rate (Boulder, Colorado).
- In **New York**, S4602 would, if enacted, introduce a graduated excise tax on SSBs. There would be no tax on beverages containing less than 7.5 grams of sugar per 12 ounces, but a tax of 1 cent per ounce on beverages containing between 7.5 grams and 30 grams of sugar per 12 ounces, and a tax of 2 cents per ounce on beverages containing more than 30 grams of sugar per 12 ounces. The revenue would be allocated to education and public health spending.

- In **Washington**, the tax rate proposed is equal to the rate in Seattle: 1.75 cents per ounce. The rate would be adjusted for inflation beginning in July 2022. Revenue is intended for public health spending.
- In **Connecticut**, the introduced legislation (HB5184), a so-called “concept bill,” merely states that an excise tax on SSBs should be imposed without revealing more detail as to tax base, rate, or revenue allocation.

Exempted from the tax in Hawaii, New York, and Washington are 100 percent fruit juice, unsweetened milk products, dietary aids, and infant formula. Most localities exempt a similar range of beverages as Hawaii would under the governor’s proposal, although Philadelphia and the District of Columbia include diet beverages in their tax base. As a rule of thumb, excise taxes should only be levied to internalize an externality (harm associated with consumption) or create a user-fee system. Due to their narrow base and regressive nature, they are unsuitable sources of general fund revenue. In breach of this principle, the taxes currently levied (and those proposed) are designed in ways that indicate that the main purpose of the tax is raising revenue.

An SSB tax is simply too narrow to meaningfully internalize the relevant externalities. Even though the proposals in Hawaii and Washington both allocate revenue to spending related to harm associated with consumption of SSBs (part of New York’s proposed spending is rather tangential), the tax design’s proxy, liquid by volume, does not capture the harm-creating agent. Because most of these taxes are designed to tax high sugar beverages and low sugar beverages at the same rate, they fail to target the actual sugar content. This removes any incentive on the manufacturer or consumer to switch out a high sugar product with a low sugar alternative. New York’s proposal does a better job at targeting the externality by increasing the rate with increased sugar content.

This tax base flaw could be addressed by taxing sugar directly rather than liquid by volume. However, even if the tax base were corrected, it would still only capture sugary beverages. Hence, the taxes do not account for sugar intake from other sources. In fact, many other sources contain significantly more sugar by weight than SSBs. Only taxing sugar in beverages would be equivalent to taxing alcohol in beer but not in wine, or only taxing tobacco when smoked in cigars. If sugar is the harm-causing agent and a clear externality can be identified, all sugar should carry the tax regardless of consumption method (though a tax on all sugary products would likely create issues of its own and would be extremely complex).

The result of these design flaws can be observed in the real-world results of the taxes. Even though there are indications that SSB taxes do have an effect, albeit small, on consumption, it remains unclear whether the taxes are effective in decreasing caloric intake. National Health and Nutrition Examination survey data indicate that when individuals reduce soda consumption due to soda tax increases, they fully offset the calories they would have consumed from soda with calories consumed elsewhere, rendering soda taxes ineffective in terms of caloric reduction.

A 2012 study at Cornell University found that, when faced with a new soda tax, many households reduced their soda consumption while purchasing an increased amount of beer, substituting one “vice” for another. The switch to beer makes economic sense as, at 2 cents per ounce, SSBs in Hawaii would be taxed at a rate almost three times higher than the state’s excise tax on beer (\$0.93 per gallon). Finally, this study concluded that the impact of soft drink taxes as a deterrent to help lower body mass index (BMI) is minimal

and not statistically significant. All in all, it remains highly uncertain that an excise tax on SSBs actually has any positive effect on public health.

The experiment with SSB taxes has not substantiated the claims that such a tax could have a positive benefit on public health. Moreover, the inherent design flaws in such a narrow tax makes it unsuitable for revenue generation. Lawmakers would do better to avoid reliance on sugar consumption to fund the government and instead raise revenue through broad-based taxes at low rates. [Source: Tax Foundation | Ulrik Boesen | February 18, 2021 ++]

Homeowners Insurance

Update 17: Does It Cover Power Outages?



Losing electrical power in your home is more than inconvenient and potentially hazardous; it can also lead to serious expenses. Fortunately, some of those are probably covered by your homeowners insurance. That could be good news to more than 3.5 million Americans who are currently without power due to storms in Texas, Oregon, Kentucky and elsewhere. But whether all of your out-of-pocket costs will be covered depends on the insurer and your policy. Already, there are reports of homeowners in affected states contacting their insurance company, only to find they aren't covered in ways they expected or hoped. Here's what to expect in coverage for two common financial impacts of a power outage, and some options to make up the difference if you aren't actually covered. Consider this a rough guide to prepare you; if you're directly affected, check with your insurance company for the details of your own coverage.

Frozen pipes

Prolonged winter power outages — like the current ones, which have already lasted for days — come with the added risk that water will freeze inside the home's pipes. That can cause the pipes to crack, and lead to flooding damage and plumbing bills once the heat returns and the water begins to flow again. It doesn't take long for such freezing to occur. According to Hope Plumbing in Indianapolis, pipes may freeze if the outside temperature is below 20 degrees for at least six consecutive hours, as it has been during recent days in many of the states with outages.

The process is faster still if you live in a geographical location that usually does not suffer from cold winters, Hope Plumbing writes, since your water pipes are less likely to have much insulation to protect them from extreme temperatures. Here, homeowners in Texas and elsewhere are probably covered,

according to property insurance lawyers VossLaw. “If your pipes froze because of an unusual cold snap,” causing water damage, your claim will likely be approved,” the company writes. They do, however, add a few caveats. Your claim may be denied, the lawyers warn, if your pipes were in poor condition due to age. “If a pipe burst simply because it was worn out, you may be out of luck.”

Negligence on your part could also be a reason to deny a claim, VossLaw warns, mentioning as an example shutting off the power when leaving your home, causing its interior temperatures to drop. Less clear is whether a failure to leave water running at a trickle through the pipe in a cold house — a step that reduces the chance of frozen pipes — might be deemed negligent. At any rate, this step is recommended by home experts as a way to mitigate the disruption and inconvenience of pipes freezing.

Ruined food

While food spoiling (or at least thawing) in a warm refrigerator is most associated with power outages in warmer months, it’s possible in any season, especially when outages are prolonged. Homeowners policies usually cover reimbursement for food losses due to an outage in their standard coverage, according to the Insurance Information Institute — although some companies instead make it an extra-cost add-on to the policy. However, it’s unlikely that claiming the value of ruined food is worthwhile, especially if it’s the only financial loss you incurred from the power going out. For starters, many insurers cap the covered loss at \$250 or \$500, according to Allstate. That figure is likely at or below the deductible for your policy, which means you could collect little or nothing on the claim.

If you suffered other financial setbacks from the outage, such as the cost to replace cracked pipes, a potential claim might exceed your deductible. And if you already made a claim on the policy within the last year, your deductible has likely already been paid regardless. In any case, talk with your insurers before submitting a claim, especially one that is fairly modest. Insurers keep track of claims, and you’ll need to consider the possible effect of one for a power outage on your future premiums.

You might also want to check with your electricity provider. While most electric companies do not offer their customers reimbursement for food spoilage caused by long-term power outages, according to the Insurance Information Institute, programs are sometimes offered. (For example, Con Edison allowed reimbursements of up to \$500 per homeowner for spoiled food after Hurricane Isaias last year.) It’s unclear if any such programs have yet been launched due to the current outages in the South. For what it’s worth, none were implemented in areas of Louisiana and Texas affected by Hurricane Laura last year, according to the Insurance Information Institute. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Paul Reynolds | February 19, 2021++]

Military Member Taxes

Some Tax Prep Advice Including COVID Quirks for 2020 Filing

While 2020 may be behind us in some ways, there’s still the matter of filing those 2020 tax returns, and there are, of course, some COVID twists to taxes. First, some basics: As of 12 FEB, the Internal Revenue Service began accepting tax returns. Taxes are due 15 APR. Susan Mitchell, executive director of the Armed Forces Tax Council, advises service members to file their taxes electronically, and choose direct deposit. “By electronically filing, it catches a lot of math errors, and direct deposit means that any tax refund is deposited directly into the taxpayer’s financial account, and that’s certainly a lot quicker,” she said.

The IRS doesn't answer inquiries about refunds until at least 21 days after the tax return was filed electronically. You can check on the status of your refund on the IRS website's "Where's my refund?" page, found at <https://www.irs.gov/refunds>. Take advantage of free, professional, military-specific tax preparation help that's offered by DoD and the services. There are fewer tax centers operated by legal assistance offices on bases this year because of COVID, but you should check to see if this free tax preparation service is available at an installation near you, at <https://www.militaryonesource.mil/vita-location-lookup>.

These IRS-trained volunteers have training in military-specific tax topics and situations, such as extensions and deadlines while serving in a combat zone, and how new tax laws may affect the military community. The service is open to active-duty members and their families for free, **and to retirees when space is available**. The Defense Department also offers free tax preparation and filing software through MilitaryOneSource.mil, and tax consultants trained in military tax issues who are available for free, any time.

COVID and Taxes

There are some COVID-related aspects affecting taxes that will be of interest to service members and their spouses, said Mitchell.

Unemployment compensation Many military spouses are among the millions of people who received unemployment compensation in 2020 because of layoffs or furloughs. Those unemployment compensation benefits are taxable. "While many of these taxpayers could have elected to have federal taxes withheld from their unemployment or make estimated tax payments, what I have found is that many just don't take those options," she said. "In that case, taxes on those benefits are going to have to be paid when they file that 2020 tax return."

Taxable interest on 2019 refunds Some taxpayers who received a refund on their 2019 tax return also were paid interest by the Internal Revenue Service, which is the result of the pandemic-induced postponement of the tax filing deadline. The IRS will send a form 1099-INT to anyone who received interest totaling at least \$10. "But the important thing for folks to know is that that 2019 refund interest payment is taxable, and taxpayers have to report that interest on their 2020 federal income tax return," Mitchell said.

Charitable contributions The vast majority of taxpayers, to include service members and their families, take the standard deduction, Mitchell said, and they normally can't claim a deduction for charitable contributions. But for 2020, the CARES Act allows people to claim a limited deduction — up to a \$300 monetary contribution — even if they take the standard deduction and don't itemize. This doesn't apply to donated property such as clothing and furniture.

Teachers Military spouses who are teachers should know that teachers can deduct their out-of-pocket expenses for COVID-19 protective items that were paid or incurred after March 12, 2020. These educators can qualify for up to \$250 of qualifying expenses for items such as face masks, disinfectant for use against the virus, hand sanitizer, disposable gloves, tape, paint or chalk to guide social distancing, any kind of physical barrier, or air purifiers. "There are several items recommended by the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention] for protections against the virus. I would advise military spouses who were teachers to take a look at this list and see what they might be able to deduct as unreimbursed expenses," Mitchell said. For more information, visit <https://www.irs.gov/newsroom/educators-can-now-deduct-out-of-pocket-expenses-for-covid-19-protective-items>.

Economic Impact Payments Most people have received two rounds of Economic Impact Payments, also known as COVID relief stimulus payments. Those who haven't received a payment, or didn't receive the full amounts, may be able to claim the Recovery Rebate Credit on their 2020 tax return. That first payment was \$1,200 per person, \$2,400 for married filing jointly, and \$500 for each qualifying child. Later in the year, the payment was \$600 per person, \$1,200 for married filing jointly and \$600 for each qualifying child. The payments were reduced for those with incomes above various levels. For further information, visit the IRS website at <https://www.irs.gov/coronavirus/get-my-payment>.

Social Security tax deferral First of all, federal and state income taxes aren't affected by this deferral. The deferral happened from September through December for military members because of an executive order signed by then-President Donald Trump requiring temporary deferral of Social Security taxes normally withheld from paychecks. Now, those people are repaying those deferred taxes, which are being collected from their paychecks through the end of the year. Employees affected by this deferral will receive a Form W-2c (Corrected Wages and Tax Statement) for tax year 2020 after the full amount of deferred taxes has been collected, likely in January 2022, according to the Defense Finance and Accounting Service.

Generally, if you had only one employer in 2020, you won't have to file an amended tax return when you receive the Form W-2c in 2022.

Some other reminders for military taxpayers

Unreimbursed moving expenses Unlike civilians, military members can still deduct certain unreimbursed moving expenses related to Permanent Change of Station moves. Don't deduct any expenses for services that were provided by the government; or expenses that were reimbursed by an allowance you didn't include in income.

While DoD covers most of the expenses for service members when they move, there may still be some unreimbursed expenses. During the pandemic, lawmakers amended the Servicemembers Civil Relief Act to allow service members to terminate a housing or vehicle lease agreement without a 30-day notice if the need is due to a Defense Department stop-move order. That provided relief to some service members who were forced to pay rent on two residences. In many cases, families have moved their household goods themselves, and in the latter half of the year, the government began paying service members doing a personally procured move 100 percent of the amount equal to the estimated cost of what the government would pay to move those items.

Use IRS Form 3903 if you want to deduct unreimbursed moving expenses. For more information, visit <https://www.irs.gov/taxtopics/tc455>, and IRS Publication 3, <https://www.irs.gov/pub/irs-pdf/p3.pdf>.

Capital gains taxes for military homeowners Taxpayers can generally avoid paying capital gains taxes on the sale of their home, as long as they've owned it and used it as their qualifying principal residence for at least two of the five years preceding the sale. The amount of profit that can be excluded from taxes is \$250,000 for single taxpayers and \$500,000 for married coupled filing jointly. But military members get an extra benefit — extending that time period by up to 10 years, for a total of 15 years, if they're assigned to a duty station that's at least 50 miles away from the house for a period of 90 days or more.

"It's a huge benefit for these service members who are moving around a lot and may not be able to necessarily sell their residence before they move, and so instead, they hang onto the house and hopefully rent it out," Mitchell said. This extra benefit means the service member may not have to pay taxes on the

profit up to those excluded amounts, if the residence has been their primary residence for at least two of the previous 15 years.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 22, 2021++]

Job Scams

Update 07: Fake Check Payment for Doing Product Promotions

If you are looking to earn extra money, adding a wrapper to your car to promote a popular drink or food brand may sound like a great gig. BBB Scam Tracker is seeing an uptick in these cons in recent months, as the pandemic has made finding a job even more difficult. But no matter how tough your job search has been, don't fall for this scam.

How the Scam Works:

- You are looking for a job, and you receive a text message or find a website promoting what seems to be a great gig. A major brand is paying people hundreds of dollars a week to wrap their car with the company logo (recent Scam Tracker reports mention food brands RedBull, Utz, and Breyers).
- You fill out a form to apply for the gig. Soon after, your new "boss" texts you with instructions about how to get started. The boss will mail you a cashier's check, which you should deposit to cover your expenses. Then, pay a local vendor through Venmo or Cash App, and they will install the wrapper on your car. Sounds easy enough, right?
- The catch is that the check is a fake! If you deposit it, it will appear as if the money is in your bank account. But when the bank realizes the check is counterfeit, you will be on the hook for the balance. In the meantime, the phony car wrapping company will have taken your money and disappeared.

How to protect yourself:

- Know your rights and responsibilities when it comes to using checks. Banks will make the funds from a check available before the money is actually transferred into your account. If you spend the money and the check is a fake, the bank has the right to recover the funds from you. Finding out about a bad check can take weeks, so it's best to wait 30 days before spending the money from a check if you have any concerns about it.
- Use money transfer apps with friends: Protect yourself from scams by only using money transfer apps for their intended purpose -- sending money to people you personally know.
- Know the red flags of job scams. Watch out for on-the-spot job offers. You may be an excellent candidate for the job but beware of offers made without an interview. A real company will want to talk to a candidate before hiring. Be careful if a company promises you great opportunities or a big income under the condition that you pay for coaching, training, certifications or directories.

For More Information

Learn more about [fake check](#) scams and read our tips for using [digital wallets](#), such as Venmo and Cash App. Also, learn more about scams [targeting job seekers](#). If you've spotted a scam (whether or not you've lost money), report it to [BBB Scam Tracker](#). Your report can help others avoid falling victim to scams. Find

more information about scams and how to avoid them at [BBB.org/AvoidScams](https://www.bbb.org/avoidscams). [Venmo](#) is a BBB Accredited Business. [Source: BBB Scam Alerts | February 19, 2021 ++]

Immigration Scam

Update 01: Con Artists Posing As U.S. Government Officials Preying On Visa-Seekers

The White House recently revoked the freeze on many types of U.S. visas and announced new immigration legislation. But like all big news stories, the situation has created new opportunities for scammers. With many people confused by changing immigration regulations, con artists are preying on visa-seekers by posing as U.S. government officials.

How the Scam Works:

- You receive an email that looks like it's from the U.S. Department of State. It looks official, and even includes the U.S. seal. The message declares that you've won the "green card lottery," a U.S. government program, officially known as the Diversity Visa Program, which grants 50,000 visas a year to individuals from selected countries. According to the email, you now qualify for a United States visa. To get it, all you need to do is download a form, complete it, and reply with a photo and copy of your passport. Sounds easy right?
- Think again! The email is a phishing scam and can open you up to identity theft. Sharing detailed personal information, such as your name, birth date, address, marital status, and phone number, as well as passport photos gives scammers all the information they need to impersonate you.
- Unfortunately, visa lottery scams aren't limited to fake emails. Watch out for phony websites claiming to be affiliated with U.S. Citizenship and Immigration Services or Department of State. These sites promise that if you hire them, your chances of receiving a visa improve. This claim is completely untrue. Often, these services "improve" your chances by including false information in your application, which will immediately disqualify you from the program.

How to protect yourself:

- *Only apply for a visa through official websites.* The only official place to get information about the Diversity Visa program and immigration visas is through U.S. government websites that end in ".gov." You should apply directly for the Diversity Visa Program through the official U.S. Department of State [website](#) during the specified registration period, which will run from May 8 to September 30, 2021.
- *Be wary of people who assist with immigration visa applications.* The U.S. Department of State does not recommend you get outside assistance and makes it clear that outside help will NOT improve your chances of being selected or approved. If you must get assistance, be sure you only work with reputable persons and double-check that all the information they put on your application is 100% accurate.
- *Check for lookalikes.* A website may appear to be official by using patriotic images but proceed with caution if the website does not end with ".gov." The same goes for emails. All official visa-related correspondence will come from a ".gov" email address.

- *Get to know scammers' tactics.* The Department of State has posted [a warning](#) about fraud related to the Diversity Visa Program. Read up on scammers' tricks to protect yourself from fraudulent offers.

For More Information

Read more about [government impostor scams](#) in our recent BBB study. Learn more about [Diversity Visa scams on the Federal Trade Commission](#) website. If you've spotted a scam (whether or not you've lost money), report it to [BBB.org/ScamTracker](#). Your report can help others avoid falling victim to scams. Find more information about scams and how to avoid them at [BBB.org/AvoidScams](#). [Source: BBB Scam Alerts | February 25, 2021 ++]

Tax Burden for Michigan Vets

As of FEB 2021

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 other ways including sales taxes, excise taxes, license taxes, intangible taxes, property taxes, estate taxes and inheritance taxes. Depending on where you live, you may end up paying all of them or just a few. Following are the taxes you can expect to pay if you retire in the state of Michigan:

Sales Taxes

The Michigan state sales tax rate is **6%** which is higher than 71.2% of states.

- Groceries and prescription drugs are exempt from the Michigan sales tax.
- Unlike many states, Michigan treats both candy and soda as groceries for sales tax purposes. Other items including gasoline, alcohol, and cigarettes are subject to various Michigan excise taxes in addition to the sales tax.
- Counties and cities are not allowed to collect local sales taxes.
- Michigan has no special sales tax jurisdictions with local sales taxes in addition to the state sales
- There are a variety of exemptions from the Michigan state sales tax, including food, prescribed drugs, and magazines/newspapers. While not technically sales taxes, a special service tax is collected on restaurant meals and a \$0.10 bottle deposit tax is levied on recyclable carbonated beverages.
- Also notable is that Michigan collects a sales tax on shipping and handling charges, which are considered to be part of the taxable purchase price of the item. Purchases made online or via mail order are not subject to sales tax, unless the seller is also located in Wisconsin.
- There is currently no sales tax on the sale of services, as a service tax introduced in 2007 was immediately repealed by the state legislature.

Excise Taxes

An excise tax is a tax directly levied on certain goods by a state or federal government. The most prominent excise Taxes collected by the Michigan state government are the fuel tax on gasoline and the so-called "sin tax" collected on cigarettes and alcoholic beverages. Michigan's excise tax is not the same thing as the Michigan Sales Tax which is collected as a percentage of the final purchase price of all qualifying sales, and is collected directly from the end consumer of the product. Michigan's excise taxes, on the other hand, are flat per-unit taxes that must be paid directly to the state government by the merchant before the goods can be sold. Merchants may be required to attach tax stamps to taxable merchandise to show that the excise tax was paid. Even though excise taxes are collected from businesses, virtually all merchants pass on the excise tax to the customer through higher prices for the taxed goods. Michigan collects an average of \$379 in yearly excise taxes per capita, lower than 70% of the other 50 states.

- **Alcohol:** Beer: \$0.20 per gal | Wine: \$0.51 per gal | Liquor \$11.90 per gal. Michigan's excise tax on beer is lower than 56% of the other states and is ranked 28th highest of the 50 states. The excise tax on wine is lower than 68% of the other 50 states and is ranked 34th highest of the 50 states. The excise tax on Spirits is one of the highest liquor taxes in the country and is ranked 9th highest of the 50 states.
- **Cannabis Tax:** none
- **Cellphone:** The average tax collected on cell phone plans in Michigan is **\$7.27 per phone service plan**, lower than 78% of the other 50 states. Michigan's average cellphone tax is ranked 39th highest of all 50 states. The Michigan cellphone tax is already included in the service plan price you pay to your service provider, and may be listed as "Misc. taxes and Fees" or "Other" on your
- **Cigarettes:** The Michigan excise tax on cigarettes is \$2.00 per 20 cigarettes, higher than 78% of the other 50 states. Michigan's excise tax on cigarettes is the 11th highest of all states. The Michigan cigarette tax of \$2.00 is applied to every 20 cigarettes sold (the size of an average pack of cigarettes). If a pack contains more than 20 cigarettes, a higher excise tax will be collected.
- **Fuel:** The Michigan excise tax on gasoline is 19.00¢ per gallon, higher than 66% of the other 50 states. Michigan's excise tax on gasoline is the 17th highest of all states. The Michigan gas tax is included in the pump price at all gas stations in Michigan and is in addition to the federal excise tax of 18.4¢ per gallon on gasoline and 24.4¢ per gallon, on diesel. For all state and federal taxes by type of fuel refer to <https://www.salestaxhandbook.com/maine/gasoline-fuel>
- **Vehicle:** Michigan collects a registration fee and a title fee on the sale or transfer of cars and motorcycles, which are essentially renamed excise taxes. Unlike standard excise taxes, however, the end consumer must pay the tax directly to the Michigan Department of Transportation and receive documentation (registration and title papers) proving the fees were paid.

Personal Income Taxes

The average family pays \$1,496 in Michigan income taxes and is ranked 25th highest of all states

Tax Rate Range: Flat 4.25%

Income Brackets: none

Personal Exemptions:

- \$4,750 each for you, your spouse (if filing jointly), and your dependents. Dependents include both qualifying children and qualifying relatives under the Internal Revenue Code.
- Only one \$2,800 exemption per person as it applies to each if deaf, blind, hemiplegic, paraplegic, quadriplegic, or totally and permanently disabled.

- \$400 in addition to the taxpayer's other exemptions for Qualified Disabled Veterans.
- \$4,750 per Stillbirth certificate

Standard Deduction: \$20,000 single or married filing separately and \$40,000 for married filing jointly

Adjusted Gross Income: AGI amount entered on your U.S. Forms 1040 or 1040NR.

Federal Income Tax Deduction: None

Retirement Income: Social Security income in AGI.

Retired Military Pay: Taxable

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

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

Military SBP/SSBP/RCSBP/RSFPP: Generally subject to state taxes for those states with income tax. Check with state department of revenue office if not mentioned specifically on their website

Delinquent Fee: The interest rate is 1 percent above the adjusted prime rate and is adjusted on January 1 and July 1. Interest is charged from the original due date of the return to the date the balance of the tax is paid. Any one of the following penalties may also apply to the unpaid tax:

- The initial penalty is 5 percent of tax due. Penalty increases by an additional 5 percent per month or fraction thereof, after the second month, to a maximum of 25 percent for failure to pay;
- 10 percent for negligence;
- 25 percent for intentional disregard of the law.

Website: Michigan Department of Treasury <https://www.michigan.gov/taxes>

Tax Forms:

- https://www.michigan.gov/documents/taxes/Book_MI-1040_instructions_only_712104_7.pdf
Form MI-1040 Instructions - Individual Income Tax Return Guide
- https://www.michigan.gov/documents/taxes/MI-1040_711857_7.pdf Form MI-1040 - Individual Income Tax Return
- All Tax forms <https://www.michigan.gov/taxes/0,4676,7-238-44143-548225--,00.html>

Property Taxes

The median property tax in Maine is **\$2,145 per year** for a home worth the median value of \$132,200. Counties in Michigan collect an average of **1.62%** of a property's assessed fair market value as property tax per year. Michigan is ranked number eighteen out of the fifty states, in order of the average amount of property taxes collected. Michigan's median income is \$55,244 per year, so the median yearly property tax paid by Michigan residents amounts to approximately 3.9% of their yearly income. Michigan is ranked 10th of the 50 states for property taxes as a percentage of median income.

The exact property tax levied depends on the county in Michigan the property is located in. Washtenaw County collects the highest property tax in Michigan, levying an average of \$3,913.00 (1.8% of median home value) yearly in property taxes, while Luce County has the lowest property tax in the state, collecting an average tax of \$739 (0.86% of median home value) per year.

Property taxes are collected on a county level, and each county in Michigan has its own method of assessing and collecting taxes. As a result, it's not possible to provide a single property tax rate that applies uniformly to all properties in Michigan. For more localized property tax rates refer to the county list at <http://www.tax-rates.org/michigan/property-tax#Counties>

In Michigan, the homestead exemption is a property tax exemption tax credit that you as a homeowner claim on your income tax return each year. To claim the Michigan Homestead exemption you must be a permanent resident of Michigan and your homesteaded property must be your primary residence. Real property used and owned as a homestead by a disabled veteran who was discharged from the U.S. armed forces under honorable conditions is exempt from the collection of property taxes. To obtain the exemption, an affidavit shall be filed by the property owner or his or her legal designee with the supervisor or other assessing officer during the period beginning with the tax day for each year and ending at the time of the final adjournment of the local board of review. The application should contain a description of the real property and show one of the following applies to the applicant:

- Has been determined by the United States department of veterans affairs to be permanently and totally disabled as a result of military service and entitled to veterans' benefits at the 100% rate.
- Has a certificate from the United States veterans' administration, or its successors, certifying that he or she is receiving or has received pecuniary assistance due to disability for specially adapted housing.
- Has been rated by the United States department of veterans affairs as individually unemployable.

If a disabled veteran who is otherwise eligible for the exemption under this section dies, the exemption shall remain available to or shall continue for his or her unremarried surviving spouse. The surviving spouse shall comply with the application procedure with and indicate on the affidavit that he or she is the surviving spouse of a disabled veteran entitled to the exemption. The exemption shall continue as long as the surviving spouse remains unremarried.

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

Michigan does not have an inheritance tax. Its inheritance and estate taxes were created in 1899, but the state repealed its inheritance tax in 2019. Its estate tax technically remains on the books, but since 2005 there has been no mechanism for it to collect it. That's because Michigan's estate tax depended on a provision in the Internal Revenue Tax Code allowing a state estate tax credit against the federal estate tax. When congress eliminated that credit in 2005, it effectively killed Michigan's estate tax.

Other State Tax Rates To compare the above sales, excise, 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> .
- Excise Taxes (i.e. gasoline, cigarettes, cellphones, automobiles, beer, wine, and liquor: <http://www.tax-rates.org/taxtables/excise-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>.
- Income Tax: <https://taxfoundation.org/state-individual-income-tax-rates-brackets-2019>

- State Tax Comparisons <https://www.moaa.org/content/state-report-card/statereportcard>

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Through the DMV Organizational website at <https://www.dmv.org/mi-michigan/apply-for-special-license-plates.php> a variety of Maryland online services are offered in addition to its branch office locations. At https://www.michigan.gov/sos/0,4670,7-127-1640_50050---,00.html is available a guide for new residents. For additional information regarding your state income tax liability, visit the Michigan Department of Treasury website <https://www.michigan.gov/taxes>.

[Source: <https://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-kansas-new-mexico#Michigan> | FEB 2021++]

* General Interest *



Notes of Interest

February 15 thru 28, 2021

- **Something to Observe.** When a person leaves the Office of The Presidency, they are still referred to as Mr. President. When the current political tensions ease it will be seen what will be the case with President Trump.
- **VARO Manila change.** Effective 02/15/2021 appointments will be required to access the Manila VA Regional Benefit Office (RO). To schedule an appointment to drop off documents or talk to a RO benefit counselor log on to <https://v2.waitwhile.com/book/vama> and select date, time, and action you would like to occur (phone, video, or drop off). You are not required to travel to the RO for assistance in filing a claim, request change of address, report a death, or change of dependents, etc.
- **Music Break.** Check out the Neil Diamond Sweet Caroline Facebook post presented at <https://www.facebook.com/neildiamond/videos/183531193466838>.
- **Flags.** Attaching this black ribbon to the top of a U.S. flag is an acceptable alternative for flags that cannot be lowered to half-staff.
- **Coast Guard Retirees.** If you're a U.S. Coast Guard, U.S. Public Health Service, or National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) retiree in Group A, you can now pay your TRICARE Select enrollment fees by allotment. This will allow you to have your enrollment fees deducted automatically from your military retirement pay. To set up your payment process, you must contact your [TRICARE contractor](#). If you or your sponsor's initial enlistment or appointment occurred before January 1, 2018, you are in Group A.
- **U.S.-Mexico Border.** The Department of Homeland Security officials told the Government Accountability Office during a review of the Pentagon's mission there that they want troops to remain at the border for at least the next three to five years.

- **Covid-19.** A woman with chronic obstructive lung disease contracted COVID-19 from a pair of donor lungs and died 61 days after the transplant — the first confirmed donor-to-recipient transmission of COVID-19 in the U.S., according to a case report published Feb. 10 in the American Journal of Transplantation. The donor tested negative 48 hours before procurement, and the recipient tested negative 12 hours before the transplant.
- **Cadence.** Check out <https://youtu.be/Yhx2ZA2eMj0> on military running cadence

[Source: Various | February 28, 2021 ++]

Map Comparisons

Brazil Annual Homicides



All The Nations That Have To Be Combined To Be Equal To Brazils Annual Homicides.

American Flag

Display FAQs

1. **Can a flag that has covered a casket be displayed after its original use?** There are no provisions in the Flag Code to suggest otherwise. It would be a fitting tribute to the memory of the deceased veteran and his or her service to a grateful nation if the casket flag is displayed.
2. **Can the U.S. flag be displayed in inclement weather?** The flag should not be displayed on days when the weather is inclement, with the exception of an all-weather (nylon or other non-absorbent material) flag. However, most flags are made of all-weather materials.
3. **What is the significance of displaying the flag at half-staff?** This gesture is a sign to indicate the nation mourns the death of an individual(s), such as death of the president or former president, vice

president, Supreme Court justice, member of Congress, secretary of an executive or military department, etc. Only the president or a state governor may order the flag to be displayed at half-staff. The honor and reverence accorded this solemn act is quickly becoming eroded by those individuals and agencies that display the flag at half-staff on inappropriate occasions without proper authority to do so.

4. **When the flag is not flown from a staff, how should it be displayed?** It should be displayed vertically, whether indoors or out, and suspended so that its folds fall free as though the flag were staffed. The stripes may be displayed either horizontally or vertically against a wall, and the union should be uppermost and to the flag's own right (that is, to the observer's left). When displayed in a window of a home or a place of business, the flag should be displayed in the same way (that is, with the union or blue field to the left of the observer in the street).

5. **How are unserviceable flags destroyed?** The Flag Code suggests that when a flag has served its useful purpose, "it should be destroyed, preferably by burning." For individual citizens, this should be done discreetly so the act of destruction is not perceived as a protest or desecration. Many American Legion posts conduct disposal of unserviceable flag ceremonies on June 14, Flag Day. Such ceremonies are particularly dignified and solemn occasions for the retirement of unserviceable flags.

6. **Can the flag be washed or dry-cleaned?** Yes. No provisions of the Flag Code prohibit such care. The decision to wash or dry-clean would depend on the material.

7. **Are you required to destroy the flag if it touches the ground?** The Flag Code states that the flag should not touch anything beneath it, including the ground. This is stated to indicate that care should be exercised in the handling of the flag, to protect it from becoming soiled or damaged. You are not required to destroy the flag when this happens. As long as the flag remains suitable for display, even if washing or dry-cleaning is required, you may continue to display the flag as a symbol of our great country.

8. **What is the proper method for folding the flag?** The Flag Code does not require any specific method. However, a tradition of folding has developed over time that produces a triangular-shaped form, like that of a three-corner hat with only the blue union showing.

9. **May a person, other than a veteran, have his or her casket draped with the flag of the United States?** Yes. Although this honor is usually reserved for veterans or highly regarded state and national figures, the Flag Code does not prohibit this use.

10. **What is the significance of the gold fringe seen on some U.S. flags?** Records indicate that fringe was first used on the flag as early as 1835. It was not until 1895 it was officially added to the national flag for all Army regiments. For civilian use, fringe is not required as an integral part of the flag, nor can its use be said to constitute an unauthorized addition to the design prescribed by statute. Fringe is used as an honorable enrichment only.

11. **What is meant by the flag's own right?** The "right" as the position of honor developed from the time when the right hand was the "weapon hand" or "point of danger." The right hand, raised without a weapon, was a sign of peace. The right hand, to any observer, is the observer's left. Therefore, as used in the Flag Code, the flag and/or blue field is displayed to the observer's left, which is the flag's "own right."

12. **Is it proper to fly the U.S. flag at night?** The Flag Code states it is the universal custom to display the flag only from sunrise to sunset on buildings and on stationary flag staffs in the open. However, when a patriotic effect is desired, the flag may be displayed 24 hours a day if properly illuminated during the

hours of darkness. The American Legion interprets “proper illumination” as a light specifically placed to illuminate the flag (preferred) or having a light source sufficient to illuminate the flag so it is recognizable as such by the casual observer.

13. What should be the position of the flag when displayed from a staff in a church, public auditorium or other public meeting place, whether indoors or outdoors, on platform, or on the floor at ground level? When used on a speaker’s platform, the flag, if displayed flat, should be displayed above and behind the speaker. When displayed from a staff in a church, public auditorium or meeting place, the flag should hold the position of superior prominence, in advance of the audience, and in the position of honor at the clergyman’s or speaker’s right as he faces the audience. Prior to the Flag Code changes in 1976, the display procedure was somewhat different. Now, the staffed flag should always be placed to the right of the speaker (observer’s left) without regard to a platform or floor level.

14. What are the penalties for the physical desecration of the flag? There are currently no penalties for the physical desecration of the flag. The American Legion and other members of the Citizens Flag Alliance continue working toward securing a constitutional amendment to protect the flag from physical desecration.

[Source: The American Legion | February 22, 2021 ++]

RP-US Relations

Update 08: Philippines Demands More U.S. Security Aid to Retain Pact



Philippine President Rodrigo Duterte's administration wants considerably more military aid from the United States in exchange for not abrogating a key security pact with Washington, his spokesman said 15 FEB, rejecting criticism that the blunt demand resembled extortion. Presidential spokesman Harry Roque said the Philippines has received much less security assistance from the U.S. than Pakistan and other countries despite Manila's long treaty alliance with Washington. Roque did not specify how much more the U.S. should provide in exchange for the continuation of the Visiting Forces Agreement.

Duterte said in a speech last week that if the U.S. wants to keep the military agreement, which he ordered abrogated a year ago, "they have to pay." "It's a shared responsibility, but your share of responsibility does not come free," said Duterte, who is known for his blunt comments. Roque said that

"what the president wants is, if you want to continue using our territory, we want just compensation for it. Not loose coins, not dilapidated equipment."

Duterte's administration notified the U.S. government in February last year that it intends to abrogate the 1998 agreement, which allows the entry of large numbers of American forces for joint combat training with Filipino troops and lays down the legal terms for their temporary stay. The termination would have taken effect after 180 days, in August, but Duterte delayed the effectivity of the decision. If the agreement is terminated, it would deal a major blow to one of America's oldest alliances in Asia. Duterte has often lashed out at U.S. security policies while nurturing relations with China and Russia. But his foreign and defense secretaries have cited the importance of Manila's alliance with America.

The U.S. military presence in the region has been seen as a crucial counterbalance to China, which continues to aggressively assert its vast territorial claims in the disputed South China Sea despite a 2016 international arbitration ruling that invalidated their historic basis. China, the Philippines, Vietnam and three other governments have been locked in the territorial standoff for decades. Filipino Sen. Panfilo M. Lacson, who heads the Senate committee on national defense and generally supports Duterte, said "there is a more civil and statesmanlike manner to ask for compensation from a longtime ally using the usual diplomatic channels and still get the same desired results."

Duterte's demand for the U.S. to pay up "may have given the impression that the Philippines is a nation of extortionists," Lacson said in a statement which stressed that "one cannot put a price tag on the value" of the Visiting Forces Agreement. Filipino Albert del Rosario, a former Philippine foreign secretary, said the agreement enforces the allies' 1951 Mutual Defense Treaty. "It is incomprehensible that when partners help each other against a common enemy, one party is asking his partner to pay," he said in a statement. Roque said the demand was "not extortion, it's upholding the national interest of Filipinos." There was no immediate reaction from U.S. officials, who have repeatedly underscored the value of the 1998 pact and Washington's alliance with the Philippines to mutual and regional security. [Source: Associated Press | Jim Gomez | February 15, 2021 ++]

Afghan Peace Talks

Update 11: Talks Resume, But Path Is Anything But Certain



With violence spiking, Afghanistan's warring sides have returned to the negotiation table, ending more than a month of delays amid hopes that the two sides can agree on a reduction of violence - and eventually,

an outright ceasefire. Taliban spokesman Dr. Mohammad Naeem tweeted 22 FEB that talks had resumed in the Middle Eastern State of Qatar, where the insurgent movement maintains a political office. There were no details other than the atmosphere was "cordial", a commitment that negotiations should continue and an announcement that the first item of business will be setting the agenda.

When talks ended abruptly in January, just days after beginning, both sides submitted their wish lists for agendas. The task now is for the two sides to sift through the respective wish lists, agree on items to negotiate and the order in which they will be tackled. The priority for the Afghan government, Washington and NATO is a serious reduction in violence leading to a cease fire. The Taliban have said it is negotiable, but until now have resisted any immediate cease fire. Washington is reviewing the February 2020 peace deal the previous Trump administration signed with the Taliban that calls for the final withdrawal of international forces by 1 MAY. The Taliban have resisted suggestions of even a brief extension, but a consensus is mounting in Washington for a delay in the withdrawal deadline.

There is even a suggestion of a smaller intelligence - based force staying behind that would focus almost exclusively on counter-terrorism and an increasingly active and deadly Islamic State affiliate, headquartered in eastern Afghanistan. But neither Washington nor NATO has yet to announce a decision on the fate of an estimated 10,000 troops, including 2,500 American soldiers, still in Afghanistan. The Biden administration has emphasized a political solution to the protracted Afghan conflict, retained Zalmay Khalilzad, the man who negotiated the U.S. peace deal with the Taliban and until now avoided any definitive statements about the road forward.

The resumption in talks in Doha follows on the heels of a blizzard of diplomatic activity including a steady stream of officials to Pakistan and its powerful Army Chief Gen. Qamar Javed Bajwa. Pakistan is seen as critical to getting the Taliban back to the table but also to pressing the insurgent movement — whose leadership is headquartered in Pakistan — to reduce violence in Afghanistan. Just this past week the U.S. Central Command head Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie was in Islamabad, as was Russian President Vladimir Putin's Afghan envoy, Zamir Kabulov and Qatar's foreign ministry's special envoy Dr Mutlaq Bin Majed Al Qahtani. Afghan President Ashraf Ghani's special envoy Umar Daudzai is expected in Islamabad on 24 FEB.

While details of the meetings have been sketchy, Afghanistan featured prominently and officials familiar with the talks said a reduction of violence and eventual cease fire dominated discussions. Pakistan, which also still hosts 1.5 million Afghan refugees has repeatedly said the only solution in Afghanistan is political and has previously been credited with getting the Taliban to the negotiating table. The latest diplomatic activity in Islamabad also coincidentally comes as Pakistan is being discussed at a meeting underway this week in Paris of the Financial Action Task Force probing terrorism financing and money laundering. Pakistan is currently on a so-called grey list, the last step before a black listing which would seriously erode the country's ability to borrow money.

Few analysts expect Pakistan to be blacklisted, which so far includes only Iran and North Korea, but Islamabad is pressing hard to be removed from the grey list. While Pakistan has allies, like China, among the 37-member countries that make up FATF, Russian and U.S. support is critical to being removed from the grey list. Still the issues ahead for Taliban and Afghan government are thorny ones and it isn't immediately clear whether any country has sufficient influence with either side to force a peace deal that will last.

Afghan President Ashraf Ghani has flatly refused an interim administration, and his critics accuse him of wanting to hold on to power. Meanwhile, a Taliban official says they want a "new Islamic government" that would not include Ghani, but refused to give details of this government and whether it would even include elections. He spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to speak to the media. In an open letter to the American people last week, the Taliban's lead negotiator in the U.S./Taliban deal, Mullah Abdul Ghani Baradar urged compliance with the deal, promised rights for men and women "based on Islamic law" without stipulating, vowed not to interfere in any other nation, and also vowed to end the world's largest crop of poppies, which produces opium used in the production of heroin. [Source: Associated Press | Kathy Gannon | February 23, 2021 ++]

North Korea Sanctions

Update 01: North Korea's Economy Is Ravaged | Kim Is Lashing Out



North Korea's leader Kim Jong Un told the ruling Workers' Party last month, yelling and finger-pointing at frightened-looking delegates, that North Korea's last economic plan failed "tremendously." He complained that his inner circle lacked an "innovative viewpoint and clear tactics" in drawing up a new one. His economy minister, appointed in January, has already been fired. It's not altogether surprising. North Korea is suffering its worst slump in more than two decades, experts say. It's a combination of international sanctions and especially a self-imposed blockade on international trade in attempts to keep the coronavirus pandemic out.

A shortage of spare parts usually supplied from China has caused factories to close, including one of the country's largest fertilizer plants, and crippled output from the country's aging power plants, according to news reports. Electricity shortages, long a chronic problem, have become so acute, production has even halted at some coal mines and other mines, Kim himself admitted in mid-February. "Without imported materials, raw materials and components, many enterprises stopped, and people, accordingly, lost their jobs," Alexander Matsegora, the Russian ambassador to North Korea, told the Interfax news agency.

The economic pain is unlikely to threaten Kim's regime or force any retreat in North Korea's standoff with the United States and allies over Pyongyang's nuclear program. Nor should it lead to famine — as it did in the 1990s, when hundreds of thousands of people died — partly because food production and distribution has improved in the past decades and ally China would probably come to North Korea's rescue, experts say. But it does presage more pain and misery for millions of ordinary North Koreans. Even in the capital Pyongyang, the regime's bastion and home to its elite, shelves have emptied, and it's difficult even

to buy basic products such as pasta, flour, vegetable oil and sugar, Matsegora said, as well as suitable clothes and shoes. "If you manage to get something, it is three to four times more expensive than before the crisis," he told Interfax.

But Kim's response to the crisis risks appears to be making the situation much worse. Andrei Lankov, a Russian university professor based in Seoul, called it a "dramatic U-turn." Kim has turned his back on even modest economic and market reforms and reverted back to de facto Leninism, emphasizing central planning while trying to clamp down on the private entrepreneurial activity that has become a mainstay of the country's mixed economy, he said. In speeches to the ruling party, Kim demanded the restoration and strengthening of the system under which the economy runs "under the unified guidance and management of the state," putting special emphasis on metal and chemical industries as the "main link in the whole chain of economic development." Kim also announced plans to expand state control of society, clamp down on foreign culture and media, and launch a "powerful mass campaign against practices running counter to the socialist lifestyle."

Benjamin Katzeff Silberstein, a nonresident scholar at the Stimson Center foreign policy think tank, said Kim is unwilling to undertake serious reforms to the state-controlled system. "The only thing left is to blame officials for not doing their jobs properly," he said, "as if a more competent official would be able to work within the system and make it more efficient — whereas, in fact, it's the system itself that's the problem." North Korea's economic managers are largely flying blind, without even the reliable data they would need to run a command economy, said Kim Byung-yeon, an economics professor at Seoul National University. The few clues he can glean suggest cement production has fallen by 25% since 2016, while interviews with defectors suggest household incomes declined a similar amount between 2017 and 2019. The overall economy may have contracted by 20% since 2017, he "guesstimates."

In rural areas, there are many days when households only get two hours of electricity, the Seoul-based Daily NK news service reports, while fertilizer shortages could compound an already shaky food situation. But it's the scarcity of goods in Pyongyang and possible discontent among the elites that will have Kim more worried, experts say. His attempt to reimpose state control of the economy may partly be driven by a desire to corral what limited resources are there. But it also could be simply driven by insecurity. "To make a Stalinist economy work these days is pretty much as hopeless as teaching pigs to fly," Lankov said. "He probably understands that, but he also feels insecure about losing control. He decided that, in the days of crisis, he should increase control over the economy and population."

Lankov noted that Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, oscillated among turning a blind eye to private enterprise, actively promoting market reforms and reverting to state control during his rule. It now appears his son may be following the same path. "I used to believe Kim Jong Un would be different from his father," he said. "I didn't expect him to surrender his nuclear weapons or pursue political liberalization, but I did expect him to pursue economic liberalization." Ever since the 1990s, North Korea has allowed a degree of private enterprise as the only way to prevent total economic collapse, allowing traders to sell food and consumer goods in markets, and other people to run small businesses. Since taking power, Kim had quietly expanded these freedoms in measures "that were clearly copied from China in the 1980s," Lankov said.

Now, Kim's apparent swing back toward central planning and the "juche" philosophy of self-reliance is unrealistic in an economy that was dependent on trade with China, experts say. "The economy was quite open before sanctions," said Seoul National University professor Kim. "He is trying to encourage people by saying they can overcome the crisis by the juche ideology. But if he really tries to implement it, it will

worsen the economic situation." The crisis is partly self-inflicted, driven by what Katzeff Silberstein calls a "remarkable paranoia" about the coronavirus pandemic that saw the regime not only block the movement of people across its border with China — with armed guards told to shoot on sight — but also block the movement of goods.

Despite the crisis, Lankov said, North Korea's diplomatic calculus is unlikely to change, and certainly won't induce Kim to go cap-in-hand to Washington or Seoul for help. Kim is never going to surrender his nuclear weapons, which he considers essential for the survival of his regime and his family, Lankov said. "Kim Jong Un basically wants to negotiate the partial or complete removal of sanctions, but at a limited cost," he said. "Denuclearization is not acceptable to the North Koreans, and so if the Americans only want to talk about denuclearization, it means nobody is going to talk to them." [Source: The Washington Post | Simon Denyer (Opinion) | February 21, 2021 ++]

Nuclear Launch Authority

Update 02: Biden Urged to Relinquish His Sole Authority



Nearly three dozen House Democrats are urging President Joe Biden to relinquish his sole authority to order the launch of nuclear weapons, arguing that no single person should wield apocalyptic military power. "Vesting one person with this authority entails real risks. Past presidents have threatened to attack other countries with nuclear weapons or exhibited behavior that causes other officials to express concerns about the president's judgement," according to the letter, which was spearheaded by California Reps. Jimmy Panetta and Ted Lieu.

The letter doesn't explicitly mention former President Donald Trump, but Democrats frequently questioned his mental state and composure during his time in the Oval Office. Trump often flouted the enormous power he had at his disposal, often making light of nuclear weapons and openly threatening to use them -- one time saying his nuclear button was "much bigger" and "more powerful" than that of North Korean leader Kim Jong Un. Speaker of the House Nancy Pelosi told Democrats two days after a pro-Trump mob assaulted the Capitol on 6 JAN that she had spoken with Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Mark Milley about "preventing an unstable president" from launching nuclear weapons.

"The worry is not about Biden, but more about Trump or another future Trump-like president," said Stephen Young, who advocates on the dangers of nuclear weapons for the Union of Concerned Scientists. "No one person should have this ability to kill tens or hundreds of millions in less than an hour. It is simply too much power." The lawmakers' letter argues that other officials, including the vice president and speaker

of the House, should concur with a launch order before it can be issued. "While any president would presumably consult with advisors before ordering a nuclear attack, there is no requirement to do so," the letter states.

"The military is obligated to carry out the order if they assess it is legal under the laws of war. Under the current posture of U.S. nuclear forces, that attack would happen in minutes." But giving up the ability to make a quick decision during an emergency could have grave security consequences, others say. Both the president and vice president are always accompanied by a so-called "football," which contains communications equipment needed to order a nuclear launch. If an adversary were to launch a strike against the United States, the president would potentially have only minutes to make a decision and launch an attack -- raising concerns over any additional bureaucracy during a time of crisis.

John Robinson, a retired Army CWO5 and former targeting officer who helped plan the use of nuclear weapons at the combatant command level, said having a "nuclear football by committee" could be devastating "How would that work?" he asked, saying such a change could mean that congressional leaders would need their own nuclear footballs. "You could have as little as 20 minutes' heads up. If the North Koreans fired a weapon at the Japanese, we have a treaty obligation." The biggest worry, Robinson said, would be a potential constitutional crisis if multiple people must green-light a first or retaliatory strike. "What if one of them disagrees? Is this a majority vote? Whether they're right or wrong, you still have to wrestle with Article II, Section 2 [of the U.S. Constitution]. There's nothing there that says anybody other than the commander in chief will have this level of responsibility."

[Source: Military.com | Steve Beynon | February 25, 2021 ++]

Sea Turtle Rescue

NAS Corpus Christi Base Residents Save Almost 1,000



Army Retiree William Bellamy and his son Jerome, (left), Capt. Christopher Jason (center), and Command Master Chief Eric Kinnaman (right) help save cold-stunned sea turtles (far right) at NAS Corpus Christi

A massive effort to rescue nearly 1,000 cold-stunned sea turtles at Naval Air Station Corpus Christi all started with a base resident wanting to help a couple of injured birds. "I saw these two injured boobies and wanted to help," retired Army Sgt. William Bellamy told Military Times, explaining how his effort 14 FEB to rescue the injured sea birds turned into a large-scale operation involving dozens of volunteers rescuing hundreds of threatened sea turtles at a time when many had no heat or water thanks to a huge and deadly winter storm.

Bellamy, 39, said he turned the birds into the Texas Sealife rescue center on Padre Island. "That's where I learned about the cold-stunned turtles," said Bellamy, whose military career started with the Marines.

“They said, ‘Since you live on base, can you keep an eye on the turtles?’ On 16 FEB, Bellamy said he started driving up and down the waterfront in his 2018 Nissan Frontier pickup, looking for turtles. “It was extremely cold and windy,” said Bellamy. “The water was extremely choppy.” Bellamy said he initially found three turtles along the waterfront, put them in his truck bed and then messaged the wife of Navy Capt. Christopher Jason, the commanding officer, who quickly rushed down to help. All told, he and his son, Jerome, 15, rescued about 40 turtles that day, Bellamy said.

Jason, 45, told Military Times that he was aware of the phenomenon of turtles being stunned by the cold weather. But what transpired was unlike anything he had experienced critter-wise since taking command in 2019. While Bellamy already had a few turtles in his truck, Jason said that others were just out of reach. The water was cold and choppy. Jason was joined by Navy Command Master Chief Eric Kinnaman, and the two searched for sticks and polls to try and reach the turtles. That effort proved unsuccessful. Jason said “a lightbulb came on” and he knew that the only way to reach the turtles was to grab his kayak and get in the water.

“We looked at each other and knew it was a crazy idea,” Jason said. “But it was the only way to save them.” So he donned a thick wetsuit, hopped in his kayak and, after taking a test run to make sure he could handle the rough, chilly surf, paddled about a couple hundred yards parallel to the sea wall and some 25 feet off shore and went after the turtles. Though the temperature was in the low 30s, Jason said the wetsuit protected him against the cold. He plucked a small turtle out of the water. Then a larger one. Then another big one. “But the problem was as I picked up the turtles, my hands got wet,” said Jason. “My gloves weren’t very thick and it was pretty painful by the time I got the third one in.” Paddling back with three turtles in his kayak was “awkward,” he said. Though Jason didn’t get back in his kayak, it was just the beginning of the rescue effort.

Dozens of base retirees, Coast Guardsmen, sailors, soldiers and spouses joined agencies like the National Park Service, Texas Parks and Wildlife, the Texas Sealife center and others to help save the turtles, Jason said. Bellamy said on 17 FEB morning, he returned to the waterfront with his son and neighbor Kyle Statham, 29, a Marine 2nd lieutenant. “It was like turtle apocalypse,” he said. “There were turtles as far as the eye could see. We started grabbing turtles and putting them in the truck.” The three rescued about 100 more turtles that day, Bellamy said. The scale of the effort was unprecedented, said Biji Pandisseril, the NAS Corpus Christi environmental director. Usually, about 20 to 30 turtles are rescued from the facility after a cold snap, said Pandisseril. “This year, we blew that out of the water,” he said. “We have 900 counted and they are still being found” and being taken to Padre Island. Thanks to all the help, only about 20 of the turtles perished, Pandisseril said.

Those who helped rescue the turtles did so at a very difficult time for Texas and much of the region. The deadly blast of winter this week overwhelmed the electrical grid and left millions shivering in the cold, in many cases without heat or safe drinking water. As of 19 FEB, a half-million homes remained without electricity, although utility officials said limited rolling blackouts could still occur. The storms also left more than 320,000 homes and businesses without power in Louisiana, Mississippi and Alabama. About 70,000 power outages persisted after an ice storm in eastern Kentucky, while nearly 67,000 were without electricity in West Virginia.

Snow and ice moved into the Appalachians, northern Maryland and southern Pennsylvania, and later the Northeast. Back-to-back storms left 15 inches of snow in Little Rock, Arkansas, tying a 1918 record, the National Weather Service said. The [extreme weather](#) was blamed for the deaths of over three dozen people,

some while trying to keep warm. In the Houston area, one family died from carbon monoxide as their car idled in their garage. A woman and her three grandchildren were killed in a fire that authorities said might have been caused by a fireplace they were using. Many of those taking part in the rescue effort themselves had no heat or water, said Jason, the commanding officer. NAS Corpus Christi has sustained water outages and scattered power outages and the people coming in from the community had similar problems, said Jason.

“They were coming from homes without water and power, and despite the challenges found a way to come and do all this.” Bellamy, who was without water for a period, was a little worried about not being able to wash off after handling so many turtles because he was warned that they often carry salmonella. “My biggest concern was disinfection and washing stuff properly,” he said. For Jason, the harsh weather is just the latest in a series of challenges that have faced NAS Corpus Christi since he arrived. “I have had a few challenges,” he said. “We had a hurricane come through, [a terrorist attack](#) [in which a sailor was injured and the attacker was killed] and the pandemic. It’s been a very unusually challenging period. I would say our base staff is learning to deal with crisis efficiently through experience.” [Source: NavyTimes | Howard Altman| February 19, 2021 ++]

Southeast Asian Refugees

Arkansas Became a Haven For Many In The Mid-1970s



Street signs in north Fort Smith, Arkansas signify what the city's Vietnamese community has known for decades. O Street is the main thoroughfare in a north Fort Smith working-class neighborhood of Southeast Asian, Hispanic, Black and white residents. But it has some of the most prominent Vietnamese-owned businesses in Fort Smith, including those on the east end of the street that host events, gatherings and reunions for the Vietnamese community. Now donning "Saigon Street" signs, O Street honors the history and contributions of Vietnamese who came to Fort Smith after the Vietnam War. The signs were erected in partnership between the Vietnamese community and the city marking the 45th anniversary of the fall of the former South Vietnamese capital.

Vietnamese refugees first came to Fort Smith in 1975 after the fall of Saigon to North Vietnamese and guerilla troops. This event signaled the end of a two-decade civil war that claimed more than 3 million lives. Fort Chaffee, which was used as a test site for the defoliate Agent Orange during the war, processed 50,809 Vietnamese, Laotian, Cambodian and Hmong refugees from 1975-1976. It was one of four camps in the United States to welcome the refugees and a country involved in their war for eight years trying to halt the spread of communism in East Asia. Refugees continued to come to the states in the following years and decades. Some were escaping the new Socialist Republic of Vietnam, which was installed after the war. Others were making good on immigration documents filed by family members who came before them. And still more waited years before taking advantage of U.S. immigration policies.

The Vietnamese population in Fort Smith has waned since the 1970s — the city had only about 1,900 Vietnamese residents in 2010. But Chung said the Vietnamese community is growing as they continue to make good on immigration papers filed on their behalf. Fort Smith Mayor George McGill, who oversaw the Arkansas Census Committee, estimates there are 6,000 Vietnamese in the area. The Vietnamese who chose to stay in Fort Smith took factory jobs and learned new life skills. They mostly lived in affordable housing on the north side of town. Vietnamese have become part of the fabric of the city, owning restaurants, practicing medicine, and pastoring churches and no longer live in just one part of town. They each carry stories of how they, their parents, or their grandparents reached the U.S. following the war. "They are a major contributor to the beautiful culture we have in Fort Smith," McGill said.

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It wasn't the defeat of South Vietnam, but rather the following years, that prompted **Hon Chung's** family to flee the country. Chung, now a 43-year-old eye doctor in Fort Smith, was 1 year old in 1979 when his family of 10 boarded a boat and set off into the South China Sea. The family had been moved out of the city of Soc Trang onto a farm after their father's rice milling business was confiscated by the government. In 1979, they suffered discrimination because they were of Chinese descent and the country was fighting China. "Mom and Dad kind of looked at the prospect of the future in Vietnam versus risking their lives at sea," Chung said. "They decided risking their lives at sea was the better option."

In the South China Sea, the Chungs were was attacked by pirates before landing in Malaysia where they suffered from "compassion fatigue" due to the number of refugees that went to the country following the war. "(The Malaysians) loaded us up on these large boats that were tied behind this military vessel, and they said, 'It's a few hours that way.' They then dragged us out to sea and cut the chains, and said, 'See you,'" Chung said. The family was eventually taken in by members of the Christian relief group World Vision after relief workers found them during a sea sweep. The family ended up in Fort Smith because the area was accustomed to taking in refugees and was sponsored by Our Redeemer Lutheran Church when they arrived.

Chung's father worked at Rheem Manufacturing "every overtime hour he possibly could." The children attended Barling Elementary, Chaffin Jr. High and Northside High School. "Dad raised all those kids, mom and dad raised all those kids, somehow, on a single income," Chung said. "With that, I never felt like I was lacking anything." Chung graduated from Harvard University in 2000 and then worked in accounting for Ford Motor Company. It was when he attended as a translator on a 2005 medical mission trip to Vietnam that he decided to become an optometrist. I saw these surgeons, these doctors, just change people's lives," he said. After quitting his job at Ford, Chung enrolled at Southern College of Optometry in Memphis,

Tennessee, graduating in 2010. Today, he operates his optometry practice at 7320 Rogers Ave. in Fort Smith.

At his practice, Chung gives exams in English and Vietnamese, allowing him to better serve fellow immigrants. "Some are doing things as diverse as running the poultry plants in the state. Some are running their little nail shops in rural communities. A lot of the ones I've run into were born here, have grown up here, may not even speak (Vietnamese), but they still identify with the culture," he said.

-o-o-O-o-o-

Tammy Nguyen remembers Saigon when it fell — she lived there when it happened. Nguyen was 12 years old living with her parents and six siblings in the South Vietnamese capital city in April 1975. She saw bodies in the streets just like she did the Tet Offensive in 1968 when she was 5. But she doesn't like to talk about it. "We were terrified," she said. "It was a bad, bad time." For Nguyen, now 85, April 30, 1975, didn't just mark the end of the Vietnam War — it's the day her father and two older brothers escaped the city on her father's boat. It was loaded with refugees.

Nguyen's father and brothers ended up in Fort Smith, where her father worked at Riverside Furniture Factory. The rest of the family stayed in Saigon, renamed Ho Chi Minh City after the late North Vietnamese prime minister, until 1976 when the government found out her father and brothers had fled to the states. "They said, 'Because your husband moved to America, you cannot have this house,'" she said. They were then moved out of the city to farm. Nguyen and her family moved back to the city in 1979 after her father sent them money he had saved working in Fort Smith. There, Nguyen's mother sold her home cooking at street markets.

In Fort Smith, Nguyen's father worked to get permission for the rest of her family to immigrate to the U.S. The rest of the family finally moved in 1984. After working briefly in Texas and then as a waitress in Fort Smith, Nguyen went to school in California to learn how to do nails. In 2000, Nguyen bought Pro Nails in the Phoenix Village shopping center from a couple she met in California. She opened Tammy's Beauty School at the corner of North O and 36th streets in 2010. "Most of my students are Vietnamese," Nguyen said adding that Vietnamese often become beauticians because the industry is prominent in the country. With a checkerboard floor, pedicure chairs, nail booths and a wall full of nail polish, the beauty school resembles a metropolitan salon. In 2020, Nguyen opened her second location in Springfield, Missouri. "I try to help people," she said. "When they come here, they can't speak (English) very well, but they can do nails very well."

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Ngoc Ha is a pastor and a former re-education camp prisoner. Ha was completing his training as a military police officer in the South Vietnamese Army when Saigon fell. He was sentenced to one of the camps, where South Vietnamese who were affiliated with the old government were indoctrinated, sentenced to labor, and sometimes tortured. Ha, now 66, spent eight months in the camp but wasn't allowed to return to the city after his release. He still recalls living under the new government after the war; each street had a "street leader" who monitored residents. "It's really hard for you to imagine what it was like when the communists took over Vietnam in 1975," he said. "We're talking about a 180-degree change."

In 1979, Ha and friends set out for the Philippines in a 40-foot boat they purchased. They also bought guns and grenades on the black market to fend off potential pirates. After the boat was picked up by the U.S. Navy in the South China Sea, Ha ended up in a refugee camp in Singapore before going to Houston,

fulfilling the immigration paperwork submitted by his brother. His brother Phat, a pilot in the South Vietnamese military, fled the country before April 1975 because he knew defeat was coming. In Houston, Ha worked a manufacturing job at Reed American and took English classes at a Baptist church. It was through the church that Ha was introduced to Christianity. He had been raised Buddhist and "had no interest in any religion," he said.

It was after his teacher's husband took the day off to drive Ha for a medical check-up for lung complications he developed in the camp that he became more interested in Christianity. "Before he dropped me at my brother's house, he said, 'May I pray for you and pray for your country?'" Ha said. After becoming a Christian in 1980, Ha attended university and then seminary in Texas. He worked at churches in Nashville and Maryland before coming to pastor at Gospel Baptist Church in Fort Smith in 2014. Ha said the Vietnamese community and the slower pace of life in Fort Smith drew him to the city. He keeps a close relationship with the Buddhist temples in the area, which are staffed with priests from Southeast Asia. "I don't have any problem with Muslims, or Buddhists, or whatever — I see people," he said. "If I'm able to get close to them, I'll share the love of Christ with them." Ha said his war background helps him relate to Vietnamese in Fort Smith. He also said his story as a refugee is helpful in his ministry, including to immigrants. "I know what they need in their lives when they're living away from home," Ha said.

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To **Thomas Nguyen**, Fort Smith was a second chance for his father and a launching pad for his career. Nguyen came to Fort Smith in 1992 with his parents and brother as a part of the U.S. Humanitarian Operation program aimed at former re-education camp detainees. His father, Cong Nguyen, was an officer in the South Vietnamese Army and spent seven and a half years in a "re-education camp" following the war. Nguyen believes the label "re-education camp" was used to rationalize prison camps where he said the government would "mentally destroy people." "They make you work hard, but they don't feed you like they're supposed to," he said. Nguyen was in third grade when his father was released, but the hard times didn't end as he couldn't get a job because of his former prisoner status.

Nguyen, 47, said the family ended up in Fort Smith because Gospel Baptist contacted them as their sponsor and convinced them to move to Arkansas. "We were so happy to be here — the whole family," Nguyen said. "We're going to come here, we're going to have a new life, and then we're going to get better." Nguyen's parents worked at Tyson Foods when they arrived in Fort Smith. His father died in 2018 at the age of 78. Nguyen took classes at the Fort Smith Adult Education Center and computer technician courses at WestArk College. He became a computer technician and opened a tech shop on Midland Boulevard. He later moved the store to Grand Avenue and then to its current location after installing the point-of-sale system for Truong Son, which is next door.

The store, iComputer Repair Center, shares space with Smiling Cup Bubble Tea, which he opened in August 2020. "It's an Asian store, but we serve everybody," Nguyen said in January. Nguyen said the Vietnamese community in Fort Smith has made an effort to come together in recent years. He pointed to the annual Lunar New Year celebration at Truong Son, which draws the community together for games, karaoke, firecrackers, and the holiday's trademark dragon dance. Although the celebration won't be held in 2021 because of COVID-19, Nguyen will still enjoy the Lunar New Year with his closest friends inside Smiling Cup. "We get along together right now," he said.

[Source: Times Record, Fort Smith, Ark. | Max Bryan | February 12, 2021| ++]

News of the Weird

FEB 15 thru 28, 2021

Oops -- Tessica Brown of New Orleans was out of hairspray in January as she got ready to go out, so she reached for the only spray she could find, Gorilla Glue, to shellac her hair into place. "I figured ... I could just wash it out," she told WDSU-TV, but "it didn't." Brown and her mother tried olive oil and vegetable oil, to no avail, and the local hospital could offer little help. She cut off her ponytail to reduce the weight, but the spray on her scalp continued to painfully tighten and harden. On 10 FEB, she posted on Instagram, she was scheduled to fly to Los Angeles to meet with plastic surgeon Michael Obeng to undergo a procedure that costs more than \$12,000 -- for free. [WDSU-TV, 2/10/2021]

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Mistaken Identity – A woman in Cajeme, Mexico, identified only as Leonora R., faces charges of domestic violence after repeatedly stabbing her husband when she found photos of him having sex with a younger, thinner woman on his phone, according to police. Local media reported the husband was eventually able to disarm his wife and clarify that it was HER in the photos, which were taken when they were dating. The New York Daily News reported on Jan. 26 that police responding to neighbors' calls for help arrived and arrested her. [NY Daily News, 1/26/2021]

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Awesome! – Appalachian Bear Rescue is on the lookout for a wild mother bear to foster three newborn cubs found in the crawl space under a home in Sevier County, Tennessee, according to United Press International. Utility workers called to the home on 13 FEB to repair a gas leak found the "ample caboose of a very large snoozing bear" when they entered the crawl space under the house, the wildlife agency said. "There was no way to safely repair the gas line while the bear was in residence," so wildlife officials tempted the bear out of her den but found three babies had been left behind. They will remain with Appalachian Bear Rescue until a foster mom is found. [UPI, 2/17/2021]

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Desperate Times – Police in the Ukrainian village of Hrybova Rudnya determined that the unnamed man who called them 13 FEB and confessed to seriously injuring his stepfather, made the call in order to get the road in front of his house cleared of snow. Police spokeswoman Yulia Kovtun told the BBC the man insisted that officers would need special equipment to get to him because of the snow, but when police arrived, they found no assault or murder, and the road had already been cleared by a tractor. The man was charged with filing a false report and fined. [BBC, 2/15/2021]

-o-o-O-o-o-

Least Competent Criminals – Leobardo Hernandez, 32, of Pomona, California, went to extraordinary lengths on 16 JAN to evade police after allegedly stealing a car. As Hernandez ran from officers, he entered an apartment complex and found an unlocked door, the Daily Bulletin reported. The apartment residents were not at home, so Hernandez moved right in, shaving his face, changing clothes and even cooking tortillas to make it seem as if he lived there. Unfortunately, he also burned the tortillas, summoning the fire

department. Hernandez eventually surrendered and was charged with burglary and possession of a stolen vehicle among other offenses. [Daily Bulletin, 1/18/2021]

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Least Competent Criminals – Robert Joseph Hallick of Chattanooga, Tennessee, was arrested 11 FEB and charged with perjury, forgery and identity theft after applying for a handgun permit using former President Barack Obama's name, according to court documents. The arrest report also said his application included a letter with a United States of America seal and U.S. Department of State letterhead, along with a \$50 check, WTVC-TV reported. In November, Hallick had been denied a handgun permit under his own name due to an active warrant for his arrest in Michigan. [WTVC, 2/15/2021]

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Weird History – In an auction in Chesapeake City, Maryland, that closed on 8 FEB a white wooden toilet seat pilfered from Adolf Hitler's retreat in the Bavarian Alps sold for about \$18,750, The Sun reported. Ragnvald C. Borch, a U.S. soldier who spoke German and French, was one of the first to arrive at the Berghof at the end of World War II. His senior officers told him to "get what you want" from the damaged property, so Borch grabbed a toilet seat and shipped it home to New Jersey, where he displayed it in his basement. Bill Panagopulos of Alexander Auctions said, "This was as close to a 'throne' as the dictator would ever get." Borch's son put the "trophy" up for auction; the buyer was not identified. [The Sun, 2/9/2021]

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Family Values – Joanna Zielinski, 62, of Naples, Florida, was arrested 11 FEB after stabbing her sister, Laura, 64, multiple times with an EpiPen, according to authorities. Investigators said the two had spent the evening drinking and taking drugs, and Laura fell asleep on the couch. "At some point," said police, "Joanna went crazy and attacked Laura with an EpiPen," because "I'm allergic to drunks," she told officers, and she wanted to sober her sister up. The Smoking Gun reported the EpiPen was prescribed to Joanna, but Laura wasn't affected by the medicine because it wasn't actually injected. Joanna was charged with domestic battery. [The Smoking Gun, 2/12/2021]

[Source: <https://www.uexpress.com/news-of-the-weird> | February 28, 2021 ++]

Have You Heard or Seen?

Corny Jokes 2 | Satirical Cartoons | Military Humor 17

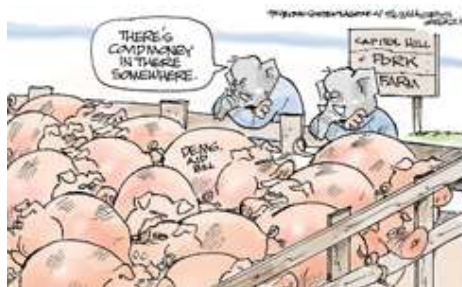
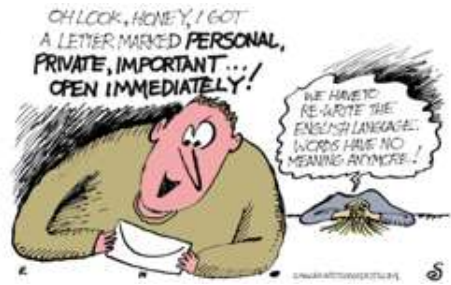
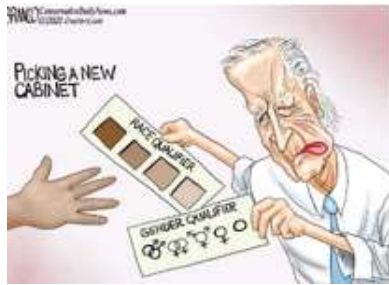
Corny Jokes (2)

21. How do you tell if a vampire is sick? See if he is coffin.
22. What do you call fake spaghetti? An im-pasta.
23. Why did the farmer win an award? He was outstanding in his field.
24. When do computers overheat? When they need to vent.
25. Why do bees have sticky hair? Because they use honeycombs.

26. Why can't your ear be 12 inches long? Because then it would be a foot.
27. What do you call a factory that sells good products? A satis-factory.
28. What kind of music do planets like? Neptunes.
29. What do you call a fish without eyes? Fsh.
30. How do rabbits travel? By hareplanes.
31. What did the tomato say to the other tomato during a race? Ketchup.
32. What do you call a cow with two legs? Lean beef.
33. How do you stop a bull from charging? Cancel its credit card.
34. Why did the mushroom go to the party? Because he was a fungi.
35. Why does a chicken coop only have two doors? If it had four doors it would be called a chicken sedan.
36. Have you heard about the corduroy pillow? It's making headlines!
37. What do sea monsters eat? Fish and ships.
38. What was the frog's job at the hotel? Bellhop.
39. What do cows most like to read? Cattle-logs.
40. Why did the photo go to jail? Because it was framed.

Satirical Cartoons





Military Humor 17

1. What's the difference between a PFC and a 2nd Lieutenant?
The PFC has been promoted twice.
2. Son: Dad, what was your favorite day as a soldier?
Dad: The first time I sent some private to find batteries for the chemical lights.
3. What do you call a 2nd Lieutenant surrounded by PFCs? Lost.

4. A General radios a Colonel.

“Got any smart Majors?”

“Quite a few! Why?”

“Can you send some over? I need to move around some furniture.”

5. What does ARMY stand for?

Air (Force) Rejected *Me* Yesterday

6. What do you get when you drop a piano on an Army officer? A flat major.

7. Did you hear about the accident on base?

A tank ran over a box of popcorn and killed two kernels.

8. Army rules:

If it moves, salute it.

If it doesn't move, pick it up.

If you can't pick it up, paint it.

9. What's the best job for babies in the Army? The Infantry

Thought of the Week

“Live the Life of Your Dreams When you start living the life of your dreams, there will always be obstacles, doubters, mistakes and setbacks along the way. But with hard work, perseverance and self-belief there is no limit to what you can achieve.”

--- Roy T. Bennett

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4. Past Bulletin articles are available on request. Bear in mind that the articles were valid at the time they were written and may have since been updated or have become outdated. To request provide original article title. If unknown provide a brief description of what the article was addressing.

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7. Articles within the Bulletin are editorialized information obtained from over 100 sources. At the end of each article is provided the primary source from which it was obtained. The ++ indicates that that the information was reformatted from the original source and/or editorialized from more than one source. Because of the number of articles contained in each Bulletin there is no way that I can attest to their validity other than they have all been taken

from previously reliable sources. Also, just because an article appears in the Bulletin it does not necessarily mean I support its content. If an article is based on the author's opinion vice a government entity I try to note that after the author's name. Readers who question the validity of any article's content are encouraged to go to the source provided to have their questions answered or express their opinions. I am always open to comments but, as a policy, shy away from anything political. Too controversial and time consuming.

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RAO Bulletin Editor/Publisher:

Lt. James (EMO) Tichacek, USN (Ret) Tel: (858) 842-1111 Email: raoemo@sbcglobal.net or raoemo77@gmail.com

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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

FPO Mail Pickup: TUE & THUR 09-1100 --- Outgoing Mail Closeout: THUR 1100

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