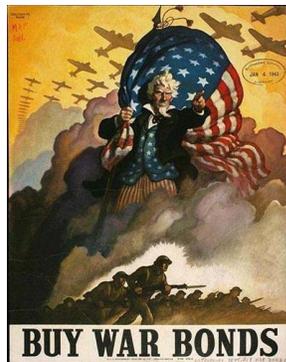


RAO

BULLETIN

1 March 2018

PDF Edition



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1. The page number on which an article can be found is provided to the left of each article's title
2. Numbers contained within brackets [] indicate the number of articles written on the subject. To obtain previous articles send a request to raoemo@sbcglobal.net.

*** ATTACHMENTS ***

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Attachment - Military History Anniversaries 01 thru 15 MAR
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*** DoD ***



Non-Deployable Troops Update 01 ► Pentagon New Retention Policy Released

The Pentagon on 12 FEB released its new policy on military lethality, which will begin separation procedures for service members who have been non-deployable for the last 12 months or more. "This new policy is a 12-month deploy or be removed policy," Robert Wilkie, the undersecretary of defense for personnel and readiness, told a Senate panel Wednesday. "However, there are exceptions." As Military Times previously reported, there will be exceptions, such as pregnancy. Medical boards will review wounded personnel, and the services will retain the ability to grant exceptions to wounded warriors.

"The situation we face today is really unlike anything we have faced, certainly in the post-World War II era," Wilkie told the Senate Armed Services subcommittee on personnel and readiness. "On any given day, about 13 to 14 percent of the force is medically unable to deploy. That comes out to be about 286,000 [service members]." Wilkie said that the new policy was the result of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis' 21 JUL memo that "everyone who comes into the service and everyone who stays in the service is world-wide deployable." Wilkie likened having 14 percent of forces non-deployable to Jeff Bezos at Amazon walking

into his company on Christmas week and finding that 14 percent of his employees were unable to work. "He would no longer be the largest company in the world," Wilkie said.

Wilkie acknowledged several deployability challenges that are "on us," such as unit leaders not ensuring that all of the service members under their leadership had gotten all of their required dental and medical care. Command Sgt Maj. John Troxell, the senior enlisted adviser to Chairman of the Joint Chiefs Gen. Joe Dunford, estimated that as many as 99,000 military personnel are unable to deploy because they were missing a medical appointment or immunization. But "the other thing we've seen is that in the down years of recruiting for the military, we offered too many medical waivers," Wilkie said. "The medical conditions those service members have followed them into the service as they progressed through their careers. We have to address that." [Source: NavyTimes | Tara Copp | February 14, 2018 ++]

TRICARE Options Update 01 ► Plan Shifts During Pregnancy

Starting in 2019, Tricare users will no longer be able to switch between coverage plans at will or only because of a pregnancy, according to new rules issued by the agency late last year. Currently, active-duty military families can at any time switch members of their household from Tricare Prime to Tricare Select, previously known as Tricare Standard, or vice versa. Retiree families who qualify for Tricare Prime are also able to switch at any time. Once users make the swap, they often are locked into the new plan for a year. However, a series of changes [ordered by Congress in 2016](#) include a requirement that families who want to move plans do so during an "open enrollment" period each year or within a 90-day window after experiencing a "qualifying life event" (QLE). The change does not impact Tricare for Life.

What is included on that QLE list was not defined in the legislation, and development of the list was left to Tricare officials. Military family advocates last year raised an alarm when a not-yet-finalized QLE list did not include pregnancy. Female Tricare users often choose to switch plans as a result of a pregnancy in an effort to find care that better fits their needs or schedule, advocates said. For example, some pregnant women may want to see the same provider at every appointment, an option is not always offered at military hospitals. Others may want to deliver at a civilian hospital closer to their home or at a birthing center instead of a hospital. Still others may currently be seen off base, but want to be seen in the on-base hospital for the duration of their pregnancy.

The QLE list, however, does not include pregnancy as a qualifying reason to switch plans. That means pregnant women will be locked into their plans unless their pregnancy happens to correspond with a separate QLE, such as a relocation, or the annual late fall open enrollment period. Tricare officials have said their QLE list is meant to reflect the rules used by commercial health insurance plans, which regularly utilize QLE systems. But leaving "pregnancy" off the Tricare list ignores the military community's special needs or considerations. And commercial plans don't leave women with extremely limited care options the way Tricare does, advocates said.

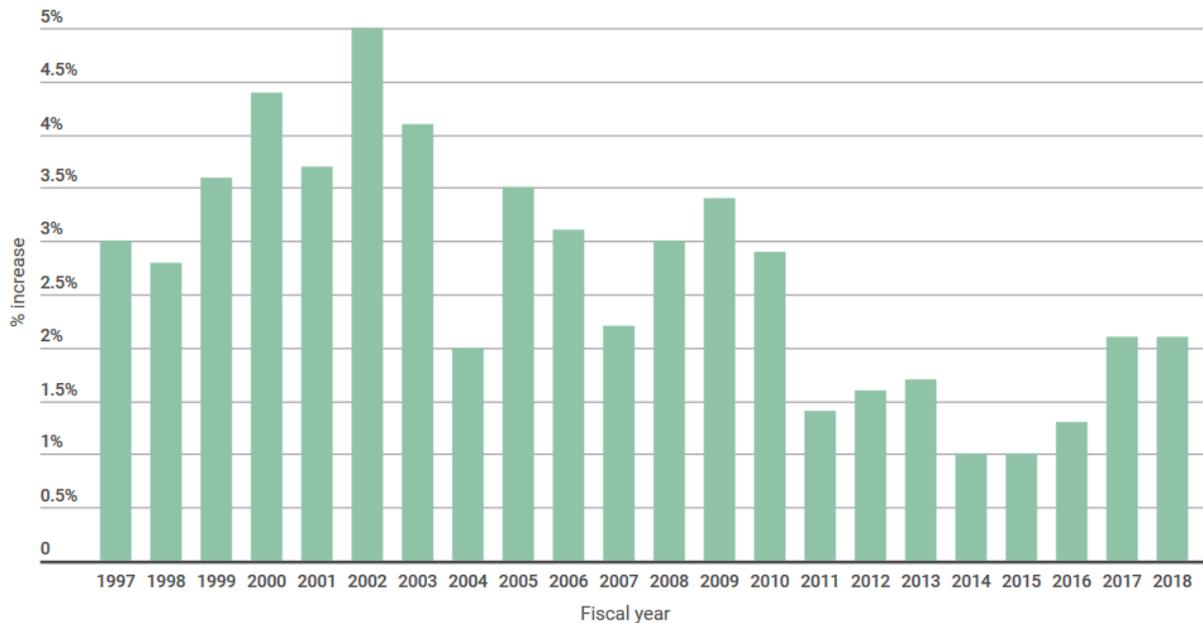
For example, said Karen Ruedisueli, a government relations deputy director at the National Military Family Association (NMFA), if a woman on Tricare Prime doesn't want to use a military hospital provider for care, she may have no fully covered recourse. But a woman locked into a specific commercial system could likely still pick a different doctor even within her same coverage plan. bFor this particular type of care, you should be able to say, 'I want my care somewhere else,' " she said. "I'm not aware of another commercial plan where if you're unhappy with care or the hospital where you are, you are stuck."

Ruedisueli said her organization is hoping Tricare officials will change their minds about the QLE exclusion before the rule goes into effect in 2019. Other QLEs on the list include deployments, moving with

or without orders, birth or adoption, retiring, the death of a family member or loss of other health insurance. A full list [can be seen on Tricare's website](#). [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | February 21, 2018 ++]

Military Pay Raise 2019 ► Proposed Compared to 1997 thru 2018 Increases

President Trump earlier this month called for a 2.6 percent pay increase for fiscal 2019 as part of his budget request to Congress. “The department expects moderate and manageable increases in pay will continue in the near term and will match the growth in private sector wages,” DoD said in the budget book accompanying the fiscal year 2019 request. Whether Congress goes along with the 2.6 percent request or not remains to be seen, though chances are the increase will be at least the requested amount. But how does Trump’s proposed increase compare with previous years’ increases:



The actual base pay increase for service members during the past two decades has been equal to or has exceeded the requested increase each year, regardless of which party controlled Congress and the presidency. In addition to base pay increases, some groups of service members received additional pay, even though the top brass in a couple of years were left out.

FISCAL YEAR	OTHER PAY
1997	None
1998	None
1999	None
2000	Additional increases for most service members, focused on midgrade officers and enlisted
2001	Additional increases for midgrade enlisted
2002	Additional increases for most service members, but focused on midgrade and senior enlisted, midgrade officers and some warrant officers
2003	Additional increases for midgrade and senior enlisted, midgrade officers and some warrant officers

FISCAL YEAR	OTHER PAY
2004	Additional increases for midgrade and senior enlisted, and some warrant officers
2005	None
2006	None
2007	Additional increases for midgrade enlisted and some warrant officers; pay table extended to 40 years of service
2008	None
2009	None
2010	None
2011	None
2012	None
2013	None
2014	None
2015	No increase for paygrades o-7 and higher
2016	No increase for paygrades o-7 and higher
2017	None
2018	None

[Source: AirForceTimes | Ken Chamberlain | February 20, 2018 ++]

Selective Service System Update 26 ► Age Exclusion for Hackers

Got hacking skills? Uncle Sam may want you for the U.S. Army—even if you’re far past traditional draft age. The National Commission on Military, National and Public Service is seeking public feedback on a slew of possible changes to the way the government handles its selective service requirements, including drafting people with cyber skills regardless of their age or gender. The commission study was directed by Congress in the 2017 version of the National Defense Authorization Act, an annual defense policy bill, and is due to Congress in 2020. The commission’s also exploring dropping age and gender restrictions on drafting people with science, math and engineering skills as well as doctors, nurses and dentists, according to the request, which is scheduled to be published in Friday’s Federal Register.

Expanding the draft to older hackers, coders and digital gurus could face some roadblocks. “I am building a company and being drafted would be an enormous hindrance,” said Roberto Pena, a 32-year-old independent app designer in Houston who works on educational apps. That’s a complaint someone younger or earlier in his career might not have. “It’s very important that the military offer pathways to people who want to volunteer their technical knowledge in the service of their country,” Pena said, “but being drafted would hinder my ability to contribute to society in the best way I know how.” Older, tech-proficient draftees might also not thrive under traditional military discipline, said Joe Hall, a 40-year-old tech policy adviser at the Center for Democracy and Technology. While Hall’s “not totally against the idea,” he said, “I do think you’d need different structures to make the best use of these folks.”

The U.S. military has been an all-volunteer force since 1973, but the government requires male U.S. citizens between the ages of 18 and 25 to register for selective service. That’s essentially the pool of possible draftees if the government institutes a military draft. The commission is also exploring ways to “foster a greater attitude and ethos of service among United States youth, including an increased propensity for

military service” and the feasibility of giving draftees some federal benefit such as subsidized student loans or federal hiring preferences. [Source: Nextgov | Joseph Marks | February 16, 2018 ++]

PCS Moves Update 02 ► Initiatives to Limit Frequency

Service and defense officials outlined programs in place and under consideration to limit military moves during a Senate hearing 14 FEB, ranging from servicewide initiatives to personnel tweaks ... even the possibility of allowing troops to decline a promotion if it means avoiding a change of station. “The one thing I hear consistently is that frequent relocations create a great disruption to the family, to employment and a number of other things,” said Sen. Thom Tillis (R-NC), who is chairman of the Senate Armed Services’ subcommittee on personnel, during a Wednesday hearing. He asked what the services, and the Defense Department, were doing to address those concerns. Their responses:

ARMY

Secretary of the Army Mark Esper has heard similar comments from soldiers, said Lt. Gen. Thomas Seamands, deputy chief of staff for personnel, so Esper has asked Army officials to look at “not only whether we can reduce the [permanent change-of-station moves] in terms of the monetary cost ... but also provide stability to the soldiers at those installations.” “Right now we’re trying to peel back the onion to find out where we can keep somebody in place longer to allow stability for them and perhaps continue employment for their spouse,” Seamands said, “because if the spouse is employed, they’ll want to stay where they are.”

NAVY

The service’s “market place detailing” program has resulted in 25 percent of sailors’ next career moves over the last two years keeping them in the same home port, Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. Robert Burke. He described the process as “a sort of LinkedIn for the Navy,” that lets sailors “connect directly with prospective jobs.” The process allows them to consider geographic stability when possible, he said.

AIR FORCE

The service is testing the idea of using technology to let officers view openings and requirements, and input their preferences, said Lt. Gen. Gina Grosso, deputy chief of staff for manpower, personnel and services. “We think leveraging technology will make it easier for people who want to move, to move, and people that want to be stable, to be stable,” Grosso said. Officials are slowly implementing the tech across the officer force, she added. The service also implemented a “second assignment in place” program for pilot retention. “But what you find is that the overseas rotation pulls people overseas,” Grosso said. “Some of the force structure makes it difficult to keep people in place.”

Allowing airmen to opt out of promotions — a personnel policy change that’s been floated within DoD — could also make a difference, she said. “There are people who would like to stay in place, but because of the career progression forced by an up-or-out system, they really can’t,” she said. With flexibility in that area, “you could keep families in place longer in the same position. We’d obviously have to think about how to manage that, but that would be one huge benefit.”

MARINE CORPS

Before the service issues PCS orders, a “monitor” talks with the Marine, taking into account the spouse and family situation, said Lt. Gen. Michael Rocco, deputy commandant for manpower and reserve affairs. “We support any effort to protect their ability to have jobs or protect their jobs,” Rocco said. Another initiative designed to improve family stability is a proposal to reduce the amount of time of unaccompanied tours overseas for married Marines, from the current two years down to 15 to 18 months, Rocco said.

DoD

Defense Secretary Jim Mattis has signed a directive creating a “close combat lethality task force,” which could ultimately have an impact on family stability for Army and Marine Corps front line close-combat units, said Robert Wilkie, the Pentagon’s personnel chief, who will head the task force. Cohesion and stability in terms of the years that a team spends training together is a key to survivability on the battlefield, Wilkie said. The goal of the task force, working with those two services, “will be to find those formulas that will allow those infantry units to stay together longer,” he said, “and provide their [noncommissioned officers] and their junior officers with deep familiarity with the soldiers and Marines that they lead, and then in the end as they leave those units to actually populate larger command structures.” Wilkie also called family stability “key to unit cohesion, and unit cohesion is a key to survivability on the battlefield.”

[Source: Military Times | Karen Jowers | February 15, 2018 ++]

Commissary Baggers ► Test Running of 'No-Bagger' Lanes

Prompted by customer feedback, commissary leaders have installed no-bagger checkout lanes at 121 stores worldwide as a test program, allowing shoppers to pack their own groceries. The test began in late January. Cashiers in the no-bagger lanes collect the payment, then customers bag the goods and take them to their vehicles. Full-service lanes with baggers are still available, and commissaries have long had self-service checkout lanes without baggers. There’s no set time frame for the test, said Kevin Robinson, spokesman for the Defense Commissary Agency: “It will run as long as needed to gather sufficient customer feedback and allow stores to comment on how it’s working at their locations.”

Baggers are a long tradition in commissaries. They work for tips and are not commissary employees — they are self-employed under a license agreement with the installation commander. They sign an agreement with a store director to conduct themselves in a certain manner when engaged in their bagging and carryout duties. Often, this arrangement provides a job for military children and others in the military community. Customers are not required to use baggers. There’s long been discussion about whether customers feel pressured to use their services, and how much of a tip is appropriate. Some have said they’ve encountered baggers who are rude or aggressive. Many appreciate the services, including elderly shoppers and those juggling young children.

Commissary officials received the feedback from customers who want to bag their own groceries as a result of “personal outreach” to installation commanders and their leadership chain by DeCA’s interim director and CEO, retired Rear Adm. Robert J. Bianchi, said Robinson. Bianchi is performing dual roles, remaining the CEO of the Navy Exchange Service Command while leading DeCA. Commissary baggers sort and bag groceries for transport to the customer’s vehicle at the Peterson Air Force Base, Colo., commissary. Bianchi also asked commissary store directors to meet with their individual installation commanders to solicit overall feedback on their commissary benefit. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | Karen Jowers | February 16, 2018 ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2018

Fat Leonard -- Navy prosecutors are seeking to move the location of a court-martial of a Navy commander charged in the Glenn Defense Marine Asia “Fat Leonard” scandal from Norfolk, Virginia, to San Diego,

California. The judge did not immediately rule on the 23 FEB request, but is expected to make a decision on the case sometime in the near future. No date has been set for the trial to begin. The Navy named Adm. Phil Davidson as the head of Fleet Forces Command, the convening authority for all Navy prosecutions related to the scandal, making Norfolk the default location for all trials. But sources familiar with the situation say that moving the trial to San Diego will make it easier for the government to call witnesses, such as Leonard “Fat Leonard” Francis himself, who is currently incarcerated in California.

Francis pleaded guilty in January 2015 to bribery, conspiracy to commit bribery and conspiracy to defraud the United States. He has yet to be sentenced and has agreed to cooperate with the government, meaning he could possibly be brought in to testify. The Navy has charged at least five officers so far in the case, including Morales. Only one case has gone to trial. Warrant Officer **Brian Ware** was charged with committing multiple offenses by soliciting and accepting gifts over a three-year period. Ware pleaded guilty 11 JAN in a military courtroom in Norfolk. He is currently serving a six-month sentence in a Navy brig and must pay a \$10,000 fine. [Source: NavyTimes | Mark D. Faram | January 25, 2018 ++]

-o-o-O-o-o-

Mikel Parish -- The Department of Justice has accused a Florida pharmacy — and the Los Angeles private equity firm that owns it — of bilking a military healthcare program out of millions of dollars by pushing unneeded vitamins and creams. In a filing in federal court in Miami, federal prosecutors said compounding pharmacy **Patient Care America** billed military healthcare program Tricare for more than \$68 million in prescriptions over an eight-month period in 2014 and 2015. Those payments, prosecutors allege, were tainted because PCA paid kickbacks to marketers who pushed unnecessary prescriptions, worked with doctors who wrote prescriptions without examining patients and illegally paid patients' copays to encourage them to fill unneeded prescriptions. The complaint alleges that two PCA executives and private equity firm Riordan Lewis & Haden knowingly submitted fraudulent claims to Tricare, which provides healthcare to members of the military and their families.

PCA, based near Fort Lauderdale, is owned by Riordan Lewis & Haden, a Westwood firm founded by former Los Angeles Mayor Richard Riordan. Though the firm still bears the former mayor's name, he has long been retired and, according to public filings, no longer has a financial interest in the firm. Managing director J. Christopher Lewis said the firm has cooperated with federal investigators "but disputes the basis of the lawsuit" and "did not violate any law." Federal prosecutors filed the complaint last week, joining a lawsuit filed in 2015 by two former PCA employees who first alleged the kickback scheme. When Riordan Lewis acquired a majority stake in PCA, then known as Diabetic Care Rx or DCRX Infusion, in 2012, it specialized in making treatments for patients with kidney disease. After the acquisition, though, the company expanded into making pain creams because they were dramatically more profitable, according to last week's complaint.

Prosecutors are suing under the federal False Claims Act, a law that allows the government to seek payment of three times its actual damages. If prosecutors prevail and show PCA and Riordan Lewis improperly billed for \$68 million in bogus prescriptions, it could lead to a payout of more than \$200 million. [Source: Los Angeles Times | James Rufus Koren | February 23, 2018 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries ► **Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2018 | 10**

“Keeping the Promise“, “Fulfill their Trust“ and “No one left behind“ are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II 73,025,

Korean War 7730, Vietnam War 1604, Cold War (126), Iraq and other conflicts (5). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home.

For a listing of all missing or unaccounted for personnel to date refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil> and click on 'Our Missing'. Refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/News-Stories/Recent-News-Stories/Year/2018> for a listing and details of those accounted for in 2018. If you wish to provide information about an American missing in action from any conflict or have an inquiry about MIAs, contact:

== Mail: Public Affairs Office, 2300 Defense Pentagon, Washington, D.C. 20301-2300, Attn: External Affairs

== Call: Phone: (703) 699-1420

== Message: Fill out form on <http://www.dpaa.mil/Contact/ContactUs.aspx>



Family members seeking more information about missing loved ones may also call the following Service Casualty Offices: U.S. Air Force (800) 531-5501, U.S. Army (800) 892-2490, U.S. Marine Corps (800) 847-1597, U.S. Navy (800) 443-9298, or U.S. Department of State (202) 647-5470. The names, photos, and details of the below listed MIA/POW's which have been recovered, identified, and/or scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin are listed on the following sites:

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

LOOK FOR

- **Army Cpl. Leonard V. Purkapile** was a member of Company E, 2nd Battalion, 35th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division. In late November 1950, Purkapile's unit was engaged by Chinese forces in the vicinity of Unsan, while withdrawing southeast to Yongbyon, North Korea. Purkapile could not be accounted for following the battle and was declared missing in action on Nov. 28, 1950. [Read about Purkapile.](#)
- **Army Pfc. David Baker** was a member of Company I, 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment, 25th Infantry Division on Nov. 25, 1950 near Yongbyong, North Korea. The battalion suffered heavy casualties and Baker was listed as missing in action on Nov. 28, 1950. [Read about Baker.](#)
- **Army Staff Sgt. Leo J. Husak** was a member of Company A, 1st Battalion, 309th Infantry Regiment, 78th Infantry Division, serving in the European theater. On Jan. 30, 1945, Husak was killed while out on patrol in Germany's Hürtgen Forest. The offensive in the forest was one of the longest battles the United States fought during World War II, lasting for nearly five months. [Read about Husak.](#)

- **Marine Corps 2nd Lt. Harvel L. Moore** was assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division. on Nov. 20, 1943 on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll. Moore died on the third day of the battle, one of approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors killed in the intense fighting. [Read about Moore.](#)
- **Marine Corps Reserve Pfc. Joe Lukie** was assigned to Company K, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division o Nov. 20, 1943 on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll. Lukie died on the first day of the battle, one of approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors killed in the intense fighting. [Read about Lukie.](#)
- **Navy Gunner's Mate 2nd Class William F. Hellstern** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. [Read about Hellstern.](#)
- **Navy Machinist's Mate 1st Class Arthur Glenn** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. [Read about Glenn](#)
- **Navy Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Lorentz E. Hultgren** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. [Read about Hultgren.](#)
- **Navy Molder 1st Class Kenneth B. Armstrong** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. [Read about Armstrong](#)
- **Navy Seaman 1st Class Henry G. Tipton** was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored off Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when Japanese aircraft attacked his ship on Dec. 7, 1941. [Read about Tipton.](#)

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | February 28, 2018 ++]

* VA *



VA Secretary Update 64 ► White House COS Vet Group Meeting

White House Chief of Staff John Kelly met with veterans groups 26 FEB on the status of VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin and the ongoing turmoil at the agency over Shulkin's charges that he was being undermined by Trump administration political appointees. The meeting at the White House included the advocacy group Concerned Veterans for America, which several of the major veterans organizations have charged is in league with efforts to oust Shulkin and outsource VA health care, according to sources familiar with the meeting.

The meeting with retired Marine Gen. Kelly included the executive directors of the so-called "Big Six" veterans service organizations -- the American Legion, the Veterans of Foreign Wars, the Disabled American Veterans (DAV), AmVets and the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA). Also attending were CVA, the Military Officers Association of America, the Vietnam Veterans of America, and the Wounded Warrior Project, according to the sources. Following the meeting, VFW Executive Director Bob Wallace issued a statement calling the session "very productive." He said "We discussed current legislation that

would better care for veterans and we discussed current operations inside the Department of Veterans Affairs. It was a good meeting."

Kelly called the meeting last week following the release of the VA Inspector General's report charging that Shulkin improperly billed to the government the \$4,132 airfare for his wife on a trip to Denmark and London last July and also wrongly accepted free tickets to the Wimbledon tennis tournament. Shulkin at first disputed the report but then accepted responsibility and said he has already written a check to reimburse the Treasury. He followed that up with his own charges that the IG's report was symptomatic of the "subversion" he was fighting from political appointees at the White House and within the VA who accused him of foot-dragging on expanding private-sector health care choices for veterans.

The major veterans organizations, while expressing "disappointment" with Shulkin's travel expenses, backed keeping him on the job as a hedge against overreliance on private sector care that they said would gut the core mission of the VA. The CVA, which is mainly funded by the conservative Koch brothers organization, has denied wanting to "privatize" the VA, and said that private care under the Veterans Choice Program, should be an option when it's in the best interest of the veteran. At a DAV conference on Sunday, Shulkin renewed his charges against the political appointees. "People who have subversive ideas or are creating two different agendas don't have a place in the VA, and people have to make a decision whether they're going to be on the team or off the team," Shulkin said. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | February 26, 2018 ++]

VA Vet Choice Update 70 ► Vet Groups Want A Trump Meeting

An ongoing political fight over funding of the Veterans Choice Program drove the agenda 27 FEB in the first of a series of congressional hearings with the major veterans service organizations. A joint session of the House and Senate Veterans Affairs Committees, with testimony from the leadership of Disabled American Veterans, followed a meeting 26 FEB at the White House with Chief of Staff John Kelly. At the meeting, leaders of the VSOs aired their complaints that President Donald Trump's political appointees were pushing a version of Choice that would gut the core health care mission of the Department of Veterans Affairs and lead to "privatization."

Kelly, a retired Marine general, "indicated to us that he's going to try to set up a meeting with the president in the next couple of weeks," Garry Augustine, executive director of the Washington office of the 1.3-million member Disabled American Veterans, told the hearing. Republicans and Democrats at the hearing backed up the organizations' concerns that political appointees on veterans issues at the White House and within the VA were aggressively pursuing reform of Choice, which allows veterans to opt for private care, that would diminish the role of the VA as the primary payer and provider of health care for veterans.

Sen. Jon Tester, a Montana Democrat and the ranking member of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, said that "there are outsize forces and there are political agendas that work against us. Dysfunction in the administration is bleeding over to the VA." He said the political appointees were advocating Choice reform that "serves them and their financial benefactors instead of veterans." Rep. Bruce Poliquin, R-Maine, a member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said he was in favor of a Choice program that would "augment the VA, not replace the VA," particularly in providing access to private care in rural communities where travel to VA facilities is a problem for veterans. As for privatizing the VA, Poliquin said "That ain't gonna happen as long as I'm here on this committee."

The VSOs have been direct in asserting that the advocacy group Concerned Veterans of America, which is funded by the conservative Koch brothers organization, was behind the efforts of political appointees to undermine the VA. CVA has denied the charges. Dan Caldwell, a CVA spokesman, told Stars & Stripes 26 FEB that "We look forward to continuing to work with President Trump and his team to advance reforms to the VA that will ultimately help our veterans." Sen. Johnny Isakson, a Georgia Republican and chairman of the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, said the Committee passed a Choice reform bill last year by a vote of 15-1 that addressed the concerns of the VSOs. The bill would gradually expand Choice while providing ample funding for VA health care. The one nay vote came from Sen. Jerry Moran, R-Kansas, who later joined with Sen. John McCain, R-Arizona, chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, in offering an alternative bill. The result has been a legislative impasse.

Rep. Phil Roe, R-Tennessee, called on both sides of the argument to recognize that private and community care, when properly integrated with the VA's health care system, was in the best interests of veterans caught up in wait lists for appointments, or who need specialized treatment unavailable at the local VA. "I think there's a way forward," Roe said. "Sometimes you have to go out of network. We certainly want veterans to have options for their care. I think that it can be worked out."

The hearing was called to receive DAV leadership's comments on the White House request of \$198.6 billion for the VA in fiscal 2019, a boost of \$12 billion over the previous year. Other VSOs will testify on the budget later this week. In her testimony, DAV National Commander Delphine Metcalf-Foster, the first African-American woman to lead a major VSO, said the DAV backed the Isakson-Tester bill as the best option for Choice reform. She said the DAV and other VSOs want an integrated network of care meshing private care with the VA health care system, with the "the VA acting as coordinator for access."

The highest priority for the DAV in the budget, Metcalf-Foster said, was the overhaul of the current VA caregiver program, which provides small stipends for family members who care for severely disabled veterans to allow them to them to stay in their homes. The program is currently limited to post-9/11 veterans, and Metcalf-Foster said it should be available to veterans of all wars. [Source: Military.com | Richard Sisk | February 27, 2018 ++]

VA Cemeteries Update 18 ► Trump Plans for 2019

Tucked into President Trump's budget is funding to construct a cemetery in Queens for at least 50,000 veterans as part of a new effort to expand burial options in densely populated cities for families of service members. Unlike a traditional cemetery, the site in St. Albans would be an outdoor columbarium only for the cremated remains of New York City-area service members and their spouses. Certain traditional VA cemeteries have columbaria, such as the one added in 2005 to the Long Island National Cemetery that had been at capacity. But the Queens construction would be among the first wave of columbaria-only veterans cemeteries in the United States. The Department of Veterans of Affairs in 2015 had pitched constructing a unique cemetery for funeral urns in Queens, acknowledging the travel time to the Calverton and Long Island National Cemeteries on Long Island is a burden for the families in the city.

The first step of the project is demolishing two buildings on the VA's St. Albans Community Living Center – estimated to cost \$1 to \$5 million. Targeted for 2019 completion, the columbarium walls would initially have a capacity of 4,000 burial niches, each with enough room for the urn of one service member and spouse. The master plan calls for 50,000 niches over a 100-year period, according to the National Cemetery Administration. Rep. Gregory Meeks, who boycotted Trump's State of the Union address, viewed the project's inclusion as a bright spot in Trump's budget request. "The columbaria at St. Albans VA will allow the family members and friends of deceased soldiers to pay tribute to their fallen heroes without

having to travel tremendous distances,” said Meeks (D-Queens) who hosted a town hall about the project in February 2016.

Trump’s Veterans Affairs’ budget calls for nine new veterans cemeteries to be open in 2019 and 2020, including three columbaria-only locations in Queens, Indianapolis and Los Angeles. A traditional gravesite cemetery would also be constructed in Western New York to serve Buffalo- and Rochester-area veterans, under the budget plan. The VA’s goal is to provide 95 percent of the veteran population a burial option within 75 miles of their home. VA’s National Cemetery Administration plans to maintain more than 3.8 million gravesites in 2019, up 88,800 from 2018. [Source: New York Post | Marisa Schultz | February 13, 2018 ++]

VA Compensation & Pensions Update 11 ► CBO 'Think Tank' Report

Recently, the Congressional Budget Office (CBO) completed a "think tank" report on veterans' disability compensation. The ranking member on the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs asked for this study, which looks in detail at trends and policy options in regard to future veterans' compensation. Though the study looked at many areas, the report was primarily focused on potential ways to save future budget dollars (2018 through 2024) in regard to compensation by modifying current compensation to all veterans. Listed below are the areas they reviewed:

- Limit the time in which a veteran can file an initial claim for service-connection after leaving the military. The CBO looked at 5-, 10- and 20-year time frames. As expected, the less time afforded to file a claim resulted in the greatest budgetary savings.
- Increase VA reexaminations on veterans already service-connected.
- Reexamine the standards for declaring something a presumptive condition.
- Change the rules about individual unemployability (IU) in that only those veterans younger than the full social security retirement age will be able to receive this benefit.
- Reexamine the rules as to how compensation payments are determined for veterans with service-connected mental disorders.
- Change cost-of-living adjustments.
- Eliminate concurrent receipt for military retirees. This results in the greatest savings in regard to future VA budget dollars.
- Tax VA compensation disability payments.

All of these are ideas that have been bantered about for some time. Just because the CBO released this report does not mean it will become a reality; however, remember the study was requested by the current administration to determine ways to save future VA budget dollars, and streamline spending. Again, none of the above has become law. [Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | February 26, 2018 ++]

VA Secrets ► Did You Know?

IDES -- Have you ever heard of DoD's Disability Evaluation System (DES) or Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) and wondered what, exactly, it is? Or why it matters to you? DoD's disability evaluation process provides disability compensation for servicemembers who are injured or become ill in the line of duty and are no longer able to perform their duties. The servicemember receives a single set of physical disability examinations, conducted according to VA examination protocols, and disability ratings

prepared by VA that both DoD and VA use to ensure the earliest possible delivery of disability benefits. For more information, visit the Integrated Disability Evaluation System (IDES) website or contact your nearest VSO.

VA Mandated To Expedite Claim -- Did you know that the VA is mandated to expedite an application for benefits if a veteran is receiving Hospice care?

Independent Living Program -- Did you know this program for Veteran's, whose service-connected disabilities are so severe they are currently unable to pursue an employment goal, is to make sure that each eligible veteran is able, to the maximum extent possible, to live independently and participate in family and community life increasing their potential to return to work? Services may include the following:

- Assistive technology
- Specialized medical, health, and / or rehabilitation services
- Services to address any personal and / or family adjustment issues
- Independent living skills training
- Connection with community-based support services

When a Vocational Rehabilitation Counselor (VRC) determines that employment goals are not currently feasible, an evaluation of the veteran's independent living needs will be conducted. The VRC and veteran will work together to identify the veteran's needs. Together they will determine services required to address the identified needs. An individualized Independent Living Program will be written providing the services necessary to meet the veteran's identified needs. Referral to specialized rehabilitation facilities and / or for consultation with other rehabilitation professionals may be necessary in the development and implementation of a veteran's ILP.

The Veterans Appeals Improvement & Modernization Act of 2017 -- Did you know **this Act** was signed into law August 23, 2017. However, the new law does not take effect until February 2019. The law creates a new claims and appeals process, which features three separate avenues; (1) Higher-Level Review, which consists of an entirely new review of the claim by an experienced adjudicator; (2) Supplemental Claim, which provides an opportunity to submit additional evidence and (3) Appeal, which provides an opportunity to appeal directly to the Board of Veterans' Appeals.

Before the implementation of the Veterans Appeals Improvement Act, the VA began a new program known as the Rapid Appeals Modernization Program (RAMP) on November 1, 2017. RAMP is a test program that allows eligible veterans with pending compensation appeals the option to have their decisions reviewed in VA's Higher-Level Review or Supplemental Claim lanes outlined in the new law and mentioned above. If you receive a letter from the VA offering RAMP, please remember that participation is voluntary. VA will notify the Veterans and/or their Power of Attorney. Veterans must have an active disability compensation appeals in one of the following stages: Notice of Disagreement (NOD) Form 9, and Remand. If uncertain of the process see your local VSO as soon as possible. Time limits may be in place for certain documents.

Non-Service-Connected Pension -- Did you know if you are a veteran who is 65 years-old or older, or permanently and totally disabled you may be eligible for the VA Non-service Connected Disability Pension (NSC). This is a program that provides financial support to wartime veterans with a limited income. The amount payable under this program depends on the type and amount of income the veteran and his/her family members receive from other sources. Monthly payments are made to bring a veteran's total annual income (including other retirement and Social Security income) to an established level. You may be eligible for the NSC pension if you were discharged from service under other than dishonorable conditions, and you served 90 days or more of active duty with at least 1 day during a period of war time*, and your

countable family income is below a yearly limit set by law, and you are permanently and totally disabled, OR you are age 65 or older. See a Veterans Service Officer for more details.

**Note: Anyone who enlists after September 7, 1980, generally must have served at least 24 months or the full period for which called or ordered to active duty. Service from August 2, 1990 to present is considered to be a period of war (Gulf War) in addition to other periods of war such as World War II, Korea, and Vietnam.*

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | February 26, 2018 ++]

VA Caregiver Program Update 49 ► Pre-911 Support Efforts

Congress is now working on a way to give more help to caregivers of veterans injured before the 9/11 terrorist attacks. It took seven years of pressure from advocates to get to this point. Groups pushing lawmakers to end what they call an unfair discrepancy between veterans injured before and after 9/11 contend negotiations – stalled for years because of the high cost of expanding benefits to more families – are coming to a critical point. “Everybody is talking about how to do this, rather than questioning whether we should,” said Adrian Atizado, deputy national legislative director with Disabled American Veterans.

In 2010, Congress created the VA caregiver program for veterans who sustained serious injuries after 9/11. Approximately 26,000 caregivers who are enrolled in the program receive monthly stipends, as well as other benefits, such as medical training, counseling and respite care. But spouses such as Jason Courneen – who has been caring for his wife for two decades – don’t meet the criteria for assistance. Alexis Courneen suffered a traumatic brain injury while serving in the Coast Guard in 1998. Jason Courneen said he felt “isolated” and had to learn by himself the skills necessary to be a caregiver. “That really needs to change,” he said last year on Capitol Hill.

Major veterans organizations – such as Disabled American Veterans, Elizabeth Dole Foundation and the American Legion – have been fighting to expand benefits to all veteran caregivers. In December, a handful of groups presented lawmakers with a printed petition containing 182,000 signatures of people supportive of the expansion. Now, there’s opportunity to reach a compromise. So far, the Senate and VA have proposed different ideas of how to expand caregiver benefits without escalating costs. And Rep. Phil Roe (R-TN), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, is working on his own legislation to expand the program, using input from the VA. The next step is a roundtable discussion on the legislation scheduled for March 6 with House and Senate lawmakers. “I do see a pathway forward where we can do this right and get this done,” Roe said 6 FEB during a congressional hearing. “Getting it done this year would be my goal.”

The Senate’s version is included in a larger VA reform bill that’s been stalled since November. Instead of opening up the program to everyone at once, the measure would first make benefits available to veterans injured before May 7, 1975 – with the intent to immediately get help to all caregivers of Vietnam War-era veterans. Two years later, veterans between 1975 and 2001 would be eligible. The Congressional Budget Office estimated the measure would cost \$3.4 billion over five years to implement. Officials with President Donald Trump’s administration told Congress last month that the White House couldn’t support the expansion because of fiscal restraints.

VA Secretary David Shulkin explained another option to lawmakers earlier this month. He proposed limiting eligibility for the caregivers program to the most severely injured and ill veterans in order to expand it to veterans of all eras without inflating costs. Under his plan, eligibility would be restricted to veterans with the highest clinical need, who require help with at least three activities of daily living, such as eating, bathing and dressing. The 26,000 caregivers already enrolled into the program should still receive the benefit

with the old rules, Shulkin said, but the new rules would apply to all new enrollees. If the program were expanded with the current eligibility rules, the VA would enroll 188,000 caregivers in the next 10 years, the VA estimated. With proposed restrictions, the number of caregivers receiving assistance would grow to only 40,000 in the next 10 years. The agency predicted it would avoid about \$2.5 billion in implementation costs.

Atizado said Disabled American Veterans would support any proposal that allows more caregivers to receive assistance, but added the group would continue fighting until help is available to all veteran caregivers who need it. “We’re open to any proposal that will get caregivers the support they need today,” Atizado said. “This is not what we believe is the complete and full solution, which is that everyone should be eligible. But we’ve been trying that approach for seven years. This gradual approach seems more reasonable to members in Congress, and we’ve been garnering more support and progress than we ever have.” After the roundtable 6 MAR Roe plans to hold a public hearing on his legislation and have the House committee vote on whether to advance it to the full House. [Source: Stars And Stripes | Nikki Wentling | February 23, 2018 ++]

DeepMind/VA Partnership ► Deterioration During Hospital Care Research

The Department of Veterans Affairs has announced a research partnership with Alphabet subsidiary DeepMind that will tackle issues concerning patient deterioration during hospital care. Using a dataset comprised of 700,000 historical, de-personalized health records, the machine learning platform will help the VA identify risk factors for deterioration while predicting its onset. “Medicine is more than treating patients’ problems,” VA Secretary David J. Shulkin said in a statement. “Clinicians need to be able to identify risks to help prevent disease. This collaboration is an opportunity to advance the quality of care for our nation’s veterans by predicting deterioration and applying interventions early.”

According to the VA, the partnership will first work to uncover risk predictors for the most common conditions experienced during a hospital stay, such as acute kidney injury. The project will then turn to other indicators of patient deterioration. “We are proud to partner with the [VA] on this important challenge,” Mustafa Suleyman, cofounder of DeepMind, said in a statement. “This project has great potential intelligently to detect and prevent deterioration before patients show serious signs of illness. Speed is vital when a patient is deteriorating: The sooner the right information reaches the right clinician, the sooner the patient can be given the right care.”

DeepMind is no stranger to government healthcare partnerships; the artificial intelligence company partnered with the UK’s National Health Service in 2016 to pilot the health apps Streams and Hark. The former aimed to help doctors more quickly receive information about their acute kidney failure patients, while the latter looked to help organize health information commonly managed with hand-written notes, fax machines, and pagers.

While the NHS partnership appeared to bear fruit, it was also marred by controversy. Within months of announcement, an investigative report from the New Scientist revealed that Google would have access to a wealth of health data without consent from patients. Deepmind and the NHS announced a new agreement addressing the data concerns before the year’s end, although an independent panel report released in July of the next year still shared some concerns. [Source: MOBIHEALTHNEWS | Dave Muoio | February 22, 2018 ++]

Concierge for Care Program ► Health-Care Enrollment Initiative

On 22 FEB the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced the launch of Concierge for Care, a health-care enrollment initiative that connects with former service members shortly after they separate from the service. “Our goal is to give transitioning service members one less thing to worry about,” said VA Secretary David J. Shulkin. “We know that more than a third of Veterans who haven’t yet visited our facilities indicated they are not aware of VA health care benefits, while a quarter reported they do not know how to apply.” As part of Concierge for Care, VA staff members are personally contacting recently separated service members to answer questions, process their health-care enrollment applications over the phone and help schedule eligible Veterans’ first VA medical appointment, if needed. Each week, VA receives a list of separating service members from the Department of Defense. The goal is to make contact with them within a month of discharge. Certain Veterans who served in a theater of combat operations are eligible to enroll and receive cost-free health care for medical conditions related to their military service during the five-year period after discharge. Information about VA health care and the application process can be found at www.vets.gov/health-care/apply. [Source: Vantage Point | Donnie La Curan | February 22, 2018 ++]

VA End of Life Care Update 05 ► Reverberations From War Complicate Challenge

Many of Ron Fleming’s fellow soldiers have spent the past five decades trying to forget what they saw — and did — in Vietnam. But Fleming, 74, has spent most of that time trying to hold on to it. He’s never been as proud as when he was 21. Fleming was a door gunner in the war, hanging out of a helicopter on a strap holding a machine gun. He fought in the Tet Offensive of 1968, sometimes for 40 hours straight, firing 6,000 rounds a minute. He never gave much thought to catching a bullet himself. “At 21, you’re bulletproof,” he said, sitting on his hospital bed at the San Francisco VA Medical Center. “Dying wasn’t on the agenda.”

Now it is. Fleming has congestive heart failure and arthritis, and his asthma attacks often land him in the hospital. Ten years ago, he was diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder, which makes him quick to anger and hypervigilant. Fleming’s physical and mental health symptoms, combined with his military history, are a challenge to the VA’s palliative care team, which coordinates his care. It is a challenge faced more frequently as Vietnam veterans age and develop life-threatening illnesses. For some veterans, the stoicism they honed on the battlefield returns as they confront a new battlefield in the hospital, making them less willing to admit they are afraid or in pain and less willing to accept treatment. Other vets, with PTSD, are reluctant to take pain-relieving opioids because the drugs can make their symptoms worse, triggering frightening flashbacks.



Ron Fleming (left) and Earl Boges (right)

About 30 percent of Vietnam vets have had PTSD in their lifetime, the highest rate among veteran groups, according to the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Center for PTSD. Their rate is higher because of the unique combat conditions they faced and the negative reception many of them received when they returned home, according to numerous studies. Since the war, many vets have developed coping strategies to keep disturbing memories and symptoms at bay. But facing a terminal illness — the severe pain of cancer, the nausea of chemotherapy or the breathlessness of heart failure — can drain their energy and make them unable to maintain their mental defenses.

Vets previously diagnosed with PTSD can slip out of remission, and some may experience it for the first time. “They’re so distracted trying to cope with their physical symptoms that they might have flashbacks,” said VJ Periyakoil, a palliative care physician at the VA Palo Alto Health Care Center and director of palliative care education at Stanford University. “War memories start coming back; they start having nightmares.” Gasping for breath can induce panic for anyone, but it can make vets feel threatened as if in a combat zone, said Eric Widera, director of hospice and palliative care at the San Francisco VA and professor of geriatrics at the University of California-San Francisco.

That’s what happens to navy vet Earl Borges, who logged 240 24-hour river patrols in Vietnam with three other men on a plastic boat, constantly looking for enemy soldiers in the brush. Since then, he’s been startled by loud noises and fast-moving shadows. Now, at age 70, Borges has amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS) and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, or COPD, which can intensify the anxiety from his PTSD. If he lies down without his breathing machine, he panics, then hyperventilates. “I have to talk him through it, tell him he’s OK, ‘just breathe,’” said his wife, Shirley Borges, 67.

For patients in severe pain, the go-to treatment is opioids. This forces vets to choose between physical pain and mental anguish. “Oftentimes, pain medications like morphine or oxycodone make some people feel a little bit fuzzy,” Widera said. “That may contribute to that feeling of loss of control.” Some vets also refuse medication because they feel as if they deserve the pain. “We see a lot of feelings of guilt over what they’ve seen and done during their experience in Vietnam,” Widera said, “and they don’t want to blunt that.”

At the end of life, this sense of guilt is amplified as vets review their lives and, perhaps, contemplate the consequences of their actions in the line of duty. This is even true for vets like Fleming, whose overriding feeling about his service is pride. “Sometimes I think that now I’m being paid back for all the men I killed. And I killed a lot of them,” said Fleming. Despite being awarded 18 Air Medals for meritorious acts and heroism in flight, Fleming has woven loss and grief into his memories of glory. “If there is a judge, I figure I’m going to hell in a handbasket,” he said. [Source: USA Today | April Dembosky, KQED | December 17, 2017 ++]

VA Rocking Chair Therapy ► Pilot Study Shows Positive Results

Who says therapy has to be complicated? Perhaps an effective tool for treatment and recovery could be something as simple as, say ... a rocking chair. Just ask a Marine Veteran who participated in a rocking chair study through the Robley Rex VA Medical Center in Louisville, Kentucky. At the time, he was in recovery from a serious addiction to alcohol and drugs, including recreational and pain-killing substances. “If it was a pill, I was popping it,” he says. Plus, he had been homeless for about a year, “bouncing around from home to home, couch to couch,” as he put it.

The former Marine, now in his 30s, has since resurrected his life, in part because of a rocking chair. He credits his use of the chair with helping him control his urge to drink and consume drugs. During the course of the study, he'd spend at least a half hour rocking back and forth several times a day. He rocked mostly in a dark, quiet room. He's been free of drugs and alcohol for 15 months and is no longer homeless. "The chair helped me control my thinking and emotions," he says. "I'd be able to set my mind free and do away with addictive urges. It helped me to train myself that when I do get those thoughts, I can just meditate and let those problems go." "I've always been athletic," he adds. "So the chair kind of reminded me a little that whenever I get on the field or on the court, all my troubles go away. I'm focused on one thing at a time. That's what the rocking chair did for me."

The former Marine was one of 19 Veterans who took part in the Louisville VA study, which was designed to test the therapeutic benefit of rocking chairs on homeless Vets in treatment for substance abuse problems, mainly alcohol addiction. Researchers hypothesized that if the participants could control mood and substance cravings, their likelihood of remaining in the treatment facility would increase, thus reducing their risk of chronic homelessness. Researchers at the Louisville VA and at the University of Alabama collaborated on the study, which was published in the *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association* in December 2017. The researchers concluded that "vestibular stimulation by rocking in a rocking chair may increase the ability to self-regulate mood and substance cravings, thereby potentially reducing risk of relapse and recurrent chronic homelessness." The vestibular system is an area of the brain associated with mood and emotion.

Dr. Rene' Cross, a nurse practitioner at the Louisville VA, served as the lead researcher. "Veterans described the rocking as calming their racing thoughts, giving them peace of mind, relieving stress, relaxing, helping them stay focused, decreasing depression," Cross says. "When a person finds themselves thinking of their substance of addiction cravings, it can lead to relapse. Being able to self-soothe by rocking in a rocking chair assisted in reducing those thoughts and thus temptations to relapse." Cross, an Air Force Veteran and a former Navy reservist, conceived of the idea for the pilot study. She serves former service members through the Health Care for Homeless Veterans program at the Louisville VA., and has seen some of them relapse on alcohol or drugs after coming through the program.

"When some of these Veterans circled back through my office, I asked them what they felt contributed to their relapse," she says. "I nearly always got an answer that cravings for their substances made it difficult for them to calm down. This made them feel anxious, and they left the facility to go drink alcohol or use drugs." Cross read a study about people who experienced improvements in mood by using a rocking chair in a long-term care facility. She learned through other published work that the motion of rocking or swinging affects the vestibular system. But none of those studies involved Veterans. So she became curious if a rocking chair may also help homeless Veterans who are battling addiction. A large percentage of homeless Veterans abuse alcohol and drugs, and many former service members have psychiatric problems. Substance abuse is known to contribute to chronic Veteran homelessness.

Researchers use different models of chairs for study

In the pilot study, the participants had to have alcohol as one of their drugs of choice and to have voluntarily entered a substance abuse treatment clinic. They could not have motion sickness or a cerebellar disease, as well as a motor neuron disease that would prevent them from getting in and out of a rocking chair. The Vets had access to rocking chairs at a non-VA transitional housing facility in Louisville that provides beds for homeless male Veterans. A North Carolina-based chair company donated the hand-crafted rocking chairs. Different models were used so there was variation in the rocker bars, in the height of the back of the chair, and in whether the back was straight or curved. "I intentionally did not want all of the chairs to be identical because then there would be a question of whether something about that particular chair design contributed to the results," Cross says. "Since Veterans were not assigned to a particular chair

and likely used various models of chairs during the study, it's impossible to say if a particular configuration had a specific impact.”

During the four-week study, the participants rocked at least 30 minutes per day in the chairs. They could use any available chair in the facility. Cross and her colleagues reached two main findings:

- A greater number of minutes spent rocking was tied to much higher scores on an alcohol craving questionnaire, suggesting that participants who experienced more intense urges and desires to drink rocked more to self-soothe.
- There was a major link between a greater number of minutes spent rocking and lower scores on an alcohol craving questionnaire subscale. That meant an increased amount of rocking time led to a decrease in thoughts and plans to drink.

The participants logged their minutes in the rocking chairs and documented how they felt. Six completed an optional feedback form. “It was a pleasure just to be able to sit in the chair,” one of the Vets wrote. “If it wasn’t for the study, I would not have been able to rock in a chair. I feel grateful and hope this study continues to grow. I believe it has helped me personally.” “I realized how comforting it was when I would rock in my great grandmother rocker,” another one wrote. “Anyone can do this and find their own peace of mind. Plus, it is a good stress reliever, [and] it is good in my recovery program of alcohol and drug addiction.”

To strengthen the results, Cross would like to lead a rocking chair therapy study that includes close to 100 Veterans, both male and female, with any type of substance abuse. She prefers a study with Veterans from different VA residential substance abuse treatment facilities and non-VA sites, as well as non-Veterans who are undergoing similar treatment. She says it would be interesting to compare the results of the Veteran and non-Veteran groups, as well as each group to one another. In addition, she’d like to see a rocking chair therapy study carried out as an additional tool for pain management and opioid addiction. In that type of study, she notes, each Veteran would get a rocking chair to use in their home. “You can’t turn on the television anymore without hearing about the opioid epidemic,” Cross says. “I’d be curious, for example, to see as an opioid medication is reduced, if using a rocking chair at any time would help with pain management. Would it help reduce opioid cravings?”

Some Veterans in the pilot study have asked Cross how they can get their own rocking chair. She says she’d like to see VA not only prescribe rocking chairs, but to place them in high stress areas at VA facilities, such as emergency departments, to help patients relax. The Marine Veteran interviewed for this story says that to him, a rocking chair has the potential to be both a temporary and a long-term fix. “Kind of in between, I guess,” he says. “I don’t really want to look at it as temporary because in the long run it taught me to be able to control my thoughts and let them go, things like that. I don’t want to say long-term because it kind of helped me on a temporary basis, too. That’s why I say in-between for me. I can’t speak for everybody else.” Either way, he hopes to just keep on rocking. [Source: Vantage Point | February 14, 2018 ++]

VA Secretary Update 63 ► Vet Groups Rally Around Shulkin Amid Rumors of Dismissal

Veterans groups scrambled to show support for embattled Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin amid reports that the White House may be considering forcing him out of the job over a [series of internal fights](#) with administration staffers. “We have been encouraged by the great progress Secretary Shulkin has made and believe that he remains the best person to lead this important federal public institution on the behalf of the American people,” American Legion National Commander Denise Rohan said in a statement Monday.

“While we were disappointed to learn of the recent issue with the secretary’s travel, we believe that the current controversy surrounding the secretary is part of a larger effort to remove him and install others who would take steps to privatize the services provided to our nation’s heroes by the Department of Veterans Affairs.”

Last week, an inspector general’s report into an overseas trip by Shulkin last July found multiple violations by department staff of federal ethics rules, including improperly paying for his wife’s travel with taxpayer funds, using VA personnel to arrange sightseeing trips, accepting tickets to a Wimbledon tennis match from an English businesswoman and doctoring emails to justify those decisions. Shulkin has denied intentional wrongdoing but has refunded the disputed costs of the trip. He has also called for a wider investigation into hacking of staff emails related to the controversy, and suggested that officials within his own department are using the scandal to undermine him because of policy disagreements.

White House officials and President Donald Trump initially did not offered public comment on the matter since the report was released 14 FEB. The silence raised fears among veterans groups that the department may be on the verge of another leadership change, and the political turmoil that comes with that.

- “What the VA needs in order to progress is stability in leadership,” said Kris Goldsmith, assistant director of policy at *Vietnam Veterans of America*. “It’s a tremendous organization, and it takes an immense amount of time and energy to truly understand it. Dr. Shulkin knows that system, and his continued leadership is essential to reforming the VA so that our nation fulfills its promises to its veterans.”
- In a statement *American Legion* Rohan said their leadership is “disappointed” by the travel scandal, but also believe that those mistakes are being exaggerated by Shulkin’s critics to advance other agendas. “Recent media investigations have confirmed that several political operatives have taken active measures to undermine Secretary Shulkin, his deputy, his former chief of staff and their ability to lead,” she said. “We are 100% opposed to the privatization of the VA and will work vigorously to ensure our nation’s veterans have the efficient, transparent, and properly functioning VA that they deserve.
- On 18 FEB, *AMVETS* National Executive Director Joe Chenelly said that divisions within VA leadership “cannot be tolerated any longer” and implored the White House to support Shulkin. “Secretary Shulkin has worked with us throughout his time at the helm, and he’s been successful in leading significant changes and laying the tracks for more important reform,” he said. “The president needs to make it clear to all that it is Secretary Shulkin who is chiefly responsible for ensuring every veterans has access to high-quality health care. Short of that, the success this administration has enjoyed so far on veterans issues will cease.”
- *Veterans of Foreign Wars* Executive Director Bob Wallace said in a statement that their organization still supports Shulkin. ”This political infighting must stop, so we also support full transparency about what is really going on,” he said. “The mission of VA is too important to have this type of behavior impacting employee morale and the trust of veterans in their VA.”

The support isn’t universal among the veterans organizations, however. Several have remains silent through the turmoil of the last few days. Others, like Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, said Shulkin needs to accept more responsibility for the current situation. “This is a massive mess spiraling downward fast,” said Paul Rieckhoff, CEO of IAVA. “Our veterans deserve a VA that works, and it’s clearly not working well enough right now. “They also haven’t heard anything whatsoever from the president about all of this. It’s long past time for him to tell us what action he’s taking to address this crisis of leadership. All of America is watching and waiting.”

Shulkin was confirmed by the Senate one year ago by a 100-0 vote, an achievement that Trump has frequently touted in public events over the last year. A still practicing physician, Shulkin is the only holdover in Trump’s Cabinet from former President Barack Obama’s administration. Last week, in connection with the travel scandal, Shulkin’s chief of staff abruptly resigned and White House officials installed the head of the new VA Office of Accountability and Whistleblower Protection as her replacement.

White House officials subsequently told Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin that his job is safe, according to people familiar with the matter who indicated 20 FEB that President Trump decided to “stomach the story” about Shulkin’s alleged misuse of taxpayer money during a 10-day trip to Europe. The president’s decision was communicated to Shulkin by White House Chief of Staff John F. Kelly, according to an administration official who, like others interviewed, spoke on the condition of anonymity to discuss the situation candidly. Trump “personally likes Shulkin,” the official said, cautioning, however, that “if other stuff comes out, this could change, but for now, he’s safe.” White House press secretary Sarah Huckabee Sanders said 20 FEB that she has “no reason to believe” Trump had lost confidence in Shulkin.

Shulkin has the White House’s approval to root out agency staffers who oppose his policies and defy his leadership, he told Politico Tuesday night. Shulkin’s new chief of staff, Peter O’Rourke, is reportedly meeting with each VA staffer who is believed to have gone against Shulkin or pushed for his ouster. “Those who crossed the line in the past are going to have to be accountable for those decisions,” Shulkin told Politico. He did not specify how many people were involved in what he called “subversive events,” but multiple appointees have reportedly defied his orders and pushed for his ouster as head of the VA. Shulkin, who also served in the VA under former President Obama, told The New York Times last week he was looking into identifying agency appointees who were “trying to undermine the department from within,” and sought a meeting with chief of staff John Kelly to address his concerns. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 19, 2018 ++]

PTSD Update 242 ► Disability Claim Stressor Letter Sample

Most VSOs will tell that a well-crafted Stressor Letter will help immensely in providing empirical evidence needed to bolster your disability claim. So, what exactly is a Stressor Letter. A Stressor Letter is used by Veterans Affairs (VA) raters to identify potential traumatic events that may have invoked Posttraumatic Stressor Disorder(PTSD) symptoms in combat veterans. The Stressor Letter consist of three vital parts: 1. Life before military service; 2. Life during military service (to include traumatic event(s); and 3. Life after traumatic event(s). The Sample Stressor Letter below has been used by thousands of veterans as supportive evidence for their PTSD claim. Use it for yours (modify as needed).

(LIFE BEFORE MILITARY SERVICE Section)

I was born on March 10, 1949, in Columbus, Ohio. I am the second of four children born to my biological parents. My childhood seemed normal and carefree to me. In elementary school I performed well academically, joined a few school clubs, and participated in the Boy Scouts. I had a few close friends during that time, and we spent much of our time playing many different sports. I also had a few hobbies during those formative years. For instance, I collected baseball cards, and toy soldiers. I was never sick, never had any broken bones, and was pretty much healthy. I remember my mother being very protective of me. She always made sure I was safe and not surrounded by trouble. It all seemed pretty normal to me.

During high school I was actively involved in athletics. Football, baseball and basketball consumed a lot of my time. I also discovered girls, and along with my friends we would do a lot in order to impress them. For example, when I got my driver’s license I would borrow my parents car so that I could cruise the

neighborhood so that the girls would see me driving. Also, during this time I expressed a lot of interest in the Armed Forces, especially the Marine Corps. I loved the uniforms and the girls seemed to like them as well. I was young and impressionable. My thinking was at the time, if I could join the Marine Corps it would be easy to capture girls. They seemed to like the uniform a lot. My senior year in high school I met with a Marine Corps recruiter who pointed out all of the positive aspects of the Marine Corps. I was hooked. When I graduated from high school in May of 1967, I joined the Marine Corps two months later.

LIFE DURING MILITARY SERVICE Section

In August 1967, I enlisted in the U.S. Marine Corps as a means of seeking gainful employment, fighting for my country, and impressing the girls. I completed boot camp at Camp Lejeune, N.C. I thought boot camp was pretty easy. I was always physically fit, did well academically in school, so boot camp was easier than I anticipated. I made squad leader the first week I was there. After boot camp I attended Advanced Infantry Training (AIT). After six weeks of AIT I was a lean mean fighting machine. I was ready for anything. After AIT, I got orders to Vietnam. I arrived in Vietnam in January 1968. When I got there my initial impression was complete shock. The place smelled bad, looked bad, and seemed dirty. After processing in, I was assigned to 1/9th Marines, 3rd Marine Division. As soon as I got settled in a grisly old gunnery sergeant made it a point to tell me I would never see the states again. I didn't let him know at the time, but that scared the heck out of me. After only two weeks in country I witnessed the horrors of war.

January 1968, while serving guard duty, my forward base camp was mortared by the North Vietnamese Army (NVA). Mortars were dropping in everywhere. The sound was loud and the smell was horrible. A machine gunner about 10 yards away from me was hit on the left shoulder. The mortar blew off the entire left side of his body. I tried to administer first aid, but he died almost immediately. After the mortar attack stopped, I remember sitting in the bunker shaking badly for about 30 minutes. I couldn't get the images out of my head of seeing my comrades killed.

February 1968, during a search and destroy mission in the jungle my unit came across three dead American soldiers. They were nailed to a tree, their ears had been cut off, and all of them had mud stuffed down their throats. The sight was horrible. We took them down and properly bagged them up and sent them to the morgue. The smell of their rotting flesh was awful. I didn't sleep well for three weeks after that incident.

April 1968, during a search and destroy mission my unit was involved in a very intense firefight. We lost two guys in our unit. I just ended my pointman duties when the firefight started. The guy that replaced me was hit in the face by a few rounds. He died instantly. Another guy was hit in the chest and died as well. Several other members of our unit were wounded pretty bad. I'm not sure how I survived, but I did. In fact, I didn't get a scratch. But, I was terrified. I had a few horrible dreams about the incident that night and days later. Of course, being the Marine I thought I was, I didn't tell anyone.

July 1968, me and my unit went on night patrol duty near a delta outside of Da Nang. Two hours into our patrol we ran into a huge platoon of NVA troops. A firefight ensued. The fighting was intense. We lost five guys in my unit and several others were injured badly. Again, I escaped with only a bruise on my left thigh. This firefight scared me the most. It was dark, and all you could see were tracers from machine guns. I was sure one of those bullets had my name on it.

After that incident, the remainder of my tour was uneventful. I carried out other seek & destroy missions against enemy troops, but saw no action. During the seek & destroy missions, I enthusiastically carried out my duties as a pointman, and where ever else I was assigned. I served in the Vietnam theatre of operations for 13 months. During my combat duty in Vietnam, I lost many close war buddies, and witnessed many American soldiers die in major firefights with Viet Cong and North Vietnamese Army (NVA) troops. As a result, I struggled daily from survivors' guilt. My buddies died in combat and I, for the most part, incurred

no major injuries. I experienced many life-threatening battle situations, and egregious life-sustaining scenarios while in the combat zone of Vietnam. I think about those events constantly.

(LIFE SINCE THE TRAUMATIC EVENT(S) Section)

When I left Vietnam and flew back to the states I remember being relieved and at the same time depressed and angry. I was glad to leave combat, where I lost many buddies and saw horrible things that no one should be subjected to. I was extremely sad as well. I was sad that some of my buddies would never be returning to their families, and I was really sad knowing that I was leaving some of my buddies in harms way. When I got back to the states I was pissed. People called me a baby killer, war monger, and death machine. People who knew nothing about the war thought I was an animal and it made me very angry.

As a result, I found that I could not tolerate being around people, not even my family. Strangers who knew I served my country treated me with disdain. My family treated me like I had a disease. They were afraid to talk to me, and when they did muster up the courage to talk to me they always seemed to say the wrong thing. I go to bed angry and afraid most nights. Angry that my military experience in Vietnam has caused many problems for me. And afraid to go to sleep because the nightmares of Vietnam scare me badly. My brain cannot tell fact from fiction and when I have dreams about Vietnam it's like I am re-living those horrible firefights I used to have in Vietnam. Daily, I find myself checking my windows, my door locks, and checking under my bed for intruders. I learned those skills in the Marine Corps, but my third wife seems to think I have lost my mind. She calls me paranoid.

Also, since I separated from the Marine Corps I have had a very difficult time sustaining employment. I first worked for the police department, but I was let go because my supervisor thought I was "trigger happy." I later worked for many small security guard firms, but all of them let me go. They said I had a temper that was out of control and that I was going to hurt someone. To earn a living I sold cars for many different dealerships. I was fired from every place I worked. The sales managers would piss me off. On one occasion, a sales manager refused to pay me and the next thing I knew I was being pulled off of the guy. I must have snapped, because I do not remember attacking him. I realized after working for automobile dealerships for more than a decade, I had to find something that I could do on my own. Since I knew the car business pretty well, I decided to open a small note lot. That didn't last very long. The customers would make so angry that I could not sleep at night. I have been in a downward spiral of despair ever since.

I went to the VA to seek help for my mental anguish. I was informed that I may have PTSD. The psychological impact of multiple war experiences may have led to the many negative psychological issues and cognitive distortions that I have struggled with since departing Vietnam. I currently participate in a combat PTSD group at my local Vet Center, and I take many medications to help with my anxiety, depression, and high blood pressure.

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | February 23, 2018 ++]

PTSD Ecstasy Treatment Update 01 ► FDA Designated Breakthrough Therapy

An illegal drug that is popular in the club scene may offer hope for veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The federal government fast-tracked a study on how MDMA, more commonly called ecstasy or Molly, can help people with PTSD. So far, the results have been so promising, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration has designated it a "breakthrough therapy."

THE SCIENCE BEHIND THE TRIAL

Many people in Hampton Roads know the tragic reality: Post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) can result in suicide attempts and deaths. The disorder is difficult to treat. Right now, the only drugs approved don't actually heal the patients. "We've known for a long time that although some medications can help decrease the symptoms, they aren't curative," psychiatrist Michael Mithoefer told WVEC-TV 13News Now. Dr. Mithoefer and his wife, Annie, who is a nurse, have used therapy for years to help people with PTSD. "The treatment involves revisiting the trauma and processing and bringing understanding to what's happened," Mithoefer explained.

While psychotherapy has produced some positive results, the treatment, in and of itself, can be traumatic. For some veterans, revisiting the harsh realities of war causes overwhelming anxiety. For others who've shut down much of their emotions, the psychotherapy isn't effective. The Mithoefers, who lead the Charleston study site for the federal trial, said MDMA has been successful with the patient population who have shut down much of their emotions. "It gives people a period of time when there's less fear," Mithoefer stated. The drug decreases activity in the fear center of the brain and increases activity in the brain's processing center. As a result, the people don't feel the fear, which normally prohibits them from facing their memories. At the same time, they are able to process what happened more clearly.

Mithoefer and Annie took 13 News through how the study (which the nonprofit group MAPS spearheads) works. In addition to regular psychotherapy sessions, there are three times when participants randomly are given MDMA or a placebo during their inpatient therapy session. The patient doesn't know which one he/she received. Participants are monitored at the study site for a full day during those sessions. The drug sessions are spaced three to five weeks apart, with regular therapy scheduled between the sessions. It's spread over the course of 12 weeks. "After one MDMA session, we've had a number of people say they could sleep through the night, and before that they could not," Annie said.

In the initial phases of the clinical trial, about 65 out of 107 patients (61 percent) no longer registered on the PTSD scale. At the one-year follow-up, that number increased to 73 (68 percent.) Using a Schedule I substance for treatment is not without stigma or concern. Skeptics claim it's an excuse to legalize MDMA. Doctors said participants need to be monitored closely so the drug doesn't affect their blood pressure. There also could be psychological risks if participants are not supported properly by trained therapists. "Neither the FDA nor any of us think it should be a take-home medicine, where you can pick it up at the pharmacy," Mithoefer said. "We think it will only be licensed in licensed clinics that are set up to give it to people only under direct supervision."

ONE VETERAN'S STORY

There are certain things about which you just don't talk. It's not because you don't want to talk about them; oftentimes, it's because you can't. "I avoid a lot of things that remind me of Iraq," said Sgt. Jonathan Lubecky whose memories of his time overseas can replay over and over again. "Knowing it was the right decision and having to live with it are two different things." Medical experts believe if you don't talk about a traumatic experience, you don't process it, and it lives with you every moment of every day.

"There's one in particular that will bother me for the rest of my life," Lubecky stated, recalling a moment from the Marine Corps and Army veteran's time in Iraq. It's one of many moments about which you won't find the designated marksman or shooter talking to his Army buddies. It only came up during an MDMA-assisted psychotherapy session. The drug is the reason Lubecky was able to talk about the memory and others. He gave 13 News Now permission to view and share video of that session in order to give a more complete picture of the clinical trial. "It's where I know it was the right decision," he told counselors on the video. "I know what he was about to do."

Lubecky and his wife, Olivia, sat down with us to explain how destructive the psychological effects of those memories were. Lubecky was diagnosed with PTSD and tried to kill himself five times. The scars on

his wrists are constant reminders of the internal torment, which took over the couple's lives. "You go from being in the military and being able to conquer the world, to not being able to leave your house," he said. "Reliving how horrible it was, I mean, like, you feel all alone," Olivia shared, sobbing. Lubecky tried just about every treatment available through the VA. At one point, he was taking 42 pills a day. When the couple learned about the clinical trial that combined MDMA with therapy to treat post-traumatic stress disorder, they didn't hesitate to sign up.

"I started talking about things I'd never told anybody before that happened over there, because I was that comfortable and that relaxed, and once the floodgates open, they open," explained Lubecky. According to his experience, once you can talk about the trauma, you can understand it and you get your life back. "I literally went from being in a mental health facility, which she had to check me into, to working on a presidential campaign on the national level," he told 13News Now. Lubecky realizes the treatment is unconventional and believes trained counselors are needed for this kind of process. "From when you take it until 24 hours later, you're under direct supervision," he stated, addressing concerns of critics. "The only time I was ever in possession was when I took it off the plate and put it in my mouth. So, this is a lot like going into a surgical suite."

The Lubeckys hope the strict controls in the clinical trial will lead to FDA approval. The agency will have more evidence to consider as 200 to 300 people soon will be enrolled in the Phase 3 trials starting this spring. Advocates with MAPS believe there will be a lot more veterans. While that government approval process drags on, The Lubeckys share their story with the belief that their experience and the trial can help veterans tormented by PTSD and encourage veterans to hold onto hope. "Get your spouse or significant other into the treatment because it makes a world of difference," Olivia said. "It really does. You can live again. They can live again." Researchers are looking for participants for this next trial phase. Applications and more information will be available online soon.

[Source: WVEC-TV 13News Now | Laura Geller | February 7, 2018 ++]

VA Fraud, Waste & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2018

Washington, DC -- A 14 FEB Veterans Affairs inspector general report blasted department Secretary **David Shulkin** for improperly accepting gifts, misrepresenting travel plans, and using a VA worker "as a personal travel concierge to plan tourist activities" during a controversial overseas trip last spring. Investigators also accuse Shulkin of lying about approvals for the trip when confronted by reporters about possible ethics violations, and suggest he worked to cover up those problems as the scandal developed. Shulkin has repeatedly defended the 10-day trip to Denmark and London as official VA business, with a break in the middle for approved tourist activities not funded with taxpayer dollars.

In a statement after the report's release, Shulkin called the findings "neither accurate nor objective" "It is a direct assault on my spouse, my character, and my unblemished record of service to veterans," he said, adding "I have done nothing wrong." Problems with the July travel first came to light last fall when the Washington Post reported that Shulkin may have improperly accepted tickets to the annual Wimbledon tennis tournament and improperly paid for his wife's airfare. It came less than two weeks after Shulkin issued a staff memo on essential employee travel advising all department employees to decrease unnecessary trips and "generate savings" for other priorities within VA. The report lists five violations of federal ethics rules and procedures, and calls into question the value of the \$122,000-plus overseas trip.

The report recommends Shulkin reimburse the government several thousand dollars for travel expenses and the tennis tournament tickets, plus a revamp of the department's ethics procedures. Shulkin's wife —

Dr. Merle Bari, a private-sector physician — was one of a dozen official travelers on the trip. The IG report states that her attendance was justified by then-VA Chief of Staff Vivieca Wright Simpson’s assertions that Shulkin would be presented with an award as part of his visit to Denmark, even though no such honor was scheduled.

Investigators say they found no evidence Shulkin was involved in that false information but added “since Ms. Wright Simpson’s false representations and alteration of an official record may have violated federal criminal statutes, the OIG referred this specific matter to the US Department of Justice to consider it for potential criminal prosecution.” Justice officials have declined any action thus far. The report recommends VA officials levy their own penalties in the case.

Vivieca Wright Simpson, the embattled chief of staff to Veterans Affairs Secretary David Shulkin, told colleagues 16 FEB that she is retiring. She was under fire for “false representations” to a VA ethics official and altering an official record during the course of arranging taxpayer-funded travel for Shulkin and his wife last summer. Wright Simpson was Shulkin’s senior-most adviser and served 32 years at the department, according to her official bio. After initially denying any wrongdoing, Shulkin told lawmakers on 15 FEB he had reimbursed the government for the cost of his wife’s travel and for tickets to a tennis match the IG said he improperly received as a gift. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 14, 2018 ++]

VAMC Jackson MS Update 02 ► One of 15 High-Risk VAMCs in the U.S.

The U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs is targeting Jackson's G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery VA Medical Center in a new approach to improve poorly performing VA hospitals across the country. The designation could lead to federal takeover of the leadership at the Jackson VA if it does not quickly improve. "Receivership has never happened, and it's my goal for it to never happen," Jackson VA Director Dr. David Walker said 12 FEB. Jackson is one of 15 "high-risk" VA medical centers in the U.S., based on the Strategic Analytics for Improvement and Learning rating system. Though a federal release 12 FEB said the Jackson VA received one star (lowest rating) from the system, it's actually a two-star facility. A federal VA spokesperson did not respond to explain the discrepancy Tuesday afternoon.

The federal VA has hired a central director to oversee the improvement at the 15 centers, including three Tennessee-based VA medical centers in Memphis, Murfreesboro and Nashville, where improvements are needed. Mississippi's Gulf Coast Veterans Affairs medical center, which received one-star in October, was not included in the new program. The federal office will identify vulnerabilities at each of the medical centers, set specific targets, carefully track improvement and, if necessary, take over the centers' leadership "if the facilities fail to make rapid substantial progress in their improvement plan." "President Trump has made it clear that our Veterans deserve only the best when it comes to their healthcare, and that's why we are focusing on improving our lowest performing facilities nationwide," VA Secretary David Shulkin said in a statement. "We will employ tight timelines for facilities to demonstrate improvement, and if low performance persists, we will make swift changes — including replacing facility leaders — until we achieve the rapid improvements that Veterans and taxpayers expect from VA."

Walker maintains that while the Jackson VA ranks poorly among other VA medical centers, it outperforms other health care providers in its community. The overall poor health of people in Mississippi, ranked the least healthy state in the country in 2017 by the United Health Foundation, plays a role. Mississippi has some of the highest rates of cancer, obesity, hypertension and diabetes. "We have some of the most ill patients within the VA system," Walker said. "The management of those chronic conditions is something we're doing well, but you always have to be on top of that because the patients are so ill."

Walker said the Jackson VA was one of the most improved medical centers in the last year, though it did not improve enough to receive three stars. "We have made statistical improvement in the last nine months so we're headed in the right direction," Walker said. He thinks the decision to include Jackson in the new improvement plan could have been the result of several issues, including turnover in nursing staff and vacancies in several leadership positions. Since then, the medical center has hired 83 registered nurses, a new chief of staff, chief of surgery and leaders in mental health, social work, human resources, food nutrition and logistics. "When you look back at the high risk list, it was likely picked during times we did not have those positions filled," Walker said.

The VA has also started tackling bureaucratic issues that can impede care. To reduce the rate of infections related to urinary catheters, which was higher than it should have been, the hospital changed its protocol so that nurses can remove catheters when they're no longer needed without having to wait for a doctor's approval. Walker has also formed small teams made up of individuals from different departments within the medical center. The teams visit different areas of the hospital, attend outreach events and get feedback from veterans. Together, those employees are authorized to implement changes within the VA without the red tape. [Source: Clarion Ledger | Anna Wolfe | February 13, 2018 ++]

VA HCS Minneapolis MN ► Reversal on Banned Sculpture Display

It was artwork once deemed too real to display. But the Minneapolis Veterans Affairs Medical Center on 14 FEB backed down and is allowing Iraq war vet Bill DeRoche to display a sculpture he created for the VA's ongoing art show. The VA originally banned the sculpture because it featured inert shells in the artwork that the VA claimed violated federal weapons prohibitions. It also claimed DeRoche's work appeared to be so real that it could trigger trauma for veterans viewing it. But after a lawyer representing DeRoche suggested in a letter that the VA was violating DeRoche's First Amendment rights, the agency said it would allow the sculpture to be displayed after all as part of its Creative Arts competition at the medical center.

Before the artwork could be shown, however, the VA told DeRoche he had to get an expert to certify that it is safe. He also had to provide the VA with documentation of the inspection. When he met both conditions, the VA said it would then display the piece behind a partition with a sign stating what it is so individuals can decide about viewing it. The art show was held 14 thru 16 FEB. DeRoche, who learned of the VA's reversal late Wednesday from a reporter, had Bloomington police certify his work was safe, an officer writing what DeRoche joked was a "doctor's note" and initialing each of the shells. VA officials met DeRoche at the door and the art work was installed at the VA Thursday afternoon. But because judging had already been completed, it wasn't part of the actual art show competition. "This could have all been handled so differently, but it took on a life of its own," he said. "Maybe it's an ego thing, but 90 percent of these people would never admit they are wrong."

After the story of the VA banning DeRoche's sculpture was published in the Star Tribune last month, lawyer and Army veteran Larry Frost contacted DeRoche and offered his support. In a letter dated Monday to the VA, Frost, who spent 27 years in the military, said banning the artwork violated DeRoche's free speech rights and that the inert casings could not be considered weapons. "Yes, shell casings (in this case) are legally recognized as 'speech,'" Frost wrote in his letter. "The VA is forbidden by Supreme Court decisions of very, very long standing from censoring speech on the basis of content. You and your agency cannot reasonably claim they were unaware of these rights. You have specifically censored Mr. DeRoche's speech because of its content."

Frost's letter added: "I am enraged that the VA would dare to decide that we, adult combat veterans, are incapable of deciding for ourselves whether to view Mr. DeRoche's art — or not to do so. Your nanny mentality smacks of the kind of paternalism no veteran is likely to stomach." As late as 13 FEB, as the opening of the art show approached, the VA's position banning the artwork was unchanged. In a letter to Frost, a VA attorney said the organization had consulted with the federal Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms and still believed the artillery casings to be an explosive device. Frost heralded the reversal on Wednesday. "Once you make a decision, you kind of get committed to it. I'm very glad the VA reconsidered, and I think it's a reasonable decision under the circumstances," he said.

DeRoche, a Marine veteran, said he had been encouraged for years to enter the art competition. Injured in a 2004 bomb blast that struck his convoy in Iraq, it would be a way, he was told, to publicly address the trauma that continues to affect him. But the VA balked when it got a look at photos of the sculpture DeRoche planned to enter. The piece includes four shells connected by wires, a representation of the improvised explosive devices (IEDs) used in the kind of blast that wounded him. The shells in the artwork were a risk to public safety and a threat to a vulnerable population, the VA said. Although the shells are inert, the VA wanted them removed. DeRoche refused, saying it would ruin the work's message.



Bill DeRoche incorporated objects meaningful to him in his artwork, including inert shells

The sculpture features the four casings wired together inside a wooden crate, with two fake skulls, a deck of cards, DeRoche's dog tags, and various symbolic medals and coins. A flickering light bulb projects up from the box. It is meant to show the light that helped DeRoche through his darkness, he said. The purpose of the competition, which generates 100 to 150 submissions a year, is "to recognize veterans for their creative accomplishments and to educate and demonstrate to our community the therapeutic benefits of the arts," according to a pamphlet the VA distributed about the event. The VA said the initial decision on DeRoche's work marked only the second time in 30 years of the competition that an entry had been rejected. [Source: Star Tribune | Mark Brunswick | February 15, 2018 ++]



Burn Pit Toxic Exposure Update 47 ► Judge Rules Tie to Respiratory Issues

Service members and private military contractors who worked around “burn pits” downrange, and later suffered from lung and respiratory issues, may soon get a breath of fresh air. A recent court decision by a judge under the U.S. Department of Labor’s Office for Workers’ Compensation Programs ruled that open-air burn pits are connected to lung disease, Fox News first reported. The burn pits — where chemicals were released into the air from trash, abandoned hardware, and other waste being incinerated — occurred throughout U.S. military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan over the course of the wars there. The ruling could be a boon for the tens of thousands of service members who signed onto the Veterans Affairs Department’s Burn Pit Registry over the course of the conflicts in the Middle East.



A service member tosses unserviceable uniform items into a burn pit. Military uniform items were often burned to ensure they could not be used by opposing forces.

The concession may pad the files of plaintiffs seeking medical services for the lung and respiratory ailments they suffered after returning from overseas, but currently are denied coverage by the VA. The ruling comes after years of veterans advocacy groups pleading for assistance. In October 2016, for instance, a group of 700 veterans and family members with the group Burn Pits 360 wrote an open letter to then-President Barack Obama to record their grievances. “We write because these veterans are seriously ill, dying or have passed away, and more must be done,” the letter read. “Many of us went to war able to run marathons, but now our health has deteriorated so much that we cannot hold down steady jobs. ... We are misdiagnosed. We are not getting the medical care we urgently need. We need you to act in this, your final year in office.”

In January, former Vice President Joe Biden even voiced the belief that his son’s fatal brain cancer may have been caused by exposure to military burn pits while serving in Iraq and Kosovo. “Science has recognized there are certain carcinogens that when people are exposed to them, depending on the quantities and the amount in the water and the air, can have a carcinogenic impact on the body,” he said in the interview. Although Biden conceded that he does not have any direct evidence linking his son’s death in

2015 to the toxic fires, he said “there is a lot of work to be done” investigating the issue given the high rates of illnesses seen in troops who worked near the waste pits. [Source: ArmyTimes | Kyle Rempfer | February 15, 2018 ++]

Vet Toxic Exposure | Lejeune Update 69 ► Family Member Care Unjust

A leading activist for Camp Lejeune veterans exposed to toxic tap water said 27 FEB he will ask Congress to allow families poisoned at the base to sue the federal government for damages. Retired Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger, whose daughter died of leukemia after her family lived at the North Carolina base, said in Atlanta that he wants Congress to pass a new law that will mitigate the impact of a 2014 U.S. Supreme Court decision that effectively blocked Lejeune families from seeking relief through the courts. Under the court’s ruling, those impacted by the water would have had to file a legal claim by 1994, when many weren’t even aware of the contamination or the associated health consequences.

“The only avenue I had to seek relief for all the hell she went through, my family went through, was stripped from me,” said Ensminger. “It was stripped from all of you who had dependents that were effected by this. Our judiciary system stripped us of the very damn constitutional rights that all of us were there serving to protect.”

Ensminger made his comments to those attending the Lejeune Community Assistance Panel at the Emory Conference Center. The base’s tap water was contaminated from 1953 to 1987. Recent federal programs were enacted to assist poisoned Lejeune veterans and their families, but family members told the AJC in an article published last week that the programs do not treat them fairly. Some one million people — veterans and their family members — were exposed to the contaminated water over four decades. Georgia has one of the largest concentrations of Lejeune veterans and their families in the country with more than 10,000 registered on a site for those exposed to the water.

Ensminger said he’s already spoken to some Congressional offices about proposed legislation that would be called the Camp Lejeune Justice Act. “All I want is for my case and your cases, if they are valid, to be allowed to go before a court of law based on their own merits,” he said. “That is what they are afraid of. They know the merits are not on their side.” Not everyone on the panel agreed with the proposal. Chris Orris, who was born at the base and has a heart birth defect, said Congress should extend the same benefits to family members that Lejeune Marines have received. He said going back before a judge to fight the case is another way to delay benefits to families and dependents. “We want medical care and we want compensation just like the veterans receive for the same illnesses,” Orris said.



Retired Master Sergeant Jerry Ensminger, far left, Marine Veteran Janice Bogan (center), and retired Marine Wayne Hunt (right) participated in the 27 FEB Lejeune Community Assistance Panel in Atlanta.

The community panel is administered at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in Atlanta through the Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry. At least a dozen veterans and family members rose to address the panel and officials at the Department of Veterans Affairs 27 FEB. They described a litany of health problems and struggles they believe are linked to the contaminated water. Wayne Hunt, of Atlanta, wore a placard across his chest to make sure his message was heard: “The Marine Corps poisoned me at Camp Lejeune, N.C. and The VA is letting Me Die!” He said he is diagnosed with colon cancer and prostate cancer and may also have breast cancer. He said the VA keeps denying him when he applies for help. “You all need to stop killing Marines,” he said. “You need to stop letting veterans die.”

Decades of industrial waste and chemicals seeping into the base’s water supply caused the contamination. The Marine Corps downplayed the problem and continued to obscure the harm caused, even after the contaminated wells on the base were shut down in the mid-1980s. Activists like Ensminger and others fought for years to get the government to acknowledge the harm and do something to help those who became sick. In 2012, President Obama signed into law a program of cost-free health care for veterans who had been harmed by the poisonous water and a less expansive health plan for their families. In 2017, launched a \$2 billion program to extend disability payments to veterans who had health conditions linked to the toxic water. **The disability program does not cover family members.**

Veterans and their families say they are not getting the help they need. The 280 people registered to attend the Tuesday meeting was the largest number yet for a panel in Atlanta. Mike Partain, a panel member who was born at the base and has breast cancer, attributed the interest to the spread of information and awareness to veterans connecting on social media. “Getting the community involved is a big part now,” he said. “That’s how you guys make a difference is getting behind us and speaking out.” [Source: The Atlantic Journal-Constitution | Brad Schrade | February 27, 2018 ++]

Vet Cemetery California Update 16 ► Dilapidated MINC Petition

Hidden away on Mare Island in Vallejo is the Bay Area’s oldest Naval cemetery, the final resting place of sailors and soldiers and loved ones—and one convicted killer. The effort to get the dilapidated Mare Island Cemetery re-claimed by the federal government has a new, local champion in Nestor Aliga, who has launched an online petition on the matter. The petition, which was posted 11 FEB, already had at least 100 signatures by the next morning, Aliga said. Aliga has taken on the mantle created by retired Navy Capt. Ralph Parrott, who was so appalled by the condition he found the site during an impromptu visit last year, that he started investigating ways its fortunes might be improved.

“Colonel Nestor Aliga has taken it upon himself to take the lead in mobilizing the veterans’ community of Vallejo to obtain justice for the Mare Island Naval Cemetery and to provide a place for future burials to honor our veterans,” Parrott said in an email from his home in the Washington, D.C. area. “He deserves the full support of the community for his selfless initiative. With grass roots efforts such as Colonel Aliga’s and the Mayor’s willingness to offer additional land adjacent to the cemetery for future burials, I think there is a very good chance the VA will take over the cemetery and restore it to its rightful condition and maintain it in perpetuity.” And that is what both men say they’ve determined is the best course of action for the oldest military cemetery on the West Coast.

The Mare Island Cemetery was closed in 1921, but cared for by the Navy until the 1996 shipyard closure, when the site was turned over to the city of Vallejo. Though a valiant effort was made by volunteers to keep the site maintained, it fell into disrepair in the intervening years. Parrott and Aliga agree that their best bet for getting the VA to retake responsibility for the cemetery would be to offer land for new veterans grave sites — something that is becoming more difficult to find statewide, and in the Bay Area in particular, they

said. “Ralph and I have been discussing ways to reach out to people and I went to the Vallejo Veterans Building Council where various local vets groups were able to discuss this issue, and they all wanted to write letters of support,” Aliga said. “A petition was suggested — and, this being the internet age, an online petition seemed like a way for the effort to go nationwide.”

“We respectfully request the Executive Branch, President Donald Trump and Secretary of Veterans Affairs Dr. David J. Shulkin, to honor the military service of our Nation’s Veterans by re-possessing/assuming ownership of the Mare Island Naval Cemetery by Fiscal Year 2020,” the petition reads. “The Mare Island Naval Cemetery (MINC) is a national shrine, but its deplorable condition is a shocking disgrace to the honorable service, uncommon valor, and selfless sacrifice of our courageous Veterans buried there and, even worse, to the dignity our great Nation.” The mission of the Veterans Affairs National Cemetery Administration is to provide a dignified burial and lasting memorial for Veterans and their eligible family members and to maintain our Veterans’ cemeteries as national shrines, the petition says.



“The MINC is a national shrine as it has about 1,000 graves including Veterans who served since the War of 1812. Designated as a National Historic Landmark, it is the final resting place for three Congressional Medal of Honor recipients, James Cooney, William Halford, and Alexander Parker. Also buried there is Anna Arnold Key, the daughter of Francis Scott Key who wrote our National Anthem, The Star Spangled Banner,” it says. The petition asks the government to assume ownership of the Mare Island Naval Cemetery by Fiscal Year 2020. “I’m hoping someone from Veterans Affairs or the White House — someone who can do something about it — will get hold of it, will see it, and will put some ‘command emphasis from the top,’ as they say in the military,” Aliga said.

With between 8,000 and 10,000 veterans in Vallejo, an impressive number of signatures should be achievable, he said. “If I can get just 20 percent to sign it, 2000, that would be great,” Aliga said. “Sometimes, it takes someone from the outside — in this case Ralph — to come and notice something wrong, to slap you in the head and say, ‘hey, folks, this is not normal, this isn’t right,’ to take you out of your stupor of complacency. This (the condition of the cemetery) is wrong. It doesn’t reflect our pride in our nation.” The petition can be found and signed at <http://chn.ge/2BUHBjI>. You do not have to be from Vallejo to sign it. [Source: The Republican | Diane Lederman | January 12, 2018 ++]

New York Vet Cemetery Update 02 ► Western New York National Cemetery

Veterans in Western New York may be happy they will finally get their own cemetery, but to hear Charles T. Pinck tell it, the graveyard will be missing something important. The veterans cemetery in Pembroke won’t bear the name of William J. Donovan, a Buffalo-born World War I hero and founder of the Office of Strategic Services, the predecessor to the Central Intelligence Agency. And Pinck, president of the OSS Society – which works to preserve the memory of the nation’s fledgling spy agency – isn’t happy about it.

Pinck said he thought for sure the cemetery would be named for Donovan, given who proposed the idea in the first place. "We were very pleased when Senator Charles E. Schumer, a New York Democrat, held a press conference several years ago to announce his support for naming the cemetery in General Donovan's honor," Pinck said. Sure enough, nearly four years ago, Schumer – now Senate minority leader – said: " 'Wild Bill' Donovan is a true Western New York hero, and I cannot think of any better way to commemorate his life, and honor our region's veterans, than by naming the new Western New York Veterans Cemetery after 'Wild Bill.' "

It seems Schumer got a little ahead of himself. Some local veterans objected to naming the cemetery for Donovan, saying it shouldn't be named for any one veteran. And the Department of Veterans Affairs then decided in 2016 it would be better to call the graveyard the Western New York National Cemetery.

"According to a source in Buffalo, the decision not to name the cemetery in honor of General Donovan was made by the Veterans Administration and Senator Schumer did not oppose it," Pinck said. Asked about what happened, Schumer's spokesman, Jason Kaplan, said Schumer's efforts were directed elsewhere. "Senator Schumer is focused on getting all the i's dotted and t's crossed so this much-needed Western New York veterans cemetery can get up and running as soon as possible," Kaplan said. "Once the whole of the Western New York community develops a broad and deep consensus on the naming, of course Senator Schumer will champion what they choose."

Schumer didn't push Donovan's name too hard for a reason, said Patrick W. Welch, a longtime Buffalo veterans advocate who fought for the cemetery's construction for years. "There's a significant number of veterans who don't want it named after any one veteran," said Welch, who himself supported naming the cemetery for Donovan before changing course after hearing from other vets. Welch doesn't fault Schumer for backtracking on the name for another reason, too. For years now, Schumer has been pushing to get the cemetery built despite long delays over land acquisition. "We must credit Senator Schumer for becoming our champion on this cemetery," Welch said in an email to other veterans advocates last week. "If not for him, the veteran population requirements would have stood in place and we would not be getting our own National Veterans Cemetery. If not for him, the funding would not have happened. So no matter your politics, we do need to thank him."

Schumer announced last week that land acquisition had finally been completed for the 269-acre cemetery at the intersection of Indian Falls Road and State Route 77 in the Town of Pembroke. That means **construction should be able to begin later this year**, with the first gravesites becoming available a year or so later. Pinck stressed that if the cemetery isn't going to be named for Donovan, the Buffalo area ought to find a way to honor him. Donovan lost his only local honor when the Donovan State Office Building was converted into a Courtyard by Marriott Hotel and offices several years ago. "Every time we have tried to honor General Donovan, one of America's greatest patriots and most highly decorated soldiers, our efforts have been thwarted," Pinck said. [Source: The Buffalo News | Jerry Zremski | February 26, 2018 ++]

Word Search Puzzles ► **Applicable to Veterans**

Looking to stretch your brain, test your vocabulary, and take on special challenges with uniquely designed word games for veterans that also teach about VA compensation and pension programs? The perfect word game puzzles that entertain and educate are at your fingertips. Numerous studies have shown that word search and other puzzles can help improve memory, focus, vocabulary, and overall mental acuity. Many research studies have found that word search is effective at helping to teach a second language. Even if you don't want to learn another language, there's always room to expand your vocabulary. Most English

speaking adults have a 20 to 35 thousand word vocabulary, while there are over 1 million words in the English language.

Doing daily word search and other puzzles can help to keep your aging brain fit. A study published in the March-April 2001 issue of the “American Journal of Alzheimer’s Disease and Other Dementias” found that a simple cognitive activity like bingo can benefit older adults. Both the AARP and the Alzheimer’s Association suggest that word search puzzles can be part of a healthy mental lifestyle.



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[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | February 25, 2018 ++]

CRSC Update 45 ► Retirees Don't Miss Out, You May Be eligible

Just because a veteran was not injured in combat does not mean he or she may not be entitled to receive **Combat-Related Special Compensation** (CRSC). Many veterans may be missing out on hundreds, if not thousands, of dollars every month because they have not applied for the special compensation. Don't let the term combat throw you; there are many circumstances which are combat related that could justify approval of extra tax-free money for you.

CRSC is designed to restore military retirement pay that has been offset by Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) compensation when evidence exists to confirm the associated disabilities are combat related. For example, if a veteran is currently rated for disability of 10 percent with the VA, he or she receives a check from the VA for \$115 each month, but his or her retired pay is reduced by the same amount. If the

disability is found to be combat-related by the CRSC review board, he or she would continue to receive the monthly check from the VA for \$115 along with the remainder of the retired pay, but begin to receive an additional monthly check from the CRSC for \$115.

Many disabilities that resulted from conditions during peacetime may meet the criteria for CRSC. Some examples are an aircraft mechanic who works on the flight line and begins to lose his hearing while in-service; a personnel technician who dives for cover during a simulated air raid and injures her shoulder; and a special forces journeyman who makes a peacetime parachute jump and breaks his ankle upon landing. If you're not sure the circumstances surrounding your disability meet the combat-related criteria, it would be beneficial for you to apply for CRSC and let the board make a determination for you. You should submit a CRSC application if:

- You think you are eligible for CRSC and have never applied.
- You have been approved for CRSC, but you have more disabilities that you think might qualify.
- The VA has recently added more disabilities to your rating that you think might qualify. VA recently expanded coverage to those suffering from the following medical conditions associated with Agent Orange.
 - Ischemic Heart Disease
 - Parkinson's Disease
 - Hairy Cell Leukemia
 - other Chronic B-cell Leukemia

There are a few prerequisites to consider before submitting a CRSC application. To meet the basic eligibility criteria to be considered for CRSC, veterans must:

- Be retired with 20 (or more) years of active-duty military service, or retired at age 60 from the Guard or Reserve and
- Be receiving military retired pay and
- Have a compensable VA disability rating of 10 percent or higher and
- Receive military retired pay that is reduced by VA disability payments.

The application for Combat-Related Special Compensation can be obtained for first time applicants at <http://www.naus.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/07/DD2860.pdf>. If you are reapplying for new disabilities, request a reconsideration application from your service branch.

- Army: At <https://www.hrc.army.mil/site/crsc/reconsiderations.html> you can find a reconsideration application and instructions.
- Navy/Marines: At <http://www.secnav.navy.mil/mra/CORB/Pages/CRSCB> you can find a reconsideration application and instructions.
- Air Force: Call 800-525-0102 concerning reconsideration

When applying include documents you feel will help your case. These might include:

- Retirement orders
- 20-year letter or statement of service (for reservists)
- Relevant pages in your VA or service medical record
- VA ratings
- Purple Heart award citations
- Retirement Form DD214

Your branch will make decisions based on what you send. The quality of the information is more important than quantity. Send copies, not original documents. Your branch will not return them. **NOTE:** Veterans who waived military retirement pay for Civil Service credit are not eligible to apply for CRSC.

[Source: USVCP & <https://www.dfas.mil/retiredmilitary/disability/applyforcrsc.html> | Staff | February 23, 2018 ++]

Vet Deportations Update 16 ► Status of USA Afghanistan Vet Miguel Perez

As the threat of deportation becomes more imminent for a U.S. Army veteran with a green card and felony drug conviction, lawmakers and clergy this week ramped up efforts to keep him in the U.S. On 8 FEB, U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth, using a little-known legislative maneuver intended to help specific individuals, introduced a private bill, requesting relief for Miguel Perez Jr., 39, who served two tours in Afghanistan but has no access to veteran benefits and has been ordered to return to his native Mexico.

“To prevent this disgraceful treatment of a veteran who risked his life on behalf of our nation, I filed a private immigration relief bill on his behalf,” Duckworth, an Illinois Democrat, said in a statement. “Mr. Perez deserves the opportunity to stay in the country he was raised in and subsequently signed up to defend. He has close family ties to the United States and removal would have a serious adverse impact on the health of this combat veteran and that of his family.” Private bills have been introduced by dozens of members of Congress this past year seeking to aid constituents with immigration issues. Their success rate is generally low, but Duckworth hopes the gesture alone will bolster Perez’s case.

Perez is awaiting deportation in a Wisconsin detention center. He began a hunger strike last week, saying that his abstinence from solid food is not only a protest of his situation, but also a prayerful fast to bring back other veterans who already have been deported. “God has given me a new sense of living,” Perez said. “I’ve got a purpose, and my purpose is those guys right now.” He said a chaplain intervened on his behalf 7 FEB when guards threatened to place Perez in solitary confinement, barring phone calls and visitors.

Nicole Aberico, a spokeswoman for Immigration and Customs Enforcement, did not confirm whether immigration officials had made such a threat to Perez. She said in a statement that once a detainee skips nine consecutive meals, officials explain the negative health effects of not eating. For detainees’ safety, ICE closely monitors their food and water intake, she said. “In general, ICE fully respects the rights of all people to voice their opinion without interference,” Aberico said. “ICE does not retaliate in any way against ICE detainees who implement religious fasts or hunger strikes.”

Earlier this week, Perez’s parents received word that Gov. Bruce Rauner had denied a pardon for their son, which advocates had hoped would encourage the government to grant citizenship to Perez, dating back to when he joined the military in 2001. His attorney, Chris Bergin, applied for citizenship on Perez’s behalf in July. That retroactive application for citizenship is the only pathway left for Perez after federal appeals judges denied a request for relief under the United Nations Convention Against Torture, a protection similar to asylum. Perez and human rights advocates believe he would be in danger if he were sent back to Mexico, where he hasn’t lived since he was 8.

Perez is one of many legal permanent residents who have served in the U.S. military, then faced the possibility of deportation to their native countries after committing a crime. As with others, Perez mistakenly thought he became a U.S. citizen when he took an oath to protect the nation. He said superiors never offered to help him expedite his citizenship.

After his military service, Perez sought treatment at the Veterans Affairs hospital in Maywood, where doctors diagnosed him with post-traumatic stress disorder. He was supposed to return for more tests to determine whether he also had a traumatic brain injury. In the meantime, he reconnected with a childhood friend who provided free drugs and alcohol. On the night of Nov. 26, 2008, while with that friend, Perez handed a laptop case containing cocaine to an undercover officer. Perez pleaded guilty to the drug charge and served half of a 15-year prison sentence. When legal residents or people who are here illegally commit crimes, ICE’s standard procedure is to let them serve most of their sentence for the crime in the U.S., then deport them.

Perez discovered the citizenship oversight when he was summoned to immigration court shortly before his release from Hill Correctional Center in Galesburg. Instead of heading home to Chicago from prison, Perez was placed in the custody of Immigration and Customs Enforcement. But as Perez's options for staying in the U.S. narrow, his plight continues to gain attention from those sympathetic to his cause. In addition to the bill introduced Thursday, Duckworth introduced several bills in August intended to prevent veterans and members of the military from being deported or denied health care. The proposed bills would bar the deportation of veterans, give legal permanent residents a path to citizenship through military service, establish naturalization offices at military training facilities, and bolster health care services for veterans.

In the House, U.S. Rep. Vicente Gonzalez, a Democratic congressman from Texas, said he would seek to amend a proposed Repatriate Our Patriots Act to cover Perez and others like him. Proposed by Gonzalez last year, the bill is the first bipartisan effort to address the issue. It is co-sponsored by Alaska Republican Don Young, the longest continuously serving member of the House, and Rep. Bobby Rush, a Chicago Democrat. "The American government breached a contract with green card vets," Gonzalez said. "I don't consider this an immigration bill. I consider this a veterans bill. This is for American soldiers."

In the interim one of his supporters, Sara Walker, told the Tribune that Perez had been moved into isolation and feels that authorities are violating his religious freedom. She said Perez called and said he was told to pack up his belongings as he was being immediately moved to segregation. "What Miguel told us is, he was over in Afghanistan defending the country twice, dodging bullets," Walker said. "He never thought he'd have to fight his home country after defending it twice." Mark Malecki, a spokesman for the Kenosha County sheriff's office, confirmed that Perez has been moved into a "solo cell" as part of "administrative segregation," but said the move was so his diet can be monitored, not for disciplinary reasons.

Ed Yohnka, spokesman for the ACLU of Illinois, said on 23 FEB that "may be the most callous and unproductive use of solitary confinement" he'd ever heard of. "You use solitary confinement for somebody disobeying an order or rules that cause harm and jeopardize safety and security in the facility," Yohnka said. "Someone not eating is not doing that." "This is someone who is dealing with an incredibly traumatic situation," Yohnka added. "He may be about to be separated from everyone he knows and everyone he loves and their solution to that apparently is to separate him from all human contact, which is counterproductive on all kinds of different levels."

Perez started a liquid fast three weeks ago to protest his deportation as he awaited a ruling regarding a stay of removal filed by his lawyer, Chris Bergin. He was drinking 8-ounce cartons of milk and bottles of Gatorade each day to balance medications for post-traumatic stress disorder. Duckworth, who filed a bill earlier this month requesting relief for Perez, has not been able to get any information from the Kenosha Detention Center or the Chicago offices of Immigration and Customs Enforcement, according to Kiera Ellis, a spokeswoman for the senator. Ellis said the senator wants to know how this is possible "legally, ethically and civically." "It's not transparent," she said.

Tara Tidwell Cullen, director of communications for the National Immigrant Justice Center of Heartland Alliance, said solitary confinement is one of many human rights concerns in detention centers across the country. "This is a pretty frequent punitive response to hunger strikes — to place people in solitary confinement," she said. [Source: Chicago Tribune | Manya Brachear Pashman & Gregory Pratt | February 8 & 23, 2018 ++]

GI Bill Update 249 ► Ashford University Application Denied

Ashford University may soon no longer qualify to receive G-I Bill benefits for its students. Illinois US Senator Dick Durbin says an agency in California has denied the company's application to remain eligible

for funding. The for-profit school is based in California. When Ashford closed its main campus in Clinton, Iowa, a state agency withdrew approval of veterans benefits. Durbin's office says Ashford challenged that decision in federal court, but lost. So the university applied to the California State Approving Agency for Veterans Education. On 23 FEB WVIK News received an email message from Bridgepoint Education, Ashford's owner.

Here is the main part of that message: Calling it a "predatory company, " Durbin says Ashford, "has a long history of exploiting the men and women who have served our country in uniform in order to pocket millions in federal G-I Bill education benefits." Durbin has asked the Department of Veterans Affairs to stop sending G-I Bill funds to Ashford. He also wants the VA to help veterans who are currently enrolled at Ashford and may no longer receive tuition assistance. [Source: NPR WVIK | Michelle O'Neill | February 22, 2018 ++]

Vet Fraud & Abuse ► Reported 15 thru 28 FEB 2017

Atlanta, Ga -- Two nurses and an aide were indicted 21 FEB in the FEB 2014 death of 89-year old World War II veteran **James Dempsey**, who died pleading for help while in their care, WXIA-TV reported. Dempsey's family hid a camera in the late veteran's room in the Northeast Atlanta Health and Rehabilitation Center that captured the night he died. The video showed the decorated U.S. Navy veteran repeatedly calling for help, saying he could not breathe. It also showed the nurses failing to take life-saving measures and laughing as they tried to start an oxygen machine.

The channel reported that Brookhaven Police launched an investigation and, on Wednesday, a grand jury returned an indictment. **Loyce Pickquet Agyeman's** top charge is felony murder; **Wanda Nuckles**, a nursing supervisor, is charged with depriving an elder of essential services; and **Mable Turman** is charged with neglect to an elder, the report said. Warrants were issued for their arrests. The nursing home's attorneys attempted to stop media news outlet WXIA-TV from getting the video, but a DeKalb County judge ruled to unseal the footage.

Nuckles told Dempsey's family lawyers in the deposition that when she learned the veteran had stopped breathing, she rushed to his room and took over CPR, keeping it up until paramedics arrived, WXIA-TV reported. However, the secret video showed that nobody was doing CPR when she arrived, and she did not start immediately. After the attorneys showed Nuckles the video, she told them it was an honest mistake, based on her normal reactions. When the attorneys asked why Nuckles was laughing, she said she did not remember.

WXIA-TV reported the nursing home was told of the video in 2014 but did not terminate the nurses until 10 months later. Nuckles and another nurse did not surrender their licenses until this September, when the Georgia Board of Nursing was sent a link to the video by the news station. Records showed the nursing home continued to have problems, including \$813,000 in Medicare fines since 2015, WXIA-TV reported. It said the nursing home got a good inspection report in May, but still has Medicare's lowest score, a one-star rating [Source: Fox News | February 22, 2018 ++]

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Albuquerque, NM -- A former U.S. Forest Service ranger was ordered to pay a disabled Afghanistan war veteran and another man almost \$600,000 after a federal judge ruled that the ranger violated their civil rights by using excessive force during their 2014 arrests at the Juan Tomas campground in the mountains east of Albuquerque. In May 2014, then U.S. Forest Service Ranger **David Chavez** confronted Adam Griego, who served in the Army during two tours in Iraq and Afghanistan, and fellow camper Elijah Haukereid at the

Juan Tomas campground. Earlier, Chavez had told Griego that the road to the campground was closed and that Griego would have to hike into the area to retrieve his belongings.

Griego found another route to rejoin his friends, who were packing up and preparing to leave. According to findings made by U.S. District Judge Judith C. Herrera, after Chavez arrived at the campsite, he noticed Griego, then handcuffed him and slammed his face into the hood of Chavez's government truck. Chavez then twice slammed Griego's head into the door frame of the truck while putting Griego into the rear seat, where Griego was kept for several hours without water despite the heat. Herrera noted in her ruling, which followed a bench trial, that, at the time of his arrest in May 2014, Griego was 100 percent disabled from his military service by post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury.

Griego received a Purple Heart for his wounds from an improvised explosive device while serving in Afghanistan, one of five IED explosions he experienced during his two tours of duty – in Iraq from 2009 to 2010 and in Afghanistan from 2012 to 2013. He was wounded, and his best friend killed by the fourth IED explosion he experienced, and he returned to his unit after being treated for his wounds in Germany. Griego served as an infantryman in 1st Battalion 23rd Infantry Regiment "The Tomahawks" 3rd Brigade Stryker Combat Team, 2nd Infantry Division, based at Fort Lewis, Wash.

After forcing Griego into the truck, Chavez then turned his attention on Griego's fellow camper, Haukereid, who was recording Griego's arrest on his cellphone. Chavez slapped the phone out of Haukereid's hand and threatened him with a Taser. Haukereid questioned why Chavez said he needed to get on the ground. Chavez then commanded his trained dog to get out of the vehicle and attack Haukereid. Haukereid then complied with Chavez's order, was handcuffed and placed in the Forest Service truck for two hours, according to the court's ruling. "It was a privilege to represent both men," attorney Louren Oliveros said. "It was particularly important that Adam (Griego) got to tell his story to Judge Herrera. It was the first time he was able to tell his story."

Herrera awarded Griego \$450,000 in compensatory and punitive damages after finding that the beating he suffered made his combat injuries worse. Haukereid was awarded \$140,000 in compensatory and punitive damages. There is still a lot of legal work to do before either man can receive any money, according to Oliveros. The Department of Agriculture, of which the Forest Service is a part, didn't provide former Ranger Chavez with a defense attorney, despite his request, and didn't agree to indemnify him. Herrera's order of a \$590,000 judgement is directed at Chavez, but normally his former employer would have to pay the judgment for his actions. Oliveros said she and her co-counsel, Timothy Padilla, will have to try to get the federal government to accept responsibility for Chavez's actions and pay the judgment.

Chavez pleaded guilty to a misdemeanor criminal civil rights charge in 2015 for slamming Griego's head twice into the hood of Chavez's government truck after handcuffing him. The criminal information charging Chavez and his agreement to plead guilty were filed together in December 2015, which indicates that the charge and plea were negotiated before being filed. He was sentenced to one year of probation. The criminal case was handled by prosecutors from Washington, D.C., because the local U.S. attorney had a conflict in the case. [Source: Albuquerque Journal | Mike Gallagher | February 23, 2018 ++]

Vet Charity Watch Update 64 ► Center for American Homeless Veterans

Virginia's attorney general has launched an investigation into a veterans charity that allegedly misled donors by spending millions of dollars on telemarketing and salaries rather than on veterans. The Falls Church, Virginia-based **Center for American Homeless Veterans** received a "civil investigative demand" for documents from Attorney General Mark Herring's office in late December, according to documents

reviewed this week by the Center for Public Integrity. The attorney general's actions came just two weeks after publication of a Center for Public Integrity investigation into the Center for American Homeless Veterans and its founder, Brian Arthur Hampton.

Separately, Rep. Walter B. Jones (R-NC) on 14 FEB asked the leaders of two U.S. House committees to launch an investigation into "bad actors" who mislead donors and enrich themselves in the name of military veterans. He cited the Center for Public Integrity's investigation into Hampton's veterans operation and media reports about other veterans charities. "Congress should not sit on the sidelines while unscrupulous individuals abuse their tax-exempt status, fleece donors and take advantage of the men and women who have served our great nation and their families," Jones wrote in a letter to the leaders of the House Committee on Ways and Means and the House Committee on Oversight and Government Reform. Committee representatives could not immediately be reached for comment.

Along with the Center for American Homeless Veterans, Hampton runs the nonprofit **Circle of Friends for American Veterans** and the **Put Vets First!** Political Action Committee out of the same office. Rep. Walter B. Jones (R-NC) asked the leaders of two U.S. House committees to investigate "bad actors" who mislead donors and enrich themselves in the name of military veterans. All three groups use telemarketers to raise millions of dollars, but hardly any of this money is spent on programs for veterans, according to federal tax filings and Federal Election Commission disclosures. Hampton denies wrongdoing and has said in the past that contracting with professional fundraisers frees up his time to focus on outreach. But in its "civil investigative demand," Herring's office alleges that Hampton's Center for American Homeless Veterans "has engaged in misleading donors to believe funds would be used for veterans-assistance programs and organizations, when funds were not used for those purposes."

Michael Kelly, spokesman for Herring, confirmed his office is investigating the Center for American Homeless Veterans but declined to answer specific questions about the probe. "Attorney General Herring has made it a priority to crack down on financial exploitation of veterans and fraudulent charities, as evidenced by his work with colleagues to shut down the deceptive "VietNow" charity, and the record-setting \$100 million settlement his team secured against USA Discounters for deceptive sales and debt collection practices," Kelly said in an emailed statement. Hampton said he is cooperating with the investigation. "We have the program goods and are always enthusiastic about sharing all the documents," Hampton wrote in an emailed statement. "We do what we say we are going to do and a great deal more."

Hampton has personally benefited from his trio of veterans organizations. During 2017, he made \$110,000 from the PAC, boosting his income from the PAC to \$20,350 in December alone, according to federal records. Hampton also earned \$340,000 in 2016 from his two veterans charities, according to the most recent tax filings available. It's not yet known how much Hampton earned from his charities during 2017. Hampton defended his compensation, noting that he has "24 years of tenure" and is the head of three organizations.

During the 2014 and 2015 tax years, a telemarketer hired by the Center for American Homeless Veterans, Outreach Calling, kept \$3.7 million — or 90 percent — of the \$4.1 million it raised for the nonprofit, according to annual tax filings. Records filed by Outreach Calling in Utah indicate the telemarketer kept \$7.9 million out of \$8.7 million it raised for the charity from 2011 to 2015. Similarly, Hampton's other nonprofit and his PAC have spent most of the money they've raised on telemarketers.

- Since 2015, Outreach Calling has raked in \$2 million from the Put Vets First! PAC. That's 89 percent of the \$2.3 million in donations the PAC has received in the same time period, according to Federal Election Commission filings.
- Charitable Resource Foundation, the telemarketer working for Hampton's Circle of Friends for American Veterans, kept \$6.4 million, or 85 percent, of the \$7.5 million it raised from donors between the 2011 and 2015 tax years, according to IRS filings.

Charity Navigator, a watchdog organization that studies the spending habits of charities, issued “concern advisories” for Hampton’s two nonprofits after the Center for Public Integrity published its initial investigation in December. [Source: Center for Public Integrity | Sarah Kleiner | February 15, 2018 ++]

Vet Eviction | Lucien Lebrun ► 96-Yr Old Hurricane Irma Victim

Ninety-six might be a bit old to start over, but that’s what one World War II veteran is facing. Lucien “Chet” Lebrun was recently given notice that he’ll be evicted from his home at 123 Bass Circle in Winter Haven, FL. Lebrun’s mobile home suffered significant damage to the roof and outside during Hurricane Irma in September, and he hasn’t had the means or ability to get it repaired. “The car port ended up on the other side of the mobile home,” he said. “I was sitting here and it was pretty bad. It took the roof off my shed.” Lebrun lives independently with his cat, Kitty, in the retirement community of Cypress Shores off U.S. 92.. Lebrun has lived at his home for more than five years and in the community since the late 1970s.

“They want me to fix the skirting and paint the house,” Lebrun said. “I can’t even walk.” The doors at the park’s clubhouse were locked 19 FEB and no one answered the listed number. The initial paperwork was given to Lebrun on 18 JAN, giving him until 29 JAN settle the issue. Lebrun served in the U.S. Army from 1941 until 1945. “I spent three years in the jungle, fighting,” Lebrun said. “I never complain, but there’s not much I can do about it.” Karen Bingham, who has power of attorney for Lebrun, said the community was scheduled to begin the eviction process 23 FEB. Bingham said the community has cited Lebrun for things like weeds in his flower beds and paint needed on his home. “They’ve gone in his house and taken pictures,” she said. “They’ve listed so many nit-picky things. Apparently, they’re on an eviction roll out there. It may be in his best interest for us just to relocate him.”



Lebrun was denied assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency in September. His appeal in October was denied, as well. “I talked with (U.S. Sen. Marco) Rubio’s office, and they’re working to expedite that process,” said Kat Gates-Skipper, veterans advocate and candidate for Board of County Commissioners. “That generation is very independent. He really doesn’t want to go to assisted living.” Veterans Affairs and the Florida Department of Health are in favor of him entering an assisted-living facility. “He was adamant that if he was forced to go into an assisted-living facility, he’d end up homeless,” Bingham said. “The VA claims he has severe dementia and that’s just not true. He’s very private, and he deserves to be treated better than he has been after all he’s done for this country.”

Nearly two months from his 97th birthday, Lebrun has undergone hardships before. During his service in the Pacific, he suffered significant wounds to his shins. After leaving the service, he needed plastic surgery for burns on his arms after an explosion occurred at a car dealership where he worked in New Zealand. “He’s like a walking history book,” Gates-Skipper said. “He still has his American flag flying; bless his heart. He wanted to replace his flag. That was something that was very important to him.”

Bingham estimates the cost to relocate Lebrun will run between \$15,000 and \$20,000. According to Bingham, Kai McCall, who owns Kai's Mobile Home Movers, has volunteered to make the renovations free of charge to the current building. The worry, Bingham said, is that the current location will be renovated and Lebrun will be evicted for something else. Others such as ABA Disaster Relief Ministry and American Legion Post 8, both in Winter Haven, have come to assist Lebrun. The ministry has performed in-kind services like mowing the lawn while the American Legion has offered financial aid and assistance with construction. "I'm 96, served in World War II, disabled," Lebrun said. "They just threw five families out. I can spread the word around not to buy here in this park." A GoFundMe was set up in November to help Lebrun. As of 2 p.m. Tuesday, 20 FEB it had raised \$9,305. To donate, go to <https://www.gofundme.com/chet-wwii-veteran-home-fix-fund>. [Source: The Ledger | Mike Ferguson | February 9, 2018 ++]

Obit | Julio Barela ► 12 FEB 2018



Julio Barela, one of the last Bataan Death March survivors, died early Monday in Truth or Consequences, New Mexico, due to complications from pneumonia. He was 101 years old. "He was a very hard worker; he farmed most of this life," his daughter Anita Dawson said. At 5:30 a.m., before she would go to school he always wake her up. "There's so much to see in the morning. If you sleep in late, you don't see the sunrise, see the animals wake up. It's God's way of saying good morning," Dawson recalled her father telling her. So, wake up she would, begrudgingly sometimes. She would pour herself cereal as her father made oatmeal, and they would sit in their two-room adobe home near the east window and watch the sunrise. They would talk about anything and everything, and it is one of the fondest memories Dawson has of her father, she said.

Barela was born to Guillermo and Refugia Barela on Sept. 28, 1916, and was raised on a farm in the Mesilla Valley. He was the fifth of 10 children. He had a desire to travel, see the world and do something different, Dawson said, so much so that at 16 he left for Los Angeles to join the Navy, which he thought would be his way of seeing the world. The plan was skewed when his grandmother said he was too young and brought him back home. So, Barela went back to farming until he was drafted into the United States Army on March 14, 1941. He would go on to train at Fort Bliss and sent overseas to the Philippines. He had served for a year before the fateful day of April 9, 1942.

The Battle of Bataan raged on for three months before Barela and thousands of American and Filipino soldiers were captured and taken in as prisoners by the Japanese military. Barela told his daughter it was awful and gruesome, the details of which he did not wish to tell her. He said he marched 75 miles in five days in 110-degree weather with no food and no water. He said prior to their capture, they had already been

on a meal-a-day for several days. After walking non-stop for days, he was shoved into a freight car with 100 other men in unbearable heat where they were transferred to Camp O'Donnell. Barela would be a prisoner of war for more than three years. He was liberated on Sept. 25, 1945, weighing 80 pounds, half his usual weight.

Dawson said her father spent several months in the hospital to recover his strength, but he never really got it all back, saying that while she was growing up he was about 120 pounds. Her father doesn't know why he survived but attributed it to his upbringing. "My dad said a lot of the survivors were men who were not used to a lot; they'd come from large families, they're farmers, orphans, a lot of farm boys from New Mexico. They were used to hard work, managing the heat. Survivors' mentality and the grace of God." Dawson said.

After his first marriage ended, Barela would spot his second wife Maria working the fields of his farm. He told his best friend that he liked Maria. His friend said he liked Maria's niece. They went on a double date and soon each would marry their girl. Barela and Maria would be married for 55 years before she died in 2007. They had one daughter, Anita. "I knew my dad to be a very honest man, very frank," Dawson said. "He was a good guy." Dawson said her father would teach her to make her bed military style, to her mother's dismay. One day, when she asked him if they could go camping, he said he had too much work but pulled out his old military tent and pitched it for her in the backyard. He built her a fire and set everything up and, by 7 p.m., Dawson said she was done camping and went inside.

On their farm, the Barelas would grow watermelon, cantaloupe and green and red chilies, Dawson said. But eventually, Barela would retire from farming, selling some of the land and leasing the rest. Especially in his late 50s, the effects of the wet beriberi he contracted while at war would cause his knees to swell so badly her mother would have to cut him out of his pants. Dawson said her father rarely took time off -- one because he financially couldn't, and two, she believes is because farming was his way of forgetting about the war. Post-traumatic Stress Disorder was not yet a recognized condition, but Dawson said seeing his friends die in front of him stuck with him, making it difficult for him to talk about his experiences.

"He would always say he's not a hero, he's a survivor. The heroes are the ones who died there," Dawson said. And Barela worked hard to survive, even till the end, Dawson said, adding that he had a desire to live. Dawson said her father taught her many things, telling her to always be honest and a good friend. "He always said, 'Work hard, think independently and always find something to appreciate every day'. A rosary in memory of Julio Barela was scheduled to be held at Getz Funeral Home Chapel, 1410 E. Bowman Ave., on 19 FEB plus a funeral mass at Our Lady of Purification the following day. [Source: Las Cruces | Ali Linan | February13, 2018 ++]

War Memorials ► Clarification Sought on NPS Group Permits for Visiting Vets

Lawmakers want promises from the National Park Service (NPS) that veterans can take pictures at war memorials without getting harassed over permit issues. In a letter to service officials this week, a pair of House Veterans' Affairs Committee members — Rep. Elizabeth Esty (D-CT) and Mike Bost (R-IL) — asked for clarification of parks rules and handling of past complaints from veterans groups over conflicts with parks personnel. "We both agree that no veteran deserves to be treated with disrespect while visiting a memorial dedicated to the memory of the men and women who gave their lives for our country," the letter states. "These veterans are simply trying to pay their respects to our fallen heroes, their comrades, and to feel that their own service to our nation is appreciated."

The complaints stem from last fall, during a legislative hearing before the committee’s memorial affairs panel, which Bost chairs. Veterans of Foreign Wars said they have received several reports of large groups of Honor Flight veterans being asked for event permits by national parks personnel when they gather for tours of the war monuments along the National Mall. John Towles, deputy director of the VFW’s national legislative service, said the interactions left the veterans involved feeling disrespected and pressured into getting permits for future photo-ops. “If they’re going to start charging for veterans to take photos at the (Vietnam) Wall, it’s unfortunate,” he said. At the time, Esty and Bost called those moves completely inappropriate. The letter asks for clarification of parks rules and information on “what the National Park Service has done to make sure that all veterans’ groups visiting the National Mall are aware of any permitting requirements” for the sites. Parks officials have not yet responded to the request.

According to park service statistics, more than 25 million people visit the National Mall in Washington, D.C. each year. The site includes the national World War II Memorial, the Vietnam Veterans Memorial and the Korean War Veterans Memorial along with the Washington Monument and the Lincoln Memorial. The site is especially popular for Honor Flight events, which bring aging veterans from across the country to Washington, D.C. for one- or two-day visits to tour those war memorials and other notable regional sites, like Arlington National Cemetery. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | February 17, 2018 ++]

Vet Service Dogs Update 24 ► Eviction Over Dogs Leads to Vet Death

A despondent military veteran — slated for eviction because of complaints about his service dogs, Roxie and Ranger — was shot to death after police say he pointed a gun at officers on Monday afternoon near Homestead. **Raymond Bishop**, 84, died inside his home at the Hidden Grove apartments. Miami-Dade police officers had rushed to the home after receiving a call of an armed man threatening to kill himself. At least four Miami-Dade officers wound up opening fire on Bishop from just outside the doorway where he stood, gun in hand — but only after pleading with him extensively to put his weapon down, law-enforcement sources told the Miami Herald. One officer even praised Bishop’s military background in an attempt to get him to surrender peacefully.

“These officers begged this gentleman to put the weapon down,” said Florida Police Benevolent Association President John Rivera. “They had no choice. These are situations officers are confronted with daily, and it’ll remain with them forever.” The dogs were inside the apartment and were not harmed, one source said. Bishop, who served in the Korean War, was upset about the apartment complex’s eviction attempt, according to a neighbor. Bishop lived there, according to court records, under a Miami-Dade County government subsidy program. “They were throwing him out. He had nowhere to go,” said neighbor Jonathan Rodriguez, who often fed Bishop and took him to the veterans hospital for medical treatment.

Bishop was fighting his eviction from the apartment complex, which went to court in July 2017 to try and get him booted from his ground-floor unit at 13831 SW 270th St. According to the lawsuit, Bishop was “harboring unauthorized pet dogs,” allowing them out without a leash. One of them, the suit said, attacked and injured another resident, according to the suit. His animals were a 13-pound pooch named Roxie, and a 30-pound one named Ranger. Bishop, who was disabled and used a walker, was being treated for “mood disorder,” according to court records. He also owned fish. A psychiatrist at the Miami Veterans Affairs Medical Center said the dogs had a “tremendously favorable influence” on Bishop. “Mr. Bishop’s pets, in this case, has provided invaluable emotional therapeutic benefit,” Dr. Ernesto Grenier wrote in a letter filed in the court record.

The case had been in mediation, but talks between the two sides had failed, according to the court record. The case was ongoing. The killing stunned his lawyer, Christopher Brochus, of Legal Services of Greater

Miami, which represents low-income clients. He was a really nice guy to talk to,” Brochyus said. “He loved his animals.” [Source: Miami Herald | Charles Rabin & David Ovalle | February 12, 2018 ++]

AFL Q&A 20 ► VA Mileage Reimbursement Checks

Q: I forgot to ask for mileage check the last time to the VA appointment. How do I get it? I live more than 100 miles one way from the nearest VA facility.

A1: I would say fill out the form that you should have filled out at the appointment. If not too far back not sure how long but fill out with the date and time of appointment and sign it and date it. Turn in at desk but don't wait too long or they may deny it and could possibly deny for not doing it right away. I was told at VA Hospital in Seattle that when they switched over that you would not have to fill out the claim for travel mileage and found out that was a lie from the VA so I always fill out a claim form for mileage every time I have a scheduled appointment to be on the safe side. (JRM) 12/3/16

A2: You can submit the VAF 10-3542 to the travel office at the facility. It has to be submitted within 30 days or it will be denied for not being submitted in a timely fashion. (AP) 12/3/16

A3: You need to contact the travel office at the VA hospital, I believe that you have to file within 30 days of appt. (NB) 12/3/16

A4: You may apply for travel reimbursement by completing VA Form 10-3542, Veteran/Beneficiary Claim for Reimbursement of Travel Expenses. The travel reimbursement form replaces older versions and local forms and improves the process for Veterans applying for mileage reimbursement at more than one VA facility. Methods to request travel pay:

- Visit the Beneficiary Travel Office (<http://www.va.gov/directory>) after completing an appointment, or
- Call the Beneficiary Travel Office (this method will require an added step to complete and sign the travel reimbursement form), or
- Send the travel reimbursement form via either secure fax or mail to the local Beneficiary Travel Office.

Applications for payment must be submitted within 30 calendar days from the date the travel is completed or the date the applicant is notified he or she is eligible for travel payments if the request is based on a change in eligibility. For assistance in completing the form, call 1-877-222-8387. (LCP) 12/3/16

A5: You must have had an appointment and once you are about ready to return home, you check in at the Travel Office at the VA where your appointment was. (JK) 12/5/16

A6: Veterans have to be at least 30% service-connected to receive travel pay other than for C&P's. (DW) 4/24/17

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If you have a question you want answered you can submit it at <http://www.armedforceslocator.com/ask-a-question.html>. Armed Forces Locator was developed to help veterans, active duty, servicemembers, Reservists, National Guard members and ROTC members locate old friends, current colleagues, and family members who serve or have served in the armed forces. Their mission is to provide an opportunity for those who served to reconnect again with war buddies. Also, locate many topics that are of interest to veterans, active duty servicemembers, and veterans organizations. [Source: <http://www.armedforceslocator.com> | February 28, 2018 ++]

Retiree Appreciation Days ► Scheduled As of 28 FEB 2018

Retiree Appreciation Days (RADs) are designed with all veterans in mind. They're a great source of the latest information for retirees and Family members in your area. RADs vary from installation to installation, but, in general, they provide an opportunity to renew acquaintances, listen to guest speakers, renew ID Cards, get medical checkups, and various other services. Some RADs include special events such as dinners or golf tournaments. Due to budget constraints, some RADs may be cancelled or rescheduled. Also, scheduled appearances of DFAS representatives may not be possible. If you plan to travel long distances to attend a RAD, before traveling, you should call the sponsoring RSO to ensure the RAD will held as scheduled and, if applicable, whether or not DFAS reps will be available. The current updated schedule for 2018 is available at:

- == 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

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

(NOTE: Attendance at some events may require military ID, VA enrollment or DD214.”@“ indicates event requires registration\RSVP.)

For more information call the phone numbers indicated on the schedule of the Retirement Services Officer (RSO) sponsoring the RAD. To quickly locate events in your geographic area just click on the appropriate State\Territory\Country listed at the top of the schedule. They will look like this:

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

[Source: RAD List Manager & Army Echoes | Milton Bell | February 28, 2018 ++]

Vet Hiring Fairs ► Scheduled As of 1 MAR 2018

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

providing location, times, events, and registration info if required can be found at the following websites. You will need to review each site below to locate Job Fairs in your location:

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

[Source: Recruit Military, USCC, and American Legion | February 28, 2018 ++]



State Veteran's Benefits & Discounts ► Rhode Island 2018

The state of Rhode Island provides several benefits to veterans as indicated below. To obtain information on these plus discounts listed on the Military and Veterans Discount Center (MCVDC) website, refer to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Vet State Benefits & Discounts – RI**” for an overview of the below benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation of each of the following benefits listed refer to <http://www.vets.ri.gov> and <http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/rhode-island.html>:

- Housing Benefits
- Financial Benefits
- Education Benefits
- Recreation Benefits
- Other Benefits
- Discounts

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits/rhode-island-state-veterans-benefits.html> February 2018 ++]

* Vet Legislation *



Note: To check status on any veteran related legislation go to <https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress> for any House or Senate bill introduced in the 115th Congress. Bills are listed in reverse numerical order for House and then Senate. Bills are normally initially assigned to a congressional committee to consider and amend before sending them on to the House or Senate as a whole.

Reserve Benefits Update 04 ► H.R.5036/S.2416 | Deployed Active Duty Parity

Deployed National Guardsmen and Reservists may achieve parity in pay and benefits with active-duty troops under bipartisan bills introduced in Congress last week. **The National Guard and Reserves Benefit Parity Act**, “addresses early retirement eligibility, high-deployment allowance and pay for mobilized federal civilian employees,” according to a press release from the National Guard Association of the United States (NGAUS). Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) and Sen. Chris Coons (D-DE) introduced the Senate version of the legislation, S. 2416. Rep. Steven Palazzo (R-MS) and Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN) introduced the bill in the House, H.R. 5038.

“Equal work and sacrifice deserves equal pay and benefits,” said NGAUS president, retired Brig. Gen. Roy Robinson. “We applaud the four sponsors for recognizing this and moving our force closer to a goal everyone should be able to support.” “Congress worked hard in the early years of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan to close the longstanding benefits gap between the active component and the Guard and Reserve,” the press release stated. “The disparity, however, reopened after the creation of mobilization authority 12304b in 2012.” The new authority enabled the services to easily mobilize and deploy Guardsmen and Reservists for preplanned missions, but without education benefits, premobilization and transitional health care, credit toward early retirement and other benefits, the press release said.

Congress added education benefits and premobilization and transitional health care to 12304b last year. Palazzo and Walz were instrumental in the actions, Robinson said. The National Guard and Reserves Benefit Parity Act is the next step, he said, in closing the gap. It would:

Reduce by three months the age at which a Guardsman or Reservist is eligible to receive military retirement pay for every 90 days mobilized under 12304b within a single fiscal year.

- Provide Guardsmen and Reservists with a monthly allowance for each month during which they are deployed, if they meet criteria already defined under other mobilization authorities.
- Protect federal civilian employees who are members of the Reserve or National Guard from a reduction in pay when activated by providing a “reservist differential” payment, which already exists under other mobilization authorities.

“And the timing couldn’t better as the Pentagon is increasing its use of 12304b to deploy the Guard and Reserve around the world,” Robinson said. The Pentagon has mobilized approximately 4,000 Guardsmen under 12304b for missions such as peacekeeping in Kosovo and the Sinai Peninsula since 2012, according to NGAUS. The National Guard Bureau expects the Army and the Air Force to increase their use of the new authority, mobilizing more than 13,000 Guardsmen total over the next two years, the press release stated.

Robinson said the issue of pay and benefit parity for Guard and Reserve troops goes beyond fairness. “Benefit issues affect morale and readiness,” he said. “If we want our soldiers and airmen to protect us, we have to take care of them and their families in the best possible way.” [Source: Enid News & Eagle | James Neal | February 23, 2018 ++]

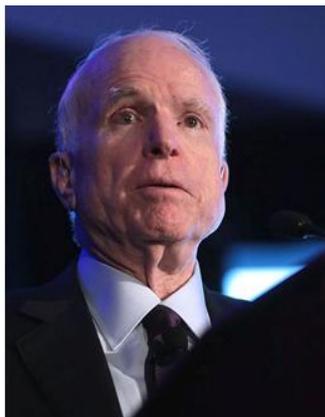
Navy Collisions Update 01 ► Surface Warfare Enhancement Act of 2018

Two top Senate Armed Services Committee Republicans have introduced legislation that covers a wide swath of Navy-suggested reforms for the surface forces. Introduced by Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS) and co-sponsor SASC chairman Sen. John McCain (R-AZ) the Surface Warfare Enhancement Act of 2018 builds off the conclusions of the Navy’s Comprehensive Review of Recent Surface Force Incidents and the Navy Secretary’s Richard V. Spencer Strategic Readiness Review following the fatal collisions of guided-missile

destroyers USS Fitzgerald (DDG-62) and USS John S. McCain (DDG-56) in 2017 that killed a total of 17 sailors.



Sen. Roger Wicker (R-MS)



Sen. John McCain (R-AZ)

“Our commanders and sailors have been calling for meaningful reform,” Wicker, the SASC seapower subcommittee chairman, said in a statement. “Overextended and undermanned ships, overworked crews, fewer officers with naval mastery, and confusing chains of command have contributed to a decline in our naval power. My legislation – based on the Navy’s own recommendations – is specifically designed to address these and other challenges. Although I have confidence in the Navy’s leadership, I believe Congress needs to play an active role in helping them to succeed in this endeavor.”

The bill addresses a laundry list of issues that created the conditions that led to the collisions. Those include unfettered requests for naval power from combatant commanders, lack of clear command structure for the surface force, an especially high operational tempo in forward-deployed forces and surface warfare officers aboard that have less time driving ships than previous generations. The almost 20 provisions include a complete review of the Navy’s command and control structure, requiring surface sailors to keep a log book of their bridge time, a change to the so-called up-and-out rules that would keep experienced mid-level officers in the service longer, and the authority for a service chief to delay the start of a deployment if the ship or strike group cannot prove it is ready.

Other provisions include providing an unclassified annual report of the Navy’s the Board of Inspection and Survey (INSURV). The Navy, following an embarrassing string of unsatisfactory results in 2008, classified the reports. Some on the House side have also called for declassifying INSURVs. “During peacetime, INSURVs should be declassified, and that makes sure there’s transparency there that we know what’s going on,” House Armed Services seapower and projection forces subcommittee chairman Rep Wittman (R-Va.) [said earlier this year](#). “That creates, again, that direction, that focus to make sure that maintenance is being done, maintenance availabilities aren’t being missed, material readiness is being maintained. All those things are critical.”

While the bill is specific about some provisions, like giving aspiring surface warfare officers time underway on six Navy Yard Patrol Craft (YPs) at the Surface Officer School Basic Division Officer Course, it’s vaguer on other suggestions like command and control. Some in the House are keen on stripping the responsibility for manning, training and equipping ships in the Pacific from local commands and consolidating that authority to a fleet-wide central point on the East Coast. However, Wicker and McCain’s bill doesn’t take [the so-called Inouye Amendment](#) head on and instead calls for a complete command and control review from the Secretary of the Navy. When reached by USNI News on 26 FEB, a Navy spokeswoman declined to comment on the legislation.

Regardless of the process for the reforms, McCain said Monday, “the status quo is unacceptable.” “As we have seen too often in recent months, the significant shortcomings in our Navy’s readiness can have disastrous results,” McCain said in a statement “The ship collisions... degraded the capabilities of our fleet, cost hundreds of millions of taxpayer dollars, and – most importantly – took precious lives. The status quo is unacceptable. Congress must provide the funding and oversight required to keep our military safe in peace and effective in combat.” [Source: USNI | Sam LaGrone | February 26, 2018 ++]

*** Military ***



Navy Stealth Destroyers ► Shift From Land Attack to Anti-Surface Role

The Navy has a new vision for what its enormous high-tech destroyers will do: Killing enemy warships at extended ranges. The Navy is asking Congress to fund a conversion of its 600-foot stealth destroyers from primarily a land attack ship to an anti-surface, offensive strike platform, according to budget documents released 12 FEB. The service’s 2019 budget request includes a request for \$89.7 million to transform its Zumwalt-class destroyers by integrating Raytheon’s long-range SM-6 missile, which can dual hat as both an anti-air and anti-surface missile, as well as its Maritime Strike variant of the Tomahawk missile.

Converting DDG-1000 into a hunter-killer is a win for the surface warfare community’s years-long drive to beef up the force’s offensive capabilities. It also answers the bell for U.S. Pacific Command, which has been pushing for the Navy to add longer range weapons to offset the increasing threat from Chinese long-range missile technology. The SM-6 is a versatile missile that the Navy has been excited about. In August, the Navy shot down a medium-range ballistic missile target with the SM-6, which uses a fragmenting explosion near its target as the kill mechanism.

The SM-6 is different from the SM-3 Block IIA in development that hits its target directly. It can also be used to hit surface targets at sea and on land from hundreds of miles away. The Navy is planning to buy 125 of the SM-6 over the next five years. For the Maritime Tomahawk, Raytheon is integrating a new seeker into its tried-and-true strike missile for long-range ship-on-ship engagements.

The decision to switch the requirements from a land-attack platform to an anti-surface platform came in November following a review of the requirements, according to the documents. “After a comprehensive review of Zumwalt class requirements, Navy decided in November 2017 to refocus the primary mission of the Zumwalt Class Destroyers from Land Attack to Offensive Surface Strike,” the documents read. “The funding requested in [FY19] will facilitate this change in mission and add lethal, offensive fires against targets afloat and ashore.”

The lead ship in the class, Zumwalt, is currently getting an overhaul and combat systems installation in San Diego. The Michael Monsoor, the second in the class, completed acceptance trials this month. Getting a surface strike platform in the Pacific fits snugly in with the distributed lethality concept that was championed by former Naval Surface Force Pacific commander Vice Adm. Thomas Rowden. Rowden

argued that surface ships can and should be used in an offensive capacity, not just be relegated to the defense of the aircraft carrier. By adding long-range systems to every kind of ship, Rowden argued, it forces potential adversaries to expend resources looking not just for destroyers and cruisers but also littoral combat ships and even amphibious ships that have not had a strike role in the past.

In testimony submitted 14 FEB to the House Armed Services Committee, PACOM commander Adm. Harry Harris said China's advancing capabilities made investing in long-range systems for his theater a must. All three of the Zumwalt-class destroyers will be based in the Pacific. "I need increased lethality, specifically ships and aircraft equipped with faster and more survivable weapons systems," Harris wrote. "Longer range offensive weapons on every platform are an imperative."

The money requested in 2019 also funds a combat systems refresh, a datalink upgrade and some new signals intelligence collection equipment. It also goes after some cyber-security hardening and replacing components of the ship's computing systems that are becoming obsolete. One thing the budget isn't funding is a new round for the ship's purpose-built Advanced Gun System. In late 2016, the service canceled its Long Range Land Attack Projectile, which cost about a million dollars per round, and has struggled to come up with a replacement round for the gun. "The Advanced Gun Systems will remain on the ships, but in an inactive status for future use, when a gun round that can affordably meet the desired capability is developed and fielded," the documents read. [Source: NavyTimes | David B. Larter | February 15, 2018 ++]

Sailor 25 | TRP Initiative ► Targeted Navy Reentry Program for Selectees

In support of Sailor 2025's goal to retain and reward the Navy's best and brightest, the Navy announced 27 FEB its Targeted Reentry Program (TRP) and associated program guidelines to expedite reentry into the Navy in NAVADMIN 047/18. Sailor 2025 is comprised of nearly 45 initiatives to improve and modernize personnel management and training systems to more effectively recruit, develop, manage, reward, and retain the force of tomorrow. It is focused on empowering Sailors, updating policies, procedures, and operating systems, and providing the right training at the right time in the right way to ensure Sailors are ready for the Fleet. Sailor 2025 is organized into three main lines of effort, specifically Personnel System Modernization, Ready Relevant Learning and Career Readiness.

The TRP is designed to benefit both the Sailor and the Navy by allowing a return to service for those who are well trained leaders with valuable and needed skills and will be offered to selected Sailors prior to their departure from the Navy. The program empowers Commanding Officer's (COs) to identify Active Component and Full Time Support officer and enlisted personnel who have elected to leave active duty (AD) service and do not desire to affiliate with the Ready Reserve and recommend them to be awarded a "Golden Ticket" or "Silver Ticket," giving them the option for expedited reentry to AD if they decide to return to the Navy.

"Talent is tough to draw in and even tougher to keep," said Vice Adm. Robert Burke, Chief of Naval Personnel. "Just like corporate businesses are adapting, the Navy must adapt to modern personnel policies as well. These changes are designed to maximize opportunities for command triads to advance their best Sailors while managing community and individual rates' health." O-3 and O-4 officers and E-4 to E-6 enlisted, who have completed their Minimum Service Requirement (MSR), but not yet reached 14 years of active service are eligible for consideration for TRP. Also, an officer's or enlisted' s community qualifications must be obtained, superior performance annotated in Fitness Reports or Evaluations, and have passed their most recent Physical Fitness Assessment (PFA). Officers who have failed to select for promotion are not eligible. Perspective participants must meet character standards, i.e. no record of civil arrest/NJP, court-martials, failed drug screenings, etc.

The Golden Ticket recipients are guaranteed a quota and an expedited return to AD within one year of release as long as they remain fully qualified. Silver Ticket recipients are afforded an expedited return to AD within two years of release, subject to the needs of the Navy and that they remain fully qualified. Golden Tickets, if not used within one year, will convert to Silver Tickets for an additional year. Silver Tickets not used within two years of release from AD expire.

Sailors who accept a Golden or Silver Ticket prior to release from active duty will go into a minimum reserve status, known as Standby Reserve-Inactive (USNR-S2) status. In this reserve status, Sailors will have no participation requirement and will not be eligible for promotion or advancement or be eligible for health care, retirement points, Servicemembers Group Life Insurance and other benefits. The Date of Rank of officers and Time in Rate of enlisted TRP participants will be adjusted upon returning to AD. Sailors who return to active duty using TRP will maintain the last rating and paygrade held at the time of separation.

BUPERS-3 is the approving authority for all TRP ticket request and will make determinations based on overall performance, community health, and needs of the Navy. Once approved for a Golden or Silver Ticket, officer and enlisted personnel will have the option to accept or reject participation in the TRP prior to their release from AD. For more information on the TRP, see NAVADMIN 047/18 at www.npc.navy.mil. [Source: Navy Personnel Command Public Affairs | February 27, 2018 ++]

Marine Corps Hazing ► Two-Star General Chastised by Appeals Court

Amid a full-court press on hazing prosecutions within the West Coast-based 1st Marine Division that has resulted in some 30 Marines getting thrown in the brig and more than a dozen kicked out of the service, an appeals court is chastising the general leading the crackdown, saying he made the issue too personal. A 15 FEB authored opinion from the Navy-Marine Corps Court of Criminal Appeals, or NMCCA, upheld a military judge's decision to remove Maj. Gen. Eric Smith, commanding general of 1st Marine Division, as the oversight authority in the case of one Marine facing hazing charges, Sgt. Jaime Ortiz.

The judge in that case, Col. Matthew Kent, went further and dismissed the charges against Ortiz without prejudice, leaving open the possibility of new charges being filed in the future. Ortiz, who was placed in pretrial confinement on July 13, 2017, was accused of hazing five junior Marines in his unit and assaulting two junior Marines by striking them on the chest with his fist. Ortiz' case was unfolding as Smith's crusade against hazing was gaining full strength. Smith took command of 1st Marine Division on June 22, 2017, and had been at his post for less than a month before firing off a series of emails regarding hazing to all commanders and sergeants major within the division.

The messages put the issue in stark terms, invoking the honor of the Marine Corps and referencing the recent deaths of Marines in a tragic KC-130 Hercules crash. "[T]he Marine Corps owns the barracks, not a few salty [lance corporals] who probably can't fight their way out of a wet paper sack," Smith wrote in a July 12 email, published in the NMCCA opinion. "We're the [1st MarDiv], victors at Guadalcanal, and we're reduced to dealing with jackassery from a few LCpls who think they are in charge. That will be proven wrong asap. We have 12 dead Marines in a KC-130 crash ... and these few LCpls who haze can't even pay them the respect our Commandant has asked for." Smith went on to say that the junior Marines engaging in hazing had "flipped the bird" at him personally by engaging in such behavior.

By October, at least 15 Marines from 1st Marine Division had been kicked out of the Corps for hazing. An attorney representing some of the Marines accused of hazing, Phil Stackhouse, told Military.com in October that many were getting administratively separated through a notification process that allowed them

to defend themselves only in writing. The system "eviscerates due process," he said. "These are first-tour Marines who have leadership positions, who may have been led astray by their immediate seniors," he said at the time. "It's disappointing that their command is not giving these guys a second chance when you're dealing with relatively minor misconduct."

Kent, the judge in the Ortiz case, found that Smith's words and actions would lead a reasonable person to believe he had a personal interest in the case, rather than the appropriate impartiality of a convening authority. Writing for NMCCA, Appellate Judge Marine Col. K. Scott Woodard agreed. "MajGen Smith's statements suggest that he was personally offended by those alleged to have violated his hazing policy. He repeatedly emphasized that he would show those accused of hazing who was really in charge," Woodard wrote in the court's opinion. "He was unwilling to wait for the law enforcement investigative process to conclude before taking action against those accused of hazing," Woodard continued. "He equated the actions of those accused of hazing as a show of disrespect to the Commandant of the Marine Corps and their fellow Marines who had died while in service to the nation. He threatened to shut down all operational training in 1st MarDiv in order to address hazing if it continued."

Most troubling, Woodard wrote, was Smith's statement that the Marines who engaged in hazing had "flipped [him] the bird" and he was personally offended by their actions. "Having considered the totality of the actions taken and statements made by MajGen Smith -- and considering their demeanor, tone, and context -- we agree with the military judge's conclusion that a reasonable person would impute to MajGen Smith a disqualifying personal, rather than official, feeling or interest in the outcome of the appellee's case," Woodard wrote.

A spokesman for 1st Marine Division, Capt. Paul Gainey, referenced official command guidance published by Smith on Aug. 30 that takes a more measured tone on the issue of hazing. "I have a strong personality and am in a position of authority, so I am obligated to ensure that none of you interpret my message against hazing as directing any specific outcome for any particular case," Smith wrote. "More important than my desire to stamp out hazing is our collective requirement to adhere to our constitution and the Uniform Code of Military Justice."

Gainey said Smith's guidance on the issue was clear. "Hazing is contrary to our core values and is prejudicial to good order and discipline. It threatens the strength of our small units and directly impacts our combat readiness," Gainey told Military.com in a statement. "Hazing is not acceptable in the 1st Marine Division -- any hazing will be investigated and adjudicated appropriately." [Source: Military.com | Hope Hodge Seck | February 21, 2018 ++]

Military Fraternization ► **Army | Maj. Gen. Joseph Harrington**

The Army stripped a star from a general who flirted on social media with the wife of an enlisted man, finding his actions "dissolute and immoral," and forced him to retire, the Army announced 16 FEB. Maj. Gen. Joseph Harrington will lose one rank in retirement after the Army determined he had engaged in inappropriate online communication with the woman in more than 1,000 messages. Harrington had been in charge of U.S. Army Africa from a base in Italy when the relationship became known in August. Harrington and the woman had exchanged Facebook messages for four months. The messages ranged from the friendly to flirty. She is married to an American soldier over whom Harrington had jurisdiction under military law.

The Army inspector general initiated its investigation after USA TODAY obtained a series of messages Harrington wrote this spring. Investigators found 1,158 messages between Harrington and the woman between Feb. 12, 2017, and June 3, 2017. "The conversations ranging from friendly conversation to

flirtatious at times, and included sexual innuendo," the report stated. The woman who received the messages told USA TODAY last year that the texting began as friendly banter after she had met Harrington at the gym in Vicenza, Italy. She became concerned with the texts when they grew suggestive. The relationship did not become physical, she told investigators. She also said that she did not feel sexually harassed by Harrington. But she did feel he had "worked" her for three months and perhaps wanted her to send him pictures of herself naked but was too smart to ask for them, according to the report.



In some messages, he focused on the woman's appearance, referring to her as "HOTTIE," a "Lovely tease" and "looking good for sure." In another series he wrote: "You seem to have a great modeling resume! Truly! Though I hadn't noticed! Where is your hubby tonight? Work?" When she replied that she'd fought with her husband and that he was asleep, Harrington responded: "I'm sorry! Make up se...x is fun" Harrington suggested "U can be my nurse," and added, "I'd enjoy being in a tent with U."

Harrington acknowledged sending the messages. However, he told investigators they were "not quite salacious" but leading in that direction, according to the report. Harrington also urged her at times to erase records of their chats. "I hope u delete this exchange!" he wrote at one point. At another: "Why not delete after communicating?" Investigators found his repeated attempts to keep their relationship secret showed he knew it was out of bounds. "Harrington's attempts to conceal and keep the conversation secret indicated that he knew the conversation was inappropriate and above board," the report says.

The inspector general concluded that Harrington "failed to display exemplary conduct" in engaging with the woman. News of the relationship caused "anger and polarization" at the base. "Maj. Gen. Harrington's online statements, his choice of vocabulary, and sexual innuendo with (the woman) were not good examples of virtue and honor," the report says. "His actions negatively impacted the command climate and readiness of the (Vicenza Military Community), were dissolute and immoral, and not an example of the exemplary conduct expected of an Army senior leader."

The Army issued Harrington a letter of reprimand, a career-killer. The letter, also released, noted that Harrington, while not found guilty of a crime, was expected to behave honorably on and off duty. "Over the course of four months, you participated in the exchange of flirtatious messages with the spouse of an enlisted soldier," the letter states. "This behavior reflects poorly on you as a senior officer and commander." The Army retired Harrington at the lower rank because it is the last one at which he had served satisfactorily, said Cynthia Smith, an Army spokeswoman. "

We believe that appropriate action was taken, and consider the matter closed," Smith said. Harrington, in a written statement, apologized to his family and the Army. "I made a mistake by responding to and entering

into a private discussion with a soldier's spouse," Harrington wrote. "While we both considered it a friendship-based conversation, it is clear that the discussion should not have occurred. I hope others can learn from and avoid my mistake."

Stripping his rank and ending Harrington's career are appropriate moves by the Army, according to a military law expert and advocate for victims of abuse in the military. "The discipline seems in line with the offense," said Don Christensen, a former chief prosecutor for the Air Force and president of Protect our Defenders, an advocacy group for victims of sexual assault in the military. Rep. Jackie Speier, a California Democrat and member of the Armed Services Committee, agreed with Christensen that Harrington's punishment was appropriate. But Speier, a critic of the Pentagon's handling of senior officer misconduct, said discipline varies among the ranks. "What we need to do with all these senior military officials is have some standardization in their punishment," she said. "Some get off with a slap on the wrist. It's got to be consistent."

Last week, Lt. Gen. David Quantock, the Army's inspector general, testified before Congress that the Army often metes out harsher discipline to generals than lower-ranking soldiers in misconduct cases. Quantock, who signed the investigation into Harrington, said at last week's hearing that the Army "crushes" generals. [Source: USA TODAY | Tom Vanden Brook | February 18, 2018 ++]

Overseas Forward Deployed Tours ► Navy Asks DoD For Longer Tours

Forward deployed sailors home-ported in Japan, Guam, and Rota, Spain, could be getting longer sea-duty tours in the coming years. Chief of Naval Personnel Vice Adm. Robert P. Burke has asked for an exception to Department of Defense policies that, if approved, would allow for an increase of overseas-based sea duty tours for a maximum tour of up to four years. Current rules only allow for a maximum of three years. The move, officials say, will allow the Navy to keep sea duty billets manned longer, and would ultimately save money in transfer costs. "The purpose of this request is to increase continuity in our sea duty commands in the FDNF," said Lt. Richard Moore, spokesman for the chief of naval personnel. "The request was submitted in November and is still being adjudicated by [DoD]."

What's not clear, however, is how the policy would impact those currently on tours or with orders in hand. For sailors who want to extend their tours overseas, the Overseas Tour Incentives Extension Program, or OTEIP, remains in effect and offers eligible sailors incentives for extending overseas an additional year. In exchange for a one-year extension, those approved for the program can select to receive either additional pay of \$80 per month, a 30-day R&R leave of absence during the extension, or 15-days R&R and round-trip transportation at government expense to the United States. Transportation inside the U.S. would still be at the sailor's own expense. As of January 2016, the Navy had over 2,500 sailors who had been approved for the extensions and incentives.

Increasing overseas sea duty tour lengths comes as the Navy is working to get U.S.- and Hawaii-based sailors to finish their sea tours. In December, the Navy announced a push to get 61,000 first-term sailors with end-of-service dates prior to their actual rotation dates to commit to the extra time. In exchange, the Navy waived up-or-out limits and allowed sailors to bypass the Navy's C-way re-up approval system. Though not specifically an aim of this program, extending these tours would bring overseas time more in line with the Navy's Sea Shore Flow, which sets sea and shore tour lengths for every Navy rating throughout the career span. In sea intensive ratings, overseas tour lengths can be up to two years shorter than those based in the U.S. and Hawaii. [Source: NavyTimes | Mark D. Faram | February 19, 2018 ++]

Fleet Life ► **Boot Camp Recruits Not Being Prepared for Harsh Reality**

It's a floating prison." This is how a sailor described serving aboard USS Shiloh, and the sentiment seemed to be shared by many of the crewmembers. The Shiloh made headlines when a crewmember Petty Officer 3rd Class Peter Mims went missing while underway, spurring a massive search by the crew for a comrade who, it turns out, who was hiding in an engineering space the whole time. This seemingly came as a surprise to no one in the crew, as Mims was a strange guy. What struck a chord with me was the fact that so many people in the media were shocked by the story. The truth is every ship has several Mims-like characters on board. The whole Shiloh affair led me to believe that the higher-ups have no idea who is actually serving aboard their ships.

From my [Drew Chowbay's] time onboard the USS Vella Gulf (CG-72), spanning 2010 to 2013, we lost more sailors to nerves, pressure, and ineptitude than I can actually count. We called the ship "Cell Block 72," and it sure felt like a floating prison. That's exactly how I describe serving in the Navy to my friends who've asked me about it. The fleet isn't a safe space. It's a grinder that chews up the vulnerable, preaching teamwork and brotherhood while practice dictates: "If you aren't carrying your weight, get the fuck out of the way."

- We had Mims beat by a long shot, as eccentricities go. We had an IT who was so inept he was not allowed to use the phone, per the captain's orders.
- We had another sailor who would speak to himself aloud in Portuguese — not even remotely his native tongue — and, with a wide-eyed gaze, shout Bible verses in berthing to make us aware of our impending damnation for watching R-rated movies. He was also not allowed to touch or operate anything other than a swab, and eventually parted ways with the crew after almost losing his hand trying to catch the ship's jack-staff, after he's removed its securing pin while it was in an upright position.
- We had another sailor, a young LSSN, go missing one night... and after a lengthy man-overboard drill, he was discovered in a comatose state, hidden away in a supply locker, high from huffing paint.

These sailors were such commonplace for us — and everyone else that I knew serving on smallboys in Norfolk — that we mostly ignored the obvious facts: They not only shouldn't have been in the Navy, they needed help. The truth is, the Navy does not prepare sailors for what life is actually going to be like on a ship. I'm not even sure if it can. The long hours, the endless drilling, the ship in constant disarray — nothing can really prep someone for operating at a non-stop pace for literally years without adequate sleep.

Unfortunately, when everyone in your immediate community is depressed, people who are really slipping off the edge go unnoticed. In the early 2010s, the "spice" epidemic hit the Navy hard. One sailor got high and passed out in the berthing barge with a spice pipe still in his lap, which launched a probing investigation onboard that had all of us afraid to even associate with anybody who might seem guilty. This is another impossibly complicated situation, and since the military is only beginning to test for the drug in your system, hearsay or suspicion by association can be enough to get you kicked out. This left many sailors hanging out to dry: These were people that were dealing with tremendous pressure by self-medicating, and nobody could help them.

The fleet isn't a safe space. It's a grinder that chews up the vulnerable, preaching teamwork and brotherhood while practice dictates: "If you aren't carrying your weight, get the fuck out of the way." I'm guilty here. I turned a cold shoulder to sailors who were crying out for help, all because I was terrified of being associated with them. That's something I have to carry now. Navy bootcamp actually sets the precedent for what happens in the fleet. Right away, a small group of sailors is selected, receives symbolic

leadership ranks, and essentially carries the rest of the team to the finish line. The problem is, once you're in the fleet, nobody can carry you.

As much as I resented the captain and chain of command for the lack of sleep, the constant drills, working until damn near midnight even while in port, pushing a broken ship through what should have been deployment-ending technical issues (and fires — so many fires), the all-too familiar echoes from the Shiloh lead me to believe that this is just how the Navy is. I truly don't know if it can be fixed. When I read articles about Petty Officer Mims asking, "Why were the signs missed?" I can't help but think about a sign that our deck department's chief placed on the door of the boatswain's locker: "If you are going through hell, keep going."

Why were the signs missed? Because you can't tell a feces-covered HT running on negative 20 hours of sleep how shitty your day was. Everybody is depressed, everybody's got issues at home, everybody is tired, and still, everyone must carry their weight for the crew to be able to complete its mission. I'm not advocating any of this; I'm simply describing the realities of life in the fleet. I'm explaining why my first reaction to the Shiloh testimonies was "So what? Nothing new. Suck that shit up with a straw": because, well, we had to. I have no idea if that's the right or wrong reaction to my fellow shipmate's misery. For now, let's go with "it's complicated." And I'm not sure how you simplify it. But being honest about fleet life is a good start. [Source: Task & Purpose | Drew Chowbay | February 19, 2018

Task & Purpose launched in 2014 to provide authentic and unfiltered perspectives on military and veterans issues in the post-9/11 era.

Military Recruiting Update 10 ► 75% of Americans 17 to 24 are Ineligible

The Trump administration's ambitious new military buildup is at risk of being hobbled before it even starts — by a dwindling pool of young Americans who are fit to serve. Nearly three-quarters of Americans age 17 to 24 are ineligible for the military due to obesity, other health problems, criminal backgrounds or lack of education, according to government data. That's a harsh reality check for the Pentagon's plan to recruit tens of thousands of new soldiers, sailors, pilots and cyber specialists over the next five years. "We all have this image in our mind of this hearty American citizen, scrappy, that can do anything," said retired Army Lt. Gen. Tom Spoehr, co-author of a new Heritage Foundation paper on the military recruiting challenge titled *The Looming National Security Crisis*. "That image we keep in our heads is no longer accurate."

"Obesity and the percentage of people overweight in the country has just skyrocketed in the last 10 to 15 years," he added in an interview. "Asthma is going up. High school graduation rates are still just barely acceptable and in some big cities they are miserable. Criminality is also not going away. We have to face the reality that these things in some cases are getting worse, not better." That's on top of a more immediate obstacle that military leaders warned about last week: A relatively low unemployment rate is already making it harder to fill the ranks, particularly for the Army, which has historically benefited when full-time jobs are harder to find in the civilian economy. "It's difficult to recruit," Ryan McCarthy, the undersecretary of the Army, told reporters. "There's 4 percent unemployment."

But increased recruitment is a key part of the administration's plan to spend billions more dollars to sharpen the United States' battlefield edge against Russia, China and other aspiring military powers. For example, the department's new defense strategy, which was published last month and provided the framework for its new budget proposal, declared that "the U.S. must reverse recent decisions to reduce the size of the joint force and grow the force while modernizing and ensuring readiness." The new budget calls for increasing the size of the military by 25,900 people through October 2019 and by a total of 56,600 by 2023 — all mostly active-duty troops.

"In 2016, our military was the smallest it had been since before World War II," David Norquist, the top Pentagon budget official, told reporters last week in making the case for a bigger military. For starters, he said the Army plans to add 4,000 troops to reach a total of 487,500; the Navy will add 7,500 sailors for a total of 335,400; and the Air Force is seeking an additional 4,000 volunteers to reach 329,100 active-duty personnel. "This allows us to fill in units and provide key skills related to recruiting pilots, maintainers and cybersecurity experts," Norquist explained. But the military is struggling to reach its current recruiting goals. "The U.S. military is already having a hard time attracting enough qualified volunteers," according to the Heritage paper. "Of the four services, the Army has the greatest annual need. The Army anticipates problems with meeting its 2018 goal to enlist 80,000 qualified volunteers, even with increased bonuses and incentives."

The booming civilian jobs market — which ebbs and flows — is seen as the least of the military's recruiting challenges over the longer term. The bleak demographic trends among the military-age population could make filling the ranks with qualified recruits exceedingly difficult for years to come. The government estimates that 24 million out of the 34 million people in the 17-through-24 age group are not qualified to serve. One major area of concern is education. All branches of the military require a high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma. But while federal statistics show that about 80 percent of students achieve a degree, concerns are growing that those numbers are vastly incomplete. "Young Americans' inability to meet education qualifications highlights underlying issues in America's educational foundations, with national consequences," the Heritage paper concluded.

Crime and drugs are also a major impediment. Studies have shown that criminal histories prevent one of every 10 young adults from being able to join the military. But health problems are the clearest impediment to military service — especially the alarming number of youngsters who are overweight. "We need to increase physical fitness and better eating habits in schools," said retired Air Force Lt. Gen. Norm Seip, chairman of the Council for a Strong America, "and not get on that obesity scale that is going in the wrong direction." The council is a bipartisan foundation made up of former law enforcement leaders, retired military officers, business executives, pastors and prominent coaches and athletes "who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be citizen-ready."

One possible solution to ease the recruiting challenge would be for the military to lower its standards for entry. "There have been efforts to look at whether you need to change basic training to accommodate the fact you have soldiers coming in that are going to take more time to develop into what you want them to be," said David Johnson, a retired Army colonel who is now a researcher at the government-funded Rand Corp. "If the physical quality is not what you want you are going to have to build that in." He also suggested that some people with criminal backgrounds could be allowed to serve if their offenses were minor and if a determination is made that they got onto a better path. "What is a bad apple?" he asked. "Is it habitual behavior? Does what they did when they were 14 really matter when they are 19 or 20?"

But others say lowering standards poses its own risks to national security. "The Army learned a painful lesson in 2009," Spoehr said. "We lowered the standards, we signed more waivers for people who had acts of criminality than we usually did. We paid the price. These people we let in eventually caused misconduct, were separated for dishonorable reasons more than normal soldiers. The last place that we would go is to mess with the standards." Seip agreed that cutting corners on quality to fill the ranks is short-sighted. "The folks who run the Army Recruiting Command would say we are just getting through some of those issues that hurt our ability to do our business," he said in an interview, referring to the need to lower standards during the height of the Iraq War. "It doesn't solve the problem of how we grow the pool of eligibles."

The Pentagon will almost certainly also have to dole out more money than anticipated for signing bonuses and other financial incentives to persuade enough eligible young people to volunteer, a number of experts said. But ultimately it will come down to leadership to address what many see as a national crisis,

they said. "The problem needs a team effort — at the federal level, the local level, parents, teachers, kids," said Seip, whose nonprofit includes a campaign called Mission: Readiness that is focused solely on the military recruiting challenge. "Sometimes we are finding more success at the state and local level," he said, expressing frustration with "polarization in Congress." "We can't sweep it under the rug," Seip added. "If you look at the new national security strategy, we are in a competition with other powers." [Source: POLITICO | Bryan Bender | February 19, 2018 ++]

Military Parades Update 02 ► Cost Determination

President Trump has proposed organizing a special military parade to honor members of the armed forces. It would be the first such parade since the 1991 National Victory Celebration marking the end of the Gulf War. With the deficit ballooning, the idea has raised concerns about its costs. The 1991 parade had a reported price tag of \$12 million, equal to \$22 million in 2018 dollars. Office of Management and Budget Director Mick Mulvaney told a congressional panel that the costs would be between \$20 million and 30 million. While that range is in line with an extrapolation of the 1991 event, current defense costs and security requirements could push the price tag much higher.

Decades have passed since the last parade, and it's difficult to find a detailed breakdown of the costs that went into that \$12 million figure. According to the Washington Post at the time: "Most of the public money will be spent flying the troops here from military bases around the country and Europe and housing them in college dormitories, military barracks and hotels. Tanks, missiles, a 50-bed military hospital and other pieces of heavy equipment used in the war also are being shipped by rail and truck." Initially, organizers hoped to bring 10,000 Gulf War veterans to the parade, but that figure was scaled back because of the cost concerns.

The parade also included a flyover of 83 military aircraft. It is unclear how much of the cost of this was reflected in the parade's price tag, since "Air Force and Army officials [said] the trips to Washington [were] counted as training flights for the aircraft crews." The flyover costs would be much higher today because the cost-per-flight hour for aircraft has grown precipitously. For example, in 1991 it cost \$4,000 (\$7,400 in 2018 dollars) per hour to fly an F-15 Eagle, compared to recent figures showing costs of \$8,600 for an F-15D and \$22,500 for an F-15C. The F-15's replacement, the F-22 Raptor, is even costlier at nearly \$36,000 per flight hour.

Like presidential inaugurations and other major events where many dignitaries and a large public crowd are expected, the parade would be considered a National Special Security Event, making the U.S. Secret Service the lead agency for planning and coordinating security. For FY 2017, the Secret Service's special events budget totaled \$52 million (compared to \$4.5 million for 2018). Additional inauguration-related funding has been annually appropriated by Congress since 2001, starting at \$6 million and rising to \$20 million for 2017.

The ultimate costs to the military would depend on the length of the parade, but the security costs for setting up a perimeter zone around the parade route would likely be in line with the amount required for the 2017 inauguration. The costs for the 1991 Victory Celebration were partially defrayed by public donations of at least \$3.5 million. Holding that event on a Saturday helped to keep costs down too, as it was not necessary to close government offices or give federal employees a bonus paid-leave day.

Mulvaney suggested that existing funds could be repurposed to cover the costs of the parade. That would still represent either a drain on other resources or a redirection of money that could otherwise be used to reduce the deficit. Moreover, there is a lack of transparency associated with events like the formerly-held Public Service Appreciation Day expo on the National Mall or presidential trips abroad. A full accounting of

the expenses would require a comprehensive review by the Government Accountability Office, which wouldn't be completed until long after the confetti has been cleaned from the streets. [Source: GovExec PM Update | Demian Brady | February 20, 2018 ++]

Navy Sea Duty ► Plan to Increase Surface Warfare Officer's

The Navy is looking to slash the time surface warfare officers spend on shore in a bid to boost seamanship skills and prevent them from atrophying during rear echelon assignments. The effort spearheaded by new Surface Warfare boss Vice Adm. Rich Brown aims to address concerns arising from a pair of reviews following last summer's fatal collisions in Asia, which concluded that SWOs were getting insufficient ship-handling experience and that their skills degrade during long shore assignments. The plan currently in development will be to ensure that SWOs do their division officer and department head tours on ships, instead of staff or squadrons billets that spend much of their time on shore, Brown told an audience Feb. 14 at the Center For Strategic and International Studies.

That plan has the seal of approval from Fleet Forces commander Adm. Phil Davidson, Brown said, but it will need to be reviewed by the chief of naval operations. Another initiative Brown is looking to spearhead is to cut the time between a department head tour and an officer's executive officer/commanding officer fleet-up tour – a tour where a junior commander or senior lieutenant commander gets selected to move from an XO tour and, if approved by the outgoing CO and immediate superior, take command of the ship. That tour keeps the same officer on the ship for three years. Today the average officer spends about 5.3 years between his or her department head tour and fleet-up tour, Brown said, but the aim is to cut that time to 4.5 years.

Brown also offered a strong defense of the fleet-up program that came into existence in the mid-2000s, but has been a source of some controversy for a variety of reasons. "Under the traditional career path, the average time between XO ride and CO ride was four years," Brown said. "So, the question is, where do you want to take your degradation of skills? Before the XO tour or the CO tour? Under the fleet up model, there is zero degradation of skills between the XO tour and the CO tour, it was the driving factor behind fleet up." The fleet-up program also creates more investment in the material condition of the ships that officers serve on because it helps them understand the issues and gives them time to chip away at nagging issues. Additionally, the program ensures that poor-performing XOs won't take command, he argued, adding that 21 officers have been prevented from assuming command for various reasons since the program's inception. "That is a safety valve, and we think it's a great safety valve," Brown said.

The arguments don't convince everyone, however. The program leaves holes in other places in the surface warfare enterprise and overloads other areas with hot-running officers, said retired Capt. Rick Hoffman, a former skipper of the cruiser Hue City. While Hoffman concedes that the fleet-up program has benefits, the drawbacks include packing too many hot-running commanders on hulls with Fleet-up paths and directing them away from other platforms such as cruisers, which are an O-6 major command with no fleet-up path. "Meanwhile, on [Littoral Combat Ships], I have no fewer than four commanders affiliated with one hull," Hoffman said. (Under the new model for manning LCS, two crews associate with one hull.)

Hoffman agreed that the gap between XO and CO under the traditional model is an issue, but not an intractable one. "Clearly that gap can be overcome by training, preparation, turnover time, etc," he said. "But ultimately the XO/CO fleet-up program didn't prevent the McCain or Fitzgerald accidents over the summer. Under that logic, the last place you should have problems is on the bridge." [Source: DefenseNews | David B. Larter | February 16, 2018 ++]

SNAP Update 05 ► White House Proposed Cut Impact on Military

A federal funding proposal issued by the White House would cut the amount of food aid given to most recipients, including many military families, and replace it with a subscription-style box of delivered foods. The proposal, announced 12 FEB would slash the food stamp program, known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), by \$17 billion in 2019. Instead, about half of the benefits received by more than 80 percent of all users would be replaced by a regular supply of government-sourced nonperishable foods, which officials likened to a "Blue Apron-type program."

"What we do is propose that for folks who are on food stamps, part -- not all, part -- of their benefits come in the actual sort of ... Blue Apron-type program where you actually receive the food instead of receive the cash," Office of Management and Budget director Mick Mulvaney said in a briefing. That change would also impact thousands of military families who monthly receive the SNAP benefit across the U.S. Although Pentagon officials have not yet commented on the proposed cut, in the past they noted that such cuts would hit troops hard, and that they would look to mitigate any impact on families were the cuts to be approved by Congress.

The number of active-duty military households who use food stamps is notoriously difficult to track, in part because the Department of Agriculture (USDA), which manages the program, and the Pentagon have not in the past shared data on the subject, according to 2016 report from the Government Accountability Office (GAO). That report found that about 23,000 active-duty troops use food stamps in 2013, the most recent year for which such data were available. "USDA has access to data on service members' use of food assistance programs, but none of the DoD officials with whom GAO spoke were aware of efforts by the department to coordinate with USDA to access these data," the report said.

"The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2016 included a provision to address the sharing of SNAP data between USDA and DoD; however, DoD does not have a coordination effort underway to access such data. Without such coordination, DoD will miss the opportunity to collect data on the needs of its service members," it continued. An update from the Pentagon on whether such coordination has since started was not immediately available. Currently, Basic Allowance for Housing (BAH), which could be up to thousands of dollars a month, is counted as part of total household income when a military family applies for SNAP. But anti-hunger advocates say that including the allowance in the calculation creates a disparity between families because BAH levels fluctuate by location. For example, a BAH rate in a high cost-of-living area, such as San Diego, can bump a family out of SNAP eligibility when the help is most needed because food costs are also higher, advocates say.

Legislation to change that requirement stalled on Capitol Hill last year when Rep. Mike Conaway, a Texas Republican who chairs the Agriculture Committee and sits on the Armed Services Committee, declined to grant an administrative waiver that would allow such a fix to be considered outside the Farm Bill, which is due for renewal this year. About 751,000 food stamp transactions, or almost \$80 million in purchases, were completed at military commissaries in 2015, the latest year for which data were readily available. But it is unclear whether those users were active-duty shoppers who regularly receive BAH, or other patrons, such as retirees, National Guard members or reservists.

A Military.com Freedom of Information Act request for scanned ID card demographic data that identify who uses food stamps at the commissary was denied last year when the Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) top attorney said it is selling that data to three market research firms. DeCA public affairs officials, however, later contradicted that statement, instead stating that because the agency could sell it, they are excluded from publicly releasing it. Military families can utilize more than 15 government food assistance

programs, the 2016 GAO report found, including SNAP and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC). A military-only food program known as the Family Subsistence Supplemental Allowance was terminated in September 2016 for troops stationed stateside. That program allowed qualifying families to receive payments of up to \$1,100 a month instead of receiving SNAP. Families stationed overseas, where SNAP is not available, can still use the program.

The president's proposed food stamp program changes would impact 16.4 million households and save \$129.2 billion over 10 years, a USDA fact sheet says. The food box would include "shelf stable foods" such as milk, juice, grains, cereals, pasta, peanut butter, canned meats and canned fruits, vegetables and beans, according to the fact sheet. Anti-hunger advocates said such a box misses the mark because, in part, the food it would contain would likely not meet the needs of those receiving it. "We're working on trying to ensure that any and all military families who need support are getting it," said Michelle Stuffmann, a spokesperson for Mazon: A Jewish Response to Hunger. "We want to make sure that all military families are getting the support they need, and shelf stable canned chicken and canned vegetables and other not fresh, not necessarily nutritious food doesn't necessarily meet their needs," she said.

Details on how or how often the boxes would be delivered were not released. About 43.5 million people in 21.5 million households received food stamp benefits in 2016, the latest year for which such data is available from the USDA. The average household received a monthly benefit of \$249. [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | February 14, 2018 ++]

SNAP Update 06 ► Food Stamps Cover Only 73% of Low-Income Meals

Food stamp benefits, even for people with no net income, are not enough to cover the full cost of an inexpensive meal in most U.S. counties, according to a study released on 22 FEB. Benefits through what's known as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, or SNAP, fell short of the cost for a "low-income meal" in 99 percent of counties in the continental U.S. and the District of Columbia, during 2015, an Urban Institute analysis found. The average cost of a low-income meal, which is defined as part of the study, was \$2.36. That cost is 27 percent higher than the maximum SNAP benefit per meal of \$1.86. Over the course of a month, benefits were shy of average meal costs by \$46.50 per person.

SNAP benefits are typically not expected to cover the full cost of a household food budget, except in situations where a household has no net income, the authors of the study explain. Citing federal figures, they note that about 37 percent of SNAP recipients had zero net income in fiscal year 2016, after claiming eligible income deductions. "For the nearly 4 in 10 households that have zero net income, the maximum SNAP benefit is the only way for families to pay for the meals they need to receive minimum levels of nutrition and reduce food insecurity," the researchers point out in their report.

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The findings come at a time when the Trump administration, in its fiscal 2019 budget released last week, proposed reducing spending on SNAP by about \$213 billion over the next decade. Congress would need to go along with the president's spending plans for them to be enacted. At the federal level, the U.S. Department of Agriculture's Food and Nutrition Service oversees SNAP. "USDA will review this study and take into consideration any recommendations," an agency spokesperson said by email on 21 FEB, referring to the Urban Institute report.

The researchers also looked at how meal costs varied between counties, and found that the biggest gaps between SNAP benefits and food prices were in high-cost urban areas, like New York City and San Francisco, and smaller rural counties—some with tourist attractions. "Better aligning the maximum SNAP

benefit with county-level meal costs is one key component of a broader strategy for ensuring that SNAP achieves its mission to reduce hunger and food insecurity and the associated negative health outcomes,” the report says. An interactive map and database showing the gap between benefits and meal costs for individual counties can be found at <https://www.urban.org/does-snap-cover-cost-meal-your-county>.

SNAP is the nation’s main federal food assistance program, with about 42 million participants and benefits that totaled nearly \$64 billion in fiscal 2017. It is funded largely by the federal government, but run by states. The cost of SNAP benefits in fiscal 2017 was equal to about 1.6 percent of the roughly \$4 trillion federal budget for that budget cycle. In 2007, the number of monthly SNAP participants averaged around 26 million. But, since 2010, the figure has been between 40 million and 48 million, although it has been declining in recent years, with caseloads falling by about 2 million last year. The number of people using the program climbed steeply in the wake of the Great Recession and has not fully receded since.

To be eligible for food stamps, a household must meet certain income requirements. Household income can typically not exceed 130 percent of the federal poverty level. This income eligibility threshold for the program was about \$26,600 annually, for a family of three, in 2018. Benefits are based on factors including income and the number of people in a household. Most adults who are not disabled, are younger than 50 years old, and who do not have children, are restricted to three months of benefits in three years, unless they meet certain work requirements or are enrolled in qualifying education or training programs. An average SNAP recipient received about \$126 per month in fiscal 2017, according to The Center on Budget and Policy Priorities.

One change to SNAP that President Trump proposes in his latest budget plan is for households receiving \$90 or more per month in benefits to receive a portion of those benefits in the form of a food package, with items like cereal, pasta, peanut butter and canned goods. White House budget director, Mick Mulvaney, likened the proposal to food delivery services like Blue Apron. “It lowers the cost to us because we can buy prices at wholesale,” he said last week. The authors of the newly released study on SNAP include Elaine Waxman and Megan Thompson, of the Urban Institute, and Craig Gundersen, a professor in the department of agricultural and consumer economics at the University of Illinois. A full copy can be found [here](#). [Source: Route Fifty | February 22, 2018 ++]

Navy Fleet Size Update 11 ► 30 Year Plan

The U.S. Navy will grow by more than 40 ships over the next five years, the Navy’s Budget director said 12 FEB. But while the fleet will grow rapidly in the near term, the gains will sputter out shortly thereafter. While the shipbuilding budget request saw a relatively modest increase in the service’s 2019 submission over the previous year, service-life extension programs, a bevy of new destroyers and littoral combat ships will push the Navy’s numbers higher rapidly to 326 ships in 2023. That’s a jump of 46 ships over just the next five years from today’s count of 280. But from there the pace of growth will slow significantly, adding the final 30 ships of the Navy’s goal over the next quarter century. The Navy will not reach the goal of 355 ships until the 2050s, said Rear Adm. Brian Luther, deputy assistant secretary of the Navy for budget.

The Navy’s new 30-year shipbuilding plan gets to President Obama’s goal of 308 ships by 2020, a year faster than the previous administration’s goal of 2021, and then moves up to 326 ships by the end of the five year future-year defense planning projections, and building 10 more ships than Obama was planning for during the same timeframe. The service will also buoy their numbers through service-life extensions on six of the older cruisers, meaning that in total, the service will have modernized 17 of its 22 cruisers past their 35-year service life. The Navy is currently upgrading its newest 11 cruisers through a phased modernization plan. It is unclear which cruisers will be modernized, and how it will affect the planned retirement of those

cruisers starting in 2020, though the shipbuilding plan doesn't show any large surface combatants retiring until 2024.



The Navy's end strength will also increase over the next five years, adding nearly 17,000 sailors, an approach that Luthor said was disciplined to not add ships or equipment without the needed sailors to support them. "I think the number we identified matches the ownership costs that we identified," Luther said in his rollout of the Navy's FY19 budget. "So we grow in lead of some of the equipment because we have to train people ahead of when the ship arrives. It was a disciplined approach to ensure we didn't procure a ship without people, we didn't procure a ship without armament, we didn't procure a ship without armament. So it's a very balanced and disciplined approach.

The Navy's 326 ships in 2023 will mark a high point under the current plan, but a slew of ship retirements starting in 2024 will start to drag down the numbers again. Those losses are driven by the final Los Angeles-class attack boats leaving the fleet and a handful of large surface combatants – likely a combination of cruisers and oldest destroyers. That will drag the fleet numbers to between 313 and 315 for a handful of years before the fleet is projected to start growing again in the 2030s. Perhaps most distressing of all is that even with the Navy's current plan to continue buying two Virginia-class attack boats per year — even during years when they buy the Columbia-class ballistic missile subs — the fleet of attack boats will still see a precipitous decline in numbers to 42 boats, down from a projected 52 in 2019. The fleet's requirement is 66 attack boats, a number the shipbuilding plan doesn't hit until 2048.

"We already know we have a capacity gap, and if it's taking longer to get there – and we even have a decrease from where we are today – you're just going to put more strain on the force," said Thomas Callender, a retired submariner and analyst at the Heritage Foundation. "And if you look at the adversaries, the Russians are investing in and building new submarines. The Chinese are as well." The Navy has identified anti-access area denial as a significant threat, Callender continued, and shorting the investment in attack boats, which can operate in areas that are denied by enemy missile batteries in the air and on the surface, doesn't make a lot of sense. "It runs counter to where they say the threats are going to be – it's a say-do mismatch," he said.

All told, the Navy's 30-year shipbuilding plan won't ever get that close to 355 ships. The highest the current plan gets is 342 in 2039. Some advocating for 355 ships were disappointed that the Navy doesn't seem to be emphasizing the smaller ships to drive up numbers, opting instead to accept fewer, more capable ships. "Overall, although I'm glad to see the numbers come up, I think they are bypassing some opportunities," said Jerry Hendrix, a retired Naval Flight Officer and analyst with the Center for a New American Security. Hendrix said he'd like to see the Navy explore some more creative options for

maintaining force structure like procuring more frigates and fewer high-end destroyers to drive numbers, and identifying some of the Los Angeles-class attack boats to be refueled and extended in service to keep the attack boat numbers from dipping too low. “If you can re-core some of those boats – there may be between six and eight that we can extend – that will help us get through that bathtub,” Hendrix said. [Source: NavyTimes | David B. Larter | February 12, 2018 ++]

West Point Update 03 ► 4 Ways to Visit

While the U.S. Military Academy at West Point is a college campus, it's also an active Army base and training facility. That means that unlike other college campuses, you can't just drive on and walk into classrooms and dorm rooms without planning your visit a little in advance. So whether you're a sports fan, historian, young aspiring Cadet, or a full-fledged Candidate, here are four easy ways to visit West Point.

1. The Sports Fan: Fall Visit to Michie Stadium -- A home football game at West Point offers brisk weather, beautiful Hudson River views, a kaleidoscope of changing leaves, and plenty of opportunities to watch cadets in action. Since game days are among the most visitor-friendly days at West Point, it's also a great way for aspiring students to experience a Saturday on campus. Purchase your tickets and parking passes in advance at GoArmyWestPoint.com and plan to arrive early! The Cadet Review parade normally takes place two hours before game time and requires a steep 1.2-mile walk from the parade field back up to Michie Stadium.

Even if you don't plan to attend the Cadet Review, make sure to get to the stadium in time to catch some of the kick-off festivities, including helicopter fly-overs and the parachuting team's tradition of sky-diving onto the 50-yard line to deliver the game ball. West Point's Michie Stadium is regularly named one of the top stadiums with the best atmosphere in college football. ESPN, USA Today, Sports Illustrated, and the National Football League all agree: attending an Army West Point football game at Michie Stadium is one of the most memorable experiences in sports! We think it's a memorable experience for an aspiring student too.

2. The Historian: Winter Guided Tour -- Did you know that the infamous traitor Benedict Arnold nearly gave West Point over to the British Army during the Revolutionary War? Did you know that a congressman wrote Hiram Grant's name incorrectly on his West Point application, which is why we know him today as Ulysses S. Grant? These are just a few of the true stories that you will learn while touring campus with West Point Tours. The hour-and-fifteen minute tour (Adults \$15, Children \$12, Under-2 free) makes stops at the Cadet Chapel, Trophy Point, Battle Monument, and the Plain. We suggest booking the 10:15 a.m. tour during a weekday, which gives you plenty of time to catch the Cadets convening for lunch formation.

The current visitor's center is under construction, but there is still plenty of parking for visitors. Plan to have your identification checked prior to going on campus. And while winter is a fun time to see the cadets in action, West Point can be known to get a little chilly. If you're cold-adverse, plan to visit during the warmer months or dress accordingly!

3. The Aspiring Student: Spring Admissions Visit -- West Point is consistently ranked among the top undergraduate institutions in the nation, and ranked in the top five for Best Classroom Experience, Accessible Professors, Diversity Interaction, Health Services, Intramural Sports, and Library Services! Even if you're too young to begin an application to West Point, we highly encourage young men and women to come visit through the Admissions visitation program. On weekdays from September to April, West Point's Admissions Directorate offers tours for you and your family to meet with cadets and staff and to see our campus alive with the activity of the school year. High school students can schedule a visit that includes

shadowing a cadet, or even staying overnight; however, overnight visits are reserved for juniors or seniors that have already started an application file.

No matter your age, we suggest combining your visit to West Point with a trip to New York City. (Because why not?) After enjoying all the city has to offer, head to Grand Central Station and board the Metro North Poughkeepsie-bound commuter train for an hour-long ride to the Garrison stop. (We suggest taking the train in off-peak hours. [Here's a map.](#) West Point Taxi offers \$20 rides to West Point, where there are many hotel options including the Thayer Hotel or the Holiday Inn. On the day of your visit, plan to arrive at the Admissions office by 7:30 a.m., as the briefing starts at 7:45 a.m. Remember that you'll need to go through the Visitor Center's security station prior to entering Thayer Gate. All Admissions appointments can be made by calling 845-938-5760.

4. The Cadet Candidate: Summer Leaders Experience -- Perhaps the most authentic way that an aspiring student can visit West Point is through the Summer Leaders Experience. Though attending SLE requires a competitive application—there are only 1,000 slots and typically more than 6,000 applicants—it's one of the best ways for an aspiring student to determine if West Point is the right choice for their college experience. Jam-packed with academic, athletic, military, and social activities, SLE is a place where people make life-long friends and try on what it feels like to be a cadet at West Point.

High School students can apply for SLE in January of their junior year by filling out the Candidate Questionnaire and indicating interest in the summer program. From living in a cadet dorm to attending classes and participating in hands-on military training, SLE is a fully-immersive week designed to give you a taste of life at the U.S. Military Academy. And while it is an optional step in the application process, we've seen time and time again the difference that one week can make in steeling an aspiring student's resolve to make his or her application the best it can be, to successfully complete the journey to becoming a cadet at West Point.

It's important for high school students to do as much research as possible before deciding where to attend college. So, whether you revel in our competitive sports, unique history, beautiful campus, or our immersive Summer Leaders Experience, we hope you take the time to visit and learn about West Point. Who knows? It might just be your college home.

[Source: Aspire | <https://www.blog.westpointadmissions.com> | January 26, 2018 ++]

Warships That Will Change The Future ► The Juliet Marine Ghost



Looking and behaving like a water strider bug on a pond, the Juliet Marine Ghost is an assault ship whose job is to go in between the boats of a carrier strike force. The boat was created after the USS Cole bombing when a seemingly innocuous fishing vessel came up alongside the ship and blew itself up. These small assault ships are able to neutralize any threat which slips between a strike force's bows.



Military History ► **Gray Zone Warfare | FDR**

While analysts tend to view gray zone warfare as a modern innovation, a departure from an older and more traditional form of waging war, it was in fact readily familiar to previous generations. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was an active and enthusiastic practitioner of the art of gray zone warfare in the period just before the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, when the United States was not yet officially a belligerent in World War II. Roosevelt used the Navy, Marines, and the Coast Guard to drive German naval forces from the western Atlantic Ocean, secure the overseas possessions of Allied nations conquered or menaced by the Nazi regime, and provide material aid to the Allied cause. All of these goals were accomplished short of actual war. Roosevelt’s “little gray ships” effort is a good example of how a nation can aggressively use conventional seapower short of war to achieve its strategic ends. To read how Roosevelt engaged Germany through gray zone warfare go to the attachment to this Bulletin titled, "**Gray Zone Warrior**". [Source: War On The Rocks | Steven Wills | November 23, 2017 ++]

Iwo Jima Flag Raising Update 01 ► **Its Origin and Provider**

The time and the place were prophetic. It was early 1945, and the place was Pearl Harbor, site of the surprise attack that plunged the United States into World War II. The war’s final year was but a few days old, and the landing ship, tank LST-779 was in Pearl Harbor for extended training maneuvers in anticipation of landing on Iwo Jima. Lieutenant junior grade Alan Wood, of Sierra Madre, Calif., was serving as the LST’s communications officer at the time. “It was our first operation, and naturally we were a little excited,” he recalled. “We knew it would be pretty important because Iwo was so close to Japan.”

During the ship’s stay in Hawaii, Wood and several signalmen visited a Navy salvage depot. Wood, who was responsible for LST-779’s flags, recalled: “I was just rummaging around looking for anything that might be of use when I found this apparently brand-new flag in a duffel bag with some old signal flags. It was a large flag, and I was glad to find it because we were out of large flags. Little did I know how famous it would one day become.” Wood figured that the flag was probably from some decommissioned vessel, although he did not know where it actually came from and has since wondered about its origins. “We carried the flag on our long trek to Iwo,” he remembered, “and it flew several times from our gaff on Sundays—it being the one large flag we had.”

After stops at the islands of Eniwetok and Saipan for further battle orientation, LST-779 set out on the last leg to Iwo Jima. On board were a company of Marines and their 155mm howitzers, as well as reserves of ammunition and high-octane gasoline. In a letter to a friend (which on November 19, 1945, found its way into the Congressional Record), Wood described his first impressions of the battle for Iwo Jima. “On the

19th of February—a clear, cool, beautiful day—we rolled up to Iwo, which was a mass of smoke and dust,” he wrote. “The big ships of the Navy circled the island and were leisurely pumping a steady barrage of shells at it. Overhead our planes buzzed and roared as wave after wave dove at the beaches and Mount Suribachi. It didn’t seem possible there could be a living thing left on Iwo when the Marines got there. It looked like a pushover. But that afternoon as we cruised around, several thousand yards off the beach, we could tell by looking through binoculars that the Japs were doing a lot of fighting back.”

Wood and his shipmates could see burning tanks and landing craft. They were dismayed as they watched Japanese mortars and artillery brutally pummeling the U.S. Marines pinned down all along the beach. Then the call came for help—the howitzers were desperately needed. LST-779 headed for the beach. Through a mix-up, two other LSTs that were also supposed to land did not show up for two more days. “The beach was a madhouse of men, supplies and noisy vehicles,” Wood wrote his friend. “Suribachi was a few thousand yards down the beach on our left, and the front line, marked by some entrenched tanks, was only a few hundred yards down the beach. Occasionally you could hear the spatter of small-arms fire, and all too often a big Jap mortar would explode with a shattering burst, and with terrible finality, right on the beach in the midst of all the men, supplies and machines.”



Holding the original Iwo Jima flag shown in the flag-raising photo made by AP staffer Joe Rosenthal, from left to right: Pvt. Ira Hayes, U.S. Marine Corp.; pharmacist's mate John H. Bradley, U.S. Navy; Pvt. Rene Gagnon, U.S. Marine Corp. All three, seen in New York, May 11, 1945, appear in the Iwo Jima photo.

Unloading LST-779 took the afternoon and most of the night—a night that Wood declared he would never forget: “That pale moon, the eerie yellow star shells, the black grotesque outline of Suribachi, the occasional burst of a shell, sometimes close at hand, and the continual clank and groan of the tracked vehicles unloading our ship, and the wash of surf on the wreckage which littered the shore line. There was a feeling of death in the air that was overpowering—almost stimulating—which prevented any weary eyes from closing for any length of time.” A pre-dawn Japanese mortar barrage threatened the LST, which was still loaded with large reserves of gasoline and ammunition. Mortar rounds fell dangerously close to the ship. “Shrapnel spraying against the steel plates sounded like someone was throwing handfuls of gravel at us,” Wood remembered. “How we missed being hit I don’t know. If we had, the result would have been disastrous.” The skipper of the LST wisely decided to pull out, since, for a time, the critical cargo had been unloaded. After two days spent a safe distance from the island, the ship was again beached, this time closer to Mount Suribachi.

Late in the morning on February 23, the Marines managed to secure Mount Suribachi and raised a small flag. But the little banner seemed insufficient to properly acknowledge the Americans’ momentous accomplishment. A battle-weary Marine appeared aboard LST-779, which was beached closest to the mountain in a long line of LSTs. As Wood recalled, the Marine asked to borrow a large flag. Wood asked him, “What for?” and the Marine responded, “Don’t worry. You won’t regret it.” Wood got approval from his skipper for the loan, which, of course, became a donation. “I barely remember the Marine who came

aboard to get the flag,” Wood said later, “and I don’t know if he was one of the group which raised the flag or not. He was dirty and looked tired, and had several days’ growth of beard on his face....Even though he couldn’t have been more than 18 or 19, he looked like an old man....I have looked carefully at the pictures of the men who raised the flag, but I recognize none of them.”

In the days that followed the flag-raising on Mount Suribachi in 1945, Wood wrote his mother about the part he had played in providing the now famous flag. Mrs. Wood, in turn, wrote to the War Department, explaining her son’s involvement. Alan Wood later heard from Brig. Gen. Robert L. Denig, director of the U.S. Marine Corps Division of Public Information in Washington, who requested details. Wood once again told his story, heaping praise on the Marine combat troops. He wrote on July 7, 1945: “Because we were the first LST to beach at Iwo, and because we experienced a little of the deadliness of the Jap fire there, the crew of the 779 is, naturally, proud that our flag was flown from Suribachi. However, speaking for myself—and yet I am sure there are many others aboard who feel the same—the part we played in the invasion of Iwo Jima was pretty small compared to the willing and simple heroism with which the Marines did their bloody job. The fact that there were men among us who were able to face a situation like Iwo where human life is so cheap, is something to make humble those of us who were so very fortunate not to be called upon to endure any such hell.”

After it flew on Iwo Jima, the ceremonial flag was preserved by the Marines. In a letter to Wood, Denig told him that the flag had been taken on tour to promote the sale of war bonds. Today it is displayed in the U.S. Marine Corps Museum in Quantico, Va. The flag Wood rescued from dusty obscurity has become perhaps the most celebrated and cherished Stars and Stripes since Francis Scott Key’s immortal “Star-Spangled Banner.”

In the years that followed the war, Wood found himself involved in another great national quest, one some have called “the moral equivalent of war”—the space program. In 1950, he joined the Jet Propulsion Laboratory (JPL) in Pasadena as a graphic artist. At the time, the JPL was heavily involved in guided missile research and rocketry. By the late 1950s, however, the JPL—the high-technology research and development arm of California State Polytechnic University and the National Aeronautics and Space Administration—found itself headed for space. In response to the Soviets’ launching of the satellite Sputnik, the United States—with the help of the JPL—launched Explorer I.

At the JPL, Al Wood drifted into the Public Affairs Division and began developing daily status reports for nearly all the organization’s major space shots. He made it his business to understand and explain the nuts and bolts of highly complex engineering and scientific concepts in order to provide knowledgeable and informative updates. The JPL’s Ranger spacecraft series went to Mars, and Surveyor landers helped pave the way for the Apollo 11 moon landing. On numerous unmanned space missions, through his telephone status reports, Wood became known as “The voice of...” whatever the JPL was involved in at the time. The grand tour of the twin Voyager spacecraft to the outer planets and later the Galileo spacecraft’s mission to Jupiter were among the complex space missions interpreted for the media and the public by the former naval officer who had helped to create a symbolic moment during America’s struggle for peace. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | R.C. House | February 24, 2018 ++]

Pearl Harbor Silver Lining ► **As Admiral Nimitz Viewed The Attack**

Sunday, December 7th, 1941—Admiral Chester Nimitz was attending a concert in Washington, DC. He was paged and told there was a phone call for him. When he answered the phone, it was President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on the phone. He told Admiral Nimitz that he (Nimitz) would now be the Commander of the Pacific Fleet. Admiral Nimitz flew to Hawaii to assume command of the Pacific Fleet. He landed at

Pearl Harbor on Christmas Eve, 1941. There was such a spirit of despair, dejection and defeat--you would have thought the Japanese had already won the war. On Christmas Day, 1941, Adm. Nimitz was given a boat tour of the destruction wrought on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese. Big sunken battleships and navy vessels cluttered the waters everywhere you looked. As the tour boat returned to dock, the young helmsman of the boat asked, "Well Admiral, what do you think after seeing all this destruction? "

Admiral Nimitz's reply shocked everyone within the sound of his voice Admiral Nimitz said, "The Japanese made three of the biggest mistakes an attack force could ever make, or God was taking care of America. Which do you think it was? "Shocked and surprised, the young helmsman asked, "What do mean by saying the Japanese made the three biggest mistakes an attack force ever made?" Nimitz explained:

- **Mistake number one:** The Japanese attacked on Sunday morning. Nine out of every ten crewmen of those ships were ashore on weekend liberty. If those same ships had been lured to sea and been sunk--we would have lost 38,000 men instead of 3,800.
- **Mistake number two:** When the Japanese saw all those battleships lined in a row, they got so carried away sinking those battleships, they never once bombed our dry docks opposite those ships. If they had destroyed our dry docks, we would have had to tow every one of those ships to America to be repaired. As it is now, the ships are in shallow water and can be raised. One tug can pull them over to the dry docks, and we can have them repaired and at sea by the time we could have towed them to America . And I already have crews ashore anxious to man those ships.
- **Mistake number three:** Every drop of fuel in the Pacific theater of war is in top of the ground storage tanks five miles away over that hill. One attack plane could have strafed those tanks and destroyed our fuel supply. That's why I say the Japanese made three of the biggest mistakes an attack force could make or God was taking care of America.

Admiral Nimitz was a Texan, born and raised in Fredericksburg, Texas -- he was a born optimist and Admiral Nimitz was able to see a silver lining in a situation and circumstance where everyone else saw only despair and defeatism. President Roosevelt had chosen the right man for the right job. We desperately needed a leader that could see silver linings in the midst of the clouds of dejection, despair and defeat. [Source: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rrNMeOLYoNQ> | February 25, 2018 ++]

Original Code Talkers ► WWI | Myths & Legends

During World War I, one main problem for the Allies was the Germans' ability to listen in on their telephone lines and to break their codes, which were generally based on either European languages or mathematical progressions. An apocryphal story spread around that a German once interrupted a U.S. Signal Corps member sending a message to taunt his use of code words. Sending out human runners proved equally ineffective since about one in four were captured or killed. And other methods of communications, such as color-coded rockets, electronic buzzers, and carrier pigeons, were too limiting, too slow, too unreliable or a combination thereof.

German intelligence monitoring Allied radios and telephone messages resulted in many lost battles and very heavy casualties. Concerned they war may be lost to the Germans, Allied commanding generals were constantly pushing their signal people to find a solution. Some progress was made but not enough to stop everyday losses. But it wasn't until early 1918 that a solution was stumbled upon by chance. When Col. A. W. Bloor, U.S. Army, noticed a number of American Indians serving with him in the 142nd Infantry in France. Overhearing two Choctaw Native Americans speaking with each another in their native language, he realized he could not understand them. He also realized that if he could not understand them, the same

would be true for Germans, no matter how good their English skills. Besides, many Native American languages have never been written down. With the active cooperation of his Choctaw soldiers, he tested and deployed a code, using the Choctaw language in place of regular military code.

The first combat test took place on October 26, 1918, when Col. Bloor ordered a "delicate" withdrawal of two companies of the 2nd Battalion, from Chufilly to Chardeny. Using a field telephone, the code talkers delivered a message in their native tongue which their colleagues on the other end quickly translated back into English. "The enemy's complete surprise is evidence that he could not decipher the messages," Bloor observed. A captured German officer confirmed they were "completely confused by the Native America language and gained no benefit whatsoever" from their wiretaps. Thus began the Choctaw "code talkers."



The Choctaw soldiers were incredibly gracious and willing to share their own language. They didn't have to but they did. They had something unique and were incredibly proud of that. Two American Native officers were selected to supervise a communications system staffed by 19 Choctaw code talkers. The team transmitted messages relating to troop movements and their own tactical plans in their native tongue. Lacking the words for certain modern-day military terms, they used "big gun" for artillery, "little gun shoot fast" for machine gun, "stone" for grenade and "scalps" for casualties, among other substitutions, thereby becoming true code talkers rather than simply communications operators speaking a little-known language. Soldiers from other tribes, including the Cheyenne, Comanche, Cherokee, Osage and Yankton Sioux also were enlisted to communicate as code talkers. Previous to their arrival in France, the Germans had broken every American code used but the Germans never broke the Native America's "code."

Ironically, the Choctaw language was under pressure back in America. It was a time of cultural assimilation. Government attempts to 'civilize' American Indians involved putting their children in state-run boarding schools, where they were often severely punished for speaking in their native tongue. On the battlefields of France, the Native American language was the much-needed answer to a very big problem. Like other tribes, the Choctaw's whole way of life was under threat. Little more than a generation before, they had been forcibly removed from their ancestral land. Under the 1830 Indian Removal Act, they were marched from areas around Mississippi to what is now Oklahoma. It is known as the 'Trail of Tears.' It is estimated 12,000 Choctaw moved where 2,500 died of hunger, disease, and exhaustion.

In the autumn of 1918, U.S. troops were involved in the Meuse-Argonne Offensive on the Western Front. Within hours, eight Choctaw speakers had been dispatched to strategic positions. They were instrumental in helping U.S. troops win several key battles. Even if the Germans were listening, they couldn't understand. It was also the quickest way of coding and decoding information, faster than any machine, giving U.S. troops a crucial edge over the enemy. Among the soldiers of the Choctaw nation was Pvt. Joseph Oklahombi, the

most-decorated from Oklahoma. He served in Company D, First World War I soldier Battalion, 141st Regiment, Seventy-first Brigade of the Thirty-sixth Infantry Division during World War I, where he was one of the Choctaw "code talkers."

On October 8, 1918, Oklahombi was at St. Etienne, France. According to some reports, he and 23 other soldiers attacked an enemy position and captured 171 Germans while killing some 79 more. They held their position for four days while under attack. Oklahombi was awarded the Silver Star with Victory Ribbon, and the Croix de Guerre from France's Marshal Henri-Philippe Petain. At the time the members of the Choctaw nation were not formally U.S. citizens. Oklahombi was married and had a son. He was killed on April 13, 1960, when hit by a truck while walking along a road. He was buried with military honors at Yashau Cemetery in Broken Bow, Oklahoma.

All of the telephone squad returned home to their families. For decades, their role in code talking was barely known outside the tribe and their efforts went unrecognized. In some cases, their own wives and families knew very little. Native Americans did not receive nationwide citizenship until 1924, yet the Choctaws were both patriotic and valiant, with a desire to serve in the war effort. Many Choctaw code talkers were instrumental in ending the war. Choctaw and other Tribal Nation served with distinction using Native languages in World War II, Korea, and Vietnam. In 1989 the French Government bestowed the Chevalier de L'Ordre National du Merite (Knight of the Order of National Merit) posthumously to the Choctaw code talkers of WWI and the Comanche and Navajo code talkers of WWII.

But it was only in 2008 that the Code Talkers Recognition Act was passed in the U.S. Senate recognizing the hundreds of overlooked code talkers from different tribes, including the Choctaw. Each tribal government received Congressional Gold Medals, America's highest civilian honor. They were inscribed with a unique design to represent their tribe. The families of each code talker received a silver version of the gold medal. At the ceremony, then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid said: "In this nation's hour of greatest need, Native American languages proved to have great value indeed. The United States Government turned to a people and a language they had tried to eradicate." Among these brave warriors were the famed Wind Talkers of the Navajo Tribe in World War II, who were deserving of the Gold Medal they received from Congress in the year 2000.

The legislation was passed in both the U.S. House of Representatives and the U.S. Senate to award the Choctaw, Comanche and other Indian soldiers who were Code Talkers a Gold Medal. Support and co-sponsorship were requested of all of the Congress. The law was signed in 2008 by the President. "Honoring Native American code talkers is long overdue," the bill admitted. Pursuant to the legislation, a medal ceremony took place in November 2013 in Washington, D.C., with 33 tribes known to have had code-talking members in attendance. It was a bittersweet moment. None of the original code talkers alive from the Choctaw nation to see this moment and none of their children were alive. But it was also an incredible moment. Those men deserved to be honored. [Source: Together We Served | February 18, 2018 ++]

WWII VETS 156 ► Maynard Smith | MOH Recipient Demoted to Private

Given a choice between jail or the military, Maynard Smith reluctantly opted for the army. This 31-year-old Private was a discipline problem from the start and was reported to be spoiled, insubordinate, and unliked by all he encountered. When he arrived in England for combat as an aerial gunner, no one wanted to fly with him, and it was only upon direct orders that the other crews would do so. Odd as it may seem it was on his very first mission that Maynard "Snuffy" Smith inexplicably emerged with the Medal of Honor.



Born in 1911 Caro, Michigan, Maynard Smith developed an early reputation as a spoiled kid prone to trouble and the ability to annoy almost anyone. On leaving school, it was apparent his plan was to live off his inheritance for as long as he could until eventually taking up a job in the tax field. Smith fathered a child which oddly enough led to his unique path to the military. He and the child's mother separated, but his failure to pay child support put the 31-year-old troublemaker in the hands of a judge. He was given two choices in 1942, go to jail or join the military.

Once in the Army, Smith found it tough taking orders from anyone particularly men nearly ten years younger than him. Consequently, he opted for the quickest route to acquire rank which at the time was to volunteer for Aerial Gunnery School. Considering the bombers he was to crew often had a 50% survival rate; it seemed an odd choice for a typically selfish man. By the time he arrived in England in 1943, his obnoxious personality and reputation for failing to be a team player preceded him. Making no friends in his new location, he earned the nickname "Snuffy" for his obtuse personality.

On May 1, 1943, now Staff Sergeant Smith climbed into the ball gun turret of his B-17 and headed out for France. The target was a series of U-Boat pens near Saint-Nazaire which was a heavily defended location with the nickname "flak city." Despite its reputation, at least one group of bombers arrived on target and met little resistance from the German forces. Dropping their bombs and heading for home, the crew of Smith's B-17 felt they had made it. Unfortunately, the lead plane made a navigational error, and while he believed they were heading for England, he was leading the group straight to the heavily fortified city of Brest, France. As the group began to descend from the clouds, they were met by a welcoming party of German fighters and intense anti-aircraft fire. Smith's bomber was instantly hit. Enemy fire ripped through the plane's fuel tanks causing a massive fire to erupt in the middle of the fuselage. Their communications system went down, the oxygen system was destroyed, and the power to Smith's ball turret was knocked out.

With the fire raging, three of the crew members decided it was time to bail out. They parachuted over the channel never to be heard from again. Smith, on the other hand, leaped into action. He tended to the wounded crew as the pilots attempted to navigate the plane home. However, German fighters were still riddling the plane with bullets, and the fire continued to rage threatening to melt the fuselage. They were a long way from home and Smith spent the next 90 minutes treating the wounded, manning the machine gun, and fighting the fire. The temperature in the plane became so intense the extra ammo began to explode. Smith threw the exploding ammunition through the holes in the fuselage the fire had created. Anything not bolted down he ejected. When the fire extinguishers were empty, Smith donned some protective clothing and attacked the fire by hand. As the plane finally approached England Smith had put the fire out, in part by urinating on it.

The plane landed on the first available airfield and broke in half upon touchdown. Somehow they had made it and the man they dubbed "Snuffy" now found himself an unlikely hero. Unfortunately for Smith, it did nothing to alleviate his personality problems, and his fellow soldiers only seemed to resent him more.

The week that Smith was to receive his Medal of Honor from the Secretary of War he was assigned to KP duty for disciplinary problems. After the presentation, Smith continued to fly on four more missions before being diagnosed with "operational exhaustion". He was reduced in rank to Private with a clerical job far from the skies where he earned the nation's highest military honor.

Smith lived until 1984. He was laid to rest at Arlington National Cemetery as the war hero with whom no one wanted to fly. His actions on that fateful May day in 1943 will forever remain noted as a real display of inexplicable courage; obnoxious personality or not. [Source: Together We Served | February 18, 2018 ++]

Hanoi Hannah ► **Voice of Vietnam**

Her name was Trinh Thi Ngo, but she called herself Thu Huong, "The Fragrance of Autumn." We called her Hanoi Hannah. She was North Vietnam's chief voice of propaganda, reaching out over the airwaves to American servicemen across South Vietnam, attempting to convince them that the war was immoral and that they should lay down their arms and go home. Her job was to chill and frighten, not to charm and seduce. Her English was almost impeccable; men would stumble across her while tuning their radios and be unable to turn away. "How are you G.I. Joe?" she asked in a June 1967 broadcast. "It seems to me that most of you are poorly informed about the going of the war, to say nothing about a correct explanation of your presence over here. Nothing is more confused than to be ordered into a war to die or to be maimed for life without the faintest idea of what's going on."

She was born in Hanoi in 1931. Her father owned the largest glass factory in Vietnam. She took a liking to American films. Her favorite was "Gone with the Wind," which she watched five times. She wanted to enjoy films without the French or Vietnamese subtitles, so her family gave her private English lessons. She joined the Voice of Vietnam, the country's largest radio broadcaster, in 1955 as a volunteer. Her unaccented English, correct intonation and her large vocabulary soon got her a staff job reading the news to Asia's English-speaking countries.

When the first American ground forces, the Marines, landed at Danang in 1965, V.O.V., which was based in the north, started propaganda broadcasts to the troops. By then the airwaves over North and South Vietnam had become a confusing battleground of conflicting propaganda voices. Working on the premise of "capture their minds and their hearts will follow," both sides supported dozens of radio stations spewing malice and disinformation 24 hours a day. Hannah's scripts were written by North Vietnam Army propaganda experts, and advised by Cubans. Her programs were soon extended to 30 minutes and broadcast three times a day.

She was a source of news, as well. Hanoi Hannah broke one of the most shocking stories of the Vietnam War — the massacre of several hundred civilians in the village of My Lai in 1968. Just weeks after the massacre, Hannah accurately named the location and estimated the civilian death toll, but she misidentified the American Army division involved, enabling the Americans to deny the report and treat it like another example of disinformation from North Vietnam.

Don North covered Vietnam from 1965 to 1973 as a television news reporter. He first heard the silken voice of Hanoi Hannah in September 1965, in a Special Forces base at An Lac, about a hundred miles west of Nha Trang. As a news correspondent, he had been on patrol with Montagnard irregulars and their American advisers. It had been raining hard for a week, keeping the supply plane that was his ticket out from coming in. At night after the perimeter was secured there wasn't much to do but play cards, read, drink Ba Moi Ba beer and listen to the radio. Up there in the Central Highlands, the Voice of Vietnam boomed in loud and clear. That night Hannah was interspersing Western rock music with her reports. The sounds of the

Animals, singing “We Gotta Get Outta This Place,” was followed by Hannah: Now for the war news. American casualties in Vietnam. Army Corporal Larry J. Samples, Canada, Alabama ... Staff Sergeant Charles R. Miller, Tucson, Arizona ... Sergeant Frank Herrera, Coolidge, Arizona.”

Her broadcasts were mostly exaggerated war news, encouragement to “frag” — assassinate — an officer and go AWOL, or suggestions that the soldiers’ wives or girlfriends were cheating on them. She was mostly greeted with loud laughter. But taped interviews with downed pilots or from American antiwar advocates like Jane Fonda were heard with anger. For bored G.I.s, Hannah’s broadcasts were often rare sources of amusement. A man’s radio was, after his rifle, his most valued possession. Like the rifle butt, the radio was often wrapped in frayed black tape for protection. Troops would laugh over Hannah’s attempts to scare them into defection or suggestions to frag an officer. However, they did wonder if she was as lovely as she sounded, and many considered her the most prominent enemy after Ho Chi Minh.

Hannah regularly addressed her comments to black American G.I.s. In one broadcast, she said, “A Vietnam black G.I. who refuses to be a victim of racism is Billy Smith. It seems on the morning of March 15th a fragmentation grenade went off in an officer’s barracks in Bien Hoa killing two gung-ho lieutenants. Smith was illegally searched, arrested and put in Long Binh jail and brought home for trial. The evidence that showed him guilty was this: being black, poor and against the war and refusing to be a victim of racism.” When violence broke out in Detroit on July 23, 1967, Hannah jumped on the news. American military stations were quiet; she broadcast every detail she had available.

Mike Roberts, a soldier from Detroit based in Danang, remembers that week well. “Hannah comes on and she knows what guard unit was called in and what kind of weapons were used,” he said. “That’s when it starts to hit home. We knew what kind of fire power and devastation that kind of weapon can do to people, and now those same weapons were turning on us, you know, our own military is killing our own people. We might as well have been Viet Cong. But Hannah picked up on it and talked about it.” Hanoi Hannah could always be assured of at least the American audience that would hear her broadcasts — the prisoners of war in places like the Hanoi Hilton. John McCain, a Hanoi Hilton inmate for over five years, recently remarked: “I heard Hannah every day. She was a marvelous entertainer. I’m surprised she didn’t get to Hollywood.”

Lt. Cmdr. Ray Voden, shot down over Hanoi on April 3, 1965, listened to her for eight years. “Hannah often stirred up arguments among the P.O.W.s. There were nearly fist fights over the programs. Some guys wanted to hear them, while others tried to ignore them. Personally, I listened because I usually gleaned information, reading between the lines.”

For almost five years after Don North became a correspondent for ABC News, he would tape-record her programs almost daily, in case she said something newsworthy or presented a captured American pilot on her program. To him she was just another source of information or disinformation to be checked out and sorted in the communications pudding of the Vietnam War. In May 1978, North returned to Vietnam and asked the Foreign Ministry to arrange an interview for him with Trinh Thi Ngo. By then Hanoi Hannah had left her beloved Hanoi and moved to Ho Chi Minh City, the renamed city of Saigon, with her husband, who was a southerner and a Vietnamese Army officer. The appointment was set up for the rooftop bar of the Rex Hotel, where North waited along with Ken Watkins, who had been a Marine corpsman and a regular listener to Hannah.

While they waited, Ken recalled his memories of Hannah. “The signal was pretty good around Danang and we would tune in once or twice a week to hear her talk about the war,” he said. “Hannah didn’t necessarily make sense; she used American English, but really didn’t speak our language in spite of hip expressions and hit tunes, even tunes banned on U.S. Army radio. The best thing going for her was that she was female and had a nice soft voice.” North asked if he was still angry at her. “Sure,” he said, “some antagonism, add it to the Vietnam list. But this trip back is about coming full circle on a lot of things, and she is another voice from the past I want to confront in person.” So an ex-Marine and an old war

correspondent waited that sunny morning for the real Hanoi Hannah to appear, waiting for reality to sweep away the years of bitter images in the windmills of their minds. Dragon Lady? Psy-warrior? Prophet? Or what?



Trinh Thi Ngo, also known as Hanoi Hannah, in 1983.

Like so many phantoms of the war, she was not what they imagined. She didn't look like the "Dragon Lady" from "Terry and the Pirates" comics. Elegant and attractive in a striking yellow ao dai, the Vietnamese traditional dress, she appeared happy to answer our questions. After she sat down, North asked where she got her information. "The U.S. Army Stars and Stripes," she replied, referring to the main military newspaper. "We read from it. We had it flown in every day. We also read Newsweek, Time and several other newspapers. We took remarks of American journalists and put them in our broadcasts, especially about casualties."

Did she ever feel anger toward the American troops? "When the bombs came on Hanoi, I did feel angry," she said. "To the Vietnamese, Hanoi is a sacred ground. But even then, when I spoke to the G.I.s I tried always to be calm. I never felt aggression toward Americans as a people. I never called them the enemy, only adversaries." They chatted for a while, about her aims, her successes, her regrets. Then North had one more question — what would she say now, if she had one final broadcast to American G.I.s? "Let's let bygones be bygones," she replied. "Let's move on and be friends. There will be many benefits if we can be friends together. There is no reason to be enemies."

Meeting and interviewing Hanoi Hannah was, for North, like being Dorothy parting the curtains hiding the Wizard of Oz. The terrible Hannah behind the facade that we constructed, turned out to be a mild-mannered announcer who spoke English and read the Stars and Stripes. Trinh Thi Ngo died on Sept. 30, 2016 at the age of 85. She was interred in Long Tri, Chau Than District, Long An province, following the Vietnamese custom of burial next to her husband and his family. Her only son escaped Vietnam in 1973 and now lives in San Francisco. [Source: The New York Times | Don North | February 8, 2018 ++]

Hello Girls ► U.S. WWI Telephone Operators In France

They were known as the "Hello Girls" — American women fluent in French and English who answered the urgent call for telephone operators needed in France during World War I. They took oaths to join the U.S. Army Signal Corps, underwent training by AT&T before boarding ships to Europe, heading to war before most of the American doughboys arrived in France, connected 26 million calls and ultimately proved to be a significant factor in winning the war. And then they were forgotten.

A documentary filmmaker from Wisconsin has created a one-hour film about the American phone operators who served in the Army Signal Corps during World War I to shine a spotlight on a group of brave, selfless women who were not officially recognized for their work until it was too late for most of them. The

film will be shown at the Women's Memorial at Arlington National Cemetery in Virginia on 1 MAR, almost 100 years to the day the first ship carrying women phone operators left the U.S. "Telephone technology was really what America brought to the war," said Jim Theres, a Racine native who hopes to bring the film to Wisconsin this year. "Women by World War I had dominated the field as telephone operators. Gen. John Pershing (commander of the American Expeditionary Forces) said we have women who do this in America and I need them over here."

The Army's initial request for 100 volunteers was greeted with 7,600 applications. A total of 223 women — including two with Wisconsin connections — eventually traveled to France. This was two years before women in America were allowed to vote. "Every command to advance or retreat or hold fire was delivered by telephone and it took an operator to connect that call," said Elizabeth Cobbs, [author of "The Hello Girls: America's First Women Soldiers,"](#) published last year. French officers frequently needed to communicate with American officers and it was the American female phone operators who put those calls through and stayed on the line to act as simultaneous translators. That meant the women handled national security secrets, frequently served near the front lines and came under bombardment, and quickly, efficiently and calmly handled numerous calls. Male telephone operators, many of whom were disdainful of the job they considered women's work, took as long as 60 seconds to connect a call; when the women arrived, the timing was cut to 10 seconds. "As one woman wrote — their hands flitted like hummingbirds over the wires," said Cobbs.



Gen. John J. Pershing inspects female operators serving in Europe during World War I.

The two women with ties to Wisconsin were Martina Heynen of Green Bay and Hildegard Van Brunt, a California native who settled in Milwaukee in the mid-1920s. Both sailed to France in the second group of phone operators in April 1918. Van Brunt's mother was born in Paris and taught her daughter to speak French. Van Brunt was 19 when she headed to France and met William Abbott, an American soldier she married after the war. They moved to Milwaukee to run his family's furniture store, said Van Brunt's granddaughter, Elizabeth Goessling. Goessling has fond memories of her grandmother and knew she served in France during World War I but thought Van Brunt was with the Red Cross. During a recent interview, Goessling learned her grandmother was, in fact, a phone operator. "I thought she was really cool. She was my favorite. (Her World War I service) was just another cool thing she did," said Goessling, who lives in Madison. Van Brunt's mother also served in France during the war; Goessling thinks she was a Red Cross volunteer.

Two female operators died in France in the Spanish Flu epidemic, including one woman who died Nov. 11, 1918, the day the war ended. Grace Banker was awarded the Distinguished Service Medal, one of only 18 of the 16,000 Army Signal Corps officers to receive the medal one step higher than the Silver Star. "I think Pershing and the generals recognized the role the women played in helping win the war. They gave one of the 223 women one of the highest awards you could get in World War I," said Cobbs. In his documentary, Theres interviewed Cobbs, families of several telephone operators, and the current national American Legion commander, Denise Rohan, who is from Wisconsin. Rohan is attending the March 1 premiere of the documentary.

When the war ended, many remained in France or were sent to Germany to continue working phone switchboards through the Treaty of Versailles. The last women returned home in 1920. Many tried to join veterans groups, including the American Legion and Veterans of Foreign Wars. When they were asked for their Army discharge papers, they contacted the military for the standard forms. That's when they were told they were not veterans. It all came down to one word. While Navy and Marines regulations said any person could join the units, the Army was open only to men. While thousands of women served in the Navy and Marines during World War I, none were sent overseas, instead serving honorably in the United States.

But the 223 women who volunteered for the U.S. Army Signal Corps and were sent into harm's way were all told they were actually well-paid civilian contractors, said Theres, a Gulf War veteran who earned degrees at the University of Wisconsin-Whitewater and Cardinal Stritch University and now lives in Washington, D.C. "They were basically told, you didn't serve," said Cobbs. "They didn't get bonuses that every member of the armed forces at home or abroad received. It was the amount of money equivalent to buying a car. The sad thing is some experienced disability from their service, including tuberculosis, and were not allowed to get veterans benefits." Which was heartbreaking for many of the women.

Most got married and started families after they returned home and figured they would never get recognition. Van Brunt's husband died during gall bladder surgery — his business failed during the Great Depression — leaving her a widow at age 39. "When I think of what my grandmother went through during the Depression when she lost her husband and had two kids, what good that would have helped her being a veteran," said Goessling. A few of the phone operators petitioned Congress and the military for decades, repeatedly getting rebuffed until the 1970s. When President Jimmy Carter finally signed legislation in 1977 recognizing what should have been done six decades earlier — that the women were indeed veterans — there were only a few dozen Hello Girls still alive. Among them was Van Brunt, who died in 1985 in Milwaukee. One woman told her family upon hearing the news that the World War I victory medal was nice but that there was only one thing she wanted: an American flag on her coffin when she died. The remaining Hello Girls were given military burials. [Source: Milwaukee Journal Sentinel | Meg Jones | February 12, 2018 ++]

Hero War Dog ► The Story of WWII's Silver Star Recipient 'Chips'

When Britain and France went to war with Germany in 1939, Americans were divided about offering military aid, and the debate over the U.S. joining the war was even more heated. It wasn't until two years later when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor and Germany declared war against the U.S., that Americans officially entered the conflict. As America's industries retooled their factories from manufacturing domestic goods to producing tanks, planes, ships, guns, and ammunition, serious concerns arose about the vulnerability of America's long coastline to infiltration by enemy saboteurs. To address the concern, the War Departments launched a program to train canines as sentry dogs for the purpose of guarding our country's factories, transportation lines, and our borders.

A goal to train 10,000 dogs was established and War Dog Training Centers were built and the procuring of suitable dogs began in earnest. But finding enough dog candidates suitable to train as sentry and scout dogs was more difficult than thought. To address the challenge of not being able to acquire enough suitable dogs in such a short amount of time, the military put out the word for civilians to donate their dogs. Eager to aid the war effort, thousands of patriotic pet owners across America responded by donating their pets. Chips - a German shepherd, collies, husky mix - was one of those dogs.

Chips' owner was Edward J. Wren of Pleasantville, New York who enlisted Chips in the Army in August 1942. According to son John Wren, Chips was a rascal. He barked at the mailman and trash collectors occasionally resulting in biting incidents. "It killed my mother to part with him," said Wren, then a toddler.

"But Chips was strong and smart, and we knew he'd be good as an Army War Dog." Everyone in the Wren family knew that Chips was a special dog. Just how special, though, it would take a war to discover. Chips was trained as a sentry dog at the War Dog Training Center in Front Royal, Virginia. Chips, and his handler Pvt. John P. Rowell of Arkansas were assigned to the 3d Military Police Platoon, 3d Infantry Division and served in North Africa, Italy, France, Germany and Sicily with Lt. Gen. George Patton's Seventh Army.

In the predawn of July 10, 1943, the 3rd Infantry Division under the command of Maj. Gen. Lucian Truscott landed on the shores of southern Sicily near Licata in Operation Husky. Among the troops that hit the beach was the 3rd Military Police Platoon, 30th Infantry Regiment were Chips and Rowell. As dawn broke, the platoon was working its way inland when a machine gun hidden in what appeared to be a nearby peasant hut opened fire. Rowell and the rest of the platoon immediately hit the ground. But Chips broke free from Rowell and snarling, raced into the hut. Rowell later said, "Then there was an awful lot of noise and the firing stopped." The platoon members then saw one injured Italian Soldier come out with Chips at his throat. Rowell called him off before he could kill the man. Moments later, three badly bitten Italian Soldiers emerged from the hut with their hands over the heads, all shepherded by a very determined Chips.

Chips was also wounded, suffering powder burns and a scalp wound from the pistol fired at close range. Medic treated Chips and released him to Rowell later that day. That night, while on guard duty, Chips alerted Rowell of an infiltration attempt by ten Italian Soldiers. Together they captured all ten. After the Battle of Salerno in which Chips and Rowell had taken part, General Dwight Eisenhower came to congratulate the unit, and he bent to pet Chips. Unfortunately, only the handler is to touch a War Dog, and so Chips responded as he was trained, he nipped Ike. Another time, Chips alerted to an impending ambush. Then, with a phone cable attached to his collar, Chips ran back to base, dodging gunfire so the endangered platoon could establish a communications line and ask for the backup they so desperately needed.

Chips was a true hero. He was awarded a Silver Star for valor and a Purple Heart for his wounds. The newspapers back home heralded his exploits. Unfortunately, the press attracted the attention of the William Thomas, Commander of the Order of the Purple Heart. He angrily wrote letters to the president, secretary of war, and adjutant general of the U.S. Army protesting that the Purple Heart was a decoration for humans, not animals. Congress then got into the act. After a debate lasting three months, it was decided no more decorations were to be awarded to non-humans adding "appropriate citations may be published in unit general orders." This meant that at least they would receive honorable discharges.

The debate surrounding the giving of medals to military dogs not only led to the denying dogs the right to recognition for their efforts but also paved the way for the military to classify them as "equipment" - a classification that would cost them dearly. When the U.S. pulled out of Vietnam, the military dogs were classified as "equipment" and left behind. Despite earnest efforts to bring the dogs' home, the order to abandon them was firm. Over 4,000 dogs served in Vietnam, many sacrificing their lives. They saved thousands of American Soldiers from death or injury. Stories vary as to what became of these valiant canines, but one thing is known to a certainty is that they shared all 24/7 with their handler. These dogs gave their full measure of devotion - whatever the danger - but they did not get to share the freedom of coming home.

In addition to patrol duty with the infantry, Chips was posted to sentry duty in Casablanca during the January 1943 Roosevelt-Churchill Conference. Through eight campaigns across Europe, Chips was also a POW guard and tank guard dog. Chips spent 3 1/2 years in the Army. He served in North Africa, Italy, France and elsewhere in Europe. He met President Franklin D. Roosevelt, British Prime Minister Winston Churchill and General Dwight D. Eisenhower. His family had requested his return after service, so in the fall of 1945, he was taken back to Front Royal where he was retrained so that he could go back to his family. In December 1945, Chips was discharged from the military and returned home to the Wren family. He was

accompanied by six reporters and photographers who wanted to cover the story. Mr. and Mrs. Wren and son Johnny, who was only a baby when Chips left, met Chips at the train.



Sadly, Chips died just seven months later due to complications from injuries sustained in the war. He was just six years old. Chips is buried in The Peaceable Kingdom Pet Cemetery in Hartsdale, New York. So remarkable were his exploits, that in 1990, Disney produced a TV movie based on the life of this heroic, life-saving dog. The title was "Chips the War Dog." There are many inspiring pets and animals in the world, but military working dogs have a special place in the hearts of many. In today's patriotic political climate and the constant presence of war in our lives, we have a special reverence and respect for our Soldiers and there's nothing like seeing a Soldier and his dog together to instill that feeling of pride, and possibly bring out a tear or two.

Our Soldiers overseas today often have specially trained canine troops along with them. These dogs are well trained and function as part of the unit, doing what they have been trained to do, but the deep devotion between the handlers and their dogs is just as intense as the feeling of family that all Soldiers have toward one another. Photos emerge online showing our Soldiers in full battle gear with their dogs' right alongside them. The dogs that are our Soldier's friends aren't always fellow Soldiers, either. The troops in Iraq and Afghanistan have rescued and cared for many stray dogs, and programs such as the Puppy Rescue Mission were created to help bring these adopted dogs home with their Soldiers. For more information on how to help bring adopted dogs home with their Soldiers, visit the Puppy Rescue Mission at <http://www.puppyrescuemission.com>. [Source: Together We Served | February 18, 2018 ++]

Port Chicago ► 1944 Ammunition Depot Explosion

A. D. Hamilton, Lawrence Matthews, James Bridges, and Leroy Hughes are the names of just four of the 320 sailors that died in the Port Chicago disaster. On July 17, 1944, a massive explosion occurred at the ammunition depot of Port Chicago. It was the worst home front disaster in World War II. Over 10,000 tons of explosives detonated, sinking two ships and killing over 300 sailors, most of whom were African-American. The disaster sparked controversy. Inadequate training, hazardous conditions and irresponsible labor practices all contributed to the disaster.

Following the disaster, many of the surviving sailors felt that their commanders had not properly addressed these issues when they asked them to continue to work. In response, the sailors protested with a work stoppage. Although no violence or threat of violence occurred, the Navy viewed the work stoppage as

a mutiny. In September 1944, the Navy charged 50 of the Port Chicago sailors with disobeying orders and initiating a mutiny. A court martial found them guilty in October.



Damage at Port Chicago (left) following the massive blast that killed 320 sailors. The remnants of the SS Quinault Victory appear in the background. The 50 sailors from Port Chicago (right) charged with mutiny appear at their court martial in 1944.

The disaster at Port Chicago and its aftermath are important moments in African-American history. The events caught the attention of civil rights activist and chief counsel of the NAACP, Thurgood Marshall. He believed that the court martial unjustly charged the sailors with mutiny. Furthermore, he called for a government investigation of the Navy's practice of assigning African-American service members to segregated support roles, as well as the unsafe conditions that the sailors worked in. Bringing national attention to these issues contributed to the executive order that desegregated the military in 1948. The legacies of the Port Chicago sailors still resonate today.

Many of the sailors that died in the Port Chicago disaster are now buried at Golden Gate National Cemetery. Last year, the Veterans Legacy Program partnered with San Francisco State University to conduct research on Veterans buried at local national cemeteries. The students and faculty created a series of short films about the stories that they discovered at Golden Gate and San Francisco National Cemeteries. One of the films highlights the Port Chicago disaster and shares the legacies that came from it. This partnership is one of the ongoing efforts to modernize the way that we memorialize Veterans. In May 2016, the National Cemetery Administration (NCA) launched the Veterans Legacy Program in order to engage students, teachers, and the public with stories about the lives and service of Veterans. To find out more about the Veterans Legacy Program visit their website <https://www.cem.va.gov/legacy>.

NCA is proud to support local filmmakers, storytellers, and students engaging with the stories of Veterans in their local national cemeteries. They may raise issues of local interest or even controversy. It is hoped this will encourage all viewers to learn more about the Veterans and their circumstances. The views expressed by parties in the films are not those of NCA, but presented as part of the plurality of perspectives and views surrounding the life and service of American Veterans. If you would like to learn more about the Port Chicago disaster and its aftermath, read the Naval History and Heritage Command's publication found at <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/p/port-chicago-ca-explosion.html>. In recognition of Black History Month, NCA is proud to share the film "Remembering Port Chicago." which can be viewed at https://youtu.be/AdoMjk_CIHs. [Source: Vantage Point | Kenneth Holliday | February 22, 2018 ++]

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

Medal of Honor Citations ► Gary~Donald A | WWII



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

DONALD ARTHUR GARY

Rank and organization: Lieutenant, Junior Grade, U.S. Navy, U.S.S. Franklin

Place and date: Japanese Home Islands near Kobe, Japan, 19 March 1945

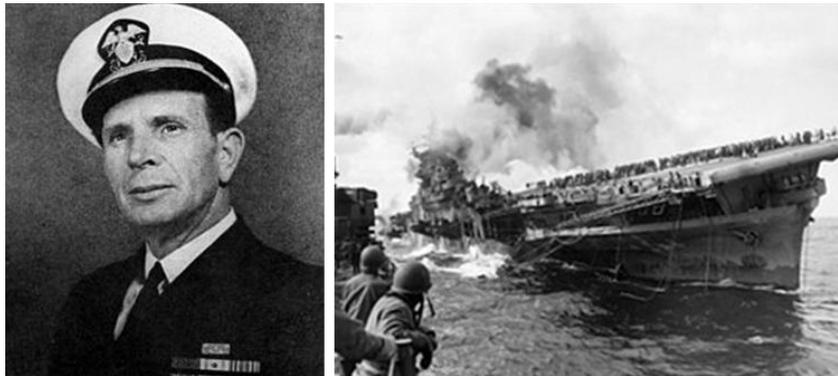
Entered service: Findlay, OH in December 1919

Born: Findlay, OH July 23, 1901

Citation

For conspicuous gallantry and intrepidity at the risk of his life above and beyond the call of duty as an engineering officer attached to the U.S.S. Franklin when that vessel was fiercely attacked by enemy aircraft during the operations against the Japanese Home Islands near Kobe, Japan, 19 March 1945. Stationed on the third deck when the ship was rocked by a series of violent explosions set off in her own ready bombs, rockets, and ammunition by the hostile attack, Lt. (j.g.) Gary unhesitatingly risked his life to assist several hundred men trapped in a messing compartment filled with smoke, and with no apparent egress. As the imperiled men below decks became increasingly panic stricken under the raging fury of incessant explosions, he confidently assured them he would find a means of effecting their release and, groping through the dark, debris-filled corridors, ultimately discovered an escapeway. Stanchly determined, he struggled back to the messing compartment 3 times despite menacing flames, flooding water, and the ominous threat of sudden additional explosions, on each occasion calmly leading his men through the blanketing pall of smoke until the last one had been saved. Selfless in his concern for his ship and his fellows, he constantly rallied others about him, repeatedly organized and led fire-fighting parties into the blazing inferno on the flight deck and, when firerooms 1 and 2 were found to be inoperable, entered the No. 3 fireroom and directed the raising of steam in 1 boiler in the face of extreme difficulty and hazard. An inspiring and courageous leader, Lt. (j.g.) Gary rendered self-sacrificing service under the most perilous

conditions and, by his heroic initiative, fortitude, and valor, was responsible for the saving of several hundred lives. His conduct throughout reflects the highest credit upon himself and upon the U.S. Naval Service.



Cmdr. Donald A. Gary, 1945 (left).Franklin listing (right) , with crew on deck, March 1945; seen from cruiser USS Santa Fe alongside

For his heroism on the U.S.S. Franklin, he was awarded the Medal of Honor in February 1946. Subsequently promoted to the ranks of lieutenant and lieutenant commander, Gary remained with *Franklin* until she was decommissioned in February 1947. He was then assigned to the Naval Disciplinary Barracks at Terminal Island, California, where he served until relieved of active duty pending retirement, which took place in June 1950. On the basis of his combat awards, he was advanced to the rank of commander upon retirement. Commander Donald A. Gary died in 1977 and was buried in Fort Rosecrans National Cemetery, San Diego, California. In 1983, the guided missile frigate USS Gary (FFG-51) was named in honor of Donald A. Gary.

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

WWII Bomber Nose Art ► (1) Heavenly Body

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





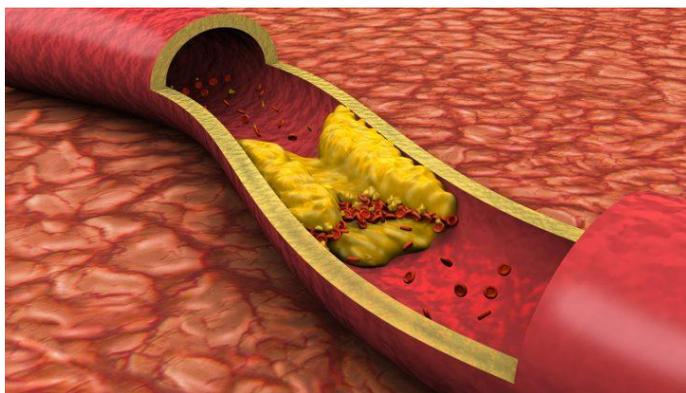
TRICARE Pharmacy Pilot ► Medication Adherence Pilot Program

Take a daily drug for diabetes or high cholesterol? Your medication now could cost less or be free thanks to a new TRICARE pilot program. The Medication Adherence Pilot Program, ordered by Congress in 2016, started 1 FEB and will run until 2023. Under the program, **Lantus Pens**, a brand-name insulin shot used to manage diabetes, will be available for reduced cost. **Rosuvastatin**, the generic version of the cholesterol management drug Crestor, will be free. About 136,000 beneficiaries will be included in the pilot, officials said. About 16,000 orders for Lantus Pens are placed monthly through TRICARE at retail and mail order pharmacies, while about 40,000 orders of Rosuvastatin are filled, they said.

The change hits even as prices for all other medications go up. That includes, for the first time ever, a new, out-of-pocket fee for generic drugs received through the system's mail-order pharmacy. In the past, those medications had been free. Starting Feb. 1, they carry a \$7 fee for a 90-day supply. That means Rosuvastatin is now the only medication available by mail or at a retail pharmacy that carries no out-of-pocket cost. Drugs received at a military treatment facility continue to be free.

Before the pilot program, Lantus Pens cost \$28 for a 30-day supply at an in-network retail pharmacy, and \$24 for a 90-day supply through mail-order. Under the program, the drug will cost \$11 for a 30-day supply at a retail pharmacy and \$7 for the 90-day supply received by mail. Rosuvastatin, which had cost \$11 for a 30-day supply at an in-network retail pharmacy or \$7 for a 90-day supply by mail order, will instead be free from both sources. The pilot program is designed to test whether patients experiencing Diabetes and Cholesterol problems are more likely to follow their medication treatment plans when the required drugs are reduced in price or free, officials said. [Source: MOAA | Amy Bushatz | February 17, 2018 ++]

Cholesterol Update 03 ► What You Should Know About It



Can you answer?

1. Which is the good cholesterol: LDL or HDL?
2. Can you have too much cholesterol and feel just fine?
3. Which should you avoid: trans fat or saturated fat?
4. Should you eat more vegetables or more whole grains?

Sorry. No answers to the quiz on this page but [you will find the answers here](#). And that's the point – this is important enough to your health that you should look for – and know – the answers to these questions. They could save your life. On that page, you will find out what you can do to prevent or control high cholesterol. And some very important facts, like this:

- Cholesterol is a fat-like material that provides structure for your body's cells. Your liver makes most of the cholesterol your body needs, but you also get some from the foods you eat.
- Too much cholesterol can cause a sticky substance (plaque) to build up in your blood vessels. This plaque can block blood vessels and cause heart attacks and strokes.

I feel fine...

OK, here's the answer to question number two: Most people with high cholesterol feel healthy and don't have symptoms. The only way to know if you have high cholesterol is to have your cholesterol checked. When did you have your last physical? at that physical did you ask your provider what your cholesterol numbers were and did you write them down. That is something you should always do. Keep track with the log at the MyHealthVet website: <https://www.myhealth.va.gov/mhv-portal-web/vitals>. Your provider may prescribe medicine to help lower your cholesterol.

- Take your medicine every day, or as directed by your provider.
- If your cholesterol numbers get lower, it's because your medicine is working. Don't stop it or take a lower dose unless your provider says you should.

Here are some questions to ask your provider:

- Is my cholesterol under good control?
- When should I have my cholesterol next checked?
- What is a healthy weight for me?
- Is it safe for me to start doing regular physical activity?

Follow a healthy eating plan and be physically active

- Read food labels and limit foods high in saturated fat, trans fat, and cholesterol.
- Eat plenty of fruits, vegetables, low-fat dairy foods, and whole grains.
- Ask to see a registered dietitian if you need help with a plan.
- "Physical activity" includes any activity that raises your heart rate, such as brisk walking, working in the house or yard, or playing sports.
- Do activity for 10 minutes or more at a time. Aim for at least 2 hours and 30 minutes of activity each week.
- If you are overweight, ask your provider for help with an eating and physical activity plan to lose weight

For more information, contact your local VA Medical Center or Health Clinic. You can also check out what VA has to say at: https://www.prevention.va.gov/Preventing_Diseases/High_Cholesterol.asp. [Source: VAntage Point | February 15, 2018 ++]

TRICARE West Update 01 ► Prime Plan Outpatient Referral & Authorization Waiver

The Defense Health Agency has temporarily waived outpatient specialty referral and authorization requirements for TRICARE West Region beneficiaries enrolled in a TRICARE Prime plan. If you are enrolled in a TRICARE Prime plan, you do not need Health Net Federal Services, LLC (HNFS) approval for TRICARE-covered services referred by your provider Jan. 1–March 18, 2018, with the exception of inpatient care, and applied behavior analysis (ABA), laboratory developed tests (LDTs) and Extended Health Care Option (ECHO) services.

For outpatient requests other than ABA, LDTs and ECHO, providers do not need to submit requests to HNFS for approval during the waiver period through March 18, 2018. The TRICARE West Region Referral/Authorization Waiver, available at www.tricare-west.com for providers to download, is verification of approval. HNFS will not be issuing separate approvals for services covered under the waiver.

Getting Care during the Waiver Period -- TRICARE Prime beneficiaries may seek covered outpatient services from any TRICARE-authorized provider (network or non-network) with the following documentation:

- A written referral or order for covered procedures, services or equipment from your provider dated between Jan. 1, 2018 and March 18, 2018.
- A copy of the TRICARE West Region Referral/Authorization Waiver Approval Letter from your provider.

Referrals issued by your provider Jan. 1–March 18, 2018 are valid through June 15, 2018. For care referred during the waiver period that extends beyond June 15, 2018, your provider must submit a request to HNFS for approval. HNFS will resume accepting referral and authorization requests for TRICARE Prime patients on March 19, 2018. Referrals issued on after March 19, 2018, must follow TRICARE Prime guidelines or Point of Service charges may apply.

Frequently Asked Questions -- We realize you may have questions about this waiver process – Who is impacted? What is HNFS doing with current referral/authorization inventory? What do I do with approvals already received from HNFS? ... and more. For answers go to the [TRICARE Prime Referral Waiver](#) page for additional information.

[Source: TRICARE West Region | February 22, 2018 ++]

TRICARE West Update 02 ► Difficulty Getting Its Act Together

For the past seven weeks, Tricare beneficiaries in the West region have been facing widespread issues and frustration trying to get medical care. Now, the new contractor is taking steps to address the problems, according to the Defense Health Agency. Families are facing problems getting referrals to specialists. They also are having trouble finding area doctors and other medical providers that are in the Tricare network, they're experiencing enrollment delays, and they're waiting sometimes 45 minutes or more when they call customer service. This has been going on since the new contract began 1 JAN.

“The DHA recognizes the issues with backlogs, call wait times and the number of provider choices for beneficiaries in the West Region. We are committed to working with Health Net Federal Service to resolve them in a timely manner,” said Ken Cannestrini, acting director of Tricare Health Plan, in a 22 FEB announcement from the Defense Health Agency, “Service members, their families and others enrolled in Tricare expect the high standard of service we set for our contracting partners.” The Defense Health Agency has been working with the contractor, Health Net Federal Services, to address the problems, officials said.

For example, the agency is allowing Health Net to waive its usual authorization process for Tricare Prime referrals in the West region, through 18 MAR.

So, if beneficiaries get a referral from their primary care provider, they can download a referral and authorization letter, then seek outpatient specialty care services that are covered by Tricare. These waiver approvals are valid for services received through June 15. “That should eliminate a barrier to access to care that some families are facing right now, and we’re grateful for that,” said Karen Ruedisueli, deputy director of government relations for the National Military Family Association. “However, we hope that the Defense Health Agency is really putting the pressure on Health Net to put together an action plan and put every resource against fixing the rest of this. It’s been seven weeks now.”

Sweeping changes

As of 1 JAN, Tricare in the U.S. shrank from three regions to two. The geographic area of Tricare West didn’t change, but the contractor changed to Health Net Federal Services. Tricare North and Tricare South combined to form Tricare East, with the contractor Humana Military, which previously had the contract for Tricare South. The TRICARE West Region includes the states of Alaska, Arizona, California, Colorado, Hawaii, Idaho, Iowa (except the Rock Island Arsenal area), Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri (except the St. Louis area), Montana, Nebraska, Nevada, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oregon, South Dakota, Texas (areas of Western Texas only), Utah, Washington, and Wyoming.

Along with the change in contractors, Tricare has undergone a number of other changes, including replacing Tricare Standard and Tricare Extra with a single plan dubbed Tricare Select. The process has been frustrating for patients and medical providers alike, and Military Times has received some complaints from military families. In a post on Tricare’s public Facebook page, a referrals coordinator for an internal medicine clinic in Washington state said she had been diligent in providing Health Net with credentials and contracting information for all of their providers, well ahead of the 1 JAN transition. But as of her post on 13 FEB, they’d been told that Health Net was behind on credentialing and unable to provide contracting information.

As a result, she wrote, “There are patients waiting to see oncologists, surgeons, etc., for LIFE THREATENING concerns that are forced to wait for referrals to be approved, or see these specialists by paying for services out of their own pocket.” She notes that when she calls to ask about referrals, there is a wait time of anywhere from 45 to 93 minutes. Health Net has had to create a new network of providers, and is having challenges building that network. “We’re hearing from some people who say their provider network has essentially gone away in some areas,” said Ruedisueli. “There are reports that there is no hospital in the network in their local area, and some have asked, ‘where did all the specialists go?’ “ she said. “It’s hard to tell at this point how much of that is truly reflecting a network that has been decimated, versus they haven’t gotten the provider directories totally up and running.”

Working on solutions

Health Net is “working to improve the completeness and accuracy of [its] provider directory,” according to the announcement from the Defense Health Agency. The call volume at the contractors’ call centers for both the West and East regions has been overwhelming and far exceeded expectations, Ruedisueli said. Beneficiaries have had questions about the new contract but also about the changes in Tricare, she said. “Tricare did an abysmal job with communicating the news about the new co-pays, so people are being confronted at their providers’ offices, they’re getting bills in the mail, and there’s a lot of confusion about the new co-pays. Who’s taking the brunt of all that? Health Net, and Humana in the East.”

While the Tricare East contractor, Humana Military, had similar customer service issues, they’ve been able to react more quickly, she said. In the West region, however, the problem seems to be snowballing, she said. Health Net is hiring additional temporary staff and cross-training at their call center, according to the announcement. There’s also an enrollment backlog, partly because of the required system-wide three-week

enrollment freeze in December. To address the enrollment backlog, Health Net is allowing beneficiaries in Tricare Prime whose primary care manager isn't in the network, or who haven't yet been assigned one, to see any Tricare-authorized PCM through 31 MAR. Point of service charges won't apply.

"I can't say we're totally surprised by this, having gone through it with the United Health Care transition in 2013, but we were hoping for something that would be smoother," Ruedisueli said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 23, 2018 ++]

Mononucleosis ► Kissing Disease | It's A One-and-Done Event



Tremendous fatigue, a very sore throat and achy body – Cheryl vividly recalls how bad she felt after coming down with infectious mononucleosis, commonly called mono, during her sophomore year at the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, New York. "I felt really dizzy, but it wasn't just my head," said Cheryl, whose last name isn't being used to respect her privacy. "It was like my whole body was twirling around inside."

Mono is a contagious disease caused by the Epstein-Barr virus, or EBV. Spread through saliva, mono's nickname is the "kissing disease." But transmission of the virus isn't limited to kissing; people can become infected by using someone else's utensils or drinking from the same container, as Cheryl believes happened to her. She shared a cup with another member of the West Point orienteering team who later was diagnosed with mono ahead of Cheryl. Teenagers and young adults are more likely than others to get mono. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 25 percent of people in this age range who are exposed to EBV will develop mono.

"Over 90 percent of adults will have antibodies to mono – meaning, at some point in their lives they've been exposed," said Dr. Jason Okulicz, an Air Force lieutenant colonel and chief of the Infectious Disease Service at San Antonio Military Medical Center in Texas. "It's also possible to not have any symptoms, though that's more likely for young children," he said. Symptoms can occur anywhere from four to six weeks after being infected, according to the CDC. Along with what Cheryl experienced, they can include swollen lymph nodes in the neck and armpits, a fever, and a rash. As bad as patients might feel, mono is a self-limiting illness for the vast majority, Okulicz said. That means it resolves on its own, usually over several weeks. "The fatigue might linger for a few weeks after that, but long-term effects on a person's overall health are uncommon," he said.

Another good thing about mono? It's a one-and-done event. "With the flu, there are many different types and you can get infected numerous times over your lifetime," Okulicz said. "But infectious mononucleosis doesn't recur." One possible complication of mono is an enlarged spleen that can rupture when performing strenuous exercises or engaging in contact sports. That's why, even though an enlarged spleen is rare,

doctors recommend people with mono avoid these activities at least three or four weeks after illness, Okulicz said. Any mono patient experiencing abdominal pain should seek help immediately, he added. Otherwise, Okulicz said, there's not much to do for mono except offer supportive care: lozenges for a sore throat; over-the-counter medications for pain and fever; plenty of fluids to stay hydrated; and, of course, rest.

Cheryl spent a week in Keller Army Community Hospital recuperating. Classmates delivered her books and assignments so she could keep up with her schoolwork. She said she felt better by the time she was discharged, but it took several weeks before the fatigue went away "I didn't realize how long it would take to feel like myself again," she said. [Source: TRICARE Communications | February 2, 2018 ++]

Atrial Fibrillation Update 01 ► Causes, Risk Factors & Complications

Atrial fibrillation is an irregular and often rapid heart rate that occurs when the two upper chambers of your heart (atria) experience chaotic electrical signals. Your heart consists of four chambers — two upper chambers (atria) and two lower chambers (ventricles). Within the upper right chamber of your heart (right atrium) is a group of cells called the sinus node. This is your heart's natural pacemaker. The sinus node produces the impulse that normally starts each heartbeat.

Normally, the impulse travels first through the atria and then through a connecting pathway between the upper and lower chambers of your heart called the atrioventricular (AV) node. As the signal passes from the sinus node through the atria, they contract, pumping blood from your atria into the ventricles below. As the signal passes through the AV node to the ventricles, it signals the ventricles to contract, pumping blood out to your body. In atrial fibrillation, the upper chambers of your heart (atria) experience chaotic electrical signals. As a result, they quiver. The AV node — the electrical connection between the atria and the ventricles — is bombarded with impulses trying to get through to the ventricles. The ventricles also beat rapidly, but not as rapidly as the atria, as not all the impulses get through. The reason is that the AV node is like a highway on-ramp — only so many vehicles can get on at one time. The result is a fast and irregular heart rhythm. The heart rate in atrial fibrillation may range from 100 to 175 beats a minute. The normal range for a heart rate is 60 to 100 beats a minute.

Possible causes -- Abnormalities or damage to the heart's structure are the most common cause of atrial fibrillation. Possible causes of atrial fibrillation include:

- High blood pressure and/or Heart attacks
- Coronary artery disease
- Abnormal heart valves or heart defects you're born with (congenital)
- An overactive thyroid gland or other metabolic imbalance
- Exposure to stimulants, such as medications, caffeine, tobacco or alcohol
- Sick sinus syndrome — improper functioning of the heart's natural pacemaker
- Lung diseases
- Previous heart surgery
- Viral infections
- Stress due to pneumonia, surgery or other illnesses
- Sleep apnea

However, some people who have atrial fibrillation don't have any heart defects or damage, a condition called lone atrial fibrillation. In lone atrial fibrillation, the cause is often unclear, and serious complications are rare.

Atrial flutter -- Atrial flutter is similar to atrial fibrillation, but the rhythm in your atria is more organized and less chaotic than the abnormal patterns common with atrial fibrillation. Sometimes you may have atrial flutter that develops into atrial fibrillation and vice versa. The risk factors for and the symptoms and causes of atrial flutter are similar to those of atrial fibrillation. For example, strokes are also a concern in someone with atrial flutter. As with atrial fibrillation, atrial flutter is usually not life-threatening when it's properly treated.

Risk factors -- Certain factors may increase your risk of developing atrial fibrillation. These include:

- Age. The older you are, the greater your risk
- Heart disease. Anyone with heart disease — such as heart valve problems, congenital heart disease, congestive heart failure, coronary artery disease, or a history of heart attack or heart surgery — has an increased risk of atrial fibrillation.
- High blood pressure. Having high blood pressure, especially if it's not well-controlled with lifestyle changes or medications, can increase your risk of atrial fibrillation.
- Other chronic conditions. People with certain chronic conditions such as thyroid problems, sleep apnea, metabolic syndrome, diabetes, chronic kidney disease or lung disease have an increased risk of atrial fibrillation.
- Drinking alcohol. For some people, drinking alcohol can trigger an episode of atrial fibrillation. Binge drinking may put you at an even higher risk.
- Obesity. People who are obese are at higher risk of developing atrial fibrillation.
- Family history. An increased risk of atrial fibrillation is present in some families.

Complications -- Sometimes atrial fibrillation can lead to the following complications:

- Stroke. In atrial fibrillation, the chaotic rhythm may cause blood to pool in your heart's upper chambers (atria) and form clots. If a blood clot forms, it could dislodge from your heart and travel to your brain. There it might block blood flow, causing a stroke.
- The risk of a stroke in atrial fibrillation depends on your age (you have a higher risk as you age) and on whether you have high blood pressure, diabetes, a history of heart failure or previous stroke, and other factors. Certain medications, such as blood thinners, can greatly lower your risk of a stroke or the damage to other organs caused by blood clots.
- Heart failure. Atrial fibrillation, especially if not controlled, may weaken the heart and lead to heart failure — a condition in which your heart can't circulate enough blood to meet your body's needs.

Prevention -- To prevent atrial fibrillation, it's important to live a heart-healthy lifestyle to reduce your risk of heart disease. A healthy lifestyle may include:

- Eating a heart-healthy diet and increasing your physical activity
- Avoiding smoking and maintaining a healthy weight
- Limiting or avoiding caffeine and alcohol
- Reducing stress, as intense stress and anger can cause heart rhythm problems
- Using over-the-counter medications with caution, as some cold and cough medications contain stimulants that may trigger a rapid heartbeat

[Note: Veterans already rated 50% with the VA for sleep apnea might want to get tested for Atrial Fibrillation. If found it could raise their rating as high as 90%.]

[Source: Mayo Clinic | January 2018 ++]

Traumatic Brain Injury Update 66 ► Detection With New Type Blood Test

A new type of blood test is being used to detect mild traumatic brain injury, Army researchers have announced. It is the first blood test for use in evaluating mild TBI to be approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration, according to a 14 FEB release from the Army Medical Materiel Development Activity. “There are blood tests for many diseases on the market, but this is the first one dedicated to traumatic brain injury,” said Army Lt. Col. Kara Schmid, project manager for the Neurotrauma and Psychological Health Project Management Office at the USAMMDA at Fort Detrick, Maryland. “For the first time, medical personnel won’t have to rely only on a description of the incident and symptoms, but will have access to an objective marker of injury to the brain, all from a simple blood test,” Schmid said. “This test holds promise to change the practice of medicine for brain injury.”

The goal is to have the blood test ready for fielding to the force in the next year to 18 months, Schmid told Military Times. The blood test can help fill a critical need to quickly evaluate injured troops in remote locations, where there is a “knowledge gap” in assessing how severe the injury is, said Army Col. Sidney Hinds, coordinator of the DoD Brain Health Research Program. The Defense Department has been working for more than a decade to find ways to diagnose and evaluate TBI in service members. TBI has been called the signature wound of the recent wars, with more than 375,000 cases diagnosed since 2000. More than four in five of those cases are considered to be mild TBI. Of the 375,230 TBI cases, the Army has had 220,014 cases, with 50,937 in the Navy, 50,995 in the Air Force and 53,284 in the Marine Corps, according to DoD records.

The new blood test works by identifying two protein markers that are specific to the brain. After an injury, these rapidly appear in the blood. Medical professionals can then evaluate the patient and assess whether the patient needs a CT scan and other treatment. Limited user testing will be done at three military treatment facilities in this fall, while two more configurations of the product are in development, Schmid said. The current version of the analytical tool, also referred to as an assay, can be used in military hospitals with clinical laboratories.

Deployed units would see future versions that are in the works for combat support hospitals and, potentially, battalion aid stations, Schmid said. “We are currently developing a configuration of the assay that could be supported, logistically, at the point of injury,” Schmid said. However, she added, decisions to deploy it will depend on several factors including approved uses for it, and what providers are available to use it at the point of injury.

The U.S. Army Medical Research and Materiel Command worked with Banyan Biomarkers, Inc. to develop the technology, and Banyan Biomarkers received FDA approval to market the brain trauma indicator, or BTI. The effort has also included scientists at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research, the University of Florida and partnerships with industry and academia. “When we started this development effort, many people were skeptical that you could find brain proteins in the blood after a head injury, especially in those classified as mild TBI,” Schmid said. “This test will open the doors to what blood based biomarkers can do for the evaluation of TBI.” [Source: NavyTimes | Kathleen Curthoys | February 22, 2018 ++]

Shingles Update 08 ► New, More Effective Vaccine

It might be time to get vaccinated against shingles if you’re 50 or older. Folks in this age group — even people who are healthy — should get a new shingles vaccine sold under the name **Shingrix**, according to the

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The CDC’s vaccine recommendations include a shingles vaccine for adults age 50 and older. Previously, the CDC specified a different shingles vaccine, **Zostavax**, as the go-to prevention for shingles. However, that recommendation only applied to folks 60 and older. The CDC still recommends Zostavax as an effective treatment for shingles, but now says Shingrix is the better option for most people.

The new shingles vaccination recommendation was strongly supported, with the CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices voting 14-1 to recommend Shingrix for the 50-and-older age group. That vote was made in October, but the details on which the committee based that decision were just recently released.



About shingles -- Shingles is a painful, blistering rash. The rash typically clears up within a few weeks, although it can lead to prolonged complications. According to the CDC, the most common complication is postherpetic neuralgia, a pain that can last for months or years after the rash is gone. Shingles, also known as herpes zoster, is caused by the varicella zoster virus (VZV), which also causes chickenpox. The CDC explains: “After a person recovers from chickenpox, the virus stays dormant (inactive) in the body. Scientists aren’t sure why the virus can reactivate years later, causing shingles.” So, anyone who has recovered from chickenpox can get shingles, although the risk of developing shingles increases with age. In the U.S., close to 1 in 3 people will develop it at some point.

About the new vaccine -- “Shingrix” is the trade name for the new shingles vaccine, the recombinant zoster vaccine, or RZV. Part of the big deal about Shingrix — which is manufactured by the pharmaceutical company GlaxoSmithKline — is its effectiveness. The CDC’s Advisory Committee on Immunization Practices reports that clinical trials found the vaccine is more than 90 percent effective in preventing shingles in folks age 50 and older. Zostavax, by contrast, is anywhere from 38 percent to 70 percent effective, depending on age. AARP reports that insurance companies will be more likely to cover Shingrix in light of the CDC’s official recommendation. GlaxoSmithKline notes that broad coverage is expected to kick in starting in April. That should give you ample time to talk to your doctor about whether a shingles vaccine is best for you.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | February 22, 2018 ++]

Diabetes Update 14 ► **VA Making Progress in Foot Ulcer Prevention**

Researchers at the VA New York Harbor Healthcare System are making steady progress on a four-year, \$1.1 million award from the VA Rehabilitation Research and Development Service to find a way to prevent the recurrence of diabetic foot ulcers in Veterans who had a previous foot ulcer that healed. The project, known as “STEP UP to Avert Amputation in Diabetes,” is now in its third year. STEP UP stands for Self-monitoring, Thermometry and Educating Patients on Ulcer Prevention.

The study is encouraging patients to take charge of their own preventive care. The program aims to motivate them to adhere to recommended self-care practices and to monitor the temperature of the soles of their feet using a special foot thermometer. The team is testing the approach in a randomized clinical trial.

To date, nearly 160 patients have been recruited. The team hopes to reach its goal of 238 participants by October 2018. “I used [the thermometer] every morning for 18 months,” said Vietnam Veteran Joseph Hammerschmitt, who recently completed his participation in the study.” It was very simple. I sat myself on the bed and did one foot and then the other. It was good. I didn’t wind up with any foot problems.”

In accordance with STEP UP guidelines, Hammerschmitt has also been washing his feet every day and using a mirror to check that his feet are clear of blisters, ulcers or other lesions. Importantly, he continues these preventive activities even today. He even monitors his physical activity using the study pedometer, which he still carries around with him. Some 25 percent of VA patients nationwide have diabetes. According to lead researcher Sundar Natarajan, M.D., M.Sc., more than 80 percent of the non-traumatic amputations in VA are caused by the complications of diabetic foot ulcers. “This is a huge problem,” he says.

Many Veterans with diabetes have neuropathy related to their illness. Natarajan explains that neuropathy causes patients to lose feeling in their toes or other parts of their feet. It also leads to poor circulation. Along with that, diabetes causes slower healing and a greater chance of infections. Therefore, minor injuries can lead to skin breakdown, ulcer formation, and subsequent infection, without the patient’s noticing until the problem becomes serious. Once the infection has spread, the foot or part of the foot may have to be amputated. That outcome is especially hard on older patients, who often have other complications of diabetes such as kidney or heart disease. Because of this, VA has created special foot clinics and provides supplies to encourage better self-care, such as mirrors for Veterans to examine their feet, and cushioned shoe inserts or special shoes to minimize pressure on foot areas at risk.

However, the biggest challenge is to get patients to follow self-care practices that are shown to reduce the risk of recurrent diabetic foot ulcers. Natarajan says “the first part [of the program] is getting people to take better care of their feet. The second part involves monitoring pre-ulcer foot health with a foot thermometer. These [steps] are in the context of typical diabetes care such as eating healthy, staying physically active, and taking medications as prescribed.” The team incorporates behavioral science methods to motivate patients.

The fact that neuropathic areas at risk for ulceration are associated with increased skin temperature was first noted in leprosy patients. The application of this idea in people with diabetes was pioneered by podiatry researcher Dr. David Armstrong, formerly with VA in Chicago. “We are building on their work to develop and test a stronger intervention and more of a home-based program,” says Natarajan. He notes that Armstrong is a collaborator on the current project.



Health science specialist Madison McCarthy instructs Vietnam-era Air Force Veteran Charles William Bell on the use of the long-handled thermometer. Bell, who uses a walker, said, "It's a marvelous idea."

The thermometer used in Armstrong’s earlier work is no longer available, says Natarajan. His team is now using a special infrared thermometer—the DermaTemp, made by Exergen—that he says is “cheaper and more durable.” Based on early feedback from some Veteran participants in the research, the study team worked with Exergen to develop a long-handled thermometer for those who have physical problems—such as back or knee pain—that make it hard for them to reach the bottom of their feet with the standard thermometer. Patients hold the thermometer probe at six different parts of the sole and record the temperatures. Natarajan says that if a patient has healthy feet, both feet will generate approximately the same temperature levels. However, when an ulcer is about to form, the temperature of that area on the affected foot may be higher, due to inflammation.

If there is a discrepancy between the two feet, the research counselors are consulted. In most situations, having patients rest for 24 hours and elevate the affected foot brings the temperature down to normal. If not, the patient is referred to a foot specialist for follow-up care. That typically involves ruling out non-ulcerative conditions, and providing special shoes that alleviate pressure. Natarajan says foot thermometry is a promising way to help patients detect and stop ulcers before they develop, but the challenge is getting patients to self-monitor their foot temperatures daily. To that end, STEP UP is testing a new phone-counseling approach designed to motivate patients to self-monitor their foot temperatures and take better care of their feet overall. Natarajan says he hopes this will “lead to a new strategy to prevent the devastating complications of foot ulcers.” [Source: Vantage Point | Claudie Benjamin | February 22, 2018 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 437 ► Children's Dental Health - Nurse Advice Line

Children's Dental Health -- February is Children’s Dental Health Month and parents need to know what to look out for to make sure their children have great dental health. Teaching children about taking care of their teeth can be challenging, but it’s important to ensure a good foundation for building lifelong habits of oral hygiene and health for them as they grow up. There’s a common misconception about infants and toddlers teeth being less important than adult teeth since they aren’t permanent, but this idea can lead to harmful conditions in a child’s mouth including Early Childhood Caries. Early Childhood Caries is when one or more baby teeth in a child zero to six-year-old has decayed, missing or has had a filling in their mouth. Here are some tips to prevent ECC in your child and give them a head start in oral hygiene:

- Take your children to early and regular dental exams. A baby’s first dental appointment should be scheduled within six months of their first tooth, but no later than their first birthday.
- Brush or rinse your child’s teeth after administering sugary medications.
- And brush your child’s teeth twice a day with fluoridated toothpaste.

If you have coverage under the TRICARE Dental Program, your child will be automatically enrolled on the first day of the month following his or her first birthday. For more information on the TRICARE Dental Program, visit www.TRICARE.mil/tdp.

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Nurse Advice Line -- When an urgent health problem arises, it’s hard to know whether you should tough it out or seek medical care. Try calling the nurse advice line for advice on health care questions first. Registered nurses can help you decide whether you should go to an urgent care center. Calling the nurse advice line before seeking care can save time and money. When you call, you’ll be asked several medical questions based on your symptoms. These questions were developed by physicians to help the nurses assess your medical problem accurately. If you’re not calling for yourself, please make sure that the family member in question is present so you can assess their condition as the nurse asks questions. The nurse may want to talk to your family member directly if the person is over 13 years old. Your nurse may give you advice on

home treatments and remedies if self-care is recommended. But if you need urgent care, the nurse will help you with next steps. Access the nurse advice line at 1-800-874-2273 and select option 1. Get more information about the nurse advice line at www.TRICARE.mil/nal.

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The above is from the TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin, an update on the latest news to help you make the best use of your TRICARE benefit. [Source: <http://www.tricare.mil/podcast> | February 16, 2018 ++]

TRICARE Podcast 438 ► Heart Health - Seasonal Affective Disorder - NG/Reserve Webinar

Heart Health -- February is National Heart Health Month. Here are five tips to help you take care of your heart.

Tip #1: Grasp the reality. Cardiovascular Disease, which includes heart disease, stroke and high blood pressure, is the most common source of death in the U.S. Roughly 610,000 people die of heart disease every year in the U.S. One woman dies every minute and African American women are more likely to die from heart disease than all other Americans.

Tip #2: Know your risk. Certain conditions and behaviors raise your risk for heart disease. These include:

- High blood pressure, high cholesterol or diabetes
- Unhealthy diet, obesity and a lack of physical inactivity
- Age, sex, race and ethnicity
- Tobacco use
- Consumption of alcohol in excess

Tip #3: Seek Preventive Care. Preventive health can help detect heart conditions before they become serious. TRICARE covers:

- Cardiovascular Disease screenings, including periodic blood pressure and cholesterol checks.
- Preventive services from primary care managers or from any network provider without a referral or authorization.
- Behavioral interventions for obesity
- Type 2 diabetes screening

Tip #4: Manage your risk. You can minimize your risk for heart disease by incorporating the following behaviors into your daily life:

- Eat a healthy diet
- Maintain a healthy weight
- Exercise regularly
- Stop smoking
- Limit alcohol

Tip #5: Learn the signs. Would you be able to recognize the signs of a heart attack? They include:

- Chest pain or discomfort
- Discomfort in other areas of the upper body, including the jaw, neck and arm
- Shortness of breath
- Other symptoms that may include nausea, light-headedness or breaking out in a cold sweat. If you think that you or someone you know is having a heart attack, call **911** immediately.

This February, take steps to care for your heart.

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Seasonal Affective Disorder -- During the winter months, the days are shorter. Lack of sunlight can affect your mood, which can lead to a form of depression called Seasonal Affective Disorder or SAD. People with this disorder experience sadness, feelings of hopelessness, lack of energy or motivation and fatigue. Most research suggests that SAD is caused by a lack of sunlight exposure. Not getting enough natural light can throw off people's internal clocks, hormone production and serotonin levels. SAD usually goes away on its own with time as the weather improves and the days become longer again. But there are treatments that can help your symptoms.

It's normal to feel down sometimes, but if this feeling lasts for days at a time and you don't have the motivation for activities you'd normally enjoy, contact your doctor. This is especially important if your sleep patterns and appetite have changes, or if you feel hopeless, think about suicide or turn to alcohol when you need comfort or relaxation. TRICARE offers mental health services. Learn more at www.tricare.mil/mentalhealth.

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NG/Reserve Webinar -- On March 6, 2018, TRICARE will hold a webinar covering TRICARE options for National Guard and Reserve members. These beneficiaries experience various stages of activation throughout their military careers. This webinar will discuss those stages and their impact on health care eligibility. It will also cover the medical, dental and pharmacy options provided by TRICARE to National Guard and Reserve members and their families. Stay tuned to www.tricare.mil for registration information.

TRICARE provides resources to help National Guard and Reserve members and their families understand their TRICARE coverage options. Visit www.tricare.mil/publications and search "National Guard and Reserve" to view them. For information on TRICARE Reserve Select, visit www.tricare.mil/trs. To learn more about TRICARE Retired Reserve, visit www.tricare.mil/trr.

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* Finances *



IRS Scam Update 08 ► Fraudulent Filing's Tax Refund

The IRS is [warning taxpayers](#) about a new scam that is "quickly growing." The scheme emerged soon after the start of the tax filing season. Within a few days, the number of potential victims had jumped from a few hundred to several thousand, according to the IRS.

How the Scam Works:

- The scammers are going after tax refunds by filing fraudulent tax returns — but with a new twist. Instead of redirecting the refund money to their own bank accounts, scammers let the money go into taxpayers' bank accounts.

- Then, the scammers try to trick taxpayers into sending the money to them. The crooks use various techniques to this end, the IRS explains:
 - “In one version of the scam, criminals posing as debt collection agency officials acting on behalf of the IRS contacted the taxpayers to say a refund was deposited in error, and they asked the taxpayers to forward the money to their collection agency.”
 - “In another version, the taxpayer who received the erroneous refund gets an automated call with a recorded voice saying he is from the IRS and threatens the taxpayer with criminal fraud charges, an arrest warrant and a ‘blacklisting’ of their Social Security number. The recorded voice gives the taxpayer a case number and a telephone number to call to return the refund.”

The IRS also notes the scam could evolve further. In fact, the agency [cautioned tax pros](#) about the scam more than a week before the IRS warned taxpayers that the scam is growing. So, prevention of this type of scam depends largely on the tax pros and their cybersecurity measures. Once cybercriminals have breached computers and stolen your sensitive information, there’s little you can do to stop them from using your data fraudulently. You can take steps to stop them from stealing your tax refund, however.

[Filing your taxes early](#) is one of the best ways to ensure you claim your refund before a crook does. Beyond that, be aware of the latest tax scams so you can recognize them and thus better avoid becoming a victim. Start by checking out:

- [“Tax Hacks 2018: Beware the Dirty Dozen Tax Scams“](#)
- [“10 Golden Rules to Avoid Getting Scammed“](#)

If you fall victim to the latest tax scam, though, the IRS advises that you:

- Follow its [procedures for returning erroneous refunds](#).
- Talk to your bank, as you may need to close the account that scammers accessed.
- Contact your tax preparer immediately.
- Read through the IRS [Taxpayer Guide to Identity Theft](#).

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | February 15, 2018 ++]

Identity Theft Victim Action Update 01 ► Military | Steps To Take

Victims of identity theft can spend painful months and years of frustrated, expensive effort trying to clear up the mess. And service members and families could be more susceptible to this scourge. “Identity theft is a perennial problem, particularly with service members,” said Gerri Walsh, senior vice president for investor education at the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority, better known as FINRA. “When they’re deployed or changing duty stations, there are concerns that people could access their credit. Especially if you’re overseas, you might not even know that it’s happening.” It may be hard to be vigilant while you’re deployed or in the busy weeks before, during and after a permanent change-of-station move. Criminals who steal your personal information can use it to drain your bank account, open new lines of credit in your name or otherwise ruin your credit history and reputation.

Identity theft was the second most reported complaint filed by those in the military community to the Federal Trade Commission’s complaint database in 2016, the latest data available. Of the 115,984 complaints filed by military consumers with the FTC Consumer Sentinel Network database in 2016, 30 percent were related to identity theft. Information wasn’t available on active-duty members filing such complaints; most of the overall military-related complaints — 66 percent — were from military retirees and

veterans. The experts advise a number of steps to guard your personal information, including one option available to active-duty members:

1. Active-duty alert. Service members who deploy can request this alert be placed on their credit reports. It tells creditors to take extra steps before granting credit in that service member's name. This free alert lasts for one year unless the service member asks for it to be removed sooner, and it can be renewed if the deployment lasts longer. To place the active-duty alert, contact one of the credit reporting bureaus — [Experian](#), [Equifax](#) or [TransUnion](#). The one you contact will contact the other two.

2. Initial fraud alert. If you're concerned about identity theft but haven't become a victim (your wallet has been stolen or lost, for instance), contact one of the three credit reporting bureaus for this free fraud alert. Again, they'll contact the other two.

3. Credit freeze. This lets you restrict access to your credit report, making it more difficult for identity thieves to open accounts in your name. You must contact all three credit reporting bureaus for a freeze. It may be a good fit if you know you're not going to need a new line of credit, FINRA's Walsh said, but the freeze may take time to lift. It's not free — costs vary by state — and you'll have to lift it if you want a potential employer or landlord to check your credit.

4. Free credit reports. Visit www.annualcreditreport.com or call 877-322-8228 to regularly check your credit report. You can request the reports from all three credit bureaus at once or space out the requests through the year.

5. Protecting personal information. Don't give out your Social Security number unless it's necessary — when you're applying for a job, for instance. Be careful with your credit card number and other financial information.

6. Strong passwords. This is important on your financial accounts, especially if you access them from work or other computers, Walsh said. "Make sure you're using encryption. If you're using Wi-Fi, make sure you're on a password-protected, encrypted Wi-Fi, not an open Wi-Fi that hackers have been known to take advantage of." If you're in the coffee shop, don't make credit card purchases or check your bank statement. Use multifactor authentication whenever possible, and be sure your cellphone is password-protected.

7. Immediate action. If you see a transaction you don't recognize, contact that financial institution immediately. "You may subsequently remember that it was a legitimate transaction, but it may be that you're on the front end of determining that somebody either guessed at or actually stole your financial information," Walsh said. The institution can help recover any funds taken from your account and take steps to prevent further fraud.

8. Raise the red flags. Consider setting up alerts with your financial institution, Walsh said. Most will allow you to create flags that will notify you when your balance goes below a certain level, for example, or if there's a charge on your credit card above a certain amount.

ALREADY COMPROMISED?

Indicators that someone has stolen your personal information, according to the Federal Trade Commission:

- Withdrawals from your bank account and/or charges on your credit card that you can't explain.
- Debt collectors calling about debts that aren't yours.
- Bills or collection notices for products or services you never received, including medical bills.
- Regular bills and account statements aren't arriving on time.
- A notice from the Internal Revenue Service that someone used your Social Security number, or that more than one tax return was filed in your name, or that you have income from an employer you don't work for.

- Your checks or debit transactions are being refused.
- You're notified that your information was compromised by a data breach at a company or other organization where you do business or have an account, including any breach at a government agency that has your personal information.

[Source: AirForceTimes | Karen Jowers | February 27, 2018 ++]

VA Home Loan Update 56 ► Restored Entitlement

When the Veterans Affairs Department sorts out the 700,000-plus annual users of VA-backed home loans, the most common demographic puts one of the most common VA loan myths to rest. Or it should, at least. Multiple real-estate experts, including those [published on VA's own blog](#), lament the misconception that VA loans can be used only once per veteran. There are a number of potential reasons why this belief still holds sway — beneficiaries can only use the VA loan for a permanent residence, and there is a cap on how much can be guaranteed — but that doesn't make it any less wrong. VA classifies those who receive more than one VA loan under “restored entitlement,” meaning they can obtain a second (or third, or more) loan “because the loan was paid in full and property disposed of.” And repeat business is big: Of the VA loans issued in fiscal year 2016, nearly 44 percent of recipients had restored entitlement. The loans that went out to nearly 310,000 repeat customers totaled \$83.3 billion, per the VA's 2016 budget report.

That figure far outdistances other groups of beneficiaries: Gulf War-era veterans made up 28.6 percent of VA loan users, for instance, and under VA's definition, that category spans all veterans from August 1990 to the present.

Borrowers still in uniform made up 12.5 percent of the total. Many of these loans are refinances, so some borrowers are re-engaging with VA without changing their address. And while repeat VA borrowers can return to the program after paying off their initial loan, it is possible to have more than one VA loan at a time, providing the combined benefit doesn't exceed a veteran's benefit cap. If the second loan doesn't fit under that threshold, it may be possible to make up the difference via a down payment.

Read more about VA's loan limits [here](#). Ready to start (or restart) your loan process? Visit the [VA Loan Center](#). [Source: MilitaryTimes | Kevin Lilley | February 7, 2018 ++]

VA Home Loan Update 57 ► Joint Loan Facts You Should Know

If your name won't be the only one on your mortgage, you may need to do a bit more homework when it comes to the [VA loan](#) process. [Eligibility requirements](#) and [basic paperwork needs](#) won't change, but other portions of the path between offer sheet and closing may have a few more hurdles. Here are a few facts to keep in mind:

1. What is “joint”? It seems simple, but not every loan involving more than one person is a joint loan. If your spouse is on the loan, it's only considered “joint” if he or she is also using VA loan benefits. Otherwise, it's not processed under joint guidelines. “Joint” applies to all other instances when more than one individual is part of the loan process, including multiple VA loan benefit users and/or partners who are not spouses of the veteran(s) involved. One exception: If you intend to marry the other individual on the loan prior to closing, the process can be started as a non-joint loan and finished that way if the marriage takes place.

2. Vets must stand alone. [VA's Lenders Handbook](#) states that when lenders are considering a joint loan, they should not allow other borrowers to compensate for perceived financial shortcomings *of the veteran*. This means a veteran's strong financial situation can be used to boost the case of a nonveteran (or individual not using VA benefits) attached to the loan, but not the other way around. With loans involving multiple veterans, their financial strength should be considered on an individual basis.

3. Equal share. In loans with multiple veterans, VA will apply equal amounts of each veteran's entitlement to the loan guaranty amount. In cases where the loan makes this impossible (borrowers with different entitlement amounts each seeking to maximize their benefit, for instance), all parties must agree to the unequal charges.

4. Some money down. VA only guarantees a veteran's part of a joint loan. In cases where the loan exceeds the guaranty amount, it's likely the lender will require a down payment.

5. Funding fees stay put. Each veteran will be assessed a funding fee as if they were applying for their own VA-backed loan, based on the amount of the loan they're taking on. Get a funding fee breakdown [here](#).

6. Residency rules. Joint loans don't allow veterans using their VA loan benefit to escape residency requirements, but others on the loan who aren't using VA benefits don't have to promise to live in the home.

7. Size restrictions. Veterans have more flexibility on property sizes when it comes to joint loans. Two veterans on a joint loan using VA benefits, for instance, may purchase a property with up to six family units, plus a business unit. The number of family units would increase by one with every other VA-backed veteran on the loan.

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Get more from VA's Lenders Handbook [here](#). [Source: MilitaryTimes | Kevin Lilley | February 8, 2018 ++]

[Nigerian Letter Scam](#) ► False Inheritance | A Crafty New Twist

You're good at your job. So good that a former client remembered your hard work and left you millions of dollars. Sounds like a dream come true, right? It's really a crafty new version of the "Nigerian Letter Scam." BBB has received reports of scammers sending letters to people based on their current or former occupations.

How the Scam Works:

- You receive a letter in the mail that appears to come from a law firm. One recent version used the name "Bill Millman & Associates" and claimed to be located in Toronto. The law firm is contacting you on behalf of their "late client." They have good news! In his will, the client left you several million dollars.
- This may sound like a classic "Nigerian Letter Scam," but there's a twist. This letter is specifically being sent to nurses. It claims that the client remembered the excellent care you gave him "while he was on a business trip in the U.S."
- Scammers are getting more targeted by using professional listings and databases to craft realistic stories. But no matter the form, the scams work the same way. The target is due a large sum of money, but they must pay various "fees," "taxes," or "bribes" to move it from one country to another. No matter how much the victim pays upfront, the money never seems to arrive.

Tips to Avoid This Scam:

- Just throw it out: If you receive a letter from Nigeria, or any other country, asking you to send personal or banking information, do not reply!
- Cashier checks and money orders can be counterfeit. When a stranger sends a check or money, consult with your bank about the time it will take to verify the check. Wait for the funds to clear before withdrawing money. This can be as long as two or three weeks.
- Report it: If you or someone you know has lost money to "4-1-9" fraud, report it to the U.S. Secret Service: secretservice.gov. In Canada, report these scams to the Canadian Anti-Fraud Centre.

For more details about tax scams, read the [full BBB article](#) on this scam. See BBB's tip on [foreign money exchange scams](#) for more advice. To report a scam, go to BBB Scam Tracker page (BBB.org/scamtracker). To protect yourself from all kinds of scams, visit the BBB Scam Tips page (BBB.org/scamtips). [Source: BBB Scam Alert | February 23, 2018 ++]

Making Money After Retirement ► 10 Ways to Do It

So, you're retired — or planning on retiring — and you're looking for ways to keep busy and maybe put a little cash in your pocket. The good news is that your many years of hard work and experience, no matter what field you spent them in, can still be valuable once you retire. But now, you're in a position to leverage those skills in a new way, or try your hand at something completely different. Use the following list of ways to make money as a jumping off point for your next chapter.

1. Walking dogs -- Now that you are retired, you will find yourself with more free time, especially during the day — when you can help out pet owners who work long hours. Dog walkers make money by taking a few dogs for a stroll each day. And that habit of getting out for exercise and fresh air is good for you as well as the dogs. Websites such as www.Rover.com can help you find this type of work.

2. Pet-sitting -- Pet-sitting gives pet lovers a chance to snuggle up with furry friends and make money. Word of mouth may get you some work, but again, you can also find work through pet-sitting sites like www.Rover.com.

3. House-sitting -- Earn extra money by helping out people in your community while they're out of town. House sitters are often responsible for watering plants and keeping an eye on homes while the residents are away. Word of mouth is often sufficient to get jobs like this. You can also check for opportunities listed on websites like www.Rover.com. It connects people in need of a house sitter with potential house sitters, just as it connects pet owners with pet sitters and dog walkers.

4. Renting out a room -- As a retiree, you might also find that you have an extra room or two, especially if the kids have all moved out. Fortunately, you can put your extra rooms to work by renting them out. This is especially easy to do through vacation rental websites such as:

- www.Airbnb.com
- www.Homestay.com
- www.VRBO.com (“VRBO” is short for “Vacation Rentals by Owner”)

5. Renting out your car or becoming a driver -- There's a good chance that after you retire your vehicle will end up spending more time in the garage or parked at the curb. However, you can get good use out of your vehicle by lending it to people or taxiing people around town. You can rent out your car to others through sites like www.Turo.com. If you'd rather do the driving, check out www.Lyft.com and www.Uber.com.

6. Running errands -- There never seems to be enough time in the day to get everything done, no matter who you are. If you have a few extra hours a day, you can earn some cash running errands for people and tackling some of the things on their to-do lists. This could mean going grocery shopping, picking up dry cleaning or running any number of other errands that people need help with.

7. Being a mystery shopper -- Yes, you can get paid to shop. Mystery shopping allows you to get your own shopping done and earn money while you provide businesses with honest feedback. This could mean eating at a particular restaurant and then answering questions about your experience or just purchasing something from a local retailer. Just be aware that scams have cropped up in the mystery shopping arena in the past.

8. Cooking -- Traditionally, bake sales were a way to make a little extra dough in the kitchen. But with internet connectedness, people who love to cook can reach out to a huge number of potential customers. There are many websites that match people who love to cook with local people or travelers who are looking for home-cooked meals. For starters check out:

- www.EatWith.com,
- <http://eatwithalocal.socialgo.com> and;
- www.CookApp.com .

9. Creating -- Do you enjoy knitting or woodworking? Believe it or not, you can actually earn money from hobbies like these. Setting up an account with an online marketplace for handmade goods, like www.Etsy.com, will give you access to millions of buyers. If you aren't quite ready to debut your products online, share your creations with your friends and family — or sell them at the local flea market. In-person conversations will help you figure out which of your ideas has the most potential.

10. Blogging or writing -- Put all your years of experience to good use by blogging or writing about it online. Whether you are an expert in RV travel, doll collecting or living on a limited income, you can set up a website, sell ad space and share your experience and expertise. You can also find a wide array of specialty sites that need help with writing, editing and tracking down images and other content.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Christina Majaski | February 22, 2018 ++]

Saving Money ► Silly & Ineffective Ways of Doing It

Everyone wants to save money, but not everyone succeeds. That's because many people choose methods of saving that simply don't work. While everyone knows it's important to save money for the future, not all methods of accumulating cash are equally effective. The U.S. Commerce Department reported that the nation's savings rate for disposable income in December fell to a 12-year low of just 2.4 percent. It's not that people don't try to save. Very often, the problem lies in the methods they choose. Here are 10 ways that people attempt to save that really do not work. Read on to find out if you need to change your savings strategy.

1. Making minimum payments on credit card bills -- It may seem like you're saving money when you make a minimum credit card payment, but you have to consider the interest due on the unpaid balance. Paying off debts takes much longer when you're paying the minimum while the interest charge is added to the balance each month. It's better to pay your bills in full and on time.

2. Delaying home maintenance projects -- It's easy to put off home maintenance projects, but such delays tend to catch up with you. Eventually you'll have to pay for repairs. Leaky roofs don't fix themselves and tend to get worse over time. If you have a termite program, the longer you wait to fumigate, the more

damage those pests will do. If you decide to sell a home that's in need of a repair, you'll get less from the buyer, who will factor in the cost of correcting delayed maintenance. You're better off taking care of your home as problems arise. In addition to having a more pleasant place to live in, your home will have a higher value when you sell it.

3. Going the do-it-yourself route -- Some people decide to save money by doing repairs around the house themselves. That's fine if you have the skills to pull it off, but if you get in over your head, you'll need to call in a professional. Repairing faucets or leaky pipes is harder than it sounds. A botched repair job may cost more to fix in the long run. Be honest with yourself about your capabilities before you tackle a home repair project. For more detail on this subject, check out "[Are DIY Home Renovations a Good Idea?](#)"

4. Letting your health insurance lapse -- When times are hard, it's tempting to stop paying premiums and let your health insurance lapse, particularly if you're young and healthy and can't imagine ever getting sick. The problem with that is anyone can be injured or hit with a serious illness that requires medical treatment. According to the government website HealthCare.gov, an injury as simple as a broken leg can cost up to \$7,500 in medical costs. A typical three-day stay in the hospital will cost you about \$30,000. The cost of treating cancer can reach hundreds of thousands of dollars. You're better off playing it safe and buying health insurance, which will help cover those costs.

5. Skipping visits to the dentist -- Delaying routine dental checkups could allow problems with your teeth to go undetected. This could lead to bigger and more serious problems down the line, such as the need for root canals, said Mark Durrenberger, a financial planner and author of "The Modern Day Millionaire." You'll ultimately save money by taking good care your teeth. Looking for ways to defray the cost of that care? Check out: "[How to Have Healthy Teeth and Avoid Crazy Dental Fees.](#)"

6. Buying perishable food in bulk -- You will pay less for food if you buy it in bulk, but there's a danger that much of your savings will be lost when excess food items spoil. The U.S. Department of Agriculture has estimated that between 30 and 40 percent of America's food supply is wasted. So unless you plan to keep a close eye on product expiration dates and eat all of your leftovers, don't buy perishable items by the pallet. Instead, stock up on canned goods, things you can freeze and household products like toilet paper that you know you will use.

7. Shopping at multiple grocery stores -- It may seem like you're saving money when you comb through grocery store ads looking for the best deals at multiple stores, but there are hidden costs. According to financial adviser Tammy Johnston, people often fail to factor in the value of the extra time they spend shopping or the cost of driving to more than one location each time they need groceries. She holds that it's more cost-effective to pick one store, become familiar with its prices and buy the items you need when they go on sale.

8. Buying discounted items without checking the price per unit -- If the grocery store where you shop has unit price labels, which are required in some states, you should use them to determine which products are the least expensive. Consumers often buy sale items without first checking the per-unit cost. Some brands are so costly to begin with that they're more expensive than competing brands (in per-unit terms), even after being marked down.

9. Buying sale items you don't truly need -- Sometimes it's hard to resist a bargain. When something is marked 30 or 40 percent off, it's very tempting to buy it, even if you wouldn't normally make the purchase. If you don't truly need something, you can't save money by buying it at a discount. An expensive coat that spends years hanging unused in a closet doesn't benefit anyone. So get a grip on your shopping impulses. When you see a bargain, ask yourself if the product is something you really will use. Check out: "[18 Simple Ways to Slam the Brakes on Impulse Buys.](#)"

10. Buying minimal car insurance -- Some people try to save money by purchasing the minimum amount of car insurance required by state law. The problem is that the minimum level of coverage may not be enough to cover your costs if you are involved in an accident that causes injuries or property damage. If you are found to be legally responsible for a serious accident, you could be required to pay hundreds or thousands of dollars beyond the limits of your coverage. You'll sleep better if you know that you have an adequate auto policy.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Emmet Pierce | February 21, 2018 ++]

Military Travel Tax Deduction ► Reserve/Guard Members Travel Expense

Reserve and Guard members who travel less than 100 miles from home to military duty won't be able to deduct any unreimbursed travel expenses thanks to the tax reform signed into law in December. This won't affect tax returns being filed this year, but will apply to all 2018 travel and to 2019 filings. "The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act suspended all miscellaneous itemized deductions, which included the itemized deduction reserve-component members could take for unreimbursed employee expenses on Schedule A" of their Internal Revenue Service Form 1040, said Army Lt. Col. David Dulaney, executive director of the Armed Forces Tax Council.

Although itemized deductions will be suspended, the standard deduction will increase in tax year 2018 under the new law — from \$6,350 to \$12,000 for single taxpayers and from \$12,700 to \$24,000 for couples. "It would seem that most would probably come out better, but not all," said John Goheen, spokesman for the National Guard Association of the United States. "The bottom line is this: NGAUS is not in favor of anything that forces National Guardsmen to dig further into their pockets to serve." While those who drill less than 100 miles away from their home won't be able to take an itemized deduction and thus won't have to keep records for tax purposes, Dulaney said, they must still keep those records to file for reimbursement from the Defense Department.

Even though National Guard members are authorized to be reimbursed for certain expenses traveling to duty, they may not always get reimbursed, said Frank Yoakum, a retired Army sergeant major who is executive director of the Enlisted Association of the National Guard of the United States. Yoakum said he didn't expect the move to affect retention. "If it costs them out of pocket [to go to drill], they will find a way," Yoakum said. "They may take it out of savings, they may go into debt. Will they be happy? No. Will it cause financial stress? Yes." Those who drill more than 100 miles from home still can deduct their unreimbursed expenses, within limits of the regular federal per diem rate, as an above-the-line adjustment to their gross income. In other words, they can deduct the entire amount of those expenses from the amount of their income that can be taxed.

These expenses are limited to the federal per diem rate for lodging, meals, and incidental expenses, and the standard mileage rate for car expenses, plus any parking fees, ferry fees and tolls. For example, if a reservist made \$60,000 last year from military pay and civilian pay and had \$1,000 in unreimbursed travel expenses for drill duty more than 100 miles away from home, the gross income for tax purposes would be reduced to \$59,000. A lot of Guard and Reserve members don't realize that this adjustment on their taxes is available, Dulaney said. For tax year 2017, these reservists can deduct unreimbursed expenses in two ways: The adjustment outlined above and as miscellaneous itemized deductions, if they have expenses in excess of amounts allowed in their adjustment. Those miscellaneous itemized deductions go away in the 2018 tax year. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | February 15, 2018 ++]

Lending Money ► When to Loan to Family or Friends

Your brother lost his job and his wife is eight months pregnant, so he asks you for a short-term loan to tide him over. Or maybe your best friend wants to borrow some money to launch that decorating business she's been dreaming about for years. You have the funds, but when - if ever - should you loan money to family or friends?

Your money - or your relationship?

Shakespeare said it best: "Neither a borrower nor a lender be; for oft loan loses both itself and friend." Late payments or a loan that's never fully paid back can strain or even destroy a relationship. You might feel it's impossible to say no if you want to preserve the relationship. But don't let them take advantage of your good nature. If you fear mixing business with pleasure will prove destructive, then say so. Offer alternative support, such as giving a smaller amount of money as a gift or offering to drive your friend to work until he can afford that new car.

As good as gone

Never loan money you can't afford to lose. A CNN Money survey suggested over a quarter of loans made to family and friends were never paid back and less than half were paid back in full. Ask yourself: "If the money isn't repaid, what will that do to my financial position?" Like any creditor, you may pursue collection activities like suing the borrower or placing a judgment or property lien against him to recoup the money. That might mean dragging your own cousin to small claims court - something many relatives aren't willing to do.

Consider the circumstances

It's smart to ask the borrower why they need the money. Emergencies arise, and you might be providing your loved one with the lifeline they need to save their house or cover skyrocketing medical bills. But what if they're just lived beyond their means and want to borrow from you to pay off other mounting debt? Has the bank turned them down because of bad credit risk? If so, maybe you should to turn them down, too.

Mortgages merit a special mention. They represent the most common intra-family loans, as adult children, excited to buy their first home, might not have enough credit history to satisfy a traditional lender. In turn, a loan can prove profitable for parents because the interest earned is likely to be more than with conventional financial instruments like bonds and CDs, making it a win-win. Using a service like [National Family Mortgage](#), which helps structure the loan and handle all the paperwork and reporting, keeps the process simple and professional.

A handshake is not enough

If you've decided to make the loan, shake on it, but then insist on putting the loan agreement in writing. This prevents any misunderstandings and protects your legal and tax standing. This promissory note should state the type of loan (secured or unsecured), interest rate, payment amounts and schedule, as well as any penalties and collateral, if applicable. It should be signed and notarized by both parties. Loan-agreement templates are available on websites like www.nolo.com, or consult your attorney.

Burden of proof

The Internal Revenue Service (IRS) treats loans very differently from monetary gifts. A loan without interest or never paid back might be considered a gift, which can lead to negative tax implications for the lender. To avoid this possibility, charge interest equal to or greater than the applicable federal rate, which is published monthly on the IRS.gov. Current rates range from 0.65 percent for short-term loans to 3 percent for long-term loans. Loan amounts affect the rate as well.

Also, documenting the loan and your attempts to collect it are crucial if you want to claim a bad debt on your tax return and avoid having the money categorized as a gift, in which case you could pay taxes on anything over the current \$14,000 exclusion. If all goes smoothly with the loan, the borrower will need to report all interest paid to you annually on [Form 1099](#), which you'll need to claim as interest income on your tax return.

Offering money, not advice or a free pass

Friends and family who have successful loan arrangements make communication a priority. Encourage the borrower to let you know if they'll be late or can't pay and consider a more lenient payment plan to keep the loan on track. Lenders also should realize loaning money doesn't give them the right to micromanage the borrower's finances; resist the urge to question their spending habits or offer unsolicited financial advice.

[Source: The MOAA Newsletter | February 15, 2018 ++]

TRICARE User Fees Update 101 ► No Increase in FY 2019

The president's FY 2019 proposed budget submission for DoD included the following statement, indicating there will be no new TRICARE fee increases for 2019: “NO compensation cost share reforms in FY 2019. Instead, the Department is focusing on internal business process improvements and structural changes to find greater efficiencies, such as modernizing our military health care systems into an integrated system.” This is indeed welcome news. Unfortunately, it will probably fall on deaf ears for most beneficiaries, who have discovered their TRICARE cost shares have, in many cases, drastically increased since 1 JAN.

This past fall, DoD unexpectedly implemented an across-the-board fixed-fee copayment schedule for the new TRICARE Select option. The new fee schedule was intended to replace the existing TRICARE Standard/Extra percentage, which had been based on a services-used model - the model most beneficiaries have been used to over the years. This change was to be cost-neutral to DoD. Some TRICARE Prime copayments also increased by as much as 150 percent. As beneficiaries receive their new explanation of benefits statements and experience the resulting sticker shock, all they can see is the cost of their health care go up. MOAA has heard loud and clear from all categories of TRICARE beneficiaries. Here's a small sampling:

- “Since February 3rd my family has amassed an astounding \$802.50 in medical expenses. When I contacted TRICARE to see why this was suddenly the case, they explained that many of the providers for my son's Autism services are out of network and that I'd be responsible for 20% of the allowed amount until I hit my catastrophic cap. ... How is it right that with no warning I'm suddenly responsible for what will be \$1000.00 before the end of the week? My family now has 30 days to pay that amount. This is a significant and unwarranted strain on military families everywhere, especially those that rely on specialty care in the [Extended Care Health Option] program.” - an active duty Army captain from Fort Gordon, Ga.
- “I require a series of appointments with physical therapy for my back and I cannot afford to pay the \$41 each time I see the therapist. ... It would be cheaper for me to just get the surgery instead!” - a spouse of a retired lieutenant colonel in N.C.

Combine this TRICARE cost share inflation with the new increases in costs for prescriptions from TRICARE, and you can understand why military retirees, active duty servicemembers, and their families are starting to feel as if the government no longer considers military health care an earned benefit of their service. MOAA believes those who are serving and have served should not be put in the position to fund the cost of readiness or their own benefits. [Source: The MOAA Newsletter | February 15, 2018 ++]

Tricare for Life Update 04 ► Why Prescription Copays Went Up

Military members and retirees, including Tricare for Life users, are used to slight drug price co-pay increases year over year. But when fees for 90-day supplies for prescription drugs received through the system's mail-order pharmacy, Express Scripts, went from free to \$7 on 1 FEB, many Tricare for Life users said they were blindsided. They had been told they would be largely exempt from a series of major Tricare changes rolled out Jan. 1, including higher co-pays and enrollment fees.

So why were they now being billed for drugs that had been free? The answer is that the 1 FEB drug price increases and the 1 JAN Tricare changes are entirely unrelated. But Tricare for Life users still wondered where, exactly, these changes came from. That history lies in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act, and a section that makes permanent a protection for military survivors against a measure known as the "widows tax." That measure required that any money received from the Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) by a new widow or widower whose spouse died from a service-related cause be offset dollar-to-dollar by the money he or she could receive from the Dependency and Indemnity Compensation program. The fix, which had been set to expire this year, reduced the amount of that offset.

Some members of Congress wanted to make that fix permanent. But to do so, they had to find a way to pay for it -- to the tune of about \$1 billion a year. The funding solution? Raise pharmacy fees for everyone. That pharmacy cost increase, which impacts all Tricare pharmacy users, was approved in the 2018 National Defense Authorization Act. As a result, the only places left for beneficiaries to receive medication for free are military treatment facility pharmacies. [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | February 27, 2018 ++]

VA Loan Appraisal Update 01 ► Perception vs. Reality

Ask a home buyer, a seller, a [real-estate agent](#), a loan officer or an appraiser what the value of a home is, and you're likely to get several different answers ... sometimes from the same person, depending on the day. But as the home-sale process [closes](#), it's the appraisal that can save or scuttle contracts. And a new report shows that for the first time in months, the [appraisal](#) and the owner's valuation of a home are heading in opposite directions. In January, appraisers valued homes 0.6 percent lower than the owners did, per the Home Price Perception Index, a metric published by [Quicken Loans](#). It's the first time in eight months that the gap has widened; last January, appraisers ran 1.47 percent behind owner expectations, per a Tuesday news release.

The regional breakdown shows fluctuations in owner perception: Veterans and service members in Seattle or San Diego, for example, are more likely to have their homes appraised for more than they think they are worth. Those in Baltimore, Cleveland or Philadelphia, however, could see a wider gap in the other direction than the national average. While the gap has narrowed overall in the past 12 months, any difference between owner valuation and appraisal can be a stumbling block for those completing a sale, regardless of the loan type. When the appraisal comes in low, the lender may not allow the buyer to move forward at the originally agreed-upon price. That leaves a few options:

- The buyer can make up the difference in cash and keep the original loan structure.
- The buyer and seller can negotiate a lower price.
- The buyer or seller can dispute the appraisal.

Loan agreements may need altering if an appraisal comes in low ... or the buyer may need to make up the difference in cash between an appraised value and the sale price. If you've settled on the third option and you're using a VA-backed loan, talk to your lender about a reconsideration of value request, which can be made via your VA Regional Loan Center; here's some [details from the Denver office](#), for instance. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Kevin Lilley | February 17, 2018 ++]

Tax Burden for Arkansas Retired Vets ► As of MAR 2018

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

Sales Taxes

State Sales Taxes: 6.50% (prescription drugs exempt). Food taxed at 2%, city and county sales taxes could add another 5.5%. Large amount is 8.95%. To view local rates, [click here](#).

Gasoline Tax: 40.20 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Diesel Fuel Tax 47.2 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

Cigarette Tax: \$1.15 cents/pack of 20

Personal Income Taxes

Tax Rate Range: Low – 0.9%; High – 6.9%. Rates apply individuals earning more than \$75,000. Two special tax tables exist for low and middle income individuals. One for individuals below \$21,000 in income, and one for those between \$21,000 and \$75,000.

Income Brackets: Six. Lowest \$0 thru \$4,298; Highest – \$35,100+. Bracket levels are adjusted for inflation each year. Release dates for tax bracket inflation adjustments vary by state and may fall after the end of the applicable tax year. Arkansas has “tax benefit recapture,” by which many high-income taxpayers pay their top tax rate on all income, not just on amounts above the benefit threshold.

Personal Exemptions: Single – \$26; Married – \$52; \$26 per dependent

Standard Deduction Single: - \$2,200; Married filing jointly – \$4,400

Medical/Dental Deduction: Same as Federal taxes

Federal Income Tax Deduction: None

Retirement Income Taxes: Social Security is exempt, as are VA benefits, Workers' Compensation, Tier 1 and Tier 2 Railroad Retirement benefits, and unemployment compensation. Up to \$6,000 in military, civil service, state/local government, and private pensions are exempt. The exemption refers to income from public or private retirement systems, plans or programs. IRA distributions can be included as part of the \$6,000 exemption if the taxpayer is 59½ or older. Out-of-state government pensions also qualify for the exemption. Taxpayers who receive an IRA distribution after reaching age 59-1/2 do not have to pay taxes on the first \$6,000 from the account. Other exemptions include active duty military personnel (\$9,000), retired military personnel, and life insurance proceeds.

Retired Military Pay: Up to \$6,000 of federal retirement pay and/or survivor benefits excluded.

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

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

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

Property Taxes

Arkansas property taxes are levied by counties, municipalities, and school districts. All households are eligible for a homestead tax credit of up to \$350 regardless of income or age. Political subdivisions collect taxes on real property (house and land) and personal property (motor vehicles, boats and motors, motorcycles and all-terrain vehicles). Assessment is based on 20 percent of the true market value. The taxable assessed value of homesteads will not increase more than 5% above the previous taxable assessed value except when new additions or substantial improvements are made to the property. However, the taxable value of the homestead will continue to increase each year until it equals 20% of market value. The taxable assessed value of homesteads of residents aged 65 or older, or those who are disabled are capped at the previous year value unless improvements are made or the property is sold. For more information about real property taxes, [click here](#) and [here](#).

In certain cases, disabled veterans are exempt from all state taxes on real and personal property. This tax exemption also is available to widow or widowers who do not remarry, as well as to dependent minor children of military personnel who were killed in action, died of service-related disabilities or who are missing in action. For additional information, go to <http://www.veterans.arkansas.gov/>

Inheritance and Estate Taxes

There is no inheritance tax. In 2003 the estate tax was repealed for those deceased after January 1, 2005.

Other State Tax Rates

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

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

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For further information, visit the [Arkansas Department of Finance and Administration](#) site or call 501-682-7751. For general tax information, [click here](#). For a booklet on moving to Arkansas, [click here](#). [Source: <https://www.retirementliving.com/taxes-alabama-iowa> | MAR 2018 ++]

*** General Interest ***



Notes of Interest ► 15 thru 28 FEB 2018

- **Valentine's Day.** My wonderful wife sent me the sweetest Valentine card. The first page is an older couple sitting on a sofa. She turns to him and says You were such an animal in bed last night. He says REALLY. Turn the page and she says You snored like an asthmatic donkey!
- **USS McCain.** The former second-in-charge of the destroyer John S. McCain was found guilty Monday of dereliction in the performance of duties for his part in the 21 AUG collision that killed 10 sailors.
- **CPO Selection Board.** Navy officials have [published the lead-up timelines here](#) for the active and reserve chief petty officer selection boards, providing guidance for first class petty officers on what must do to ensure their best chance at pinning on anchors this summer.

- **Trump Parade.** President Donald Trump's military parade would cost between \$10 million and \$30 million, White House budget director Mick Mulvaney estimated on 14 FEB, during questioning at the House Budget Committee. The last military parade in Washington in 1991 to celebrate the U.S. victory in the first Gulf War - in which more than 8,000 U.S. troops participated and there were helicopters, tanks and fireworks - cost about \$12 million in 1991, which would be about \$21 million or \$22 million in today's dollars.
- **Trump Parade.** President Donald Trump says officials are discussing Veterans Day in November as the likely date for his proposed Pennsylvania Avenue military parade, although he likes July 4. The president says a parade would be "something great" for the country's spirit but he'll scrap the idea if it can't be done at a "reasonable cost."
- **ICE Hiring.** The hiring of new deportation officers at Immigration and Customs Enforcement dropped in half to just 371 total in 2017, according to information provided to potential vendors for a contract to help ICE boost hiring. The agency hired about 300 criminal investigators, an increase of more than 100 employees. ICE is currently trying to meet President Trump's mandate that the agency hire a net of 10,000 new agents.
- **Cuba U.S. Diplomats.** The long-awaited report about the mysterious attack on U.S. diplomatic workers in Cuba sheds no light on the culprits or their motivation. Rather, in dry medical language, the [University of Pennsylvania researchers describe](#) the persistent and crippling effects of weapons that target the brain — and foreshadow a terrifying future.
- **VA Budget.** The 2019 fiscal year's budget request totals \$198.6 billion in VA funding - an increase of nearly \$12 billion over last fiscal year. Since 2006 the VA budget is up 175%, while overall federal spending increased 54%, and GDP grew by only 40%.
- **Torah.** Two Laws in the Torah were fulfilled on the same day. Washington State recently passed two landmark laws: "Gay marriage" and the "Legalization of marijuana." The fact that gay marriage and marijuana were legalized on the same day makes perfect biblical sense because Leviticus 20:13 says: "If a man lies with another man, they should be stoned."
- **Missile Test.** The U.S. Missile Defense Agency spent a total of \$130 million on a failed missile test off of Kauai. The missile failed to intercept an air-dropped intermediate-range target missile during a 31 JAN demonstration. The cost of the Raytheon SM-3 Block IIA missile that was still in development was \$36 million, according to the U.S. Missile Defense Agency.
- **Marine E-8 Board.** A Marine Corps investigation into "irregularities" on the FY18 sergeant major through master sergeant promotion board found that one board member was suspected of leaking information. The investigation led to disbanding of the board.
- **N.C. National Guard.** Legislators in North Carolina say Gov. Roy Cooper should consider calling on the National Guard to help as the state's prisons contend with severe staff shortages. Officials with the state's Department of Public Safety, however, say the idea may not be practical, because specialized training is involved and the Guard has other duties, including overseas deployments.
- **USMC.** Faced with towering attrition rates, the Marine Corps has steadily modified its grueling Infantry Officer Course — changes that top Marines say are not attempts to water down standards, but to more accurately replicate today's real-world requirements. Recent changes include the number of evaluated hikes required to pass the course, and the removal of the physically demanding Combat Endurance Test as a strict requirement to graduate. Under the new requirements, only 3 vice 6 of those nine hikes will be evaluated, and Marines will have to pass all three in order to graduate.
- **Nuclear Sub Crews.** The Ohio-class guided missile submarine Florida is the second sub in the Navy fleet to incorporate integrated male-female crews. The Florida, of Kings Bay Naval Submarine Base, follows the Michigan from Bangor, Washington, which welcomed enlisted women to its crews in 2016. More women are expected to join the 30 or so already assigned before the Florida deploys.

- **Best of Times.** The Best Of Times at <https://biggeekdad.com/2013/01/the-best-of-times> is a memorable look back at the 1950's and 1960's and should be entertaining to watch for anyone that grew up in that era.
- **COLA.** The January 2018 CPI is 241.919 which is 0.9 percent above the FY 2018 COLA baseline. The CPI for February, 2018 is scheduled to be released on March 13th, 2018.
- **Mind Blowing Tricks.** Check out <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PBKA0JIT3Rw> and see if you can swallow what you see is swallowed.
- **Camp Lejeune.** Were you stationed at Camp Lejeune, N.C. for at least 30 days between August 1, 1953 and December 31, 1987? You may have been exposed to chemicals in the drinking water. In the video at <https://youtu.be/OfiINMMTof4> VA Secretary Dr. David Shulkin describes Veteran disability compensation and health care benefits available for Veterans and in some cases, family members.
- **NFL Protest.** At <https://youtu.be/uPNnsi2dJIO> those of you who aren't happy with the NFL players protest can listen to Take a Knee My A**!
- **Memphis Belle Movie Clips.** At <https://youtu.be/1gIDvaxBxZc> you can rewatch the 1990 B-17 flying fortress Memphis Belle movie takeoff scene followed by its first air-battle and fourth crash.
- **Bitcoin.** At <https://youtu.be/EA0LkCkvUeU> you can learn what a bitcoin is and how they are used.
- **School Security.** After the Sandy Hook shooting, I gave my grandson this little door stop to always keep in his backpack. In light of the recent shooting, you might want to share this with all parents...and ANYONE else for that matter...to get themselves one. Sure it's small, but it can be powerful in keeping you safe if you ever have to barricade yourself in a room. If a gunman shoots out the door lock it will still keep the door from opening and may just buy you some time. They cost about one dollar each.



[Source: Various | February 28, 2018 ++]

Garbage Disposal ► Things You Should Never Put in Them

Garbage disposals often get a bad rap. They're frequently used as bloody weapons in horror movies. On the TV sitcom "Roseanne," the title character's husband, Dan, pretended to get his hand caught in a moving one, complete with fake blood flying. Some people think we shouldn't use them. They're not as common in England, where many compost their food scraps instead. And every so often, a writer will report that plumbers advise against running disposals at all. There's no doubt that the in-sink grinders can be convenient, time-saving helpers, and many of us would find it tough to get along without them. But they can be sensitive. Many scraps can go into them just fine, but as with any appliance that can require pricey repairs, be careful. Here are 19 items that should never be ground up in a disposal — and three that definitely should.

1. Bones -- This one seems obvious. Think of the blades in your disposal as resembling those in your blender. Would you throw a chicken carcass in your blender and expect it to be chopped up with no problem? If your city picks up food and yard waste, put the bones in that container.

2. Grease and oil -- Frying potatoes, or doughnuts, or bacon? Don't dump the leftover grease down the drain, whether or not there is a disposal in it. It will solidify and can make a mess out of your drain and pipes. (Don't flush it either — same reason!) If you're not going to save the oil to reuse (hey, more doughnuts), let it cool and pour it into a container you're getting rid of anyway, and put it in your trash. Feeling ambitious? There are plenty of YouTube videos showing how to turn used cooking oil into biodiesel fuel. Now that's a real gas.

3. Avocado and fruit pits -- Avocado pits are sort of the rocks of the kitchen-scrap world. The blades of your disposal will do next to nothing to break up these solid pits — think of Rocky the boxer pounding on a frozen side of beef. Instead, toss the pits in your compost or yard waste. Better yet, grow an avocado tree. The California Avocado Commission has tips on how you can actually plant it — though not all of us live in the right climate for that.

4. Potato and carrot peels -- Potato peels are not as tough or fibrous as many vegetables' outer coatings, but they still can clog your disposal. Even when cut up, peels contain so much starch they can create a sort of paste that clogs the pipes. You say po-tay-to; I say, don't grind that.

5. Corn husks -- You really shouldn't put corn husks down your disposal. The husks are fibrous and tough, and those fibrous threads can wind around your disposal's blades and tangle and jam the motor. It could make for an a-maizing mess. Compost them, or toss in your food-waste bin.

6. Onion skins -- Treat onion skins much like you would corn husks. They appear papery and thin, but, like their corny brethren, onion skins can get caught in the disposal's blades and stop them from spinning. Composting them is a much more a-peeling option.

7. Lettuce -- Lettuce is a wonderfully healthy vegetable, but not so healthy for your garbage disposal. If you've ever mistakenly let some leftover salad float down into the machine, you know that not only can lettuce leaves be tough to chop, but when you try to wash them down with water, they can create a gooey, green slime that looks like something out of an "Alien" movie. Lettuce vow to compost lettuce scraps in the future.

8. Banana peels -- Don't monkey around: Banana peels don't belong down a disposal. Some experts say that if you cut the peel up into small pieces, the blades can handle it, but the same fibrous toughness that protects the soft banana fruit can play havoc with your disposal. Instead, throw the peels on the floor and wait until a clown walks by to dramatically slip on it! No? OK, fine, just throw it in the compost then.

9. Pasta -- Cooked pasta and rice are delicious, but the leftovers can create a disposal dilemma. The whirring blades can mash these products into a starchy paste that will clog your drain. Dump any leftover pasta into your food-waste bin — or better yet, save it for a second-day snack.

10. Gum -- If you're stuck on Bubble Yum or Bazooka, by gum, go for it. But never, ever, throw the sticky stuff anywhere near your disposal. The reasons are self-evident: Sticky gum will clog up the blades as surely as if you'd squirted glue down the sink. Wad chewed gum up in a small piece of paper and toss it in your trash. And don't worry if you happen to swallow it — that idea that gum takes seven years to digest is only an urban legend.

11. Marshmallows -- Marshmallows may seem like an odd item to put on this list — it's not as if your average person is pitching them into the disposal, and it's not the kind of snack that has leftovers. But maybe your marshmallows were a gooey topping from Grandma's Thanksgiving sweet potatoes, or some other delightfully sweet and sticky recipe. Keep your mallows out of the disposal to keep your plumbing mellow.

12. Coffee grounds -- What could possibly be wrong with putting coffee grounds down your garbage disposal? They're small, smell good and seem harmless. But they clump together, don't break up and can create a caffeinated clog. Instead, spread them around plants in your garden to repel insects and stimulate plant growth.

13. Eggshells -- Eggshells might be the most controversial item on this list. Opinions on whether they belong in the disposal or not are rather scrambled. Some say the shells actually work almost like a scouring powder, breaking into tiny bits and helping clean gunk off the disposal's blades. But others say they can become compacted and either clog the drain entirely or stick to the walls of the pipe, slowing draining. After eggs-amining the evidence, it would seem wise to keep them out entirely,

14. Paint -- You'd never pour paint down your drain, toilet or your disposal, right? It might color your world, but it's not healthy for your pipes and it's bad for the environment. Sure, some natural paints may say they can handle it, but the fact is it's just not that hard to dry out excess paint and check your neighborhood waste guidelines for how to dispose of it. Some companies will accept leftover paint if you've poured sand or kitty litter into the can to turn it into a solid.

15. Bread dough -- Even those of us who love baking sometimes find ourselves with dough to dispose of. Maybe a recipe failed, and the dough never rose. Or maybe there's just a lot of extra dough sludge clinging to the side of your bowl after you've removed the dough you need. Don't throw it down the disposal — bread dough's sticky and thick, and it'll form a kind of sludgy paste and clog up the works. If there's not much, scrape the extra dough into your compost bin. And here's a neat-but-weird solution: If the dough didn't rise, it might be easier to just try baking it anyway, then tossing the resulting brick if it turns out as bad as you suspected. One note: If you're throwing away a full batch of dough by putting it in some kind of bag or container, leave room for it to rise, just in case it's not done!

16. Celery -- Celery's crisp and delicious, good in salads or stir-fries, and a dieter's staple. But one place it doesn't belong is down the disposal. Those stringy, twisty threads that peel off celery when you're snacking on it are like evil little octopus tentacles that can't wait to wind their way around your disposal's blades.

17. Pumpkin tops -- Halloween's a wonderful holiday, and it can be terrifically fun to carve a pumpkin into a jack-o'-lantern. But don't ever toss the pumpkin tops (or other parts you carve out — like those classic triangle eyes) down your drain. They're thick and will fight your disposal blades to the death, and they'll win. And the resulting repair bill would be spookier than any of the little monsters out trick-or-treating.

18. Seafood shells -- You'd never put oyster, clam, lobster and crab shells down your disposal, right? One rule to keep in mind: If your teeth can't crunch it up, don't expect your disposal to do so. And there's nothing fishy about that advice.

19. Non-food items -- Here's a goes-without-saying tip: Never intentionally let non-food items — such as silverware or twist-ties or rubber bands — down the disposal. Sure they might slip into the sink when you're rinsing off an ingredient or plate, but keep an eye on them so they don't find their way into a running disposal.

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If you're kind to your disposal and want to avoid ugly plumbing bills those are things to avoid putting in the grinder. But wait. There's more: 3 good things to grind ...

1. Citrus -- If you've read this far, you may be wondering why we even have garbage disposals, since so many things just don't belong in them. Just remember: They're garbage disposals, not garbage cans. Many food scraps can go down there just fine, that's the point. And a few things can actually improve your disposal's performance and condition. Citrus slices is probably the best example. Extra lemon, lime, orange

or grapefruit slices? Toss them down, turn on the water, and press the “on” switch! The rough peels may help clean off the blades, and the fruity oils make the disposal smell fresh and clean.

2. Ice -- Now here’s a cool tip: Smallish ice cubes can knock debris off your disposal blades and may also clear off odors. Some folks reportedly make special ice cubes by freezing lemon juice or vinegar for an extra cleaning boost, but honestly, that takes a level of disposal devotion very few of us have. Ice, ice, baby.

3. A squirt of dish soap -- If you don’t have citrus on hand, but are detecting an unpleasant odor from your garbage disposal, the answer is close at hand. Just squirt a small amount of dish soap down there, and wash it down with water while running the disposal. Cold water is better than hot, which can melt trapped fat and push it further down the drain to re-emerge later as an unpleasant clog. Splish-splash, you’re all set.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Gael F. Cooper | February 26, 2018 ++]

Malware Update 01 ► Nanacore Developer Prosecuted

An Arkansas man has been sentenced to serve almost three years in federal prison for developing advanced malware that he knew would be used to steal passwords, surreptitiously turn on webcams, and conduct other unlawful actions on infected computers. **Taylor Huddleston**, 27, of Hot Springs, Arkansas, admitted in July that he was the developer of NanoCore, a remote-access trojan that he sold online, documents filed in federal court in Virginia show. In a statement of facts signed by Huddleston, the defendant confirmed that from 2012 to 2016 he marketed the malware on [Hack Forums](#), a site that offers discussions on a wide range of topics including hacking. Huddleston also agreed with prosecutors that NanoCore and available plugins offered a full set of features including:

- A keylogger that allowed customers to record all keystrokes typed.
- A password stealer that extracted passwords saved and sent them over the Internet to the customer the ability for customers to remotely turn on webcams and spy.
- The ability to view, delete, and download files.
- The ability to lock infected computers until users paid customers a ransom.
- A "booter" or "stresser" that allowed infected computers to participate in distributed denial-of-service attacks

The statement of facts, signed on July 25, said:

By developing NanoCore and distributing it to hundreds of people, some of whom he knew intended to use it for malicious purposes, Huddleston knowingly and intentionally aided and abetted thousands of unlawful computer intrusions and attempted unlawful computer intrusions, including intrusions and attempted intrusions that occurred within the Eastern District of Virginia... Huddleston agrees the evidence would show that NanoCore was used in a massive "spear phishing" scheme designed to infect and attempt to infect thousands of victim computers, including computers within the Eastern District of Virginia.

In 2015, more than 500 websites inadvertently exposed their visitors to an attack that attempted to install NanoCore. Attackers pulled off the hack by compromising the account of an anti-adblocker service the sites used. The statement of facts made no mention of the incident. Huddleston also admitted he developed and sold a program called Net Seal to other developers, many of whom the defendant knew were using it to distribute their own malicious wares.

Huddleston's case gained national attention last March when Daily Beast reporter Kevin Poulsen argued that the case against Huddleston was novel because it prosecuted the developer of "dual-use software" who

had "hacked no one." Huddleston, the article reported, insisted he wrote the \$25 program as a legitimate remote administration tool for administrators, tech-support professionals, and parents. Poulsen went on to suggest Huddleston was being held accountable for the crimes of crooks who pirated and abused the software. "The court filings don't detail why the government is so certain that Huddleston wanted to help hackers, but the indictment mentions eight times the name of the website where Huddleston announced and supported NanoCore: HackForums.net," Poulsen wrote. In an update in July, Poulsen reported that the self-taught programmer was pleading guilty after admitting NanoCore was intended for malicious purposes all along. In addition to receiving 33 months in prison, Huddleston was sentenced to two years of supervised release following his prison sentence. [Source: ARS Technica | Dan Goodin | February 25, 2018 ++]

RP-US Relations Update 01 ► U.S. Report Tags Duterte A Threat To Democracy

Philippines President Rodrigo Duterte is taking seriously the U.S. Intelligence Community's report tagging the firebrand leader a threat to democracy in Southeast Asia, his spokesman said on 21 FEB. The report, produced by the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, places Duterte alongside Cambodian's Hun Sen, the Rohingya crisis and Thailand's military-backed constitution as threats to democracy. "We view this declaration from no less than the intelligence department of the United States with some concern ...," presidential spokesman Harry Roque told DZMM radio.

Roque rejected the U.S. Intelligence assessment of Duterte as a threat to democracy. "I do not think that's true. He is a lawyer, he knows the law, he wants to uphold the rule of law, he knows about the bill of rights," he said. Democracy and human rights in many Southeast Asian nations will remain fragile in 2018 because of autocratic tendencies, rampant corruption and cronyism, the U.S. Intelligence Community said in its Worldwide Threat Assessment report dated 12 FEB. "In the Philippines, President Duterte will continue to wage his signature campaign against drugs, corruption, and crime," the report read, adding that Duterte has suggested he could suspend the constitution and declare a revolutionary government.

This is not the first time the United States has criticized Duterte, who is notorious for his defiance of international pressure. Duterte was infuriated by expressions of concern by former President Barack Obama's administration about drug-war killings in the Philippines. More than 4,000 people have been killed in what police call legitimate operations against suspected drug dealers and users under the Duterte's signature war on drugs since July 2016. Rights group accused police of summary executions, which authorities refute. International Criminal Court prosecutors have opened a preliminary examination into Duterte's anti-drugs campaign. [Source: Reuters | February 21, 2018 ++]

Vietnam Immigrant Story ► Sometimes We Just Forget What's Really Important.

On Saturday, July 24th, 2010 the town of Prescott Valley, AZ, hosted a Freedom Rally. Quang Nguyen, a Vietnamese immigrant, was asked to speak on his experience of coming to America and what it means. He spoke the following in dedication to all Vietnam Veterans.

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Start Quote: 35 years ago, if you were to tell me that I am going to stand up here speaking to a couple thousand patriots, in English, I'd laugh at you. Man, every morning I wake up thanking God for putting me and my family in the greatest country on earth. I just want you all to know that the American dream does exist and I am living the American dream. I was asked to speak to you about my experience as a first

generation Vietnamese-American, but I'd rather speak to you as an American. If you hadn't noticed, I am not white and I feel pretty comfortable with my people. I am a proud US citizen and here is my proof. It took me 8 years to get it, waiting in endless lines, but I got it, and I am very proud of it.

I still remember the images of the Tet offensive in 1968, I was six years old. Now you might want to question how a 6-year-old boy could remember anything. Trust me, those images can never be erased. I can't even imagine what it was like for young American soldiers, 10,000 miles away from home, fighting on my behalf.

35 years ago, I left South Vietnam for political asylum. The war had ended. At the age of 13, I left with the understanding that I may or may not ever get to see my siblings or parents again. I was one of the first lucky 100,000 Vietnamese allowed to come to the U.S. Somehow, my family and I were reunited 5 months later, amazingly, in California. It was a miracle from God.

If you haven't heard lately that this is the greatest country on earth, I am telling you that right now. It was the freedom and the opportunities presented to me that put me here with all of you tonight. I also remember the barriers that I had to overcome every step of the way. My high school counselor told me that I cannot make it to college due to my poor communication skills. I proved him wrong. I finished college. You see, all you have to do is to give this little boy an opportunity and encourage him to take and run with it. Well, I took the opportunity and here I am.

This person standing tonight in front of you could not exist under a socialist/communist environment. By the way, if you think socialism is the way to go, I am sure many people here will chip in to get you a one-way ticket out of here. And if you didn't know, the only difference between socialism and communism is an AK-47 aimed at your head. That was my experience.

In 1982, I stood with a thousand new immigrants, reciting the Pledge of Allegiance and listening to the National Anthem for the first time as an American. To this day, I can't remember anything sweeter and more patriotic than that moment in my life.

Fast forwarding, somehow I finished high school, finished college, and like any other goofball 21 year old kid, I was having a great time with my life I had a nice job and a nice apartment in Southern California. In some way and somehow, I had forgotten how I got here and why I was here.

One day I was at a gas station, I saw a veteran pumping gas on the other side of the island. I don't know what made me do it, but I walked over and asked if he had served in Vietnam. He smiled and said yes. I shook and held his hand. This grown man's eyes began to well up. I walked away as fast as I could and at that very moment, I was emotionally rocked. This was a profound moment in my life. I knew something had to change in my life. It was time for me to learn how to be a good citizen. It was time for me to give back.

You see, America is not just a place on the map, it isn't just a physical location. It is an ideal, a concept. And if you are an American, you must understand the concept, you must accept this concept, and most importantly, you have to fight and defend this concept. This is about Freedom and not free stuff. And that is why I am standing up here

Brothers and sisters, to be a real American, the very least you must do is to learn English and understand it well. In my humble opinion, you cannot be a faithful patriotic citizen if you can't speak the language of the country you live in. Take this document of 46 pages - last I looked on the Internet, there wasn't a Vietnamese translation of the U.S. Constitution. It took me a long time to get to the point of being able to converse and until this day, I still struggle to come up with the right words. It's not easy, but if it's too easy, it's not worth doing

Before I knew this 46-page document, I learned of the 500,000 Americans who fought for this little boy. I learned of the 58,000 names inscribed on the black wall at the Vietnam Memorial. You are my heroes. You are my founders.

At this time, I would like to ask all the Vietnam veterans to please stand. I thank you for my life. I thank you for your sacrifices, and I thank you for giving me the freedom and liberty I have today. I now ask all veterans, firefighters, and police officers, to please stand. On behalf of all first generation immigrants, I thank you for your services and may God bless you all.

Quang Nguyen
Creative Director/Founder
Caddis Advertising, LLC
"God Bless America"
"One Flag, One Language, One Nation Under God"

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For those who understand, no explanation is needed For those who do not understand, no explanation is possible. [Source: PIGazette | John Mosier | July 29, 2010 ++]

Car Longevity Update 01 ► 15 Longest-Lasting Vehicles

If you want a car that will last, consider buying a Japanese brand. That's the takeaway from a [recent analysis](#) by the research firm iSeeCars.com. It found that 14 of the 15 vehicles that were most likely to last their original owners for 15 years are from Japanese manufacturers, particularly Toyota. The other was a German-made Volkswagen. Phong Ly, CEO of iSeeCars.com, notes: "Japanese automakers are known for setting quality and reliability standards, so it is no surprise that they are the most likely to reach the fifteen-year milestone." Toyota models account for nine of the top 15 cars, including the entire top five. The Toyota Highlander took the No. 1 slot, with 18.3 percent of original owners keeping this SUV for 15 years.

More than 650,000 cars were included in iSeeCars.com's analysis. All were from the 1981-2002 model years and were sold in 2017. On average, 6.8 percent of original owners kept their cars for 15 years. But looking at the top 15 models, anywhere from 10.6 percent to 18.3 percent of owners kept them that long. The top 15 vehicles are:

- **Toyota Highlander:** 18.3 percent of original owners kept the car for at least 15 years
- **Toyota Sienna:** 17.1 percent
- **Toyota Tundra:** 15.7 percent
- **Toyota Prius:** 15 percent
- **Toyota RAV4:** 14.3 percent
- **Honda Odyssey:** 12.8 percent
- **Toyota Sequoia:** 12.8 percent
- **Toyota Tacoma:** 12.4 percent
- **Honda CR-V:** 11.9 percent
- **Toyota Avalon:** 11.7 percent
- **Acura MDX:** 11.6 percent
- **Toyota Camry:** 11.5 percent
- **Subaru Forester:** 11.5 percent
- **Nissan Frontier:** 11 percent

- **Volkswagen Golf:** 10.6 percent

Many of these same vehicles also made the cut a year ago, when iSeeCars.com analyzed which vehicles were most likely to be kept by their original owners for 10 years. For more, see [“10 Cars You’re Most Likely to Keep for a Decade.”](#) Toyota’s Highlander as well as the Highlander Hybrid made that list and also appeared in [“The 10 Best Cars for a Long-Term Relationship.”](#) If you’re in the market for a new car, also check out [“11 Essential Tips for Buying the Right Car at the Right Price.”](#) [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | February 18, 2018 ++]

Military Parades Update 01 ► 2015 Russian Victory Day Parade

Three years ago, DefenseNews reporter Matthew Bodner, had the pleasure of covering his first ever Russian Victory Day parade directly from Red Square. As someone who grew up watching too many Cold War movies, he walked into the event with naive, boyish excitement. Standing front row as what felt like the entire Russian military paraded by, he admits that it was not a disappointment. That was the 70th anniversary parade, a major event in contemporary Russian patriotic lore. And it was the year the Victory Day parade became something more than what may have been an earnest, albeit very Russian, event to mark a solemn and hard fought victory. As talk of a new Cold War proliferated, the parade was used to unveil scores of new vehicles and weapons for the world to see, and fear.



Russian S-400 Triumph medium-range and long-range surface-to-air missile systems (left) ride through Red Square during the Victory Day Moscow military parade in on May 9, 2017. A Russian Tupolev Tu-160 Blackjack strategic bomber flies over Red Square during the Victory Day military parade in Moscow on May 9, 2015,

For those, like him, hoping to get a peak of what President Vladimir Putin’s massive military modernization program was producing, the parade was a goldmine. Tanks roared onto the brick pavement of Red Square, followed by every armored vehicle in Russia’s arsenal. Massive bombers flew in tight formation trailed by the red, white and blue stripes of their flag. It is easy enough as an American to witness such a spectacle and wonder why the U.S. military does not parade like the Russians do. In four years of witnessing these parades, Bodner concluded that it is only something that a government that feels politically or militarily insecure would do.

His dissolution with the idea began shortly after the parade ended. He wandered off Red Square and bumped into Steven Seagal and began to witness the public spectacle taking place outside the closed off square. Families with young children flooded the closed off streets of central Moscow. Some of the kids dressed in costumes resembling WWII-era Red Army uniforms. The whole city seemed to be adorned in the orange and black St. George’s ribbons, a symbol that saw a massive boost in popularity after Russia’s annexation of Crimea. Everything about it was unapologetically militaristic.

The Victory Day parade serves as an important case study for Americans sympathetic to President Donald Trump’s call for their own massive military parade. While it may seem as simple as calling up Defense Secretary James Mattis and ordering him to arrange a parade, Bodner's experience in Moscow over

the past four years has shown him it is significantly more complicated. First, preparations begin weeks before the parade actually begins. This takes men and material out of regular and training duty. But, more important for the common man, it is a major, prolonged disturbance to city life. Moscow's main roads, like the central Tverskaya artery in and out of the city, are closed frequently. This exacerbates an already dramatic traffic problem.

While the processions of tank columns and nuclear missiles make their way through the city streets mostly at night, it is the bomber flights that have really come to bother him over the past four years. They practice their Red Square runs early in the morning, and their flight path has always somehow gone directly over whatever apartment he was living in. If you have never heard the propellers of a 60-year-old Tupolev Tu-95 Bear strategic bomber before, he can promise you that they are loud. Very, unreasonably loud. The massive jet engines hanging below the body of the Tu-160 supersonic bombers are a much more pleasant sound in comparison. They're all unwelcome, recurring wakeups in the lead up to the big day on 9 MAY.

Back to the topic of the children. What kind of message does a parade like this send to them? Inevitably, they will be the most attentive audience. Bodner can't speak for Russia's children, but he can't help but feel saddened when he saw legions of them swarming Moscow's lovely boulevards in play uniforms, fawning over Topol-M nuclear missiles designed to incinerate millions of people. When the parade ends, the aftermath begins. Transiting across the city center can be a nightmare, especially on foot. Streets remain blocked off for hours. Fireworks are detonated in a steady barrage. One year, he stood on the river bank and found himself dodging large, hot chunks of firework shrapnel falling down on the crowd.

This leaves a lot for the city to clean up the next morning. And needless to say, almost everyone wakes up with a bad hangover. The city streets are no match for the treads of a 46 tonne T-90 main battle tank. And, every year, Moscow's city government dishes out tens of thousands of dollars in street repair tenders after the military has retreated to their bases outside the city. In 2015, the cost of repairs to Manezh Square, a lead-in to Red Square stormed several times by over 100 armored vehicles, cost the city \$80,000 alone. In previous parades, repair contracts across the city have sometimes totaled millions of dollars. The parades are messy, expensive, and morally questionable affairs. The White House and Pentagon should keep this in mind. [Source: DefenseNews | Matthew Bodner | February 9, 2018 ++]

Where There's a Will, There's a Way ► 11



Have You Heard? ► Little Old Lady | Drivers License

A farmer stopped by the local mechanics shop to have his truck fixed. They couldn't do it while he waited, so he said he didn't live far and would just walk home.

On the way home he stopped at the hardware store and bought a bucket and a gallon of paint. He then stopped by the feed store and picked up a couple of chickens and a goose. However, struggling outside the store he now had a problem – how to carry his entire purchases home.

While he was scratching his head he was approached by a little old lady who told him she was lost. She asked, "Can you tell me how to get to 1603 Mockingbird Lane?"

The farmer said, "Yes, as a matter of fact, my farm is very close to that house. I would walk you there but I can't carry this lot."

The old lady suggested, "Why don't you put the can of paint in the bucket. Carry the bucket in one hand, put a chicken under each arm and carry the goose in your other hand?"

"Why thank you very much," he said and proceeded to walk the old girl home.

On the way he says, "Let's take my short cut and go down this alley. We'll be there in no time."

The little old lady looked him over cautiously then said, "I am a lonely widow without a husband to defend me. How do I know that when we get in the alley you won't hold me up against the wall, pull up my skirt, and have your way with me?"

The farmer said, "Holy smokes lady! I'm carrying a bucket, a gallon of paint, two chickens, and a goose. How in the world could I possibly hold you up against the wall and do that?"

The old lady replied, "Set the goose down, cover him with the bucket, and put the paint on top of the bucket. I'll hold the chickens."

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Driver's License

A mother is driving her little girl to her friend's house for a play date.

'Mommy,' the little girl asks, 'how old are you?'

'Honey, you are not supposed to ask a lady her age,' the mother replied. 'It's not polite.'

'OK', the little girl says, 'How much do you weigh?'

'Now really,' the mother says, 'those are personal questions and are really none of your business.'

Undaunted, the little girl asks, 'Why did you and Daddy get a divorce?'

'That's enough questions, young lady! Honestly!'

The exasperated mother walks away as the two friends begin to play.

'My Mom won't tell me anything about her,' the little girl says to her friend.

'Well,' says the friend, 'all you need to do is look at her driver's license. It's like a report card, it has everything on it.'

Later that night the little girl says to her mother, 'I know how old you are. You are 32.'

The mother is surprised and asks, 'How did you find that out?'

'I also know that you weigh 130 pounds.'

The mother is past surprised and shocked now. 'How in Heaven's name did you find that out?'

'And,' the little girl says triumphantly, 'I know why you and daddy got a divorce.'

'Oh really?' the mother asks. 'Why?'

'Because you got an F in sex.'



When you don't want your enemies to track your moves



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