

# RAO

# BULLETIN

## 1 March 2015

### PDF Edition

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**SECDEF Update 13 ► Chuck Hagel | A Look Back**

Chuck Hagel’s tenure as secretary of defense comes to a close 17 FEB. During two turbulent years at the helm of the Pentagon, he won kudos for managing the Defense Department bureaucracy during a period of downsizing but may have been scapegoated for the policy disarray following the rise of the Islamic State in the Middle East. Defense analysts give the former Nebraska Republican senator high marks for managing the withdrawal of combat forces from Afghanistan, setting in motion the shift in military resources to the Pacific, and coping with the deep, congressionally mandated budget cuts known as “sequestration.” All those achievements, however, were overshadowed by the Obama administration’s muddled response to the rise of the Islamic State group after the militants seized about a third of Syria and Iraq and routed the U.S.-trained Iraqi army last year.

The Associated Press reported this month that foreign fighters are streaming into Syria and Iraq in unprecedented numbers, including at least 3,400 from Western nations among the 20,000 from around the world. In Iraq, efforts to retrain the Iraqi army are moving slowly, and the Islamic State has threatened one of the air bases where U.S. troops are training Iraqi forces. Meanwhile, the Pentagon program to recruit and train moderate forces to fight the Islamic State in Syria has barely gotten off the ground. President Barack Obama has ruled out sending U.S. ground forces into combat in Iraq or Syria, which makes training local forces to retake terrain controlled by the Islamic State group all the more critical. The White House has alluded to differences with Hagel over the Middle East, while at the same time denying he was pressured into resigning. “The priorities of the department ... have changed (since Hagel took over), given changes in the international community,” White House spokesman Josh Earnest said on Nov. 24, the day Hagel’s resignation was announced. “As we consider the next remaining two years of the president’s time in office, [we believe] that another secretary might be better suited to meet those challenges.”



Hagel's personality might have contributed to the perception that he was not skilled at articulating policy. In unscripted remarks, he often rambled or delivered muddled responses to questions. During his Senate confirmation hearings, Hagel appeared ill-prepared to answer questions about his record and views. "I think it did damage him in the eyes of the (Pentagon) bureaucracy ... but most of all the White House," said MacKenzie Eaglen, a defense analyst at the American Enterprise Institute. Eaglen said Hagel's tenure started off "with a whimper and an embarrassing one that contributed to the perception of him as a sort of weak and inarticulate Pentagon leader." But Christopher Preble, a defense analyst at the Cato Institute, said Obama is ultimately responsible for the administration's policy in the Middle East. "At the end of the day, the [secretary of defense] doesn't make big national security decisions, he implements decisions," Preble said in an email. "If Barack Obama was determined to [have a more aggressive Syria policy], Hagel would have been responsible for executing the mission."

Several analysts described Hagel as a "fall guy" who was the victim of politics. Shortly before Hagel's resignation was announced, Democrats suffered an embarrassing defeat in the midterm elections and the administration's approach in the Middle East was being widely criticized. "I think they removed him because [of] the election and ... the fact that they had to go back into Iraq (to combat insurgents)," said Lawrence Korb, a senior national security fellow at the Center for American Progress. "They were looking for a scapegoat." Nevertheless, defense analysts say Hagel had some significant achievements during his brief tenure:

- When Hagel took office, there were 68,000 troops in Afghanistan fighting what had already become America's longest war. At the end of 2014, the U.S. combat mission officially came to a close. It is now a train-and-advise mission, and there are about 10,000 American troops performing that role. Korb noted that Hagel secured a deal with the Afghans to keep a sizable force there to continue the training effort and a limited counterterrorism mission.
- The U.S. signed major basing access agreements with countries in the Pacific, started rotational deployments and put forth cutting-edge platforms. There's also been at least some improvement in military cooperation with China. "He sustained the rebalance to Asia at a time when some of the rest of the administration had a hard time focusing on that crucial region," Michael O'Hanlon, a defense analyst at the Brookings Institution, said in an email.
- Analysts gave Hagel high marks for dealing with sequestration and force reductions on this front, especially compared with his predecessors. They noted the Pentagon was guilty of wishful thinking

before Hagel took over. “(Leon) Panetta said “sequestration wouldn’t happen [and the Pentagon] just didn’t plan for it,” Korb said. Eaglen said the Strategic Choices and Management Review, which Hagel initiated, generated the first document that laid out the strategic, personnel and modernization implications of varying budget levels in the coming years. In a recent interview in his office, Hagel noted that he was more burdened than his predecessors on the fiscal front. “I’m the first secretary of defense who’s actually had to deal with sequestration and the consequences of sequestration. I’m the first secretary of defense who actually had to put together ... a real budget, a practical budget with the law of sequestration hanging over us,” he said. Experts described Hagel as a guy who was dealt a bad fiscal hand but played it well. “I think he was a very competent manager,” Eaglan said. “He may not have been the leader everybody wanted, but at this point in where we are with the drawdown, post-Budget Control Act cuts and sequestration ... I’d argue that Hagel was what the Pentagon needed at the time.”

- Hagel held regular meetings with junior enlisted and junior officers, away from commanders, to get candid views. He ordered more than 30 initiatives to combat sexual assault. He shook up the POW/MIA accounting offices plagued by incompetence and malpractice. He surged Defense Department personnel to Veterans Affairs facilities to help deal with the claims backlog. Also, he ordered officials to consider post-traumatic stress disorder as a mitigating factor for Vietnam veterans who received other-than-honorable discharges that prevented them from receiving care.

After Hagel’s resignation was announced, John Stroud, the commander of the Veterans of Foreign Wars, praised “the close, unprecedented working relationship he (Hagel) built between the Pentagon and the VFW,” adding that “his leadership and his presence will be missed.” Korb described Hagel, who was awarded two Purple Hearts in Vietnam, as a “soldier’s soldier” who cared deeply about the people he was leading. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Jon Harper | Feb. 16, 2015 ++]

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## **DoD Mobilized Reserve 10 FEB 2015 ► 24,893| Decrease of 2,867**

All services announced a decrease in Guard members and reservists in the week prior to 10 FEB with the exception of the Marine Corps and Air Force Reserve and Air National Guard. The net collective result is a decrease of 2,867 activated National Guard members and reservists in comparison to those reported in the 15 JAN Bulletin. The total number currently on active duty from the Army National Guard and Army Reserve as of 10 FEB was 14,679; Navy Reserve, 2,628; Marine Corps Reserve, 937; Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, 6368; and the Coast Guard Reserve, 291. This brings the total National Guard and reserve personnel who have been activated to 24893, including both units and individual augmentees. [Source: DoD News Release No. NR-053-15 dtd Feb 12, 2015 ++]

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## **Afghanistan/Iraqi Campaign Medals Update 03 ► OFS Extension**

The Pentagon will extend the Afghanistan Campaign Medal for troops currently serving there, despite the official end of the 13-year war. Defense officials said 19 FEB that the current phase of the Afghanistan War, known as Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS), is now a qualifying operation for award of the Afghanistan Campaign Medal. The phase of the war known as Operation Enduring Freedom technically ended on Dec. 31. The new mission does not involve U.S. troops in direct combat operations and instead limits their mission to advising and assisting the Afghan forces and potentially some targeted counterterrorism missions. About

10,000 U.S. troops are in Afghanistan. The military mission there is slated to end by December 2016. Service members should contact their military departments for additional information, defense officials said.



The qualifying Afghanistan Campaign Medal operations, campaign phases, and associated inclusive dates for each are as follows:

**Operations:**

- Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan) Sept. 11, 2001 to Dec. 31, 2014.
- Freedom's Sentinel Jan. 1, 2015 to present.

**Campaign Phases:**

- Liberation of Afghanistan Sept. 11, 2001 to Nov. 30, 2001.
- Consolidation I Dec. 1, 2001 to Sept. 30, 2006.
- Consolidation II Oct. 1, 2006 to Nov. 30, 2009.
- Consolidation III Dec. 1, 2009 to June 30, 2011.
- Transition I July 1, 2011 to Dec. 31, 2014.
- Transition II Jan. 1, 2015 to present.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | Feb. 19, 2015 ++]

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## **Humanitarian Service Medal Update 01 ► Operation Damayan Approved**

The Humanitarian Service Medal has been approved for award to soldiers and other U.S. service members who participated in Operation Damayan, the massive Pacific Command relief effort that followed Super Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines in fall 2013. Eligible soldiers were among 13,400 service members who were assigned to Joint Task Force 505, functional component commands and Pacific Command, and who were physically present and provided humanitarian assistance from Nov. 10 to Dec. 1, 2013. Within the Army, personnel eligibility has been delegated to the commanders having operational control over soldiers participating in the relief effort. The authority cannot be delegated below the command level of colonel. The approval authority for Army veterans and retirees is the commander of the Human Resources Command, Attn:AHRC-PDP-A, 1600 Spearhead Division Ave., Fort Knox, KY 40122-5408. Under the Army's military awards regulation (AR 600-8-22), soldiers are not entitled to more than one award of the Humanitarian Service Medal for participation in the same act or operation. A bronze service star will be worn to denote direct participation in a second or subsequent humanitarian act or operation. Specific eligibility criteria include:

- Soldiers must have been on active duty at the time of direct participation in the relief effort. Active duty means full-time duty in the active military service of the United States.
- Evidence that substantiates direct participation in the relief mission during the qualifying period. Acceptable evidence includes certificates, letters of commendation or appreciation; officer and NCO

evaluation reports, and copies of temporary duty or special duty orders and unit records reflecting a soldier's participation in the mission. Also acceptable are statements from commanders, supervisors and other officials who were in a position to substantiate a soldier's participation in the operation.

Operation Damayan was the Pacific Command response to a mammoth typhoon that reduced much of the Philippine coastal city of Tacloban and parts of Leyte to rubble. The U.S. military response included 13,400 service members, 66 aircraft, 12 naval vessels and the evacuation of 21,000 people from the storm area. Participating units included the Army's 593rd Sustainment Command, Joint Base Lewis-McChord, Washington, the 3rd Marine Expeditionary Brigade from Okinawa, the USS George Washington aircraft carrier and the amphibious ships USS Ashland and USS Germantown. [Source: ArmyTimes | Jim Tice | Feb. 12, 2015 ++]

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## **DoD IT ► Cloud Transition | Cyberthreats**

Some lawmakers aren't convinced the Pentagon is adequately preparing for sophisticated cyberthreats, despite a growing Defense Department budget request. At a 25 FEB House Armed Services Committee hearing on DOD's IT investments, Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN) pinned some of the blame on the department's push to adopt cloud computing, quipping that he worried "cloud" stood for "Chinese Love Our Uploaded Data." "I'm worried that our troops would be incapable of working if the 'net went down, [or] if things go dark," he said. "To me, the vulnerability is amazing when virtually every company has been taken down." DOD has evinced clear interest in accelerating adoption of cloud computing, although the steps it's taken have generally been cautious.



**DOD acting Chief Information Officer Terry Halvorsen**

DOD's transition to the cloud has been slowed by the fact that technology providers aren't always up to the department's constantly evolving security requirements, DOD acting Chief Information Officer Terry Halvorsen testified. "We are not dodging the hard question of how [companies] will meet our requirements, and frankly how will they respond when they have a penetration and lose our data, [and] what's the accountability that they're going to have," he said. "What we've had to tell them is the standards I put out today in this environment, in the IT world, they will change. And they might change in six months, depending on what the threat does. We've told them they have to be reactive to that." President Barack Obama's 2016 budget proposal, released earlier this month, requested a total federal IT budget of \$86 billion, up 2.7 percent from the previous year. About \$37 billion of the total budget is slated for Pentagon IT programs.

During the hearing, Halvorsen urged lawmakers to prioritize efforts to update military IT, such as the Joint Information Environment, a concept for a militarywide data sharing system. About 80 percent of the department's logistics applications incorporate the same data, Halvorsen said. "We can start shrinking the number of systems . . . combine the data elements, and wrap that around the different parts of the application that each of the services needs [individually]," he said. Doing that would allow the department to protect information in one location, Halvorsen added. All told, the White House budget requested \$534 billion for DOD spending, about \$36 billion more than sequestration caps, according to the department. If DOD budgets returned to sequestration levels, Halvorsen warned, it would delay IT modernization by two to three years. "We won't [be able] to support the warfighters," he said. "They will be at risk." Cyber actors are more capable than before, he added. "That includes everything from your country-state threats to terrorist groups that would be in the news today," Halvorsen said. "Any slowdown in our modernization would make it easier for even less complicated or less sophisticated groups to interfere with our business."

Rep. Rich Nugent (R-FL) asked witnesses how the department planned to combat insider threats -- unauthorized personnel gaining access to sensitive information, for instance. "The biggest insider threat is from system administrators, the guys that have complete access," Halvorsen said. DOD is working to require system administrators to use tokens to access sensitive information, so "you will have a visible identity for every systems administrator." DOD is also developing the ability to monitor system administrator behavior, sending alerts "if they route traffic differently or if we're seeing them move things around differently," Halvorsen said. Army CIO Lt. Gen. Robert Ferrell said the Army supplements software-based security with educational outreach and training to prevent insider threats. [Source: Nextgov | Mohana Ravindranath | Feb. 26, 2015

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## **DECA Budget Cuts Update 12 ► ALA Opposed to 2016 Commissary Cuts**

The Defense Department's fiscal 2016 budget request would slash taxpayer support of base grocery stores by \$322 million in 2016 and by \$1 billion next year, enough to "destroy" the shopping benefit, warns the American Logistics Association. ALA, which represents manufacturers, distributors and brokers of products sold in commissaries and base exchanges, released a position paper that contrasts DoD's plan to "wreck" commissaries with less onerous recommendations of a blue-ribbon panel to consolidate all base store operations to gain efficiencies.



**The entrance to the commissary at Ramstein Air Base, Germany. The American Logistics Association says that a fiscal 2016 budget request would slash taxpayer support of base grocery stores enough to "destroy" the shopping benefit.**

That would seem to leave Congress with an easy choice. But the Army and Air Force Exchange Service warns in its own position paper that the store consolidation path laid down by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission won't produce the savings it touts. AAFES says requiring the three exchange services, including Navy and Marine Corps store systems, to merge with Defense Commissary Agency (DeCA) into a new Defense Resale Activity would add near-term costs of \$466 million, which wouldn't be recouped through efficiencies for "85 years." That is no typo. AAFES says the commission's plan to integrate four "companies" that provide shopping discounts on base could take six to nine years to execute. Meanwhile, it says, AAFES stores alone would suffer "lost improvements" over that span of \$45 million to \$80 million a year.

On the commission idea that exchange profits be used to fund commissary and other store operations that historically have been backed by defense appropriations or tax dollars, AAFES warns it lower or eliminate exchange "dividends" which for decades have paid for base morale, welfare and recreational activities such as gymnasium and libraries. Analysts at the Pentagon are studying whether to recommend replacing or modifying DeCA budget plans based on the commission's report. Other commission ideas also would have unintended consequences, AAFES says. For example, trying to preserve shopper savings at commissaries by allowing base grocers to sell items now sold only in exchanges would "cannibalize exchange sales, earnings and MWR dividends."

AAFES cites studies showing that up to 60 percent commercial store mergers "destroy or fail to create value as expected." Such mergers typically save the equivalent of a third of one percent of sales. AAFES warns to expect even less savings from consolidating military systems, which have no brands to merge, no tax relief to gain and no unprofitable stores to eliminate. And yet the military resale industry nearly howls with delight at the consolidation idea versus DoD's budget plan to gut commissary funding. "The President's own Commission report stands in stark contrast to the President's own 2016 budget" which "would destroy these valuable benefits," ALA argues. "The Commission seeks to sustain these benefits and calls for management efficiencies to be implemented instead of diminishing the savings that patrons now realize."

One commissioner, retired Air Force Lt. Col. Michael Higgins who served an even longer second career as professional staff on compensation for the House Armed Services Committee, warned in testimony this month that commissaries will remain under attack if operations aren't consolidated. "There should be no illusions that DOD is not going to come after commissary money year after year after year... You are going to have a very difficult time here in the Congress protecting commissary funding. That means services are going to erode." The commission seeks to preserve the sale of groceries on base at cost-plus-a-five-percent-surcharge, Higgins said. But if store hours drop and days that stores are open are cut, he warned, commissary shoppers will go elsewhere and "the exchanges are going to take a terrible hit." "We need to reform [to] a single manager" to be able "to negotiate deals that protect MWR funding. We can do that," Higgins told Congress.

The president's budget goes down the path he warns against. It reflects the Joint Chiefs of Staff desperate search for budget trims to help stay a freefall in readiness from the mindless cost-cutting formula of sequestration. Congress adopted sequestration in 2011 and has lacked the courage to repeal it by reaching a compromise that will both slow spending on entitlements and close tax loopholes for the wealthy and special interests. Commissary funding, in this environment, is a ripe plum to pick. The defense budget request would do so in stages, explained Joseph Jeu, DeCA's director, in a budget memo drafted for an under secretary of defense.

- First, DeCA would lower its \$1.4 billion budget by \$183 million through administrative actions, saving \$29.5 million by cutting store hours; \$4.5 million by closing stores on holidays; \$58.2 million by reducing days stores are opened and \$18.8 million by cutting staff.
- Store staffs would be cut by an average of six employees next year. The number of days commissaries open would be cut a day or two per week across 183 locations. If a base would want to keep its store open longer than DeCA proposes, it would have to find the money in its own budget.
- DOD proposes securing an additional \$139 million in DeCA savings next year through legislation. It seeks authority to raise prices enough to pay the cost of shipping products to stores overseas. It also wants a change in law so DeCA can pay for store supplies from surcharges collected at checkout. This presumably would lower the amount of money available to maintain commissaries and to build new ones.
- The \$1 billion cut to DeCA in 2017 would force most stateside stores to become self-sustaining, which would mean deep cuts to shopper discounts. Commissaries also would have to sell items they cannot today, including beer and wine, gift cards and greeting cards, which would put exchange profits at risk. DeCA also would have to advertise heavily, budget documents explain, to be able to persuade patrons that shopping on base still has value.

This same legislative package was proposed last year and Congress ignored it. Without sequestration relief, it will be harder to ignore this year. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Tom Philpott | Feb. 19, 2015 ++]

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## **POW/MIA Update 53 ► Remains Recovery Team Dispatched to Koh Tang**

The newly established Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) has dispatched a remains recovery team to the Cambodian island of Koh Tang, where three Marines were left behind following the final battle of the Vietnam War. The excavation site is believed to hold the remains of Lance Cpl. Joseph Hargrove, Pfc. Gary Hall or Pvt. Danny Marshall, according to official documents from DPMAA's predecessor, the Joint Prisoners of War, Missing in Action Accounting Command. The three-man gun team was left behind in the confusion of a troop withdrawal following a brutal May 15, 1975, battle between about 200 U.S. Marines and entrenched Cambodian Khmer Rouge soldiers in what became known as the "Mayaguez Incident." The dig began 14 JAN and is expected to run through the end of March.

The location of excavation site has not been made public, but it's likely to be one of two areas where the heaviest fighting occurred. In 2013, a seven-member JPAC investigation team spent a week on the island's east and west beaches. Months later, JPAC told Stars and Stripes that the team did find enough evidence to bring one site before the administrative body that decides whether to allocate funds for a dig. A recovery operation, such as the one ongoing on Koh Tang, means that the site was approved by the board, and the likelihood of finding remains is high. Officials have declined numerous requests from Stars and Stripes for information related to the excavations. "This is an ongoing mission and details can't be discussed at this time," DPMAA spokeswoman Lt. Col. Melinda Morgan said. However, the Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office has declassified some of the documents since the investigative dig occurred. Heavily redacted copies are housed in Texas Tech University's Vietnam War archives.

According to a document dated November 2013, investigators found a water well where former Khmer Rouge soldiers claimed they killed and buried an American soldier after the battle. Any American remains found there would likely belong to Hargrove, because most accounts say that Hall and Marshall were taken to the mainland and executed. In addition to Hargrove, Hall and Marshall, two other servicemembers remain

missing from the battle. Lance Cpl. Ashton Loney's body was left behind on west beach in the haste of the withdrawal, and former combatants claimed he was buried on the beach. There is no public record of his body being recovered, or his remains identified. Air Force Staff Sgt. Elwood Rumbaugh was lost at sea near a downed helicopter. Although that site has been located, according to the Texas Tech documents, it was not explored at the time due to inclement weather. No other recovery operations have been announced.



**The body of Marine Lance Cpl. Ashton Loney lies on West Beach covered in a poncho after he was killed in action during the battle of Koh Tang**

In May 1975, Khmer Rouge forces captured the SS Mayaguez, an American container ship, several nautical miles off the coast of the Cambodian island of Pulo Wai. It didn't take long for President Gerald Ford to authorize a rescue operation. In the one-day battle that followed, 38 U.S. servicemembers were killed and approximately 50 were wounded. The ship and crew were released shortly thereafter. Immediately after the battle, when it became apparent that Hargrove, Hall and Marshall were unaccounted for, Navy SEALs and Marines asked to make a rescue attempt for the missing but were denied. U.S. Navy ships were recalled from the area, closing the chapter on U.S. involvement in Southeast Asia. While accounts of enemy combatants differ, most say that Hargrove was captured on Koh Tang and executed. Hall and Marshall were taken to the mainland and executed there.

Since the early 1990s, documents show that JPAC investigators have excavated sites, both on the mainland and on Koh Tang, and have collected numerous fragments and sets of remains, including as recently as 2008. During an excavation in 2008, a set of remains that was unearthed was determined to likely be Caucasian, according to Charles Ray, former ambassador to Cambodia and deputy assistant secretary of defense for POW/Missing Personnel Affairs. JPAC documents state four samples were sent for analysis. It's not made clear in the documents if the samples are something as small as bone fragments or as large as full sets of remains. No results from any of the excavations on Koh Tang and subsequent analysis have been made public.

Members of Hargrove's family hope his remains soon will be returned. "By them being on the island, I hope it is a good sign that we will be receiving Joseph's remains soon," said Hargrove's cousin, Cary Turner. "I'll keep praying they will do the right thing and send Joseph home." But, the time to recover the remains is

running short. A Russian consortium leased the island from the Cambodian government in 2008, and construction has already begun on what will one day be a casino, resorts, a seven-hotel complex and luxury villas aimed at drawing 300,000 tourists annually from China, Korea and Japan. “POW/MIA investigators will lose access to the island once the investment company moves in full-time to develop the resort,” an accounting document from March 2013 said. “A Cambodian POW/MIA committee member emphasized the urgency of conducting Tang Island investigations as soon as possible.” [Source: Stars and Stripes | Matthew M. Burke | Feb. 12, 2015 ++]

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## **POW/MIA Update 54 ► 4 Family Groups Displeased with New DPAA**

Four POW/MIA family groups representing every conflict back to World War II have banded together to express their displeasure with the Defense Department’s current personnel accounting reorganization and have asked Congress to step in again. In a joint statement released last week, the groups — World War II Families for the Return of the Missing; Search and Recover Greatest Generation; Korea Cold War Families of the Missing and the National Alliance of Families for the Return of America’s Missing Servicemen — said they have been forced out of the reorganization process.

Former Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel announced the shakeup of America’s personnel accounting agencies a year ago. The reorganization, which combined JPAC and DPMO into the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency, has cost more than \$7 million with few concrete changes and little transparency, according to the groups. In January, Rear Adm. Michael Franken and Maj. Gen. Kelly McKeague were named to helm the new agency in the interim in a move that the groups say came as a surprise. McKeague was the last commander of JPAC and many blame him for its dysfunction. The groups have accused DOD officials and the new agency’s leadership of adopting a “dictatorial attitude,” according to the statement. The groups have called for a Congressional investigation into the reorganization process and their lack of a continuing role in it, and the money spent.

“We unite to voice our extreme displeasure and frustration at the current turn of events in the process to reorganize the POW/MIA accounting effort,” the groups said in their statement. “Unless significant changes in policy, practice and attitude take place in the coming weeks, our membership will be FORCED to deal with a new organization that will be nothing more than a costly cosmetic change and the new POW/MIA accounting agency will be a failure before it is even fully operational. ... Our missing servicemen and their families deserve better.”

The reorganization effort started in earnest, but began to unravel in June with the departure of a key DOD official, according to Lisa Phillips, president of WWII Families for the Return of the Missing. Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Christine Wormuth joined the process, working with other Defense officials, the family groups, the Personnel Accounting Consolidation Taskforce and DOD consultants. “The families finally had the opportunity to discuss where things had gone wrong in the mission and were thankful that we could be part of the mission to correct the past mistakes and to work jointly with the Department of Defense in a positive, joint effort,” Phillips wrote to Stars and Stripes. Things appeared to be progressing smoothly, the groups said, until members voiced opposition to JPAC and DPMO leadership being included in integral positions within the new agency.

In October, Hagel and Wormuth told the family groups that the reorganization had lost momentum, and the process would be put on hold. The groups were kept from engaging with defense officials or consultants

during that time, Phillips said. Requests for meetings with Defense officials were denied, she said. However, another POW/MIA group – the Vietnam-focused National League of POW/MIA Families, led by Ann Mills-Griffiths – met with Wormuth. The other groups were told of the meeting and believe it’s an example of unfair treatment that has plagued the process. Franken responded broadly to the groups’ concerns: “We continue to be completely transparent about the steps we are taking to move this organization forward. We host biweekly discussions with a number of national and grassroots stakeholders to encourage feedback, answer questions, and provide information to these organizations that care very much about this issue and who can use their broad reach to amplify our message.”

The task force and working groups were terminated in October, according to the League’s website. Management consultants ‘The Clearing’ stopped working with families, and the results of all of these efforts have not been made public. Since the leadership announcement last month, the groups say they were threatened with exclusion from the process because of their vocal criticism of the stalled process and asked to provide financial information and membership lists. Currently, the groups are not involved, Phillips said. Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense for Community and Public Outreach Rene’ Bardorf responded but did not address specific allegations. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Matthew M. Burke | Feb. 26, 2015 ++]

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## **POW/MIA Recoveries ► Reported 150215 thru 150228**

"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 (73,515) Korean War (7,855), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,656), 1991 Gulf War (5), and Libya (1). 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 personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to <http://www.dpaa.mil/> and click on ‘Our Missing’. 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 remains of the following

MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

### **Vietnam**

Capt. **David Chorlins** U.S. Air Force 602nd Special Operations Squadron, 34th Tactical Group 1/11/1970 Laos He was accounted for Jan. 17, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.



### **Korea**

Cpl. **Robert Higgins** U.S. Army Battery C, 15th Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division 2/13/1951 South Korea He was accounted for Jan. 6, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

**o-o-O-o-o-**

Sgt. 1st Class **Donald R. Strum** U.S. Army Company C, 19th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division 11/4/1950 North Korea He was accounted for Jan. 13, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

**--o-o-O-o-o-**

Cpl. **Lindsey C. Lockett** U.S. Army Medical Detachment, Headquarters Battery, 503rd Field Artillery Battalion, 2nd Infantry Division 12/1/1950 North Korea He was accounted for Jan. 26, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

**--o-o-O-o-o-**

Sgt. **Floyd J.R. Jackson** U.S. Army Headquarters Company, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division 12/12/1950 North Korea He was accounted for Jan. 27, 2105. He will be buried with full military honors.

**--o-o-O-o-o-**

Sgt. **Arnold V. Andring** U.S. Army Company L, 3rd Battalion, 9th Infantry Regiment, 8th Army 2/4/1951 North Korea He was accounted for Jan. 28, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

### **World War II**

2nd Lt. **Alvin Beethe** U.S. Army Air Forces 393rd Fighter Squadron, 367th Fighter Group, 9th Air Force 11/26/1944 Germany He was accounted for Jan. 28, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

**--o-o-O-o-o-**

2nd Lt. **Stephen V. Biezis** U.S. Army Air Forces 575th Bombardment Squadron, 391st Bombardment A group burial service March 18 at Arlington National Cemetery will honor 12 World War II crew members lost when their bomber was shot down in the South Pacific Theater more than 70 years ago.

**--o-o-O-o-o-**

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced 23 FEB that the remains of the following airmen have now been accounted for and are being returned to their families:

- 1st Lt. **William D. Bernier** of Augusta, Montana.
- 1st Lt. **Bryant E. Poulsen** of Salt Lake City.

- 1st Lt. **Herbert V. Young Jr.** of Clarkdale, Arizona.
- Tech Sgt. **Charles L. Johnston** of Pittsburgh.
- Tech Sgt. **Hugh F. Moore** of Elkton, Maryland.
- Staff Sgt. **John E. Copeland** of Dearing, Kansas.
- Staff Sgt. **Charles J. Jones** of Athens, Georgia.
- Sgt. **Charles A. Gardner** of San Francisco.

The airmen took off from Texter Strip, Nazdab Air Field, New Guinea, on April 10, 1944, on a mission to attack a Japanese anti-aircraft site at Hansa Bay in New Guinea's Madang Province, according to a Defense Department news release. Four managed to parachute from the ill-fated B-24D Liberator when it took on fire, but they reportedly died in captivity. The others were reported missing. Five years later, the Army Graves Registration Service recovered the remains of three of the airmen but concluded the other nine were unrecoverable. More than half a century passed. Then in 2001, a U.S.-led team found the wreckage of a B-24D with the missing bomber's tail number. "After several surveys, DoD teams excavated the site and recovered human remains and nonbiological material evidence," the news release said. Scientists from the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including mitochondrial DNA, to identify six of the airmen – Jones, Johnston, Gardner, Young, Moore and Bernier, according to the news release. "To account for Poulsen and Copeland, scientists from DPAA used circumstantial evidence that placed them on the aircraft and accounted for as them as part of the group," the release said. Young, Moore and Gardner were buried last year with full military honors. Jones will be laid to rest in his hometown on Feb. 28; Johnston at Arlington on March 2. The group burial service honoring Bernier, Poulsen, Copeland and the other crew members will follow March 18. Gardner's brother, Theodore Gardner, told Air Force Times in December he remembered the day their father received a telegram stating that Gardner was missing in action. It was one of the few times Theodore Gardner ever saw his father cry, he said. "We just had to accept the news and pray that he would be found," he said. Gardner's burial at Arlington Dec. 4 was an answer to that prayer at long last. Group, 9th Air Force 12/23/1944 Germany He was accounted for Feb. 3, 2015. He will be buried with full military honors.

[Source: <http://www.dpaa.mil> | Feb. 27, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Conversion Proposal** ► **Make it a Non-Profit Government Corporation**

The federal agency that provides health care to vets should be turned into a non-profit government corporation that competes with the private sector for patients, according to a veterans' advocacy group. The conservative-leaning Concerned Veterans of America recommends splitting the Veterans Health Administration into two entities, one that focuses on hospital and clinical health care for vets, and another that runs the department's health insurance component. Under the proposal, the VHA would operate along the same lines as Amtrak, the rail service that is independent from the government but also receives some

federal money. Veterans would have the choice to stay within the VHA health care system, or obtain care from providers in the private health care network. Those who chose the latter would have to help subsidize the cost of their care through co-payments and deductibles, similar to the Federal Employees Health Benefits Program for civilian federal workers, which the CVA report called “the oldest and most successful premium support program in the world.”



**Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Fla. , said the current VHA model doesn't work anymore.**

The idea behind the proposed reforms is to improve health care veterans by offering them more choices, but also creating competition for VHA and giving the agency incentives to become more efficient. “This approach is not anti-VHA,” said the report, crafted by a bipartisan task force headlined by former Sen. Bill Frist (R-TN) and former Rep. Jim Marshall (D-GA). “It is pro-veteran. The VA should be given every opportunity to compete for veterans’ health care dollars. But it can no longer take veterans for granted as customers. Some veterans get great care from the VA and will want to continue doing so. Others do not and will not.” CVA on 26 FEB released its recommendations for overhauling VHA -- the Veterans Affairs Department agency at the heart of the management scandal involving patient wait times -- during a Capitol Hill event featuring several high-profile Republicans, including possible presidential hopeful Sen. Marco Rubio of Florida.

The current VHA model doesn’t work anymore, Rubio said. “The challenges before our veterans have changed, and the way we provide service for them must change as well. The result of the current system is pretty straightforward. Our veterans today are facing, and are met with, the same charm and the same efficiency from the Veterans Administration as they get from the Department of Motor Vehicles or the IRS,” the Florida Republican said. “I believe they deserve a lot better than that.” Rubio said navigating the VA health care and benefits system is a huge issue for many of his Florida constituents. As part of the report, CVA surveyed roughly 1,000 vets, with 90 percent of respondents favoring “efforts to reform veteran health care in this country.” But what that reform should look like is a matter of debate.

VA Secretary Bob McDonald was not thrilled by CVA’s recommendation to carve out VHA from the rest of the department. “Unfortunately, many of today’s proposals advocate ‘contracting out’ a sacred mission to care for those who have borne the battle,” McDonald said in a statement. “There is an important role for outside care in the veteran health model to supplement VA’s own care, but that role should not diminish or obscure the importance of VA’s health care system. Reforming VA health care cannot be achieved by dismantling it and preventing veterans from receiving the specialized care and services that can only be provided by VA.” The 2014 Veterans Access, Choice and Accountability Act allows some vets temporary access to private health care rather than waiting for a VA appointment or traveling more than 40 miles to a VA facility. The Obama administration has said that not as many vets as expected have opted out of the VHA

system at this point. President Obama’s fiscal 2016 budget recommends taking any money left over from that “choice” part of the law and channeling it back into other VA programs, which many lawmakers oppose.

The task force did not call for a wholesale dismantling of the VHA, and emphasized that vets who want to stay within that health care system would be able to do so under the proposed recommendations. The agency runs the country’s largest integrated health care system, with 150 medical centers and nearly 1,400 local outpatient clinics, vet centers and other facilities. Most of the VA’s roughly 313,000 employees work at VHA. Frist, who spoke during Thursday’s event, sought to distinguish between VA employees and the bureaucracy. “[VA] hospitals are full of people who are committed, who are hard-working, who want to do the very best for that individual patient and take them, and love them and give them the care that they deserve,” he said. “But the system sets up barriers that restrict and restrain, and come between that desire and that commitment between the individuals who are in these VA hospitals ... we’ve got too many barriers in their way to deliver that care.” The idea of privatizing veterans’ health care and transforming the VHA into a government-chartered corporation is not new. But it’s fair to say that the reaction from stakeholders will be mixed.

The Military Officers Association of America did not take a position on CVA’s report. “The important thing is that this allows for further dialogue and another perspective that should be considered,” said Rene Campos, deputy director of government relations at MOAA. Campos said that there are a lot of challenges facing the veterans’ health care system that privatization won’t necessarily improve (or make worse), such as data-sharing. The VA and Defense Department historically have had problems sharing health care information, and there’s no indication the situation would improve between the VA and private health care providers. All the ideas on reforming VA health care need to be “thoroughly debated and understood,” Campos said.

The American Federation of Government Employees, which represents many VA workers, did not immediately respond to a request for comment. Other veterans service organizations contacted for comment on the CVA report also did not immediately respond. Some of Thursday’s speakers argued that VA employees, who are enrolled in FEHBP, have more health care choices than the vets they serve. “It’s kind of ironic that people who work at the VA have choices in the health care that they get, but veterans who enroll in the VHA are captive to the system,” said Avik Roy, a co-chairman of the CVA task force and senior fellow at the Manhattan Institute’s Center for Medical Progress. Rubio was less diplomatic. “The fact that those very bureaucrats have more options for their own health care than the veterans they are supposed to be working for is immoral and makes no sense,” he said. [Source: GovExec.com | Kellie Lunney | Feb. 26, 2015 ++]

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## **Louisiana DVA Complaints ► Late Bill Payments | Poor Outreach**

Louisiana veterans are running up debt because a federal agency isn’t paying their medical bills on time, according to the chief of the state’s veterans agency. Federal law authorizes the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to provide health coverage for eligible military veterans when they are “financially liable” for emergency medical services provided at a local non-VA hospital or ambulance company. But the VA division Congress recently put in charge of getting the bills paid isn’t doing its job, said David LaCerte, secretary of the state Department of Veterans Affairs. “Unfortunately, VA employees have ignored the intent of Congress and refused to pay these bills on time, leaving hundreds of Louisiana veterans with medical debt they should

not have incurred,” LaCerte wrote members of Louisiana’s congressional delegation. The delays reportedly have led to “negative impacts” to the credit of 229 Louisiana veterans, he said.

In addition, LaCerte said 26 FEB that inadequate VA outreach has left many Louisiana veterans unaware of potential financial risks. “The VA outreach to people and explanations needs to be better,” LaCerte said. In July, the VA owed Louisiana medical providers more than \$35 million. By February, the debt rose to an estimated \$48 million, according to the Louisiana Hospital Association. “Louisiana’s veterans sacrificed to preserve our freedom, and they deserve to have their medical bills paid on time,” LHA President Paul Salles said. “Congress needs to put an end to the VA backlog and require the VA to improve outreach to our veterans with unpaid bills.” Salles urged veterans who have received emergency medical services from a Louisiana hospital or ambulance provider within the last two years to check with the provider to see if the VA has paid their claim. If the claim remains unpaid, Salles urged veterans to share their stories with Congress.

Meanwhile, LaCerte asked Louisiana’s congressional delegation to push for an expedited U.S. House and Senate oversight hearing “to ensure timely and appropriate payments for veterans’ emergency medical care in local communities and to improve VA outreach to veterans who do not know their bills remained unpaid.” At the same time, LaCerte’s office is trying to raise awareness among veterans of their rights and how they can contest their credit reports. “The VA has chosen not to inform Louisiana veterans that their claims remain unprocessed or to proactively educate veterans of their appeal rights in the event of a denial,” LaCerte wrote. “Instead, the VA has told providers to ‘bill the veteran’ if a claim is denied and no appeal is filed.” [Source: The Advocate | Marsha Shuler | Feb. 27, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Health Care Stories Update 07 ► In Praise of VA Care**

I must voice my personal experience with the Pittsburgh VA Healthcare System in light of recent accusations. My father, 100-percent disabled World War II veteran Alberth Goga, was under the system's home care for many years. He left us on Jan. 14 at the age of 93 ( “‘Mr. Bluebird' remembered for loving nature” ). He was blind and bedridden. Without the Pittsburgh VA, I don't know how I could have tackled his extensive needs for caregiving. Every possible medical need he had was taken care of by the VA. From nursing to medicine, supplies, beds, ramps, whatever the need, every need was met swiftly and with care. The VA nurses, Craig and Jody, were as top notch as they come. They were here at a moment's notice. Dr. Judith Plowman was the most caring and wonderful doctor, attending to his every need right at his bedside. I cannot put into words my appreciation for the entire Pittsburgh VA organization. They treated Dad up to his last breath with the highest honors and dignity. I received a sympathy card from them and it wasn't just signed with names. There were 14 handwritten personal notes inside. Thank you, Pittsburgh VA Healthcare System, for your excellent service. I will always be grateful for how you paid honor and respect to my father in his greatest time of need.



**Cheryl Sturm**

[Source: The Tribune-Review | Cheryl Sturm | Jan. 26, 2015 ++]

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## **VA SSVF Program Update 03 ► \$300M Available for Homeless**

Building on President Obama’s commitment to end Veteran homelessness, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is announcing the availability of another \$300 million in grants to non-profit organizations and other groups that serve Veterans through VA’s Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program. The SSVF program assists very low-income Veteran families who are homeless or at risk of becoming homeless. The \$300 million grants are available to current grantees seeking renewals.

Announcement of the grants comes on the heels of the January agreement that dedicates the West Los Angeles VA campus to serving veterans in need, and commits the Department to design a plan to help end homelessness among Veterans in Los Angeles County. Additionally, a nationwide homeless 2015 Point in Time (PIT) Count took place last month, in which VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald and other VA officials spread out around the country to identify homeless Veterans. Last year’s PIT Count revealed that 49,993 Veterans were homeless on a single night representing a 33-percent decline in homelessness among Veterans since 2010. VA relies on strong, targeted collaborations in key areas at Federal and local levels and engages community partners to develop innovative and forward-thinking solutions that can lead to scalable and replicable models of service.

FY 2014 alone, through VA’s various homeless programs, nearly 70,000 Veterans and their family members were placed in permanent housing or prevented from becoming homeless under the SSVF program. VA’s goal is to end Veteran homelessness by the end of 2015. “One of the things you learn in the Army is you never leave a soldier behind,” said Secretary McDonald. “Unfortunately, we’ve left some people behind, and they’re our homeless Veterans. VA is committed to achieving the goal of ending Veteran homelessness, and we won’t rest until every homeless Veteran has a place to call home.” VA most recently announced awards totaling \$507 million in SSVF grants. Those funds included targeted support for 56 high-priority communities. VA is currently preparing to award an additional \$93 million in SSVF funds for high-priority communities. The Federal Register notice of funding availability may be found at [http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/SSVF\\_NOFA\\_Feb3.pdf](http://www.va.gov/HOMELESS/ssvf/docs/SSVF_NOFA_Feb3.pdf). For more information about VA’s homeless programs, visit <http://www.va.gov/homeless>. Additional information about the SSVF program may be found at [www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp](http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp). [Source: VA News Release | Feb. 13, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Vet Choice Program Update 05 ► 2016 Budget Controversy**

Only 27,000 veterans have made appointments for private medical care since the Department of Veteran’s Affairs Choice Card program rolled out at the start of November, Secretary Robert “Bob” McDonald said this week. It’s such a tiny number compared with the 9 million people who use VA health care that McDonald has asked for “flexibility” to reallocate billions of dollars for other pressing matters, from hiring more claims officers to help wade through a vast veterans’ benefits backlog to managing other patient medical needs. The VA’s release of the choice card numbers is at the heart of a controversy over President Obama’s 2016 budget, which asks for authority to reallocate funds from the temporary \$10 billion program that Congress established last year to help former troops struggling to obtain care at vastly overstrapped VA clinics.

House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL) has roundly rejected the plan, calling it a “complete non-starter, which I will not support.” He is instead pushing to expand the program to give veterans more care in private clinics. “If there’s going to be any reallocation, it’s going to be to further improve and strengthen the program itself and not address other unspecified needs,” Miller told McDonald. The program, was created after the VA’s patient wait list scandal, which kept veterans on lists for months as they waited for care for everything from suicide prevention to cancer-related surgeries. A series of government reports earlier this year documented a widespread coverup of the issue through falsification of appointment data and extensive treatment delays. The card gives veterans who have been waiting more than 30 days for appointments or who live more than 40 miles from a VA facility the chance to see a private doctor.

The VA has been hiring tens of thousands of doctors and nurses to curb to fill shortages that they said contributed to the delays. They now say wait times are down. Nationally, VA completed more than 37 million appointments between May 1, 2014 and December 31, 2014. That’s an increase of 1.8 million more appointments than were completed during the same time period in 2013, a fact sheet by the agency said. Before the choice card, veterans could receive outside care for emergencies — wherever the closest hospital is, for instance — or for procedures the VA didn’t offer. And separate from the choice card, the VA made over 2 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector from May 1, 2014, through January 31, 2015 — a 45 percent increase in authorizations when compared to the same period in the previous years, according to data from the department. But many veterans report that they often have to wait months and even years to be reimbursed for this care, and some say this issue could be one reason why veterans haven’t used their care cards.

Frederick H. Nordhorn, a commissioner of the Prince George’s County Commission For Veterans and a former Army sergeant who served from 1973 to 1979 in Germany, said he has over 10 dings on his credit reports because of private medical bills the VA hasn’t paid. He spoke to McDonald directly about it, reaching him on his cell phone, which the secretary gave out to The Washington Post and on live television when he first took office with an agenda of reform. McDonald promised to help. And several members of his staff called Nordhorn after he spoke to the secretary. But the issue has yet to be resolved. “They put Robert McDonald in a swamp, and he’s up to his neck in alligators and snakes. And for extra fun they hung a few hornets nests,” Nordhorn said. “These are deep problem of dysfunction that need fixing that have been going on for decades. No wonder veterans aren’t sure if they should use or trust the choice card. They feel discouraged at every turn.”

On 19 FEB VA released an informational video on the Veterans Choice Program. The video covers basic program eligibility requirements, as well as the appointment scheduling process. To watch the video, click here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i9nnsRIX5b8>. [Source: Washington Post | Emily Wax-Thibodeaux | Feb. 13, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Vet Choice Program Update 06 ► Senator Coalition Urges Fix**

A bipartisan coalition of 41 senators is pressing Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald to remedy the implementation of a program that allows veterans to seek private medical care. The effort, often called the "choice card," allows veterans to seek medical care at non-VA providers, if they live more than 40 miles from an agency facility or if they cannot get a doctor’s appointment within 30 days. The program was a cornerstone of legislation Congress approved last summer to overhaul the VA — with lawmakers allocating

\$10 billion for the effort — after a months-long scandal over patient wait times that were linked to a series of deaths. The VA is “construing the eligibility criteria as it relates to the 40-mile rule so narrowly that it is excluding too many who are far away from the care that they need,” the group — lead by Senate Armed Services Committee John McCain (R-AZ)— wrote 25 FEB in a letter to McDonald.

They charged that while the department has sent out 8.5 million cards, only 0.37 percent of veterans who received them have been authorized to seek private healthcare. Senators said the VA “does not consider the type of care available within 40 miles of where a Veteran lives” and measures the distance “‘as the crow flies’ and not the actual distance that the veteran would have to travel.” “Given the clear intent of Congress to reduce barriers to care, it is perplexing that the VA is not using its authority to allow non-VA care for those who face a geographic challenge in accessing care, including long drive times or health conditions that make travel difficult,” the group wrote. The group reminded McDonald he has the authority to modify how the program’s distance criteria is calculated and urged him to do so “without delay.”

Senators also said they were “dismayed” over a provision in the administration’s fiscal 2016 VA budget request that would allow McDonald to funnel money away from the program. “It is deeply disturbing that the administration would try to reduce funding for this program before this program has even been allowed to work — being in existence for only a few short months — and as barriers to care continue to exist.” They asked him to “stop any attempt to propose a reallocation of funds designed to kill the choice card program in its infancy.” The missive is the latest in a rough week for McDonald. On Tuesday he had to apologize for misstating that he had served in special forces, a false claim that has put him on thin ice with Capitol Hill and veterans groups. [Source: The Hill | Martin Matishak | Feb. 25, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Vet Choice Program Update 07 ► Doctors May Opt Out**

Doctors may opt out of a program providing outside health care to veterans caught up in long waits at the VA because the department is not paying high enough reimbursements, a national association of family physicians said this week. Family physicians approached to participate in the multi-billion-dollar Veterans Choice program reported they were offered rates far below the benchmark set by Medicare, the American Academy of Family Physicians wrote 24 FEB in a letter to Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald.



**Reid B. Blackwelder, chairman of the American Academy of Family Physicians**

The Veterans Choice program began in November but is already drawing criticism from Congress for the very low number of veterans who have made appointments for outside health care. The letter from the AAFP — one of the largest U.S. medical associations — indicates the VA may also have trouble drawing in

providers. “Simply put, any public or private payer health plan contract that does not at least meet the Medicare payment rate will remain financially impossible for most medical practices that already operate on extremely thin margins,” Reid Blackwelder, chairman of the AAFP board, wrote to McDonald.

The group said doctor reimbursement rates under the federal government’s Medicare health insurance system are used as a benchmark for public and private payers. Some of its nearly 116,000 members are reporting that the VA approached them about being in the Veterans Choice program and offered rates that were 30 percent below Medicare. “If the VA continues to offer contracts at less than the Medicare rate, the AAFP is concerned that most practices will not be able to participate in the program, which undermines the law’s intent of expanding access to veterans,” Blackwelder wrote. On 26 FEB, Senators said the Veterans Choice program appears not to be working and that it is “shockingly underutilized” by VA beneficiaries. After 500,000 calls, only about 30,000 appointments or requests have been resolved so far. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Travis J. Tritten | Feb. 26, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Choice Act Update 11 ► 900 Employees Let Go to Date**

VA Secretary Robert McDonald said 15 FEB on Meet The Press that 900 employees at the scandal-plagued agency have lost their jobs under his leadership since July. “We’ve held accountable about 900 employees who are no longer with us since I became secretary,” Mr. McDonald said on NBC’s “Meet the Press.” Of those, 60 were employees who manipulated wait-time data as part of last year’s scandal when a whistleblower alleged that veterans were dying while waiting for care. Mr. McDonald said 100 senior leaders are currently under investigation. The rate of firings, however, is lower than that under Mr. McDonald’s predecessor, retired Army Gen. Eric Shinseki, according to a staff member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee. Data from the Office of Personnel Management shows that 4,300 VA employees were let go under Mr. Shinseki’s two-year term. That would be an average rate of more than 1,000 employees let go over six months — more than the 900 fired since Mr. McDonald took over in July.

Meanwhile, problems at the agency continue. The VA recently was added to a list of high-risk agencies because of a lack of oversight, sub-par training for employees and trouble implementing legislation enacted last summer designed to help veterans get timely care. Mr. McDonald said he met with the comptroller general and “encouraged” him to include the VA as one of the more than 30 government agencies on the high-risk list. “I want to be on that list. I want to shine a light on what we’re doing, and that’s what we’re working to do,” the VA chief said. When questioned about a heated exchange with Rep. Mike Coffman in last week’s House Committee on Veterans Affairs hearing in which the congressman said the new secretary was not making any difference, Mr. McDonald said that even leaders from veterans service organizations have said the agency is improving. “We’re not where we need to be yet, I’m not saying that. What I’m saying is we’re making progress,” he said. [Source: The Washington Times | Jacqueline Klimas | Feb. 15, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Accountability Update 02 ► Problem Employee Firings Decrease**

Of the 900 Veterans Affairs Department employees fired in the past seven months, only eight have been dismissed for their connection to wait time problems that were at the center of a nationwide scandal last year, according information provided to Congress. That small percentage casts doubt on the assertion by VA officials that they’re doing a better job of holding individuals accountable for past failures. In a “Meet the

Press" appearance this week, VA Secretary Bob McDonald insisted that leadership is making "fundamental changes" in operations to help rebuild public trust in the wake of last year's scandals, including punishing employees who fail at their jobs. "Nine hundred people have been fired since I became secretary," he said. "We've got 60 people that we fired who have manipulated wait times. We've got about 100 senior leaders who are under investigation. ... So we're holding people accountable." But VA officials later clarified that about 60 employees have faced some type of discipline for actions related to the records errors, including short suspensions and letters of reprimand.

The 900 fired in seven months for any reason appears to represent a slowdown within VA, which has more than 300,000 employees. Congressional testimony from VA leaders last spring indicated that 2,000 to 3,000 individuals are fired each year from the department for a range of infractions. VA officials this week said those numbers may have been compiled differently, and that the 900 number comes mostly from dismissed Veterans Health Administration workers and represents "an environment of sustainable accountability" within VA. They also said that 91 percent of VA medical facilities have installed new leadership teams since June, a dramatic turnover in the wake of last year's problems. And McDonald has mandated that every VA employee "reaffirm their commitment to the mission and core values of the department" each year moving ahead, in an effort to better emphasize expectations of performance.

But the secretary — confirmed by the Senate in July — also has faced repeated criticism from lawmakers that he has not done enough to purge problem employees from VA's ranks, particularly after Congress passed new legislation last summer on the topic. In a statement Tuesday, Paralyzed Veterans of America Deputy Executive Director Sherman Gillums Jr. called the figure of 900 dismissals encouraging but added that "provoking real change may take firing 9,000 employees, particularly the hardliners who believe 'this too shall pass' in response to calls for sweeping changes and greater accountability in VA." But he also praised McDonald's efforts so far, saying his group has seen "incremental changes" within the department. House Veterans' Affairs Committee Chairman Jeff Miller (R-FL) called the firing numbers upsetting. "Though VA leaders have begun to stress the importance of accountability — something department officials almost never did in the past — instilling a climate of accountability at VA will only be achieved through actions, not words," he said. "The fact that VA firings have actually decreased amid the biggest scandal in the department's history is a troubling development VA leaders must explain and remedy." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Feb. 18, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Lawsuit | Gerald Bain ► Minneapolis Vet Home Negligence**

The family of Air Force veteran Gerald Bain, who overdosed at the Minneapolis Veterans Home in 2012, is suing the state Department of Veterans Affairs over his death. The family's attorney says administrators at the state-run facility were not paying close enough attention to how much medication Bain was taking when he died. "Their personnel were negligent and failed to properly assess and control the use of prescribed and non-prescribed medication," attorney Richard Nygaard said in the lawsuit filed in January in Hennepin County District Court. In March 2013, James Bain was appointed as trustee for the heirs and next-of-kin of his brother, Gerald, who died of methadone toxicity while living at the veterans home. He was 61.

Under its "Care Plan" policy, the home was required to reassess Gerald and revise his plan as his medical conditions changed, the suit alleges. "They certainly knew he had been taking illegal drugs and just didn't do anything about it," Nygaard said. Staff members were also aware that Bain, who suffered from bipolar disorder and chronic back pain, had not been taking the drugs that were prescribed to him, the attorney said.

James Bain said his brother, who lived in the home's domiciliary and had a job at its coffee shop, had a weakness for pain pills, and staff members should have kept a more watchful eye on his medications, especially since his roommate had voiced concerns about his drug addiction to officials at the home. When it was time to refill his prescription, James Bain said his brother received his pills for the entire month and was able to take them at his own discretion. "If he got his doses every day, maybe he'd still be alive ... but he just ate them up like candy," James Bain said.



**Elaine Bain and sons Richard, center, and James**

In 2012, an investigation by the Minnesota Department of Health discovered the home's staff members had found a stash of unprescribed drugs in Bain's room five days before his death. They were also aware he was taking a painkiller more frequently than was prescribed. The state investigation found that employees at the home failed to adequately monitor Bain's medications. "That's what ticks me off more than anything," James Bain said. "They just swished it under the rug." The Minneapolis home has a history of complaints and has been investigated by the state Department of Health more than 10 times in the past five years, state records show. At least four of those cases involved suspicious deaths.

Following this string of incidents, the Minnesota Department of Veterans Affairs, which administers the state's five veterans homes, reported it had made improvements in its policies and training. It also received a \$35 million grant last September from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs to finish renovation and expansion of the Minneapolis home. Construction plans include a new nursing facility, and a tunnel connecting all the skilled nursing buildings on the campus.

Anjali Shankar, who is representing the home through the Minnesota attorney general's office, said in a written response to the lawsuit that any "alleged damages were the result of a pre-existing medical condition, a superseding cause, an act of nature and/or omission by person over whom defendants have no control." The attorney general also is seeking to have the suit dismissed and to recover attorney's fees. Civil cases filed against state-run facilities are often difficult to win because state law makes government facilities such as the veterans home immune from punitive damages. Instead, Bain's estate is seeking more than \$50,000 to cover the costs of the funeral, as well as other expenses. "They have to monitor their patients so much better than what they're doing," James Bain said. "This could've been prevented." [Source: Minneapolis Star Tribune | Tina Munnell | Feb. 17, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Needs Based Programs ► Proposed Regs | 3-yr Look Back**

The Department of Veteran Affairs (VA) has announced proposed regulations that will affect needs-based programs such as Pension and Aid and Attendance for older veterans and their surviving spouses. The VA claims that the proposed changes are the result of a 2012 Government Accountability Offices (GAO) report. This report recommended changes in the VA needs based programs to “to maintain the integrity of VA’s needs-based benefit programs.” The VA itself says another reason for the new rules is to “reduce opportunities for attorneys and financial advisors to take advantage of pension claimants.” The programs targeted by these new rules are low income pension, homebound pension, and Aid and Attendance.

These benefits may be available to a veteran, or a surviving spouse of a veteran who served at least one day during wartime (as set by Congress) for at least 90 days, and received something other than a dishonorable discharge. The benefit, particularly the Aid and Attendance benefit, replaces some income that the veteran or surviving spouse is spending on unreimbursed medical expenses. Furthermore, there is a limit on assets or net worth since the VA assumes that if the veteran or his surviving spouse has sufficient assets to take care for himself or herself, then the VA should not be providing money to the veteran or spouse. These proposed changes to the rules would presumably not apply to compensation, which are the benefits for those with a current injury/illness that is service connected.

The proposed rules would impose a 36 month “look back” period on transferred assets, even between spouses to the extent that assets exceed the new net worth limit which would be the maximum community spouse resource allowance permitted by Medicaid prevailing at the time the final rule is published, indexed for inflation. In 2015, the maximum allowance is \$119,220. For those who dispose of excess assets in order to qualify for VA benefits, there will be a penalty period of up to 10 years based upon the total assets transferred during the “look back” period that exceed the net worth calculation. The penalty period would begin on the first day of the month that follows the last asset transfer, and the divisor would be the applicable maximum annual pension rate in effect as of the date of the pension claim. If the VA mirrors Medicaid rules, this would mean that no pension monies would be paid during the penalty period. The net worth is determined by adding the claimant’s annual income to his or her assets. The primary residence would not be included as an asset unless it is sold and another residence is not purchased within one calendar year. Deductible medical expenses would be further clarified as well.

These new regulations seem to attempting to mirror Medicaid rules for a benefit that is not nearly as valuable as Medicaid. Moreover, it would seem that veterans earned the right to some assistance when they are older and ill by virtue of simply being veterans and having served our country. These rules are so restrictive, it would seem that few veterans or surviving spouses would qualify for what is a fairly low benefit (in 2015, the maximum surviving spouse benefit is \$1,149 per month and a veteran with one dependent/spouse is \$2,120 per month). Most claimants are trying to obtain assistance to pay for personal care/assisted living facilities, or for care in a State Veterans facility. If you are concerned about this consider contacting your U.S. Congressman or U.S. Senator to express your feeling on the proposed regulations. If accepted the new regulations could go into effect as early as early as July, 2015. [Source: Legal Ease | Kathleen Martin | Feb. 15, 2015 ++]

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## **VA BRAC ► 336 Buildings at Issue**

Veterans Affairs Department officials want their own version of a base closure round, targeting aging hospitals and clinics they no longer need. But getting support for such a move might be as frustrating and fruitless as convincing lawmakers to go along with the unpopular military base closing process, something the Pentagon has been begging for since 2012. In budget testimony last week before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee, VA Secretary Bob McDonald said the department has 336 buildings nationwide that are less than half-occupied, and many are completely unused. The inventory includes not just historic sites but also aging, out-of-date locations. Combined, the maintenance costs on those sites total more than \$24 million a year, officials said. "VA cannot be a sound steward of the taxpayers' resources with the asset portfolio that we're currently carrying," McDonald told lawmakers. "No business would carry such a portfolio. Veterans deserve much better. It's time to close the VA's old substandard and underutilized infrastructure."



**VA Secretary Robert McDonald and other VA officials appear before the House Veterans Affairs Committee on Capitol Hill 18 FEB**

More than 1,300 VA facilities are at least 70 years old, officials said, pointing to the need to upgrade and replace many parts of the infrastructure. But closing any facilities will require support from lawmakers, who have fought viciously against Defense Department requests to close their own excess base capacity. For many, any federal government facility closure means potential lost jobs, reduced services and angry constituents back in home states and districts. Underscoring that tenet at the hearing was Rep. Corrine Brown (D-FL) who joked that "we support closing some of the VA facilities ... just as long as you don't close any in Florida. "That's kind of the mentality of the members of Congress," she said. "So as we work through it, we got to keep in mind, it is a team effort. And that those communities need to have input and involvement as we evolve as to what we want the VA to look like."

Ray Kelley, legislative director for the Veterans of Foreign Wars, told lawmakers that VA shouldn't be paying for space it isn't using, but added that any such moves need to be done in a way that doesn't frighten veterans already concerned about the availability of VA programs in their areas. Paralyzed Veterans of America National Legislation Director Carl Blake said rather than jettison facilities, he would like to see the department find other ways to use the space. "We've talked for years about using some of those underutilized spaces for ... homeless veterans," he said. "I would hope that they would think outside the box in some of the areas where these facilities can serve a purpose." VA officials have not developed a formal list of facilities to be closed or a plan for how to actually shed the extra space. McDonald said he hopes to work with Congress

in the months to come as part of larger conversations about eliminating waste within his department's budget. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Feb 17, 2015 ++]

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## **Crisis Hotline Update 01 ► 50+% of Calls Blocked**

The ABC15 Investigators found the majority of veterans calling the Department of Veterans Affairs' (VA's) national hotline are not getting the help they need. Most callers are either getting hung up on or getting a busy signal. Recently obtained VA documents show that in 2014, 55 percent of calls never got through to a representative. And, so far in 2015, that number is even higher, at 59 percent. "It's ridiculous," said Tom Boyle, a three-year veteran of the Navy. He was discharged after being injured in the line of duty. "I was proud to be a sailor," said Tom. "A lot of work, a lot of dedication, I just loved it." Boyle said he felt marginalized by the VA. He said he has called the hotline over and over again, but, most of the time, can't get through. "You wait like 45 minutes to an hour," said Boyle. "I got frustrated and hung up because I can't get through."

ABC found, most veterans or their families calling the hotline for help with their benefits can't either. Last November, they interviewed two former call center employees who told them they were fired along with several others because they didn't meet VA guidelines that require employees to spend less than 10 minutes on the phone with each caller. Boyle's connection to the call center goes deeper than most vets. His wife, Arlene, worked at the call center in Phoenix for five years. There are seven call centers around the country. She recently took early retirement because she was fed up with how she was asked to treat our country's vets. "It's not the veteran's fault. They can't keep enough people staffed in the call centers to answer those phones," said Arlene.

The VA reported that there are a total of 736 employees of the call centers nationwide, but the department could not provide ABC15 with an exact number of employees charged with answering calls on a daily basis. The department estimated their management consists of about 10 percent of employees on staff. The VA told ABC15 their attrition rate is 3 percent. In a statement, a VA representative told ABC15, "Although the number of "blocked" calls – an industry term describing calls that are not connected to a Call Center employee due to a full call queue – is high, demand for information from the National Call Center continues to climb." But, according to the VA's own data, the number of people trying to contact the call center was actually lower in 2014 than in the previous three years.

During that time, the VA told ABC the department increased staff at all seven call centers nationwide by 30 percent. The number of blocked calls was also slightly lower in that time. "The bottom line is," said Arlene, "The government is responsible to have enough people there." ABC asked the Veteran's Benefits Administration for an on-camera interview, but they declined. They did respond to requests for information via e-mail. ([http://media2.abc15.com/html/pdf/veteran.pdf?\\_ga=1.41457892.719632569.1423245558](http://media2.abc15.com/html/pdf/veteran.pdf?_ga=1.41457892.719632569.1423245558) and [http://media2.abc15.com/html/pdf/FOIA.PDF?\\_ga=1.248028097.719632569.1423245558](http://media2.abc15.com/html/pdf/FOIA.PDF?_ga=1.248028097.719632569.1423245558)).

The department told ABC15 they have made significant advancements in how veterans can ask questions since 2009. They created the eBenefits platform and created live-chat capabilities on-line. Arizona Senator John McCain sent ABC15 the following statement in response to their investigation: "If true, these allegations further add to the VA's disappointing history of denying timely and quality care to veterans. While significant steps have been taken to fix our broken VA health care system, including passage of historic bipartisan reform legislation last year, clearly the VA still has a long way to go to earn back the trust of our service members.

Our veterans deserve to have a department dedicated to helping them in every way possible, and I remain committed to making sure that the VA fulfills its promise to care for all of those who have served.” Go to <http://www.abc15.com/news/local-news/investigations/va-scandal-majority-of-calls-to-benefits-hotline-are-blocked-dont-get-through-to-a-representative> to view the video of the newscast. [Source: ABC 15 Arizona | Lauren Gilger, Shawn Martin | Feb. 16, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Health Care System ► On GAO’s 2015 High Risk Program List**

The Veterans Affairs Department continues to struggle to provide timely, decent health care to veterans — a weakness that warrants extra attention among all federal programs, according to a government report released 11 FEB. Citing the growing demand for health services among disabled and aging veterans, as well as the challenges of managing a new \$10 billion program designed to let former service members receive care from non-VA doctors, the Government Accountability Office listed VA health care as one of the federal government’s “high-risk” programs for 2015. This is the first time the department has landed on the biennial list.

According to GAO, the federal government’s comptroller general has written numerous reports and made multiple recommendations to VA to fix problems at its Veterans Health Administration — ranging from hospitals failing to track patient appointments or document treatment errors and suicides to insufficient oversight of employees and leadership. But GAO says more than 100 of these recommendations have yet to be addressed. With VA undertaking its multibillion Veterans Choice program, and also striving to address problems within its 150 medical centers and more than 800 clinics, the department must be focused, according to the report. “These risks to the timeliness, cost-effectiveness, quality, and safety of veterans’ health care, along with other persistent weaknesses we have identified in recent years, raise serious concerns about VA’s management and oversight of its health care system,” the report noted.

While the \$56 billion VA health system provides care to 9 million veterans, questions over the quality of that care have dogged VA for the past four years, peaking in 2014 with a scandal that found veterans had waited months for appointments at facilities nationwide — and some died during their waits. Further investigation found that some VA medical centers had manipulated data on patient wait times to hide the problem from leadership, veterans and the general public. The scandal led to the resignation of then-VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. New VA Secretary Bob McDonald has promised to overhaul the bureaucracy and rebuild veterans’ trust in the system. In an appearance on NBC’s “Meet the Press” on Sunday, McDonald said being on the GAO’s list is actually part of his plan to fix VA.

McDonald said he met with Comptroller General Gene Dodaro and encouraged him to put us on the high-risk list. “Why?” he asked rhetorically. “We’re a health care system. We’re one of the largest businesses in this country. ... I want to be on that list. I want to shine light on what we’re doing. I want to improve. And that’s what we’re working to do.” In its report, the GAO recommended that VA resolve the problems previously identified and follow through on recommendations expected from consultants as well as a 15-member congressional commission required under the Veterans Choice Act to assess the state of the VA health system. It also recommended VA pay attention to guidance from the department’s own inspector general as well as oversight by Congress.

Speaking after the release of the GAO report, Rep. Jeff Miller (R-FL), chairman of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee, promised to continue bird-dogging VA’s activities in the new Congress. Miller said he

believes McDonald is doing what he can to turn the department around. "But given VA's past struggles with transparency, honesty and accountability, we can't afford to take anything other than a 'trust but verify' approach with the department in all of its activities," Miller said. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | Feb. 18, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Prescription Policy Update 03 ► Opioid Rule Adversely Impacts Vets**

New federal rules that make it harder to get narcotic painkillers are taking an unexpected toll on thousands of veterans who depend on these prescription drugs to treat a wide variety of ailments, such as missing limbs and post-traumatic stress. The restrictions, adopted last summer by the Drug Enforcement Administration to curb a national epidemic of opioid abuse, are for the first time, in effect, forcing veterans to return to the doctor every month to renew their medication, although many were already struggling to get appointments at overburdened VA health facilities. And even if patients can get appointments, the new rules pose an additional hardship for many who live a good distance from the health centers.

Although the tighter regulation applies to everyone on opioid painkillers, it's hitting veterans especially hard because so many are being treated for horrific injuries sustained during the long wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and have become dependent on the Department of Veterans Affairs' beleaguered health-care system for medical care. The rules come at a time of turmoil for VA. The agency's widespread problem with patient backlogs burst into view last year with revelations that employees had covered up how long veterans had to wait for care, even for such pressing matters as cancer and suicide prevention. In dramatically curtailing access to the highly addictive painkillers, the government is trying to roll back what the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has termed "the worst drug addiction epidemic in the country's history, killing more people than heroin and crack cocaine." The rules apply to "hydrocodone combination products," such as Vicodin.

More than half a million veterans are now on prescription opioids, according to VA. Pain experts at VA say that in hindsight they have been overmedicating veterans, and doctors at the Pentagon and VA now say that the use of the painkillers contributes to family strife, homelessness and even suicide among veterans. A study by the American Public Health Association in 2011 also showed that the overdose rate among VA patients is nearly double the national average. But some veterans say they have come to depend on these painkillers to function and now, unable to get a timely renewal of the prescription, are suffering withdrawal symptoms that feel like a panic attack and the flu at the same time.



**Craig Schroeder, who was injured in 2006 while serving with the Marines in Iraq, suffers from traumatic brain injury and pain, for which he has been on a steady regimen of opioids.**

Craig Schroeder was injured in a makeshift-bomb explosion while serving as a Marine corporal in the “Triangle of Death,” a region south of Baghdad. He suffers from traumatic brain injury, which has affected his hearing, memory and movement, and from pain related to a broken foot and ankle and a herniated disc in his back. He has been on a steady regimen of opioids. But after the DEA regulations were put in place, he was unable to get an appointment to see his doctor for nearly five months, he said. He stayed in bed at his home in North Carolina much of that time. “It was a nightmare. I was just in unbearable, terrible pain,” he said. “I couldn’t even go to the ER because those doctors won’t write those scripts.”

His wife, Stephanie Schroeder, said getting him a VA appointment turned into a part-time job and her “main mission in life.” While part of the problem was a shortage of doctors, she said she also noticed that VA had become hostile toward patients who asked for painkillers. “Suddenly, the VA treats people on pain meds like the new lepers,” she said. “It feels like they told us for years to take these drugs, didn’t offer us any other ideas, and now we’re suddenly demonized, second-class citizens.” Officials at Disabled American Veterans, a veterans service organization, said VA needs to be more compassionate and help veterans through the changes. “We’re hearing from veterans with lifelong disabilities, who never had a problem with addiction issues. They have been on these drugs for decades, and then all of a sudden it was boom, a total change in attitudes,” said Joy Ilem, the group’s deputy national legislative director.

Gavin West, a clinical operations chief at VA, said there has been a systematic effort since autumn to contact veterans to explain the new rules, broader concerns about opioid use and alternative options for treatment. At the same time, he said, the agency is working to ensure that veterans get the access to medical care that’s required. “The DEA did a good thing here for opioid safety,” he said. But he added, “How do you balance the sensitivity of patients and the new rules when all of a sudden a veteran, who’s been treated with this medication for 15 years or 20 years, has everything change?” To help patients adjust to the changes, Rollin Gallagher, VA’s national director for pain management, said staff members are meeting personally with veterans. “There is the real anxiety of being in pain and losing control of that pain. We are aware of the fact that we need to pay attention to this,” he said.

The agency recently set up a Choice Card program for veterans, which would allow those facing long wait lists or who live more than 40 miles away from a VA hospital to use private clinic visits. Veterans say the initiative is complicated and confusing. VA officials acknowledged this month that veterans have been using this program at a lower rate than anticipated. DEA officials declined to comment on the specific challenges that the new rules pose for veterans. Barbara L. Carreno, a DEA spokeswoman, said in a statement that everyone, including “practitioners employed by the U.S. Veterans Administration,” have to follow the new regulations. The officials said the rules are a response to multiple medical studies that have showed that the opioid overdose rate is higher in the United States than anywhere else.

DEA officials offer some flexibility, allowing doctors to write prescriptions for up to 90 days by post-dating them. But many VA doctors will not do that because of concerns over fraud or fatal overdoses; doctors are telling patients they need to come back every month, medical staff say. Half of all returning troops suffer chronic pain, according to a study in the June issue of the Journal of the American Medical Association. So a new generation of pain doctors is pushing for alternative ways to help veterans cope with chronic pain. Some alternatives are acupuncture, bright light therapy and medical marijuana. As part of a \$21.7 million initiative with the National Institutes of Health, VA is looking for therapies that could substitute for opioids. “Our hospitals are doing some really exciting things to combat chronic pain and take care of our veterans. There are VA hospitals that are using alpha-stimulation devices to treat pain and depression,” VA Secretary Robert McDonald said. “That’s only going to continue and keep getting better. And we are getting there.” In

the meantime, however, veterans say they continue to bear the burden of the new restrictions on narcotic painkillers.

A retired staff Army sergeant who served in Iraq, who spoke on the condition of anonymity for medical privacy reasons, said he can't drive because of shrapnel in his femur and pelvis. He takes the bus nearly two hours for "a one-minute consult" to get his medications. He has been taking them for more than nine years and has never had an addiction problem, he said. Mike Davis, a retired Army corporal, said he shattered his left arm from the elbow to the fingertips when he fell off of a Pershing missile during maneuvers in Germany in 1979. Over the years, he has had six surgeries. After the last one, in 2003, he was prescribed opioids and said he has been on them since. Davis, who now works as a social worker in Illinois, said he feels lucky to have found a combination of painkillers that works for him. "It's just insulting to the veteran to assume they are abusing these drugs," said his wife, Linda Davis, who works as his personal patient advocate. "I'm fully aware that people doctor-shop, some docs overprescribe. But I think they need to realize that there's a real difference between addiction and dependence."

But Andrew Kolodny, president of Physicians for Responsible Opioid Prescribing, called the new DEA rules "the single most important change that could happen. The best way to treat any disease, whether it's Ebola or opioid addiction, is to stop creating more people with the disease." At the same time, he said, VA needs to do far more to help veterans through the rocky transition. "Unfortunately, veterans are the victims here," Kolodny said. "The VA created this mess by aggressively jumping onto pills as the solution. But it's not something you can just abruptly stop." [Source: Washington Post | Emily Wax-Thibodeaux | Feb. 18, 2015 ++]

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## **VA Whistleblowers Update 19 ► Rosayma Lopez Pending Dismissal**

A Department of Veterans Affairs employee assigned to investigate whether a government whistleblower should be fired is instead being dismissed after she refused to change her finding that the target of the investigation did nothing wrong. **Rosayma Lopez**, a privacy and disclosure officer who handles Freedom of Information Act requests for the Veterans Department in Puerto Rico, was asked to determine whether her colleague Joseph Colon broke privacy rules by divulging information embarrassing to the office's boss. Colon discovered that DeWayne Hamlin, director of the VA Caribbean Healthcare System and a longtime VA executive at facilities in the continental U.S., had been arrested in April 2014 in Florida where police said he was driving drunk and refused to say where he got painkiller pills that were found on him.

Colon also told officials in the department's Washington headquarters about his concerns with the integrity of the VA's hiring process. Hamlin's criminal charges ultimately were dropped because of a prosecutor's concerns about the legality of the traffic stop. Colon, who worked in the Credentialing Program Support department, was accused of nine "inappropriate behaviors," including "overhearing other people's conversations," "talking to others, gathering information," and "going over the chain of command to talk to Director and Deputy director." The accusations were lodged against Colon by Dr. Antonio Sanchez, chief of staff of the Caribbean Healthcare System, and Victor Sanchez, Colon's immediate supervisor.

Hamlin tasked two employees with conducting an investigation to build a case against Colon. But their investigation found that "there is no evidence of a breach in private information," that all of Colon's performance reviews had been "outstanding" and his bosses had never raised any issues they brought up in the firing letter, such as that he complained too much about people tapping their fingers on desks. The

investigation also found that Veterans Affairs managers in Puerto Rico might have altered evidence, saying an email provided by Victor Sanchez, supposedly from Colon, was actually sent from Sanchez to himself. "There is an e-mail communication that has the appearance of having been sanitized, and original information could not be provided upon request," the investigators wrote. Unsatisfied with the conclusions of the first investigation, Lopez was instructed to conduct a second review, which came to a similar conclusion. Hamlin then demanded that Lopez redo it, but the conclusions were the same the third time.

Meanwhile, Colon submitted a FOIA request for records concerning Hamlin's arrest, and for a "copy of the fact-finding investigation on myself," which also went to Lopez for processing. VA says both requests should have been denied. Lopez said she did deny them, but released a small amount of information that couldn't be withheld legally. Colon's proposed firing was reduced by department officials to a three-day suspension. That decision came after a human resources panel said the termination was "not appropriate nor within the range of reasonableness." Days later, on November 24, 2014, VA proposed firing Lopez, according to documents reviewed by the Examiner. "You were again tasked to re-open your initial investigation to conduct a supplemental investigation ... However, yet again, you reached the same conclusions," wrote Nayda Ramirez, deputy director of the Caribbean Healthcare System.

Other reasons listed for her firing included leaving government laptops unattended in the office and not denying Colon's FOIA requests. His requests "should have been closed out without disclosing any information ... You demonstrated negligence in the performance of your duties by failing to appropriately assess the request, which ultimately was disclosed unduly." The firing letter also claimed Lopez was 30 minutes late for work several times. After the Colon incident, her supervisor changed her start time from 8:30am to 8am, when the supervisor knew that her family schedule made that difficult. Lopez' family has one car, and she leaves her house at 6am to drop off her husband at work and kids at multiple schools at the right times, drive 90 minutes to work, and walk 20 minutes from the parking lot, Lopez said. So immediately after the change was made, she arrived at work at 8:30, since there was no work-related reason for the change, and worked until 5 instead of 4:30. "They had the police remove me for staying a half hour late, even though many other employees were still there working, using an excessive show of force. I was traumatized ... I hope no one has to go through this again," she said.

While dealing with the firing proceedings, Lopez has been demoted to a job where "I'm doing nothing, eight hours getting paid and obviously bored. I can't move from my desk or they ask me where have you been, but they won't give me work to do, so I just sit." Veterans Affairs Secretary Robert McDonald spoke 8 FEB to a conference of the American Federation of Government Employees, the civil service union that represents thousands of VA workers. Colon was in the audience when McDonald said whistleblower retaliation would not be tolerated. When Colon returned home, however, he found that he had been demoted to answering the phones. "Probably because he's new, he doesn't realize how institutionalized the retaliation is. Maybe he thinks it's isolated scenarios, but in my experience, at least in VA Caribbean, retaliation is institutionalized at every level," Lopez said. [Source: Washington Examiner | Luke Rosiak | Feb 19, 2015 ++]

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## **VAMC Northampton MA ► Hospice Care | A Daughters Story**

"I've got bad news." This was the beginning of a phone conversation between Tracey Belliveau and her 91-year-old father, Robert L. Belliveau, from his bed in Cooley Dickinson Hospital. Doctors would not be able to operate on his failing aortic valve. "Hospice" was in the next sentence. Hospice? Where? How quickly

would he have to move? Are we allowed any time to decide where? A decision needed to be made quickly, and thankfully my father, who lived in Easthampton, was a veteran of World War II. Fate intervened and we ended up at the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs Central Western Massachusetts Healthcare System. My father found allies in the hospice unit at the Leeds VA. Going there proved to be the best decision we've ever made, because I have never met a more caring group.



As we were in the process of admitting my father in for care, the head nurse of the unit came down and introduced himself. He, too, was a paratrooper like my father and they immediately began talking shop. My father served in the 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment and the 82nd Airborne Division. He participated in the Battle of the Bulge and was in the unit considered “Devils in Baggy Pants.” Back in the States, he moved to Easthampton and worked as a fleet manager for Bay State Gas Co. In 1999, he was awarded a high school diploma under Operation Recognition, a program that recognized how wartime service cut studies short for so many Americans. The connection my father made with his fellow paratrooper was emblematic of the entire experience — each and every staff member took time to talk to my father and connect with him.

I spent 11 days there, all day each day, and was offered my own bed in my father’s room if I felt the need to stay. I was fed lunch and dinner as well so that I could remain in the room. And then there were Madison and Zoe, the therapy cats who live on the ward. They are Devon Rex cats, a hypo-allergenic breed. These wonderful cats spent most of their time in our room keeping me company and snuggling when I needed it most. I live in Rhode Island and stayed with local friends at night so I was unable to see my own pets. Madison and Zoe were very comforting.

My father passed peacefully on 18 JAN, without pain or discomfort, surrounded by family and friends. As we waited for other family members to arrive, the staff provided us with coffee, tea and snacks. What’s more, we were honored with a processional when my father was finally transported from the ward. He was covered with a beautiful quilt and each staff member and patient stood in doorways as we passed, paying their respects and saluting. Northampton should be proud of this VA medical center and its staff. I know I am. [Source: Daily Hampshire Gazette | Tracey Belliveau | Feb 18, 2015 ++]

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## **VAMC Tomah WI Update 02 ► Sen. Baldwin Comprehensive Review**

Sen. Tammy Baldwin said 25 FEB she is conducting a comprehensive review of how her office handled a critical inspection report questioning the prescribing of opiates to veterans at the Tomah Veterans Affairs Medical Center in Wisconsin and subsequent pleas from a whistleblower that she take action. "I am in a very detailed and careful fashion, comprehensive fashion, seeking to understand everything that happened in my

office in terms of the handling of a whistleblower case," the Madison Democrat said. "And I will have lots more to say when we come to the end of that process."



**Sen. Baldwin says she is accepting responsibility for not calling for an investigation sooner amid allegations that a Tomah VA medical center overprescribed opiates.**

It was the first time she has answered questions about the issue since USA TODAY reported 19 JAN that her office got the report in August but didn't do anything with it, despite repeated emails from a former Tomah employee in November and December asking her to investigate. Baldwin didn't call for an investigation until last month, when news reports revealed a veteran died from an overdose as an inpatient in the Tomah facility in August. Baldwin did not indicate when her internal review will be completed, saying only "as soon as we can." "Right now our major focus is on the investigation that's ongoing into Tomah," she said. "Our veterans deserve the highest quality health care. We've got to get to the bottom of the problems in Tomah." Baldwin fired her top aide in Wisconsin following the USA TODAY report and offered the aide a severance agreement that included a cash payout and confidentiality clause. The aide, Marquette Baylor, rejected the deal earlier this month. [Source: USA TODAY | Donovan Slack | Feb. 25, 2015 ++]

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**VARO Oakland CA ► 13,184 Forgotten Claims Discovered**

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs' regional office in Oakland shoved thousands of compensation and disability claims into a filing cabinet without processing them, leaving many veterans or their surviving family members without needed benefits, the agency's inspector general said in a report issued 18 FEB. The claims, which dated back as far as the mid-1990s, were discovered in 2012 as a national scandal erupted over the VA's sloppy and slow handling of benefits, which outraged veterans. The report said the office in 2012 counted 13,184 informal claims for benefits that had been found in the cabinet, with 2,155 requiring "review or action." Those files were assigned to a special team, the report said, but later, in spring 2014, office workers found a cart of the claims that the team had reviewed but failed to act upon.

"Management determined staff had not taken action on these informal claims as required," the report stated. Inspectors quoted staffers as saying that processing the claims discovered in the cabinet "was not a priority" in the office. When the inspector general's office visited for a two-week probe in July, it learned the office had created a spreadsheet after 537 unprocessed claims were found in the cart. But the office had created no paper trail for the larger cache of claims. Inspectors couldn't verify they had been taken care of due to "management's poor record-keeping practices," the report said. The Oakland office, which reviews claims for Northern California veterans, "did not maintain adequate records and provide the oversight needed

to ensure timely processing and storage of these informal claims,” the report said. “As a result, veterans did not receive consideration for benefits to which they may have been entitled.”

An informal claim is defined as any communication — from a veteran or their representative — that indicates an intent to apply for VA benefits. Employees at regional offices, once they receive an informal request, are required to send the veteran a formal application. The date an informal request is received is then used to mark the effective date of claim once the official claim is processed. The inspector general’s report said the 537 unprocessed claims were discovered on the cart only because the office was undergoing a construction project. Inspectors looked at a sample of 34 of those and reported finding seven that needed processing — even though they had been “repeatedly reviewed” from 2012 to 2014. One request investigators reviewed showed that a veteran seeking treatment for post-traumatic stress disorder was shorted almost \$3,000 because his informal claim was never processed. His date of claim should have been July 2002 rather than November 2002. He had lost four months of benefits.

Another veteran, seeking treatment for hearing loss and tinnitus, was underpaid about \$1,200, the report said, because his formal claim was approved 10 months after his informal claim was received and ignored. Referring to the other five claims that needed processing, the report said neither the VA nor the inspector general’s office “can determine entitlements to disability benefits without the veterans submitting formal applications. As a result, the veterans may not have received timely consideration for benefits to which they were entitled.”

Rep. Doug LaMalfa (R-01-CA) requested the inspector general’s review after a group of whistle-blowers came forward with information about the hidden claims. He said Wednesday that he was disappointed in the report’s recommendations — that the Oakland office process the 537 claims found in the cart, institute more training and implement an oversight plan. “The accountability for why these things happen doesn’t have any clear conclusion,” LaMalfa said. “They say all these files were missing, but there’s not enough information to confirm what’s wrong. That’s a self-perpetuating nonsolution. You need to step back and figure out why the information is not there or missing.” LaMalfa said he was pleased the claims in the cart were being processed, but concerned about the 12,647 other informal claims supposedly found in the cabinet, and whether or not the veterans who filed those claims got the help they needed. “Who is looking out for the veterans?” he asked.

Lauren Price, founder of the veterans advocacy group Veteran Warriors, said she was concerned that inspectors accepted the Oakland office’s assertion that only 2,155 of the 13,184 claims in the cabinet required action or review. Under federal law, the VA not only has to “notify the claimant of any information or evidence necessary to substantiate the claim,” but make “reasonable efforts to assist a claimant in obtaining evidence necessary” to substantiate the claim. “According to the law, every single one of them needed to be verified and every veteran needed to be contacted,” Price said. She added, “They’re just basically taking the leadership’s word for it, that 11,000 of them were junk. We’re just going to keep taking their word for it when they covered this up for two years?”

The Oakland office’s response to the inspector general’s findings was included in the report. Julianna Boor, the Oakland regional director, said she concurred with the recommendations, and noted that the staff had received training on the proper procedures for processing informal claims in June and October of 2014. She said the office, after a transition in December, now routes all mail through a scanning vendor to be converted into an electronic file to accurately track informal claims. Boor did not address how or why so many informal claims had been cast aside for so long. A representative from the VA office in Oakland did not immediately return calls for comment Wednesday. The office, which serves veterans from Bakersfield to the Oregon border, has a history of backlogged claims and accuracy issues in processing those claims.

Nationwide, officials have come under fire for lying to federal investigators and doctoring waiting lists for veterans seeking help. [Source: San Francisco Chronicle | Vivian Ho | Feb. 18, 2015 ++]

**\* Vets \***



**Burn Pit Toxic Exposure Update 31 ► SIGAR Final Report**

The Defense Department's failure to follow regulations on solid waste disposal, along with its practice of burning prohibited items in burn pits in Afghanistan put U.S. troops' health at risk, says the chief watchdog for Afghanistan reconstruction. In his final report on the use of burn pits and incinerators in Afghanistan, John Sopko, special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, accused the Pentagon of being unprepared for waste disposal at the start of Operation Enduring Freedom and said continued use of burn pits put troops at unnecessary risk from potentially harmful emissions. According to Sopko, DoD "had been aware for years" of the health risks posed by burn pits and called their use — even after policies were adopted to restrict it — "disturbing." "It is indefensible that U.S. military personnel, who are already at risk of serious injury and death when fighting the enemy, were put at further risk from the potentially harmful emissions from the use of open air burn pits," Sopko wrote in the "Final Assessment: What We Have Learned from Our Inspections of Incinerators and Use of Burn Pits in Afghanistan," released Thursday.



**U.S. Marines dispose of trash in a burn pit in Khan Neshing District, Afghanistan, in 2012**

The Office of the SIGAR (Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction) was established to ferret out waste and fraudulent use of U.S. taxpayer money in rebuilding Afghanistan. The U.S. has spent more than \$104 billion for reconstruction, with Sopko's office recovering more than \$570 million from criminal fines, restitution, forfeitures, civil settlements and cost-savings, according to SIGAR reports. SIGAR previously had released four reports on burn pits and incinerators in Afghanistan, and the final study

summarized them, noting that the Defense Department spent more than \$20 million on eight never-used incinerators and ignored its own policies. "[U.S. Central Command] officials told us that no U.S. installation in Afghanistan has ever been in compliance with Regulation 100-2.21," noted Sopko, referring to the regulation that required bases accommodating more than 100 troops for longer than 90 days to install advanced waste disposal technologies.

Saying DoD was unprepared for effective waste management at the start of combat operations, burn pits "provided an easy answer" for getting rid of trash but this did not excuse DoD's continued use of the pits after building incinerators, according to the report. The U.S. built a total of 23 incinerators in Afghanistan at a cost of nearly \$82 million. Sopko urged the Pentagon to develop waste disposal plans prior to the next contingency operation and said the department should hold contractors accountable for projects. The Defense Department maintains that the SIGAR reports do not account for the "difficult and complex operational environment that led commanders to make some very difficult decisions" about burn pits. In a response to the most recent report, Army Maj. Gen. John Murray, deputy commander for support for U.S. Forces Afghanistan said for lessons to be applied in future operations "the reader must have a full understanding and appreciate the difficult conditions that heavily influence commanders."

Burn pits were used in Iraq and Afghanistan to dispose of everything from paper trash and food waste to plastic bottles and human and medical waste, according to personnel who lived and worked near the sites. The pits produce large amounts of smoke and gas that may pose a health hazard, although scientific data has not proven any long-term health consequences related to breathing the pollution. The VA established a burn pit registry in October to track the health of individuals who believe they were exposed to pollutants from burn pits or other airborne hazards in Iraq and Afghanistan, such as dust and sand. As of January 26, 30,711 people have enrolled in the registry, according to VA. Hundreds of troops have reported medical problems they believe are related to living and working near the pits, from rare pulmonary diseases and unexplained rashes to cancer. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | Feb 12, 2015 ++]

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## **Uniform Wearing Update 03: ► Army Policy for Retirees**

### **Wearing military medals on civilian clothing:**

Retired Soldiers are authorized by Army Regulation 670-1, Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia, to wear military medals on appropriate civilian clothing. This includes clothes designed for veteran and patriotic organizations on Veteran's Day, Memorial Day, and Armed Forces Day, as well as at formal occasions of ceremony and social functions of a military nature. Personnel may wear either full-sized or miniature medals. Personnel who wear medals on civilian clothes should place the medals on the clothing in approximately the same location and in the same manner as for the Army uniform, so they look similar to medals worn on the Army uniform.

### **How to wear the Retired Service Identification Badge:**

The Retired Service Identification (ID) Badge will only be worn by Retired Soldiers when they wear the Army service or dress uniforms. Department of the Army Pamphlet 670-1, Guide to the Wear and Appearance of Army Uniforms and Insignia, says the badge is worn on the wearer's left side. Also, no more than two ID badges may be worn on one pocket or side of the coat. The higher badge is worn on the wearer's right. DA Pam 670-1 lists the order of precedence of all 12 Army ID badges in par. 22-17a. On males, ID badges are centered between the bottom of the pocket flap and the bottom of the pocket and from left to right. When two badges are worn on the same side, they are spaced equally from left to right on the pocket. On

females, ID badges are worn parallel to the waistline with one inch between badges when two are worn on the same side.

**When Retired Soldiers are prohibited from wearing the Army uniform:**

AR 670-1 (par. 3-7k, 23-1, and 23-3d) says Retired Soldiers are prohibited from wearing Army uniforms:

- When furthering any political or commercial interests, or when engaged in civilian employment.
- When participating in public speeches, interviews, picket lines, marches, rallies, or public demonstrations.
- When attending any meeting or event that is a function of, or is sponsored by, an extremist organization.
- When wearing the uniform would bring discredit upon the Army, as determined by the Commander.
- When specifically prohibited by Army regulations.
- When not on active duty but acting as an instructor or responsible for military discipline at an educational institution, unless the educational institution is conducting courses of instruction approved by the Armed Forces.

[Source: ArmyEchoes | Feb 2015 ++]

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**Burial At Sea Update 05 ► How to Request**

Burial at Sea is a means of final disposition of remains that is performed on United States Navy vessels. The committal ceremony is performed while the ship is deployed. Therefore, family members are not allowed to be present. The commanding officer of the ship assigned to perform the ceremony will notify the family of the date, time, and longitude and latitude once the committal service has been completed. Individuals eligible for this program are:

- Active duty members of the uniformed services;
- Retirees and veterans who were honorably discharged;
- U.S. civilian marine personnel of the military sealift command; and
- Dependent family members of active duty personnel, retirees, and veterans of the uniformed services.



**How to get started**

After the death of the individual for whom the request for Burial at Sea is being made, the Person Authorized to Direct Disposition (PADD) should contact the Navy and Marine Corps Mortuary Affairs office at (866) 787-0081 to request a packet and for additional information. Supporting documents which must accompany this request are:

- A photocopy of the death certificate;
- The burial transit permit or the cremation certificate;

- A copy of the DD form 214, discharge certificate, or retirement order.

The Burial at Sea Request Form and the three supporting documents listed above make up the Burial at Sea Request package. A burial flag is required for all committal services performed aboard United States Naval vessels, except family members, who are not authorized a burial flag. Following the services at sea, the flag that accompanied the cremains/remains will be returned to the PADD. If the PADD does not wish to send a burial flag for the service, a flag will be provided by the Navy for the committal service, but will not be sent to the PADD. Cremated remains (cremains) must be in an urn or plastic/metal container. The cremains, along with the completed Burial at Sea Request package, and the burial flag will be forwarded to the Burial at Sea Coordinator at the desired port of embarkation (listed below). Prior to shipment, a family member should call the coordinator about the pending request.

Specific guidelines are required for the preparation of intact (casketed) remains. All expenses incurred in this process are the responsibility of the PADD, who will select a funeral home in the area of the port of embarkation. Prior to shipment, a family member should call the coordinator about the pending request. Funeral homes responsible for preparing and shipping intact remains should contact the mortuary services office at Navy Casualty in Millington, TN to receive the preparation requirements. For further information about a Burial at Sea, call (866) 787-0081, Monday - Friday, 7:30 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. Central Time. Ports of Embarkation are Norfolk, Virginia; Jacksonville, Florida; San Diego, California; Bremerton, Washington; and Honolulu, Hawaii. [Source: ArmyEchoes | Feb. 15, 2015 ++]

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## **Vet Needless Deaths ► John Skelley | Hypothermia**

The state of Michigan has ordered Consumers Energy to report on a natural gas service shutoff in a Hazel Park home where a Vietnam veteran died of hypothermia earlier this month. John Skelley, 69, was found dead Feb. 1 in a home on West Pearl Street. Hazel Park police say Skelley died of hypothermia and other health issues. According to Consumers Energy, service was disconnected at the home on the afternoon of Jan. 19 and a tag with assistance and reconnection information was placed on the door. Utility companies are prohibited from shutting off heat in homes that have residents aged 65 and older from Nov. 1 to March 31, according to Michigan Public Service Commission spokeswoman Judy Palnau. Consumers Energy does have a shutoff protection program for people 65 and older.

"That doesn't mean they don't have to pay; that just means they can't be shut off," she said. "But other folks could find themselves in shutoff situations, but before they have a problem, they should contact their utility company. There are several programs that they can get on that can protect against shutoffs." But the company said it was not aware that Skelley was living in the home. According to the company's records, the service was in the name of Joseph Mixen, who requested natural gas service on Nov. 18, 2014. Mixen had previously lived at the home between March 2012 and May 2013 and had an outstanding balance of \$760.28.

As a condition to restore service, he was required to make an initial payment and was then put on a payment plan for the outstanding balance with payments required every two weeks. According to Consumers spokeswoman Deborah Dodd, no payments were made after initial payment on 18 NOV. Dodd said shutoff notices were sent on Dec. 18, 24 and 31 DEC. Dodd said no mail was returned and the company had no phone number on record for Mixen. "It's very unfortunate," Dodd said. "We had no idea that anyone else was living with him. ... We need our customers to let us know if they're having problems, the sooner the better. We can't help you if we don't know you need help." Dodd said Mixen did not contact Consumers Energy about his account. "This recent Hazel Park death from apparent hypothermia is indeed tragic, and our

sympathy goes out to his family, friends and all who've been affected by his loss," the company said in a statement. "Following today's order from the Michigan Public Service Commission, we will file a report about this incident." The report is due March 31.

MPSC staff are working to revise its rules on billing practices for residential service, which include provisions on shutoff procedures, medical emergencies and winter protection plans. The commission hopes the review and Consumers' findings can "avert a repetition of this tragedy," it said in a statement. The MPSC will file its conclusions and recommendations by April 30. Hangin' with the Heroes, a metro Detroit-based organization that helps veterans, has pooled resources and raised money to cover Skelley's funeral. Founder Ron Gilmour said Skelley will receive a full military burial. Gilmour said he has been in touch with Skelley's family, including two of his children. "This is something that was a massive undertaking for us," he said. "Within two hours of hearing about it, we decided on our course of action and through a lot of help and reaching out to get some publicity, we managed to make everything happen."

In a brief interview, Skelley's daughter, Freya Keener, said her father was a very private man who "didn't show emotion very often, but all his kids knew he loved us." In addition to Keener, Skelley is survived by his children, Kristy Skelley, Tanya Mitchell, John Skelley Jr. and James Skelley. [Source: Detroit Free Press | Katrease Stafford | Feb. 18, 2015 ++]

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## **Vet Needless Deaths** ► **Bradley Sutter | Hypothermia**

After surviving two wars, frigid weather took the life of Bradley Sutter this week. Police found the 85-year-old dead in his rural mobile home with nothing but electric blankets for heat. With temperatures in the single digits this week, concerned neighbors asked the Sequatchie County Sheriff's Office to check on Sutter, whom neighbors hadn't seen in several days. Deputies found him dead of hypothermia 18 FEB inside his squalid mobile home, which is tucked away in some woods off of state Route 111 near Dunlap.

Deputies found an electric furnace in the home, but it was either broken or not turned on. Sutter's only source of heat came from two electric blankets -- one on top of him, the other underneath. A piece was missing from the bottom of the front door, plugged up with grocery bags. "It was 16 degrees outside when we arrived," said Sequatchie County Sheriff Ronnie Hitchcock. "It didn't feel any different inside." Officials couldn't immediately confirm Sutter's military history, though the sheriff said he served in World War II and the Korean War. Mickey McCamish, chairman of the Southeast Tennessee Veterans Coalition, said coalition members were saddened by the situation and working Friday to help hunt down his military records. "He survived the wars and then lost out to weather," McCamish said.

The veterans coalition, which serves 13 counties in the Chattanooga area, could have easily helped find Sutter a heater, said McCamish. "He just had a basic need," he said. "He gave so much for us and we would have loved to have had the opportunity to give back to him by helping him." Hitchcock gathered from neighbors and family members that it didn't seem like Sutter wanted help. "He was a loner," Hitchcock said. When neighbors and relatives came to visit Sutter, Hitchcock said, he would meet them at the end of the long, thickly wooded driveway that obscured his home from view. The sheriff wasn't sure how long Sutter had been dead, and said it could have been anywhere between one and five days. After days of searching for family members, investigators tracked down Sutter's son through an ancestry registry, though the sheriff said the two hadn't been in touch for some time. Sutter's son, who traveled from Englewood, Tenn., on Friday to sort through his father's things, declined to comment.

The winter storm that swept through the country this week has so far claimed the lives of 18 Tennesseans. Nine of those deaths were hypothermia-related, according to the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency. One of those hypothermia-related fatalities was local 64 year-old Douglas King, who was found Tuesday morning near the railroad trestles at 600 E. 11th St., just a block from the Chattanooga Community Kitchen. With more cold weather coming this weekend, Hitchcock encouraged people to check on their neighbors, especially if they're infirmed or elderly. People in need should utilize the resources in the city and county available to them, including food pantries, clothes closets and local shelters, he said. Hitchcock even offered to put people up at the sheriff's office. "If need be, people can come here," Hitchcock said. "We don't have a huge budget, but we've got space, we've got a kitchen. If it means saving somebody's life, we'll put them up." [Source: Times free Press | Kevin Hardy and Will Healey | Feb. 21, 2015 ++]

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## **Purple Hearts Reunited ► Over 100 Returned to Families**

Keith Dalen has only a few remaining items from the grandfather who raised him. There are the old photographs. There is the flag that covered his grandfather's casket after his death in 1992. And there is the Purple Heart medal that his grandfather, Army Staff Sgt. Raymond "Ramon" Ferrer, earned for his service in World War II. Dalen isn't sure when the medal first went missing — he suspects it happened when he or his son moved a few years back. But earlier this year, the Purple Heart turned up at a pawnshop in Connecticut, where he is from. A group that reunites Purple Hearts with veterans' families contacted Dalen's daughter and promised to send the medal down to Dalen's home in Estero. He expects to receive the medal any day now. "It's just a great organization," Dalen said 17 FEB.



**The Purple Heart is one of the oldest commendations in American military history, dating back to the later years of the Revolutionary War and was originally designed as the Badge of Military Merit.**

From what Dalen can remember, his grandfather was shot in December of 1944 and taken to a POW camp, where he was held for about five months until Germany surrendered. Ferrer wasn't one to volunteer a lot of information about his time in the Army, but he would answer questions if his grandson asked. To Dalen, the medal was a tangible reminder of his service, a family heirloom that can't be replaced. "Even though he didn't make much of it, to me, it showed me the kind of person he was," Dalen said. "He went to war and prepared to risk his life because he felt it was his responsibility."

Army Capt. Zachariah Fike started the organization that became Purple Hearts Reunited in 2009. Upon his return from a deployment, Fike began collecting antiques as a way to keep himself occupied. He started stumbling across military items and rescuing them, feeling sorry that they had been sold and discarded. As a Christmas present that year, Fike's mother gave him a Purple Heart she'd purchased at a pawnshop for \$100. He became interested in tracking down the medal's recipient, and the search eventually led him to the man's family. Fike returned the medal to them and said for the first time in years, the recipient's siblings reunited to claim it. "It became something more than just returning the medal — it became reuniting the family," Fike said.

Since then, the group has returned more than 100 medals. Fike has made it somewhat of a mission to purchase Purple Hearts — which he said can go for up to \$300 — when he comes across them in shops or on eBay. "Believe it or not, these medals, especially Purple Hearts, are collected like baseball cards," he said. Fike believes the medals should be placed with the veteran's family or, if that's not an option, a military museum or city hall in the place where the veteran was from. He doesn't believe most of the medals are sold with the permission of the recipient's family. "There are some instances where the families just don't care, but we have over 100 examples of that not being the case," he said.

In Dalen's case, his grandfather's medal somehow ended up at a pawnshop in Connecticut that was going out of business. The property owner came across the medal and contacted Fike's group for help. Fike was able to find Dalen's daughter, who lives in Naples, through ancestry.com. Dalen said he assumed his son had possession of the medal, and his son assumed that he did. They didn't even know it was missing. Dalen now plans to pass the medal along to his son, so it can be enjoyed by the next generation. He is thrilled to have the Purple Heart back in the family. "We have to thank them very much," Dalen said. "They do this on a regular basis, but I gotta stress: these people are wonderful." [Source: Naples Daily News | Jessica Lipscomb | Feb 18, 2015 ++]

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## **War Experience False Claims Update 01 ► VA Secretary Robert McDonald**

Robert McDonald, the secretary of veterans affairs, wrongly claimed in a videotaped comment earlier this year that he served in special operations forces, the most elite units in the armed forces, when his military service of five years was spent almost entirely with the 82nd Airborne Division during the late 1970s. U.S. special operations forces (SOF) are composed of exhaustively trained and highly capable troops from each military service, including the Green Berets, Army Rangers, Delta Force and Navy SEALs -- but not the 82nd Airborne. They are certified to undertake the most dangerous and delicate missions, including, famously, the killing of Osama bin Laden in May 2011. Special operators are a close-knit community deeply hostile to outsiders who try to claim the coveted mantle of special operations.

McDonald, a retired corporate executive who took over the VA last June as the agency was sinking in scandal, made the claim in late January as he was touring a rundown Los Angeles neighborhood during a nationwide count of homeless veterans. He was accompanied by a CBS-TV news crew, which recorded an exchange between McDonald and a homeless man who told McDonald he had served in special forces. "Special forces? What years? I was in special forces!" McDonald told the homeless man. That exchange was broadcast in a Jan. 30 CBS News story about the VA's efforts to find and house homeless veterans. In fact, McDonald never served in special forces. He graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 1975, completed Army Ranger training and took courses in jungle, arctic and desert warfare. He qualified as a senior parachutist and airborne jumpmaster, and was assigned to the 82nd Airborne Division until he retired

from military service in 1980. While he earned a Ranger tab designating him as a graduate of Ranger School, he never served in a Ranger battalion or any other special operations unit. "I have no excuse," McDonald told The Huffington Post, when contacted to explain his claim. "I was not in special forces."

McDonald's remark came to light after several retired military officers noticed his remark on the CBS tape, days after NBC News anchor Brian Williams was suspended for fabricating stories about his reporting experiences in Iraq and elsewhere. McDonald told The Huffington Post that he "wanted to clear up the confusion I probably created -- I did create" in the exchange with the homeless man in L.A. Saying he was in special forces, McDonald said, "is not right. I was not in special forces. What I said was wrong." McDonald said he has many friends in the special forces community "and I have great respect for special forces." But, he added, "as I thought about this later I knew this [claim] was wrong." When the homeless veteran claimed to have served in special forces, McDonald said, "I reacted spontaneously and I reacted wrongly, [with] no intent in any way to describe my record any different than it is." "It was wrong," said retired Army Col. Gary Bloomberg, a former senior special forces commander who had not seen the video before being contacted by The Huffington Post. When he first watched it, Bloomberg said, "I thought, 'What a boneheaded statement - - is this what we want from our senior government officials?'"

Bloomberg said he checked around with others in the special forces community, which is normally quick to jump on SOF impostors in the same way that the Stolen Valor organization hunts down and exposes people who wear unearned military decorations and honors. Bloomberg said he talked to several other former special operators, "and no one got really crazy about the whole thing, compared to some of what we've seen," he said. "It's a lot different from guys running around faking their special forces credentials." Several times a month, Bloomberg said, an email message will bounce around the SOF community asking for information on someone claiming special forces status. "When it turns out the guy doesn't have it," he said, "the community goes to great lengths to expose it." In McDonald's case, he said, "I can see [other former special forces soldiers] going, 'Hey, check out this boneheaded remark,' but I don't see the gravitas that I would with a guy wearing medals he didn't earn."

McDonald, the former chairman, president and CEO of the consumer products giant Procter & Gamble, was selected by President Barack Obama to replace Eric Shinseki, the retired Army general who resigned in disgrace last May following reports of widespread corruption and malfeasance within the VA. The White House said 23 FEB that the Obama administration accepted McDonald's explanation. "Secretary McDonald has apologized for the misstatement and noted that he never intended to misrepresent his military service," the White House said in a statement. "We take him at his word and expect that this will not impact the important work he's doing to promote the health and well-being of our nation's veterans."

Addressing reporters in front of VA headquarters building on Tuesday, McDonald said he had no intention of stepping down for the mistake, saying he made the error in an effort to connect with the veteran, not to embellish his record. "In my 61 years, integrity has been the foundation of my character. ... It is a part of who I am and I will do better to not make a mistake like I made in L.A. again," McDonald said. Saying there was "no excuse" for his error, Department of Veterans Affairs Secretary Bob McDonald apologized for claiming to have served in U.S. Special Forces while in front of a large group of Legion family members 24 FEB at the Washington Hilton. To view a video of his remarks plus his question and answer session with those attendees refer to <http://portal.stretchinternet.com/legion/full.htm?eventId=203914&streamType=video>. [Source: Huffington Post | David Wood | Feb. 24, 2015 ++]

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## OBIT | John P. Craven | WWII ► 12 Feb 2015

John P. Craven, a former Navy scientist whose innovations in ocean technology and exploration led to some of the nation's most celebrated feats of espionage, died on Feb. 12 in Hawaii. He was 90. The cause was complications of Parkinson's disease, his family said. From 1959 to 1969, as chief scientist of the Special Projects Office, Dr. Craven led the Navy's drive to expand its presence into the crushing depths of the sea. Among other things, he turned submarines into spy machines that could reach down miles to inspect and retrieve lost enemy materiel, including nuclear arms. Dr. Craven liked to regale friends and journalists with as much of his personal history in the Navy as the nation's secrecy laws would allow, resulting in books and articles that sought to illuminate his Cold War exploits. "There's a hell of a lot of stuff that went on," he said in an interview in 1993 on the front porch of his home overlooking Honolulu. After all, he added philosophically, "the whole object of life is to adapt."



**Dr. John P. Craven in 1993**

John Piña Craven was born on Oct. 30, 1924, in Brooklyn, coming from a long line of naval officers on his father's side and a family that reached back to Moorish pirates on his mother's. He graduated from Brooklyn Technical High School and joined the Navy during World War II, serving in Hawaii and earning two battle stars before he was sent to Cornell University for officer training. After the war, under the G.I. Bill, he studied at the California Institute of Technology and the University of Iowa, where he met his future wife, Dorothy Drakesmith, and received a doctorate in mechanics and hydraulics. Years later he received a law degree from George Washington University and became an expert on seabed legalities.

Dr. Craven's naval career began in 1951, when, as a civilian, he investigated how to improve ships and submarines. He was promoted quickly after correctly predicting and helping to fix a structural problem with the Navy's first nuclear-powered submarine, the Nautilus. He was project manager for developing the Polaris, the world's first intercontinental ballistic missile that could be fired from a submerged submarine. It underwent test firing in 1960 and was in service for decades. The Navy was eager to restore the nation's confidence in its deep-sea abilities after the new attack submarine Thresher sank in 1963 during a test dive east of Boston because of a mechanical failure, taking 129 lives. Officials gave Dr. Craven and his special-projects team leeway to devise a wide range of undersea gear for search, rescue, salvage and gathering intelligence from the sunless depths.

In 1965, he selected the nuclear submarine Halibut for conversion into an innovative spy sub, filling the vessel with electronic, sonic, photographic and video gadgets. Hovering beneath the waves, invisible to adversaries, the sub could lower a long cable heavy with lights, cameras and other gear for deep reconnaissance, recovery and manipulation. It was a technological first that begot a new kind of espionage.

Among the targets were ships, planes and spacecraft lost at sea, as well as functioning equipment, like undersea cables and listening devices. To build support for his top-secret endeavors, Dr. Craven met with senior Pentagon officials, showing them classified photographs of Soviet warheads buried in muck on the seabed.

In March 1968, a rich new target materialized when a Soviet missile submarine bearing code books, encryption gear and nuclear arms sank in the central Pacific. By all accounts, Dr. Craven and the spy sub located the wreckage more than three miles beneath the sea's surface. That May, the nuclear-powered attack submarine Scorpion vanished in the Atlantic with 99 men on board. Dr. Craven scrutinized recordings from undersea microphones, found evidence of explosions, and drew on his knowledge of math and statistics to pinpoint the spot where the submarine was most likely to have sunk. Search teams discovered the Scorpion's wreckage at a depth of nearly two miles.

The undersea fleet that Dr. Craven helped devise included the Navy's NR-1, a nuclear submarine with crablike claws; the Deep Submergence Rescue Vehicle, a cylindrical craft designed to evacuate up to 24 people at a time from a crippled submarine; and the bathyscaph Trieste, a vessel his team improved, which investigated the sunken Scorpion. Dr. Craven twice received the Distinguished Civilian Service Award, once from the Navy and once from the Department of Defense. After Richard M. Nixon won the presidential election in 1968, Dr. Craven, convinced that the new administration would have no room for an outspoken Democrat, left the Navy and took a teaching post at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. In 1970, lured to Hawaii by its governor, he was named dean of marine programs at the University of Hawaii and the state's marine affairs coordinator.

The spy sub he devised made one of its greatest coups shortly after he left the Navy. In 1971, the Halibut stole into the Sea of Okhotsk north of Japan, found a telecommunications cable used by Soviet nuclear forces and succeeded in tapping its secrets. The mission, code-named Ivy Bells, was so secret that a vast majority of the submarine's sailors had no idea what they had accomplished. The success led to a concealed world of cable-tapping. In 1974, Dr. Craven founded the Natural Energy Laboratory of Hawaii, a state research center that investigated how to make electricity by exploiting the temperature difference between the Earth's warm surface and cold water from the ocean's depths.

Dr. Craven's naval career has been profiled in several books. He recounted his own story in 2001 in "The Silent War: The Cold War Battle Beneath the Sea." In its prologue, he says he wrote the book to honor men whose sacrifices might otherwise go unacknowledged. He is survived by Dorothy Drakesmith Craven, his wife of 64 years; a son, David; a daughter, Sarah Craven; and five grandchildren. Once, at his Hawaiian laboratory, Dr. Craven described an energy project in terms that echoed his own life. "It seemed," he said, "like perpetual motion." [Source: New York Times | William J. Broad | Feb. 18, 2015 ++]

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## **OBIT | Donald Johnston | WWII ► 17 Feb 2015**

Donald Johnston of Moon was known by his friends and family as a gentleman, but his good manners and calm demeanor belied the fighter within. During World War II, the Penn Hills native flew nearly 160 bomber escort missions and other flights over enemy-held territory with the U.S. Army Air Forces, logging 442 combat hours. Many of those combat missions were in the China-Burma-India Theater with the 88th Fighter Squadron. As a flight leader with the 80th Fighter Group "Burma Banshees," Mr. Johnston soared the skies of Southeast Asia in the Republic P-47 Thunderbolt. The group's assignment: escort and conduct combat air

patrols for transports “Over the Hump,” a perilous, no-man’s land in the rugged Himalayan Mountains that became a graveyard for hundreds of WWII-era fliers.



**Donald Johnston**

Nicknamed “the Jug” because of its milk jug-shaped fuselage, the P-47 “was an amazing aircraft,” recalled his son Scott Johnston of Nashport, Ohio. “It could be hit by gunfire and still make it back to base.” Promoted to colonel in 1968 in the Pennsylvania Air National Guard, which he joined as a pilot in 1949, Mr. Johnston would eventually serve for 35 years before retiring in 1979. His many decorations include the Distinguished Flying Cross, the World War II Victory Medal and the Air Force Longevity Service Award. On 17 FEB, he died from cancer. He was 90.

Mr. Johnston’s Scottish father, Bertram, was an oral surgeon, but medicine would not be his son’s calling. Rather, the day after he graduated from high school in 1942, he joined the U.S. Army Air Forces, where after completing flying school in 1944, he became a fighter pilot. After being released from active duty in 1946, Mr. Johnston remained in the reserves while he attended the University of Michigan to study law. He married his wife, Florence, who grew up in the same Scottish community in Penn Hills, in 1947. But he ultimately decided against a career as an attorney. In 1949, he joined Pennsylvania Air National Guard’s 147th Fighter Squadron as an operations officer. He was named commander in 1956. In 1964, he assumed command of the 171st Military Airlift Group, retiring in 1984. He and his wife would raise four children in Moon.

“Mom always wanted him to fly commercial, where the money was,” recalled his son. “But he was very patriotic. The military was his calling.” That said, he didn’t talk about his war experiences until he was in his late 70s. “He was a very humble man,” his son said. In addition to his son, Mr. Johnston is survived by two other children: Christine Seifert of Santa Cruz, Calif., and another son, Steven Johnston of Hollidaysburg. He also leaves behind eight grandchildren and seven great-grandchildren. [Source: Pittsburgh Post-Gazette | Gretchen McKay | Feb. 23, 2015 ++]

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## **OBIT | Robert Thomas Jr | WWII ► 10 Feb 2015**

Robert Thomas Jr., a Pearl Harbor survivor who became Orange County’s first chief administrative officer, has died. He was 95. Thomas, a longtime resident of Orange, died of natural causes 10 FEB at the home of his son, Robert Thomas III, in Gridley, a town in Northern California. On Dec. 7, 1941, he was a young naval officer assigned to the USS Nevada when Japanese planes launched the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Thomas, who suffered shrapnel wounds to his legs and arm but continued to issue orders until he collapsed, was awarded the Navy Cross for bravery. “I was probably going into shock, because I felt so safe and serene, even while the attack continued,” Thomas told The Times in 2007. “I remember thinking, ‘OK, you SOB’s. You tried to kill me and you didn’t.’”



**Robert Thomas Jr.**

According to his daughter, Carole Lynn Thomas, he kept a low profile for decades about his experiences at Pearl Harbor. In later years, though, he maintained a steady schedule as a guest speaker, visiting Newport Harbor High School, Camp Pendleton and other venues to pass his stories to younger generations. Thomas was born July 16, 1919, in Illinois, where he grew up in a military family. During World War II even though he survived the conflict, his father, Robert Thomas Sr., died in a plane crash in 1943 while serving with the Navy. The younger Thomas stayed in the service for nearly two decades after the war ended and remained an airplane enthusiast for the rest of his life. Upon his retirement from the Navy in 1964, Thomas went to work for Orange County as building services director. He later was named chief administrative officer.

According to Chris Jepsen, president of the Orange County Historical Society, Thomas helped guide the region through a period of population and budget growth. During his tenure, the county budget increased from less than \$100 million to more than \$1 billion. Among the structures built during Thomas' years with the county were the Civic Center in Santa Ana and the county jail. The Robert E. Thomas Hall of Administration at the Civic Center bears his name. After Thomas announced his plan to retire in the mid-1980s, then-county Supervisor Bruce Nestande stated in *The Times* that Thomas "brought [Orange County] from a rural, agrarian nature to basically a major urban center, and did a very good job in doing so."

Carole Lynn Thomas remembers her father as a hard-working man who was dedicated to his job and enjoyed taking his family on history-oriented vacations, driving to sites such as Gettysburg, Penn., and Antietam in Maryland and telling his children the stories behind them. When she joined a 4-H club in junior high school, Thomas woke at 5 a.m. on school mornings to drive her to the local farm, then sat in the car doing crossword puzzles while she worked with animals. "He was a great dad," she said. "He focused on his work 90% of the time, but the time he gave his kids was great." Thomas' wife, Carol, died in 1982. In addition to his son Robert and daughter Carole Lynn, he is survived by another daughter, Helen Hogan, seven grandchildren and three great-grandchildren. Services were held at 12:30 p.m. Feb. 21 at Fairhaven Memorial Park, 1702 Fairhaven Ave., Santa Ana. [Source: Los Angeles Times | Michael Miller | Feb. 20, 2015 ++]

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## **Retiree Appreciation Days ► As of 26 Feb 2015**

Retiree Appreciation Days (RADs) are designed with you 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 schedule is provided in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Retiree Activity\ Appreciation Days (RAD) Schedule**”. Note that this schedule has **been expanded to include** dates for retiree\ veterans related events such as town hall meetings, resource fairs, stand downs, etc. For more information call the phone numbers of the Retirement Services Officer (RSO) sponsoring the RAD as indicated in the attachment. An up-to-date list of Retiree Appreciation Days can always be accessed online at

- HTML: [http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs\\_and\\_Other\\_Retiree-Veterans\\_Events.html](http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.html)
- PDF: [http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs\\_and\\_Other\\_Retiree-Veterans\\_Events.pdf](http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.pdf)
- Word: [http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs\\_and\\_Other\\_Retiree-Veterans\\_Events.doc](http://www.hostmtb.org/RADs_and_Other_Retiree-Veterans_Events.doc)

[Source: RAD List Manager | Milton Bell | Feb 26, 2014 ++]

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## **Vet Hiring Fairs** ► 01 thru Mar 31 2015

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. visit the U.S. Chamber of Commerce’s website at <http://www.hiringourheroes.org/hiringourheroes/events> .

### **Recovering Warrior & Caregiver Virtual Job Fair**

March 3 - 11:00 am to 3:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Washington, DC - Washington, DC Recovering Warrior & Caregiver Flexible Work Conference**

March 4 - 10:00 am to 1:30 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Latham, NY - Latham Hiring Fair**

March 5 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Houston, TX - Houston Hiring Expo with Houston Rockets**

March 6 – 9:30 am to 3:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Manchester, NH - Manchester Hiring Fair**

March 10 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Louisville, KY - Louisville Hiring Fair**

March 11 – 8:30 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Ft. Benning, GA - Fort Benning Transition Summit**

March 11 to March 12 [Details](#) [Register](#)

### **Louisville, KY - Louisville Hiring Fair**

March 11 – 8:30 to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Colorado Springs, CO - Colorado Springs Military Spouse Networking Reception**

March 11 – 7:00 pm to 9:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Salem, OR - Salem Hiring Fair**

March 11 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Fort Carson, CO - Colorado Springs Military Spouse Hiring Fair**

March 12 – 10:00 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Grand Island, NE - Grand Island Hiring Fair**

March 25 – 8:30 to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Dallas, TX - Dallas Hiring Fair**

March 25 – 8:30 to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Greenville, SC - Greenville Hiring Fair**

March 25 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Washington, DC - DC Hiring Expo with Washington Wizards**

March 25 - 12:00 pm to 3:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Casper, WY - Casper Hiring Fair**

March 26 - 8:30 to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Fairfield, CA - Travis AFB Military Spouse Hiring Fair & Networking Luncheon**

March 26 – 11:00 am to 2:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

**Indianapolis, IN - Indianapolis Hiring Fair**

March 27 - 10:00 am to 1:00 pm [Details](#) [Register](#)

[Source: U.S. Chamber of Commerce Assn 24 Feb 2015 ++]

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## **WWII Vets 81 ► Angelo Racine**

The kamikaze bore down on the USS Caperton, and Angelo Racine stood his ground as still-green sailors, some little more than boys, scattered. Bullets from the Japanese Zero whizzed by his head. The gunner's mate 3rd class manned the 40 mm gun and took aim. The pilot in the cockpit was close. "I could see him in the plane," the 90-year-old Toms River man recalled. "He was coming at me just like he was in front of me. I can still see him. He didn't look scared to me." Racine was, he said.

Two years earlier, he was an All-Middlesex County guard for the New Brunswick High School Zebras football team. The son of a bricklayer and a Squibbs factory worker, both Italian immigrants, left school early to join the Navy. "I wanted to be proud of myself," he said. In 1944 in the South Pacific, he had the opportunity. Racine unloaded round after round at the Japanese Zero while the enemy aircraft strafed his position on the destroyer's deck. "It was either he killed me or I killed him," he said. The Zero crashed into the sea, about 50 yards from the Caperton, he said. The citation signed by Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal that came with the Bronze Star Medal, reads "Steadfast and courageous, Racine manned his 40mm gun and with resolute determination...coolly disregarded all personal danger...thereby inspiring the inexperienced crew to similar performance."



**Angelo Racine, 90, holds the Bronze Star for his service in WWII**

With each passing Veteran's Day, tales like Racine's are being recalled less and less. The Greatest Generation cast such a large shadow it may have seemed like the men and women who suffered through the Great Depression as children and served during World War II would never fade. But according to the National World War II Museum in New Orleans, there are a little more than a million veterans still alive out of the 16 million who served. Five hundred fifty-five die each day. There are about 27,400 living in New Jersey, according to the museum. Of the 360 men who served with Racine on the Caperton, the veteran believes about 15 are alive. Nine died while he served on board. He saw each man buried at sea. "I was the guy who would get a 5-inch shell and tie it between their legs. I put them on the stretcher let them go into the water. And down they went," he said. "There was no place to put them." Combat for Racine happened on land too. He killed another Japanese soldier in an armed struggle on one of the Mariana Islands, and he took the man's sword. He has no regrets, he said. But he wasn't without sadness over all the killings. He helped rescue a group of Japanese sailors from the open water, eight or nine of them. They were turned over to U.S. Marines, who shot the unarmed men, Racine said.



**Angelo Racine (right) is pictured with his brothers (from left) Carl, Vito and Sal, all now deceased**

After the Navy, Recine played football for the Tennessee Volunteers for a year and had a tryout with the New York Giants, he said. He settled back in New Brunswick where he worked as a bricklayer for more than 40 years for Atlas Concrete, eventually becoming president of the company. One of his two daughters, Arlene Anderson, of South Seaside Park, said she never knew about her father's war record until she was an adult with her own family. "He was never a man to brag about anything," she said. If people spoke about the war around him, he said nothing, she said. Recine, who now lives at the Rose Garden Nursing and Rehabilitation Center in Toms River and gets around in a wheelchair, also has four grandchildren and one great granddaughter. Recine's three brothers served in the Navy. All survived the war but have since died. One of nine children, he has four living sisters. "I've seen the bad, I've seen worse, I've seen good," he said. "Let's put it this way — it's been a good life." [Source: Asberry Park Press | Ken Serrano | Nov. 10, 2014 ++]

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**America's Most Beloved Vets** ► **Vietnam War (2)**



**David Hackworth**



**George "Bud" Day**



**Jeremiah Denton**

- David Hackworth received 24 decorations for heroism in Korea and Vietnam, and created the Tiger Force unit to "out-guerrilla the guerillas."
- Air Force Colonel George "Bud" Day served in three wars – World War II, Korea, Vietnam – and spent nearly six years in a North Vietnam POW camp.
- The future rear admiral and senator from Alabama Jeremiah Denton confirmed that Americans were being tortured in North Vietnam, blinking his eyes in Morse code during a TV interview.

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**Vet State Benefits & Discounts** ► **Kansas 2015**

The state of Kansas 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 – KS** for an overview of the below benefits. Benefits are available to veterans who are residents of the state. For a more detailed explanation

of each of the following refer to and <http://militaryandveteransdiscounts.com/location/kansas.html> and <http://kcva.ks.gov> .

- Housing Benefits
- Financial Assistance Benefits
- Employment Benefits
- Education Benefits
- Other State Veteran Benefitstime
- Discounts

[Source: <http://www.military.com/benefits/veteran-state-benefits> Feb. 2015 ++]

### \* Vet Legislation \*



### **SVAC Update 12: Senate VA leaders lay out goals, hopes to AL**

The goals of the Senate Committee on Veterans’ Affairs’ leadership were made clear to Legion family members 24 FEB during their Washington Conference. Sen. Johnny Isakson, chairman of the committee, and Ranking Member Sen. Richard Blumenthal both spoke during the Commander’s Call. Isakson said he had five goals for the 114th Congress: ensure the Veterans Choice Act works – “not to diminish the VA, but to enhance the VA” – ensure a seamless transition from Department of Defense to VA health care, address military sexual trauma for U.S. servicemembers, improve mental health services for veterans, and eradicate veterans homelessness.



**U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal addressing the Legion during the Washington Conference.**

“We’ve got to see to it that we have access to housing ... so that no single veteran goes to bed at night (in the United States) on a slab next to a bench or on steps off a building, but instead, they have warmth, they have food and they have support,” Isakson said. “I’m going to see to it that I do everything I can to address ... homelessness. “And we’re going to see to it that no veteran who has the stigma and pain and hurt of mental health illnesses from (traumatic brain injury) and (post-traumatic stress disorder) goes un-served or underserved. That is the goal of this committee and something I’m going to work on.”

Blumenthal said the Legion’s presence in the nation’s capital “reminds us of the importance of what we do here for our veterans. This effort should continue to be bipartisan.” He said of proof of successful bipartisanship came during passage of the Clay Hunt Act. “I co-sponsored (the bill) with John McCain,” he said. “He and I worked together as a team (with others). This cause brings us together as Americans. I’m hoping that the Clay Hunt bill will be a template, a direction, an example for this Congress of how we can work together.” But Blumenthal said the Clay Hunt Act – and VA reform legislation that was passed – are both “only a down payment. It’s only a first step. The measures that are being made right now by (VA Secretary) Bob McDonald are very welcome ... are only the beginning. And I hope they will be followed by other steps, even more significant steps, so that the VA regains trust and credibility. It’s lost a lot.”

Blumenthal said VA regaining trust is critical “because the challenges are going to be greater than ever before. Tens of thousands of men and women will be separating from the military over the next two to four years. They deserve job training, employment opportunities and health care.” [Source: The American Legion | Steve B. Brooks | Feb. 24, 2015 ++]

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## **DoD Sexual Abuse Update 19 ► DOD Registry Bill**

The Defense Department would be required to publish a database of all convicted military sex offenders under new legislation introduced 12 FEB by House lawmakers. The bill, sponsored by Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) and Rep. Mike Coffman (R-CO) is aimed at closing a legal loophole allowing servicemembers to self-report their convictions to law enforcement — civilians are automatically added to such registries — while also making DOD sex crime records available to communities across the country. The lawmakers said they are concerned those convicted in courts martial are leaving the services and disappearing back into civilian life where their past is unknown. A recent investigation by the Scripps news service found that 242 military sex offenders out of 1,300 cases examined were never recorded on any public registry, despite a federal law that makes it a felony to ignore reporting requirements. “When you have somebody convicted of a sexual crime, the rate of recidivism is extremely high,” Coffman said. “Given the opportunity, they will re-offend.”

Speier said the bill creates a DOD registry for those convicted of rape, sexual assault and other sex-based offenses similar to the registries kept by local governments, states and law enforcement agencies across the country. The registries are designed to reduce repeat offenses by letting communities know if a sex offender is living nearby and what crimes they committed. Sex offenders are required to register immediately after their convictions or when they are released from prison and report to authorities where they live, work and go to school. The bill would add the global and often transient military community to the system by requiring the DOD to perform and publish its own registry, rather than relying on other civilian authorities to distribute the information. Speier said the DOD database would also include descriptions of each offender’s crimes beyond a list of military convictions such as “conduct unbecoming” that can obscure the nature of what was done. She recounted incidents in which a servicemember had several 12-year-olds walk on his chest in high

heels, and touch his genitals. In another case, an airmen posed as a doctor and persuaded a woman to submit to pelvic exams even after a conviction for the same acts. She said that there was no projected cost for the database and new reporting.

Don Christensen, a retired Air Force prosecutor and president of the advocacy group Protect Our Defenders, also came out in support of the legislation, saying it would help solve a much bigger problem with reducing and prosecuting sexual assault in the ranks. “That makes this all the more absurd, that when we do bring these criminals to justice, they are essentially released into the civilian world and giving a clean slate,” he said. A similar registry bill was introduced in the Senate last week by Sen. Claire McCaskill (D-MO) and Sen. Richard Burr (R-NC). That legislation calls for military sex offenders to be automatically added into the FBI’s National Crime Information Center. But that database is used primarily by law enforcement and not accessible by the public. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Travis J. Tritten | Feb. 12, 2015 ++]

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### **TRICARE Choice Act of 2015 ► S.448 & H.R.868**

Senators Jerry Moran (R-KS) and Richard Blumenthal (D-CO) both members of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee, introduced the Veterans TRICARE Choice Act of 2015, S. 448, which would give TRICARE-eligible veterans the ability to pause TRICARE benefits and contribute to a Health Savings Account (HSA). The bipartisan bill addresses the inequities of current federal law, which prevents retired veterans from participating in their employer’s HSA program due to their eligibility for TRICARE. HSAs have proven to be an effective way to pay for medical costs and proactively save for future medical expenses. Employees invest and save tax-free money in HSAs, which are then used to pay for qualified medical expenses. Providing retired veterans with the option to either participate with their employer’s health plan and HSA or continue their TRICARE health plan not only benefits veterans, but also saves taxpayers money when their benefits are voluntarily paused. The House companion bill H.R. 868 was introduced by Reps. Chris Stewart (R-UT) and Tulsi Gabbard (D-HI). [Source: NAU Weekly Watchdog | Feb. 13, 2015 ++]

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### **VA Blue Water Claims Update 26 ► Bill Reintroduced | H.R.969**

Congressman Chris Gibson (R-NY-19), a U.S. Army retiree, reintroduced The Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act in the House of Representatives on 13 FEB, along with 130 original House sponsors. Co-sponsors are continuing to be added to that overwhelming bipartisan support. H.R.969 for this new Congressional Session, reads exactly like the previous H.R.543. When the last session ended in December, HR-543 had 258 cosponsors. It was not brought out of committee for a vote before that Congressional Session ended. On the Senate side, Sen. Gillibrand (D-NY) is ready to introduce an identical Senate legislation. However, she is waiting for a Republican Senator to step out with her so there will be an initial bipartisan support. By the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association’s reckoning, there are 20 or more Senators who will support that legislation. However, at least 50 will be needed to pass through the Senate.

One of the key factors that has been holding up this legislation has been the uncertainty of the final cost for treating all the sailors and fleet Marines who are sick with diseases recognized by the VA to have been caused by exposure to Agent Orange. Last week the Association’s lawyer, retired Navy CDR John Wells,

along with Congressman Gibson, met with key individuals from the Congressional Budget Office (CBO). They walked away from that meeting feeling very confident that the CBO would release a cost (score) that should fall into a dollar range acceptable to both House and Senate. But of course, everyone is saying that regardless of the cost they don't know where the money will be coming from. There have been two very important developments that will play in favor for passage.

- First, the pilots and crews of the Air Force reserve who inherited the airplanes that had been used in Vietnam to spray Agent Orange, have been steadily dying off from diseases that are on the Agent Orange list. But since they did not serve in wartime, they were not allowed to have Agent Orange related benefits. Their leader, retired Air Force Major Wes Carter, has been tenacious and recently the Institute of Medicine (IOM) returned a report to the VA that specifically stated these reservists were exposed to Agent Orange from the interior residue of Agent Orange on the fuselage that did cause their illnesses. The VA has not done anything with that information yet; however they have been backed into a corner. The report clearly stated two conditions that the VA has adamantly denied for 50 years: Agent Orange is persistent over time at a high toxicity rate, and it was capable of contaminating individuals who handled equipment that had been exposed.
- Secondly, there is now a case before the Court of Appeals for Veteran Claims where a decision must be made whether Da Nang harbor should be considered inland water. If the court rules in favor of that then as many as an estimated 80% of Blue Water Navy sailors could be affected and 80% of the cost of treating them is going to magically disappear from the legislation. This is because they will be put into a category of veterans who are required to be cared for under previously enacted and funded legislation. That hearing is scheduled to be concluded on 25 FEB.



[Source: Salem-News.com | Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Association | Feb. 16, 2015 ++]

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## **Federal Recovery Coordination Program ► Vets Act H.R.914**

U.S. Rep. Gwen Graham's first piece of legislation as a member of Congress would train and hire more recovery coordinators to help badly injured post-9/11 veterans. Graham hopes the VETS Act — Veterans, Education, Training Act — will improve veterans' ability to recover from war injuries by helping them better navigate government red tape to receive benefits. Recovery coordinators with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs assist seriously injured military members from active duty to veteran status. The coordinators help veterans find health care, housing and employment. Graham, who announced the legislation 18 FEB while standing with North Florida veterans at Gulf Coast State College in Panama City, said it was "the least we can do for those who have served our country so admirably."



**U.S. Rep. Gwen Graham**

Part of the legislation would require the VA work to establish recovery coordinator training curriculum in existing nursing schools like Florida State University, Tallahassee Community College and Florida A&M University. It would also allow the VA to increase the number of recovery coordinators and create a better system so that service members don't "fall through the cracks." "This legislation shows those who have served or are considering serving in the military that we have their backs," Graham said. Graham introduced the bill (H.R.914) on 12 FEB. It is co-sponsored by Rep. Ken Buck, a Colorado Republican. Refer to <http://www.oefoif.va.gov/fedrecovery.asp> for information on VA's involvement in this program. [Source: Tallahassee Democrat | Sean Rossman | Feb. 19, 2015 ++]

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## **Vet Bills Submitted to 114th Congress ► 150215 to 150228**

For a listing of Congressional bills of interest to the veteran community introduced in the 114<sup>th</sup> Congress refer to this Bulletin's "**House & Senate Veteran Legislation**" attachment. Support of these bills through cosponsorship by other legislators is critical if they are ever going to move through the legislative process for a floor vote to become law. A good indication of that likelihood is the number of cosponsors who have signed onto the bill. Any number of members may cosponsor a bill in the House or Senate. At <https://beta.congress.gov> you can review a copy of each bill's content, determine its current status, the committee it has been assigned to, and if your legislator is a sponsor or cosponsor of it by entering the bill number in the site's search engine. To determine what bills, amendments your representative/senator has sponsored, cosponsored, or dropped sponsorship on go to:

- <https://beta.congress.gov/search?q=%7B%22source%22%3A%5B%22legislation%22%5D%7D>
- Select the 'Sponsor' tab, and click on your congress person's name.
- You can also go to <http://thomas.loc.gov/home/thomas.php>

Grassroots lobbying is the most effective way to let your Congressional representatives know your wants and dislikes. If you are not sure who is your Congressman go to <https://beta.congress.gov/members>. Members of Congress are receptive and open to suggestions from their constituents. The key to increasing cosponsorship support on veteran related bills and subsequent passage into law is letting legislators know of veteran's feelings on issues. You can reach their Washington office via the Capital Operator direct at (866) 272-6622, (800) 828-0498, or (866) 340-9281 to express your views. Otherwise, you can locate their phone number, mailing address, or email/website to communicate with a message or letter of your own making at either:

- [http://www.senate.gov/general/contact\\_information/senators\\_cfm.cfm](http://www.senate.gov/general/contact_information/senators_cfm.cfm)
- <http://www.house.gov/representatives>

**Tentative 2015 Legislative Schedule 114th Congress, 1st Session:** To be determined

**FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF VETERAN RELATED LEGISLATION INTRODUCED IN THE HOUSE AND SENATE SINCE THE LAST BULLETIN WAS PUBLISHED:**

- H.R.914 : **VA/DoD Federal Recovery Coordination Program Operation.** A bill to direct the Secretary of Defense and the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to jointly operate the Federal Recovery Coordination Program, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Graham, Gwen [FL-2] (introduced 2/12/2015)
- H.R.915 : **Voices for Veterans Act.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to extend and expand the membership of the Advisory Committee on Minority Veterans to include veterans who are lesbian, gay, or bisexual and veterans who are transgender. Sponsor: Rep DelBene, Suzan K. [WA-1] (introduced 2/12/2015)
- H.R.926 : **Vet Guide Dogs.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to improve the provision of guide dogs to veterans blinded by a service-connected injury. Sponsor: Rep Amodei, Mark E. [NV-2] (introduced 2/12/2015)
- H.R.941 : **Non-VA Department Health Care.** A bill to amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to extend the requirement of the Secretary to furnish hospital care and medical services through non-Department of Veterans Affairs entities to veterans residing in certain locations. Sponsor: Rep Kuster, Ann M. [NH-2] (introduced 2/12/2015)
- H.R.969 : **Vietnam Agent Orange Exposure Amendment.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to clarify presumptions relating to the exposure of certain veterans who served in the vicinity of the Republic of Vietnam, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Gibson, Christopher P. [NY-19] (introduced 2/13/2015)
- H.R.992 : **Disabled Vet Transportation Security Administration's PreCheck program.** A bill to waive the application fee for veterans with a service-connected disability rated at 50 percent or more who apply to participate in the Transportation Security Administration's PreCheck program, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Latta, Robert E. [OH-5] (introduced 2/13/2015)
- H.R.993 : **Vet Independent Living Services and Assistance Limit.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to repeal the limitation on the number of veterans authorized to be enrolled in programs of independent living services and assistance administered by the Secretary of Veterans Affairs. Sponsor: Rep Lujan Grisham, Michelle [NM-1] (introduced 2/13/2015)
- H.R.1016 : **VA Standard Identification Protocol.** A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to direct the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to adopt and implement a standard identification protocol for use in the tracking and procurement of biological implants by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Roe, David P. [TN-1] (introduced 2/20/2015)
- H.R.1017 : **VA Information Security Improvement.** To improve the information security of the Department of Veterans Affairs by directing the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to carry out certain actions to improve the transparency and the governance of the information security program of the Department, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Rep Walorski, Jackie [IN-2] (introduced 2/20/2015)
- H.R.1096 : **Clarify VA Reimbursable Mileage Computation.** To amend the Veterans Access, Choice, and Accountability Act of 2014 to clarify the distance requirements regarding the eligibility of certain veterans to receive medical care and services from non-Department of Veterans Affairs facilities. Sponsor: Rep Byrne, Bradley [AL-1] (introduced 2/26/2015)
- S.471 : **Women Veterans Access to Quality Care Act of 2015.** A bill to improve the provision of health care for women veterans by the Department of Veterans Affairs, and for other purposes. Sponsor: Sen Heller, Dean [NV] (introduced 2/12/2015)

[Source: <https://beta.congress.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> Feb. 27, 2015 ++]

**\* Military \***



**Army Most Wanted Fugitives ► Website Launched**

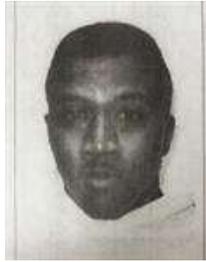
Army officials officially launched a website tracking the service's top fugitives 11 FEB, publishing photos and case details as a way both to inform the public of potential danger and to seek its help in bringing wanted men to justice. Initial plans called for the website, <http://opmg.hqda.pentagon.mil>, to be up by the end of 2014 and to feature the top 10 fugitives. Instead, the site lists 24 cases, including five men who already have been captured. Jerome Dale Mathieu, wanted on charges of domestic assault and spousal abuse, was brought in 5 FEB, according to the website; a Facebook page with his name and image was active until late November. Other cases have been open far longer, according to the site:

- Darryl Leandra Grigsby, wanted for aggravated assault, attempted rape and other charges, has been off the Army's radar since 1980. He's one of three listed fugitives without available photos.
- Andres Marquez Carillo, a former supply sergeant wanted on homicide charges, went missing in 1981 and was last seen in Spain.
- Rogelio Armando Quinn has evaded Army officials since 1983 and is identified by a blurred black-and-white mugshot that has a staple through it. He's facing charges of attempted murder and rape, among others.

The site resembles similar efforts from the Air Force Office of Special Investigations and the Naval Criminal Investigative Service. It includes contact information for Army Criminal Investigation Command and links to other Army law enforcement resources. Maintained by the Office of the Provost Marshal General, the site had been under consideration and/or in development for several years, beset by legal and technological hurdles. An 23 OCT directive by Army Secretary John McHugh authorizing the site's creation spurred renewed interest. [Source: ArmyTimes | Kevin Lilley | Feb. 14, 2015 ++]



Andres Marquez Carrillo



Jesse Bussey



John Timothy Shinnick



Margarito Valencia-Daniel



Mohammed Hajoui



Nazzareno Mifsud



Robert Louis Barnett III



Rogelio Armando Quinn



Dennis Edward Radel



Dennis Edward Radel



Yari Palacios



Darryl Leandra Grigsby



Steven Michael Crim



Antonio Gastelum



Shukri Mohammad  
Ali Ammouri



Luis Ernesto Berrios



Binh Quoc Son



Richard Anthony Feliz-Culler



Carnel Davis



Dion Omar Hawkins Jr.

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## **Army Retired Lapel Button ► Now Available**

The new U. S. Army Retired Lapel Button (depicted below) is now available through the Exchange stores and website at <https://www.shopmyexchange.com>. The lapel button costs \$5.80 online and the larger Retired Service Identification Badge, which is worn by Retired Soldiers on the Army Service Uniform, costs \$12.25. To quickly find the new items on the Exchange website, just type "Soldier for Life" into the keyword search box at the top of the site and hit enter. The Army logo in the middle of the new U. S. Army Retired Lapel Button and Retired Service Identification Badge is slightly different than the official Army logo due to manufacturing requirements. The new Soldier for Life window stickers, which incorporate the official Army logo, will be available this summer.



[Source: ArmyEchoes | Feb. 15, 2015 ++]

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## **USNS SGT Matej Kocak ► Reef Grounded Vessel Refloated**

The damaged maritime prepositioning ship USNS Sgt. Matej Kocak (T-AK-3005) is headed to the shipyards after being stranded on a coral reef for the better part of two weeks, six miles off the coast of the Japanese island of Okinawa. Workers freed the grounded vessel by offloading enough of the ship's weight ahead of a high tide 2 FEB, officials said. "Kocak was refloated by lightening the ship's liquid loads (fuel and ballast) and then, with the assistance of tugs, moving her off the reef at a peak high tide," Cmdr. Ron Flanders, a spokesman for U.S. Naval Forces Japan, wrote in an email. The successful freeing of Kocak capped an 11-day effort. Those trying to free the 821-foot-long cargo ship were also trying to minimize environmental damage to the reef.

The Kocak was pierside 19 FEB at White Beach Navy Pier, Okinawa, Flanders said, adding that workers from Naval Sea Systems Command are completing emergency repairs. "These temporary emergency repairs are underway; NAVSEA contractors have already patched up the portside hull and internal repairs to restore watertight integrity are ongoing," he said. "All necessary repairs are on schedule for completion by February 21st." After the temporary fixes are complete, the ship can head out on its own power to the yards where more permanent repairs can be made. The location hasn't been identified yet because the repair work is out to bid, Flanders said. The ship will depart Okinawa by the end of the month, he said. The Navy sent divers and independent marine biologists to survey the damage to the reef, Flanders said, and forwarded the findings to the Japanese government. "The surveys found there was some physical scarring of the reef, but it was in a much smaller area than initially believed," he said.



**The U.S. Navy cargo ship Matej Kocak is seen grounded 22 JAN off the coast of Uruma, Japan's southern island of Okinawa.**

The Kocak ran aground 22 JAN on an ebb tide near the southern portion of the island, according to Navy officials. Once it was determined that the ship was hard aground, the Navy held the ship in place while divers assessed the damage to the hull resting on a rocky bed of sand and reef. There were 38 civilian crew aboard, as well as 67 Army personnel and 26 Marines, at the time of the grounding. An investigation into the causes of the grounding is underway. [Source: NavyTimes | David Larter | Feb 19, 2015 ++]

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### **Iwo Jima Survivors ► 70th Anniversary Gathering**

Capt. Larry Snowden led a company of 230 Marines that landed on the beach of a small Japanese island on Feb. 19, 1945. Five weeks later, when Iwo Jima fell to U.S. forces after one of the bloodiest battles in the Pacific during World War II, his unit's losses reflected the steep cost of an historic victory. "When we walked off the island, 99 of us remained," said Snowden, 93, the senior ranking survivor of the invasion, who retired from the Marines as a lieutenant general in 1979. "That's a pretty high casualty rate." Snowden spoke 19 FEB in Washington at a gathering of Iwo Jima survivors who marked the 70th anniversary of the start of the siege.



**A Battle of Iwo Jima veteran and his wife speak with each other after the Iwo Jima Wreath Laying Ceremony at the Marine Corps War Memorial in Arlington, Va. on Feb. 19,**

Over the decades, the battle's prominence has persisted, owing to a photograph that shows five Marines and a Navy corpsman raising an American flag on Mount Suribachi, the island's highest point. Yet it is the ferocity of the fighting that lingers in the memories of the men sent to Iwo Jima. Snowden's company belonged to the 2nd Battalion, 23rd Marine Regiment of the 4th Marine Division. His unit went ashore the first day, part of the initial push of 30,000 U.S. troops, most of whom were Marines. An additional 40,000 men later joined the struggle against 22,000 Japanese soldiers, who hid among an intricate network of tunnels and caves spanning the volcanic island 750 miles from mainland Japan. U.S. forces advanced as little as 50 yards a day in the early stages as both sides suffered massive casualties. By the time combat ended on March 26, 1945, almost 7,000 American troops had been killed and more than 19,000 wounded. Almost 19,000 Japanese soldiers were killed as they followed the orders of Gen. Tadamichi Kuribayashi to fight to the death.

U.S. commanders realized only after the battle that they had overrated the strategic importance of the eight-square-mile island and its three airstrips. Iwo Jima nonetheless produced an incalculable morale boost to the American war effort when the photo of the six men raising the flag appeared in newspapers across the country. Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal captured the moment on Feb. 23, 1945, the battle's fourth day, and the image endures as a symbol of American resolve in wartime. Gen. Joseph Dunford, commandant of the Marine Corps, told the survivors that their triumph has reverberated across the generations. "The battle of Iwo Jima has become part of the very ethos of the Marine Corps," he said. Dunford added that their example inspired Marines who fought in America's most recent wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. "Your legacy transcends the capture of a faraway island in the Pacific long ago."

Kenichiro Sasae, the Japanese ambassador to the United States, extolled the sacrifice of U.S. and Japanese soldiers alike. Referring to Japanese troops who defended the island as they moved underground, he said, "Mount Suribachi must have felt like a tomb waiting to be closed." Fleet Admiral Chester Nimitz remarked in 1945 that, among U.S. troops on Iwo Jima, "uncommon valor was a common virtue." Snowden, who led his company even after shrapnel from a mortar blast wounded him in the neck and head, described overcoming his injuries in more modest terms. "Part of the game," he said. [Source: Stars and Stripes | Martin Kuz | Feb. 19, 2015 ++]

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## **GuardBot** ► Amphibious Drone | Future of Amphibious Assault

Establishing a beachhead on enemy-held turf is historically one of the most dangerous jobs in warfare, just ask Achilles. But the robotic age may make it slightly less so. A research team from Stamford, Conn. has developed an amphibious drone that they are currently testing with the Marines. The GuardBot is a robot ball that swims over water at about 4 miles per hour and then rolls along the beach, at as much as a 30-degree incline and 20 miles per hour. It uses a nine-axis stabilization, "pendulum motion" propulsion system, which moves the bot forward by shifting the center of gravity back and forth and a variety of steering algorithms. It took creator Peter Muhlradsome seven years to develop, but now that it's complete Muhlradsays it can be rapidly produced various sizes. Company documents suggest it can be scaled down to units as small as 10 cm and as large as nine feet. The company is planning to develop a prototype that's 6 feet in diameter.



Muhlrad's company, GuardBot Inc. has a cooperative research development agreement, or CRADA, with the Navy. A CRADA is a legal framework that allows private companies or researchers to use government facilities, research and resources to build things that are mutually beneficial to both parties. The information that the researcher discovers is protected for up to five years. Under many CRADAs the researcher does not receive money from the government but has the right to commercialize what he or she produces. The government retains a use license. The company is currently working with the Marine Corp War Fighting Lab to test the GuardBot in an operational environment, though it's unclear what that may be. Here's the team presenting it at Marine Corps Base Quantico, in Virginia, in 2012. Watch it navigate the volleyball pit.

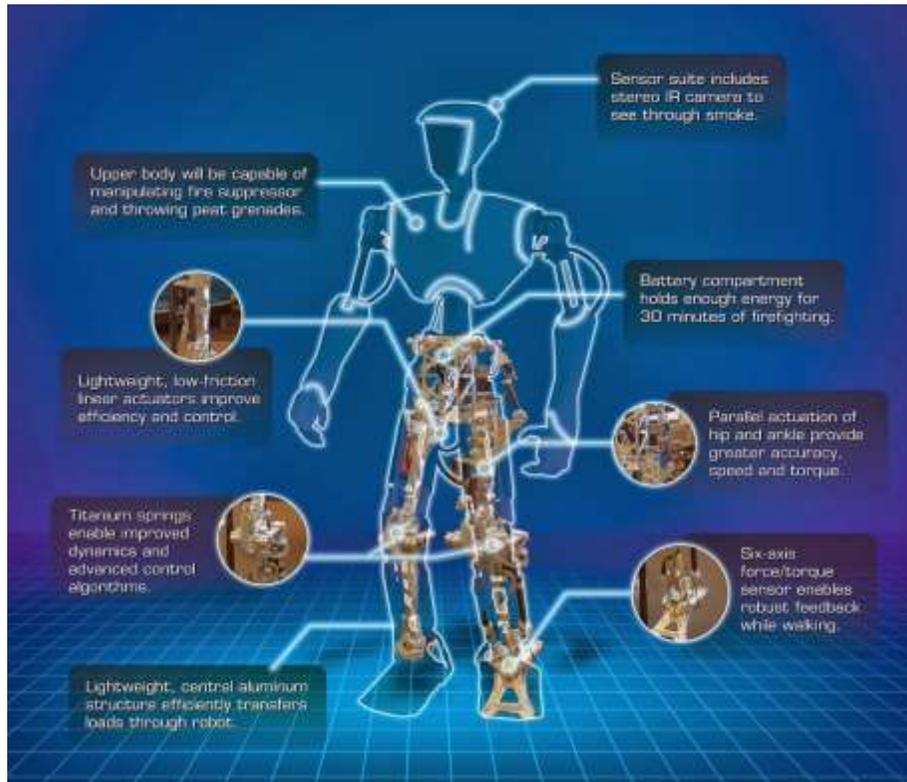
In January 2014, they tested it at the Naval Amphibious Base in Little Creek, Va., where the GuardBot successfully deployed from and returned to a naval craft. Today, the machine is remotely operated over a 2-8 GHz datalink. But Muhlrad and his team are working on new software that incorporates geographic information system data, or GIS, to allow for far greater autonomy. Just pick a spot on the map and the ball will get there. "Depending on if we get funding, we could develop that in 8 to 10 months," Muhlrad told Defense One. Muhlrad designed the system primarily for surveillance and object inspection. It's capable of 360 degree turns so its somewhat more maneuverable than other ground robots. In tests with Smith Detection's raman laser spectroscope in the payload (the two small transparent half-spheres on the side of the bot) it was able to detect explosive chemicals from about 2 inches away. No, unlike a one-armed PackBot, it clearly won't be disabling explosives. And it won't replace special operations teams, but it could accompany them on dangerous missions. When Defense One asked if the GuardBot could carry explosives rather than detection or camera equipment, Muhlrad answered simply: "Yes." To see the GuardBot in operation refer to <http://www.defenseone.com/technology/2015/02/marines-are-building-robotic-war-balls/105258>. [Source: Defense One | Patrick Tucker | Feb. 12, 2015 ++]

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## **SAFFiR** ► **Shipboard Autonomous Fire-Fighting Robot**

Coming soon to your repair locker: a sailor-sized fire-fighting robot. Meet the Shipboard Autonomous Fire-Fighting Robot, or SAFFiR. This humanoid robot, four years in the making, will one day help sailors locate and suppress fires. The robot stands 5-foot, 10-inches and comes in at 140 pounds. It can walk on a variety of terrain while wearing a payload and without special tuning. It easily navigates through hatches and over knee knockers, and can climb stairs with no problem. "That may sound like a very simple thing to us as humans, but to a robot that is incredibly difficult," said John Seminatore, a graduate researcher in Virginia Tech's Terrestrial Robotics Engineering and Controls laboratory who serves as the student program manager. "Robots are very good at things people are bad at. I can make a robot that is very strong very easily. But it is the simple things that humans do that robots have trouble with." For example, a robot has no idea what a door

is, let alone a watertight hatch. And once identified, many other issues emerge: What kind of door is it? How do you open it? Will it swing in or out when opened?



"The fact that our robot can walk, operate in, and adapt to a changing environment is really a huge step forward," said Seminatore, who also serves as an Air Force Reserve captain. The team proved this capability in a November demonstration aboard the retired dock landing ship Shadwell, which provides the Navy full-scale damage control research. The robot walked down the passageway, which has been warped from repeated fires. SAFFiR detected the fire, charged a fire hose and attacked. Such skills are just the beginning, because it was designed with human characteristics, SAFFiR can pick up and use a standard drill. The next goal is to use a cutting torch to make a hole in the wall. The robot will not replace damage controlmen, at least not at this point. But it can supplement damage control efforts in many ways — a strong selling point when new ships are designed for minimal manning. Though its temperature tolerance is similar to humans, the robot can stay in a hot environment far longer since it neither dehydrates nor grows tired. Infrared cameras can see through smoke and provide on-scene assessment, and SAFFiR is well suited to assess damage when hazardous contamination, such as radiation, is a concern.

Forthcoming efforts will focus on artificial intelligence, Seminatore said. Specifically, the ability to respond to voice and gesture commands, as well as sensory feedback that will enable the robot to rightly respond when it runs into or is pushed aside by a human. The next version will also extend battery life from 20 to roughly 90 minutes, and the ability to plug into a standard AC wall outlet. [Source: NavyTimes | Lance M. Bacon | Feb. 09, 2015 ++]

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## Medal of Honor Citations ► Edward W. Freeman | Vietnam



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

### **Edward W. Freeman**

***Rank and organization:*** Captain, U.S. Army, Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division

***Place and date:*** Battle of Ia Drang Valley, Republic of Vietnam November 14, 1965

***Entered service at:*** McLain, Mississippi in 1944

***Born:*** Neely, Mississippi November 20, 1927

### ***Citation***

Captain Ed W. Freeman, United States Army, of Boise, Idaho, who distinguished himself by numerous acts of conspicuous gallantry and extraordinary intrepidity on 14 November 1965 while serving with Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). As a flight leader and second in command of a 16-helicopter lift unit, he supported a heavily engaged American infantry battalion at Landing Zone X-Ray in the Ia Drang Valley, Republic of Vietnam. The unit was almost out of ammunition after taking some of the heaviest casualties of the war, fighting off a relentless attack from a highly motivated, heavily armed enemy force. When the infantry commander closed the helicopter landing zone because of intense direct enemy fire, Captain Freeman risked his life by flying his unarmed helicopter through a gauntlet of enemy fire time after time, delivering critically needed ammunition, water, and medical supplies to the besieged battalion. His flights, by providing the engaged units with supplies of ammunition critical to their survival, directly affected the battle's outcome. Without them the units would almost surely have gone down, with much greater loss of life. After medical evacuation helicopters refused to fly into the area because of intense enemy fire, Captain Freeman flew 14 separate rescue missions, providing lifesaving evacuation of an estimated 30 seriously wounded soldiers—some of whom would not have survived had he not acted. All flights were made into a small emergency landing zone within 100 to 200 meters of the defensive perimeter, where heavily committed units were perilously holding off the attacking elements. Captain Freeman's selfless acts of great valor and extraordinary perseverance were far above and beyond the call of duty or mission and set a superb example of leadership and courage for all of his peers. Captain Freeman's extraordinary heroism and devotion to duty are in keeping with the highest traditions of military service and reflect great credit upon himself, his unit, and the United States Army.



**After receiving the Medal of Honor, Ed Freeman was inducted into the Pentagon's Hall of Heroes on July 17, 2001.**

Freeman was born in Neely, Greene County, Mississippi, the sixth of nine children. When he was 13 years old, he saw thousands of men on maneuvers pass by his home in Mississippi. He knew then that he would become a soldier. He grew up in nearby McLain, Mississippi McLain and graduated from Washington High School. At age 17, before graduating from high school, Ed enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served, during World War II, on the USS Cacapon (AO-52) for two years. Once the war was over, he returned to his hometown and graduated from high school. Immediately afterwards, he joined the Army. On April 30, 1954, he married Barbara Morgan. They had two sons, Mike, born in 1956 and Doug, born in 1962.

Beyond his service in the Navy in World War II, he reached the Army rank of first sergeant by the time of the Korean War. Although he was in the Corps of Engineers, he fought as an infantry soldier in Korea. He participated in the Battle of Pork Chop Hill and earned a battlefield commission as one of only 14 survivors out of 257 men who made it through the opening stages of the battle. His second lieutenant bars were pinned on by General James Van Fleet personally. He then assumed command of B Company and led them back up Pork Chop Hill. The commission made him eligible to become a pilot, a childhood dream of his. However, when he applied for pilot training he was told that, at six feet four inches, he was "too tall" for pilot duty. The phrase stuck, and he was known by the nickname of "Too Tall" for the rest of his career.

In 1955, the height limit for pilots was raised and Freeman was accepted into flying school. He first flew fixed-wing Army airplanes before switching to helicopters. After the Korean War, he flew the world on mapping missions. By the time he was sent to Vietnam in 1965, he was an experienced helicopter pilot and was placed second-in-command of his sixteen-craft unit. He served as a captain in Company A, 229th Assault Helicopter Battalion, 1st Cavalry Division (Airmobile). On November 14, 1965, Freeman and his unit transported a battalion of American soldiers to the Ia Drang Valley. Later, after arriving back at base, they learned that the soldiers had come under intense fire and had taken heavy casualties. Enemy fire around the landing zones was so heavy that the landing zone was closed to medical evacuation helicopters. Freeman and his commander, Major Bruce Crandall, volunteered to fly their unarmed, lightly armored UH-1 Huey in support of the embattled troops. Freeman made a total of fourteen trips to the battlefield, bringing in water and ammunition and taking out wounded soldiers under heavy enemy fire in what was later named the Battle of Ia Drang. Freeman was subsequently promoted to the rank of major, designated as a Master Army Aviator, and was sent home from Vietnam in 1966.



**Boot Camp 1971**



**Korea**



**Vietnam**

He retired from the military in 1969. Freeman and his family settled in the Treasure Valley area of Idaho, his wife Barbara's home state. He continued to work as a pilot. He flew helicopters for another 20 years, fighting wildfires, conducting animal censuses, and herding wild horses for the Department of the Interior until his second retirement in 1991. By then, he had 17,000 flight hours in helicopters, 22,000 overall. Freeman's commanding officer nominated him for the Medal of Honor for his actions at Ia Drang, but not in time to meet a two-year deadline then in place. He was instead awarded the Distinguished Flying Cross. The Medal of Honor nomination was disregarded until 1995, when the two-year deadline was removed. He was formally presented with the medal on July 16, 2001, in the East Room of the White House by President George W. Bush.

Freeman died on August 20, 2008 due to complications from Parkinson's disease. He was buried with full military honors at the Idaho State Veterans Cemetery in Boise. In the 2002 film *We Were Soldiers*, which depicted the Battle of Ia Drang, Freeman was portrayed by Mark McCracken. The post office in Freeman's hometown of McLain, Mississippi, was renamed the "Major Ed W. Freeman Post Office" in March 2009. His death was reported on NBC Nightly news in the video at <http://www.nbcnews.com/video/nightly-news/26336240#26336240>

[Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed\\_Freeman](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ed_Freeman) & <http://www.history.army.mil/html/moh/vietnam-a-1.html#FREEMAN> Feb 2015 ++]

**\* Military History \***



## Aviation Art 83 ► Ploesti: The Odyssey of Utah Man



# Ploesti: The Odyssey of Utah Man

by Gil Cohen

The exhausted crew of the B-24, Utah Man, has just returned to base near Benghazi, Libya, on August 1, 1943, after bombing the oil refineries at Ploesti. The pilot, 1st Lt. Walter Stewart is seen describing his mission to operations officer Maj. Ramsay Potts, who had returned earlier that day. [Source: <http://www.brooksart.com/Odyssey.html> Feb 2015 ++]

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## Military Trivia 101 ► Legion of the United States

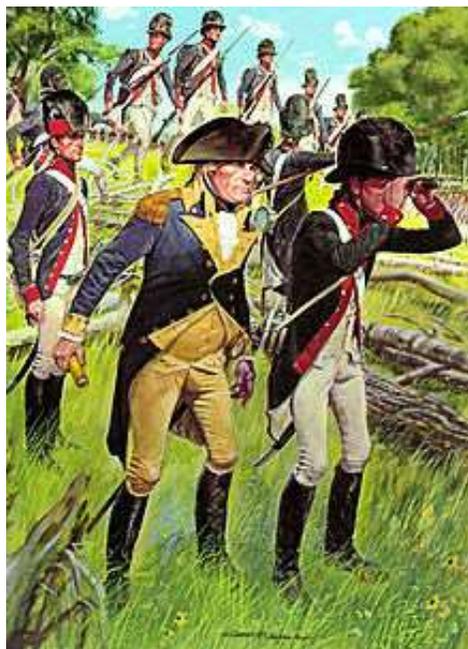
When the 13 American Colonies initially began resisting Britain, they had no organized military. Individual states fielded militias and troops, but a unified military was lacking. In part, this was a result of wary attitudes among many members of the public who did not support the idea of an organized military force acting on behalf of all of the colonies. The Continental Congress also shared this view. After a few defeats, however, the Continental Congress reluctantly established the Continental Army as a unified means for the colonies to fight Great Britain. Officially established on June 14, 1775, George Washington was named its commander in chief. But unconditional support was missing. The Continental Congress came up with an inadequate and, in retrospect, foolish requirement where each of the then-colonies were to send men and to supply and pay those men. Since few colonies were able to meet these requirements, the Continental Army was often inadequately supplied with food, clothing, and other materials.

What was not lacking, however, was the spirit to succeed along with an interesting blend of traditional and well-established military tactics and innovations shown by members of the Continental Army. While it often struggled against the more highly trained and organized British troops in open battle, Continental forces were not above using guerrilla tactics to harry the British. It subverted traditional ideas about how wars should be fought, relying on knowledge of the terrain and creativity to fight the British, rather than attempting to overpower British forces by conventional means. Inconsistent organization within the British military forces

was exploited by Continental troops. Though there were many defeats, there were also enough successes for the United States to win its bid for independence. After the signing of the Treaty of Paris in 1783 to end the Revolutionary War, the Founding Fathers, still suspicious of standing armies and believing that the militia would be suited to all the nation's defensive needs, they disbanded the Continental Army. State militias became the new nation's sole ground army, with the exception of a regiment to guard the Western Frontier and one battery of artillery guarding West Point's arsenal.

The Regular Army was at first very small, and after General St. Clair's defeat at the Battle of the Wabash, the Regular Army was reorganized in 1791 as the Legion of the United States. St. Clair's Defeat also known as the Battle of the Wabash, the Battle of Wabash River or the Battle of a Thousand Slain, was fought on November 4, 1791 in the Northwest Territory between the United States and the Western Confederacy of American Indians, as part of the Northwest Indian War. It was a major American Indian victory and remains the greatest defeat of the United States Army by American Indians; of the 1,000 officers and men that St. Clair led into battle, only 24 escaped unharmed.

President Washington picked his old lieutenant, General "Mad Anthony" Wayne, to lead the new professional army. At the recommendation of Secretary of War Henry Knox, it was decided to recruit and train a "Legion of the United States" that would combine all land combat arms of the day (cavalry, heavy and light infantry, artillery) into one efficient brigade-sized force divisible into stand-alone combined arms teams. Congress agreed with this proposal and agreed to augment the small standing army until "the United States shall be at peace with the Indian tribes." The legion was composed of four sub-legions, each commanded by a lieutenant colonel. These sub-legions were self-contained units with two battalions of infantry, a rifle battalion (light infantry skirmishers armed with Pennsylvania long rifles to screen the infantry), a troop of dragoons and a battery of artillery. The sub-legions were created from elements of the 1st and 2nd Regiments of the US Army. These units then became the First and Second Sub-Legions. The Third and Fourth Sub-Legions were raised from men recruited in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.



**General Wayne with the Legion of the United States, 1794**

From June 1792 to November 1792, the legion remained cantoned at Fort LaFayette in Pittsburgh. The legion then moved to the United States Military's first basic training facility at Legionville in western Pennsylvania on the banks of the Ohio River. The frontier fort was built on the orders of General Anthony Wayne. General Wayne also established various forts along his line-of-march to ensure adequate re-supply, and garrisoned these forts with freshly trained legionnaires. The Legion was engaged in several attacks on their convoys as the expedition pushed further into Native American strongholds chiefly towards the Maumee Rapids. On June 30, 1794, just outside the gates of Fort Recovery a pack-horse train led by Major William Friend McMahon was attacked by 2,000 Indians. After Major McMahon was killed and the rest of the survivors fled into the fort, a general attack was made on the fort. Fortunately for the defenders, most of the men (about 125) were expert riflemen. The fort also had artillery to back them. The battle raged for two days but Fort Recovery was not taken.

Eventually the need for a standing Army was realized by the congress and in 1789, the United States Army was established. It is a common misconception that the legion was abandoned in 1796. After the death of General Anthony Wayne in Erie, Pennsylvania on December 15, 1796, his second-in-command, Brigadier General James Wilkinson (later found to be a spy for the Spanish government) tried to rid the army of everything Wayne had created including the legionary structure of the army. Thus the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Sub-Legions became the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th Regiments of the United States Army. The coat of arms for the 1st US Infantry Regiment shows part of the shield in red in honor of the 2nd Sub-Legion. {The 1st Inf Regiment is descended from the 2nd Regiment US Army} The device worn on the epaulette of the 3rd US Infantry (The Old Guard) shows a black hat with white plume. These are the colors of the 1st Sub-Legion. The coat of arms of the 4th US Infantry Regiment is green and white in honor of the 4th Sub-Legion. [Source: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legion\\_of\\_the\\_United\\_States](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Legion_of_the_United_States) & Together We Served | Dec. 2014 ++]

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**Military History** ► Iwo Jima | AP Was There 70 Years Ago

Seventy years after its original publication, the AP is making Rosenthal's photo and the story about the assault on Mount Suribachi available.

On Feb. 23, 1945, Associated Press photographer Joe Rosenthal took a photograph that would become one of the most recognizable and reproduced images in history. It showed five Marines and a Navy corpsman raising an American flag atop Mount Suribachi during the World War II Battle of Iwo Jima. To view a short video report on this photo and the controversy over whether or not it was staged, refer to <http://www.wowktv.com/story/28178333/ap-was-there-70-years-ago-marines-raise-flag-on-iwo-jima>



**Original Photo**



**Joe Rosenthal**



**Posed Photo**

GUAM (AP) - Hard-fighting United States marines, who have paid the Pacific's highest price for 58 hours of battle with 5,372 casualties at Iwo, wrested 546-foot Mt. Suribachi on the south tip of the island from the Japanese today.

The United States Flag was raised on the crater's rim at 10:35 a.m. by the 28th Regiment, signaling the end of one phase of the five-day-old struggle.

From Suribachi, whose slopes had been blasted by battleships and dive-bombed by carrier planes, the Japs (Editor's note: a disparaging word used to describe the Japanese that was in common use at the time) had raked marine positions throughout the southern sector with deadly mortar and artillery fire.

Adm. Chester W. Nimitz announced the victory in a brief communique soon after one which had reported only minor advances through Thursday against fierce opposition.

*The earlier communique, covering marine casualties only through 6 p.m. Wednesday, disclosed that 644 marines had been killed, 4,168 wounded and 560 were missing. Since then severe battles have raged. In the same 58-hour period, a total of 1,222 enemy dead were counted. No invasion of the Pacific war for a comparative period has cost so many American casualties. At Tarawa, previously considered the bloodiest fight of the war, marine casualties for its entire 72 hours slightly exceeded 3,000.*

The three marine divisions, the 3rd, 4th and 5th, inched forward slightly on the north toward the enemy fighter base in the center of the island and constructed their lines around Mt. Suribachi as a preliminary to its capture. Presumably hard fighting will still be necessary to clean all the Japs from its caves.

The Japs launched two powerful counterattacks on the flanks of the forces attacking the airfield. Significantly, Nimitz did not specifically claim either had been completely blunted.

Nimitz said that artillery and the supporting guns of U.S. 5th Fleet warships "appeared to have repulsed the assault on the left."

He added, however: "No reporters were available on the action on the right."

At Mt. Suribachi strong patrols moved up the cliffs under attacks by the enemy, who was using hand grenades and demolition charges.

Heavy rains hampered the fighting.

In a broadcast, Larry Tighe, Blue Network correspondent, said high winds have whipped waves "to heights of six feet" against the shore and "endanger any attempts to keep the supply lines flowing smoothly into the beaches." Despite this supplies were moving ashore much faster than in the first two days when the invasion was perilously close to being repulsed.

Jap planes, earlier acknowledged to have inflicted some damage on units of the 5th Fleet, continued their attacks Thursday.

The raids were unsuccessful, the Navy said.

Fighters and anti-aircraft guns shot down six enemy planes.

Warships and carrier planes, despite bad weather, kept adding to the more than 20,000 tons of explosives which have been pumped into Iwo's enemy garrison - one ton for each Nipponese who was on the island's eight square miles when the invasion was opened Monday.

Vice-Adm. John Hoover, commander of forward areas, disclosed today that at one time on D-Day the beach head actually appeared "doomed."

Other observers reported only a few trucks got ashore the first two days, during which the landing parties were almost without supplies.

"There was little change in the position of the front lines," Nimitz had reported in a Thursday communique which covered action up to Thursday noon.

"Some damage to fleet units" was announced by Nimitz in reporting the first successful attack by the Jap air force on American warships supporting the invasion.

Although Iwo Jima is only 750 miles from Tokyo, and about 100 south of the enemy's bases on Chichi and Haha islands in the Bonins, the Japs had been unable until at sunset Wednesday to penetrate the air screen thrown about the fleet as it pounded Iwo's defenses. The enemy attack doubtless was aided by the heavy rains drenching Iwo and hampering the ground invasion.

Landing Wednesday of the reinforcing 3rd Marine Division, the mounting casualties, bitter resistance and almost negligible gains all indicated the marines were up against their toughest assignment of the Pacific war. An American invasion force of perhaps 40,000 is pitted against an original enemy garrison of probably 20,000. In addition to outnumbering the enemy, the devildogs had the support of American warships and American carrier and land-based planes commanded the air.

With the capture of Mt. Suribachi heavy fighting on Iwo will be concentrated in the northern section where the marines are driving for the central airfield.

Several heavy enemy counterattacks in the northern sector were beaten off Wednesday night, Nimitz reported, and then on Thursday the marines launched a northward attack of their own under heavy enemy fire.

By noon Thursday, fighting in a hard rain, this force was advancing slowly.

In the southern sector, the leathernecks launched a coordinated attack up the steep slopes of Suribachi to achieve its capture. They fought "under the most difficult combat conditions," said the communique. Every few feet there was an enemy pillbox. Japs resisted from every cave and crevice in the 546-foot high peak.

Suribachi was isolated early in the invasion from the Japanese farther north when a marine column drove across the southern edge of Iwo.

American warships, which plastered Iwo for several days in a heavy preinvasion bombardment, continued to shell the northern area of the island, Nimitz reported.

By The Associated Press



[Source: MilitaryTimes | Joe Rosenthal, The Associated Press | Feb. 23, 2015 ++]

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**D-Day** ▶ **Tending the Wounded**



Army medical personnel administer a plasma transfusion to a wounded comrade, who survived when his landing craft went down off the coast of Normandy in the early days of the Allied landing operations.

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**WWII Prewar Events** ▶ **Nazi Youth Movement Feb 1936**



A group of German girls line up to learn musical culture under auspices of the Nazi Youth Movement, in Berlin, Germany on Feb. 24, 1936.

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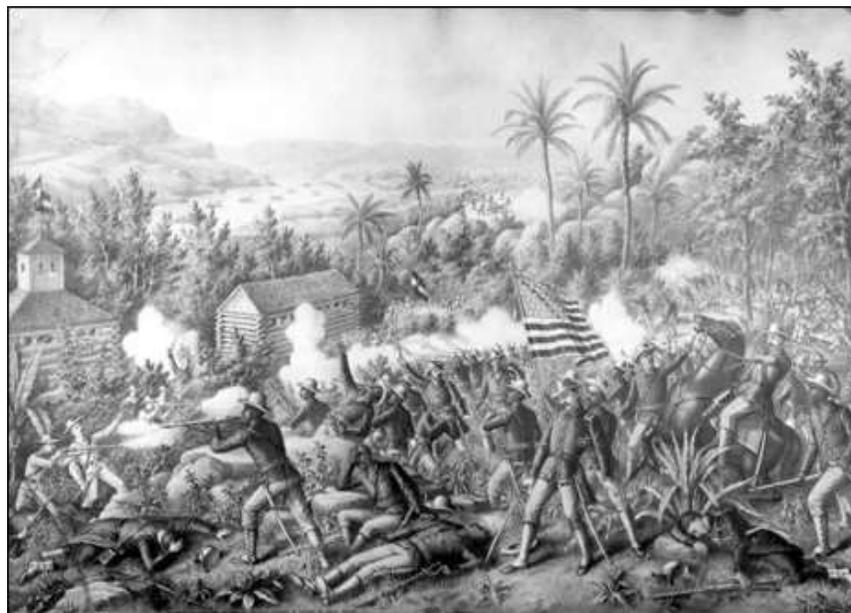
. **WWII PostWar Events** ▶ 7" TV Showing Aug 1945



This television set, retailing for \$100, is reportedly the first moderately priced receiver manufactured in quantity. Rose Clare Leonard watches the screen, which reproduces a 5x7 image, as she tunes in at the first public post-war showing at a New York department store, on August 24, 1945. Although television was invented prior to World War II, the war prevented mass production. Soon after the war, sales and production picked up, and by 1948, regular commercial network programming had begun.

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**Spanish American War Images 12** ▶ Battle of Quasimas June 24th, 1898



*The Battle of Quasimas near Santiago, June 24th, 1898*

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**WWI in Photos 121** ▶ **Mr. Dumas Realier's Dog 1915**



**A dog belonging to a Mr. Dumas Realier, dressed as a German soldier, in 1915.**

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**Faces of WAR (WWII)** ▶ **General Omar Bradley 1945**



**General Omar Bradley 1945**

## Military History Anniversaries ► 01 thru 31 Mar

Significant events in U.S. Military History over the next 30 days are listed in the attachment to this Bulletin titled, “**Military History Anniversaries 01 thru 31 Mar**”.

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### \* Health Care \*



## Pulmonary Health ► OEF/OIF Vets Needed for Army Study

Army researchers are looking for Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with breathing difficulties such as shortness of breath or wheezing to study how deployments may affect lung health. With some combat veterans returning from war with respiratory ailments such as asthma, hyperactive airways and, in some cases, constrictive bronchiolitis — a rare disease involving scarring and inflammation of the smallest airways — Army physicians are starting the third phase of a long-term study into deployment-related pulmonary health. The Study of Active Duty Military for Pulmonary Disease Related to Environmental Deployment Exposures, or STAMPEDE, seeks to determine what lung diseases may be associated with overseas military operations, said retired Army Col. Michael Morris, a pulmonologist at San Antonio Military Medical Center, Texas. "There are complicated diagnoses out there," Morris said. "We want to be able to explain to a general medical public the difference between the average citizen and the military population who may have different exposures."

Previous studies done under STAMPEDE include an analysis of the health of 400 soldiers with career-limiting asthma to see whether the incidence of the disease was higher in those who deployed than those who didn't (it wasn't), and a study of 50 service members to evaluate respiratory symptoms after they deployed. In that research, published last July in the American Journal of Respiratory and Critical Care Medicine, 40 percent of patients showed some evidence of reactive airways after deployment, including eight diagnosed with asthma and two with respiratory issues related to acid reflux. Six service members also were found to have miscellaneous airway disorders and four other troops displayed diminished capacity to transfer inhaled oxygen into their bloodstreams. The new STAMPEDE study will be similar to the one with the 50 troops. Morris and his team are seeking active-duty or retired personnel who deployed to a combat zone and developed respiratory symptoms during or shortly after deployment and still have symptoms.

Participants will be required to spend a week in San Antonio or at Walter Reed National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland. They also must be able to exercise on a treadmill and have no history of pre-existing lung conditions before deploying, according to Morris. As part of the research, participants will undergo blood work and chest imaging, electrocardiograms, breathing tests, exercise tests, a vocal cord exam and bronchoscopy. Morris emphasized that participants also must be eligible for Tricare. While he is in talks with the Veterans Affairs Department's War-Related Injury and Illness Study Center and the South Texas VA Medical Center to offer the study to veterans, he said those discussions are preliminary.

Some veterans of Iraq and Afghanistan have developed debilitating respiratory illnesses after serving in the region. Many blame the military's use of open-air burn pits to dispose of trash in theater, saying the smoke produced by the fires sickened them. Other studies have shown that particulate matter in the air — fine granules of microscopic dust and sand — may have damaged airways while several veterans who were exposed to a sulfur fire in Mosul, Iraq, in 2003, developed chronic disease. A study by experts at Vanderbilt University diagnosed 38 soldiers from Fort Campbell, Kentucky, with constrictive bronchiolitis. But Morris said more research is needed to determine the extent of that diagnosis in service members and explore other possibilities. "The study from Vanderbilt was biased in favor of one disease, making other people think they have that disease, but it's more complicated than that," Morris said.

Service members or retirees wanting to participate can call the STAMPEDE staff at San Antonio Military Medical Center at 210-916-3976 and at Walter Reed at 301-295-4191. They also can be reached by email via [usarmy.jbsa.medcom-bamc.list.bamc-stampede@mail.mil](mailto:usarmy.jbsa.medcom-bamc.list.bamc-stampede@mail.mil). [Source: NavyTimes | Patricia Kime | Feb. 27, 2015 ++]

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## **TRICARE Program Abolishment ► Proposal Splits Veterans' Groups**

The leaders of several prominent veterans' and uniformed services' organizations are split over a proposal to effectively abolish Tricare, the military's health insurance plan. The proposal, one of 15 recommendations put forward by the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission, has become a flashpoint on Capitol Hill. The suggested change would allow nearly 5 million active-duty family members, reserve soldiers and military retirees who are not yet old enough to receive Medicare, to leave the Tricare system and sign up for a private insurance plan.

- **MOAA.** The proposal "is a welcome shot across the bow," Norbert Ryan, President and CEO of the Military Officers Association Of America, told the Senate Armed Services Personnel subcommittee on 25 FEB. He said the "status quo is unacceptable" but urged senators to look for ways to modernize Tricare "in a systematic manner without resorting to its elimination." Ryan's group recently conducted a survey of more than 7,500 beneficiaries and found that eight out of 10 prefer Tricare to broadly comparable alternatives.
- **TREA.** In a statement, The Retired Enlisted Association struck a similar chord. "Scrapping the entire Tricare system would represent a change in the entire philosophy of delivering military health coverage," the group said, urging panelists against "blowing up the system."
- **NGAUS.** Gus Hargett, president of the National Guard Association, said the proposed change has been "well received" by his members since many don't live near a major military installation, and therefore do not have easy access to many Tricare-accepting providers. However, he added, the association is concerned about the costs associated with the plan and advised lawmakers to bring in actuaries to do a cost-benefit analysis.

- **NMFA.** Joyce W. Raezer, executive director of the National Military Family Association, said beneficiaries are “used to Tricare” and “accepting” of some of the plan’s drawbacks, such as a limited provided network. She suggested lawmakers could tell the Defense Department to delay awarding the next round of Tricare contracts – which usually run for five years – so that the Pentagon can provide them more data about the system.
- **FRA.** Thomas Snee, the Fleet Reserve Association’s national executive director, said that the proposal requires “additional reviews.”

At the end of the hearing, subpanel chairman Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC) admitted lawmakers have been “wrestling this alligator” for years and that he had “lost faith” in the existing system. He said that while he sees the benefits of scrapping the current plan — including more choice for members of the reserve and families — military retirees likely will end up paying more out of pocket for health coverage. Graham said he doesn’t know what the right system is but “change is coming.” [Source: The Hill | Martin Matishak | Feb. 25, 2015 ++]

## **Caffeine Powder ► Health Dangers**

Quantico officials have released a Corps-wide warning about the dangers of pure caffeine powder, a teaspoon of which can contain the equivalent of about 25 cups of coffee and result in a dangerous overdose. The supplement, now widely available, has already resulted in at least two deaths, according to a Food and Drug Administration consumer advisory warning on powdered pure caffeine products sold in bulk over the Internet. In response the Marine Corps released its own warning via Marine administrative message 047/15, signed 2 FEB 2. "Pure caffeine is a potent stimulant and very small amounts could lead to accidental overdose and toxicity," according to the message. "Symptoms of caffeine overdose may include rapid or dangerously erratic heartbeat, seizures, and death. Symptoms of caffeine toxicity include vomiting, diarrhea, stupor (impaired consciousness), and disorientation."



**Package of Hard Rhino brand caffeine powder**

Officials with Marine and Family Programs Division said the products should be avoided all together, citing the FDA's guidance. While caffeine in moderate doses is not dangerous an can indeed have enhancing cognitive and physical effects, one of the primary dangers of pure caffeine powder is that it is so concentrated it is difficult and dangerous to measure with standard kitchen implements, said Catherine Ficadenti, the branch head for Semper Fit and Recreation. One of her branch's primary tasks is helping to educate Marines on healthy lifestyle choices and warn them away from potential dangers. "If the dose is 1/16th of a teaspoon, I don't even have an instrument in my kitchen to measure that," she said. "I think pure caffeine has no place in a typical Marine's day. They can get caffeine other ways from tea, soda — there are potentially plenty of places to get their dose of caffeine and most of those foods are regulated."

One of the dangers is that supplements, because they are not medicine or food, are not scrutinized by the FDA. "FDA regulates caffeine in Folgers, but supplements on the market are without any regulation," she said. "They have to step in after the fact if something is proven to be dangerous. It has to first demonstrate it has caused harm to people who used the product in accordance with the manufacturer's directions." Whether any Marines or sailors have suffered negative effects related to caffeine powder consumption is unknown, according to Ilka Regino a spokeswoman for the Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery. "We have confirmed with our subject matter experts at the Navy and Marine Corps Public Health Center we have not conducted studies/surveillance on adverse effects associated with Caffeine overdose... so are unable to tell if any Sailors or Marines have been admitted for this condition," she wrote. That doesn't mean caffeine powder isn't dangerous, however, as evidenced by civilian physician reports of multiple negative reactions including death among civilians.

The potential draw for many is that caffeine powders are marketed as performance enhancing. "These products appeal to children, teenagers, and young adults who are drawn to the perceived benefits such as the ability to study longer, improve performance, and weight loss," the MARADMIN reads. Those are all things that would be beneficial at face value to Marines who work in a hyper-competitive organization where a premium is placed on doing things better, faster and longer. "If I see caffeine on a label and words about energy performance, I might be prompted to take it," Ficadenti said. "When I used to run I used to always have a cup of coffee first." But the risks outweigh the benefits she repeatedly stressed. One of the reasons caffeine powder is a particularly vexing danger is that it is a familiar word unlike some exotic supplement that might make a Marine skeptical. That, she fears, might make some more likely to try pure caffeine powders.

While her job is to steer Marines clear of harmful substances, she did say that there was nothing they could do to stop or punish Marines using the powders because caffeine is a legal supplement. It is no different from a legal standpoint than cold medicine. But if Marines engage in behavior that negatively affects them in their official duties that can result in significant disciplinary and career problems. Ficadenti said her branch does not try to steer Marines away from all supplements because there are many out there that can be beneficial or at least safe. Those might include vitamins or protein powders. Her philosophy is that diet is always the best source of nutrition, but by no means the only. All that said, even the most benign supplements can be dangerous to a Marine with a preexisting medical condition or one who is currently taking other medications. She advised that any Marine thinking about taking a supplement to first consult a healthcare professional. [Source: MarineCorpsTimes | James K. Sanborn | Feb. 14, 2015 ++]

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## **TRICARE Air Evac ► Who Pays and When**

Following retirement from active service, many retirees and retiree family members decide to travel or live overseas. If they do, it is important they understand that if they need air ambulance services (aeromedical evacuation or "air evac"), TRICARE only pays if the transport is medically necessary and to the closest, safest location for medical care.

Retirees overseas have to pay for the service upfront and then file a claim for reimbursement. TRICARE won't cover the cost for non-medically necessary air evacuation and won't move a patient to a location of their choosing. TRICARE won't pay to move a retiree or retiree family member from overseas back to the U.S., unless the medically necessary care is not available in their current location or the U.S. is the closest

location that can provide the necessary care. If retirees want to return to the U.S. from overseas for personal reasons (e.g., to be closer to family), they pay the air ambulance company and TRICARE won't reimburse them. Air ambulance service can be very expensive. If you are planning to live or travel overseas, you may wish to consider other options for coverage of air transport for circumstances not covered by TRICARE.

Active-duty family members (ADFM) using TRICARE Standard should also consider health care costs before opting for air evacuation. ADFMs using TRICARE Standard may have to pay up front for the air evacuation; the evacuation must be medically necessary; and must be to the nearest facility capable of providing the needed care in order for TRICARE to cost-share on the aeromedical evacuation. For more information about receiving care overseas, visit the TRICARE Overseas Program page on the web at <http://www.tricare.mil/Plans/Enroll/TPO.aspx>. [Source: TRICARE Communications | Feb 18, 2015 ++]

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## **TRICARE Dental Program Update 09 ► Dental Sealants**

A dental sealant is a plastic material that is applied to the chewing surfaces of the back teeth, or molars, to prevent cavities. This material acts as a barrier so cavity causing bacteria cannot enter the pits and grooves in the chewing surfaces of the teeth. Sealants are quick and easy to apply. The dentist cleans and prepares the teeth with a solution to make the plastic stick. The plastic is then painted on the teeth where it hardens. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, most cavities in children occur in teeth that have pits and grooves. Two-thirds of those cavities occur on the chewing surfaces. Research shows that dental sealants help prevent cavities on teeth with pits and grooves. It is recommended that dental sealants be placed on the permanent molar teeth of children shortly after the molars erupt.

The first permanent molars erupt in children around age 6, with the second set of permanent molars appearing around age 12. Sealants placed on permanent molars are covered under the TRICARE Dental Program through age 18. The teeth must be cavity-free with no previous restoration. One sealant per tooth is covered in a three-year period. Sealants for teeth other than permanent molars are not covered. The cost-share for covered sealants is 20 percent. Command-sponsored beneficiaries living overseas do not have cost-shares for this service. For more information about coverage under the TRICARE Dental Program, visit <http://tricare.mil/TDP>. [Source: TRICARE Beneficiary Bulletin #293 | Feb 20, 2015 ++]

### **\* Finances \***



## Timeshares Update 01 ► Tips For Selling

At one point, the working title for this article was “Timeshares: Just Say No.” If you’re one of the people struggling under \$1,000+ annual maintenance fees, you know exactly why. The resale market for timeshares is horrendous, with TUG estimating the average resale price being about 30-50 percent of the original cost. For those giving away their properties, the depreciation rate is obviously even more. If you’re thinking of parting ways with your timeshare, here are a couple of tips and suggestions.

- 1) **Watch out for scams:** List your timeshare for sale practically anywhere and get ready for the scam emails and calls to come rolling in. Typically, these come from “law firms” or brokers who claim to be able to get you out of your timeshare in exchange for a hefty fee. Never pay anyone a hefty upfront fee; it’s almost never legit. A second tactic is a version of the old Nigerian scam. You’ll have someone interested in buying the timeshare, but they’re going to send you a big check. You need to cash it and then forward a portion of the money to someone else. Don’t do it. Scam, scam, scam.
- 2) **Ask if your resort has a deed back program:** Although not the norm, some resorts would rather have the timeshare deed back than see you sell it on the resale market. You might need to track down someone higher up the food chain than the customer service rep to tell you whether you can deed back your timeshare. In addition, the resort might require you to pay the next year’s maintenance fees before they’ll accept it. When doing a deed back, work directly with the resort. Don’t trust third parties who promise to do it for you in exchange for a fee.
- 3) **Consider a timeshare exchange:** Maybe you still like the idea of a timeshare, but your current property is no longer a good fit for your family or lifestyle. You can use sites like RedWeek (<http://www.redweek.com>) to exchange weeks with other timeshare owners. You could also see if your resort offers any programs that let you change your timeshare property. Again, be prepared for fees.
- 4) **Rent rather than sell:** For most timeshares, there’s no reason why you can’t rent out your unit during your allotted week. Since most timeshare resorts are at desirable locations, this could be a win-win. You could get enough for your unit to cover some or all of the annual fees, and the renter could get bargain priced vacation accommodations. But you might want to do a little due diligence on your renter first because you could be on the hook for any damage they cause during the stay.
- 5) **Price to sell:** As a final bit of advice, keep your selling price reasonable. You’re not going to get \$10,000 for the timeshare you bought five years ago for \$12,000, especially not when others are practically giving theirs away. Do a search for similar units and destinations and then price yours below the other listings. If you’re really desperate, consider covering the closing costs or transfer fees, too.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Maryalene LaPonsie | Jan. 30, 2015 ++]

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## Store Return Policies: 5 Worst

How many times have you skipped the dressing room, figuring you can always return what doesn’t fit? You might want to rethink that shopping strategy at some stores. Here are five stores that may go so far as to ban you for making too many returns.

**1. Amazon** - For most items sold by Amazon, the online retailer gives you 30 days to make a return. Miss that window, and your refund could be docked by 20 percent of the purchase price. Take the plastic wrap off

DVDs, CDs and games, and your refund drops 50 percent. And don't even think about returning opened software. You won't get anything for that. All that may be within the realm of the reasonable, compared with other store return policies. What may be more concerning for shoppers is the number of people who say they've been banned from Amazon for what the store deems to be excessive returns. The store doesn't say anything about banning customers in its posted policy, but it apparently closes your account when you hit a certain percentage of returns. Refer to <http://liviajwashburn.blogspot.com/2012/10/banned-from-amazon-for-life.html>.

**2. Best Buy** - For the 2013 holiday shopping season the electronics giant made it onto Consumer Reports' "Naughty List" (<http://www.moneytalksnews.com/heres-who-made-consumer-reports-nice-and-naughty-list>) because of its return policy. The store requires a valid ID to make a return or exchange and then tracks that information. The company warns in its return policy: "Based on return/exchange patterns, some customers will be warned that subsequent returns and exchanges will not be eligible for returns or exchanges for 90 days." Beyond that, Best Buy gives customers a tiny window to make returns, only 15 days for customers who aren't My Best Buy Elite or Elite Plus members.

**3. Saks Fifth Avenue** - Saks Fifth Avenue has also decided to go with a 30-day window for returns. If you try to make a late return, Saks will only credit you based on the current selling price regardless of how much your receipt says you paid. And like Best Buy, the company includes this little gem in its return policy: "To ensure a positive shopping experience for all our customers, if we identify through electronic analysis an unreasonable return pattern, we may restrict or refuse future transactions from such customers at Saks Fifth Avenue or at saks.com."

**4. Lowe's** - At least Best Buy and Saks get props for being open and honest. Lowe's doesn't come right out and say it will ban customers for too many returns, but you can read between the lines in its return policy. Lowe's stores use refund and check verification systems. All returns are subject to system approvals. In fairness to Lowe's, news reports indicate competitor Home Depot uses the same system, and it's not stated in its posted return policy.

**5. Victoria's Secret** - Finally, we come to Victoria's Secret. The retailer will take returns within 90 days and issue a full refund. Not bad. Come in after 90 days, and you can expect to get a merchandise credit. Still not bad, but either way, expect to pull out your driver's license. Here's what its return policy says, "In select stores, a government-issued ID is required for all returns and exchanges. Victoria's Secret will electronically scan this ID for the sole purpose of preventing return abuse. Victoria's Secret does not sell the information obtained through this process." The store doesn't say when customers will be prevented from making future returns, but at least one employee says you get up to seven returns in a three-month period before being cut off.

These five stores may be just the tip of the iceberg when it comes to tracking customers with the intent of limiting serial returners. The Retail Equation says 11 of the top 50 retailers in the United States use its services to track customer return data. Of course, The Retail Equation doesn't give out client names, but if your driver's license has ever been swiped when you made a return, there's a good chance your data was going through the company's Verify Return Authorization system. Depending on the arrangement with that particular retailer, The Retail Equation may be tracking any of this information: Purchase history; Frequency of returns; Dollar amount of returns; and whether a receipt is used for a return. However, the company says it doesn't share information between stores. That means, for example, Best Buy won't know about your returns to Lowe's and vice versa.

If you want to see exactly what The Retail Equation has on file for you, consumers are welcome to request a copy of their Return Activity Report. You can send your request via email or snail mail To: The Retail Equation, P.O. Box 51373, Irvine, CA 92619-1373 or [returactivityreport@theretailequation.com](mailto:returactivityreport@theretailequation.com). Because the company tracks many people by their driver's license number, you'll need to provide that information. However, as with any sensitive data, you don't want to send that number via email. Instead, send your phone number so a company representative can call you for it. The bottom line for shoppers is to not take returns for granted. While many businesses offer them as a part of good customer service, there is no legal requirement for a retailer to take back that maroon sweater because you decide chartreuse looks better on you. As with many things in life, it only takes a few bad apples to ruin a good thing. As long as some people continue to take advantage of the system, you can probably expect to see even more stores tightening their policies in the future. For some additional shopping savvy, watch the MoneyTalksNews video at <http://www.moneytalksnews.com/think-twice-before-returning-items-these-5-stores/3> on tricks that retailers use to get you to part with your money: [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Maryalene LaPonsie | Feb. 04, 2015 ++]

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## **Military Pay & Benefits Update 03 ► Paycheck is Getting Smaller**

Your military paycheck is getting smaller. It's happening despite raises in military pay every year, military advocacy groups warn. And they say it will keep shrinking if Pentagon officials get their way. Critics say the Pentagon's intensifying zeal to hold military raises under the rate of average private-sector wage growth is threatening to resurrect an old specter: a so-called "pay gap" that some say slowly drains away the purchasing power of military families. "It's insidious, because troops are still seeing a 'raise' in their pay," said retired Air Force Col. Mike Hayden, director of government relations for the Military Officers Association of America. "But your dollars don't go as far. You don't have the same discretionary income as before."

Over the years, Pentagon officials have consistently downplayed such concerns, saying basic pay is just one aspect of a robust pay-and-benefits package that stacks up very well against the private sector when considered in total, even with the recent smaller basic pay raises. During the rollout of the White House's 2016 defense budget request in early February, Air Force Lt. Gen. Mark Ramsay, the Defense Department's director of force structure and resources, sought to reassure troops, stating: "We are all about our people." But, he added, "Dollars we saved in pay and compensation ... help balance out readiness and capability." Critics say that won't matter if troops feel unappreciated and leave the ranks. The Air Force Sergeants Association says the recent pay decisions have "re-opened the wound of a pay gap" and threaten retention. The Association of the U.S. Army has labeled pay equity one of its top concerns in coming years.

The 2016 defense budget request calls for a 1.3 percent increase in basic pay, 1 percentage point below the estimate of average private-sector wage growth next year. If approved, it would be the third consecutive year troops would get raises lower than their civilian counterparts. For 2014 and 2105, service members received a 1 percent bump in basic pay — the two smallest raises in the history of the all-volunteer force, dating back to 1973. Next year's proposed raise would be the second-smallest in that time period. According to MOAA's calculations, the gap has vanished only once, for a single year — 1982, when a massive 14.3 percent catch-up raise for the troops was approved in an effort to compensate for the parsimony of the 1970s. But in 1983 and beyond, military raises again lagged civilian pay growth to an extent that the gap grew as high as 13.5 percent in 1998 and 1999. Above-average raises again narrowed the gap over the first decade of this century, but it has never been smaller than 2.4 percent, from 2010 through 2013. This year, it has widened for the first time since 1999, growing to 3.2 percent.

MOAA and other critics estimate that a 1.3 percent basic pay raise next year that lags private-sector wage growth would widen the gap between military and civilian pay to around 5 percent, an annual salary difference of about \$1,500 for most midlevel enlisted troops and around \$3,000 for midlevel officers. And if the Pentagon's long-term plans are approved, that gap could rise steadily over the next four years, approaching double digits, MOAA says. Hayden noted that when the gap peaked at over 13 percent in the late 1990s, it took almost a decade of compensation corrections to deflate. "Once you start capping pay, it becomes so easy to keep doing it until you really hurt retention," he said. Hayden said MOAA is already hearing anecdotal evidence of troops bailing out of the service for civilian life mainly because of compensation trims.

Pentagon officials have repeatedly told Congress the lower pay raises are not ideal but are not crippling, and once again are disputing suggestions of a significant gap between military and civilian pay. They have also noted that a focus on troops' paychecks does not consider other pillars of military compensation such as housing benefits free health care and heavily discounted prices at base commissaries. However, the Pentagon's budget plan calls for further cutbacks in housing allowances so that troops cover about 5 percent of their costs out of their own pockets; suggests that prescription co-pays may rise again under the military's health plan; and seeks to trim back subsidies for commissaries, driving up prices and shortening store hours. In testimony before the Senate Armed Services Committee, incoming Defense Secretary Ash Carter noted that "compensation and benefit costs must be balanced with readiness and modernization requirements to ensure we maintain the highest quality, ready, and modern military force." In coming weeks, Carter will return to Capitol Hill for more budget hearings at which he will defend the lower pay raise proposal.

Last year, House members pushed to have the military pay raise at least match private-sector wage growth, but accepted a lower pay raise after negotiations with the Senate. Members of both chambers promise a fresh look at the issue this year, along with the long-term personnel changes recommended in the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission report. Hayden said he is hopeful that his and other groups can successfully lobby lawmakers to block the Pentagon plans this year, even while military leaders argue that the billions saved by the pay changes over coming years could fill critical needs elsewhere.

"The question is, when is enough going to be enough?" Hayden said. "We need the military to speak out about the negative impact this has on their wallets too. Once you start trimming back on pay, you're starting to threaten readiness." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | Feb. 16, 2015 ++]

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## **TRICARE on Tax Forms ► How to Report It**

The new Affordable Care Act has a provision that penalizes taxpayers who do not have health insurance and choose not to purchase health insurance via the new health care exchanges. These penalties are happening via the federal income tax return. If you have qualified health insurance, then you show that on your tax return. Unfortunately, the line is small, the labelling is poor, and the instructions are slim. There are three versions of the basic 1040 federal income tax return: the 1040EZ, the 1040A, and the regular 1040. Each has a different level of complexity and lets people include more information to reflect different tax situations.

Each form has a line where you state that you have health care coverage, but it is a different line for each form. Fortunately, it is not nearly as difficult as it looks. Each form has a line that says Health Care: individual responsibility (see instructions), and then the words Full-year coverage and then a box. IF you had an acceptable forms of Tricare for the entire 2014 calendar and tax year, then you just check the box and

you are done. Tricare coverage that meets the requirement of minimum essential coverage includes: Prime, Standard, Tricare for Life, Overseas, Remote, and Uniformed Services Family Health Plan, and also Tricare Young Adult, Tricare Reserve Select, and Tricare Retired Reserve. Minimum required coverage is also provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to those who are enrolled with the VA for health care, and for those who are enrolled in the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the VA (CHAMPVA.)

**1040EZ** - If you file the 1040EZ, the health care question is located on Line 11 of the form. If your spouse (if applicable) and you were both covered by acceptable Tricare health insurance (as listed above) for the entire 2014 calendar year, then you can check the box and continue. Easy!

'. The form also includes sections for Income, Payments, Credits, and Tax, and Refund."/>

The image shows a portion of the 2014 Form 1040EZ. The form is titled "1040EZ" and includes instructions for filing. The "Income" section includes lines 1 through 5. The "Payments, Credits, and Tax" section includes lines 6 through 11. Line 11 is circled in blue and contains the text "Health care: individual responsibility (see instructions). Full-year coverage ". The "Refund" section includes lines 12 through 14. The form also includes sections for "Amount You Owe" and "Third Party Designee".

**1040A** - The form 1040A form poses the health care question on line 38, on page two of the form. If everyone claimed on this tax form was eligible for acceptable Tricare coverages (as listed above) for the entire 2014 calendar year, then tick the box and move on to the rest of the form.

'. The form also includes sections for Standard Deduction, Exemptions, Tax, Credits, and Refund."/>

The image shows a portion of the 2014 Form 1040A. The form is titled "1040A" and includes instructions for filing. The "Standard Deduction" section includes lines 24 through 27. The "Exemptions" section includes lines 28 through 30. The "Tax" section includes lines 31 through 34. The "Credits" section includes lines 35 through 38. Line 38 is circled in blue and contains the text "Health care: individual responsibility (see instructions). Full-year coverage ". The "Refund" section includes lines 39 through 42. The form also includes sections for "Amount You Owe" and "Third Party Designee".

Please be sure that you understand that you are indicating that every member covered by the tax form has had eligible coverage for the entire year. This question is only likely to get complicated if you have dependent

parents, or if you have a strange situation where your spouse and children don't have Tricare because you have never enrolled them in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS).

**Form 1040** - The forms may get more complicated, but indicating that you have health care coverage doesn't get any harder. On the Form 1040, health care identification occurs on line 61, on page two. As with the forms listed above, if everyone represented on this tax form has been covered by qualified Tricare health coverage for the entire 2014 calendar year, your only responsibility is to put a check in the box and continue on with the form.

The image shows a portion of the 2014 Form 1040, page 2. The 'Other Taxes' section is highlighted, with line 61 circled in blue. Line 61 is labeled 'Health care: individual responsibility (see instructions)'. Below it, there are checkboxes for 'Full-year coverage' and 'Taxed from: a Form 802 b Form 8962 c Instructions, enter code(s)'. Other lines in the section include 57 (Self-employment tax), 58 (Unreported social security and Medicare tax), 59 (Additional tax on IRAs), 60a (Household employment taxes), and 62 (Additional taxes on Social Security). The 'Payments' section includes lines 64 through 73, and the 'Refund' section includes lines 74 through 76a.

Now, if you were not covered by Tricare or other minimum essential coverage for the entire 2014 calendar year, or if you have some family members who were not covered, then you have an entirely different set of questions. You are encouraged to go to the IRS website and do some reading, or enlist the assistance of a qualified tax person to help ensure that you complete this new portion of the tax return properly. [Source: Military.com | Kate Horrell | Jan. 23, 2015 ++]

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## Tax Law Misperceptions ► 4 Most common

Many folks will tell you Mark Twain said, “It ain’t what you don’t know that gets you into trouble. It’s what you know for sure that just ain’t so.” Despite a deluge of misinformation, Twain’s contemporary Josh Billings authored the expression. Let this quintessential mix-up guide your dealings in matters of fact, especially when the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) is involved. Whether it comes from the “barracks lawyer,” watercooler talk, or something you’ve heard on the radio, there are more than a couple of things some taxpayers “know for sure that just ain’t so.”

**1. Employee expenses** - For those on active duty and a few about to make the transition to the civilian world, a lot of misperceptions involve Schedule A — and the most common area is unreimbursed employee expenses.

- *Uniforms.* More than one servicemember has assumed that because uniforms are required by the military, they are an unreimbursed employee expense. Sorry, it just ain't so. The IRS says a uniform

(cost and maintenance) is deductible if the employee is required to wear the clothes as a condition of employment and the clothes are not suitable for everyday wear. You might think your uniforms qualify, but according to the IRS, most of your uniforms are suitable for everyday wear. The IRS specifically addresses military uniforms and says active duty servicemembers can only deduct battle dress uniforms and utility uniforms and insignia or other distinctively military items such as ceremonial swords. Reservists' uniforms are deductible if they can only be worn while performing duties as a reservist. And, sorry, if you're transitioning from the military to the civilian world, you can't deduct new suits, dress shoes, or cufflinks either.

- Gym memberships. Ever heard this one? "I have to pass a PT test, so working out at the gym is a required employee expense and I can deduct the fees at the Pentagon Athletic Center." It just ain't so. The IRS is very specific here. It states, "You cannot deduct health spa expenses, even if there is a job requirement to stay in excellent physical condition."
- Home office. You would think if you work from a home office (for the military or for your civilian employer), the expense definitely would be an employee expense. Begging the forgiveness of Billings, this one might be so, but you must meet several requirements before you can deduct a home office. The major ones are you must regularly use part of your home exclusively for conducting business, you must show you use the office as your principal place of business, and the business use of your home must be for the convenience of your employer (it must be a business necessity).

**2. Sale of a primary residence** - Another area wrought with misperceptions is the sale of a house that has been a primary residence and a rental property.

Home sale tax exclusion. If you've been in the military for a while, there is a pretty good chance this one applies to you. Most people think if you've lived in your house for two out of the past five years (potentially up to 15 years if you moved out as a result of military orders), you don't have to pay taxes on the capital gains from your home. This one is just partially so. There are two parts of the sale. The first part applies to the difference between the purchase price and sales price (after expenses). This capital gain can be excluded under Section 121 of the code. (If you have "non-qualified use," a portion of the sale may still be taxable.) But there is more. When you rented out the house, you should have depreciated it. The difference between the depreciated value and the original value of the home is subject to taxation under Section 1250 of the code. Now you might have received advice to not depreciate the property to avoid taxes on the 1250 gains. This definitely ain't so. The IRS says you must pay taxes on the depreciation you took or should have taken. If you are subject to taxes on 1250 gains, the maximum rate is 25 percent. Another thing to consider is those 1250 gains might mean you owe taxes even if you sell the house for less than you paid for it.

### **3. TSP/401(k) plans and IRAs**

- Individual Retirement Account (IRA) eligibility. You've been told that because you are covered by the Thrift Savings Plan (TSP) or a 401(k) plan at work, the plan affects your ability to contribute to an IRA. It just ain't so. Your participation in a plan at work has zero effect on your ability to contribute to an IRA or the amount you can contribute. What it does limit is your ability to deduct your contributions to a traditional IRA.
- Traditional IRA. If you participate in a retirement plan at work, you lose your ability to deduct traditional IRA contributions starting at \$60,000 of modified adjusted gross income (MAGI), and deductibility is completely phased out at \$70,000 of MAGI. If you're married, the phase-out range runs from \$96,000 to \$116,000 if the taxpayer or spouse is covered by a plan at work. However, if both the taxpayer and spouse are employed and one of them is not covered by a retirement plan at work, the uncovered spouse can deduct the full contribution to a traditional IRA as long as the couple's MAGI is less than \$181,000. The deduction completely phases out at \$191,000. If a

couple's income is above the phase-out limit, the contributions can be made to a nondeductible traditional IRA.

- Roth IRA. As previously mentioned, your retirement plan at work does not affect your ability to contribute to a Roth IRA. If your income is below certain limits, you can make a full contribution to a Roth IRA. The phase-out for a single taxpayer starts at \$114,000 and ends at \$129,000. For a married couple filing jointly, the phase-out range runs from \$181,000 to \$191,000.

**4. Inheritance taxes** - Asset transfer and step-up. You might be pretty sure you'll have to pay income taxes when you get an inheritance. But don't worry. It just ain't so. Assets transfer from the decedent's estate to you and other heirs without income taxation. But that doesn't mean there will never be income taxes. It works like this: When the original owner of the asset dies, the basis (think of it as the cost of the asset) steps up to the value of the asset on the date of death. When the estate or the person who inherits the asset sells the asset, capital gains or loss will be calculated based on the price the asset is sold for and the stepped-up basis. So, no income taxes are due when you receive the asset, but there could be some taxes based on the sale price of the asset when it is disposed of. Of course, there still could be estate or inheritance taxes.

Tax laws are complicated. Be very careful if you decide to act on something you heard or your tax software insinuates. Before you take a deduction, read the IRS publication (search at <http://www.irs.gov>) that addresses the topic you heard about and confirm whether it just ain't so.

#### 2015 Tax Law Changes

- Contribution limits to 401(k)/Thrift Savings Plan
- (TSP)/403(b) plans increased to \$18,000.
- Catch-up (over age 50) contributions to 401(k)/
- TSP/403(b) plans increased to \$6,000.
- Exemption amount is \$4,000.
- Standard Deductions are married, \$12,600; single, \$6,300; and head of household, \$9,250.
- Maximum contribution to a defined contribution plan increased to \$53,000.

[Source: MOAA News Exchange | Curt Sheldon | Feb. 19, 2015 ++]

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## **my Social Security Account ► New Online Service**

Social Security beneficiaries are now able to quickly and easily obtain a replacement SSA-1099 from the agency's website with my Social Security account. "I am proud of our continued efforts to make it even easier for people to do business with us in a way that's convenient for them, from the comfort of their home, office, or a library," Acting Commissioner Carolyn W. Colvin said. "Beginning this tax season, any my Social Security account holder who misplaces their original SSA-1099 will be able to request an instant replacement from our menu of online services."

Social Security sends SSA-1099s each January to everyone who receives Social Security benefits. It shows the total amount of benefits paid in the previous year and is used for tax purposes. Previously, people who lost their SSA-1099 had to call or visit a Social Security office to get a replacement or request one be mailed to them. With this new online service, people now only need to create a my Social Security account, or log into their existing one. Once there, they can view and print their SSA-1099 or request to have a new one mailed to them--all online.

my Social Security is a secure, online account people use beginning in their working years and continuing throughout the time they receive Social Security benefits. Once the account is created, it is used by people who are working to keep track of their earnings and to get estimates of future benefits. People already receiving benefits manage them with their account--changing their address, starting or changing direct deposit, getting a benefit verification letter, and more. In addition to those existing services, beneficiaries will now be able to immediately get their SSA-1099 replaced without needing to call or visit an office and often wait for a replacement form in the mail. "Setting up a my Social Security account is quick, easy, and secure; plus it's a great way to do business with Social Security," Acting Commissioner Colvin said. "That's why more than 16 million people have already taken advantage of our award-winning online services and experienced the new features available with their own accounts." For more information, go to <http://www.socialsecurity.gov/myaccount>. [Source: My Federal Retirement Newsletter | Feb. 20, 2015 ++]

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### **TriWest Scam ► Phishing Letters**

There have been reports of a potential phishing scam in which someone is allegedly using TriWest letterhead to attempt to obtain Personal Health Information (PHI) or Personally Identifiable Information (PII) from veterans. It is important to know that TriWest will only send a letter to veterans to confirm appointments, notify veterans of VA decisions important to their eligibility for care in the community, or to provide the new choice card. None of TriWest's letters will ever request PHI/PII or credit card information. You can verify the validity of any letter you receive from TriWest by calling TriWest directly at 1-855-PCCCVET (722-2838). [Source: NAUS Weekly Watchdog | Feb. 27, 2015 ++]

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### **Background Check Scam ► How it Works**

Be on the lookout for this creepy email scam that landed in our in-boxes recently (yes, even BBB gets scams!). The fake messages claim someone ordered a background check on you, but it's really a ploy to get you to click an infected link.

#### **How the Scam Works:**

- You receive an email with the subject line: "Someone recently viewed your background-information." Curious, you open it. The message claims to be an automatically-generated notification that someone "has just recently ordered the results of your background-check."
- Interested in who requested information about you? At the bottom of the message is a link to "find out more about this new-scan." You may be curious, but don't click the link! This email is a scam, and the link will download malware to your computer.

How to Spot a Scam Email: In general, it's best not to click on links that come in unsolicited emails. Here are some more ways to spot a malicious email just in case your spam filter doesn't catch it.

1. The email claims to have information about you, but you never signed up for it. Scams often pretend to be personalized for you, but they are actually blast emails. Don't fall for this! If you never signed up for custom email alerts, you shouldn't be receiving them.
2. Check out the "From" field: Scammers have the ability to mask email addresses, making the message appear to come from a legitimate source. But they don't always use it. Look out for email addresses that don't match the brand used in the email message.

3. Watch for typos, strange phrasing and bad grammar. Scammers can easily copy a brand's logo and email format, but awkward wording and poor grammar are typically a give away that the message is a scam. In the example above, the strange hyphens in "background-information" and "new-scan" are a telltale sign.
4. Hover over URLs to reveal their true destination. Typically, the hyperlinked text will say one thing, but the link will point somewhere else. Scammers either set up fake websites or hack into third-party sites and use them to host malware.

Check out BBB Scam Stopper at <http://www.bbb.org/council/bbb-scam-stopper> to find out more about other scams.



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## Online Dating Scam ► How it Works

Online dating is a great way to meet "the one." Unfortunately, it's also a popular source of scams. This Valentine's Day (and every day), watch out for online dating cons, in which scammers fool victims into falling in love... and paying up.

### How the Scam Works:

1. You sign up for an online dating website and receive a message from someone. He or she lives far away (scammers frequently claim to be in the military or working overseas). But you want to give it a chance, so you reply.
2. After exchanging a couple of messages through the dating site, your new love interest suggests that you start emailing or chatting through a different service. You agree, and, soon, you are exchanging photos and messages frequently. You may even talk on the phone or through a webcam.
3. Your relationship seems to be getting serious, and your new love interest wants to visit. There's just one problem. He or she doesn't have money for the trip and asks for cash for airfare. But after you send the money, you find your new sweetheart has suddenly stopped communicating!

Online dating scams have been around for as long as Internet dating itself, so scammers have had many years to invent new twists. Some scammers create fake Facebook accounts and even use fake webcam footage (check out <http://www.bbb.org/blog/2013/03/9864>). Some con artists will ask for money multiple times as the relationship progresses, continually upping the amount requested. Others will ask you to move money for them, which may make you an unwitting accomplice in another scam.

**How to Spot a Fake Online Dating Persona:** Most people on dating websites are simply looking for love, but be wary of anyone who:

1. Always has an excuse to postpone meeting. Someone really interested in a relationship will want to see you in person. Be wary of someone who is constantly "traveling" or always overseas.
2. Has a photo that doesn't match his/her profile: Lots of people fib in their dating profile, adding an inch of height or subtracting 10 pounds. But be on the lookout for big discrepancies. For example, a scammer may describe their fake persona as blonde but uses a photo of a brunette.

3. Claims to be from this country but is currently traveling, living or working abroad. Scammers frequently pretend to be temporarily working or stationed overseas.
4. Has a suspicious Facebook profile: Scammers often use the names and photos of real people to create fake Facebook profiles. Their profiles tend to have few friends and be rife with grammatical errors. Also check to see when they joined. Recent pages are another red flag.
5. Asks you for money or credit card information. In some cases the scammer will claim an emergency like a sick relative or stolen wallet and will ask you to wire money. The first wire transfer is small but the requests keep coming and growing.

To find out more about other scams, check out BBB Scam Stopper <http://www.bbb.org/council/bbb-scam-stopper>.



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## Tax Burden for Oregon Retired Vets ► As of Feb 2015

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 Oregon.

### Sales Taxes

**State Sales Tax:** None

**Gasoline Tax:** 49.47 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

**Diesel Fuel Tax:** 54.74 cents/gallon (Includes all taxes)

**Cigarette Tax:** \$1.31/pack of 20

Note: Tax rates do not include local option taxes of 1 to 2 cents.

### Personal Income Taxes

**Tax Rate Range:** Low – 5%; High – 9.9%.

**Income Brackets:** Four. Lowest – \$3,250; Highest – \$125,000. For joint returns, the taxes are twice the tax imposed on half the income.

**Personal Tax Credits:** Single – \$191; Married – \$382; Dependents – \$191

**Additional Credits:** Credit equal to 40% of federal credit

**Standard Deduction:** Single – \$2,025; Married filing jointly – \$4,055; Deduction greater if age 65 or older.

**Additional Deduction:** Single over 65 – \$1,200; Married over 65 filing jointly \$2,000

**Medical/Dental Deduction:** Full only for age 59 or older, if itemized. Oregon allows a tax credit on long-term care insurance premiums. The credit is the smallest of 15% of premiums paid or \$500.

**Federal Income Tax Deduction:** \$5,000 (\$2,500 if married filing separately)

**Retirement Income Taxes:** Most retirement income is subject to Oregon tax when received by an Oregon resident. This is true even if you were a nonresident when you earned the income. However, you may subtract some or all of your federal pension income from Oregon income. The state does not tax Social

Security or railroad retirement benefits. Depending on your age and income, you may be entitled to a retirement income credit on your Oregon return. If you receive a U.S. government pension, you may be entitled to subtract part or all of that pension on your Oregon Individual income tax return. For more information go to <http://www.oregon.gov/Pages/index.aspx>.

**Retired Military Pay:** Federal retirees, including military personnel, may be able to subtract some or all of their federal pension income. This includes benefits paid to the retiree or to the surviving spouse. The subtraction amount is based on the number of months of federal service before and after October 1, 1991. Retirees can subtract their entire federal pension if all the months of federal service occurred before October 1, 1991. If there are no months of service before October 1, 1991, retirees cannot subtract any federal pension. If service included months before and after October 1, 1991, retirees can subtract a percentage of their pension income.

**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**

Oregon does not grant homeowners a homestead exemption. Tax rates are set by the counties and any special considerations are levied by [county officials](#). Homeowners 62 or older may delay paying property taxes based on certain income criteria. The state offers a Disabled Citizen Property Tax Deferral Program and a Senior Citizen Property Tax Deferral Program. Both deferral programs allow qualified taxpayers to defer payment of their property taxes on their homes. The state pays the taxes to the county, maintains the account, and charges 6% simple interest, which also is deferred. Taxes are owed when the taxpayer receiving the deferral dies, sells the property, ceases to live permanently on the property, or the property changes ownership.

To qualify for either program, the taxpayer must live on the property and have a total household income of less than \$39,500 for the year before application. Participants may remain on either program as long as their federal adjusted gross income does not exceed that amount. If a participant's income exceeds the \$39,500 limit, part of the taxes still may be deferred. Participants can come in and out of the programs if their income changes. In addition to meeting the income limitation and property ownership requirement, disabled persons must be receiving or be eligible to receive federal Social Security Disability benefits to qualify. Residents must be 62 years old or older to qualify for the [Senior Citizen Property Tax Deferral Program](#). Call 800-356-4222 or 503-376-4988. For other property tax information refer to <http://www.oregon.gov/Pages/index.aspx>

### **Inheritance and Estate Taxes**

At the beginning of 2012, the laws governing Oregon's inheritance tax changed. First the name of the tax changed from an "inheritance tax" to an "estate tax." This is consistent with the majority of states and the federal government which defines an estate tax as a tax on an entire estate while an inheritance tax is defined as a tax assessed against only certain beneficiaries of an estate.

In addition, while the estate tax exemption of \$1,000,000 remains in effect. The tax will only apply to the value of an estate in excess of \$1,000,000. Under current law once an estate exceeds \$1,000,000 the tax

applies to the entire estate and the rates change such that the majority of estates valued between \$1,000,000 and \$2,000,000 will pay slightly less in taxes an estates valued over \$2,000,000 will pay slightly more in taxes. For more information, go to <http://www.oregon.gov/DOR/forms/business/form-it-1-150-103-001-2011.pdf?ga=t>

For further information, refer to the Oklahoma Tax Commission site <http://www.oktax.state.ok.us> or call 405-521-3160. [Source: <http://www.retirementliving.com> Feb 2015 ++]

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## **Tax Burden for Colorado Residents ► As of Feb 2015**

### **Personal income tax**

- The Colorado income tax rate is a flat 4.63 percent of your federal taxable income, regardless of income level.
- Colorado tax returns are due April 15, or the next business day if that date falls on a weekend or holiday.
- Colorado tax returns can be filed electronically, either online via NetFile or by touch-tone telephone with the state's TeleFile system. Both options are available 24 hours a day, every day throughout the income tax season. Most Colorado filers are eligible to use at least one of the e-file methods.

### **Sales taxes**

- Colorado's state sales tax is 2.9 percent on retail sales.
- Because of budget concerns, Colorado lawmakers have in recent sessions made more products and services taxable.
- Many counties and cities charge their own rates in addition to the base state rate.
- There are also certain county and special district taxes that may apply.
- Locate your city and county sales tax rates with the Department of Revenue's online rate finder.

### **Personal and real property taxes**

- Real estate and personal business property are taxable in Colorado.
- Personal business property includes computers, shelving, furniture, equipment and items that directly or indirectly produce income within your business.
- The county assessor determines the value of property using a market, cost or income approach. Property taxes then are assessed on a percentage of the property's actual value. You can determine your property tax bill by multiplying the assessed value by your local tax rate.
- The county assessor will mail a declaration schedule for property taxes after Jan. 1. The county treasurer is responsible for mailing and collecting the actual property tax bill.
- If you have questions about your property taxes, check the county listing in the blue pages of a local telephone book for the Colorado county property tax office that applies to you or check Colorado Counties Online for your county's website.
- Colorado offers a rebate for property taxes and heating costs, whether paid directly or as a part of rent payments, to qualifying elderly, disabled and lower-income taxpayers. File Form 104PTC to claim the rebate.

### **Inheritance and estate taxes**

- The Colorado estate tax does not apply to decedents whose date of death is on or after Jan. 1, 2005. The Colorado estate tax is based on the state death tax credit allowable on the federal return. That credit was eliminated, effective Dec. 31, 2004, as a result of federal estate tax law changes. Future changes to the federal laws will determine whether states will collect an estate tax in future years.
- Colorado does impose an income tax on estates and trusts. The tax, sometimes referred to as fiduciary income tax, is a flat 4.63 percent. When an estate or trust is administered in Colorado, it is considered to be a resident estate or trust. Nonresident estates or trusts that are not administered in Colorado must file a return if they have Colorado source income.
- Colorado has no gift tax on transfers of property by gifts, if the transfers occurred after Jan. 1, 1980.
- For more information call (303) 866-4622 or visit the Colorado Department of Revenue website <https://www.colorado.gov/revenue>

**Other Colorado tax facts**

- Colorado was the first state to allow taxpayers to check off a voluntary contribution to a charitable program on their annual state returns. This year, Colorado taxpayers can choose from 15 funds to which they can direct their money.
- Colorado does not levy an intangible personal property tax.

For more information, go to the Colorado Franchise Tax Board's website <https://www.colorado.gov/tax> or call (800) 852-5711.

[Source: <http://www.bankrate.com/finance/taxes/state-taxes-colorado.aspx> Feb 2015 ++]

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**Thrift Savings Plan 2015 ▶ Share Prices + YTD Gain or Loss**

**TSP Share Prices as of Feb 26, 2015**

	Close	YTD
▲ G Fund	\$14.6600	+0.30%
▼ F Fund	\$16.9769	+1.04%
▼ C Fund	\$27.9497	+2.89%
▼ S Fund	\$37.9526	+4.56%
▼ I Fund	\$25.8957	+6.93%
▼ L 2050	\$15.5386	+3.88%
▼ L 2040	\$27.2859	+3.44%
▼ L 2030	\$25.5578	+3.03%
▼ L 2020	\$23.4527	+2.42%
▼ L Income	\$17.6469	+1.12%

Average Annual Returns (As of December 2013)										
	L Income	L 2020	L 2030	L 2040	L 2050	G Fund	F Fund	C Fund	S Fund	I Fund
1-Year	6.97%	16.03%	20.16%	23.23%	26.20%	1.89%	(1.68%)	32.45%	38.35%	22.13%
3-Year	4.64%	8.76%	10.49%	11.73%	-	1.94%	3.42%	16.22%	16.99%	8.51%
5-Year	5.64%	11.13%	13.20%	14.74%	-	2.32%	4.58%	18.00%	22.90%	12.39%
10-Year	-	-	-	-	-	3.39%	4.65%	7.44%	10.43%	7.08%
Since Inception	4.50%	6.09%	6.65%	7.02%	12.40%	5.54%	6.66%	10.30%	9.31%	5.38%
Inception Date	08/01/05	08/01/05	08/01/05	08/01/05	01/31/11	04/01/87	01/29/88	01/29/88	05/01/01	05/01/01
Calendar Year Returns										
	L Income	L 2020	L 2030	L 2040	L 2050	G Fund	F Fund	C Fund	S Fund	I Fund
2009	8.57%	19.14%	22.48%	25.19%	-	2.97%	5.99%	26.68%	34.85%	30.04%
2010	5.74%	10.59%	12.48%	13.89%	-	2.81%	6.71%	15.06%	29.06%	7.94%
2011	2.23%	0.41%	(0.31%)	(0.96%)	-	2.45%	7.89%	2.11%	(3.36%)	(11.81%)
2012	4.77%	10.42%	12.61%	14.27%	15.85%	1.47%	4.29%	16.07%	18.57%	18.62%
2013	6.97%	16.03%	20.16%	23.23%	26.20%	1.89%	(1.68%)	32.45%	38.35%	22.13%
YTD	(0.08%)	(0.58%)	(0.83%)	(1.02%)	(1.18%)	0.18%	2.13%	(2.99%)	(1.85%)	1.19%
Monthly Returns (Past 12 Months)										
	L Income	L 2020	L 2030	L 2040	L 2050	G Fund	F Fund	C Fund	S Fund	I Fund
2014										
Feb	1.15%	2.73%	3.44%	3.94%	4.44%	0.18%	0.62%	4.58%	5.43%	5.58%
Mar	0.19%	0.17%	0.14%	0.12%	0.09%	0.19%	(0.15%)	0.85%	(0.69%)	(0.57%)
Apr	0.31%	0.39%	0.37%	0.32%	0.32%	0.20%	0.90%	0.75%	(2.47%)	1.51%
May	0.64%	1.20%	1.46%	1.63%	1.78%	0.20%	1.21%	2.35%	1.52%	1.72%
Jun	0.58%	1.19%	1.52%	1.77%	1.96%	0.19%	0.14%	2.07%	4.45%	0.99%
Jul	(0.26%)	(0.97%)	(1.34%)	(1.63%)	(1.86%)	0.19%	(0.19%)	(1.37%)	(4.38%)	(1.95%)
Aug	0.84%	1.64%	2.07%	2.40%	2.61%	0.20%	1.12%	4.01%	4.98%	(0.14%)
Sep	(0.42%)	(1.36%)	(1.84%)	(2.18%)	(2.50%)	0.18%	(0.58%)	(1.40%)	(5.18%)	(3.82%)
Oct	0.61%	1.09%	1.36%	1.58%	1.70%	0.20%	0.96%	2.45%	4.11%	(0.63%)
Nov	0.55%	1.04%	1.27%	1.42%	1.55%	0.17%	0.74%	2.70%	1.33%	0.51%
Dec	(0.04%)	(0.50%)	(0.67%)	(0.76%)	(0.94%)	0.18%	0.21%	(0.24%)	0.99%	(4.13%)
2015										
Jan	(0.08%)	(0.58%)	(0.83%)	(1.02%)	(1.18%)	0.18%	2.13%	(2.99%)	(1.85%)	1.19%
Last 12 mo	4.13%	6.12%	7.04%	7.66%	8.03%	2.27%	7.31%	14.32%	7.86%	(0.10%)

**Thrift Savings Plan Returns as of 3 Feb 2015**

[Source: [www.myfederalretirement.com/public/237.cfm](http://www.myfederalretirement.com/public/237.cfm) & <http://tspcenter.com/tspReturns.php?view=year> 26 Feb 2014 ++]

**\* General Interest \***



**Notes of Interest ▶ 15 thru 28 Feb 2015**

- **SECDEF.** On 17 FEB, with his wife Stephanie holding the Bible upon which he swore to support and defend the U.S. Constitution against all enemies foreign and domestic, Ashton Carter took the oath of office as the 25th Secretary of Defense in a ceremony at the White House.

- **Army Snipers.** According to the U.S. Army, the average soldier will hit a man-sized target 10% of the time at 300 meters using the M16A2 rifle. Graduates of the U.S. Army sniper school are expected to achieve 90% first-round hits at 600 meters, using the M24 Sniper Weapon System (SWS).
- **Fed Pay.** More than 16,900 federal employees took home in excess of \$200,000 in base salary in 2014, according to a partial database of federal salary data.
- **Identity Theft.** An estimated 2.32 million American adults were victims of medical identity theft as of 2014, up from the 1.84 million estimated in 2013, according to the Medical Identity Fraud Alliance. That's a nearly 22% jump in this specific kind of fraud.
- **Cable TV.** If you are thinking of cutting ties with cable, check out the MoneyTalksNews video clip at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a2u7P4jZ2js> for tips on doing it with the least pain
- **Tooth Fairy.** According to the Tooth Fairy Poll from Delta Dental, a lost tooth earned about \$4.36 on average in 2014, up 25 percent from \$3.50 the previous year.
- **National Defense.** Less than half of the Air Force's combat-coded squadrons are fully prepared for combat, top service officials told lawmakers on 25 FEB.
- **Islam.** Check out Admiral (Ret) James Lyons, 88, 11 FEB opening comments on Defeating Jihad to a Washington Congressional Committee at [www.liveleak.com/view?i=bc0\\_1423721020](http://www.liveleak.com/view?i=bc0_1423721020).
- **PTSD.** In 2014, The American Legion conducted a survey of more than 3,000 veterans struggling with post-traumatic stress disorder or traumatic brain injury. The results were shocking. Nearly 60 percent of respondents felt no improvement as a result of their VA treatment plans. Another 30 percent said they terminated their plans because they did not work.
- **FSBO.** If you want to sell your house yourself and not pay the 7% sales commission, consider the experiences of others by checking out the "For Sale by Owner" (FSBO) article at [www.frugalfringe.com/war-stories/5-amazing-fsbo-stories-as-told-by-real-life-home-sellers](http://www.frugalfringe.com/war-stories/5-amazing-fsbo-stories-as-told-by-real-life-home-sellers).
- **Homeownership.** The rate of homeownership has fallen to a 20-year low, continuing a slide that began at the apex of the housing market in 2004. Ten years ago, 69% of Americans owned homes, but that has fallen to 64.5% in 2014 according to the Census Bureau.
- **COLA Watch.** The January Consumer Price Index of 228.294 declined 0.8 percent for the second consecutive month and 2.5 percent from the FY 2014 COLA baseline. The Consumer Price Index for February 2015 is scheduled to be released on March 24, 2015.

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## China Island Building ► 600 Acres of at Least Seven Islands



Chinese-built permanent "island" in South China Sea.

What began with a tiny artificial island built by China to stake a concrete claim in the South China Sea is fast on its way to becoming 600 acres of at least seven islands spread across the South China Sea. One of the most impressive is so-called Fiery Cross Island, the permanent structure above complete with an air strip and, perhaps, the ability to permanently station advanced weapon systems there to patrol the skies and seas. Sen. John McCain made a point of asking Director of National Intelligence James Clapper about the Chinese actions just before the end of the 26 FEB morning Senate Armed Services Committee hearing on worldwide threats, calling the Chinese actions “a rather dramatic change.” DNI Clapper told the SASC “this is a worrisome trend of the Chinese because of the tensions this is going to create in the South China Sea. They have been very aggressive about it.” The biggest worry about these efforts by the Chinese is that they could base advanced aircraft and ships at some of these locations, trying to enforce their so-called Nine-Dash Line claiming most of the South China Sea. That would grant them the presumptive ability to block international shipping in an area every other country in the region — including the United States — says are international waters. It would also provide China much greater range to project power through the region.

“While Washington is focused on happenings in Europe and the Levant, China has spent the last year quietly building 600 acres of tiny islands across the South China Sea,” a Senate staffer said in an email. “As Director Clapper alluded to in his testimony this morning, they could use these islands to sustain a presence far from China’s mainland, deploying fighters, naval or fishing administration ships, logistics hubs, and even to deploy land-based anti-ship or anti-air missiles. Right now, we appear to just be watching all of this unfold while sending soft messages of our disapproval to Beijing and calculating that the costs of preventing further expansion are just too high. In another six months we could wake up to a far different operational and diplomatic situation in this maritime highway, where the Philippines and Vietnam are left with tangible reasons to question the resolve of our ‘rebalance’ and the field goal for America’s commitment to preserving the status quo continues to be pushed down the field.”

At the same time on the other side of Capitol Hill, the chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on defense was grilling the Navy’s top admiral on the balance of power with China, “which has done a remarkable job challenging us in the South China Sea,” Rep. Rodney Frelinghuysen said. So, he asked, “do we still have the naval edge there?” “Today, yes, sir,” answered Adm. Jonathan Greenert, the Chief of Naval Operations. But “if we go down the road we’re on [with sequestration], sooner or later, we won’t have it.” Already, growled Frelinghuysen, we’re confronting the Chinese and they’re “denying us access to where we have traditionally maintained access [for] the world’s commerce.” “Chairman, I can’t think of a place in this world of oceans that our Navy can’t go today. Nobody’s denying us anything,” Greenert retorted. But “if we go to budget control act numbers, it’s a different world, it’s a different situation.” [Source: Breaking Defense | Colin Clark | Feb. 26, 2015 ++]

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## **TV Commercials ► Speeding Up Program Content to Fit for Ads**

The number of commercials you’re forced to endure while watching reruns of some of your favorite TV shows is increasing. Many cable networks are speeding up shows and movies so they can cram in more advertisements, The Wall Street Journal reports. Tinkering with shows to squeeze more advertising dollars out of them has been done before. Cable networks have long made room for ads by shortening the opening credits. ... But speeding up the actual content is a more subtle tactic TV networks use to achieve a higher volume of ads. Sitcom reruns of “Seinfeld” and “Friends,” as well as movies such as “The Wizard of Oz,” have all received the rapid playback treatment. “Some cable channels have gotten so edit- and compression-

happy that they can now fit in more than 20 minutes of ads each hour, several minutes more than what you'll find on most prime-time network broadcasts," Consumerist said.

Although showing more ads is a way for cable networks to try and keep their heads above water amid declining ratings and a sluggish cable advertising market, it may backfire. Jackie Kulesza, executive vice president and director of video at Starcom USA, told the WSJ that the networks need to be careful that viewers don't get fed up with the commercial clutter and switch to commercial-free streaming services. It is important for us to consider the effect this is having on the viewer experience. We want to ensure our message is seen by receptive viewers. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Krystal Steinmetz | Feb. 24, 2015 ++]

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## **Homeland Security ► Congress Refusing to Fund on Principle**

*As the week in Washington comes to a close, the majority in Congress is acting irresponsibly by refusing to pass a bill to fund the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).*

*On December 11, 2014, H.R. 83 passed the House of Representatives and was signed into law by the President. This legislation provided funding for almost all of the federal government through September 2015, but in a politically-motivated response to the President's executive action on immigration, funding for DHS was only provided through February 27, 2015. This means that DHS will shutdown tomorrow at midnight if Congress does not pass a new funding measure.*

*I am deeply disappointed by this as it puts our nation's safety and security in jeopardy.*

*If DHS shutdowns, 30,000 vital DHS employees across the country would be forbidden to come into work and perform their duties. This means that the bulk of DHS management and headquarters administrative support activities would cease, including much of the homeland security infrastructure that was built following the 9/11 terrorist attacks to improve command, control and coordination of frontline activities. In addition, 169,000 employees, many of them frontline security personnel, would go into work without pay.*

*In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Paris, and continued calls by terrorist organizations to attack Western targets, it is crucial we continue to fund this agency.*

*We must pass a funding bill for DHS and address the immigration issue separately. Discontent with the President's executive order should not threaten our primary responsibility in Congress, keeping American families safe.*

*Tammy Duckworth*

As of 27 FEB the Senate was still working on a bill to provide a budget for the Department of Homeland Security for the remainder of the fiscal year. In the interim, at the 11<sup>th</sup> hour, it passed a 3-week continuing resolution (CR) bill. It was sent to the House who passed it and forwarded it to the president for signature. He signed it. It will ensure members of the Coast Guard will continue to be paid for three more weeks. This should also give both chambers time to work out differences in their bills. The House is working on another bill that will try to force a joint committee to work out both chamber's differences to assure DHS funding. The National Association of uniformed Services (NAUS) sincerely urges lawmakers to overcome the

President's executive action on illegal aliens and to find agreement on funding for DHS before appropriations run out.

**NAUS Note:** Those who guard our country by working for DHS do not deserve to be treated as pawns in political battles. Nor do they deserve to be ordered to look the other way on illegal entry into the United States. They need to do their lawful jobs, especially the brave men and women of the US Coast Guard who help guard our borders to interdict illegal entry and illegal drug traffic. The smallest and busiest of all the Armed Services should always be protected from this type of action.

[Source: U.S. Congresswoman Tammy Duckworth & NAUS Weekly Watchdog | Feb. 26-27 2015 ++]

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### **Photos That Say it All** ▶ **Father & Son | 9/11 Tenth Anniversary**



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### **Normandy Then & Now** ▶ **Omaha Beach near Colleville sur Mer 2**



**D-Day, the invasion of France, June 6, 1944. American craft of all styles at Omaha Beach, Normandy, during the first stages of the Allied invasion and May 7, 2014, near Colleville sur Mer, France.**

**They Grew Up to Be? ► Tina & Tamery Mowry (Sister, Sister)**



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**WWII Advertising ► Camel Cigarettes**

**"I tame Hellcats!"**  
It's Teddy Kenyon — ace woman pilot — who tests the Navy's famous fighter plane — the Grumman F6F "Hellcat"

WHAT? A woman flying a "Hellcat"? Right? Yes, and Teddy Kenyon has handled "hellcats" wing over the check-out! Now, she's going to new plane in preliminary ground check.

2,000 FEET! She pulls her into the air... soon she's over a hundred miles away, and Teddy Kenyon's report comes in by radio: "Grumman Terror... This is Flight 60... Engine smooth... Going into Area 2 for slower test and check dive..."

HOW, KITTEN, LET'S SEE HOW YOU DIVE...

POWER TO PLUM! GO! THE HELICOPTER AS I ASK! SHE CAN!

SHE MADE IT!... SNEAKED IN UNDER THE FOG JUST IN TIME!

BROTHER, THAT KENYON GIRL CAN FLY!

A REAL NAVY SHOW, TEDDY KENYON?... AND I SEE YOU SMOKE THE NAVY MAN'S CIGARETTE, TOO... CAMEL.

YES, CAMELS HAVE ALWAYS BEEN MY FAVORITE... I CAN SEE WHY THEY'RE FIRST IN THE SERVICE.

**FIRST** IN THE SERVICE  
The favorite cigarette with men in the Army, the Navy, the Marines, and Coast Guard in Camel. (Based on actual sales records.)

CAMELS SUIT ME BETTER. ALL WAYS... THEY'RE SO FRESH-TASTING, SO WILD, AND SO EASY ON MY THROAT.

...And Navy men everywhere will agree with Top Pilot Teddy Kenyon—Camels are fresh, wherever the men they're smoked to go round the world.

**CAMELS**

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## Have You Heard? ► Mexican Invasion

A U.S. Navy destroyer stops four Mexicans in a row boat rowing towards California. The Captain gets on the loud speaker and shouts, “Ahoy, small craft. Where are you headed?”

One of the Mexicans puts down his oar, stands up and shouts, “We are invading the United States of America, to reclaim the territory taken by the U.S.A. during the 1800s.”

The entire crew of the destroyer doubled over in laughter. When the captain is finally able to catch his breath, he gets back on the loud speaker, and asks, “Just the four of you?”

The same Mexican stands up again and shouts, “No we are the last four, the rest are already there.”

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## Words You Don't Hear anymore

- No! I don't have 10 cents for you to go to the show. Do you think money grows on trees?
- Eat those turnips, they'll make you big and strong like your daddy.
- That dog is NOT coming in this house! I don't care how cold it is out there, dogs don't stay in the house.
- Sit still! I'm trying to get your hair cut straight and you keep moving and it is all messed up.

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## Interesting Inventions ► Solar Charging while Parking



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**Moments in US History** ▶ 4-H Club Convention 1941



**Human Star Created by Girls From The 4-H Club Convention, Iowa State College – Jun 1941**

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**Korean War Memorial Feb. 17, 2015**





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## Notes:

1. The Bulletin will be provided as a website accessed document until further notice. This was necessitated by SPAM19.098HAUS who alleged the Bulletin's former size and large subscriber base were choking the airways interfering with other internet user's capability to send email. SPAMHAUS told us to stop sending the Bulletin in its entirety to individual subscribers and to validate the subscriber base with the threat of removing all our outgoing email capability if we did not. To avoid this we have notified all subscribers of the action required to continue their subscription. This Bulletin notice was sent to the 19,499 subscribers who responded to that notice. All others are in the process of being deleted from the active mailing list.

2. Anyone who no longer wants to receive the Bulletin can use the automatic "UNSUBSCRIBE" tab at the bottom of this message or send a message to [raoemo@sbcglobal.net](mailto:raoemo@sbcglobal.net) with the word "DELETE" in the subject line.

3. Bulletin recipients with interest in the Philippines, whether or not they live there, can request to be added to the RAO's Philippine directory for receipt of notices on Clark Field Space 'A', U.S. Embassy Manila, and TRICARE in the RP.

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