

Feres Doctrine ► **Congressional Hearing on DoD Malpractice Rules Change**

House lawmakers will hear directly from the victims of military medical mistakes next week in a hearing looking at whether Congress should consider changing the rules regarding malpractice cases against the Department of Defense. Among those scheduled to testify at the hearing on 30 APR are Sgt. 1st Class **Richard Stayskal**, a Green Beret fighting stage four lung cancer because of Army doctors errors, and the widow of Air Force Staff Sgt. **Dean Patrick Witt**, who was left in a vegetative state after a botched appendectomy surgery. Natalie Khawam, an attorney for Stayskal, said the 37-year-old father of two is in considerable pain daily but will appear before the House Armed Services Committee to “show that there needs to be accountability for these doctors.”

At issue is a 1950 Supreme Court decision called the Feres doctrine which lower courts have cited repeatedly to block troops from claiming medical malpractice damages for actions related to their military service. Defense advocates have argued that changing the precedent would prompt a flood of frivolous lawsuits against the military. But critics of the doctrine say the ruling has been applied far beyond issues of troops facing war-related injuries or on-duty accidents, and deprived military families of compensation for negligence and carelessness.

In Stayskal’s case, Army doctors overlooked a tumor in lungs in early 2017, allowing it to grow rapidly in ensuing months. By the time his cancer was properly diagnosed, doctors told him they could not treat the illness, and gave him only a few months to live. Khawam, who runs the Whistleblower Law Firm, said his family has been unable to sue for damages and to censure the military doctors involved because of the Feres doctrine. The same mistakes in a civilian hospital would face no such legal obstacles. “ISIS couldn’t kill this guy, but our medical system is,” Khawam said.

In Witt’s case, a nurse inserted a breathing tube into his esophagus instead of his airway, depriving his brain of oxygen. The nurse surrendered her medical license, but the family was blocked from receiving any damages because of the Feres doctrine. Military officials did not return requests for comment on the malpractice accusations.

Lawmakers in both the House and Senate have said they want a fix to that complete shutdown of legal cases against problematic military physicians. Rep. Jackie Speier (D-CA) and chairwoman of the House Armed Services personnel subcommittee, has said the issue is one of her top legislative priorities for this year. Also scheduled to testify at the hearing are former Air Force Judge Advocate Rebecca Lipe and Dwight Stirling, chief executive officer of the Center for Law and Military Policy. The hearing is scheduled to begin at 2 p.m. on 30 APR and will be streamed online at the committee’s web site. <https://armedservices.house.gov>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | April 22, 2019 ++]

Cyber Defense ► **Cyberattack on Japan Could be Regarded as an “Armed Attack”**

Top American and Japanese officials said 19 APR that a cyberattack on Japan could be regarded as an “armed attack” requiring a response by the United States under a joint security treaty binding the two allies. “The United States and Japan affirmed that international law applies in cyberspace and that a cyberattack could, in certain circumstances, constitute an armed attack under Article 5 of the U.S.-Japan Security Treaty,” said U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo during a news conference in Washington, D.C. Pompeo had met with his Japanese counterpart, Foreign Minister Taro Kono, along with U.S. acting Defense Secretary Patrick Shanahan and Japan Defense Minister Takeshi Iwaya, as part of the U.S.-Japan 2+2 Ministerial Meeting. “We stressed the need to work together to protect classified information, maintain technological superiority, and preserve our shared defense and economic advantages from theft and exploitation,” Pompeo said.

The United States is obligated under Article 5 to help Japan defend its territories in the case of an armed attack. The issue of mutual defense has been in the forefront in recent years as China and Japan routinely clash over

sovereignty of the Senkaku Islands, a group of uninhabited isles in the East China Sea west of Okinawa. In 2013, China announced it was instituting an air defense identification zone over part of the East China Sea, including the Diaoyu Islands, which is China's name for the Senkakus. Japan and the United States have ignored the designation.

Japanese officials had been recently pressing the United States to broaden the scope of Article 5 to include cyberattacks, according to Japanese media reports earlier this year. Iwaya told reporters that the inclusion of cyberattacks was "significant from the perspective of deterrence." "Not just China, but different countries are pursuing superiority in technologies that back up the capability in new domains such as space and cyber and electromagnetic spectrum," Iwaya said. "So, during this 2+2 meeting, we agreed that it is quite important to cooperate in the cross-domain capability building. And this alignment in our direction will be the foundation of our alliance going forward, specifically in the cyberspace."

The officials said they had not yet begun discussing a possible increase in how much money Japan spends to support U.S. military personnel stationed in the country. Shanahan said the discussions had instead focused on how the two nations could "operationalize" their forces. "The defense minister talked about some of the basic building blocks, but our multiple conversations – and this isn't the first conversation – is how do we really develop capability in the cyber and space domain, because it's an area where we're not limited by geography. And the capabilities industrially and militarily are very complementary." [Source: Stars & Stripes | Wyatt Olson | April 19, 2019 ++]

Commissary Alcohol Sales Update 02 ► No Decision on Which Stores Will Sell Next

Commissary officials will likely change, expand and test the assortments of beer and wine in the first 12 stores that currently sell it, before making any decisions about which stores will see the libations next. But while there might be more of a selection, that doesn't mean the amounts will dramatically increase. As one industry source put it, there's only so much shelf space available in commissary stores, and they're not going to take out baby food and diapers to make room for beer and wine. No decisions have yet been made about which stores will sell the libations next, according to Rick Brink, a spokesman for the Defense Commissary Agency.

So far, the commissary introduction of beer and wine isn't bringing a massive increase in sales. Cumulative beer and wine sales for the 12 commissaries from the start on July 23, through April 6 were \$717,005, according to Brink. That includes \$329,419 worth of beer and \$387,586 worth of wine. The dollar value of wine sales is increasingly outpacing beer sales. The number of transactions is not available. The selections have been purposely kept small at the 12 stores, and are being culled and changed, said one industry source. Beer and wine sales are expected to be rolled out slowly to other stores, he said, as officials evaluate the initial sales, and remain sensitive to the needs of customers, and the military services' desires to deglamorize alcohol. As commissaries have started selling beer and wine, they were implementing measures that promote the responsible use of alcohol.

One industry source said the Fort Myer, Va., store has the best sales of all 12 stores. Although its selection is the smallest, its placement near the meat section is key, he said. "It's all about where you put it, and how you stage it." Distilled spirits are not included in this effort. Commissary prices for beer and wine are comparable to the prices in military exchanges, which also have bigger selections. These sales began as the result of a memo signed April 27, 2018 by Robert Wilkie, who was then under secretary of defense for personnel and readiness. He said the move would increase customer satisfaction and convenience, and move the commissaries more in line with commercial grocery store practices.

Until then, commissaries hadn't been allowed to sell beer and wine, aside from some limited tests in the past. Retail sales of beer and wine were limited to the military exchanges, and there has been concern that selling it in commissaries could shift sales from the exchanges, and reduce the amount of money contributed in dividends to morale, welfare and recreation programs. So far, the sales haven't matched the 2015 predictions of the Boston Consulting Group. Its

"Military Resale Study" estimated that if the commissaries introduced beer and wine, the overall amount of beer and wine bought in commissaries and exchanges combined would increase by 46 percent. But for these stores, the sales are flat, increasing the overall take by 0.9 percent, factoring in just those 12 commissaries and the exchanges at those installations, according to one source. The stores selling beer and wine now are:

- California -- Twentynine Palms, Port Hueneme,
- Missouri -- Fort Leonard Wood
- Nevada -- Nellis Air Force Base
- New Jersey -- Lakehurst Naval Air Engineering Station (part of Joint Base McGuire-Dix-Lakehurst)
- New Mexico -- White Sands Missile Range
- South Carolina -- Shaw Air Force Base
- Tennessee -- Arnold Air Force Base
- Texas -- Fort Sam Houston (part of Joint Base San Antonio)
- Virginia -- Fort Myer (part of Joint Base Myer-Henderson Hall), Little Creek (part of Joint Expeditionary Base Little Creek-Fort Story), and Quantico Marine Corps Base

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 16 2019| ++]

Commissary/Exchange Merger ► Scrutiny of Merger Proposal Requested

Military and veterans' organizations have asked Congress to increase oversight of a Pentagon proposal to merge the commissary and exchange systems, asking for a review by government auditors and congressional hearings. The Military Coalition, a group of 27 organizations that represent 5.5 million active-duty personnel, veterans and family members, asked House and Senate Armed Services committees leaders in March to pay attention to the proposal, which would consolidate the three exchange systems and some Defense Commissary Agency functions.

Earlier this year, a task force drafted a business case analysis supporting that the Army and Air Force Exchange System, Navy Exchange and Marine Corps Exchange consolidate to streamline store operations. It also recommended that certain store functions of commissaries could be managed by the same organization, with certain grocery functions remaining separate. The report concluded that the merger would cost \$500 million in implementation, but would save an estimated \$700 million to \$1.3 billion in the first five years. Under the plan, the commissary and exchange stores would look the same to the consumer, but back office and other functions would be joined under a single umbrella organization.

Military Coalition members said they aren't opposed to the idea but urged caution in implementing changes to what they described as a "fragile military community ecosystem that may impact other important programs." "We are very concerned that proposals to merge the various elements of the defense resale system may pose a threat to its continued viability and request further study and oversight by Congress," stated The Military Coalition letter, signed by the organizations' chiefs. The group wants the Government Accountability Office to review the proposal and called for hearings so that interested parties could "express their concerns." The Defense Department can merge the exchange systems without congressional approval. To combine them with portions of the commissary system, however, would require new legislation.

The task force's business case has been approved by Lisa Hershman, DoD's acting chief management officer but must also be approved by Acting Deputy Secretary of Defense David Norquist and, if the commissary provisions are included, Congress. By law, even if Norquist approves the exchange consolidation, the Pentagon cannot implement a merger until 1 OCT.

The military services have had mixed reviews over the proposal. The Army and Air Force concurred with the task force findings. The Navy, which initially balked at the plan, reluctantly concurred, adding that its leadership thinks

the task force overstated the estimated amount of savings and length of time for the consolidation. The military and veterans groups said that if the services' concerns are accurate, the system "may be unable to provide the services (low cost groceries and support for MWR programs) relied on by service members, their families and survivors."

In developing its business case analysis, the task force aimed to find efficiencies in the system while preserving profits generated by exchanges to continue supporting Morale, Welfare and Recreational activities. Members also sought to protect commissary savings, which are estimated to be nearly 24% for shoppers compared with commercial supermarkets. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | April 11, 2019 ++]

Selective Service System ► The Case for Keeping Military Draft Registration

A federal judge in Texas ruled last month that exempting women from the Selective Service violates the Constitution's equal protection principles. However, the controversy over whether women should be required to register for Selective Service overlooks a more critical issue, namely, whether we even still need to continue draft registration, or Selective Service, 46 years after the end of conscription and the creation of the all-volunteer force (AVF), during which time we have never used it. When the AVF was created, it had three components.

- First, it established a comparatively small active-duty force because, unlike in the draft era, which had existed for over 30 years, the military would now have to pay market wages to recruit and retain qualified women and men volunteers, thus forcing the cost per person in the military to rise dramatically. (In FY2019 the average cost per service member was approximately \$125,000 per year. Even adjusting for inflation, this is 64 percent higher than it was 20 years ago.)
- Second, an operational reserve component that was trained, equipped, and ready enough that it could be activated quickly to effectively supplement the smaller active force.
- Third, a Selective Service System that could be activated in case the combination of active and reserve units could not handle a military conflict in an efficient and effective manner, without putting too much strain on the existing force of volunteers. This Selective Service System was intended to provide a draft-ready list of potential soldiers in case the AVF needed to be augmented by drafting young people into involuntary service.

From the beginning of the AVF, the Selective Service System was criticized for being unnecessary and wasteful. President Ford actually cancelled it in 1975. However, President Carter re-instituted it in 1980 when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan. But in the 1980 campaign, Ronald Reagan pledged he would cancel it again because it was an unnecessary and wasteful program.

In Lawrence J. Korb's first year serving as an assistant secretary of defense for President Reagan, he was given the task of developing the case for the president to renege on his campaign promise. At a Cabinet meeting on December 1981, almost all of the president's advisers, particularly the head of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) and the Attorney General (AG) urged the president to keep his campaign promise and abolish the Selective Service System. OMB was concerned about wasting money (about \$20 million a year) and the AG did not want to devote scarce resources prosecuting those men who failed or refused to register. The secretary of state, Alexander Haig, argued that we should abolish the AVF and re-institute the draft.

Korb made the argument for keeping the Selective Service System in case we needed it not only to deal with a conflict with the Soviet Union, but more likely a long-running regional war that caused a strain on the comparatively small volunteer force. To the surprise of many, President Reagan decided to keep Selective Service. Although we maintained Selective Service through the Cold War and the downsizing of our military, we did not use it when we should have — during the nearly 20 years of conflict in Afghanistan and Iraq — and the consequences for the military

and the nation have been disastrous. We were unable to keep sufficient forces in Afghanistan after our 2001 invasion because of the invasion of Iraq, and, as a result, the Taliban were able to regroup.

The mindless, needless, senseless invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003 was initially supported by most of the so-called foreign policy blob. However, when it became clear that the invasion was carried out under false pretenses and without sufficient troops or an effective strategy, support among the American people for the invasion dropped precipitously. Consequently, the ability to recruit and retain quality people — especially for the Army and Marines — decreased markedly. As such, to meet their recruiting and retention goals, they lowered their standards for enlistment, giving tens of thousands of moral waivers, even for felonies.

Among them was Bowe Bergdahl, who had been thrown out of the Coast Guard for mental health problems, and Chelsea Manning, who was deployed to Iraq after flunking basic training. Bergdahl walked off his military outpost in Afghanistan, was captured by the Taliban and was only returned in exchange for five Taliban detainees held at Guantanamo. During her time in Iraq, Manning provided troves of classified documents to WikiLeaks. Moreover, there were not enough ground forces to allow the men and women to receive sufficient time at home between deployments. (Troops should spend at least two days at home for every day in a combat zone. Most were lucky to get one.) Finally, the service of thousands of soldiers and Marines was extended involuntarily by invoking “Stop Loss,” in effect a back-door draft.

These problems could and should have been solved by activating Selective Service no later than 2002 when it became clear that Bush was intent on invading Iraq, even as it was still engaged in Afghanistan. Supporters of that war knew that if Selective Service was activated the American people would have skin in the game and would therefore ask a lot more questions. Today, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which the public would support drafting young people without significantly more scrutiny of the goals of engagement.

This — rather than those who should or should not register — is the real issue. If we did not activate Selective Service when we were involved in two significant and protracted conflicts, when will we do so? And if we did, how useful would a mass database of potential soldiers be when our military is increasingly reliant on highly specialized skills? Given these foreseeable drawbacks, why spend tens of billions of dollars maintaining this system that now has a base of 80 million men between the ages of 18 to 25? And why did the administration of George W. Bush allow the members of the AVF to bear such an unfair burden that will impact them negatively for the rest of their lives? President Reagan is rolling over in his grave. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Larry Korb | April 22, 2019 ++]

Background Investigations ► Responsibility Shift From OPM to DOD’s DCSA

The Department of Defense will have full responsibility for conducting background investigations of federal employees and contractors, under an executive order signed by President Donald Trump 24 APR. The Trump administration has long telegraphed the transfer, as background investigations for DoD personnel were already assigned to the Pentagon under the National Defense Authorization Act for fiscal 2018, and officials maintained that transferring the whole process to one agency would be more efficient.

“Implementing that legislative mandate while retaining the benefit of economies of scale in addressing the federal government’s background investigations workload, avoiding unnecessary risk, promoting the ongoing alignment of efforts with respect to vetting federal employees and contractors, and facilitating needed reforms in this critical area requires that the primary responsibility for conducting background investigations government-wide be transferred from the Office of Personnel Management to the Department of Defense,” Trump wrote in the executive order. The order also mandates that the Defense Security Service, which began the process of taking over security clearance IT systems from the Defense Information Systems Agency (DISA) in March, change its name to the Defense Counterintelligence and Security Agency (DCSA).

According to the order, the change requires that “no later than 24 JUN, the DCSA shall serve as the primary entity for conducting effective, efficient and secure background investigations for the federal government for determining whether covered individuals are or continue to be eligible for access to classified information or eligible to hold a sensitive position.”

The federal government has long struggled with a security clearance investigation backlog, which was listed on the Government Accountability Office’s list of systems most susceptible to fraud, waste and abuse. The Trump administration has previously listed the transfer of background investigation services away from the Office of Personnel Management’s National Background Investigation Bureau to the DoD as the beginning of breaking apart OPM entirely into other agencies. The move has drawn criticism from federal employee groups as an attempt to politicize the civil service.

Trump’s executive order also places the responsibility for background investigation IT systems in the hands of the secretary of defense, who will be required to oversee work to “design, develop, deploy, operate, secure, defend, and continuously update and modernize” such systems. DoD and OPM leadership will also be responsible for coordinating the transition of operations, including the designation of background investigation personnel to the Pentagon. [Source: FederalTimes | Jessie Bur | April 24, 2019 ++]

VA Appeals Status Tracker ► How to check the Status of Your Claim

Knowing what stage of the appeals process your claim is in can help you avoid missing deadlines and better understand how the VA claims and appeals process works. Generally, there are eight steps that disability claims follow:

- 1) Claim Received. Your claim is moved to this stage once it has been received by VA.
- 2) Under Review. A Veterans Service Representative is reviewing your claim to determine if there is a need for additional evidence. This includes the results of your Compensation and Pension Exam, which VA will schedule.
- 3) Gathering of Evidence. If the Veterans Service Representative deems that your claim requires additional evidence, he or she will request it from the appropriate sources.
- 4) Review of Evidence. All evidence is received and is under review.
- 5) Preparation for Decision. At this stage, the Veterans Service Representative has recommended a decision and is preparing documents detailing that decision.
- 6) Pending Decision Approval. The Veterans Service Representative’s decision is reviewed, and a decision is made.
- 7) Preparation for Notification. Your decision is being prepared for mailing.
- 8) Complete. The award or decision is sent to you via U.S. mail, along with the details surrounding this decision.

VA allows veterans to track the progress of their claims throughout the claim stream in three ways:

- By visiting a local VA regional office;
- By calling VA’s national toll-free phone number at 800-827-1000;
- Or by logging into gov and using VA’s appeals tracker.

Online VA Appeals Status Tool

VA has created its online appeal status tracker in an attempt to improve transparency and allow veterans easier access to their appeal’s status. VA describes this tool as easy to use and provides accessible information to veterans. To use this tool, veterans can sign into vets.gov using:

- DS Logon, which is the same logon as your eBenefits account;
- My HealtheVet account;
- ID me account.

If you do not yet have a login, create an ID.me account at <https://api.id.me/en/registration/new>. Once you are logged in, select the “Check your claim and appeal status” option to access the appeals tracker tool. The main page entitled “Your Compensation Appeals and Claims” will show the type of claim that is under appeal (e.g. Appeal of Compensation Decision), the date you received the claim decision, the appeal’s status (e.g. a Decision Review Officer is reviewing your appeal), the issues on appeal (e.g. increased rating), and a “View Status” option that will lead you to detailed information about your appeal.

On the “View Status” page, veterans can view the current status of their appeal followed by a description of what happens during the next step of the process (e.g. The Board will make a decision). On this screen, you may also select “See past events” which displays a timeline of events that have already occurred throughout your appeal process. Below this timeline, you will see the “Current Status” of your appeal. If your appeal stage requires action, an alert box will be highlighted in yellow under this portion of the webpage. This section will describe what action must be taken in order to continue on with your appeal and the date by which it must be completed. For example, if a veteran recently received a Statement of the Case, this section will instruct the veteran to submit a VA Form 9 within 60 days of receiving it and provide the deadline.

The “What happens next?” feature will display a projected wait time for reaching the next step in the appeal process. Using the same example as mentioned above, the “What happens next?” section will show an estimate of when your case will be transferred to The Board if you do not submit new evidence with your VA Form 9. In this case, a timeline of two events will be provided because veterans are able to submit new evidence in support of their claim at this stage. If you did submit new evidence, you will subsequently receive another Statement of the Case, called a Supplemental Statement of the Case, and a new projected timeframe.

Once your appeal has been certified to the Board, you will be able to see a progress bar beneath “What happens next?” showing where your appeal is on the Board’s docket. This progress bar shows the total number of appeals on the docket, and the number of appeals ahead of you. Although you are able to see the progress of your docket number, no time estimate is provided here as the Board is not required to adhere to any deadlines.

At the top of the page, there is a tab entitled “Issues” where you are able to see what issues are currently on appeal and previous issues that have been closed whether they were granted, denied, or withdrawn. If you need assistance during any point of the appeal process, do not hesitate to contact a VA-accredited claims agent, Veteran Service Organization, or VA-accredited attorney. [Source: Chisholm Chisholm & Kilpatrick LTD | July 5, 2018 ++]

VA Disability Review ► Frequently Requested to Check Severity of Disabilities

A thorough review of disability examinations is often requested by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) to check on the severity of a previously rated service-connected disability. VA staff use review exams, and any other relevant evidence, to assess the current severity of a disability and, if possible, reduce the initial rating assigned. VA regulations point out specific timelines for “examination checks,” but, it is not a hard and fast rule, and, oftentimes, ignored by VA personnel. But, rest assured, it will happen at some point. By law, VA should and will request a review exam under the following circumstances:

- VA needs to assess the severity of a disability;
- Additional or more relevant evidence indicates there has been an important and significant (or material) change in a disability; or
- Because of law, VA personnel are required to conduct a periodic review.

The Examination Process

Oftentimes, a contracted medical professional or VA medical professional will conduct the disability review exam. The medical examiners and staff will not answer specific questions about benefits, pension program or compensation. Nor, will they consult with a veteran about the disability compensation process. Acting as a stoic conduit within strict bureaucratic protocol, the medical examiners methodically go through a set of procedures to assess disability conditions. Typically, the examination is conducted in a medically approved facility, with the veteran and medical staff member. In very rare cases, VA personnel may decide that an examination by telephone would be the most appropriate route.

The medical examiner will often conduct the following procedures:

- Ask a veteran questions related to the disability in question;
- Perform a physical exam related to the disability;
- If multiple disability conditions are to be examined the medical examiner will conduct one examine at-a-time;
- Send the veteran for lab work, which may include: blood work, X-rays, MRI, etc.;
- While conducting exam, the medical examiner will pay very close attention to how the veteran reacts to certain procedures;
- At the conclusion of the exam, sometimes the medical examiner is required to go over the veterans medical file with him/her;
- In some instances, if the veteran is accompanied by someone familiar with the disability the veteran is having examined, the medical examiner may ask that person questions related to the disability being examined.

It is important to understand that the medical examiner is not involved in making a rating decision about the disability. The medical examiners' job is simply to conduct the examination based upon certain set of criteria established by VA. However, the words the examiner uses in describing the examination review, may ultimately affect the thinking of the VA rater and how a disability is to be perceived. The medical examiner may select words and sentence structures that may be perceived in a way that a reduction in compensation benefits is necessary, or that an increase is appropriate or no change at all is necessary.

Based on a thorough review of the disability examined, VA raters may issue a new or updated medical decision and contact the veteran by mail. After the decision has been made, VA will do 1 of 3 possible outcomes:

- The veteran's disability rating will remain unchanged;
- It was concluded that the disability has worsened and an increase in compensation benefits may be approved. If not approved for an increase it will be annotated in a veteran's disability file that an increase was not warranted, but the worsening of the disability condition has been recorded and recognized;
- The disability has improved significantly enough that a reduction in compensation benefits may be appropriate at this time.

If a veteran misses a review exam, it may negatively affect the outcome of any potential increase in compensation benefits. The veteran should always call their VA Regional Office (VARO) to reschedule their appointment as soon as reasonably possible once they realize they won't make it to the scheduled review exam. Harsh, but true, if a veteran misses an exam without details as to why, VA may be required by law to propose an immediate reduction in the disability that was to be examined or an immediate termination of compensation benefits for that specific disability.

It's very important that a veteran review exam results as soon as possible. All too often, what is written by the medical examiner differs quite a bit from what the veteran witnessed. For instance, some veterans have reported that the medical examiner indicated that a certain instrument was used during the exam, and the veteran was sure no such instrument was ever used. Checking the accuracy of the medical exam is crucial. Some veterans use the [Post Examination Assessment Form](#) immediately after medical examinations conducted by VA medical staff. In doing so, the veteran has an opportunity to record exam results as he/she remembers them, and the form provides a structured format the way VA personnel like to work with.

Lastly, it is vital to the outcome of any medical examination conducted by VA personnel that the veteran comb over all details of correspondence sent to them related to the medical examination. Addressing any and all issues related to the medical examination is a must. If VA is asking for information, it is very important that a veteran respond to the question as soon as humanly possible. Some veterans may require the help of a certified VSO in interpreting information sent to them be VA personnel. Understanding what a veteran receives from VA is of utmost importance.

[Source: USVCP | June 2018 ++]

VA Women Vet Programs ► Text Messaging Call Center | 855-829-6636

Finding information about VA services for women veterans is now only a text message away thanks to a new feature implemented by the Department of Veteran Affairs. The Women Veterans Call Center is staffed by representatives and available Monday through Friday, 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. ET and from 8 a.m. to 6:30 p.m. ET on Saturdays. Through the call center, women veterans are linked with female VA employees who can answer questions about topics from benefits, gender-specific care, and even clinic locations nearest you. Even those not enrolled in VA or VA health care can use this number. "By offering new methods of communication, such as texting, we can reach more women veterans and support their health care needs more quickly," said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. You don't need to provide any personal information such as your social security number or address through the text messaging feature. The number for the VA's Women Veterans Call Center is 855-829-6636.

[Source: ConnectingVets.com | Kaylah Jackson | April 24, 2019 ++]

VA EHR ► Senators Move to Ramp Up Oversight of VA's \$16B Project

Lawmakers have made it clear that the Department of Veterans Affairs' \$16 billion electronic health records project would be under close scrutiny. This week, two senators took steps to ramp up that oversight of the beleaguered IT initiative. U.S. Senators Jon Tester (D-MT) and Marsha Blackburn (R-TN) introduced this week bipartisan legislation (PDF) to establish a third-party oversight committee to help monitor the implementation of the new EHR system. The 11-member EHR advisory committee would be made up of medical professionals, IT and interoperability specialists and veterans currently receiving care from the VA but would operate separately from the departments of Veterans Affairs and Defense, according to a press release.

The VA signed a \$10 billion deal with Cerner last May to move from the VA's customized Vista platform to an off-the-shelf EHR to align the country's largest health system with the Department of Defense, which has already begun integrating Cerner's MHS Genesis system. "The new electronic health record system is too important to veterans' health care for the VA to get wrong," Tester, the ranking member of the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, said in a statement. "Our bill will create another layer of accountability and oversight of the process to make sure the VA roll-out does right by the 9 million veterans who will rely on this system."

Blackburn said that a crucial part of giving veterans better care is improving the way the DOD and the VA organize their health records. "The EHR Advisory Committee will be entirely devoted to ensuring the implementation and transition is done as smoothly as possible. Comprised of professionals who have experience in the health care field, as well as veterans currently receiving care at the VA, this committee will have the knowledge and expertise to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of the VA's services," she said. The committee will be tasked with analyzing the VA's strategy for implementation, developing a risk management plan, touring VA facilities as they transition to the new system and ensuring veterans, VA employees and medical staff and other participants have a voice in the process. The

committee also will meet with the VA secretary at least twice a year on their analysis and recommendations for implementation.

Tester and Blackburn said the EHR advisory committee is necessary to help keep the VA on target and transparent on its rollout of the new multibillion-dollar commercial EHR system for 9 million veterans. The VA plans to pilot initial operating capabilities of its new Cerner EHR platform in March 2020 across three sites in the Pacific Northwest. The VA has faced regular hiccups in its development of an EHR system, as revealed in numerous watchdog reports and during congressional hearings.

Lawmakers in both houses of Congress have made it clear that they continue to have concerns about the cost and timeline of the project, as well as ensuring seamless interoperability between the VA and DOD systems and with private sector healthcare providers. The Government Accountability Office has examined the VA's system modernization efforts and found that the department has significant challenges in managing its IT projects and programs. At a recent hearing, a GAO official said the VA's EHR project already is facing serious challenges and the ability of the VA and the DOD to hash out differences between their EHRs would be crucial to the success of the projects.

The VA's EHR project also has been plagued by gaps in leadership. The VA announced an oversight entity, the Office of Electronic Health Record Modernization, back in July. Genevieve Morris, formerly principal deputy national coordinator for health IT at ONC, was tapped for that post, but she resigned two months later. She cited her resignation to differences in opinion over where the project should be heading. The VA has had high turnover in its CIO role, with 10 CIOs since 2004 and six since 2012, according to the GAO. At one point, a top lawmaker tasked with overseeing the VA's EHR effort, Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN), called out the agency's "deteriorating and rudderless" leadership in the wake of two key departures.

In addition, a Politico article last year detailed major failures in the Pentagon's \$4.3 billion Cerner EHR implementation. Military and VA health IT specialists and doctors reported that technical glitches and poor training caused dangerous errors and reduced the number of patients who could be treated, according to that article. Lawmakers have also scrutinized the VA's IT initiatives to support its Community Care initiative following a highly critical report from the U.S. Digital Service about a flawed software tool the VA is building.

[Source: FierceHealthcare | Heather Landi | Apr 19, 2019 ++]

VA Privatization ► If it Ain't Broke, Don't Fix it

Rep. Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez (D-NY) defended the treatment of veterans by the Department of Veterans Affairs during a town hall event in her district last week. The freshman congresswoman said privatization of the VA will not help veterans because of the "for-profit healthcare industry." "If it ain't broke, don't fix it," Ocasio-Cortez, 29, said, insisting the VA provides "some of the highest quality" healthcare for veterans. She said people who advocate for a privatized VA are only trying to fix it in favor of pharmaceutical companies. "Here's the thing, they are trying to fix it. But who are they are trying to fix it for, is the question we gotta ask ... They are trying to fix the VA for pharmaceutical companies, they are trying to fix the VA for insurance corporations, and, ultimately, they are trying to fix the VA for a for-profit healthcare industry that does not put people or veterans first," she said.

Because people are trying to privatize the VA, Ocasio-Cortez said, "We have a responsibility to protect it." Calls to privatize the VA were heightened after news broke of secret waiting lists, which delayed many veterans' care, in 2014. For instance, CNN reported at least 40 people died waiting for time-sensitive care because of the lists at the Phoenix Veterans Affairs Health Care system. The Nation reported the socialist Democrat said the main problem with the department is that it is understaffed. "If we really want to fix the VA so badly, let's start hiring, and fill up some of

those 49,000 [staff] vacancies,” she said, adding the VA would be a blueprint if "Medicare for all" were to pass: “If you ask me, I would like VA for all.” [Source: Washington Examiner | Julio Rosas | April 22, 2019 ++]

VA Vet Choice ► Program Eligibility Mileage Change

Many veterans are unaware of recent VA changes to policies, programs and procedures that have a major effect on their benefits. For instance, to expand eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program, VA will determine eligibility for the Veterans Choice Program based on the distance between a veteran’s place of residence and the nearest VA medical facility using driving distance rather than straight-line distance. This change has been published in the Federal Register for reference if needed. The change from straight-line to driving distance roughly doubles the number of eligible veterans eligible for the program. VA sent letters to the newly eligible veterans to let them know they are now eligible for the Veterans Choice Program under this new expansion policy. If a veteran does not remember receiving a Veterans Choice Card or has other questions about the Choice Program, they can call 866-606-8198. Additionally, VA changed the mileage calculation for beneficiary travel. The change will ensure consistency in VA’s mileage calculations across the two programs. For clarification of VA changes, veterans are advised to contact their Veterans Service Officer (VSO) or local VAMC. [Source: USVCP | August 31, 2018 ++]

VA Women Vet Programs ► What’s Available at Your VAMC

At each VA Medical Center nationwide, a Women Veterans Program Manager is designated to advise and advocate for women Veterans. She can help coordinate all the services you may need, from primary care to specialized care for chronic conditions or reproductive health. Woman Veterans who are interested in receiving care at VA should contact the nearest VA Medical Center and ask for the Women Veterans Program Manager. VA health care for women Veterans includes:

Primary Care

- General care includes health evaluation and counseling, disease prevention, nutrition counseling, weight control, smoking cessation, and substance abuse counseling and treatment as well as gender-specific primary care, e.g., cervical cancer screens (Pap smears), breast cancer screens (mammograms), birth control, preconception counseling, Human Papillomavirus (HPV) vaccine, menopausal support (hormone replacement therapy).
- Mental health includes evaluation and assistance for issues such as depression, mood, and anxiety disorders; intimate partner and domestic violence; sexual trauma; elder abuse or neglect; parenting and anger management; marital, caregiver, or family-related stress; and post-deployment adjustment or post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).
- Military Sexual Trauma (MST). Women—and men as well—may experience repeated sexual harassment or sexual assault during their military service. Special services are available to women who have experienced MST. VA provides free, confidential counseling and treatment for mental and physical health conditions related to MST. Go to <https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/trauma.asp> for more on this subject.

Specialty Care

- Management and screening of chronic conditions includes heart disease, diabetes, cancer, glandular disorders, osteoporosis, and fibromyalgia as well as sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV/AIDS and hepatitis.

- Reproductive health care includes maternity care, infertility evaluation and limited treatment; sexual problems, tubal ligation, urinary incontinence, and others. VA is prohibited by legislative authority from providing abortion services.
- Rehabilitation, homebound, and long-term care. VA referrals are given to those in need of rehabilitation therapies such as physical therapy, occupational therapy, speech-language therapy, exercise therapy, recreational therapy, and vocational therapy. Homebound and long-term care services are available as well, limited to those meeting specific requirements.

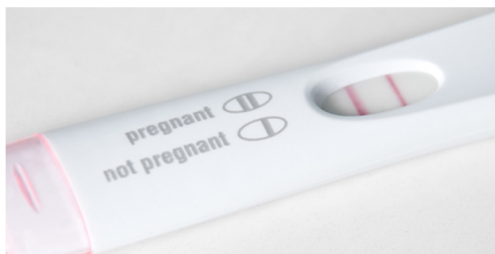
Telephone Care -- For enrolled women Veterans, a VA health care professional is available by phone at each VA Medical Center to answer questions and advise on health concerns 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. If you are currently enrolled as a VA patient, you can [contact your VA Medical Center](#) and ask for the telephone care number.

Programs for Special Groups -- Special programs provide services for [homeless women Veterans](#), victims of domestic violence, and women Veterans interested in education and training, employment assistance, and vocational rehabilitation.

[Source: https://www.womenshealth.va.gov/WOMENSHEALTH/womenshealthservices/healthcare_about.asp | April 21, 2019 ++]

VA Infertility Services ► VA Can Help Veterans and Their Families

Infertility is a common problem for women in the United States. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, about 12% of women between the ages of 15 and 44 years old have difficulty conceiving or carrying a pregnancy to term. During National Infertility Awareness Week, April 21-29, take this opportunity to share these resources with Veterans you know.



VA infertility services are available to help eligible Veterans. Through VA health care, enrolled Veterans have access to many different types of fertility treatments, procedures and services including infertility counseling, laboratory blood testing, genetic counseling, sperm testing, ultrasounds, surgery, reversal of a vasectomy or tubal ligation, medication and other treatments. Veterans with certain service-connected conditions that result in infertility, and their spouses, may be eligible for in vitro fertilization (IVF) or another form of assisted reproductive technology services. Coverage is determined case by case, based on an infertility evaluation at a VA medical center. Qualified Veterans or their spouses may be eligible for up to three IVF treatment cycles. To qualify for the benefit:

- The Veteran must be legally married.
- The Veteran must have a service-connected condition causing infertility.
- The Veteran or spouse must have an intact uterus and at least one functioning ovary or own cryopreserved eggs.
- The Veteran or spouse must be able to produce sperm or own cryopreserved sperm.

This benefit does not cover surrogacy, donor eggs, donor sperm or donor embryos. To receive treatment for infertility, Veterans enrolled in VA health care can take the following steps:

- Veterans can schedule an appointment with a VA provider (e.g., primary care provider, gynecologist or urologist) for an evaluation to identify the cause of infertility before determining eligibility for the benefit.
- Veterans can contact their local VA medical facility to schedule an evaluation.
- For questions regarding eligibility and services, contact the Women Veterans Call Center at (855) 829-6636.
- If the Veteran is eligible for assisted reproductive technology (ART)/IVF, VA will refer the Veteran (and spouse) to a Reproductive Endocrinology and Infertility (REI) specialist in the community.
- The community provider works with the Veteran and spouse to perform any evaluations and tests to develop a treatment plan.
- Medical care is provided based on the treatment plan developed by the Veteran and community provider.

To learn more about IVF treatment and other services through VA, visit VHA's Office of Community Care at <https://www.va.gov/COMMUNITYCARE/programs/veterans/ivf.asp>. [Source: Vantage Point | April 21, 2019 ++]

VA Individual Unemployability ► What It Is in plain, understandable English.

Unfortunately, many veterans are too often confused about Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) 100 percent disability ratings and whether or not they are allowed to secure gainful employment if rated at 100 percent. While complex, and sometimes confusing to the most experienced VSO, let's take a look at the four types of 100 percent disability ratings in plain, understandable English.

1. Combined. When a veteran's service-connected disabilities are combined to reach 100 percent, he/she is allowed to work full time or part time. For example, if a veteran is rated 70% for PTSD, and 30% for IBS, the two disabilities equal 100% (sometimes – see rating table), and the veteran is allowed to hold a full time or part time job.

2. TDIU or IU. Total Disability/Individual Unemployability. This is a specific type of claim made by a veteran, requesting that he/she be paid at the 100 percent rate even though his/her disabilities do not combine to reach 100%. The request is often made because the veteran is unable to maintain "gainful employment" because his/her service-connected disabilities prevent him/her from doing so. The basic eligibility to file for Individual Unemployability (IU) is that the veteran has one disability rated at 60 percent or one at 40 percent and enough other disabilities that result in a combined rating of 70 percent or more. The one disability at 40 percent criteria can be a combined rating of related disabilities.

Meeting the basic criteria is not a guarantee that the veteran will be awarded 100 percent under IU criteria. The medical evidence must show that the veteran is unable to work in both a physical and sedentary job setting. A veteran not meeting the percentage criteria may still be awarded IU if the disabilities present a unique barrier to gainful employment. If a veteran is granted 100 percent under IU he is prohibited from working full-time, because in filing the claim for IU the veteran is stating he/she is unable to work because of his/her service-connected disabilities. However, receiving IU does not necessarily prevent a veteran from all employment circumstances. The veteran can work in a part-time "marginal" employment position and earn up to a certain amount annually, but not allowed to surpass a certain amount.

3. Temporary 100 percent rating. If a veteran is hospitalized 21 days or longer or had surgery for a service-connected disability that requires at least a 30-day convalescence period, the VA will pay at the 100 percent rate for the duration of the hospital stay or the convalescence period. For example, if a veteran has a total hip replacement for a service-connected hip disability, the VA will pay 100 percent compensation for up to 13 months, the standard recovery period for a replacement of a major joint. The duration of 100 percent temporary disability for any other type of surgery will depend on what the doctor reports as the recovery period.

4. Permanent and total. A 100 percent "permanent and total" rating is when the VA acknowledges that the service-connected conditions have no likelihood of improvement and the veteran will remain at 100 percent permanently with no future examinations. The P&T rating provides additional benefits, such as Chapter 35 education benefits for dependents, among others. Veterans sometimes make the mistake of requesting a P&T rating simply because they want education benefits for their dependents. The one caveat that veterans need to keep in mind is that when P&T is requested, all of their service-connected disabilities will be re-evaluated. If improvement is noted during the subsequent examinations, a reduction from 100 percent can possibly be proposed.

Because many veterans are service-connected for conditions that VA says have a "likelihood of improvement," most ratings are not considered permanent and are subject to future review. The only time veterans can't work a full-time position, that is considered a gainfully-employed job is if they were awarded 100 percent disability through a claim for IU. Additionally, a 100 percent rating under either IU or combined ratings may or may not be rated as permanent and total. A temporary 100 percent rating is just that: temporary due to being hospitalized or recovering from surgery on a service-connected condition.

-o-o-O-o-o-

If a veteran is approved by the VA for IU, not only do they receive the 100-percent service-disabled rate of pay but they may also receive additional benefits including health insurance for their dependents, Property Tax Credit, a service-disabled military ID card and a \$10,000 life insurance policy with a waiver on monthly premiums. To apply for IU download Veteran's Application for Increased Compensation Based on Unemployability form [VA Form 21-8940](#). Complete the form, and mail it to Department of Veterans Affairs, Evidence Intake Center, PO Box 4444, Janesville, WI. 53547. Veterans may fax form to 1-844-531-7818. Keep in mind, it is always best for a veteran to work with an accredited Veteran Service Officer (VSO) who can explain the complex workings of the VA benefit system. [Source: USVCP | July 9, 2018 ++]

VA 3D Printing ► VA Looks to Create Artificial Organs, Even Bones

A veteran at a VA medical center had been diagnosed with a tumor in his one remaining kidney. Facing possible dialysis for the rest of his life, the former service member was anxious about surgery and wondered whether he should risk removal of the mass. Confused by the CT scans of his diseased organ, the veteran faced difficulty making a decision about the potentially life-altering procedure. But his VA surgeon had another option: the doctor loaded the medical imagery into a 3D printer, which used the information to build an exact replica of the patient's kidney, tumor included. Using the model, the doctor could walk the veteran through the surgery, step-by-step. Then, once the veteran agreed to the surgery, the doctor followed the exact plan in the operating room.

"[3D printing] is a total game-changer," said Dr. Beth Ripley, a radiologist at VA Medical Center Puget Sound and chair of the Veterans Health Administration's 3D Printing Advisory Committee. "Often [technology] pushes us further away from our patients ... this technology is allowing our VA staff to really come close to the patient." VA has launched an aggressive campaign to put 3D printers in many of its medical centers. The initiative aims to improve patient care by aiding surgical planning, crafting assistive medical devices and prosthetic limbs and eventually, creating bones and organs for transplant. The department has more than 100 printers at 23 medical centers, up from just three in 2017. And it has plans to expand to even more, making it a leader in the effort to adapt 3D printing for medical use nationwide, where fewer than 100 academic and private health facilities -- mainly at research universities -- use 3D printing, according to Ripley.

"VA remains at the forefront of innovative work in 3D printing by expanding our expertise across VA," Secretary Robert Wilkie said in a release. "Through this growing virtual network, VA continues to help define how 3D printing technology will be used broadly in medicine for the benefit of patients." While models may be the most obvious use

for 3D printers, which create three-dimensional solid objects by layering various materials slice-by-slice, bottom-up, VA scientists are also looking to bioprinting -- using the technology to create replacement tissues and organs -- to treat diseases.

VA Ann Arbor Healthcare Systems in Michigan currently is working on creating an artificial lung that could be utilized while a patient waits for a lung transplant or needs help breathing during recovery from a respiratory illness. The 3D artificial lungs would replicate the structure and size of the blood vessels and would be constructed of substances that would be more compatible with the human body, reducing immune response. According to a VA release, the technology could eventually have long-term applications, such as providing replacement lungs. "This exciting project is the latest in a long string of incredible research and medical advancements developed by researchers over the years," Wilkie said.

Other bioprinting initiatives at VA include creating vascularized bones. Ripley said that while the biologics printing is at least eight to 10 years away, VA plans to complete installation of the technology and train staff within the next two years; grow its ability to print prosthetics and other devices using advanced materials such as titanium in the next three to five years; and then, hopefully, be able to start implementing its development of human body parts within a decade.

The technology can also help occupational therapists build devices to improve veterans' mobility and create orthotics that can be made and fitted in a day. In one case, an occupational therapist at Hunter Holmes McGuire VA Medical Center in Richmond, Virginia, designed a specialized device that enabled a veteran to balance a pool cue at a billiards table, despite having lost an arm in combat. "He was a world-class pool player ... he could start to play pool again with just one hand. That is so cool," Ripley said.

All this work is made possible, in part, through a partnership with GE Healthcare that provides software and work stations for the initiative while VA provides feedback on its medical needs and use of printers. "We have a very comprehensive program that we are building throughout VA to make sure we are using 3D-printing technologies to the fullest," Ripley said. The VA's 3D Printing Center of Excellence falls under what VA calls its VHA Innovation Ecosystem, which encompasses programs that aim to identify best practices at VA medical centers and push them out across the VA's health system.

Ripley did not say how much the buildout of the printing network is costing VA, but she said printers, which come in seven different types, range from \$3,000 for a basic printer that builds with simple plastics to \$300,000 for one that can print with different colors and materials and up to \$1 million for a titanium metal printer. She said VA does not have a titanium printer -- yet. "Walter Reed [National Military Medical Center in Bethesda, Maryland] has titanium printers ... and we talk with them. But we have [one] is in our three- to five-year plan, so stay tuned," Ripley said.

She said for radiologists and physicians using the technology, it's an exciting time to be at VA. "This is happening through a specific program that encourages frontline staff to bring their best ideas forward ... What you see with 3D printing is that the decision of what gets made is happening on the frontlines. These are people that are caring for patients every day, interacting with patients every day, seeing what they need. 3D printing allows them to become innovators at the bedside," she said. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | April 19, 2019 ++]

PTSD ► Prolonged Exposure vs. Coping Skills Therapy Use

According to a new study by the VA San Diego Healthcare System, prolonged exposure (PE) therapy is more effective at treating PTSD than coping skills therapy for patients who also have an alcohol use disorder. The research will provide clinicians with important guidance for helping veterans cope with both PTSD and problem drinking. When the researchers compared patients who were given prolonged exposure treatment with those given coping skills treatment,

they found that both methods effectively reduced PTSD symptoms and heavy drinking. However, patients receiving prolonged exposure therapy had significantly lower scores on a measure of PTSD symptoms.

PE therapy is used for vets who have been avoiding things that remind them of their traumatic event. PE will help confront them. It involves eight to 15 sessions, usually 90 minutes each. Early on in treatment, your therapist will teach you breathing techniques to ease your anxiety when you think about what happened. Later, you'll make a list of the things you've been avoiding and learn how to face them, one by one. In another session, you'll recount the traumatic experience to your therapist, then go home and listen to a recording of yourself. Doing this as "homework" over time may help ease your symptoms.

The study was led by Dr. Sonya Norman, who is a researcher at the San Diego VA, the director of the PTSD Consultation Program for the National Center for PTSD, and a professor of Psychiatry at the University of California San Diego. "The research is not showing concerns that PTSD patients with alcohol use disorder can't handle exposure to be true," said Dr. Norman. "The main takeaway of the study for me is that we may be doing a disservice to veterans if we don't offer them the best treatments we have available for PTSD, such as prolonged exposure."

People suffering from both PTSD and alcohol use disorder tend to have shorter periods of abstinence from drinking and a greater risk of suicide and homelessness. Compared to individuals with just one disorder, these patients also tend to have more legal and psychological problems. During prolonged exposure therapy, patients gradually confront memories, feelings, and situations related to their trauma. The goal is for them to be able to face these experiences without triggering anxiety and stress.

While previous studies have shown that prolonged exposure therapy is the most effective treatment for PTSD, many therapists do not offer this particular psychotherapy to problem drinkers out of concern that it will cause them to drink more. However, the results of the new study show that prolonged exposure therapy is more effective at treating PTSD regardless of whether patients also have alcohol use disorder. The researchers concluded that many patients are not getting the best available treatment because of their issues with alcohol. The next stage of this research, is to learn how to make prolonged exposure even more effective for patients with PTSD and alcohol use disorder," explained Dr. Norman.

"We are now conducting a study where we are combining medication to help reduce drinking with prolonged exposure to see if the combination helps patients complete prolonged exposure and benefit even more from the treatment." The study is published at <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapsychiatry/article-abstract/2731312> in the journal JAMA Psychiatry.

[Source: Earth.com News | Chrissy Sexton | April 25, 2019 ++]

VA Blue Water Claims ► Supreme Court Grants 30-Day Denial Extension

The Supreme Court this week granted a 30-day extension to Department of Justice officials contemplating an appeal of a lower court ruling in January which extended presumptive benefits to tens of thousands of Navy veterans who have claimed exposure to toxic chemical defoliants during the Vietnam War. But advocates say they are not concerned by the move, calling it a typical legal maneuver and not a serious threat to getting benefits to the group of so-called "blue water" veterans. "This just seems to be going through the motions," said John Wells, retired Navy commander and the executive director Military-Veterans Advocacy, which has lobbied on the issue for years. "It's not a setback for us. Veterans Affairs Secretary (Robert) Wilkie has told us this was not initiated by his department."

In January, a federal court ruled that VA officials for years has used faulty reasoning to deny disability benefits to veterans who served in ships off the waters of Vietnam. VA officials had argued that for years that existing law established only that troops who served on the ground on on ships close to shore were entitled to the presumption of

exposure to chemical defoliants like Agent Orange, speeding the process for their disability benefits. Sailors on ships further out to sea were not, even though many contracted the same rare cancers and respiratory illnesses that their land-based counterparts did. They have been required to provide proof of chemical exposure during their combat tours, a near-impossible prospect given the decades that have passed and lack of environmental monitoring at the time.

Until the court ruling in January, VA officials had also argued that extending presumptive benefits to the estimated 90,000 blue water veterans would cost as much as \$5 billion over 10 years, a figure that advocates have disputed. But since the ruling, Wilkie has said publicly he will work with veterans groups and Congress on a path ahead for awarding the benefits. He also advised Justice officials against appealing the federal court ruling. Department of Justice officials had until next week to raise that objection, but instead asked for a 30-day extension. In their court request, lawyers for the department did not indicate they intend to fight the decision, but needed more time to research the potential impact of the ruling on other pending court cases.

Wells said he would not be surprised if the department requested another extension next month too. He said the move does not affect congressional work to draft an implementation plan for the benefits, and has not stopped the Board of Veterans Appeals from starting to accept some veterans' benefits cases based on the federal court ruling. Several bills are pending in the House and Senate to address the issue, including bipartisan legislation announced last week from Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) and Steve Daines (R-MT). The House Veterans' Affairs Committee is scheduled to discuss a proposal from Chairman Mark Takano (D-CA) during a hearing on 1 MAY. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | April 24, 2019 ++]

Veterans In Politics Program ► For Veteran Eyeing a Run for Office

If you're a veteran eyeing a run for office, you now have access to a training program specially designed to get you in the race. Syracuse University, with a grant from JP Morgan Chase & Co., plans to start a training program late this fall or early winter for veterans on the nuts-and-bolts of running for office at the state, local and federal levels. The goal of the "Veterans in Politics," or VIP, program is to take advantage of veterans' commitment to public service and translate that into organizing and running a campaign, but the school is upfront about potential pitfalls.

"We want to be clear about what they're getting into. It's not all cookies and cream," said Steve Lux, director of executive education at the university's Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs, located in central New York state. He said the program will start with online preparation, leading to a free, week-long intensive seminar at the Maxwell School, tied for No. 1 with Indiana University as the nation's top public affairs graduate school, according to U.S. News & World Report. The program's launch was announced last week by Syracuse University's Institute for Veterans and Military Families, or IVMF, and the Maxwell School, with the intent of aiding veterans and military family members who aspire to public office or administration.

In a statement, David M. Van Slyke, dean of the Maxwell School, said the collaboration with IVMF would "empower those who have served our nation in uniform with preparation, expertise and confidence, so that they can extend their commitment to public service in the form of a political career at the local, state or federal level." University and IVMF officials said VIP courses will cover election law, party politics and public policy; creating, managing and leading campaign teams; campaign finance; understanding voters; message development; and other aspects of running for office.

Dr. Mike Haynie, executive director of IVMF, said he began discussions with the Maxwell School about a year ago, adding "once we started the conversation, it was a no-brainer." He called JP Morgan's grant "generous," though he would not give details. In a statement, Mark Elliott, head of Military and Veterans Affairs at JP Morgan & Chase, said the program is intended "to help develop the next generation of political leaders" from veterans and their families,

who have a commitment to the public sector. Both Haynie and Lux said VIP is non-partisan and open to veterans with widely divergent political views, but there will be screening to keep out extremists whose values are not in line with those of the university.

Lux said the plan is to start small with a first class of 20 to 25 applicants. The first phase will be online with required readings and videos to set up the week-long, on-campus phase involving immersion seminars, he said. The third phase entails follow-ups to gauge the veterans' progress in achieving their political goals, he said. "We don't just want to send them out there in the woods and say 'Good luck.'" "We need to keep the first cohort size relatively small," Haynie said. But, he added, the eventual goal is to put more veterans in office in Congress and at the state and local level.

According to IVMF, veterans made gains in the 2018 elections, but overall veteran representation in Congress has dropped from more than 75% in the 1960s to 19.1% today. Currently, the 116th Congress has a total of 96 veterans - 30 Democrats and 66 Republicans. More information on the VIP program and instructions on how to apply are available at <https://www.maxwell.syr.edu/executive-education/training-programs/veterans-in-politics>. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Richard Sisk | April 15, 2019 ++]

U.S. Census 2020 ► Veteran Status Question

The former head of the Utah Department of Veterans Affairs is pushing for the U.S. census to include a question about veterans next year. Terry Schow, a Vietnam veteran, wants the 2020 census to ask about veteran status so the state can have a more accurate count of people with military service, the Standard-Examiner reported 20 APR. "It's really just one question: Are you a veteran?" Schow said.

The Census Bureau pulled the veteran status question from the questionnaire in 2010, according to the agency. The bureau continues to collect data on veterans through three smaller surveys: the American Community Survey, the Current Population Survey and the Survey of Income and Program Participation. These surveys only go to a portion of the population, Schow said. The American Community Survey, the largest of the three, is sent out to about 3.5 million people each year.

Current counts of veterans from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and the Census Bureau are likely missing a significant number of people, Schow said. The department lists about 152,000 veterans in Utah while the bureau says the state has about 144,000. A state database indicates Utah has about 180,000 veterans, Schow said. The VA uses census data to determine spending on veteran housing, hospitals and assistance programs, Schow said. Republican U.S. Rep. Rob Bishop sent a letter to the bureau's director earlier this month, asking for the veterans question to be included. "I believe this small change will have a big impact on our ability to take care of our nation's heroes and the proper allocation of resources for veterans cemeteries and homes," Bishop wrote. [Source: The Associated Press | 22 Apr 2019 ++]

GI Bill Update ► VES Study | How Schools Utilize Taxpayer Money Received

Some of the schools that receive the most Post-9/11 GI Bill money spend the least on teaching students, a new report suggests. The study, conducted by the nonprofit group Veterans Education Success, analyzed more than 4,600 higher-education institutions and found that in 2017, 427 of those schools spent less than 30 percent of their gross tuition dollars on instruction, according to VES. That's about \$980 million in GI Bill money that went toward costs other than directly educating student veterans, VES estimates.

“Is it appropriate for colleges to charge taxpayers for GI Bill funds but then divert those funds away from veterans’ actual education?” asked VES President Carrie Wofford during a Capitol Hill briefing on the report 18 APR. “And does Congress owe it to veterans and taxpayers to more carefully guard veterans’ earned benefits?” The three schools receiving the most GI Bill money nationwide from fiscal year 2009 through fiscal year 2017 – University of Phoenix, DeVry University and Strayer University, all of which are for-profit schools – spent only 15.3 percent, 12.4 percent and 10.9 percent respectively of their overall revenue on instruction in 2017.

But some schools are pushing back on the report, saying that its definition of “instruction” doesn’t make sense for the online schools many veterans attend. A spokeswoman for Strayer parent company Strategic Education Inc. told Rebootcamp in an email that, as a mostly online school, Strayer must make significant IT investments that aren’t counted as “instruction” spending. In addition, spokeswoman Elaine Kincel said that other schools’ “instruction” numbers are inflated based on academic research. “As Strayer University is not a research institution, it reports only direct instructional expenses,” Kincel said.

The VES study defines “instruction” in line with the Education Department’s Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System Outcome Measures Survey, including funds for academic and training essentials like providing classes and professors. It notably does not include investments in academic support or student services in that definition. The study used data from the Education Department’s IPEDS Outcome Measures Survey, the 2016-17 IPEDS Finance Survey, the College Scorecard database and VA’s records of schools’ GI Bill tuition and fee payments.

VES calculated how much of a school’s GI Bill revenue is going toward teaching and learning by dividing the total amount schools spent on instruction by the total amount they received in tuition and fees. In addition to analyzing GI Bill revenue, the report also looked at schools’ success graduating their students within eight years of enrolling and whether those graduates were making more or less than \$28,000 a year — what the average U.S. high school graduate makes — within six years of entering a college. VES concluded that seven of the top 10 schools receiving GI Bill funds failed to graduate more than 50 percent of their students. It also found that only about 47 percent of GI Bill students at those schools were earning more than \$28,000 a year within six years of starting school.

The worst schools — or the ones the VES dubbed the “bottom of the barrel” — for allocating GI Bill money for instruction were all for-profits: Colorado Technical University, American Intercontinental University and Capella University, all of which spent less than 10 percent of their gross revenue on instruction in 2017. For context, the study noted that health insurance companies are required to spend 80 percent of patient premiums on improving the quality of patient care.

VES did point out quite a few schools that were putting a large portion of their GI Bill tuition revenue toward instruction. That group included some of the country’s most prestigious institutions, like Yale University and Stanford University, as well as schools that grant lower-level degrees, like Bismarck State College and Lakeshore Technical College. The study also spotlighted a few for-profit schools with high completion rates and post-graduate salaries that are also using most of their GI Bill tuition money toward instruction, like Professional Golfers Career College, Fox College and Swedish Institute.

Wofford said that GI Bill benefits are designed to be not only a reward for veterans service but also an investment by the government in their future success after the military. “There are no rules on how a college spends the money once they receive it,” she said. “And I think Congress may be surprised what many of these institutions are doing with it.” A University of Phoenix spokesman questioned the study, saying the data it focuses on “fails in many respects to represent the full fabric of the university and the academic quality of our programs.” “University of Phoenix strongly supports a constructive, fact-based policy discussion about student outcomes,” he said. “Unfortunately, this report does not get us there.

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Joshua Axelrod | April 16, 2019 ++]

Veterans FAQ ► Could My Lesions be From Exposure to Agent Orange?

Q. I served in Vietnam from 1967 – 1968. I was infantry soldier, and I was exposed to Agent Orange almost every day. I now have lesions all over my body. My legs, arms, chest, and neck are covered with these lesions. It looks like ring worms but it is not. Doctors at the VA and my civilian doctor don't know what I have. The lesions look horrible. So bad that physical therapists and massage specialists won't touch me because they are afraid they will contract what I have since no one can put a name to this condition. VA doctors act like I have leprosy, they too are afraid to touch me. This condition is very embarrassing. It doesn't itch or hurt, just looks really awful. Could the lesions be from exposure to Agent Orange?

Answers

A1: Yes (JW) 4/12/19

A2: You were in Nam at the same time as I; when the height of the most intense spraying of Agent Orange took place. The VA considers you exposed to certain presumptive diseases such as soft tissue Sarcomas, Multiple Myeloma, Google VA Agent Orange Associated Diseases & just get checked out as to what it is. I ended up with an aggressive form of Prostate Cancer. Make them find your problem! (BB) 4/12/19

A3: I feel it is more likely than not you have been poisoned by Agent Orange. That was nasty stuff and so many vets are suffering from exposure. My vet has Leukemia. Get to Mayo Clinic. You need to be diagnosed asap. How long have you had these symptoms? Is it Lupus? Go right to Mayo Clinic website. Ask for help. My guess is what you have is rare but they will figure it out. (JM) 4/12/19

A4: Go to a local VSO for advice ASAP. (WP) 4/12/19

A5: I was with the 4th ID in II Corps 1967/68. I have these lesions on my legs, ugly looking. I separated in 1970, failed my ETS physical because of the lesions that I did not have before Vietnam. So to get out and go home, I signed a waiver on the condition, which I'm now told was illegal, an attempt at CYA by the Army. I have not had good experiences with the VA now I'm 71, and at this point it doesn't seem to be worth my time to chase down medical records etc. etc. to be told again, there's nothing here for me. (BM) 4/13/19

A6: Hire an attorney. Look on these sites for an ad. I use HILL & PONTON. They are excellent. A lawyer will get YOU TREATED FAIRLY. (DD) 4/15/19

<p>Note: Go to http://www.veterandiscountdirectory.com/question94.html if you would like to add your experience regarding on this question.</p>
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[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | April 22, 2019 ++]

Veterans FAQ ► Why Isn't my IU Application on record with VA?

Q. I'm 70% disable, and filed for IU 3/12/2019, however, when I went to e-benefits checking my file, it said I do not have any open submitted items on record with VA at this time. The VSO helped me with the paper work etc. Can anyone tell me what happen?

Answers

A1: In my experience brother, the only "VSO's" that are any good are with the DAV. They're the ones who know how to get things done. Try that and best of luck to you. (BO) 4/12/19

A2: Could possibly mean no open claims or submitted as it is under something else on E-benefits like already processed or something, i had something of that sort 4 years ago, i just forget exactly where else it was, dont worry to much at this point. If nothing in a month then at least you have the VSO to look into it. (BB) 4/12/19

A3: First e benefits is not updated very often by the VA. It will take 30-90 days for the VA to send out the letter asking for more info. You can call 18008271000 to make sure they got it. (GR) 4/12/19

A4: Go to VA.gov and create an account. You can log on with your DS logon password and even with your my healthy vet account. ebenefits is phasing out little by little. Va.gov has more info. If you don't see the claim, it wasn't filed. (JD) 4/14/19

Note: Go to <http://www.veterandiscountdirectory.com/question95.html> if you would like to add your experience regarding on this question.

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | April 22, 2019 ++]

Veterans FAQ ► How Can I Prove Drill Sargent Beatings Caused My Medical Problems?

Q. I served 6 years in the Marine Corps (1980 – 1986), making the rank of Sergeant. During basic training my drill instructor practiced his MMA moves on us. He literally knocked a few grunts unconscious with kicks and blows to the head. I was one of the grunts he knocked out. He actually knocked me out four times. None of this was put in my medical records, it was all considered part of making me a Marine. Well, today I suffer short term memory loss, headaches, double vision, and major neck pain. I am sure my problems are due to this drill sergeant beating the heck out of me. If I put in a claim for my problems with the VA, how can I prove they were caused by this drill sergeant who routinely kicked my butt?

Answers

A1: Simply by finding another Marine Grunt who was there at that training with you when this happened and by obtaining a 'Buddy Letter' verifying what had happened. Look online for Myhealthvet.com & google and research examples of Buddy Letters. You can submit with the Buddy Letters any and all medical files, too. I hope this helps. I would contact a VSO, either American Legion, VFW, or DAV. They would assist you at no cost. Try www.usvets.com. Also www.military.com/benefits/veteran-benefits/the-ebenefits-program.html. Good luck. (SS) 4/16/19

A2: I'm sorry, I don't believe this story. Notice the Marine uses the term Drill Sergeant, which is an Army term. No true Marine would make this mistake. I also don't believe the level of alleged physical attacks the recruits suffered from. It's highly possible they were assaulted with much less physical attacks; however, nothing life threatening nor prolonged. If this punishment were true, I would think at least one recruit would have reported it to proper authorities. Recruits/Marines have "Request Mast", wherein they can report serious abuses as well as other alleged wrongdoing. Why did this Marine wait so long to divulge these alleged abuses In summary, I believe this Marine is a liar. I also believe he needs help from a mental health provider. (TR) 4/15/19

A3: You probably cannot prove it, but you need to file a claim for it anyway. The burden of proof is not on you. Its on the Marine's. You may be able to find someone who experienced the same thing in your unit or at least witnessed it to provide a statement for your claim. (LR) 4/16/19

A4: I am a VSO for the Vietnam Veterans of America. You will need to get what is called a buddy letter. Try to find some one you served with that saw you get knocked out and have them write a letter describing the incident. Make sure they sign the letter and not just an email. (RA) 4/16/19

A5: To (TR), I respectfully want to respond to your skepticism about my tenure in the Marine Corps. I am sorry if I offended you, but I refer to all basic training personnel as "Drill Sergeants." After my tenure in the Marine Corps I joined the Air Force, and eventually retired as a Senior Master Sergeant. Air Force drill sergeants are titled as "Training Instructors," but I simply refer to them as Drill Sergeants too, and everyone in the Air Force knew what I was referring to. The kind of rigid thinking you illustrate is exactly why I left the Marine Corps. Think about it for a moment (TR), I was simply trying to make the point that the Marine Corps trainers beat me and others endlessly all in the name of training. Your insult to me and other Marines who were beaten to a pulp is aggravating and disappointing. You sir, are the epitome of absolute thinking. I know many Marines who understand what I mean by the term "Drill Sergeants," and think no less about dissecting a meaning only another Marine would understand without pause. I apologize for being abstract to those who don't understand generic terms, but I will never apologize for being a Marine and an Airman who has a working brain. Food for thought [abstract concept] (TR), jumping to illogical conclusions is a dangerous exercise often done by mediocre minds. (WT) 4/16/19

A6: You can get statements from people that witnessed these events. Find members from your unit that were there when it happened. Maybe you wrote a letter to a family member. If so, get a copy and have a notarized statement that they can attest to what you told them. (BG) 4/16/19

A7: Hello, I have been helping my husband's company with their reunions for many years now, and this is not the first time I've heard of this kind of abuse. Where do you live? And have you been to the American Legion. They are wonderful here in Houston and can help you with this. Bless you and hope you can find some relief. (EB) 4/16/19

Note: Go to <http://www.veterandiscountdirectory.com/question97.html> if you would like to add your experience regarding on this question.

[Source: U.S. Veteran Compensation Programs | April 22, 2019 ++]

WWI Vets ► **Eddie Rickenbacker | America's Flying Ace**

Born in Columbus, Ohio, Rickenbacker was a mischievous, but motivated child. As a young man, he began a career in the emerging field of motorsports, starting as a mechanic and eventually becoming a driver for the Maxwell Race Team. Rickenbacker gained moderate fame during his career as a race car driver, competing four times in the Indianapolis 500 and earning the name "Fast Eddie."

When World War I began in 1914, Rickenbacker hoped to join the Allied forces. Though the United States had not yet entered the war, Rickenbacker voluntarily left his motorsports career to serve as an aviator in the United States Army. When the United States entered the war in 1917, Rickenbacker was deployed to France as part of the first contingency of the American Expeditionary Forces under General Pershing.

Rickenbacker arrived in France on June 26, 1917 and was assigned as an engineer officer with the 3rd Aviation Instruction Center stationed in Issoudun, France. There, during his downtime, he practiced flying and became a highly skilled pilot. Despite possessing the skills and desire to fly, Rickenbacker continued to serve as an engineer officer as his commanders felt his skills as a mechanic were indispensable. After finding a qualified replacement, Rickenbacker convinced his superiors to reassign him as a pilot with the 94th Aero Squadron.

Rickenbacker's service with the 94th Aero Squadron was exceptional, earning him the title of "America's flying ace." By the end of the war, he had amassed 26 air combat victories, the most of any American pilot during World War I. The most notable of these engagements took place on Sept. 25, 1918, when Rickenbacker encountered seven enemy aircraft while on a solo patrol. Despite being outnumbered, Rickenbacker engaged the enemy singlehandedly, downing two enemy aircraft and escaping the rest. He earned the Medal of Honor for his actions on that day.

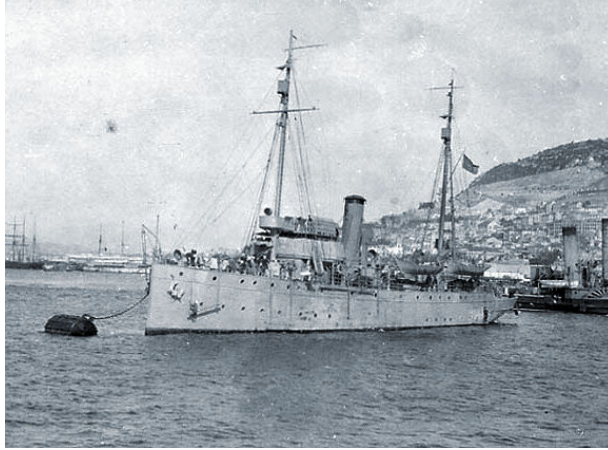
Throughout his career as a pilot with the Army Air Service, he pioneered many air combat techniques and maneuvers. Following the Armistice, Rickenbacker returned to the United States and was discharged at the rank of captain. In addition to the Medal of Honor, he earned seven Distinguished Service Crosses, the Medal for Merit and several other awards and commendations, making him the most decorated American veteran of World War I. After leaving the military, Rickenbacker returned to the automotive industry, started his own car company and went on to found Eastern Airlines in 1926. In 1942, following U.S. involvement in World War II, Rickenbacker was asked by Secretary of War Henry Stimson to travel to the Pacific theater as an observer and report on U.S. Army Air Forces' units stationed there. Rickenbacker agreed, placing his career on hold and traveling to the atoll of Kanton, located in Micronesia.

During the flight to Kanton, the navigational equipment aboard Rickenbacker's B-17 became uncalibrated, leading the plane astray in the Pacific. As fuel ran low, the men prepared to ditch their plane over open ocean. When their B-17 finally ran out of fuel, the men landed the plane in rough waters, crashing violently into the sea. All seven men aboard survived the landing, but were injured to some degree following the impact. As water quickly filled the plane, the men struggled to retrieve their emergency rafts and supplies. After managing to escape, the men realized nearly all of their food and water had been washed away, leaving them with only four oranges and a handful of cherries.

The men subsisted on the fruit for six days. They attempted to catch fish with the hooks provided in their emergency kits, but without bait they had no luck. In their dire conditions, Rickenbacker took charge, encouraging his fellow survivors and refusing to let them give up hope. On the 8th day, the men had their first stroke of good luck when Rickenbacker managed to catch a seagull. After eating the bird, the men used the intestines for bait and began catching fish. Later, the men passed through a storm and were able to collect rainwater. Despite their stroke of good luck, Sgt. Alexander Kaczmarczyk, who had been sick before the crash, died on the thirteenth day from dehydration after consuming sea water. On the 20th day, the men, increasingly desperate, decided to split up the rafts in hope of increasing their odds of being spotted. The idea was a success after one of the rafts was spotted the men were able to direct the Navy towards the other rafts. On the 23rd day, near death, Rickenbacker and the two other men on his raft were finally spotted by Navy sea planes and rescued.

After recovering, Rickenbacker went on to complete his mission and evaluated the Army Air Forces' units in the Pacific. Hoping to further serve his country, in 1943 Rickenbacker undertook a fact-finding mission to the Soviet Union, securing permission to visit the nation under the guise of providing the Soviets with technical assistance for their American aircraft. There, he gained the favor of Soviet officials and obtained information on Soviet strategies and capabilities. After returning to the United States, Rickenbacker disclosed the information to American officials. For his efforts, Eddie was awarded the civilian Medal for Merit. After the war, Rickenbacker continued running Eastern Airlines, living primarily in New York City. He remained a popular figure throughout his life, giving speeches on his experiences and visions. Rickenbacker passed away following a heart attack in 1973 at the age of 82. [Source: Vantage Point | Nicholas Rogers-Dillon | April 22, 2019 ++]

USCGC Tampa ► **WWI's Greatest Combat Loss by the U.S. Naval Forces**



On September 26, 1918, the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Tampa (operating as the USS Tampa under wartime rules) was lost with all hands, a total of 131 men. This was the greatest combat loss taken by the U.S. Naval forces during World War I as well as the greatest loss of life incurred by the U.S. Coast Guard in its entire history. The Tampa's short story began on August 9, 1912, when the U.S. Revenue Service Cutter (UCRC) Miami, built by the Newport News Shipbuilding and Drydock Corp., was commissioned at Arundel Cove, MD. The ship was named for the Miami Indian tribe rather than for the then little settlement in south Florida. At the time, several revenue cutters were named after Indian tribes. The Miami was 190 ft. long, with a 14.6-ft. draft and a displacement of 1,181 tons. Her normal crew complement was 70 Officers and men, she carried three quick-firing six-pounders and various small arms, and she could do 13 knots.

The Miami's first duty was with the International Ice Patrol, operating out of Halifax and looking for icebergs. Subsequently, she was based at Tampa, Florida, and developed a relationship with the city. In January 1915 the Revenue Cutter Service and the Lifesaving Service were merged and re-named the U.S. Coast Guard. It was then decided that the Indian tribal names were to be phased out, so in February 1916 the Miami was renamed the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter (USCGC) Tampa.

Soon after war was declared on April 6, 1917, according to law the U.S. Coast Guard was transferred to the U.S. Navy for the duration of the war. Three days later, the USS Tampa, along with the former USCGC Tallapoosa, seized the Austrian merchant ship Borneo, the first overt action by Coast Guard ships in the war. At the time the USCG had 23 cutters capable of ocean service, which were sent to east coast Navy yards where they were up-gunned and outfitted with depth charges. In August and September of 1917 the cutters Ossipee, Seneca, Yamacraw, Algonquin, Manning, and Tampa left for European service. They were designated as Squadron 2, Division 6 of the Atlantic Fleet's patrol forces (the flagship was the slightly larger gunboat USS Paducah PG-18), and the squadron was based at Gibraltar. These cutters escorted hundreds of vessels convoying between Gibraltar and UK and also performed escort and patrol duty in the Mediterranean.

On the evening of her loss, USS Tampa was detached from escorting Convoy HG-107 in the Bristol Channel with orders to proceed to Milford Haven, Wales, to discharge passengers. At 8:45 p.m. an explosion was noted by a hydrophone operator in the convoy. Subsequently, the Tampa failed to arrive at her destination and a search was made for her by U.S. and British patrol craft. A small amount of wreckage identified as belonging to the Tampa and two unidentified bodies in Naval uniforms were found. Two other bodies later washed ashore. Losses were 111 U.S. Coast Guard, four U.S. Navy, eleven Royal Navy, and six civilians.

The British Admiralty notified Rear Admiral William Sims, USN, commander of the U.S. Navy in Europe: Their Lordships desire me to express their deep regret at the loss of the USS Tampa. Her record since she has been employed in European waters as an escort to convoys has been remarkable. She has acted in the capacity of ocean escort to no less than 18 convoys from Gibraltar comprising 350 vessels, with a loss of only 2 ships through enemy action. The

commanders of the convoys have recognized the ability with which the Tampa carried out the duties of ocean escort. Appreciation of the good work done by the USS Tampa may be some consolation to those bereft and Their Lordships would be glad if this could be conveyed to those concerned.

The German U-boat UB-91 claimed credit for sinking the Tampa. Her captain, Kapitänleutnant Wolf Hans Hertwig, wrote in his service log that he had spotted the Tampa while he was running on the surface and submerged and fired the torpedo from the stern tube at a distance of 550 meters, which hit the Tampa amidships. Clearly, UB-91 wasn't spotted by any lookouts on the Tampa, which took no action or countermeasures whatsoever. From the reported distance at the time the UB-91 launched her torpedo, the ships had been quite close together. Why did Hertwig submerge? With his 105mm deck gun, he had the Tampa out-ranged. He could easily have fallen back and engaged Tampa with his gun, which would have saved a torpedo.

Hertwig was a very new U-boat commander in a new craft; the UB-91 had been commissioned in April. He had spent nearly all of the war with the High Seas Fleet, having served at the Battle of Jutland on SMS Westfalen, had only recently graduated from the U-boat training program, and his first patrol had no results. How did an inexperienced U-boat commander and crew pull off a tricky stern shot at very close range so flawlessly? In any event, the official U.S. Coast Guard history doesn't concede that UB-91 sank the Tampa.

The men of the USS Tampa are commemorated at the Brookwood ABMC Cemetery and Memorial in Surrey, UK, and also on the U.S. Coast Guard memorial in Arlington National Cemetery. [Source: Together We Served | James Patton | April 2019 ++]

Agent Orange Diseases ► **H.R.2200 | Keeping Our Promise Act**

A group of lawmakers introduced legislation that would add nine more diseases to a list of conditions presumed to be caused by the chemical herbicide Agent Orange, giving veterans who suffer from them a fast-track to Department of Veterans Affairs disability compensation and health care. The **Keeping Our Promises Act**, introduced last week, adds prostate cancer, bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, hypertension, stroke, early-onset peripheral neuropathy, AL amyloidosis, ischemic heart disease and Parkinson-like syndromes to a list of diseases presumed to be caused by Agent Orange exposure during the Vietnam War.

Researchers with the National Academy of Medicine released findings in November that there was “suggestive” evidence that eight of the diseases could be caused by Agent Orange. For hypertension, researchers found that “sufficient” evidence exists. “American heroes affected by Agent Orange deserve the peace of mind knowing that the federal government recognizes the existing link between their exposure and illness,” said Rep. Brian Fitzpatrick (R-PA) one of eight lawmakers who banded together to introduce the legislation.

VA experts have begun a “formal, deliberative review” of the National Academy of Medicine’s latest report, VA Press Secretary Curt Cashour said 16 APR. The review is expected to be complete in the summer, at which time the agency will make recommendations about presumptive conditions, he said. During a Senate hearing 26 MAR, Richard Stone, the executive in charge of the Veterans Health Administration, guessed the review would be complete within 90 days. “We’re working our way through that right now,” Stone said of the national academy report. Recommendations would be sent to VA Secretary Robert Wilkie, who would choose when – and whether – to act on them.

The VA previously recommended that some of the conditions be added. After the last National Academy of Medicine report in 2016, the VA took 20 months before it sent recommendations to the White House that bladder cancer, hypertension, hyperthyroidism and Parkinson’s-like tremors be added to the list. The recommendation hasn’t made it past the White House’s Office of Management and Budget. Last year, VA officials told the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs that the Office of Management and Budget is waiting for results of ongoing mortality and

morbidity studies, which could provide more evidence of a connection between the diseases and Agent Orange. On Tuesday, Cashour said some of those results will be published as early as mid-2019.

But some lawmakers don't want to wait on the executive process. Fitzpatrick, along with Reps. Annie Kuster (D-NH), Bruce Westerman (R-AR), Scott Tipton (R-CO), Elise Stefanik (R-NY), Joe Cunningham (D-SC), Brendan Boyle (D-PA), and Mike Thompson (D-CA) are trying to use a legislative route. Boyle estimated it would help tens of thousands of Vietnam War veterans. "This bipartisan legislation makes good on that promise by ensuring all servicemembers exposed to these herbicides and chemicals as a part of their military service get the health care they need," Boyle said in a statement. "Not one more servicemember should be forced to suffer in this way without the best care our federal government has to offer."

The bill is likely to face an uphill battle in Congress, where veterans and advocates have fought for years to prove toxic exposures and secure VA benefits. Attempts failed in Congress last year to approve benefits for "blue water" Navy veterans – sailors who served on ships off the coast of Vietnam and argue they were exposed to Agent Orange. The veterans could be close to getting VA benefits, but the victory was won in court, not Congress. The VA opposed the legislative effort to approve benefits for blue water Navy veterans, citing high costs and insufficient scientific evidence. The agency has not yet issued an opinion on the Keeping Our Promises Act. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Nikki Wentling | April 17, 2019 ++]

DIC Update ► **S.1047 | DIC Improvement Act**

Survivors receiving pay from the Department of Veterans Affairs would see an increase in benefits under a new bill introduced by Sen. Jon Tester (D-MT). Tester's bill, the **Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act**, would increase the amount of DIC paid to surviving spouses and align the benefit with other federal programs. The proposal, which could net survivors an extra \$5,400 a year, has been a long-time goal of both MOAA and The Military Coalition.

Currently, DIC is paid at a monthly rate of \$1,319, with additional allowances in certain circumstances. That works out to 40 percent of what a veteran with a 100 percent service-connected disability rating receives from the VA. However, federal survivor programs provide up to 55 percent of a civil servant's pay, computed as if the employee retired on disability at the date of death. DIC is a tax-free monetary benefit paid to a surviving spouse and dependent children when a servicemember dies of a service-connected cause. This includes death while on active duty or death later due to an injury or disease contracted while the servicemember was on active duty.

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee plans to work on the bill later this year. Act now to send your senators a MOAA-suggested editable message on this bill which is available at <http://takeaction.moaa.org/moaa/app/write-a-letter?2&engagementId=498946>. [Source: The MOAA Newsletter | April 25, 2019 ++]

Tricare Reserve Select Update ► **H.R.613/S.164 | TRS Improvement Act**

More National Guard and Reserve members, many of whom have remained on rotational deployments in overseas operations throughout the country's longest war, may soon have a new choice when it comes to health insurance. MOAA has long supported opening enrollment of TRICARE Reserve Select to all retired National Guard and Reserve members, and congressional subcommittees now are reviewing legislation that would allow members of the National Guard and Reserve who are federal employees covered under the Federal Employees Health Benefits Plan (FEHBP) to enroll in the TRICARE plan. "It's more choice," said Capt. Kathy Beasley, USN (Ret), government relations

director of health affairs for MOAA. “Guard and Reserve members are more utilized now in the past 17 years than before the war. It’s important to look after them. They’re utilized a lot. They go on and off duty, and that’s a disruption.”

The Tricare Reserve Select program was established in the 2005 National Defense Authorization Act to offer reserve-component members and their families health insurance. However, Guard and Reserve members who are eligible for FEHBP were not allowed to enroll. Discussions to offer these troops more choice began as the operational tempo increased for National Guard and Reserve units. Last month, more than 3,500 soldiers with the Mississippi and Kansas National Guard returned from a nine-month deployment in support of Operation Spartan Shield – the first time in the past decade that a reserve component that large had been deployed.

The House’s proposed legislation, introduced by Rep. Trent Kelly (R-MS) has been referred to the House Armed Services subcommittee on military personnel, while the Senate version, introduced by Sen. Steve Daines (R-MT)) is in the Senate Armed Services Committee. The proposed legislation would allow about 113,000 Guard and Reserve members to choose whether to enroll in TRICARE Reserve Select. It would provide a cost savings of about \$1.5 billion in discretionary spending over 10 years, according to the Congressional Budget Office, against a \$240 million increase in mandatory outlays.

TAKE ACTION: Ask Your Lawmaker to Support Making TRICARE Reserve Select Available to All Reservists and Guard Members at <http://takeaction.moaa.org/app/write-a-letter?4&engagementId=498918>. [Source: The MOAA Newsletter | Amanda Dolasinski | April 25, 2019 ++]

Vet Suicide Update ► H.R.2333 | Support for Suicide Prevention Coordinators Act

VA employees whose task it is to prevent veteran suicides by identifying high-risk veterans and making sure they get help are “overworked” and “unable to keep up” with the demand, Rep. Anthony Brindisi (D-NY) said. Veteran suicide is a ‘gut-wrenching’ ‘crisis,’ officials say. Here’s what Congress is doing about it. Brindisi is sponsoring the “**Support for Suicide Prevention Coordinators Act**” filed 18 APR, which is intended to ensure that those VA staff members “have the tools and resources they need to provide veterans with critical mental health resources,” a news release from Brindisi’s office said.

“Twenty veterans die by suicide every day,” Brindisi said in a statement. “This is wrong and unacceptable, and we must do more. It is our responsibility to ensure every veteran has a place to turn when he or she needs help. Our bill is an important step to improve VA suicide prevention resources and ensure all veterans have access to the life-saving mental health care they need.” The bill would require an assessment of the responsibilities, workload and number of vacancies in the Department of Veterans Affairs suicide prevention coordinators.

Suicide prevention coordinators “are the face of the VA’s efforts to combat veteran suicide,” according to Brindisi. “They identify high-risk veterans and ensure they receive appropriate care, conduct outreach and promote awareness and suicide prevention best practices within the VA, among other responsibilities,” according to the release. “Many suicide prevention coordinators report being overworked and unable to keep up with their many responsibilities.”

“It’s clear we’re not doing enough to support our veterans when they need it most, but the truth is there’s a lot we still don’t know about veteran suicides,” Rep. Mark Takano (D-CA), chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, said in a statement. “That’s why I’m proud to support this legislation to require GAO to review training, workload and staffing at VA to ensure this critical workforce is prepared to care for veterans in crisis.”

“At the forefront of this national epidemic are the caring VA suicide prevention coordinators,” Rep. Jim Banks (R-IN) said in a statement. “I am proud to co-lead this bipartisan legislation that will help those who work tirelessly to save the lives of our beloved warriors.” “We have a duty to ensure our heroes considering suicide have access to the

tools and resources they need to know they are not alone,” Rep. Mike Bost (R-IL) said in a statement. “But we have our work cut out for us.” If the bill passes, a report on findings will be due to Congress no later than one year after its passage. For more information on potential warning signs of suicide, click [here](#). [Source: ConnectingVets.com | Abbie Bennett | April 25, 2019 ++]

Vet Suicide Update ► H.R.2340 | Fight Veterans Suicide Act

Congressman Max Rose, an Army combat veteran and former non-profit healthcare executive, introduced legislation 18 MAY aimed at addressing the troubling trend of veterans dying by suicide on Department of Veterans’ Affairs (VA) campuses. Just this month, it’s been reported that three veterans have committed suicide at VA facilities. “It’s imperative that we receive not only basic information from the VA, but substantive data on this rising trend of veterans committing suicide at VA facilities,” said Rose, a member of the House Veterans’ Affairs Committee. “Getting this data more quickly and thoroughly would guide Congress’ efforts in understanding this crisis, and preventing these tragedies. We must ensure all veterans have the services they need when they need them, plain and simple.”

“Veteran suicide is a national public health crisis that we need to address—that’s why the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs has made it a top priority,” said Rep. Mark Takano, Chairman of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs. “Congress can help develop a response to these tragedies, but we have to know what’s happening. I’m proud to support this bill to ensure Congress gets the data it needs as quickly as possible so we can work together to prevent these incidents and give veterans in crisis the support they desperately need.”

Rose’s legislation is a key effort in response to recent tragedies of veterans committing suicide on VA campuses. Congress has found that VA is not always forthcoming with timely information around these events. Having key data points which this legislation requires from VA would help Congress fully understand the scope of this crisis to better serve our veterans in need. The legislation would require VA to provide notice to Congress of the suicide or attempted suicide and the name of the facility and location where the suicide or attempted suicide occurred no later than seven days after the incident. Additionally, the legislation would require VA to provide notice to Congress within no more than 60 days of the incident the following information regarding the veteran who committed or attempted to commit suicide:

- The enrollment status of the veteran with respect to the patient enrollment system of the Department;
- The most recent encounter between the veteran and any employee or facility of the Veterans Health Administration before the suicide or attempted suicide occurred;
- Whether the veteran had private medical insurance;
- The Armed Force and time period in which the veteran served;
- The age, marital, employment, and housing statuses of the veteran; and
- Confirmation that the Secretary of Veterans Affairs has provided notice to the immediate family members of the veteran regarding any Department support or assistance for which such family members may be eligible.

Rose, who serves on the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, has called on the Department of Defense to change the policy that leads to servicemembers and veterans on Staten Island receiving hundreds of dollars less per month for housing than the other four boroughs. Additionally, Rose passed legislation through the House of Representatives to expand childcare coverage from VA to apply to veterans seeking treatment for addiction and joined a bipartisan meeting with the Secretary of Veterans’ Affairs at the White House to discuss priorities and challenges facing VA. [Source: Congressman Rose Press Release | April 18, 2019 ++]

Transition Assistance Program ► Changes Coming to TAP this Fall

Changes are coming to the Pentagon's program for transitioning troops, which is designed to boost veterans' chances for success, starting with requirements that must be completed more than a year before a service member plans to leave. Starting 1 OCT, service members will have to complete their initial counseling with a Transition Assistance Program adviser and fill out their personal self-assessment, also known as an individual transition plan, no later than 365 days before retirement or the end of their enlistment.

As before, they will then be required to attend an eight-hour Defense Department pre-separation training day, during which they will learn about resiliency and managing their transition. They also receive coaching on how to translate their military skills into recognizable civilian terms, among other workshops, followed by day-long briefings from the departments of Veterans Affairs and Labor. Then, service members will have a couple of days of the usual five-day TAP to choose workshops on one or more of four tracks: employment, vocational, higher education and entrepreneurship.

The changes should prompt service members to focus on their futures earlier, providing an opportunity to consider all that goes along with leaving the military, including networking, financial planning, higher education and employment, DoD officials said. "The psychological and emotional aspects of transition are important to consider and are embedded in a variety of places in TAP. Not only are individual goals and needs addressed during the individualized counseling, but transitioning service members also receive more information on these topics during TAP," said Tamre Newton, director of the Pentagon's Transition to Veterans Program Office, in a news release.

The adjustments also should improve participation in the optional specialized workshops, which provide tailored training on how service members can reach their goals. A report issued in November 2017, by the Government Accountability Office found that, while 85% of active-duty service members attended TAP, 15% of transitioning service members -- and just 9% of officers -- took advantage of the sessions, which added two days to the weeklong TAPS curriculum.

Finally, the last requirement for TAP, the Capstone, during which commanders verify that troops have met career readiness standards and have a transition plan, must be completed no later than 90 days before separation. The GAO report found that fewer than half of service members in TAP completed Capstone 90 days before leaving the military. "These changes will tailor TAP to meet individual needs and with a look at their unique transition experience to best prepare for civilian life," Newton said.

All troops who have served on active duty for 180 continuous days or more, including National Guard and Reserve members being released from active duty, are required to go through TAP. The DoD recommends that retiring service members begin the process two years out. It also suggests that spouses or designated caregivers attend pre-separation counseling. The bill that made the changes to TAP, the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal 2019, also initially included a pilot program for spouses to participate in TAP, but that provision did not make it into the final law. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | April 18, 2019 ++]

Military Recruiting ► Do US High Schools Bar Military Recruiters?

Activists are trying to call Pentagon's bluff. Peace activists are offering \$2,000 to a high school that admits it prevents U.S. military recruiters from entering its campus -- an effort, they say, to discredit military leaders who claim that 1,100 high schools nationwide are barring recruiters from schools. Author and anti-war activist David Swanson and Pat Elder, director of the National Coalition to Protect Student Privacy, are asking schools that deny access to military

recruiters to post a video online with the hashtag #recruiterfree school, "explaining why their school keeps out military recruiters."

The two will award one of the schools \$2,000 to organize an education day focused on peace and non-military related careers. Swanson said the offer was made to challenge what he described as a falsehood perpetuated by senior military leaders: that schools are keeping recruiters out.

- In February, Army Secretary Mark Esper said that, after falling short in meeting recruiting goals in 2018, the service launched a major recruiting campaign in 22 cities but was finding that "schools are not letting our recruiters in, or counselors are not even presenting as an opportunity the chance to serve your country."
- Addressing members of the Senate Armed Services Committee in December, Navy Secretary Richard V. Spencer described an "excess of 1,100 schools and districts that deny access to uniform members to recruit on campuses," mainly in the northeast and northwestern United States, he said.
- And Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Ronald Green in January said there are just some places where we are not allowed to recruit. "I'd like to see a more open-door process. In some high schools, there is just no entry point," Green said at a forum on military readiness at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.

But Swanson and Elder say they can't find any schools that restrict access and add that the Defense Department has not provided a list of schools. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, public high schools that accept federal funds must give recruiters the same access to students as employers and colleges. "A number of organizations can't find any evidence to prove that it is happening. If schools were doing this, it would be in violation of federal law," Swanson said. Interpretation of the law can vary by school and district. Access may mean direct contact and freedom to approach students on campus or in classrooms, or it may be tightly controlled, restricted to requiring direct appointments only and limiting distribution of information. It also may be limited to offsite events such as college fairs.

A Defense Department spokeswoman said 25 APR that problems sometimes arise when recruiters are not provided the type of access they believe they should have to meet their recruiting goals, and schools provide only minimum access under the law. But sometimes schools are actually not in compliance, Pentagon public affairs officer Jessica Maxwell said. According to Maxwell, the Office of the Secretary of Defense reviews the status of school access twice a year and, if any schools are found not to be in compliance, they receive a visit from a senior-level officer. If problems continue, a SecDef representative will contact either the school or the state's board of education. Maxwell added that the 1,100 schools Spencer discussed were largely in New York City. The Navy, she said, has since worked with the Chancellor of the New York City Schools to restore access. Currently, no schools in the U.S. are non-compliant, she said.

Swanson said the services are having trouble recruiting because of low unemployment and the unpopularity of "participating in endless brutal wars that serve no clear purpose, increase hostility to the United States and leave participants at heightened risk of death, physical injury, brain damage, post-traumatic stress disorder, moral injury, violent crime, homelessness and suicide."

Both Elder and Swanson favor restricting the release of student information to the DoD and support a ban on military recruiting in schools. "[Recruiters] should not be there," Swanson said. "It's illegal to recruit minors into the military. And even if they are talking to people who are 18, much of what they are doing is targeted to people under age 18." Green said students have the right to consider a career in the military and believes recruiters should be allowed to speak with them. "There are people that want to serve in the military. I don't think any door should be slammed shut or closed. There should be limits about when we come in; we can work with that," Green said. [Source: Military.com | Patricia Kime | April 26, 2019 ++]

Military Draft ► Trump Appeals Ruling That Male Only is Unconstitutional

The Trump administration has moved to defend the male-only military draft, appealing a federal court ruling that Selective Service registration is unconstitutional because it discriminates based on sex. The appeal on 22 APR comes as the plaintiffs in the case step up their legal efforts to force the government to either force women to register for the draft or to eliminate mandatory draft registration entirely. The case is in an unusual posture because U.S. District Judge Gray Miller declared the current system unconstitutional in February but didn't require the Selective Service System to change it. So the agency is continuing to require registrations from men while forbidding women from registering.

So the plaintiffs – two men who say they're more likely to go to war because women are excluded from the draft-eligible pool – have asked the Houston judge to expand that ruling with an injunction ordering Selective Service to put men and women on an equal footing. But the Justice Department says ordering women to register for the draft is particularly problematic. "It would impose draft registration on all eligible American women by judicial fiat before Congress has considered how to address the matter," argued Justice Department lawyer Michael Gerardi. "No party before this court represents the interests of those who would be impacted by this change."

Congress has been debating the issue since President Jimmy Carter restored draft registration in 1980. Carter asked Congress to include women, but Congress refused – and in 1983 the Supreme Court held that the all-male draft was constitutional because only men could serve in key combat roles. But after the Pentagon opened all positions in the military to women, Congress created the National Commission on Military, National and Public Service to study the future of the draft and women's role in it. The commission will hold a series of hearings Wednesday and Thursday in Washington on whether military draft registration should be expanded or eliminated. [Source: USA TODAY | Gregory Korte | April 23, 2019 ++]

Night Vision ► ENVG-B | One of the Most Advanced Optics Available Being Deployed

US Army soldiers will soon be deploying with game-changing new night vision goggles as the service wraps up the final round of testing this week. Troops will be putting the Enhanced Night Vision Goggles - Binocular (ENVG-B), recognized as one of the most advanced night vision optics available, to the test at Fort Drum in New York at the last of ten limited user events. Once the testing is complete, the ENVG-B will enter full-rate production with fielding scheduled for this fall, PEO Soldier announced Monday. An armored brigade combat team set to deploy to South Korea this fall is expected to be the first unit to deploy with the new system, according to Army Times.



ENVG-B

Highlights of the new night vision goggles include dual-tubed binoculars for improved depth perception and increased situational awareness, white phosphorous tubes (a higher-resolution improvement over the traditional green

glow), and improved thermal capabilities that allow soldiers to see through dust, fog, smoke, and just about anything else that might impair a soldier's vision on the battlefield. But, the really impressive capability is the ability to wirelessly connect the new goggles to the Family of Weapon Sights-Individual (FWS-I) for Rapid Target Acquisition. With the picture-in-picture setup, soldiers can fire accurately from the hip or point their weapon around a corner to observe or fire on targets effectively while remaining hidden.

This capability "enables Soldiers to detect, recognize and engage targets accurately from any carry position and with significantly reduced exposure to enemy fire," the Army explained. "Now, if a soldier's on a patrol, weapon's down at his hip, all of a sudden a threat pops, instead of having to flip up a goggle, shoulder his weapon, reacquire, he has that aim point in his field of view, and he can actually shoot from the hip," a BAE Systems spokesman previously told Business Insider. The FWS-I, along with the highly-capable monocular ENVG IIIs, were developed by BAE. The new ENVG-Bs were developed by L3.

Army officials have spoken highly of the new goggles and their improved capabilities. "It is better than anything I've experienced in my Army career," Lt. Gen. James Richardson, deputy commander of Army Futures Command, recently told Congress, according to Army Times. He said there had been a marked improvement in marksmanship, explaining that Rangers had "gone from marksman to expert" with the help of the new optics. Referring to the Rapid Target Acquisition capability, Brig. Gen. Dave Hodne, director of the Army's Soldier Lethality cross-functional team, told reporters last fall that he "can't imagine, right now, any future sighting system that will not have that kind of capability." The new goggles are also suitable for augmented reality, an option that allows the Army, and later the Marines, to turn the optics into a virtual reality platform for synthetic training. [Source: Business Insider | Ryan Pickrell | April 23, 2019 ++]

Army Promotions ► Way For Senior NCO Promotions Completely Revamped

The days of biding your time until you come up for promotion are over. The Army has done away with sequence numbers, which take into account how long a noncommissioned officer has been serving and rank them versus their peers. The Army will now promote based purely on talent. They'll do it with a multipurpose selection board, Sergeant Major of the Army Dan Dailey told Army Times on 16 APR. The board will rank staff sergeants through sergeants major within their military occupational specialties. The new list, like the current Order of Merit rundowns, will be based on their mandated milestones and further informed by NCO Evaluation Reports.

"If you need to select for promotion, school attendance, training, you start from the top," he said "If you need to manage the size of the force by MOS and skill level, you can start from the bottom." So rather than the seven to nine separate boards the Army currently convenes each year, each rank will get its own quarterly board where this master list is assembled. Then, when Human Resources Command needs to fill training seats, select for broadening opportunities like drill sergeant or recruiter, and move some soldiers up to the next rank, they can consult the list.

- "If you meet the eligibility requirements and you're the number one person, you'll be the number one selected for school," Dailey said, regardless of time in service or grade, and
- During a drawdown, if there's a need for a qualitative management selection, those at the bottom of the list will be the first to go, rather than getting together an entirely new board to decide who is under-performing.

The new board process will "most importantly, create opportunities for upward mobility for those who are seeking to reach the highest standards," Dailey said, because the most talented soldiers will be selected, rather than the ones with the most seniority.

New boards

The board system isn't going away, but it will be condensed. "It's paying back what I call the unbuyable resource – time," Dailey said, eliminating the need to take leadership out of their formations, pay for them to travel on temporary duty and help make individual decisions about promotions, education slots and so on.

The staff sergeant board will convene in February, the master sergeants in May, sergeants major in August and sergeants first class around December. "So the fundamental premise of leadership is what the board looks for and evaluates," said Jerry Purcell, the Army's personnel policy integrator. Once the board is over, soldiers can sign onto Army Career Tracker — or the Integrated Pay and Personnel System, when it's fully fielded — and see where they stand. "If you're an infantryman, you will see you're number X of N," Purcell said. "It will be transparent to the individual affected." There will also be notes, he added, with feedback from board members, who can select on a drop-down menu which of the soldier's attributes most affected their standing, good or bad. For example, "character negative" or "character positive." There will be another, public list, but it will be alphabetical and only include soldiers who are fully qualified in their MOS and grade — with an asterisk next to those are who are at or near the top.

The roll-out will happen over the next three years, starting later in 2019, with the next class of U.S. Army Sergeants Major Academy students, who were selected for sergeant major before attending school. Their standing on the Order of Merit List will determine which jobs they're selected for once they graduate, Purcell said. Next year, training selections will be according to the OML. And this year's master sergeant and sergeant first class boards will be the last. They will select for promotion and those NCOs will eventually go to training and get promoted. Next year, the Army will skip those boards, allowing this year's selections to fill up all of the available slots, and then in 2021 start selecting according to the OML. A senior enlisted council of about 300 sergeants major will be trained on the new system and will fan out to every installation, Dailey said, to teach soldiers face-to-face about the new system.

Rebalance

There's another benefit to this system — rather than trying to predict the future, Human Resources Command will know how many NCOs it needs on a monthly basis. "We're not going to try to predetermine and forecast for the out years, and draw a line on that board," Dailey said. "We're going to have a continuous, running talent assessment, where we select people for training, and educate them, and then select them for promotion based on an annual requirement that year."

This is the progression now: An NCO is selected for promotion, then selected for a seat at the education course required for the next rank up, then finally promoted when a space opens up at the next grade. That whole process could take two years. "So in order to allow time to do all of that – and then satisfy a year's worth of promotion demand – we're really looking, 27, 28 months in the future at structure and at loss behavior over that entire time frame," Purcell told Army Times. And, inevitably, when those two-plus years are up, the forecast won't be 100-percent accurate — the Army could launch into a buildup or a drawdown that affects the number of NCOs it needs, or a good economy might convince some NCOs to brave the open job market, and there won't be enough to fill every slot.

"They're educated guesses, but they're often wrong," Purcell said. "So we end up with people on a list who we have to promote — because we've committed to do that — when they're excess, and they create skill and grade imbalances." Meaning that in a year when they overshoot the number, the next year has fewer promotions. Or if they undershoot it, they have to promote some soldiers lower down on the list to fill in the gaps. But all that is over. Now, the yearly, streamlined OML allows the Army to go one step at a time. At 18 months in grade — rather than the current 24 — soldiers will be "boarded," and they can't opt out. "Now we're going to simply inform who to train to qualify for promotion," Purcell said. "The promotion will come later when there is an actual requirement."

First comes school. If they're at the top of the OML for 11B staff sergeants, for instance, they'll get a spot at the Senior Leader Course. When they complete it, they'll be eligible for promotion, but they won't be selected until there's a requirement for them. "Every month, we decide by month," Purcell said. "We'll be able to look at the next month, establish exactly what we need, go down every MOS for every grade, and we'll be able to promote to the actual requirements." So the days when a soldier would rock staff sergeant-promotable for months before his or her name

are done. Now, you might know a few weeks out that you're getting promoted. "We sacrifice soldier predictability for improved readiness," Purcell said.

As a consolation, the Army will publish a quarterly list of promotion projections. "Once we're 90 days out, we have a pretty good idea of what the requirements are going to be," versus the current two-year forecast, he said. And because the more accurate predictions will fix the problem of course-correcting later on, he added, it's likely that the Army will make more progress down the list than in years past. "We'll end up promoting more people from this process than we ever have before," he said.

Up or out?

Within the discussion over talent management in the past couple of years, Dailey has floated the idea of limiting looks at promotion boards for E-7s, in the name of making space for promising E-6s to move up. It probably won't be necessary to force NCOs out if they're not selected for promotion twice in a row, he said, but there will be provisions in place to keep everyone performing and improving. "What we're going to try to do is eliminate the retention control point environment," Purcell said, in favor of performance. The Army doesn't want to force out successful NCOs, he added, just because of time. It takes eight new soldiers to replace a staff sergeant, and if that staff sergeant is good, he said, they don't want to lose him or her.

For soldiers who have missed professional milestones, the backstop will be a letter from the Army Department, triggered after a soldier is determined unqualified for promotion. Those will start going out in 2021. They'll have until the next year to correct it, Purcell said, or risk involuntary separation. In some rare cases, there may be soldiers who turn down a promotion. If they are high-performing, Dailey said, there will be a specific exception that allows them to continue serving. "We are putting together a set of rules for that," he said. "As long as you're doing exactly what the Army needs you to do, and there's no detriment to anybody else in the Army as a result of it, and we need you – so there's got to be a requirement, you don't just get to stay – we think that there's a provision to say that that's okay." [Source: ArmyTimes | Meghann Myers | April 23, 2019 ++]

USCG China Mission ► U.S. Using Coast Guard to Help Counter China

As a U.S. Coast Guard cutter sailed through the East China Sea last month, Chinese vessels shadowed it on the high seas, service officials said. It was a reminder to the Americans of where they were: in a strategic area a couple hundred miles from China's shores. The situation underscored the evolving U.S. response to the rise of China and the Coast Guard's role operating missions typically closer to home. The Coast Guard is increasingly orienting itself toward China, senior officials said, by deploying new cutters, repositioning older ones and dispatching service members to countries such as Vietnam and Sri Lanka to help train those nations' coast guards.

Adm. Karl Schultz, the Coast Guard commandant, said that as the Defense Department shifts its focus to competing with Russia and China, the Navy is "oversubscribed." The factors he cited include "realities in the South China Sea" and the loss of two Navy destroyers involved in deadly collisions in 2017. "The Coast Guard brings some capacity to that equation," Schultz said in an interview. "The Coast Guard brings some authorities below the threshold of war. We're U.S. warships, but we look different, with a white hull and an orange stripe."

The deployment of the U.S. Coast Guard Cutter Bertholf to the Asia-Pacific region from Alameda, Calif., in January marked an expansion of Coast Guard operations there. The vessel, part of the service's growing fleet of modern cutters, is under the control of the Navy's 7th Fleet in the Asia-Pacific region during the deployment, despite the Coast Guard being part of the Department of Homeland Security. The Bertholf has carried out several missions that are typically assigned to the Pentagon, including a high-profile transit of the Taiwan Strait in March alongside the

USS Curtis Wilbur, a Navy destroyer that was meant to demonstrate that international waterways near China remain open.

More recently, the Bertholf made a port stop in Hong Kong on 1 APR, the first time the Coast Guard has visited the Chinese territory in 17 years. The ship has carried out sanctions-enforcement operations in the East China Sea, preventing illegal ship-to-ship transfers of cargo meant for North Korea. The deployment of the Bertholf marks the first time in years that the Coast Guard has deployed a large vessel to the Asia-Pacific region. The service has committed to the deployment later this year of another similar cutter, the Stratton, which will focus on training partner nations in the Asia-Pacific region to patrol their own waters, said Vice Adm. Linda Fagan, who leads Coast Guard operations in the region.

The Coast Guard did not want the Bertholf used “solely like a combatant” ship if it was deployed to the Pacific under Navy control, Fagan said she told Defense Department officials. There also was a desire to show that national security cutters have “interoperability” with Navy ships, she said. The Coast Guard also can provide deep insight into such areas as search-and-rescue operations and fisheries enforcement. Air Force Brig. Gen. Dagvin Anderson, the deputy director of operations for U.S. Indo-Pacific Command, said in a statement to The Washington Post that the Coast Guard “brings deep knowledge and unique capabilities” important to partners and allies in the region. The service’s law enforcement authorities also complement the Defense Department’s objectives, he said.

The Coast Guard’s involvement in the region has included transferring a decommissioned 378-foot Coast Guard cutter, the former USCGC Morgenthau, as well as 45-foot aluminum shark boats to the Vietnamese coast guard. The vessels will assist Vietnam in stopping smuggling, piracy and illegal fishing, according to a statement released by the U.S. Embassy in Hanoi. The United States handed over another decommissioned Coast Guard cutter, the former USCGC Sherman, to the Sri Lankan navy last year. The Coast Guard is in the process of adding fast-response cutters — 154-foot ships manned by a crew of 24 people — in the Pacific. Three will be based in Hawaii and three in Guam. One already has sailed about 2,400 miles west from Honolulu to Kwajalein Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands.

The deployments of the national security cutters come as the Coast Guard wrestles with interdicting more than 400,000 pounds of cocaine per year closer to home, mostly off the coast of Colombia. Fagan acknowledged that cutters in the Asia-Pacific region might otherwise be deployed there, where the service has sought to put more vessels. “That becomes a national-level, commandant-level conversation,” she said. “How do we not lose focus on the interdictions and the need to be present in the eastern Pacific, and the value of the national security cutters in that?”

Lyle Morris, an analyst with Rand Corp. who studies security issues in the region, said the Coast Guard has been involved in Asia “in a minor way” for decades but is now responding to requests from smaller nations in the region to control their own territorial waters. “They see the role of law enforcement vessels and coast guards as relatively non-escalatory, or less escalatory, than a navy,” he said. The need for the Coast Guard goes beyond countering China, he added. “China is a factor, and an increasing factor, but I would say that it’s not the only factor,” he said. “The biggest constraint for these countries is the money. They just don’t have the money to buy a lot of new vessels.” [Source: The Washington Post | Dan Lamothe | April 21, 2019 ++]

Base Housing ► New Registry and Hotline Aims to Address Housing Woes

In the wake of families’ complaints about mold, vermin and other problems with some military housing, and possible related health effects, the Army Medical Command has established a new housing health registry and hotline that will be manned 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And this is part of a broader initiative that will result in a tool that will allow military families to search a database, by Army housing property, to find out about potential exposure and adverse health impacts. The hotline and registry is aimed at addressing the health or safety concerns of former and

current residents and helping them get access to medical care for any housing-related illnesses. Information was not immediately available about whether the other services are also establishing similar registries.

"Great 1st step, but joint service registry would be best. We'll watch how connection to health care will work," tweeted Joyce Raezer, executive director of the National Military Family Association, on 16 APR. However, those who serve in other branches of service, but live or have lived in Army housing can call the Army hotline for assistance and to provide information for the registry. It will provide a two-way exchange of information for all potential enrollees.

"We want to hear all concerns so we can make sure they are properly addressed," said John Resta, director of the U.S. Army Public Health Center and acting deputy chief of staff of Public Health for the Army Medical Command, in an announcement about the hotline. A team of trained professionals will document the caller's concerns and assist them with access to medical care if needed, said Resta. They can also refer any housing related concerns to the appropriate installation Department of Public Works, he said. The staff members will also provide current and former residents of Army housing with information on environmental health hazards.

The toll-free hotline/registry number is **800-984-8523**. Other registry numbers: Overseas: DSN (312) 421-3700; Stateside: DSN 421-3700; Stateside Commercial: 210-295-3700. Calls to the toll-free and commercial numbers confirmed that staff members answer the phones immediately. A timeline for launching this digital application for a searchable database has not yet been determined, said Doug Holl, spokesman for the Army Public Health Center. It's the third phase of a broad initiative to establish the fully integrated registry of Army housing properties and environmental health assessments, Holl said.

In the second phase, officials will compile the information about the housing inventory and associated environmental health hazards and enter it into the DoD Enterprise Military Housing system. Housing environmental health exposure data will be entered into the Defense Occupational and Environmental Health Readiness System. "The registry was created as an Army initiative directed by Vice Army Chief of Staff Gen. James C. McConville and seen as an additional opportunity to engage in a dialogue with our Army family and better understand their housing concerns," Holl said. "This registry is currently available to anyone and provides an opportunity to pursue further information and support regarding any health or safety concern that may not have been fully addressed," stated Army Surgeon General Lt. Gen. Nadja West, in a letter to housing residents.

The third phase will result in a solution for understanding the health effects of potential environmental hazards found in housing; assess future needs for health interventions and health education; and inform the individuals about potential exposure and adverse health impacts, Holl said. Darlena Brown, an Army wife who says her son, now almost 9, still suffers from the effects of lead poisoning in Army housing, said the hotline and registry are a step in the right direction. She and other military families and family advocates have questioned whether officials were tracking and treating the health issues that are linked to their military housing.

DoD is collecting data on the health effects, said Dr. Terry Adirim, deputy assistant secretary of defense for health services policy and oversight, during a March 19 meeting of the DoD Military Family Readiness Council. The issue is important not just to the families with health issues they believe are connected to their current base housing, but also to those who lived in those houses previously, said Karen Ruedisueli, deputy government relations director for the National Military family Association, at the council meeting.

The Army Public Health Center provides continuously updated online health information and resources on mold and lead for service members, families, civilians, contractors and health care providers. The website, <https://phc.amedd.army.mil/topics/campaigns/housing/Pages/HEHRR.aspx> also has information about the registry. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Karen Jowers | April 17, 2019 ++]

CBD Products ► **Military Users Risk Testing Positive for Illegal Drug Use**

The Department of Defense is warning servicemembers about the risk of being exposed to illegal drugs when using products containing cannabidiol, popularly known as CBD. The warning follows passage of the Agriculture Improvement Act of 2018, which removed hemp from the government's list of controlled substances. The crop is now treated as an agricultural commodity if it has extremely low concentrations of delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol or THC. In a command message on the American Forces Network, DOD officials are letting troops know that they could potentially get a dose of THC, the psychoactive ingredient in marijuana, when using supplements containing CBD.



The hemp extract is found in many widely available products ranging from vape oil to gummies and marketed as a treatment for ailments such as chronic pain, anxiety, inflammation and cancer. CBD products are legal under federal law as long as they contain less than 0.3 percent THC, which is present in hemp at much lower concentrations than in marijuana. However, it's uncertain whether THC levels in all CBD products comply with the law, said Patricia Deuster, a professor in the Department of Military and Emergency Medicine at Uniformed Services University, said in a telephone interview 11 APR.

There have also been cases of CBD products that contain synthetic cannabinoids, said Deuster, who also serves as director of the Consortium for Health and Military Performance. "CBD isn't psychoactive but if it is adulterated it could contain psychoactive ingredients," she said.

Nate Atwood, 45, a former civilian defense worker at Misawa Air Base, Japan, and Grafenwoehr Training Area, Germany, said he's used CBD products to battle inflammation and pain. "I would definitely recommend it for anyone who has problems with inflammation, including arthritis and backpain," he said. "You can easily replace Motrin and most other over-the-counter pills, and a lot of pharmaceutical pain pills as well. I'm living proof of that." Atwood recently started growing cannabis at home in Salcha, Alaska, to make his own CBD oil, he said.

Some CBD manufacturers guarantee no THC, but others might add it to give their products a kick, he said. "That's the stuff people need to be wary of," he said. "If you do get tested for drugs at your place of employment, THC might show up. I doubt it's possible, but if the military could come up with a list of approved brands, it could be beneficial to a lot of people." The military's Operation Supplement Safety campaign posted a message on its website 26 FEB warning that "Military Service Members should avoid using any product with CBD, as it could contain THC and result in a positive drug test."

In a two-month period last year, military bases in the U.S. reported more than 100 medical incidents related to such products, Deuster said. The incidents involved things such as emergency room visits with troops reporting symptoms ranging from increased heart rates to hallucinations, she said. Military regulations prohibit members of the Army and Air Force from consuming hemp products. The Navy and Marines allow their servicemembers to consume them but Deuster said those who do are taking a risk consuming "foods that might cause them to fail a drug test." A positive test for THC is a career ender, she said. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Seth Robson | April 16, 2019++]

Toxic Exposure | Kirtland AFB ▶ Jet Fuel Seeping Into The Ground For Decades

The Air Force says it has spent \$125 million so far cleaning up thousands of tons of soil and millions of gallons of water contaminated by jet fuel at a base bordering New Mexico's largest city. Air Force Deputy Assistant Secretary Mark Correll briefed Albuquerque water utility managers on the project at Kirtland Air Force Base during a meeting last week. The Albuquerque Journal reports Correll also reiterated the Air Force's commitment to the clean-up. He said drinking water wells are tested monthly and no contamination has been found. The fuel leak — believed to have been seeping into the ground for decades — was detected in 1999. While state and military officials say drinking wells are protected, community watchdogs are pushing for an independent review of the cleanup. [Source: The Associated Press | April 23, 2019 ++]

Health Care Cost Update 02 ▶ Americans Report Great Angst Over Healthcare Costs

Recent research by West Health and Gallup discovered that American adults fear a major health event could lead to bankruptcy, that the U.S. economy is in significant danger and that the U.S. government is ill-equipped to address rising healthcare costs in a significant way. The study findings are based on a nationally representative survey of more than 3,500 randomly selected U.S. adults. The study revealed more than 3 in 4 Americans believe they pay 'too much' for healthcare relative to the quality of care they receive. Furthermore, 45% of the American public is concerned that a major health event could result in personal bankruptcy.



Surprisingly, this concern remains relevant for Americans in the top 10% of earners. Of Americans who reported earning more than \$180,000 a year, 1 in 3 were "concerned" or "extremely concerned" that a major health event could result in personal bankruptcy. But the anxiety induced by healthcare costs goes beyond worry over personal finances. Three quarters of Americans (77%) say they are concerned healthcare costs will result in significant and lasting damage to the U.S. economy. Despite Americans' concerns about U.S. healthcare costs, their perceptions about the quality of healthcare in the United States are surprisingly positive. 64% of Americans reported being completely or mostly satisfied with the U.S. healthcare system when it comes to meeting their needs and that of other household members.

This optimistic outlook seems somewhat disjointed with key healthcare outcomes reported by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development or OECD. When compared with 36 other developed nations within the co-operation, the U.S. ranks 28th in life expectancy and 31st in infant mortality, two indicators considered important barometers of national healthcare quality. Furthermore, perceptions around quality differ by partisan affiliation. 67% of self-identified Republicans vs. 38% of Democrats believe the U.S. healthcare system is "among the best" or "the best in the world." But despite these opposing outlooks, both party groups report similar effects on their finances and health due to high healthcare costs.

In the past 12 months alone, Americans reported borrowing an estimated \$88 billion to pay for healthcare. In the same time period, Americans reported heavy withdrawals against their future by tapping into long-term savings and retirement funds to the tune of \$126 billion. A Gallup Panel member who was interviewed in-depth as part of the study brings this figure to life, saying:

"I'm a 61-year-old male married 40 years, no children. Both my wife and I are heavily considering our retirement and one of the biggest hurdles is our healthcare. We're hoping something positive will happen in our healthcare system, so we can enjoy our retirement."

But perhaps more worrisome than the financial burden is the effect that the cost of healthcare has on the health of the American people. In the past 12 months, 38 million Americans elected to forgo a medical procedure, test or evaluation that was recommended by a physician, for a "somewhat" or "very serious" medical condition because they didn't have enough money to pay for it. A sobering conversation with another member of the Gallup Panel illustrates the gravity of this problem:

"My brother died because he didn't have access to healthcare. He didn't go to the doctor because he couldn't afford it and he had prostate cancer. I think he got Medicare, but then when he went to the doctor, it was too late."

Outlook for the Future Is Pessimistic

Americans currently have little optimism about future healthcare costs. Three in four (76%) predict that healthcare costs will continue to increase over the next two years. An overwhelming majority of Americans believe the government is not doing enough to ensure that prescription drug prices and healthcare costs, in general, remain affordable (77% and 74%, respectively). Americans have little faith that the government will achieve this goal; only 8% of Americans say they are confident that bipartisan legislation will be achieved to reduce the cost of healthcare. Ironically, this pessimism is uniform across party affiliation with more than two-thirds of Republicans and Democrats saying they are "not at all confident" elected officials will be able to work together to reduce costs. To learn more, download West Health and Gallup's full report: [The U.S. Healthcare Cost Crisis](#).

[Source: Gallup Blog | Mike Ellrich & Lance Stevens | April 2, 2019 ++]

PTSD Detection ► Voice Analysis Software | 89% Accurate

Voice analysis software can help detect post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in veterans based on their speech, a study suggests. Doctors have long understood that people with psychiatric disorders may speak differently than individuals who do not have mental health problems, researchers note in *Depression and Anxiety*. While some previous research points to the potential for distinct speech patterns among people with PTSD, it's been unclear whether depression that often accompanies PTSD might explain the unique voice characteristics.

In the current study, voice analysis software detected which veterans had PTSD and which ones did not with 89 percent accuracy. "Those with the PTSD talked more slowly (slower tongue movement), were more monotonous with fewer bursts of vocalization, were less animated and energetic (lifeless) in their speech, and had longer hesitations and a flatter tone," said lead study author Dr. Charles Marmar, chair of psychiatry at NYU School of Medicine in New York City. "Our findings suggest that speech-based characteristics can be used to diagnose this disease, and with further refinement and validation, may be employed in the clinic in the near future," Marmar said by email.

Marmar's team used an artificial intelligence program that "learns" how to classify individuals based on examples of speech. First, researchers recorded hours-long interviews based on questions often asked by clinicians to diagnose PTSD. Altogether, they interviewed 53 Iraq and Afghanistan veterans with PTSD related to their service as well as 78 veterans without the disease. Then, they fed the recordings into voice analysis software developed by Stanford

Research Institute (SRI) International, designers of the “Siri” App, to yield a total of 40,526 speech-based features captured in short spurts of talk. The software linked patterns of specific voice features with PTSD, including less clear speech and a lifeless, metallic tone, both of which had long been reported anecdotally as helpful in diagnosis.

While the study did not explore the disease mechanisms behind PTSD, the theory is that traumatic events change brain circuits that process emotion and muscle tone that affect a person’s voice, the study team writes. The study was small, and it wasn’t designed to prove whether or how PTSD might directly cause changes in vocal patterns. It’s also possible that results might be different for people who experienced trauma unrelated to military service such as sexual assault or a natural disaster.

Other warning signs of PTSD may also be easier for family members to spot, said Dr. Ronald Pies of Tufts University School of Medicine in Boston. “I think more general, observable indicators of trauma are more relevant in such cases,” Pies, who wasn’t involved in the study, said by email. “Noticing that a family member exposed to a recent trauma appears to be unusually irritable, aggressive, hyper-vigilant, or reports nightmares, flashbacks of the trauma, or appears socially withdrawn or depressed ... would warrant a clinical assessment.” But it may not be too far in the future that a tool like the one tested in the study could be one way to identify people who need to be evaluated for PTSD, said U.S. Army Capt. Jeffrey Osgood of the Center for Military Psychiatry and Neuroscience at the Walter Reed Army Institute of Research. “In a perfect world, I see this technology used as an early warning tool for PTSD,” Osgood, who wasn’t involved in the study, said by email.

It’s possible a version of the software tested in the study could be readily available, perhaps as a smartphone app, to analyze a person’s speech during and after highly stressful or traumatic experiences and to flag potential problems to patients or clinicians, Osgood said. “This could prompt a more thorough screening and early intervention,” Osgood said. “However, more studies are needed before clinicians can confidently use this tool to help make diagnoses.” For more on the subject refer to Depression and Anxiety www.bit.ly/2vhqhA0 . [Source: Reuters Health News | Lisa Rapaport | April 22, 2019 ++]

Medicare Freebies ► Seniors, Don’t Overlook These Six

If you have Medicare or will soon, you probably know the basics of what it covers. But how much do you know about all the lesser-known benefits that are included with Medicare health insurance coverage? They aren’t exactly free, because [Medicare isn’t free](#). But these included services have no out-of-pocket costs for many Medicare beneficiaries. There are some caveats. For example, there may be limitations on frequency, and your health care provider must accept Medicare’s payment conditions. Still, it’s worth knowing these benefits are in your pocket if you have Original Medicare, which is one of the two main types of Medicare plans.

Costs may differ for Medicare Advantage plans — the other main type of Medicare plan — because they are offered by private insurers and generally come with their own set of benefits, as are explained further in [“7 Facts You Need to Know About Medicare.”](#)

1. Annual wellness visit

The purpose of the [annual wellness visit](#) is to develop or update a personalized plan to help prevent disease and disability based on your health situation. According to Medicare.gov, the official government website for Medicare, the visit might also include:

- A review of your medical and family history
- Developing or updating a list of your health care providers and prescriptions
- Routine measurements — such as height, weight and blood pressure
- Detection of cognitive impairment
- Personalized health advice

Just note that costs such as a deductible might apply if during an annual visit you receive additional tests or services that aren't covered preventive benefits.

2. Counseling

The following types of counseling are among those covered by Medicare for people who meet eligibility requirements:

- [Alcohol counseling](#) — up to four sessions per year
- [Smoking and tobacco counseling](#) — up to eight sessions in a 12-month period
- [Cardiovascular behavioral therapy](#) visits — one per year

While the first two types of counseling are intended to help a patient quit alcohol or tobacco, which are moves with extensive health benefits, cardiovascular behavioral therapy is targeted at helping you lower your risk of developing heart disease. “During therapy, your doctor may discuss aspirin use (if appropriate), check your blood pressure, and give you tips to make sure you’re eating well,” says Medicare.gov.

3. Screenings

Medicare covers screenings for a variety of health conditions. They include screenings for:

- [Cardiovascular disease](#) — one blood test every five months
- [Colorectal cancer](#) — one colonoscopy every 24 or 120 months, depending on your risk
- [Depression](#) — one screening per year
- [Diabetes](#) — up to two screenings per year

Some screenings have eligibility requirements, while others do not.

4. Vaccines

One [influenza shot](#) per flu season is free. A total of two [pneumococcal shots](#) are also covered. These vaccines protect against pneumococcal disease, which the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention describe as any type of infection caused by *Streptococcus pneumoniae* bacteria. Vaccines for [hepatitis B](#) may also be covered, depending on your risk.

5. The ‘What’s Covered’ app

Medicare recently debuted a free app called “[What’s Covered](#),” which is available for Apple and Android devices. You can use the app to look up other items and services and find out whether Medicare covers them. “The app delivers general cost, coverage and eligibility details,” says Medicare.gov. If you don’t want to download the app or don’t have a smartphone or internet-connected tablet, you can use a computer to access Medicare.gov’s [Your Medicare Coverage tool](#), which also lets you search for an item or service and find out whether it’s covered.

6. Insurance assistance

People who are eligible for Medicare as well as their families and caregivers have access to free in-depth, one-on-one insurance counseling and assistance from State Health Insurance Assistance Programs (SHIPs) SHIPs are funded by grants that the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) makes to states, according to the HHS Administration for Community Living. There is a SHIP for every state as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, Guam and the U.S. Virgin Islands. SHIPs can be especially helpful during open enrollment season, although they offer various other services besides one-on-one assistance with reviewing your Medicare plan options. They can also:

- Answer questions about what Medicare does and does not cover.
- Tell you about out-of-pocket cost assistance programs for which you might be eligible.
- Help you understand Medicare’s eligibility criteria.
- Explain how Medicare coverage works in conjunction with supplemental insurance policies, Medicaid and other forms of health insurance.

To find the SHIP for your state, [visit the national SHIP website](#) or call 877-839-2675.

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Brandon Ballenger | April 18, 2019 ++]

Heart Disease ► People with Stress Disorders Like PTSD are at Higher Risk

People coping with psychological trauma have a heightened risk of developing cardiovascular disease, a large-scale study finds. Researchers used national health registers to identify 136,637 Swedish patients with no history of cardiovascular disease who were diagnosed with a stress-related disorder — a cluster of mental health conditions, including post-traumatic stress disorder, triggered by acute trauma — from 1987 to 2013. The team compared each of these patients with siblings and with unrelated people of the same age and sex, both of whom had a clear bill of mental and heart health.

In the patients first year after being diagnosed, those with a stress-related disorder had a 64 percent higher risk of developing cardiovascular disease than their siblings without a mental health diagnosis, and a 70 percent higher risk than unrelated patients, the scientists report. The cardiovascular disease accounted for included heart failure, arrhythmia, stroke, hypertension and heart attack. The study found that those with a stress-related disorder were most vulnerable in the year following their mental health diagnosis: They had four times the relative risk of heart failure compared with their siblings. After one year, the patients with a stress diagnosis had a 29 percent higher risk for all cardiovascular disease than their siblings. Over the course of 27 years, 10.5 percent of patients with stress-related disorders developed cardiovascular disease — compared with 8.4 percent of the sibling group and 6.9 percent of the general population group.

The study, published 10 APR in the British Medical Journal, builds on a growing body of research linking mental health with heart disease. “Researchers have been connecting mental health and cardiovascular disease for at least 40 years,” says Mary Whooley, a professor of medicine at the University of California, San Francisco, who was not involved in the study. But much of the previous research into the link between psychiatric stress and heart health has focused on populations of male veterans of PTSD, says Whooley, who is also director of cardiac rehabilitation at the San Francisco Veterans Affairs health care system.

“Whats really impressive about this study is the enormous number of patients,” Whooley says. More than half the patients with stress-related disorders were women. By comparing siblings, the study was also able to better control for genetic traits and childhood experiences that might contribute to a person’s risk of developing cardiovascular disease. [Source: Britain Today News | April 16, 2019 ++]

Ticks ► Season Has Begun

Once outdoor temperatures go over 8 degrees Celsius (about 46 degrees Fahrenheit), ticks start coming out. They usually wait in forests, meadows, parks and gardens, hoping that a host will brush against them while walking through tall grass or shrubs. Anyone who spends a lot of time outdoors will probably come across them sooner or later. News reports on ticks can paint an alarming picture, but they aren't actually as dangerous as many people think. Although ticks can carry and spread disease, tick bites don't usually cause health problems. If you are bitten by a tick, any problems are usually only temporary and minor. Tick bites rarely have serious or lasting effects.

Two main diseases can be transmitted by them: Lyme disease (also called Lyme borreliosis) and tick-borne encephalitis (TBE), which can cause inflammation of the brain (encephalitis) or the membranes surrounding the brain and spinal cord (meningitis). Infection is only possible if the tick that bites you is infected, and also manages to transmit the viruses or bacteria. Lyme disease is much more common than TBE. Generally speaking, TBE is rare, and doesn't

occur at all in many regions. Neither of these two diseases can be spread from one human to another. In other words: if someone is infected, they are not contagious to others.

Learn more

Your risk of a tick bite will mainly depend on where you spend your time and what you do outdoors. Wearing closed shoes on hikes through tall grass or shrubs can help keep ticks out. Clothes that cover as much of your body as possible – like full-length trousers and long-sleeved shirts – make it harder for ticks to attach. It is easier to see them on light-colored clothing. Ticks can be found both out in the wild and in gardens or parks. Ticks may wander around your body for a few hours before biting. So you can prevent bites and substantially lower your risk of Lyme disease or TBE by checking your body for ticks right after spending time in a forest or meadow, and removing any you find. Children often won't remember to look for ticks, so they might need a reminder or some help. It also makes sense for adults to have someone help, especially to check hard-to-see places.

According to the German Robert Koch Institute, tick repellent sprays only offer temporary protection from ticks. The effect wears off after two to four hours, so you will need to re-apply the spray on longer walks. There is a vaccine for TBE. The TBE vaccine may be a good idea if you spend a lot of time outdoors in high-risk areas. Last but not least, it's important to look out for signs of infection if you have been bitten, and to seek medical attention if any symptoms develop. [Source: Informedhealth.org: Newsletter | April 25, 2019 ++]

TRICARE After Retirement ► Must Enroll Within 1-YR

When you retire from active duty or turn age 60 as a retired reserve member, your TRICARE coverage changes. After either of these [Qualifying Life Events](#) (QLEs), you must take action and enroll in a TRICARE retiree health plan so that you and your family members don't have a gap in your TRICARE coverage after retirement. Under a recent change, you have up to 1-YR after your retirement date to enroll in a TRICARE plan as a retiree. If you don't, you and your family members will only be able to get care at a military hospital or clinic if space is available.

Each service is responsible for updating the [Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System](#) (DEERS) with your retirement date. Until that date is posted to DEERS, you can't enroll in a retiree TRICARE plan. In some cases, the retirement date doesn't show up in DEERS until days or even months after you've retired. "This allows plenty of time to update DEERS and enroll in a TRICARE health plan as our new retirees adjust to civilian life."

Coverage must begin effective the day after you ended your previous TRICARE coverage, and any TRICARE enrollment fees must be paid retroactive to that date. Continuing TRICARE health care coverage isn't automatic following these QLEs. If you don't enroll in a plan after retiring from active duty or turning age 60, you'll lose TRICARE coverage and only be able to receive care at military hospitals and clinics if space is available. After the 12-month period, you may only enroll in or make changes to your health plan during the annual [TRICARE Open Season](#) or following another QLE.

You'll need to make sure you update your and your family's information in DEERS. You and your family members will also need new identification cards upon the sponsor's status change. No matter when you enroll within the 12-month period, coverage begins on the first day of your retirement and you must pay all enrollment fees back to that date.

Retiring from Active Duty

If you're [retiring from active duty](#), you previously paid nothing out of pocket and your family's costs were minimal (if covered under TRICARE Select). As a retiree, you'll now pay retiree costs for care. Depending on the retiree TRICARE health plan you choose, you may see an increase in your enrollment fees, deductibles, copayments, cost-shares, and other fees.

Retired Reservists Turning Age 60

If you're a [retired reserve member who turns age 60](#) and were enrolled in TRICARE Retired Reserve (TRR), your TRR coverage ends the day you turn age 60 and become eligible for TRICARE Prime or TRICARE Select coverage. You must have your retirement fully completed with your service personnel office or command. This means your retirement pay is processed and activated

To confirm your retired status is properly reflected in DEERS, visit <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/milconnect> or call the DEERS Support Office (1-800-538-9552). Once DEERS is accurate, enroll in a TRICARE health plan based on your residence within 12 months from your 60th birthday. As a retiree, you'll pay retiree costs such as enrollment fees, deductibles, copayments, and cost-shares.

Health Plan Options

You and your family members may be eligible for one of the following TRICARE health plans:

- TRICARE Prime (if residing in a Prime Service Area)
- TRICARE Select or TRICARE Overseas Program Select
- US Family Health Plan
- TRICARE For Life

Visit the [TRICARE Plan Finder](#) to learn more about your options. Once you enroll in a TRICARE health plan, you also have [pharmacy coverage](#).

Dental and Vision Options

Retiring service members and their eligible family members have the option to enroll in the Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP). You don't have to be enrolled in a TRICARE retiree health plan to purchase dental coverage. However, you must be enrolled in a TRICARE health plan to potentially qualify to purchase vision coverage through FEDVIP. For more information about FEDVIP and to check your eligibility, visit the [FEDVIP website](#).

Learn more about retiring with TRICARE by downloading the [Retiring from Active Duty Brochure](#) and [Costs and Fees Sheet](#). Take command of your health and understand your benefits before you retire.

[Source: TRICARE Communications | April 23, 2019 ++]

Prescription Drug Costs ► S.64 | Prohibit Delaying Generic Drug Market Entry

Sens. Amy Klobuchar (D-MN) and Chuck (R-IA) announced Sens. Dick Durbin (D-IL) and Kevin Cramer (R-ND) have joined their bipartisan legislation to bring down the skyrocketing prices of prescription drugs. The **Preserve Access to Affordable Generics and Biosimilars Act** would limit anticompetitive pay-for-delay deals that prevent or delay the introduction of affordable follow-on versions of branded pharmaceuticals. The use of "pay for delay" deals—the practice in which drug companies use pay-off agreements to delay the introduction of cheaper substitutes—could make some critical prescriptions unaffordable for patients and impose significant costs on the U.S. health care system. Sens. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., and Joni Ernst, R-Iowa, have previously co-sponsored this bill.

"I'm glad that we have the support of Sens. Durbin and Cramer for our bipartisan legislation to spur competition in prescription drug markets, which will help to reduce prices and ensure patients can access the medications they need," Klobuchar stated in the release. "By promoting increased competition from generic drugs and biosimilars, this legislation will help curb the skyrocketing costs of prescription medications." [Source: Brainerd Dispatch | April 16, 2019 ++]

IRS 2019 Filing Season ► 7 Ways Your Taxes Will Change in 2020

Once you're done breathing that sigh of relief after filing your taxes this year, it's time to get right back to work preparing for the next tax season. We're already nearly one-third of the way through tax year 2019 — the one for which your return is due by April 2020. If you want to make the most of everything from tax deductions to tax-advantaged accounts this year, now is the time to learn the rules that will apply to your next return. Many key dollar figures — from standard deductions to retirement account contribution limits — can change every year due to inflation. Additionally, some aspects of 2017's tax reform didn't take effect until this year. So, here is a look at some of the biggest ways in which the federal tax return you file in 2020 will differ from the one that you hopefully filed by today:

1. No individual mandate penalty -- Most of the tax code changes stemming from the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act of 2017 took effect in 2018. One exception is the change to the shared responsibility payment, which takes effect this year. The shared responsibility payment — commonly referred to as the individual mandate penalty — has applied to folks required to have health insurance under the Affordable Care Act but who didn't get coverage and didn't qualify for an exemption. If you owed the penalty, it was due when you pay your taxes. Starting this year, however, there is no penalty. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act zeroed it out effective in 2019. So, folks who don't have health insurance this year will not owe the penalty when they file their taxes in 2020.

2. Higher medical expense deduction threshold -- Another way in which 2010's Affordable Care Act had an impact on taxes was by raising the threshold for deductible medical and dental expenses from 7.5% to 10% of adjusted gross income, which made it harder to qualify for the deduction. This meant that if you itemized your tax deductions, you could deduct eligible out-of-pocket medical expenses if they exceeded 10% of your income, rather than the previous 7.5%. The Tax Cuts and Jobs Act gave taxpayers a brief reprieve from that change, lowering the threshold back down to 7.5%, but only for the 2017 and 2018 tax years. Starting this year, it returns to 10%. In other words, as the IRS puts it in Publication 5307, which details how tax reform affects individuals: "If you plan to itemize for tax year 2019, your unreimbursed medical and dental expenses will have to exceed 10% of your 2019 adjusted gross income in order to be deductible."

3. No alimony deduction -- Elimination of the alimony deduction is another Tax Cuts and Jobs Act change that took effect in 2019 rather than 2018. For divorce and separation agreements made or modified this year or thereafter, alimony payments will not be deductible, says IRS Publication 5307. So, a spouse who gets divorced this year and pays alimony this year cannot write the payments off on a tax return in 2020. That also means that a spouse who gets divorced this year and receives alimony this year will not count the payments as income on the tax return filed next year.

4. Higher retirement account contribution limits -- This year, you can stash more cash in various types of tax-advantaged retirement accounts, as is detailed in "[Limits for 401\(k\), IRA and Other Retirement Plans to Rise in 2019.](#)" Contributions that you make to such accounts, including traditional 401(k) plans and traditional individual retirement accounts (IRAs), in 2019 could be deductible on your next tax return. The 2019 contribution limits include:

- 401(k) base contribution: \$19,000 (up from \$18,500 last year)
- 401(k) catch-up contribution (for taxpayers age 50 and older): additional \$6,000 (unchanged)
- IRA base contribution: \$6,000 (up from \$5,500)
- IRA catch-up contribution (for taxpayers age 50 and older): additional \$1,000 (unchanged)

The increases to IRA contributions limits for 2019 are a particularly big deal, as this is the first year since 2013 that IRA limits have budged.

5. Higher HSA contribution limits -- Health savings accounts are another type of tax-advantaged account for which the contribution limits generally increase as the years roll along. HSAs are not strictly for retirement savings, although you can effectively use them as retirement accounts, as we explain in "[3 Reasons You Need a Health Savings Account](#)

[— and How to Open One Today.](#)” The 2019 contribution limits for people who are eligible for an HSA and have the following types of high-deductible health insurance policies are:

- Self-only coverage: \$3,500 (up from \$3,450 last year)
- Family coverage: \$7,000 (up from \$6,900)

6. Higher standard deductions -- Standard deductions are somewhat higher this year on account of inflation. The IRS reports that they are:

- Married filing jointly: \$24,400 (up \$400 from last year)
- Married filing separately: \$12,200 (up \$200)
- Head of household: \$18,350 (up \$350)
- Single: \$12,200 (up \$200)

The standard deduction reduces the amount of your income that’s subject to federal taxes. So, if a married couple filing a joint tax return is eligible for and chooses to take the standard deduction on their next return, they would not be taxed on the first \$24,400 of their taxable income from 2019.

7. **Higher income brackets** -- Income tax brackets are also somewhat higher in 2019 than they were last year on account of inflation. The IRS reports that the tax rates and corresponding 2019 income brackets are as follows for folks whose tax filing status is single:

- 37% tax rate: Applies to incomes of more than \$510,300
- 35%: More than \$204,100 but not more than \$510,300
- 32%: More than \$160,725 but not more than \$204,100
- 24%: More than \$84,200 but not more than \$160,725
- 22%: More than \$39,475 but not more than \$84,200
- 12%: More than \$9,700 but not more than \$39,475
- 10%: \$9,700 or less

For complete 2019 tax rate tables for all tax filing statuses, see [IRS Revenue Procedure 2018-57](#). They start on Page 8 of the document. For the 2018 tables, see [Internal Revenue Bulletin 2018-10](#).

[Source: MoneyTalksNews | Karla Bowsher | April 15, 2019 ++]

IRS Kiddie Tax ► A Disaster for Some Gold Star Families

For some, tax season brings a small boon in the form of a refund. For others it can be a source of stress. But Theresa Jones sees it as an annual reminder of her husband, Navy Lt. Cmdr. Landon Jones, who was killed in a helicopter crash on Sept. 22, 2013. Since then, Jones and her two sons, ages 5 and 11, have received monthly compensation in the form of survivor benefits — one allotment through the Department of Defense is taxable, and another through the Department of Veterans Affairs, which is not taxed. For the past several years she's had to pay roughly \$1,150 in taxes on her sons' benefits. This year, it was \$5,400. "My kids are owing the government back money, that the government gave them, because their dad died, and my kids have to pay it back," Jones told Task & Purpose. "And every year this comes around and it's just this reminder of this tragedy, and it's literally like throwing salt in the wound."

Military widows and widowers **who put their benefits in their child's name** saw a significant spike in their taxes this year. To make matters worse, Jones, along with three other military widows who spoke with Task & Purpose, said they were not aware how much their taxes would increase and were unable to budget or otherwise prepare for the hike in cost. "It was a very hard pill to swallow, that they're even taxed; that they have to give money back in general, as kids," said Jones, who provided Task & Purpose with copies of her tax documents for 2018 and 2017. "I've been sitting here for four days trying to figure out why it's so much more. I looked at it and realized this is going to be something

that's going to happen every year so this is going to have to be calculated into the monthly budget now. If it's going to be \$400 a month, that's like a car payment. That's something that I'm going to have to take into account every year.", Jones said.

The increase was due to a change with the "Kiddie Tax" under the Tax Cuts and Jobs Act, which President Donald Trump signed into law in December 2017. Previously, survivors benefits that were allocated to the children of a fallen service member were taxed at the parent's rate. Under the new tax code, those benefits are instead treated the same as a trust or estate, which means they can be taxed at a rate as high as 37%, and that threshold is reached faster than it did before. While the change in the tax code may have had an immediate financial impact on Gold Star families this year, it may be a consequence of a more pervasive problem with how survivors benefits are classified and paid out.

Just the tip of the iceberg

Though the change in the tax code has had a direct impact on Gold Star families this tax season, some advocates argue that it's a symptom of a larger issue: A rule against concurrent receipt or "double dipping," which bars recipients from getting two simultaneous types of federal monetary benefits. Beyond the Service Members Group Life Insurance policy, which provides a one-time lump-sum payment up to \$400,000 to a beneficiary if the service member elected to pay into it, there are two different types of survivor benefits for military spouses and children.

- There's the Department of Veterans Affairs Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC), which provides roughly \$1,300 per month to a surviving spouse, regardless of the service members' grade or length of service, and is not taxed, nor is it transferable.
- And then there's the Survivor Benefits Plan (SBP), a Department of Defense insurance annuity that varies in amount depending on the service member's rank, and is based on 55% of projected retired pay with 30 years of service.

Because recipients can't double dip, the VA benefit and the military benefit are offset — meaning that if a survivor chooses to put both the VA benefit and the DoD benefit in their name, then they'll see a \$1 reduction in their SBP for every \$1 they receive from their DIC plan. This dollar for dollar offset in survivors benefits has become known as the Widow's Tax. This offset typically means that survivors are left with just the VA benefit, which tends to be higher, and is roughly \$15,800 a year. As of last year 65,255 military widows and widowers were subjected to this offset, according to a fact sheet provided by the Tragedy Assistance Program for Survivors (TAPS), a non-profit that advocates for and provides support to military families who lost a loved one.

To get around the Widow's Tax, survivors can put their SBP in their child's name, and for years, it was a reliable workaround to ensure that military spouses with children who lost a loved one could actually take home the benefits they were entitled to. But even that fix has pitfalls: If a parent puts their military survivors benefits in their child's name, those benefits disappear when the child turns 18, or 22 if he or she is a full-time student. Additionally, if a survivor remarries, then he or she forfeits their VA benefit. This has forced Gold Star families to make tough financial decisions on how they'll allocate their benefits, whether they'll remarry, and what will happen as their kids grow up. 'It's a survivor's benefit. It's not a tax shelter for us'

Cheryl Lankford, whose husband U.S. Army Command Sgt. Maj. Jonathan Lankford, Sr. died in Iraq on Sept. 22, 2007, told Task & Purpose that she saw her taxes for her 14-year-old son's survivor benefits increase from roughly \$100 and \$200 dollars per year to about \$2,500 this year. "I heard rumors that this year we were gonna be paying a little bit more, especially after the news broke that the taxes have changed and there may be a bit of an increase," Lankford told Task & Purpose. "I had no idea it would be quite that much money. That was a shocker for me"

It was the same for Jessica Braden-Rogers. For the last seven years since her husband, Army Capt. Michael Braden, died on April 18, 2012 while deployed to Afghanistan, Braden-Rogers has paid roughly \$1,100 in taxes for her son's benefits. This year she said it jumped to \$4,600. "None of us knew any of this until we all started filing our taxes and had such a significant increase in our tax burden," said Braden-Rogers, who has since remarried and no longer receives the VA benefit. "We've always had a tax burden, but for me, quadrupling the tax burden of a Gold Star child is completely unfair. It's cruel. I mean why would you tax a nine year old?"

When Jessica Johns started seeing comments on social media about how the tax code may impact Gold Star families like hers — Johns' husband, Army 1st Lt. Jonathan Rozier was killed in Iraq in 2003 — she told Task & Purpose she thought the reactions may have been overblown. Then she did her taxes, too. Like Braden-Rogers, Johns has also remarried and subsequently lost her VA survivor benefits. Her 16-year-old son Justin, however, still receives the military's Survivor Benefit Plan, and now those benefits are being taxed at a higher rate than ever before.

Last year Johns paid around \$400 in taxes for her son's benefits. This year she claims to have paid almost \$3,000. "I kind of was in denial," Johns told Task & Purpose. "I mean I was shocked first of all and then I started to get mad 'cause I'm like, well first of all, the name of the annuity is Survivor Benefit Plans so I don't understand why they tax it in the first place, but if they are going to tax it, why are they all of a sudden taxing like we are trying to shelter money in our kid's names so that we don't get taxed on it?" "It just made absolutely no sense to me at all," Johns continued. "That's really what they're doing and they're taxing it like we are rich people and pushing some of our income into our children's names so that we can shelter that from having to pay a higher tax bracket for us, but that's not what we are doing. It's a survivor's benefit. It's not a tax shelter for us."

The unexpected tax increase has led to some tough choices for the survivors who spoke with Task & Purpose: Cancelled vacations and trips; no summer camp for the kids; a tighter budget year-round; and a monthly, if not weekly re-assessment of finances as parents struggle to pay this year's taxes and plan for next year. And then there's the impact it has on their families that goes beyond the financial burden the tax hike has imposed. "It was heavy on my heart when I realized that my son receives this money because his dad died," Lankford said, speaking of her son Jonathan. "Now we feel like it's a challenge for us because he's a child, he's paying taxes, but he's paying taxes on the money that was left for him because of his father's service."

"That's a lot for a kiddo to take in," Lankford continued. "He's not unaware, and most of our kids are not unaware of what's happening around them. They know what's going on. And at the same time, we want to provide for them, we want to shelter them from these things, but it's important as surviving spouses that we come together and we help Congress understand how important it is to our families and to our well-being, that this can change. This needs to change. It needs to be changed soon."

Repealing the offset could end the tax issue

"In layman's terms, surviving spouses are having to give their benefits to their children in order to receive all of the benefits they have earned," Ashlynn Haycock, the deputy director of policy and legislation for TAPS told Task & Purpose. "The tax code isn't the issue," said Haycock, the Widow's Tax is. Under the new tax code "those benefits are being taxed at an astronomical rate," Haycock explained. "If we end the offset, those benefits will be reassigned back to the spouses, so they'll get all of the benefits they have earned, and we won't have this tax issue going forward."

Advocates like Haycock argue that the military's Survivor Benefits Plan and the VA's Dependency and Indemnity Compensation are two separate benefits that come from different pots — SBP is an insurance annuity, and DIC is a VA benefit — and so shouldn't count against each other. Currently, two bills aimed at removing the offset from survivors benefits have been introduced to the House and Senate; the Military Widow's Tax Elimination Act of 2019, sponsored by Sen. Doug Jones (D-AL); and the Military Surviving Spouses Equity Act sponsored by Reps. Joe Wilson, (R-SC) and John Yarmuth, (D-KY).

Even with bills to remove the offset introduced the House and Senate, survivors like Johns, Braden-Rogers, Lankford, and Jones are left to deal with the fallout of this year's tax season on their own. "A lot of us as military widows, many of us didn't have jobs, didn't have careers, when our spouses were killed, because we had followed our husbands around," Jones, who works part-time in real estate, in between going to college and caring for her sons, told Task & Purpose. "Now you're a single parent and you're trying to be there for your kids, and they've already lost one parent and you've got to go to work all day long, and you're trying to balance this," Jones continued. "It's so hard, and it's so exhausting. How am I going to pay for this... What am I going to do when this child turns 18 and all this drops

off. Am I going to have to sell my house, are we going to have to move?" [Source: Task & Purpose | James Clark | April 23, 2019 ++]

Social Security Q & A ► 190415 thru 190430

(Q) What if I die before I collect. Will my surviving spouse receive benefits based on the age that I pass away?

A. The amount that your spouse will receive will differ depending on whether you claim benefits or not. If you do not claim benefits, the amount will depend on your age when you die. Let's compare these situations first.

- If you do not claim your own retirement benefit and you die before your full retirement age (FRA), then survivors benefits will be based on your benefit at full retirement age. For example, if your benefit is \$1,000 per month at FRA and you die before your FRA, Social Security will determine the survivors benefits based on this \$1,000.
- On the other hand, if you claimed your own benefit at 64, your retirement benefit would be less than \$1,000, and the survivors benefits would be based on this smaller amount. (There is a limit on the size of this reduction. The reduction cannot be below 82.5 percent. So, if you claimed at 62, Social Security would base the survivors benefits on \$825 even though your benefit is smaller.)

The situation changes if you live beyond your full retirement age. If you claim benefits after FRA, the survivors benefits will be based on your retirement benefit, and delayed claiming increases your Social Security benefits by 8 percent each year until age 70. If you do not claim benefits and pass away between your FRA and 70, the survivors benefits would be based on an amount that you would have received if you claimed on the day that you died. Thus, if you pass away one year after you reach FRA, the survivors benefits would be based on \$1,080.

This, however, is only the first step in the calculation of the actual survivors benefits. The actual benefit also depends on your spouse's age when she claims survivors benefits. If she waits until her full retirement age, then these are indeed the amounts she will receive. If she claims before her FRA, however, her benefit will be smaller. If she claims at 60, the earliest age she can claim, then her benefit will be 71.5 percent of the base amount. Each month she delays claiming her benefit will increase until at FRA, she will get the full base amount. Waiting to claim beyond FRA will not increase her benefit. [Source: MoneyTalksNews | Jeff Miller | April 18, 2019 ++]

Hidden Cable Fees ► Let's End Those Sneaky Fees!

Like the airline and hotel industries, the cable TV and broadband sector has a masterful knack for obnoxious, hidden fees. From fees for simply trying to pay your bill to broadband surcharges based entirely on fluff and nonsense, the industry has spent years advertising one rate, only to hit you with a significantly higher price once your bill actually comes due. A new bill being proposed by Senator Ed Markey and Representative Anna Eshoo is attempting to put an end to the practice. The duo's **Truth-In-Billing, Remedies, and User Empowerment over Fees ('TRUE Fees') Act** would require cable TV or broadband providers to include all additional surcharges in the advertised price, helping consumers avoid sticker shock.

In recent years the industry has been under fire for its misleading "broadcast TV" fees, which simply takes a part of the cost of programming and buries it below the line. In many areas consumers can pay as much as \$12 per month extra just from this fee alone. Several class action lawsuits against cable giants like Comcast have yet to derail the practice. With so many consumers on auto-payment systems, most will never realize that they're suddenly paying a higher rate, something consumer groups say is entirely by design. "Communications service customers are almost used to being hit

by mysterious fees at the end of the month, never knowing what the true cost of service will be until the bill shows up—or, if they have automatic bill payment set up, maybe never really knowing about or even seeing these hidden fees increase,” Matt Wood, General Counsel of Consumer Group Free Press told Motherboard in an email. “That’s a shame, and they shouldn’t have to accept it.”

Regulators and lawmakers have historically turned a blind eye to the practice across industries. For example, the hotel industry in the States routinely imposes resort fees also intended to misleadingly jack up the advertised price, a practice banned in many European countries. And anybody that’s flown lately is well aware of the wide variety of nonsensical surcharges that can quickly result in a far more pricey trip than you may have originally expected. Wood said that instead of addressing this problem for what it is (false advertising), American leadership tends to treat such spurious surcharges as the height of capitalistic creativity. And when bills addressing the problem arrive, they tend to go nowhere thanks to industry lobbying.

Consumer Reports has attempted to draw some additional attention to the problem via its “What the Fee?!” campaign, highlighting misleading charges like “regulatory recovery” fees (designed to trick users into believing government is to blame for higher rates), to soaring charges for antiquated cable boxes and DVRs that cost companies a pittance to provide. “This legislation is simple, straightforward, and effective,” Consumer Reports said of this latest legislative effort. “The TRUE Fees Act would address the out-of-control fee problem in the telecommunications marketplace and deliver much-needed transparency for cable and internet providers’ unnecessarily-complicated billing practices.”

The government’s apathy has come with a steep price for cable and broadband customer wallets. Many of these fees have been jacked upwards of 241% in just the last few years, leaving American consumers paying even higher rates for what’s already some of the most expensive cable TV and broadband prices in the developed world. You are encouraged to [take a moment to add your voice here, so this pro-consumer legislation can be passed!](#) **Take Action.** [Source: Truth-In-Billing & MoneyTalksNews | Karl Bode & Miranda Marquit | February 19 & April 9, 2019 ++]

Use Tax ► **Legal Obligation and Civic Duty to Pay**

People living in a state which has no income tax but does have a sales tax who shop in a neighboring state which has an income tax but no sales tax are normally obligated under state law to pay use tax on any purchases which are brought back to their state of residence. Washington state law does mandate they do this. “Use tax is equal to the amount of WA sales tax that would have been paid, had the item been bought in WA state. In fact, some enforcement personnel from the Washington Department of Revenue are sent to Oregon on a regular basis to note WA license plates in shopping parking lots to note who might be making purchases, especially of high value items, like computers, appliances, cars, furniture, etc. and they then contact them at their WA residence to inform them of their obligation.

Other Washington residents, contrary to WA law, purchase and/or license cars in Oregon, which has no sales tax, but also extremely low license fees. To be entitled to those low license fees and no sales tax, you need to be a resident of Oregon, paying income and property taxes to that state.

When you are a resident of WA, and not paying an income tax, paying sales tax to the state in order to fund the state services, is one’s civic duty. Note that if a WA resident was instead shopping [in] a state or country with taxes equal or equivalent to WA, there is no use tax obligation. If you are paying a sales tax lower than that of WA, you owe use tax in the amount of the difference. Purchases from eBay or other internet sellers on which no sales tax is paid also generate use tax obligations. Note that if a WA resident who purchases restaurant meals or lodging in Oregon is not liable for use tax on those services, which are used in Oregon.” [Source: Federal News Network | Mike Causey | April 29, 2019 ++]

Afghan Manning Levels ► Afghanistan's Hired Guns

The number of security contractors the military employs in Afghanistan is higher now than at any time since President Barack Obama declared an end to combat operations in the country in 2014, Defense Department documents show. More than 5,800 privately employed security personnel are currently operating in Afghanistan under Pentagon contracts, according to the latest report released this month that the military headquarters overseeing Middle East wars compiles for Congress. The number of security contractors jumped by more than 1,000 in the three months since the last report – a spike of more than 20 percent and the biggest increase in two years.

More than 17,000 uniformed troops from NATO and partner countries are currently operating in Afghanistan in support of local forces, up from roughly 13,000 when President Donald Trump took office. Of those, roughly 8,500 are Americans. Another 5,500 U.S. troops remain in Afghanistan for the separate mission of hunting insurgent forces like the Islamic State group and elements of the Taliban. The last time the number of private security contractors exceeded 5,000 was in April 2014 during the height of the Obama administration's effort to withdraw all U.S. troops from Afghanistan. When Trump entered the White House in January 2017, the number stood at just over 3,400.

The new data comes amid concerns that the administration could increasingly turn to private companies to carry out the war. Officials and analysts, meanwhile, are raising alarm that the U.S. government is concealing the situation on the ground. "The main problem with contractors of all sorts is there's just not enough attention to what they're doing. That's not been reported out in a clear way to anybody's satisfaction for all these years," says Catherine Lutz, a professor at Brown University and a director of its Costs of War project, which documents the use of private contractors in U.S. conflicts. "The Pentagon should be telling us, the American public, who's funding this, what that means, why this is happening." "The main problem with contractors of all sorts is there's just not enough attention to what they're doing."

U.S. military headquarters in Kabul did not immediately respond to a request for comment. A Pentagon spokeswoman declined to provide further detail on how the military uses its security contractors and what accounts for the sudden increase. Of the 5,883 security contractors outlined in the latest reports from U.S. Central Command, 2,567 of them are armed private security contractors. The rest provide support functions, like driving vehicles or other logistics work related to security activities.

Security contractors – both armed and unarmed – are a subset of a larger group of contractors who perform a broad range of tasks, including translation, construction and information technology services. But at nearly 20 percent of that pool, they now represent a bigger portion of all contractors than at any time since 2013. The Costs of War project has documented that as many as 2,800 contractors have died in Afghanistan – a figure that often goes unmentioned in public remembrances of the 2,400 U.S. military deaths in that war.

The extent to which the U.S. needs more security contractors because of a deteriorating situation on the ground is unclear, largely because the Trump administration, like its predecessors, has opted to withhold pertinent information. Faced with reports of a rising death toll among Afghan soldiers and national police officers, the government in Kabul – with U.S. support – stopped releasing those figures two years ago. Even those who monitor the security situation there closely cannot discuss it publicly. When asked, for example, about the death rate among Afghan soldiers, which open source reporting indicates has reached unsustainable levels of as many as 40 per day, a top official tasked with scrutinizing reconstruction efforts in Afghanistan said he could not answer.

"A lot of the answers or information to answer that question is classified now," John Sopko, the congressionally appointed special inspector general for Afghanistan reconstruction, told a small group of reporters earlier this week. "What we are finding now is almost every indicia, metrics, however you want to phrase it, for success or failure is

now classified or nonexistent." When pressed about whether the situation appears to be improving or worsening, Sopko again refused to answer, but added, "Governments don't usually classify good news."

Contractors have provided critical support functions in U.S. conflicts going back to the Revolutionary War and regularly carry out benign tasks like meal service and maintaining infrastructure on military bases. They may also be called upon to train local troops or service military equipment like helicopters. In other circumstances, like with the subsequently rebranded firm Blackwater in the early days of Iraq, they provide security for high-profile officials or for U.S. bases and convoys. Prohibitions on their engaging in direct combat become murky when they operate in conflict zones where enemies move freely among the local populace. Blackwater, in particular, generated heated controversy for its heavy-handed battlefield tactics with seemingly little oversight.

And American leaders have relied on private security contractors to purposefully mask distasteful aspects of war. The Obama administration reportedly replaced troops that came home with private contractors, allowing it to maintain pressure on enduring enemies while publicly claiming the war was waning. Lutz draws particular attention to Blackwater's founder Erik Prince, who has developed close ties with the Trump administration and who has advocated for Trump to turn over responsibility for the war in Afghanistan to private companies, akin to the British East India Company that governed colonial commerce in South Asia and whose use of private armies to maintain stability grew increasingly forceful. Prince's suggestion wrought widespread criticism.

In response to queries about the spike in the number of security contractors, Pentagon spokeswoman Heather Babb said in an emailed statement that military leaders in Afghanistan "continue to assess and right-size contracted support to provide executable options in pursuit of established strategic goals." She added that these leaders regularly conduct reviews of existing contracts "to identify requirements for reduction, consolidation, elimination, or transition to the Government of the Islamic Republic of Afghanistan." Services provided by private contractors in this fiscal year amount to approximately \$2.3 billion, Babb says. [Source: U.S. News & World Report | Paul D. Shinkman | April 26, 2019 ++]

Afghan Withdrawal ► Poll | Veterans, Military Families Want Out

Veterans and military families overwhelmingly support plans to fully withdraw troops from Afghanistan and similarly favor a complete U.S. military pullout from Syria, according to a new poll from a conservative activist group released Wednesday. Concerned Veterans for America, which has close ties to the conservative Koch brothers' network and the Trump administration, said the results indicate that President Donald Trump should follow through with his public comments to bring those troops home. "Veterans and military families have borne the brunt of America's endless wars, and after nearly two decades of fighting there is clear support among both groups for a new approach to American foreign policy," said Dan Caldwell, executive director at Concerned Veterans for America.

"President Trump would have strong support from these communities if he were to follow through on his promise to remove U.S. troops from Afghanistan and Syria, and get serious about our country's financial future." In recent months, CVA officials have teamed up with leaders from VoteVets.org — a left-leaning advocacy group with close ties to the Democratic Party — to push lawmakers to halt open-ended foreign military operations, arguing the "forever" wars cost too much in taxpayer funds and military readiness. CVA leaders say results from the survey show support for that position from among veterans and military families.

Less than 40 percent of those surveyed said that keeping troops in Afghanistan is still necessary for the safety of the United States. Sixty percent said they support removing all U.S. personnel from Afghanistan. The U.S. military mission in Syria got more support — about 55 percent of those surveyed said they think having a military presence there is important to U.S. national security — but roughly half said they still would support removing all American

military personnel from that region. Less than one-third said they would oppose a total withdrawal from Afghanistan, and about 45 percent said they would oppose a full pull out from Syria.

Trump in recent months has vacillated on the troop presence in both areas. In his State of the Union speech in February, Trump said that “great nations do not fight endless wars” and hinted at major personnel changes in both areas. But rumored plans for a full withdrawal from both combat zones have not yet materialized. The potential rapid drawdown of troops from both combat zones was also a factor in the resignation of Defense Secretary Jim Mattis last year. The veterans and military households surveyed by CVA offered a mixed view of the president’s work as commander in chief. Of those surveyed, 53 percent said they approve of his job performance, while 47 percent said they disapprove. Those figures echo Military Times’ own poll of service members from last fall, which found 44 percent had a favorable view of Trump’s presidency and 43 percent a negative view.

One of Trump’s repeated military policy accomplishments over the last year has been securing a sizable increase in the defense budget, to \$716 billion. He has also requested \$750 billion in national security spending for fiscal 2020. But only about one-third of the individuals surveyed by CVA say the military needs another funding increase next year. Among veterans surveyed, half said spending levels should remain the same. Among military households, nearly a quarter said spending levels should be decreased. “The vast majority of veterans and military families do not support massive increases in defense spending and appear more concerned about the negative consequences of our growing national debt,” Caldwell said.

The results also showed more than three times as many respondents in support of a new base closure round than opposed to the idea. More than 70 percent said the national debt poses a significant threat to American security. The full survey results are available on CVA’s web site at https://mk0wehezuhuljcn3uqvn.kinstacdn.com/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/I20190424_PO-CVA-Survey_Interview-Schedule_Release.pdf. The data was collected between April 5 and 14, and includes responses from a randomized sample of 800 veterans and 800 more military households. Group officials said there is a 3.5 percent margin on the responses. It was conducted by the communications firm Pursuit Of — an organization connected to the Koch brothers’ network, though with separate funding and operations from CVA. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane III | April 24, 2019 ++]

South China Sea ► Vietnam vs. China Islet Development

Both China and Vietnam are building up tiny islets across Asia’s most disputed sea, but while China receives international criticism Vietnam receives very little, and even gets some support because its pace of construction is slower and widely seen as defensive. Vietnam’s work on islets it has held for decades is kept to areas of the South China Sea closest to its mainland coasts. The country shuns military mega projects that might appear offensive. And it belongs to the 10-country Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) known for working out any bilateral differences. These factors differ from China.

“They’ve never had, I think, a standoff with any other country, because all the other claimants have respectfully kept to their developable spheres around the South China Sea, and I think there’s this intra-ASEAN consensus, that within ASEAN the claimants do not rock the boat so as to present a common front towards China,” said Alan Chong, associate professor at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies in Singapore. Vietnam has slowly added buildings on some of its 10 major islets since 2017, the Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative said in a report earlier this month. The initiative under the U.S. think tank Center for Strategic and International Studies also tracked new communications equipment, a sports field and the extension of a runway from 750 meters to 1,300 meters on its largest holding Spratly Island.

Development of military-controlled islands that Vietnam has occupied for decades in the South China Sea’s Spratly Island chain involves landfill work plus installation of solar panels on some buildings, the initiative report says. The

report points also to 25 “pillbox” forts that Vietnam has built on sometimes submerged reefs or banks. Vietnam is very slowly reclaiming land for construction that offers self-defense against harsh weather, said Trung Nguyen, international relations dean at Ho Chi Minh University of Social Sciences and Humanities. Construction has shunned use of large ships that might grab international attention, he said. “The Vietnamese government has made it very clear they just reclaim the islands for self-defense, and they do not expand massively for other purposes,” Nguyen said. “I don’t think the Vietnamese government wants to draw a lot of attention from other countries on their reclamation, so that’s the reason they want to do it quietly.”

Hanoi hopes its tiny islets can get by without much help from mainland Vietnam, Chong said. He said the country is preparing for a long stay on the islets. Vietnam is upgrading islets to make them harder for China to take without a cost, not for offensive military use, Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative Director Gregory Poling said. “The Vietnamese endgame seems to be making these facilities more survivable, raising the cost for the Chinese to try to take them,” he said. China normally leaves Vietnam alone at sea because they have shown a willingness to “bump shoulders” with Chinese vessels if pushed, he said.

China contrast

China claims about 90 percent of the disputed sea, overlapping Vietnam’s smaller claim as well as tracts that four other governments call their own. The other claimants are Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines and Taiwan. Chinese reclamation work particularly alarms Vietnam because China controls the full Paracel archipelago, also claimed by Hanoi, and three major islands in the Spratly chain. Beijing’s reclamation work has created infrastructure for military aircraft and radars, the think tank initiative says. Chinese contractors had used 1,294 hectares of reclaimed land to help develop reefs and atolls under their control, according to a Pentagon estimate in 2016. China draws attention from other countries, including the United States, when it sends bombers and naval vessels into the sea. Both China and Vietnam cite historic usage to back their maritime claims.

Keeping peace

China and the Philippines have complained occasionally to Vietnam over the years because its islets fall into their claims. But the complaints fade because the other countries do not see Vietnam as a threat, scholars believe. Vietnam’s armed forces and maritime development budget lag China, which is Asia’s top economic and military power. Chinese officials meet sometimes with ASEAN leaders but lack access to the regular events for Southeast Asian heads of state, defense chiefs and foreign ministers. “One ASEAN country is not going to war with another ASEAN country,” said Oh Ei Sun, senior fellow with the Singapore Institute of International Affairs. “We would find consensus. That’s the true spirit of diplomacy.” Vietnam also has picked up support from Japan and the United States, both keen to limit Chinese expansion. Japan’s agreement in 2014 to donate six coast guard vessels to Vietnam helped prove its “power projection abilities,” Chong said. The U.S. Navy regularly passes ships through the sea to warn China.

[Source: VOA | Ralph Jennings | April 19, 2019 ++]

Iran Revolutionary Guard ► US Terrorism Label Takes Effect

The U.S. terrorism label for Iran’s Revolutionary Guard formally took effect on 15 APR, amid a battle between the Trump administration and some in Congress over waivers on oil and nuclear sanctions that are due to expire or be extended early next month. The Guard’s formal designation as a “**foreign terrorist organization**” — the first-ever for an entire division of another government — kicked in with a notice published in the Federal Register. The move adds a layer of sanctions to the elite military unit and makes it a crime for anyone in or subject to U.S. jurisdiction to provide it with material support. Depending on how broadly “material support” is interpreted, the designation may complicate

U.S. diplomatic and military cooperation with certain third-country officials, notably in Iraq and Lebanon, who deal with the Guard.

President Donald Trump and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo announced the step with great fanfare last week, opening a one-week consultation period with Congress during which members could have raised objections. Lawmakers were broadly supportive, but congressional Iran hawks are now expressing concern that the administration may extend waivers on oil and nuclear sanctions. Those sanctions, which are unrelated to the Guard designation, were imposed last November following Trump's withdrawal of the U.S. from the landmark 2015 Iran nuclear deal that May.

They target major elements of Iran's economy, notably its energy sector, by hitting foreign companies and governments with so-called "secondary sanctions" if they continue to do business with targeted Iranian entities. A main goal has been to dry up revenue from Iran's oil exports, which the U.S. says is the main driver of the country's funding of destabilizing activities throughout the Middle East and beyond.

In order not to shock oil markets with the sudden loss of Iranian crude, the administration granted several waivers that allowed some nations and Taiwan to continue their imports as long as they moved to reduce them to zero. Those waivers are due to expire in early May, and Iran hawks in Congress and elsewhere are urging the administration not to renew any of them. They say extending even some of the eight waivers would run counter to Trump and Pompeo's stated goal of keeping "maximum pressure" on Iran. U.S. officials have been coy when asked about the waivers, leading to concern among hawks that some or all of them may be extended. The administration's point man for Iran, Brian Hook, has said that three of the waivers won't need to be extended as those countries have eliminated all Iranian oil imports. But he has remained silent on the other five. Pompeo has similarly refused to comment on the possibility of extensions.

In testimony before the Senate Foreign Relations Committee last week, Pompeo was pressed by Sen. Ted Cruz (R-TX) about whether the oil sanctions waivers, as well as waivers related to technical cooperation at Iranian nuclear facilities, would be extended. He suggested that some at the State Department were pushing for extensions. "Let me urge you and urge the department unequivocally not to grant the nuclear waivers and not to grant the oil waivers," Cruz said, "I think maximum pressure should mean maximum pressure." Pompeo demurred, but during a trip to South America over the weekend he bristled when asked if the Iran hawks had reason to be concerned. "It's ludicrous," he told reporters accompanying him. "It's ludicrous. Look, people want to tell stories, people want to sell newspapers. I've got it. Congressmen will grandstand, I've got that, too. The State Department's going to get it right. We understand our mission."

Cruz was not impressed. "The Senate Foreign Relations Committee needs to understand why some in the State Department think it's a good idea to keep enriching the Ayatollah with oil billions and to let Iran keep spinning centrifuges in a bunker that they dug into the side of a mountain so they could build nuclear weapons," he said in a statement released by his office.

Iran's lawmakers on 16 APR overwhelmingly approved a bill labeling U.S. forces in the Middle East as terrorist. Iran's Defense Minister Gen. Amir Hatami introduced the bill authorizing the government to act firmly in response to "terrorist actions" by U.S. forces. It demands authorities use "legal, political and diplomatic" measures to neutralize the American move, without elaborating. The U.S. move aims at "thwarting Iran's influence," and shows that America's longstanding sanctions against Iran have become ineffective, Hatami told lawmakers. [Source: The Associated Press | Matthew Lee | April 15, 2019 ++]

U.S. African OPS ► The U.S. Footprint in Africa

Many Americans first became aware of U.S. military operations in Africa in October 2017, after the Islamic State ambushed American troops near Tongo Tongo, Niger, killing four U.S. soldiers and wounding two others. Just after the attack, U.S. Africa Command said U.S. troops were providing “advice and assistance” to local counterparts. Later, it would become clear that those troops — the 11-man Operational Detachment-Alpha Team 3212 — were working out of the town of Oullam with a larger Nigerian force under the umbrella of **Operation Juniper Shield**, a wide-ranging counterterrorism effort in northwest Africa.

Until poor weather prevented it, that team was supposed to lend support to another group of American commandos who were trying to kill or capture Islamic State leader Doundoun Cheffou as part of **Obsidian Nomad II**. Juniper Shield and Obsidian Nomad II were not isolated efforts but part of a panoply of named military operations and activities U.S. forces have been conducting from dozens of bases across the northern tier of Africa. Many of these operations are taking place in countries that the U.S. government does not recognize as combat zones, but in which U.S. troops are nonetheless fighting and, in several cases, taking casualties.

Between 2013 and 2017, U.S. special operations forces saw combat in at least 13 African countries, according to retired Army Brig. Gen. Don Bolduc, who served at U.S. Africa Command from 2013 to 2015 and then headed Special Operations Command Africa until 2017. Those countries, according to Bolduc, are Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Central African Republic, Chad, Democratic Republic of Congo, Kenya, Libya, Mali, Mauritania, Niger, Somalia, South Sudan and Tunisia. He added that U.S. troops have been killed or wounded in action in at least six of them: Kenya, Libya, Niger, Somalia, South Sudan and Tunisia. The following map is provided to help enlighten readers where the U.S. has established themselves on the continent to date from which Special Operations forces have or will be launched. [Source: Yahoo News | Nick Turse & Sean D. Naylor | April 17, 2019 ++]

U.S. African OPS ► Operations Conducted to Date

Yahoo News has put together a list of three dozen special operations across the African continent which have been conducted to date. The code-named operations cover a variety of different military missions, ranging from psychological operations to counterterrorism. Eight of the named activities, including Obsidian Nomad, are so-called 127e programs, named for the budgetary authority that allows U.S. special operations forces to use certain host-nation military units as surrogates in counterterrorism missions.

Used extensively across Africa, 127e programs can be run either by Joint Special Operations Command (JSOC), the secretive organization that controls the Navy’s SEAL Team 6, the Army’s Delta Force and other special mission units, or by “theater special operations forces.” These programs are “specifically designed for us to work with our host nation partners to develop small — anywhere between 80 and 120 personnel — counterterrorism forces that we’re partnered with,” said Bolduc. “They are specially selected partner-nation forces that go through extensive training, with the same equipment we have, to specifically go after counterterrorism targets, especially high-value targets.”

Using documents obtained via the Freedom of Information Act, interviews, published reports and a Defense Department list of named U.S. military operations that leaked online, Yahoo News put together the following list of 36 operations and activities that are (or were until recently) ongoing in Africa. Where possible, Yahoo News has also listed the bases that support these operations, relying mostly on information sheets about those locations obtained via the Freedom of Information Act. Yahoo News does not claim that this list is comprehensive. While the Defense Department has acknowledged the names, locations and purposes of some of these operations, others are far lower-profile. Almost all are unknown to the general public:

ARMADA SWEEP: A U.S. Navy electronic surveillance effort conducted from ships off the coast of East Africa, Armada Sweep supports the U.S. drone war in the region. Bases used: Unknown

ECHO CASEMATE: This operation covers a series of activities in the Central African Republic. It began in 2013 as a support mission for French and African forces deployed to the troubled Central African Republic for peacekeeping purposes and continued as an advise-and-assist mission to those African peacekeeping forces. However, U.S. forces neither accompanied their partners in the field nor formally trained them. The operation also covered the introduction of contractors and Marines to secure the U.S. Embassy in Bangui and the deployment of a small U.S. special operations contingent to assist the U.S. ambassador in missions to counter the Lord's Resistance Army. In the first days of the operation, the U.S. military airlifted hundreds of Burundian troops, tons of equipment and more than a dozen military vehicles into the Central African Republic, according to Africom. The U.S. military continued transporting French forces in and out of the Central African Republic, and the mission was still underway in early 2018. Base used: Abeche, Chad

EXILE HUNTER: One of a family of similarly named counterterrorism efforts that U.S. special operations forces have conducted in East Africa. Exile Hunter was a 127e program in which elite U.S. troops trained and equipped an Ethiopian force for counterterrorism missions in Somalia. Bolduc says he shut it down in 2016 because the Ethiopian government was uncomfortable about the force not falling under its command. However, a February 2018 Defense Department list of named operations suggests it had been resurrected. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti

JUKEBOX LOTUS: Operation Jukebox Lotus began as the crisis response to the September 2012 attack in Benghazi, Libya, that killed U.S. Ambassador J. Christopher Stevens and three other Americans, but continued until at least 2018. It gives Africa Command broad authority to conduct a variety of operations in Libya as required and is specific to neither special operations nor counterterrorism. Bases used: Faya Largeau and N'Djamena, Chad; Air Base 201, Agadez, Niger

JUNCTION RAIN: A maritime security effort in the Gulf of Guinea involving African and U.S. Coast Guard boarding teams operating from U.S. Navy ships or those of African forces. In 2016, the hybrid teams conducted 32 boardings, resulting in \$1.2 million in fines levied for more than 50 maritime violations, as well as the recovery of a diesel fuel tanker that had been seized by pirates. Last year, operations with the Senegalese and Cabo Verdean navies resulted in at least 40 boardings — mostly of fishing vessels — and \$75,000 in fines handed down for two fishing violations. Base used: Dakar, Senegal

JUNCTION SERPENT: A surveillance effort in Libya that, as part of the 2016 campaign of airstrikes against Islamic State positions in the Libyan city of Sirte, gave Joint Special Operations Command specific authorities to coordinate assets in order to develop targeting information for the campaign Bases used: Unknown

JUNIPER MICRON: In 2013, after France launched a military intervention against Islamists in Mali code-named Operation Serval, the U.S. began Operation Juniper Micron, which involved airlifting French soldiers and supplies into that former French colony, flying refueling missions in support of French airpower, and assisting allied African forces. Juniper Micron was ongoing as of October 2018, with plans for it to continue in the future. Bases used: Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; Istres-Le Tube Air Base, France; Bamako and Gao, Mali; Air Base 201 (Agadez), Arlit, Dirkou, Madama and Niamey, Niger; Dakar, Senegal

JUNIPER NIMBUS: Juniper Nimbus is a long-running operation aimed at supporting the Nigerian military campaign against Boko Haram. Bases used: Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; N'Djamena, Chad; Arlit, Dirkou and Madama, Niger

JUNIPER SHIELD: The umbrella operation for the mission that resulted in the deadly ambush in Niger, Juniper Shield is the United States' centerpiece counterterrorism effort in northwest Africa and covers 11 nations: Algeria, Burkina Faso, Cameroon, Chad, Mali, Mauritania, Morocco, Niger, Nigeria, Senegal and Tunisia. Under Juniper Shield, U.S. teams rotate in every six months to train, advise, assist and accompany local partner forces to conduct operations against terrorist groups, including ISIS-West Africa, Boko Haram and al Qaida and its affiliates. Bases used: Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; Garoua and Maroua, Cameroon; Bangui, Central African Republic; Faya Largeau and N'Djamena, Chad; Bamako and Gao, Mali; Nema and Ouassa, Mauritania; Air Base 201 (Agadez), Arlit, Diffa, Dirkou, Madama and Niamey, Niger; Dakar, Senegal

JUPITER GARRET: A JSOC operation aimed at high-value targets in Somalia, Jupiter Garret first came to light in a 2012 Washington Post article. It was ongoing as of February 2018 Bases used: Camp Lemonnier and Chebelley, Djibouti; Laikipia, Manda Bay and Wajir, Kenya; Baidoa, Baledogle, Bosasso, Galcayo, Kismayo and Mogadishu, Somalia

JUSTIFIED SEAMOUNT: Another counter-piracy effort in the waters off East Africa. Bases used: Chebelley, Djibouti; Laikipia, Mombasa and Wajir, Kenya; Victoria, Seychelles; Baidoa, Baledogle, Kismayo and Mogadishu, Somalia

KODIAK HUNTER: A 127e program in which U.S. special operators trained and equipped a Kenyan force to conduct counterterrorism missions in Somalia. Base used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Manda Bay, Kenya

MONGOOSE HUNTER: A 127e program in which U.S. special operations forces trained and equipped a Somali force for counterterrorism missions against al-Shabab. Base used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Baledogle, Somalia

NEW NORMAL: An Africa-wide crisis response capability established by the U.S. military after the 2012 attack on the U.S. Consulate in Benghazi, Libya. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Libreville, Gabon; Accra, Ghana; Dakar, Senegal; Entebbe, Uganda

NIMBLE SHIELD: A low-profile effort targeting Boko Haram and ISIS-West Africa. Bases used: Douala, Garoua and Maroua, Cameroon; Bangui, Central African Republic; N'Djamena, Chad; Diffa, Dirkou, Madama and Niamey, Niger

OAKEN SONNET I-III: A series of three contingency operations in South Sudan. Oaken Sonnet I was the difficult 2013 rescue of U.S. personnel from that country at the beginning of its civil war. Oaken Sonnet II took place in 2014 and Oaken Sonnet III in 2016. Base used: Juba, South Sudan

OAKEN STEEL: The reinforcement of the U.S. Embassy in Juba, South Sudan, to protect State Department personnel during a conflict between rival factions in that country's civil war, Operation Oaken Steel, which ran from July 12, 2016, to Jan. 26, 2017, saw U.S. forces deploy to Uganda to provide for rapid crisis response during the unrest. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Moron Air Base, Spain; Entebbe, Uganda

OBJECTIVE VOICE: In 2010, the first head of Africa Command, Army Gen. William "Kip" Ward, told the Senate Armed Services Committee that Operation Objective Voice was an "information operations effort to counter violent extremism by leveraging media capabilities in ways that encourage the public to repudiate extremist ideologies." Coordinated with other government agencies, this propaganda effort included "youth peace games" in Mali, a film project in northern Nigeria, and, according to his successor, Army Gen. Carter Ham, a "variety of messaging platforms, such as the African Web Initiative, to challenge the views of terrorist groups." Objective Voice continues today. Bases used: Garoua and Maroua, Cameroon; Bangui, Central African Republic; Abeche, Faya Largeau and N'Djamena, Chad; Bamako and Gao, Mali; Nema and Ouassa, Mauritania; Air Base 201 (Agadez), Arlit and Madama, Niger; Dakar, Senegal; Entebbe, Uganda

OBLIQUE PILLAR: A program to provide private contractor helicopter support to Navy SEAL-advised units of the Somali National Army fighting al-Shabab in Somalia. The operation was in existence as of February 2018. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Mombasa and Wajir, Kenya; Baidoa, Baledogle, Kismayo and Mogadishu, Somalia; Entebbe, Uganda.

OBSERVANT COMPASS: An operation to capture or kill Joseph Kony and eradicate his Lord's Resistance Army, a militia that has committed atrocities since the 1980s. In 2017, with around \$780 million spent on the operation, and Kony still in the field, the United States wound down Observant Compass and shifted its forces elsewhere. But the operation didn't completely disband, according to the Defense Department. "U.S. military forces supporting Operation Observant Compass transitioned to broader scope security and stability activities that continue the success of our African partners," Pentagon spokesperson Cmdr. Candice Tresch told Yahoo News. Bases used: Obo, Central African Republic; Abeche, Chad; Dungu, Democratic Republic of Congo; Juba and Nzara, South Sudan; Entebbe, Uganda

OBSIDIAN LOTUS: A 127e activity concentrated on Libya, in which U.S. commandos trained and equipped Libyan special operations forces battalions. One of those units ended up under the control of renegade warlord Gen. Khalifa Haftar, according to Bolduc. Bases used: Unknown

OBSIDIAN MOSAIC: A 127e counterterrorism effort focused on Mali. Bases used: Unknown.

OBSIDIAN NOMAD I and II: Two 127e counterterrorism programs in Niger: Obsidian Nomad I in Diffa and Obsidian Nomad II in Arlit. The operational name emerged in the wake of the October 2017 ambush in Niger that killed four U.S. soldiers. Bases used: Arlit and Diffa, Niger

OCTAVE ANCHOR: A psychological operation focused on Somalia Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Mogadishu, Somalia

OCTAVE SHIELD: An Africa Command psychological operation focused on Somalia, carried out under the aegis of Combined Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, based at Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier and Chebelley, Djibouti; Laikipia, Manda Bay, Mombasa and Wajir, Kenya; Victoria, Seychelles; Baidoa, Baledogle, Bosasso, Galcayo, Kismayo and Mogadishu, Somalia; Entebbe, Uganda.

OCTAVE SOUNDSTAGE: A JSOC psychological operation focused on Somalia. Bases used: Unknown

OCTAVE STINGRAY: A JSOC psychological operation focused on Somalia. Base used: Mogadishu, Somalia

OCTAVE SUMMIT: A JSOC psychological operation focused on Somalia. Base used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti

ODYSSEY LIGHTNING: The campaign of special operations-directed airstrikes against Islamic State targets in Sirte, Libya, between August and December 2016. Base used: Naval Air Station, Sigonella, Italy

ODYSSEY RESOLVE: Another component of the 2016 special operations campaign of air strikes against the Islamic State in the Libyan city of Sirte, Operation Odyssey Resolve consists of intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance flights. It was ongoing as of February 2018. Bases used: Ouagadougou, Burkina Faso; Faya Largeau, Chad; Benina and Misrata, Libya; Bamako and Gao, Mali; Nema and Ouassa, Mauritania; Arlit and Niamey, Niger; Dakar, Senegal; Bizerte, Tunisia; Entebbe, Uganda

PALADIN HUNTER: A 127e counterterrorism program in the semi-autonomous Puntland region of Somalia. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti; Bosasso and Galcayo, Somalia

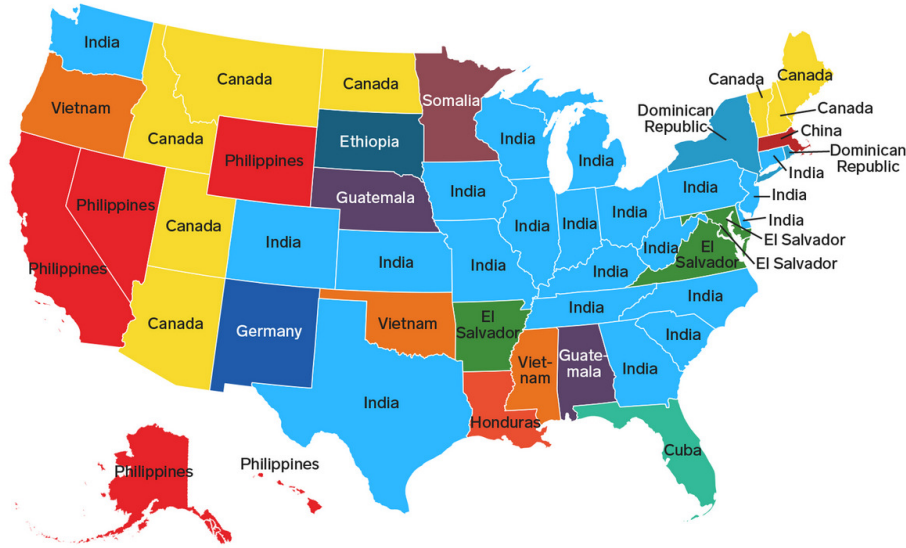
RAINMAKER: A highly sensitive classified signals intelligence effort. Bases used: Chebelley, Djibouti; Baidoa, Baledogle, Kismayo and Mogadishu, Somalia

ULTIMATE HUNTER: A 127e counterterrorism program using a U.S.-trained, equipped and directed Ugandan force in Somalia. Bases used: Camp Lemonnier, Djibouti.

[Source: Yahoo News | Nick Turse & Sean D. Naylor | April 17, 2019 ++]

Immigrants ► Foreign Born Residents by State in America

The US is a nation of immigrants from all around the world. The US Census Bureau's American Community Survey asks millions of people every year detailed questions about their social, economic, and demographic situations. One of the questions asks respondents what their country of birth is. The Census Bureau pooled together survey responses from between 2013 and 2017, allowing the bureau's statisticians to publish estimates of how many people in the foreign-born populations of each state and the District of Columbia came from various countries.



The percentage of the population born outside the US varies widely from state to state. Among those immigrant populations, countries of origin also vary widely. For 32 states, the most common country of birth among respondents who said they were born outside the US was Mexico. Therefore, the map above looks at the country other than Mexico that is the birthplace of the most foreign-born respondents in the survey. India tops that list in 21 states. Several states have Canada as a major source of immigrants. Several Asian, African, and Central American countries also have large immigrant populations in various states. For more interesting maps refer to:

- <https://www.businessinsider.com/percentage-immigrants-born-outside-united-states-by-state-2018-12> for how many people in each state were born outside the U.S.
- <https://www.businessinsider.com/highest-paying-job-in-every-us-state-2019-2> for the highest paying job in each state
- <https://www.businessinsider.com/animated-map-of-200-years-us-border-territory-changes-2016-1> to see how the map of the United States has changed in 200 years.

[Source: Business Insider | Andy Kiersz | April 19, 2019 ++]

DPRK Russia Relations ► Kim Jong Un’s Upcoming Summit Objectives

When North Korean leader Kim Jong Un meets with Russian President Vladimir Putin for their first one-on-one meeting, he will have a long wish list and a strong desire to notch a win after the failure of his second summit with President Donald Trump. But it’s not entirely clear how much Putin can or will oblige. Despite a relationship that goes back to the very foundation of North Korea, relations between Pyongyang and Moscow haven’t always been the picture of comradery, or even particularly close. A look at what Kim is hoping to get out of his furtive pivot north, and why he might be looking to shake things up as his talks with the U.S. and parallel campaign to win massive investment from South Korea have stalled.

KIM’S WISH LIST

Kim has two urgent concerns as he heads to the summit. More than 10,000 North Korean laborers still employed in Russia, many working in the logging industry in the Russian Far East, are being kicked out by the end of this year as a 2017 U.N. sanctions resolution takes effect. The laborers, who previously numbered as many as 50,000, have provided a revenue stream estimated by U.S. officials in the hundreds of millions of dollars that the Kim regime would

like to keep flowing. Kim is also looking at the possibility of a food shortage this summer. Russia has shown a willingness to provide humanitarian aid and just last month announced that it had shipped more than 2,000 tons of wheat to the North Korean port of Chongjin.

But his decision to more actively court Putin undoubtedly goes deeper than that. Despite all the talk in Washington about denuclearization, Kim's primary concern is improving his country's economy. After the breakdown in his February summit with Trump in Hanoi, his efforts to get out from under sanctions that are keeping him from doing that have reached an impasse. North Korea has long depended on China as its primary trading partner. But that reliance, and the influence it threatens to give Beijing, makes many officials in Pyongyang nervous. Kim has also pushed Seoul hard to participate in joint inter-Korean projects to rebuild its railroads and improve its moribund infrastructure. His appeal to Korean unity, however, has run headfirst into the South's allegiance to Washington, which has warned Seoul against any actions that would undermine sanctions.

According to internal documents obtained by a South Korean researcher and published this week in a Japanese newspaper, Kim wants to boost trade with Russia tenfold — to \$1 billion — by 2020. That would obviously require some significant easing of sanctions, which would seem unlikely. But it would also require a change in Russian behavior. Unlike China, which has lots of businessmen on the ground in North Korea, Russia has a very small footprint in the North. Officials have long talked about big projects — including rail routes to Europe, or pipelines across the Korean Peninsula — but Putin hasn't shown much interest in actually carrying them out.

WHY NOW?

The Kim-Putin meeting, whose exact date has not been announced, is coming surprisingly late in the game. It's been nearly a year and a half since Kim announced his plan to emerge from relative isolation at home and expand diplomatic relations with China and South Korea and open denuclearization talks with Washington. He has since held four summits with Chinese President Xi Jinping, three with South Korean President Moon Jae-in and two with Trump. The summitry has done a lot toward establishing Kim as a serious player on the world stage. But the Hanoi summit showed his limitations. It ended with no agreements on either denuclearization measures or the lifting of sanctions, which may now be even more difficult to accomplish since both sides are digging in on hard-line negotiation positions.

Kim's decision to meet with Putin now may reflect his frustrations over that. Putin has more experience with North Korea's leaders than most. He visited Pyongyang in 2000, and met with Kim's father, Kim Jong Il, in Moscow in 2001 and in Vladivostok in 2002. Former President Dmitry Medvedev also met Kim Jong Il in Vladivostok, in 2011. Moscow played an instrumental role in bringing Kim's grandfather, Kim Il Sung, to power and helped rebuild the country after the 1950-53 Korean War. Those ties fell apart after the 1991 Soviet collapse and Russia's decision to end support for former Soviet allies amid its own economic meltdown.

Like Kim, Putin is no admirer of Washington's use of sanctions as a political tool. Even a cautious statement of solidarity with the North, or a rebuttal of any of Washington's "maximum pressure" policies, would be a win for Kim. But Putin has a lot on his plate and good reason to be cautious about making any big new commitments. He particularly doesn't want to anger China. Immediately after seeing Kim, Putin will fly to Beijing for a major international meeting on China's "Belt and Road" initiative, which could be lucrative for Russia.

WHAT'S NEXT?

If Putin chooses to take a more hands-on approach to North Korea, Washington's efforts to keep Kim's focus on denuclearization could get a lot more complicated. He has already expressed his opposition to Trump's sanctions-centric approach. It's also in Putin's general interest to weaken Washington's influence in the region — though, like China, Russia does not want a chaotic collapse in the North that would create a wave of refugees and economic instability.

So what's the bottom line? Even if he isn't planning to make any immediate changes in his policies toward Pyongyang, meeting with Kim provides a good opportunity for Putin to reassert himself as a player in a contest for political influence that is, after all, right on his own border. And for Kim, with the pressure from Washington not

likely to let up soon, keeping all options open makes a lot of sense. [Source: The Associated Press | Eric Talmadge | April 23, 2019 ++]

U.S. Sanctions | Iran ► Bill Labels all U.S. Military Forces as Terrorist

Iranian lawmakers on 23 APR overwhelmingly approved a bill that labels all U.S. military forces as terrorist, state TV reported, a day after Washington ratcheted up pressure on Tehran by announcing that no country would any longer be exempt from U.S. sanctions if it continues to buy Iranian oil. The bill is a step further from the one last week, when lawmakers approved labeling just U.S. troops in the Middle East as terrorist, in response to the U.S. terrorism designation for Iran's Revolutionary Guard earlier this month. The Trump administration re-imposed sanctions on Iran, including on its energy sector, last November, after pulling America out of the landmark 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers.

The U.S. designation against Iran's Revolutionary Guard — the first-ever for an entire division of another government — added another layer of sanctions to the powerful paramilitary force, making it a crime under U.S. jurisdiction to provide the guard with material support. On 22 APR, President Donald Trump decided to do away with waivers as part of the administration's "maximum pressure" campaign on Iran that aims to eliminate all of its revenue from oil exports that the U.S. says funds destabilizing activity throughout the Mideast and beyond. Hours before Trump's announcement, Iran reiterated its long-running threat to close the Strait of Hormuz if it's prevented from using the crucial waterway in the Persian Gulf through which about a third of all oil traded at sea passes. The U.S. Navy has in the past accused Iranian patrol boats of harassing American warships in the waterway.

Iran's Foreign Ministry promptly brushed off Trump's move to stop the oil waivers, saying the Islamic Republic "basically has not seen and does not see any worth and validity for the waivers." But on Tuesday, 173 out of 215 lawmakers at the parliament session in Tehran voted for the new bill. Only four voted against while the rest abstained; the chamber has 290 seats. The bill confirms Iran's earlier label of the U.S. Central Command, also known as CENTCOM, and all its forces as terrorist. Any military and non-military help, including logistics support, to CENTCOM that can be detrimental to the Revolutionary Guard will be considered a terrorist action, the semi-official ISNA news agency said.

The bill also demands the Iranian government take unspecified action against other governments that formally back the U.S. designation. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain and Israel have all supported the Trump administration's designation. The lawmakers also requested Iran's intelligence agency provide a list of all CENTCOM commanders within three months so that Iran's judiciary can prosecute them in absentia as terrorists. The bill requires final approval by Iran's constitutional watchdog to become law. Other than underscoring Iran's defiance, it's unclear what impact the bill could actually have, either in the Persian Gulf or beyond. The Revolutionary Guard has forces and wields influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen, and is in charge of Iranian missiles that have U.S. bases in their range. [Source: The Associated Press | Nasser Karimi | April 23, 2019 ++]