

SOUND OFF!



VOL. VIII, NO 4

THE NEWSLETTER OF VETERANS UNITED FOR TRUTH, INC.

“VETERANS STANDING UP FOR EACH OTHER”

20 JUNE 2013

THE GREAT DIVIDE ~ LET’S BRIDGE IT!

There is a huge divide between today’s veterans and those of past wars. We at VUFT believe that the divide is largely self-made and needs to be dispelled.

While there may be a divide in our perceptions of each other, there is no divide in our collective intent when it comes to veterans’ benefits or the healing process necessary to all veterans.

This feeling of separation among the military eras is not unique to this age.

WW II veterans got put down by the veterans of “The Great War” with the reason being, apparently, that death and maiming was not quite as universal and as horrible in WW II as in WW I.

Korean War veterans got put down by veterans of WW II because they said the Korean War wasn’t won—it ended in a “stalemate”.

Vietnam War veterans were put down by Korean War veterans because they told us that we lost the Vietnam War while they at least managed to return the situation to the *status quo ante*.

Vietnam War veterans put down the veterans of Panama, Granada, etc. as being “skirmishes” instead of a “real war”.

The pattern has been apparent and two-fold.

On the one hand the older veterans consistently took the attitude that the last war was the “real” war and what you are doing now isn’t “real”, or at least “as real” as ours was.

On the other hand the younger veterans translated their youthful view of their elders as “being out of touch with my world” into “those old fogies can’t understand what we went through.”

Thankfully, that pattern has changed, at least in part, with the reason largely being the “never again” view of many Vietnam War veterans. Vietnam War veterans have vowed that new veterans will never suffer as they did upon returning.

The problem is that we talk about it more than we do something about it.

Vietnam War veterans were loudly condemned by their fellow citizens, even reviled for partaking in that war despite the fact that many were drafted and did not go voluntarily. Nonetheless, all who participated in any form in Vietnam felt abandoned when they came home. We all vowed “never again”.

Never again, we said, would those who fought for our country be abandoned by their fellow citizens, regardless of our individual view of the rightness or wrongness of the war itself. [VVAW says, “Honor the Warrior, Not the War.”]

Many of the Vietnam War veterans have tried to reach out to the veterans of Iraq—both wars—and Afghanistan, often with little success.

There is another component that contributes to this divide in the veterans of different eras. Access—we had it, they don’t.

In general, WW II and Korean War vets entered a benefits system that was ramped up to meet their needs. Those who needed medical help got it, and got it relatively quickly. Once in the system they often remained in it for life. They praised the help they got and continue to praise it, and don’t understand what all the fuss is about.

Those who applied for GI Bill benefits got them quickly, had little or no problem in paying their college

tuitions and fees, and almost never ran into problems with their educational funding.

Contrary to the older veterans' experience, the benefits system started to slow down for Vietnam veterans; ultimately it ground nearly to a halt.

I am going to take some space here to reconnoiter the current system for the benefit of those veterans who got into the system easily, got good treatment, and who need to understand what is different today, and just how profound that difference is.

Today's veterans face a largely dysfunctional system that has publicly set its goals at responding to requests for benefits within 5 months. That hardly helps someone who needs assistance today—this afternoon.

The system is so complex that it is not just veterans who don't understand it; many VA employees don't seem to understand it either. It is quite apparent that VA senior management hasn't a clue.

I'll take the liberty here of quoting part of an article by Barry Allen, a retired USAF JAG Col. and a member of the law firm Brown and Roberto:

"The heart of the issue is the unbelievably complex, non-user friendly system the VA has created over decades to deal with disability issues.

VA tasks the people who rate the claims with making legal and medical judgments, when they are neither lawyers nor doctors. VA claims it is "paternalistic" towards Veterans, yet it locks Vets into a system where there are no time requirements for VA to make a decision, the Regional Office decisions are usually wrong at least 75% of the time, and the appeals process is mind-bogglingly complex. Getting the initial decision, even if delayed for a minimum of 270+ days, or extending past 900 days, is just the first hurdle. Since the initial decision is invariably wrong in some way, the constant reviews, re-reviews, multiple medical exams for the same issue, and appeals that are separated into multiple parts that each move up and down independently are where the real delays come into play.

...Try calling the local VA Regional Office (at least one in each state). One 800 number exists for the entire country. Try getting the name of the rater who is handling your VA claim. Rating decisions are almost always not signed; initials and numbers describe who is supposed to be handling a case. Claim two or more disabilities, and the chances are that somewhere along the way, different people will be handling the claims at the same time, and not talking to each other so inconsistent results are highly likely. Submit evidence that supports your claim and have it dismissed by the VA because their doctors, or raters, or unknown staff members

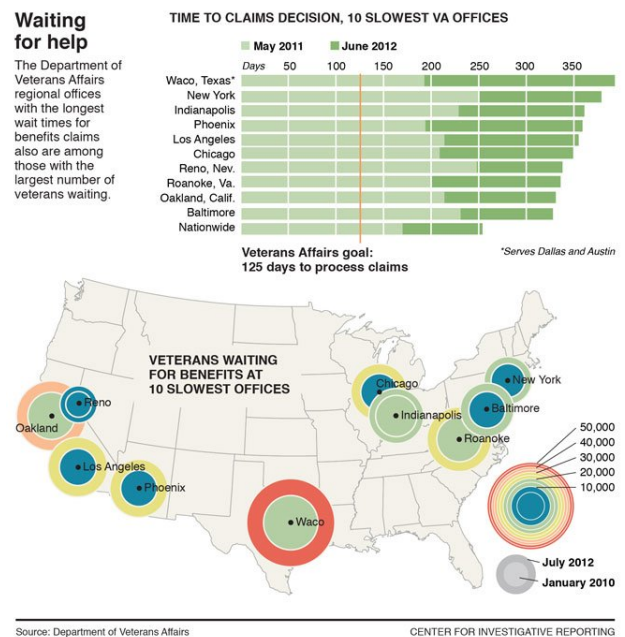
know more than your own doctors, or you, or your spouse."

Finally Barry concludes with the statement that you have already seen here on numerous occasions:

"If VA simply approved every claim, this would be cheaper and less costly than the current system."

Of course, if the VA made their stated five month goal many veterans would be OK even if they were not completely satisfied. Unfortunately, as the interactive map at the Center for Investigative Reporting shows, the VA never makes it, and is currently missing in some areas by as much as 320%. The map is constantly updated and is available at <http://cironline.org/reports/map-where-veterans-backlog-worst-3792>

One of the tables from that site is reproduced here:



Here in California, veterans who file claims with any of the VA's three regional offices – in Oakland, Los Angeles and San Diego – wait more than nine months on average for their first response.

On 3/13/13 Jennifer Rizzo of CNN reported:

"...the number of veterans waiting more than a year for their benefits has skyrocketed, from 11,000 in 2009 to 245,000 in December 2012, a jump of more than 2,000%. ... In big cities such as New York, veterans could wait for almost two years."

Likewise, GI Bill benefits are slow in coming and many of today's veterans have had to drop out of school because their benefits checks were late, and many schools are too profit-bound to be patient and cut them some slack. Once they are forced to drop out, few go back.

It's not just medical and educational benefits that are at stake. The gutless jobs guarantee program in the USERRA law has failed a huge number of Reservists and National Guard members, as many have been unable to get their jobs back, and some only if they forego the protections for raises and promotions embodied in that law, which protections are either largely ignored by employers and the government, or actively countered in practice.

Much of the problem starts with the military and its transition of military records to the VA. After spending 100s of millions of dollars on both the VA and the DOD records systems to make them compatible, they still cannot talk to each other. The latest reports imply that they may have given up trying, but lacking openness in internal reporting—everything is a secret these days—who can tell?

How hard can it be? The soldier/veteran's name is the same in both systems; they use the same medical dictionary, or they should; they use the same calendar; handwritten notes can be scanned into pdfs for compatibility; etc., etc.

I can translate an entire movie in Russian digital format to conventional format with all sound, color, framing, subtitles, and timing accurately converted, with one click, and they cannot marry two nearly identical data fields with any certainty?

I can convert a complete book-length document with tables, spreadsheets, footnotes, table of contents, index, and illustrations without a glitch, and they cannot find out if this Johnny Jones in the claims paperwork is that Johnny Jones in the sketchy military report, or if the Mary Smith who broke 8 bones in a vehicle rollover in Iraq is the same Mary Smith whose paperwork is sitting in front of them—after all, she could be a “veteran benefits queen”.

Sounds like the bureaucratic version of GIGO, doesn't it? The VA doesn't get off the hook but they do start with a distinct disadvantage because of the incompatibility of records problem, and the unwillingness of the military to take responsibility for the quick and accurate transition from military service to the VA.

Of course, antiquated VA document handling practices—paper, paper everywhere, stacked on desks, stacked on the floor, thrown in boxes in warehouses—doesn't help the situation. They say that they don't lose documents, but they just can't find them.

Rather than clean up that system, they just ask for more copies claiming that there is no record that the veteran ever submitted the originals.

Beyond that, the military often does not release the combat data necessary to establish the validity of certain claims. It would seem that unit battle records, deployment orders, and daily rosters ought to still be part of the record. They were when we were all there.

So a helicopter pilot whose back was broken in a helicopter crash in Iraq has waited two years trying to prove that the injury happened in battle. Somehow the military cannot come up with the fact that a helicopter with a certain tail number crashed on a certain date in a certain place in the war zone.

Enough explanation. If you aren't convinced yet you never will be.

Let's get back to the original subject and to the critical question. How do we bridge this divide between the older and younger veterans?

The discussion earlier about the effort on the part of some of the Vietnam War's veterans to effect this bridge is not often reciprocated by new veterans.

We need to change that!

Let's start with an immutable fact!

We older veterans care deeply about our younger brothers and sisters who volunteered and who have served proudly. These new veterans and their families are owed what they were promised and that which they so rightly deserve.

Despite wholesale federal budget cutting, the military budget is increasing. Sequestration is crippling state and local resources as well.

The military is its people and very little more.

Even with the drones and other automated military technology, in the end it is the men and women in the military who carry the fight to any enemy, and who stand ready and prepared to take on the next challenge.

It is the people not the machines that count.

It is the people who fight the battles; the machines are just their tools.

Yet, every dime of the increase in military spending goes to the machines—F-22s and F-35s; new rifles; new destroyers.

What about the people? What about considering the full effect of military service on each individual who serves? What about funding the true cost of separation from active duty and returning to the community, as well as the long term costs of having

served, and funding that obligation, whether through the military budget or the VA's budget?

What about the people of America standing up for the people who serve them?

That is what we want to help our young veterans to attain; at least equality in the consideration of the many demands of modern life, and at least parity with the technological demands of the modern military.

We all remember how the military taught us that if you take care of the troops the troops will take care of the mission. Have today's leaders forgotten that?

There are several serious problems in fighting for what is right in military and veterans' affairs. There is the problem of a disinterested or uninterested public; there is the problem of a Congress that is devoted to politics not governance; and finally, young veterans' voices, are strong, but not strong enough alone.

Those problems can be beaten, but it will take more than today's veterans fighting alone to get it done. The advantage that older veterans have in this fight is connections. In this increasingly political environment, those connections matter.

The disadvantage that older veterans have is that we bore the hell out of younger veterans. They come to us and to our organizations to seek help and to find those community associations that will be sympathetic to their cause.

Instead they find us old fogies arguing about what will be served at the next barbecue and who will carry the flag in the next parade. And by the way, did I tell you MY war story—you know, in a real war?

That crap doesn't mean anything to them, and it shouldn't mean much to us.

When they try to contact us we hit them with our agenda when we should be listening to theirs. They don't care much about what we tell them is important; we must care about what THEY believe is important.

Most of us are in a very comfortable position as veterans who have re-integrated into society with some success using a system that used to work; have found jobs when we came home; have raised families; and who now spend too much of our time telling lies about our service, and spend too much time in jingoistic memorials and parades.

We are so smug about our own position we have forgotten how to listen to our brothers and sisters who are really hurting. Telling them about our success doesn't help them one bit.

In a very real sense their perception that things are different is absolutely correct. It is high time that we older veterans shut up and listened to them.

There are great organizations out there for the current veterans. They are doing mighty work: national organizations like IAVA, Not Invisible, and SWAN; local organizations like Dry Hooch, and the various support organizations for veterans' courts and veterans' families, and Stand-downs, just to name a few. But they are not enough.

To those who say that local and charity organizations should pick up the burden, I ask, "Did you ask them about starting these wars in the first place? Did you ask them about your recruitment, separation, and benefits policies? Did you ask them if they wanted you to ignore this problem while spending their tax dollars on more deadly toys?"

The only solution to the collective problems with the military and the VA is to get Congress to act. The only thing that will line up national resources—not national charities but Executive Branch agencies—is public pressure on Congress, and Congressional pressure on the Executive.

We at VUFT are committing ourselves to reach out to the veterans of today's wars.

We are committed to putting pressure on Congress. But—and it is a big but—we have to change the way we go about it.

To today's veterans we say come together with us and let us hear what you need.

We promise we will not impose our agenda on you; it is your agenda that counts now.

We will not interpret your issues as if they were ours and were based on our service, which we recognize is different from yours.

We will make available to you the broad range of contacts that we have built over the years through our own community service, and political involvement.

Most of all we promise you two things

1. We will listen
2. We will act.

It is essential that whatever divide there is between us be bridged and that we go forward together.

Collectively we are 7% of the population. As a voting block we are probably closer to 15 %, since veterans vote more consistently than most others.

We can make a difference, but only together.

MILITARY SEXUAL ASSAULT

In past issues we have discussed the current scandal over Military Sexual Assault (MSA). As most of us know, this is not a new problem in the US military. The difference now is that the victims, both male and female, are beginning to speak up.

The recent hearings before Congress showed one major component of the problem. All but one of the DOD personnel testifying before the Senate were men, and all, including the lady admiral, were general officers.

It is not just that they were nearly all men, which is one component of the problem; but it is also that it is almost impossible for a four-star with 30+ years of service, all or most of it spent as an officer, to relate to the problems of the ranks of enlisted men and women, where most of the assault victims serve.

These flag officers can easily relate, however, to the officers and noncommissioned officers who in many of the assault cases either commit the crimes, or commute the sentences of those who miraculously get convicted of the crime. They are part of the system that they fight to protect.

These generals and admirals lost first-hand contact with the troops decades ago when they were promoted out of direct command. Even then, they knew if they were to be successful in their rise to the highest ranks they had to be seen to serve the system first, and to serve the troops only incidentally.

Major aspects of the problem today stem from those conditions. The service chiefs circle the wagons to protect the organization (maybe that's why the Army has re-adopted the cavalry uniform). The continuity of the organization in the only form that they are comfortable with is the most important item on their agendas.

While giving lip service to civilian leadership of the military, they defy anyone to tamper with the actual day-to-day leadership roles of the officer corps. They defend to the death against any incursion on any even minor aspect of command as being "detrimental to good order and discipline". If there were "good order and discipline" on this issue we wouldn't be having this conversation. They fail at every turn to explain how the system should react when "good order and discipline" go out the window.

They defend the right of a commander to decide on the legal questions surrounding the assault and say that legal personnel cannot understand the nature and mystery of command. It is obvious that the reverse is very true in that commanders do not understand the nature and complexity of the law.

Every major western military force has taken major crimes out of the hands of the chain of command. We must do so also. Unfortunately the Gillibrand amendment to the Defense Authorization Act was defeated in the back room by a coalition of Democrats and Republicans alike. Those stalwart politicians, as the minority leader's chief of staff said recently on national TV, are devoted as their first duty to getting reelected. They were sure that they would be portrayed as anti-military if they backed Senator Gillibrand.

What they don't realize of course is that it is not Senator Gillibrand that they have opposed and let down, it is the thousands of victims in the military, the sons and daughters of their constituents. Disappointing constituents doesn't seem to be a disqualifying event for most politicians; rather it is a daily occurrence.

DOD's most recent formal response was to submit their 2012 "Sexual Assault and Prevention Response" report which is twice the size of the 2011 report. It is now in two volumes of a total 1,494 pages; Volume 2 being the report of a survey taken in 2011. The reports are a morass of bureaucratese that tries to represent the services as a caring, zero-tolerant organization on this subject. Apparently the victims don't agree, and we should not agree either. These reports, at best festering piles of bull feces, should be called out for what they are—Magnum opuses of temporizing and cover-your-ass.

Secretary Hagel calls for a "culture of dignity and respect" in the military. General Dempsey pledges to "eliminate sexual assault within the ranks". Boy, have we heard those words before!

Great goals but their plan to do something about it falls a bit short. As an example of both the shortfall and the rhetorical gobbledygook in the reports, here is the table included in both the 2011 and 2012 reports delineating their "PRIORITY 1" which is to "institutionalize prevention strategies in the military community":



Beyond the amazing return of the scrapped DHS color coded chart for threat, there is one glaring omission.

Where in the “Spectrum of Prevention” is any plan to deal with the penalties? Aren’t penalties part of the “prevention” scheme in almost every societal endeavor—politics, taxes, manufacturing, medicine, even driving your car?

Who gets in trouble if an assault occurs? Who gets in trouble if the program doesn’t work? Who gets in trouble if they let a perpetrator off the hook? Who gets in trouble if the same old bull hockey is published next year (in the unlikely event that they read this they will probably change the chart but not the message).

What are the consequences of failure and where and when will you deal with those?

A last thought.

Until the American public stops raising their kids to believe that it is *macho* to take what you want whenever you want it, the military’s job in this arena will remain gravely difficult. They can however go along way by finally doing what they keep pledging to do and truly have zero tolerance for sexual assault—by any one—under any circumstances. They can probably go the rest of the way by relieving commanders of their inappropriate responsibility to handle those crimes that in all other arenas we entrust only to our legal system, and never to legal amateurs..

BE A MEMBER If you are getting this newsletter and have not yet joined, please go to www.vuft.org/membership.html and join. Membership is free. The more our numbers grow, the greater voice we have. It shouldn’t be that way, but it is, so join us and help us take the fight to Congress and the state legislatures. Please encourage your friends who either are veterans, are related to veterans, or who support veterans’ causes to join VUFT, Inc. at www.vuft.org/membership.html

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NEED LEGAL HELP IN AN APPEAL TO THE DVA?

Try these two organizations: Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program www.vetsprobono.net/; National Organization of Veterans’ Advocates (NOVA) www.vetadvocates.com .

Also, United States Court of appeals for Veterans Claims “Public List of Practitioners” lists members of the court’s bar <http://www.uscourts.cavc.gov/practitioners/>

VETERANS CRISIS HOTLINE

The hotline for anyone needing immediate help with mental health issues is **800-273-8255**.

TAPS – PASSINGS AND WAR STATISTICS

OIF/OEF – HACK DATE THURSDAY 20 JUNE 2013

NOTE: DoD HAS STEADILY REDUCED ITS PUBLIC REPORTING OF THESE STATISTICS, SO ALL FIGURES ARE AS OF LAST AVAILABLE REPORT.

OP'N IRAQI FREEDOM/NEW DAWN (2,721/1,023 DAYS)

KILLED US [6/19/13]	4,409/66
WOUNDED US [3/20/13]	31,925/295
OTHER US CASUALTIES [2/6/12]	40,374/2,623
DIED OF SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS [3/20/13]	223/12
MISSING OR CAPTURED US	1
KILLED UK [2/6/12]	179
KILLED OTHER COALITION [2/6/12]	139/1
WOUNDED/INJURED COALITION [2/6/12]	1,819
**KILLED CONTRACTORS [11/9/08]	1,182
KILLED IRAQI POLICE/MILITARY [1/25/09]	≥ 48,874
KILLED IRAQI CIVILIANS [6/20/13]	≥ 123,873–1,455,590
WOUNDED IRAQI MIL/CIVILIANS [9/20/10]	≥ 400K–1.556M
IRAQ REFUGEES INT./EXT. [9/27/07]	2.1M/2.5M

OP'N ENDURING FREEDOM (4,274 DAYS)

KILLED US [6/19/13]	2,243
WOUNDED US [3/20/13]	18,350
OTHER CASUALTIES US [2/6/12]	15,693
DIED OF SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS [3/20/13]	98
MISSING OR CAPTURED US	0
KILLED COALITION [3/20/13]	1097
WOUNDED/INJURED COALITION (12/2/07)	1,602
KILLED AFGHANI POLICE/MILITARY [7/4/09]	≥ 11,152
KILLED AFGHANI CIVILIANS (9/10/2010)	≥ 8,813
WOUNDED AFGHANI MIL/CIVILIANS (2/24/2009)	46,322
AFGHAN REFUGEES INT./EXT. [9/27/07]	1.75M/4.8M
COST OF IRAQ WAR TO DATE	\$813,153,646,832
COST OF AFGHAN WAR TO DATE	\$636,127,959,568

NOTE: SOME NUMBERS DO NOT CHANGE BETWEEN ISSUES BECAUSE UPDATED FIGURES ARE NOT AVAILABLE AT PRESS TIME

* This entry has been changed to "Non-mortal casualties" which includes wounded, non-hostile casualties, and diseased where medical air transport was required. ** Includes 280 additional contractor casualties reported in international press but not in US official figures

NOTE: The DoD has revised its reporting page and in doing so has significantly reduced the number of casualties reported from their own previously reported totals. We choose to accept the independent numbers provided by those who have no reason to hide the truth.

NOTICE:

This is the fourth issue of Volume 8 of **SOUND OFF!**. It is the new shorter form of the newsletter which will now be published quarterly. Our intent with the new newsletter is to continue to keep you apprised of the status of our new initiatives. We will also present an issue for your consideration each quarter, and generally will solicit some form of action from you through petitions either to Congress <http://www.contactingthecongress.org/> or to the DVA <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/ro/rocontacts.htm>, or both. Finally we will maintain the statistics table for all of those killed and maimed in the current unnecessary wars.

Sorry to cutback, but we are all growing older and the continuing monthly effort to review 100s of news stories to select a few for general information has become a bit trying.

If you wish to keep up, several excellent websites cover military and veterans' matters:

Military.com <http://www.military.com/>

Colonel Dan's excellent news feed which you can sign up for at <http://www.angelfire.com/il2/VeteranIssues/>

If you are familiar with RSS Readers I can recommend Awasu at <http://www.awasu.com/products.php> -- the "Personal Edition" is free. There you can add various sites that you are interested in and it will poll them for you.

You can set up search queries (on Google for example) to provide you with daily input on these issues.

Our next issue will be in June 2013, and quarterly thereafter. Keep up the fight! Keep involved! Never give in!

"Either we have hope within us or we don't; it is a dimension of the soul, an orientation of the spirit, an orientation of the heart -- not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense."

Vaclav Havel

VETERANS UNITED FOR TRUTH, INC.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: I have been asked what guides my selection of articles. In general, I try to stick with articles that deal exclusively with our target group: serving military, veterans, retirees, and their families. I also favor articles that deal with the effect of Legislative or Executive inaction or bad actions that adversely affect our target group. I try not to pick those articles that have already been beaten to death in the regular press, but rather try to bring the reader articles that he or she might not run across in another medium. While we are non-partisan, I do not believe articles critical of government actions to be partisan as long as they are accurate and fair. Criticism, like dissent, is fair. Finally, I screen hundreds of articles for inclusions and for every article I include, I throw five or six away – good articles, but not as important as the ones selected.

I always appreciate contributions, whether it is opinion in Letter-to-the-Editor form, or articles that the reader believes would be good for our readership. Since I get a chance to vent once in awhile in these newsletters, I will certainly consider Op-Ed copy for inclusion. I always welcome reader comment or complaint. Sandy Cook, Editor <mailto:scook@vuft.org>

If you need to call us, our number is 1.805.530.6417.

The phone is covered by a voice recorder 24 hours a day. We'll get back to you ASAP.