

SOUND OFF!



VOL. IV, NO 13

THE NEWSLETTER OF VETERANS UNITED FOR TRUTH, INC.

“VETERANS STANDING UP FOR EACH OTHER”

25 FEBRUARY 2009

FIRST CALL – NOTES FROM THE FRONT

CAN HE DO IT? ~ WE WANT TO HELP!

On the first full day of the current administration, Eric K. Shinseki, GEN USA (Ret) was sworn in as the new Secretary of Veterans Affairs. [We all still call it the “VA”, as in “Veterans Administration”, but for 20 years, since 15 March 1989, Veterans Affairs has been a cabinet post.]

We all have to remember that the DVA has also been a bureaucracy, and a huge one at that. As of September 30, 2008, VA had 278,565 employees on the rolls. Among all departments and agencies of the federal government, only the Department of Defense has a larger work force. Of the total number of VA employees, 247,113 were in the Veterans Health Administration, 16,135 in the Veterans Benefits Administration, 1,549 in the National Cemetery System, 3,412 in the Veterans Canteen Service and 437 in the Revolving Supply Fund. The rest, 9,919 employees, are in various staff and facilities offices. According to a report on Homeland Security credentials required, DVA also has 217,946 contractors. Close to 100,000 citizens also volunteer at various DVA facilities. Altogether, approximately 600,000 people serving 23.4 million veterans - a ratio of 39:1; not bad,

but!.

We also have to remember that the DVA bureaucracy has been around since Herbert Hoover established the VA in 1930. It has had 79 years to develop its own bureaucratic inertia. It is not going to change easily.

Secretary Shinseki, a retired military man with 38 years of military service is going to have to face the same situation that President Eisenhower faced. Harry Truman is alleged to have said, “Poor Ike. He’s going to come in here and give an order and expect someone to obey it.” Good luck, Mr. Secretary!

Secretary Shinseki and President Obama have vowed to reduce waiting times for those veterans seeking benefits rulings, and waiting for the benefits themselves. Let’s see what kind of problem these two dedicated leaders face.

We all know that any bureaucracy takes time to do things. If we are to assess the “Change” requirement for the DVA then we should propose acceptable goals. Even if there is no change in the steps required in the current system, we would have to propose that any veteran ought to be able to get a local ruling from a DVA Regional Office (RO) within 30 days; should be able to get an appeal through the Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA) within 60 more days, or 90 days total; and ought to be able to get a final appeal through the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) within another 90 days for a total of 180 days. That’s 6 months altogether for someone who needs a ruling ASAP, but we have to be realistic and reasonable – bureaucracies take time.

Currently the times that the VA and the appeals system allow themselves, however, is rather startling, and is a product of the fact that only

about 6,000 people are handling all of the claims, and maybe far fewer than that at the Regional Office level. Since only about one quarter of all veterans ever file claims, that means that there are 3900 or more potential cases per benefits adjudicator.

Right now the time for a veteran to get an initial response to his or her claim is 196 days (all times average). If that claim is denied and the veteran pursues the claim to the BVA, it takes another 971 days for a response.

Now those two steps are all that the DVA can control. Once an appeal goes to the CAVC it is out of the DVA's hands. Of course you need to know that the CAVC takes 1,286 days to process an appeal of a BVA ruling. If the CAVC's ruling is unfavorable, the appeal can then go to the Federal Circuit Court of Appeals, which takes another 317 days, and finally to the Supreme Court which takes another 386 days – if the Supreme Court accepts the case. Altogether, 9 years, 9 months, and 3 days.

But let's examine the first 1,167 days – 3 years and 2 ½ months!. How can Secretary Shinseki reduce that to our target of 90 days? I don't know. Despite the fact that the stimulus package contains \$150,000,000 to hire and train new examiners, can that wait really be cut by 93% in the next four years in an 80-year old bureaucracy? I am truly afraid that it would take a miracle beyond any of those already postulated for the current administration to get such a result. Simple walking on water and raising the dead is not enough.

So, with great humility, I propose to Secretary Shinseki that he take a new tack – one that just might work, and would immediately exceed everyone's expectations.

Get rid of the operating assumption within the DVA that all claimants are attempting fraud. They really aren't, you know, but that is the operating basis of the DVA's benefits system.

Their current approach requires absolute verification of the validity of a claim before the claim is granted. A demand for absolute validity,

when coupled with their reported 12-a-day quota for evaluations, gives the bureaucrats not only a great incentive, but also multiple opportunities to deny the claim.

Their goal is to “process claims”. Our goal is to “grant benefits”. So here is our proposal.

PRESUME THE VALIDITY OF THE CLAIM FROM THE GIT-GO!

Let me repeat that –

PRESUME THE VALIDITY OF THE CLAIM FROM THE GIT-GO!

Grant the claim, perhaps at a reduced initial level, when a veteran with a valid DD-214 walks in the door. Then go about determining the claim's validity and the ultimate percentage of disability.

Think of how that would change the DVA's incentive system! Instead of being incentivized to “get x claims processed (regardless of outcome) every day” so that the wait-numbers or the claims-processed numbers look good and the administrative budget is met, they could incentivize their evaluators on numbers of claims validated. That's a marked difference, and it gets some response and some benefits into the hands of the individual veteran immediately.

This approach might not only return the DVA to the intent of the law, but would allow them to take down their current motto of, **“We will serve you as soon as you present absolute proof and we don't lose the paperwork or shred it”**, and return it to, **“To care for him who has borne the battle, and for his widow and orphan”**

Yes there will still be fraud, and they need to root that out. But the evaluators should never be incentivized on the basis of numbers-of-frauds-uncovered, rather they must be incentivized on numbers-and-percentages-of-claims-validated.

The evaluators have to know that they are not just the administrators of the nation's sacred promise to veterans, but it's protectors also. Without that inherent knowledge, and a real belief in their responsibility under that charge, nothing will change.

Instant presumption of validity will instantly eliminate all of the current waiting periods at the DVA level. If a claim is found to be fraudulent, then the perpetrator is liable for criminal charges and restitution. If the claim is found to be erroneous – invalid but not fraudulent – then the veteran could be down-evaluated and the government should waive any restitution. After all, he or she thought the claim was valid but was just wrong. Everyone else seems to be getting a pass for getting things wrong, from the DoD to Wall Street, so why not vets?

Such a system would get all of the valid claims in the system immediately – this is what was promised, wasn't it? If the claims were granted at a reduced rate pending validation, then any underpayment could be made up retroactively once validation was complete. Fraud will still be discovered. Erroneous claims will still be denied.

But the pressure to perform is off the veteran and on the bureaucratic system, where it belongs.

I have a sneaky feeling that administrative costs would plummet, although benefits costs would undoubtedly rise – but again, benefits is what the system is designed for, isn't it?

So General Shinseki, VUFT, Inc. offers you a solution free of charge. Now you can spend your time on getting Congress to guarantee the DVA budget from year-to-year. Your second-order task is to design a system that forces the Congress to calculate all these cost into their future decisions to go to war (they are going to take that power back aren't they?) [Ed.]

“Surely, then, it is our responsibility to ensure that our soldiers are cared for as well in life as they are in death.”

Mary McNamara
LA Times review of *"Taking Chance"*

REVEILLE - WAKE-UP CALLS – CALLS TO ACTION

NEED LEGAL HELP IN AN APPEAL TO THE DVA?

Try these two websites: Veterans Consortium Pro Bono Program www.vetsprobono.org/index.htm. United States Court of appeals for Veterans Claims “Public List of Practitioners” are members of the court’s bar www.vetapp.gov/practitioners/

WAKE UP! SPREAD THE NEWS!

Membership is open, free, and very worthwhile! Get your fellow veterans, and veterans’ family members to join VUFT! We are beginning to be heard, and we need you to help us get the message out. If each of us would bring in one new member every month, what an impact we could have!

ASSEMBLY - PROGRESS OF THE ORGANIZATION

VCS - VUFT LAWSUIT UPDATE:

Class Action Suit: The appeal was filed in December and now the 9th Circuit Court of Appeals has ordered us to an Assessment Conference to determine if the case should be included in the court’s Mediation Program. Our appeal goes on, even though we hope that the new administration will address the focus of our case directly and with vigor.

Case Progress to Date:

7/23/2007 Suit filed w/Federal District Court
9/25/2007 Defendant’s Motion to Dismiss
2/11/2008 Motion for Preliminary Injunction
2/25/2008 Preliminary Injunction Hearing
4/21/2008 Trial
6/25/2008 Judgment based on jurisdiction

7/25/2008 Appeal notice filed w/9th Circuit Court of Appeals
12/10/2008 Appeal brief filed
12/15/2008 *Swords to Plowshares* and *Vietnam Veterans of America* file amicus briefs
12/22/2008 *Military Spouses for Change* and *United Spinal Association* file amicus briefs

Here is a link to the legal [documents](#) on the lawsuit.

BE A MEMBER If you are getting this newsletter and have not yet joined, please go to [our website](#) 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.](#)

SUPPORTING THE CAUSE If you wish to donate to our work you may now do so via PayPal or Visa on [our website "Donate" page](#). Every little bit helps. We are a 501(c)(3): your donations are deductible on your federal taxes. You can also buy our handsome pins using the same method. If you wish to volunteer your services to the organization, please contact the Chair at rhandy@vuft.org or the Vice Chair at scook@vuft.org. Watch for details at www.vuft.org

DO YOU PASS THIS NEWSLETTER ON TO ANYONE?
IF YOU DO. PLEASE LET US KNOW HOW MANY PEOPLE YOU SEND IT TO
NO NAMES, JUST NUMBERS

MAIL CALL - LETTERS FROM MEMBERS AND OTHERS [SOME EDITED FOR LENGTH]

No letters this issue

RECALL - FEDERAL AND STATE LEGISLATION AND LEGISLATORS

SURGE NEEDED ON VETS CLAIMS, LAWMAKERS SAY

Rick Maze - Staff writer - Feb 11, 2009

While representatives of the Board of Veterans' Appeals and the U.S. Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims bickered over who bears more responsibility for the long delay veterans face on disability claims, a key Republican senator said it was time to take some drastic action.

Sen. Richard Burr of North Carolina, ranking Republican on the Senate Veterans' Affairs Committee, said proposals from the appeals board, the court and veterans service organizations will not end veterans' frustration any time soon.

While such changes as holding federal workers more accountable for errors and shortening deadlines for filing and ruling on appeals might provide some help, Burr said, the end result is likely to be modest, with the Veterans Affairs Department able to finish a few more claims each year than received.

But with an estimated backlog of between 600,000 and 800,000 claims, depending on how it is counted, modest progress isn't enough, he said. Burr called for a military-style "surge" strategy to allow VA to quickly reduce the backlog using temporary measures. <More at: www.marinecorpstimes.com/news/2009/02/military_veteransclaims_surge_021109w/>

MORE DWELL TIME FOR OUR TROOPS

February 12, 2009

Today, a long-overdue bill is being introduced in Congress by Rep. Ellen Tauscher which calls for increasing dwell time for our servicemembers who will serve in Iraq and Afghanistan. Current deployment policies and operational tempo, which usually consists of a 1:1 ratio of time deployed and time at home, are compounding the wounds of war for our troops. It is a medical fact confirmed by DoD studies (see Mental Health Advisory Team reports [IV](#) and [V](#)) that repeated exposure to high-intensity combat with inadequate dwell time greatly increases the incidence of service-connected psychological problems.

<http://open.salon.com/content.php?cid=111184>

NEW BILL TO IMPROVE POST-9/11 GI BILL

February 16, 2009

Rep. Bob Filner, D-Ca. introduced a bill (H.R. 950) to remove the requirement for veterans to take at least one class on-campus to receive the monthly housing stipend under the new [Post-9/11 GI Bill](#). This would make the stipend available to all eligible veterans who attend school on a greater than half-time basis. According to reports, the bill doesn't change the tuition and fees payment rate, which is tied to the highest in-state tuition rate for undergraduate level studies. However, this change will ensure that the new Post-9/11 GI Bill will provide equal benefits for vets who are unable to attend traditional classroom college courses. www.military.com/military-report/new-bill-to-improve-post-911-gi-bill

HR 1016 - VETERANS HEALTH CARE BUDGET REFORM AND TRANSPARENCY ACT OF 2009

On February 12, Representative Filner, along with 9 original co-sponsors, introduced HR 1016, the Veterans Health Care Budget Reform and Transparency Act of 2009. This is companion legislation to S 423. This legislation would significantly improve the way the Veterans Administration is funded by providing two-fiscal year budget authority.

Historically, VA's health care system has been plagued by under-funding, which has required the VA repeatedly request supplementary funding for health care costs. Even with sufficient funding, however, the money for VA has been provided late in 19 of the past 22 fiscal years. Sometimes, the appropriations have come as late as February, when VA needed the funds to spend in the preceding October. Obviously, such unevenness in the funding process works counter to the ability of the VA to plan for immediate needs and to forecast future needs in veterans health services.

HR 917 TO PROVIDE HEALTH CARE TO SURVIVING SPOUSES

Spouses of service members killed in combat or who later die because of combat injuries would receive free lifetime military health care under a bill introduced by Representative Brett Guthrie (KY) on February 9.

Under current law the surviving spouse of those killed in combat continues to receive active duty health care benefits for three years. After that time limit, the spouse continues to have coverage but is charged the same fees and co-pays as retirees. Dependent children receive free health care until age 21, or age 23 if they are full time college students and remain unmarried. HR 917 only applies to the surviving spouse. The current rules remain unchanged for dependent children.

IOWA LEGISLATURE UNANIMOUSLY PASSES BILL TO PROTECT VETERANS' DISABILITY COMPENSATION FROM ATTACHMENT

February 12, 2009

Today Iowa State Legislators unanimously approved a Bill that will enhance Federal statutes designed to protect veterans' disability compensation from attachment in divorce settlements.

Veterans' service-connected disability compensation is intended to financially compensate a military veteran disabled in the line of duty. This compensation is not an asset, or property, and should not be used to calculate a veteran's net worth. Disability compensation is awarded to a veteran that has lost some/all physical or mental ability to work, or maintain a daily routine. Veteran's disability compensation is tax exempt and not classified as 'income' by the IRS. VA disability compensation is non-transferable and cannot be awarded to a third party under any legal process whatsoever. Even after the veteran has deposited these funds into their personal bank account they are federally protected from attachment or seizure. Disability compensation belongs solely to the disabled veteran that has suffered the disability.

<More at: www.veteranstoday.com/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=4812>

RETREAT – NEWS

COMMANDERS IN IRAQ CHALLENGE PETRAEUS ON PULLOUT RISK

Gareth Porter*

WASHINGTON, Feb 17 (IPS) - CENTCOM Commander General David Petraeus and Multinational Force Iraq (MNF-I) Commander General Ray Odierno have submitted assessments of Iraq combat troop withdrawal plans to President Barack Obama based on the premise that his 16-month withdrawal plan would pose significantly greater risk to "security gains" than the 23-month plan they favour.

But a senior commander in Iraq appeared to contradict that premise last week by declaring that security gains in the Shi'a provinces of Iraq are "permanent", and a field commander in Iraq says there is no objective basis for any Petraeus-Odierno finding that Obama's plan carries greater risk than their 23-month plan. Maj. Gen. Michael Oates, U.S. commander for the eight southern provinces of Iraq, denied in remarks to reporters Feb. 12 that the security gains in that region were fragile, contrary to the premise that Odierno has publicly asserted. Oates cited the dramatic reduction in activities by Shi'a militia fighters and the holding of the Jan. 31 elections without any major attacks. <More at: <http://ipsnews.net/news.asp?idnews=45795>>

TENSIONS ESCALATE OVER KIRKUK

Feb. 16, 2009

ERBIL, Iraq, Feb. 16 (UPI) -- Tensions with Arabs in the north of Iraq could escalate to all-out war if U.S. officials there do not act to resolve regional issues, Kurdish officials said.

Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the Kurdistan Regional Government, said tensions in the region, notably in Kirkuk, had not erupted into conflict because of the presence of American forces in the region, Iraq's satellite channel al-Sumaria reported Monday. <More at: www.upi.com/Emerging_Threats/2009/02/16/Tensions_escalate_over_Kirkuk/UPI-95091234815549/>

DOD ANNOUNCES AFGHANISTAN FORCE DEPLOYMENT

February 17, 2009

Pursuant to President Obama's decision today, Secretary Gates ordered the deployment of two additional combat units, totaling more than 12,000 troops, to Afghanistan. The 2d Marine Expeditionary Brigade (MEB), from Camp Lejeune, N.C., with approximately 8,000 Marines will deploy to Afghanistan in late Spring 2009.

The 5th Stryker Brigade, 2nd Infantry Division from Ft. Lewis, Wash., will deploy approximately 4,000 soldiers to Afghanistan in mid-summer 2009. This Stryker Brigade and the MEB will deploy to increase the capabilities of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF). Approximately 5,000 additional troops to support these combat forces will receive deployment orders at a later date.

STATES PUSH TO TAKE BACK NATIONAL GUARD

Maya Schenwar - [truthout](http://truthout.org) | Report - 11 February 2009

Going on its seventh year, the Iraq war has taken its toll on not only the US military, but also on the states's National Guard units, which were called up when Congress passed the 2002 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF) against Iraq. Now a growing state-level movement is working to keep the Guard at home.

Its logic: The AUMF's goals have been fulfilled. The authorization's explicit purposes were to defend the US against the "threat posed by Iraq" and to enforce UN Security Council resolutions regarding Iraq's alleged ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Saddam Hussein - along with his supposed threat - is gone, and the UN resolutions are no longer relevant, so there's no longer a mandate to keep troops in Iraq. <More at: www.truthout.org/021109J>

INQUIRY ON GRAFT IN IRAQ FOCUSES ON AMERICAN OFFICERS

James Glanz, C.J. Chivers and William K. Rashbaum February 15, 2009

Federal authorities examining the early, chaotic days of the \$125 billion American-led effort to rebuild Iraq have significantly broadened their inquiry to include senior American military officers who oversaw the program, according to interviews with senior government officials and court documents.

Court records show that last month investigators subpoenaed the personal bank records of Col. Anthony B. Bell, who is now retired from the Army but who was in charge of reconstruction contracting in Iraq in 2003 and 2004 when the small operation grew into a frenzied attempt to remake the country's broken infrastructure. In addition, investigators are examining the activities of Lt. Col. Ronald W. Hirtle of the Air Force, who was a senior contracting officer in Baghdad in 2004, according to two federal officials involved in the inquiry.

It is not clear what specific evidence exists against the two men, and both said they had nothing to hide from investigators. Yet officials say that several criminal cases over the past few years point to widespread corruption in the operation the men helped to run. As part of the inquiry, the authorities are taking a fresh look at information given to them by Dale C. Stoffel, an American arms dealer and contractor who was killed in Iraq in late 2004. Before he was shot on a road north of Baghdad, Mr. Stoffel drew a portrait worthy of a pulp crime novel: tens of thousands of dollars stuffed into pizza boxes and delivered surreptitiously to the American contracting offices in Baghdad, and payoffs made in paper sacks that were scattered in "dead drops" around the Green Zone. <More at: www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/world/middleeast/15iraq.html>

GI SKINHEAD

Jacob Wheeler - February 11, 2009

An FBI report details white supremacists' recruitment of military personnel.

Domestic Skinhead groups are recruiting U.S. military members. They're looking for "ghost skins"—personnel without records of white supremacist activity or overtly racist tattoos.

According to a recently declassified July report from the FBI's Domestic Terrorism Analysis Unit, "extremist leaders have historically favored recruiting active and former military personnel for their knowledge of firearms, explosives and tactical skills and their access to weapons and intelligence in preparation for an anticipated war against the federal government, Jews and people of color." <More at: www.inthesetimes.com/article/4177/gi_skinhead/>

TO THE COLORS - GATHERINGS

| Date | Time | Where | What | Who | Notes |
|----------|-----------|---|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|
| 3/5 | 1000-1600 | Scottish Rite Event Center 1895 Camino del Rio South San Diego, CA | Western Regional Career Event | | Register |
| 3/9-3/10 | | Crystal Lake, IL | Stand-down | Amy Johnson | 815-455-5190 |
| 3/12 | 1000-1600 | Virginia Beach Convention Center 1000 19th Street, Virginia Beach, VA | Mid-Atlantic Regional Career Event | | Register |
| 3/1 | 1200-1600 | Great Lawn, National Veterans Home Brentwood (LA), CA | | | |
| 3/2 | 1100-1400 | Crowne Plaza 4100 Presidential Blvd Philadelphia, PA 19131 | Philadelphia Career Fair | | |
| 3/12 | 1100-1400 | Radisson Martinique On Broadway Hotel, 49 WEST 32ND STREET New York, NY 10001 | New York Career Fair | | |
| 3/21 | 1200 | 23 rd St & Constitution Ave. Washington, DC | March on the Pentagon | ANSWER | |

We are a non-partisan organization. We will advertise all legitimate veterans' events, regardless of purpose.

TATTOO - CURRENT ISSUES

PHYSICAL DISABILITY BOARD OF REVIEW

Service members who have been medically separated since September 11, 2001 will have the opportunity to have their disability ratings reviewed to ensure fairness and accuracy.

The new Physical Disability Board of Review (PDBR) will examine each applicant's medical separation, compare DoD and VA ratings, and make a recommendation to the respective Service Secretary (or designee.) A disability rating cannot be lowered and any change to the rating is effective on the date of final decision by the Service Secretary.

To be eligible for PDBR review, a service member must have been medically separated between September 11, 2001 and December 31, 2009 with a combined disability rating of 20 percent or less, and not found eligible for retirement.

<More at: www.health.mil/Pages/Page.aspx?ID=19>

STIMULUS BILL WOULD AID MILITARY HOMEOWNERS, WOUNDED

Walter Pincus - Washington Post Staff Writer - February 13, 2009; A09

To help military personnel forced to sell their homes amid the current real estate crisis, the compromise stimulus bill contains \$555 million for the secretary of defense to acquire title to a military person's property or reimburse the individual for losses after a private sale or foreclosure. The bill also includes nearly \$3 billion in construction funds to repair and modernize military facilities.

The new program established in the stimulus bill is called the Homeowners Assistance Fund. It is primarily for wounded who need to move for medical reasons, surviving spouses of those killed in action or Defense Department personnel suddenly ordered to relocate. The program is also available to the widows of Defense Department civilian employees killed in the line of duty. It builds on a program to help homeowners near military bases being closed.

<More at: www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/02/12/AR2009021203503.html>

ARMY SUICIDES IN JANUARY OUTNUMBERED COMBAT DEATHS

Bruce E. Levine - AlterNet - February 11, 2009

The U.S. Army recently reported that for the month of January in 2009, the number of soldiers who committed suicide surpassed the number of soldiers who were killed in combat in Iraq and Afghanistan. While there were 16 U.S. combat deaths, the Army believes that there were 24 suicides (the Army has confirmed seven suicides, and it believes that investigators will confirm an additional 17 other deaths as suicides). The number of suicides in January 2009 is more than five times as many as the total in January 2008. <More at: www.alternet.org/story/126114/>

PROGRAM CURBING SOLDIERS' LOSS OF HEARING

Brian Newsome - February 6, 2009

Staff Sgt. Chris Mountjoy couldn't hear for three days after the mortar round screamed into his camp and exploded 15 feet away from him. The open door of a Humvee saved him from the shrapnel, but a shock wave blew him 30 feet into a wall, perforating his ear drums. His hearing came back, but only partially.

Now, more than two years later, the 27-year-old who loved being in the infantry spends his days behind a desk at Fort Carson's 10th Combat Support Hospital, where he was reassigned because of his hearing loss and a traumatic brain injury from the blast. <More at: www.gazette.com/articles/hearing_47663_article.html/soldiers_iraq.html>

SKIN WOES TAKE TOLL ON U.S. COMBAT TROOPS

Steven Reinberg - *HealthDay Reporter* - February 17, 2009

TUESDAY, Feb. 17 (HealthDay News) -- Rashes, eczema and other skin troubles can be exacerbated by combat conditions in Iraq and Afghanistan and are a major cause of American soldiers being evacuated for treatment, a new report finds.

In the history of warfare, skin diseases have been responsible for poor morale and combat ineffectiveness, the researchers noted in the February issue of the *Archives of Dermatology*. In fact, in tropical and subtropical areas, more than half of the days lost by front line units are due to skin diseases.

<More at: <http://health.usnews.com/articles/health/healthday/2009/02/17/skin-woes-take-toll-on-us-combat-troops.htm#subscribe>>

MANY COMBAT VETS SUFFER SEVERE HEADACHES UPON RETURN

Amanda Gardner - *HealthDay Reporter* - February 23, 2009

MONDAY, Feb. 23 (HealthDay News) -- Headaches have become a common complaint among soldiers who suffered mild head trauma while serving in Iraq or Afghanistan. These headaches tend to be debilitating, mirroring migraines in intensity, according to research released Monday that is to be presented next month at the American Academy of Neurology's annual meeting in Seattle.

About 15 percent of soldiers deployed to Iraq experience mild traumatic brain injury (TBI), according to background information from the researchers, who are based at Madigan Army Medical Center in Tacoma, Wash. But not much has been known about the headaches that can occur as a result.

Research presented at the AAN meeting last year determined that almost 20 percent of U.S. soldiers returning from Iraq are being diagnosed with migraines. This group also has nearly double the risk for depression, post-traumatic stress disorder and other psychiatric troubles. <More at: <http://yourtotalhealth.ivillage.com/many-combat-vets-suffer-severe-headaches-upon-return.html>>

PTSD IN THE FEMALE SOLDIER

Rick Nauert, Ph.D. - *Senior News Editor* - Reviewed by John M. Grohol, Psy.D. - February 20, 2009

(Psych Central) -- According to military records, as of September 30, 2008 over 200,000 women were serving on active duty. While women are technically barred from serving in combat, they are serving in support positions in combat areas in greater numbers.

This new role for women in the military brings with it new physical and mental health concerns, namely post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) for those exposed to combat-related trauma.

... PTSD affects approximately 2.6 percent of the U.S. population. Among military personnel serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), that percentage climbs as high as 17 percent. In the general population, women suffer from PTSD at almost twice the rate as do men.

<More at: <http://psychcentral.com/news/2009/02/20/ptsd-in-the-female-soldier/4243.html>>

LOUISIANA TOPS NATION IN [PERCENTAGE OF] HOMELESS VETERANS

Bryony D. Stocker - Louisiana State University - February 17, 2009

BATON ROUGE — No state in the union has a higher percentage of veterans who are homeless than Louisiana.

That includes more than 300 women vets, and they are the reason Kim Marshall is turning her childhood home into one of only nine transitional housing centers in the nation specializing in services for female veterans and their children.

The female vet's needs are different, say experts, including the fact that nearly a third of female veterans interviewed by Veteran Administration's medical screening said they were being sexually assaulted.

Metamorphosis Inc., a private Baton Rouge non-profit, will open its doors, pending Metro Council approval on Wednesday, to female veterans this month making temporary housing available to four single women plus a single mother and two children. Metamorphosis receives a per diem grant from the U.S. Department of Veteran Affairs to provide fixed-rate housing for each occupied bed. Louisiana's per-capita rate of homeless veterans is four times higher than the national average, according to government figures. <More at: www.thenewsstar.com/article/20090217/NEWS01/902170311>

STOP-LOSS GIS STILL WAITING ON MONEY

United Press International - February 24, 2009

WASHINGTON -- Soldiers forced to return to active duty haven't received the pay bonuses they were promised five months ago, advocates say. The 13,000 Soldiers, who were made to remain on active duty beyond their enlistment period by so-called stop-loss orders, are entitled to monthly bonuses of up to \$500 under a plan approved last year by Congress and was set to take effect Oct. 1. But the Soldiers are still waiting to see the bonuses, USA Today reported Monday.

<More at: www.military.com/news/article/stoploss-gis-still-waiting-on-money.html>

GATES ORDERS REVIEW OF POLICY ON SOLDIERS' COFFINS

Katharine Q. Seelye - February 11, 2009

Defense Secretary Robert Gates suggested on Tuesday that he was open to allowing the media to photograph the flag-draped coffins of fallen soldiers as their bodies and remains are returned to the United States.

"If the needs of the families can be met and the privacy concerns can be addressed, the more honor we can accord these fallen heroes, the better," Mr. Gates told reporters.

He said he was ordering a review of the military policy that bars photographers from taking pictures of the return of the coffins, most of which are coming from Iraq and Afghanistan and go through Dover Air Force Base in Delaware. He also set a "short deadline" for a decision. <More at: www.nytimes.com/2009/02/11/us/11bodies.html>

SPECIAL COURT'S SOLE FUNCTION IS SUPPORT OF MILITARY VETERANS

Jim Suhr - Associated Press - February 8, 2009

EDWARDSVILLE [IL]-- With combat duty in Vietnam under his belt, Madison County Circuit Judge Charles Romani Jr. knows veterans often have special issues in terms of drug treatment and mental illness. Soon, many of them may be getting an offer of special judicial help.

Taking a page from a similar program launched a year ago in New York, court administrators plan to launch a court designed to deal with only military veterans charged with nonviolent crimes.

The mission: Divert many of the veterans from the criminal courts to a program that, much like popular drug courts, will offer them treatment for underlying issues, perhaps sparing them a criminal conviction if they complete the treatment.

"There are a lot of services out there; one thing the court will be able to do is get them connected" with veterans, ideally keeping them from becoming repeat offenders, Ann Callis, the county's chief judge, said.

Veterans' participation will be voluntary and Callis said it will be staffed by veterans from virtually every branch of the military. The prosecutor will be former Marine Corps Cpl. Michael Stewart, the public defender former Navy Lt. Tyler Bateman — officials Callis said "hopefully would have more of an understanding (of veterans' issues) from being there."

<More at: www.pantagraph.com/articles/2009/02/08/news/doc498f8cedf249c293990343.txt>

VA CLINIC WARNS OF POSSIBLE CONTAMINANT EXPOSURE

Bill Poovey - Associated Press Writer - Feb 13, 2009

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. - Thousands of patients at a Veterans Administration clinic in Tennessee may have been exposed to the infectious body fluids of other patients when they had colonoscopies in recent years, and now VA medical facilities all over the U.S. are reviewing their own procedures.

A spokesman at the Alvin C. York VA Medical Center in Murfreesboro, Tenn., said the clinic is offering free blood tests and medical care to all patients whose records show they had colonoscopies between April, 23, 2003 and Dec. 1, 2008.

<More at: http://health.yahoo.com/news/ap/veterans_colonoscopies.html>

AT THE FRONT, WHEN VETERANS COME HOME

Kevin Coyne - February 15, 2009

The old vets and the young sit side by side in the waiting room at the veterans center here, facing the "Welcome Home" sign and the framed Purple Heart, and if you close your eyes sometimes and listen as they talk it's hard to tell which war was whose. They fought on different sides of the world, but their battles are the same.

The center is part of a network established by the federal government in the years after an earlier war, when too many veterans came home from Vietnam to find too few places to talk about what had happened to them there. But the centers have been pressed into duty now for the veterans of a new war, more of whom are arriving home — and arriving here, too — each day from Iraq and Afghanistan.

"This is the front lines, right here," James Gordon said as he walked through the suite of conference rooms and offices he oversees as the team leader here. Known as the Trenton Vet Center, this facility — one of four in New Jersey that offers counseling and other services outside the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital system — had 3,300 visits from veterans in 2003, the first year of the Iraq War; it had 7,300 visits last year. "It's coming now, and it's going to keep coming, and each of those people is going to have tentacles reaching to kids and family and other people."

<More at: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/02/15/nyregion/new-jersey/15colnj.html>>

VETERANS SUPPORT REINTRODUCTION OF 'THE TCE REDUCTION ACT'

Salem-News.com - Feb-22-2009

(SOMERDALE, N.J.) - The Veterans for Change (VFC), a small but proactive organization, plans to petition Congress to reintroduce "The TCE Reduction Act," and to include exposure to trichloroethylene (TCE) for military bases with TCE contamination of groundwater under the VA's Presumptive Disability category.

The Veterans for Change's (VFC) mission is to promote positive changes in the treatment and rights of all veterans, especially relating to benefits claims, claims appeals, medical treatment, VA facilities, PTSD, Agent Orange, POW/MIA recoveries, diabetes, dioxins and related issues affecting veterans and their families. (See: groups.yahoo.com/group/VETERANS-FOR-CHANGE/)

Recognizing the need for VA disability compensation of many veterans exposed to trichloroethylene (TCE), Jim Davis, founder of the VFC, told the Salem-News.com that he plans to launch a nationwide petition to push for the reintroduction of The TCE Reduction Act, which was never reached the 110th Congress for a vote.

<More at: www.salem-news.com/articles/february222009/tce_vets_2-22-09.php>

THESE NEXT TWO GO TOGETHER – CHARGE & REBUTTAL

ARMY CHARITY HOARDS MILLIONS

Jeff Donn - AP National Writer - 20 February 2009

FORT BLISS, Texas – As soldiers stream home from Iraq and Afghanistan, the biggest charity inside the U.S. military has been stockpiling tens of millions of dollars meant to help put returning fighters back on their feet, an Associated Press investigation shows.

Between 2003 and 2007 — as many military families dealt with long war deployments and increased numbers of home foreclosures — Army Emergency Relief grew into a \$345 million behemoth. During those years, the charity packed away \$117 million into its own reserves while spending just \$64 million on direct aid, according to an AP analysis of its tax records.

<More at: http://news.yahoo.com/s/ap/20090222/ap_on_re_us/army_s_stingy_charity_abridged/print>

AER REPLY TO AP REPORT CONCERNING AER OPERATIONS

The recent Associated Press article on AER incorrectly infers that Army Emergency Relief withheld financial assistance from Soldiers and Families during a time of need. The article focused on the following:

"Between 2003 and 2007- as many military Families dealt with long war deployments and increased numbers of home foreclosures – Army Emergency Relief grew into a \$345 million behemoth. During those years the charity packed away \$117 million into its own reserves while spending just \$64 million on direct aid according to an AP analysis of its tax records"

The facts are as follows:

a. Between 2003 and 2007, Army Emergency Relief distributed a quarter of a billion dollars in financial assistance to 258,000 Soldiers and Families.

b. AER does not hold any funds in reserve. All of our assets less \$9 million in restricted accounts and the receivables from interest free loans are available at all times to meet the needs of our Soldiers and their Families.

<More at: <http://www.aerhq.org/AER%20Reply%20to%20AP%20Report%20Concerning%20AER%20Operations.pdf>>

TAPS – PASSINGS AND WAR STATISTICS

OIF/OEF – HACK DATE TUESDAY 24 FEBRUARY 2009

OPERATION IRAQI FREEDOM (2,168 DAYS)

| | |
|---|-------------------|
| KILLED US | 4,251 |
| WOUNDED US [1/31/09] | 31,010 |
| OTHER US CASUALTIES [1/31/09] | ≥35,841 |
| DIED OF SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS [1/31/09] | 176 |
| MISSING OR CAPTURED US | 1 |
| KILLED UK | 179 |
| KILLED OTHER COALITION | 139 |
| WOUNDED/INJURED COALITION | 1,819 |
| **KILLED CONTRACTORS [11/9/08] | 1,182 |
| KILLED IRAQI POLICE/MILITARY [1/03/09] | ≥ 48,874 |
| KILLED IRAQI CIVILIANS [2/24/09] | ≥ 99,077- 658,227 |
| WOUNDED IRAQI MIL/CIVILIANS [11/9/08] | ≥ 400K – 1.374M |
| IRAQ REFUGEES INT./EXT. [9/27/07] | 2.1M/2. 5M |

OPERATION ENDURING FREEDOM (2,697 DAYS)

| | |
|---|------------|
| KILLED US | 660 |
| WOUNDED US [1/31/09] | 2,686 |
| OTHER CASUALTIES US [1/31/2009] | 7,581 |
| DIED OF SELF-INFLICTED WOUNDS [1/31/09] | 29 |
| KILLED COALITION | 426 |
| WOUNDED/INJURED COALITION (12/2/2007) | 1,602 |
| KILLED AFGHANI POLICE/MILITARY | ≥ 8,619 |
| KILLED AFGHANI CIVILIANS (2/24/2009) | ≥ 7,373 |
| 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 \$599,744,441,626

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. To see detailed demographic data on the casualties go to

<http://siadapp.dior.whs.mil/personnel/CASUALTY/castop.htm>

** Includes 280 additional contractor casualties reported in international press but not in US official figures

NATIONAL GUARD AND RESERVE ACTIVATED AS OF FEBRUARY 17, 2009

This week the Marine Corps announced a decrease, while the Army, Air Force and Navy announced an increase.

The Coast Guard number remained the same. The net collective result is 4,079 more reservists activated than last week. At any given time, services may activate some units and individuals while deactivating others, making it possible for these figures to either increase or decrease. The total number currently on active duty from the Army National Guard and Army Reserve is 96,184; Navy Reserve, 6,259; Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, 15,298; Marine Corps Reserve, 7,332; and the Coast Guard Reserve, 733. This brings the total National Guard and Reserve personnel who have been activated to 125,806, including both units and individual augmentees. A cumulative roster of all National Guard and Reserve personnel who are currently activated can be found at <http://www.defenselink.mil/news/Feb2009/d20090217nrg.pdf>.

AFTERTHOUGHTS ~ MISCELLANEOUS AND OTHER STUFF

SIGNS OF THE TIMES

DISBANDING OF WASHBURN VETERANS' GROUPS MARKS THE END OF AN ERA

Rick Olivo - Staff Writer Ashland WI Daily Press - February 20, 2009

There was no sounding of taps, no final posting of the colors for members of the Washburn Veterans of Foreign Wars and American Legion posts — only a sad realization that their membership was too old and too few to continue their proud tradition of service to their community.

"We had three men over the age of 90 who were trying to carry the colors last Memorial Day," said longtime American Legion Post Commander and Adjutant Jim Ledin Sr.

At the relatively youthful age of 79, Ledin said that was when he realized it was time to case the unit's banners for the last time.

"I tried to keep it going for as long as I could, but it's time," he said.

... Ledin said closing out the organizations was a very unhappy task.

"They wanted to fold them up years ago, and I just kept trying to keep it going. It felt sad to shut them down after all these years," he said.

Another person who keenly feels the loss is Bayfield County Veterans Service Officer Chris Johnson.

Johnson noted that part of the reason for the demise was that the organizations, while they might have met the needs of the World War I, II and Korea veterans, didn't have that great an appeal to Vietnam and more recent veterans.

"I am hoping that in the future, new service organizations will spring up, will meet those same sort of needs," he said. "I don't think that veterans from the past and the future are any different, of what their long-term goals are. I think it's just the culture difference, and perhaps that the younger veterans haven't found their fit about how they help their community." <More at: <http://www.ashlandwi.com/articles/2009/02/20/news/doc499ee4b77ed7d363551946.txt>>

ADD-ON ~ STUFF OF INTEREST

A FRONTLINE SHOW WORTH WATCHING

The Soldier's Heart

The military teaches soldiers how to fight, how to kill, how to survive. But who teaches them how to live with themselves? Examining an underreported story of the Iraq war: the psychological cost on those who fight it.

In case you miss it on 24 February (tonight), this previously shown FRONTLINE episode is available for watching in its entirety online at www.pbs.org/wqgb/pages/frontline/shows/heart/

THANKS TO JOSEPH A. BELLO FOR THE FOLLOWING STIMULUS PACKAGE INFO:

| | | |
|---|------------------------|--|
| Veterans Health Administration | | |
| Medical Facilities | \$1,000,000,000 | Non-recurring maintenance |
| National Cemetery Administration | \$50,000,000 | Monument repairs |
| Departmental Administration | | |
| General Operating Expenses | \$150,000,000 | Hiring/training of temporary surge claims inspectors |
| Information Technology Systems | \$50,000,000 | TBD |
| Inspector General | \$1,000,000 | Oversight/audit of funds provided in this program |
| State Grants: Extended Care Facilities | \$150,000,000 | New construction/modification/repair |
| Other | | |
| Work opportunity tax credit for employers hiring unemployed veterans in 2009/2010 | Unspecified | |
| Economic Recovery payments to adults eligible for Veteran's compensation or pension | \$7,200,000 | |
| Military Construction - Vet-related (Title X) | \$3,410,525,000 | |
| TOTAL | \$4,818,725,000 | |
| Percentage Of Total Stimulus Package | 0.612% | |

TO U.S. MILITARY PERSONNEL AND THEIR FAMILIES

Knight A. Kiplinger, Editor in Chief, Kiplinger's Personal Finance and Kiplinger.com

Steven J. Cole, President and CEO Council of Better Business Bureaus - February 2009

The financial strategies, rules and resources for military families are often very different from those for civilians.

We are pleased to present you with a personal-finance guide created especially for military families. While our troops carry out their difficult and dangerous missions, we know that they and their families are not immune to the financial turmoil that is impacting every household in America. Times are tough and it is harder than ever to make ends meet, let alone save money for future expenses such as college and retirement.

That's where the Kiplinger-BBB Personal Finance Guide for Military Families comes in. On these pages you will find practical, easy-to-understand information about being financially prepared for deployment, buying a home, minimizing taxes, holding down insurance costs and avoiding financial schemes that too often target military families.

<More at: www.kiplinger.com/features/archives/2009/02/about-our-personal-finance-guide-for-military-families.html

VIETNAM INFO

Two archives that are valuable for searching units and other information about the Vietnam war:

Georgia Tech – <http://www.cc.gatech.edu/fac/Thomas.Pilsch/Vietnam.html>

Texas Tech – <http://www.vietnam.ttu.edu/>

BE INFORMED – READ THIS ONE AND HIS FIRST BOOK “FIASCO”!

'THE GAMBLE' BY THOMAS E. RICKS

An explosive, revealing account of the U.S. military in Iraq under Gen. Petraeus and the efforts to develop a better strategy there.

Tim Rutten - February 10, 2009

"In 2005 the United States came close to losing the war in Iraq."

So writes Thomas E. Ricks, the Washington Post's senior military correspondent, in his gripping and brilliantly reported new book, "The Gamble: General David Petraeus and the American Military Adventure in Iraq, 2006-2008." This is contemporary history of a vivid and urgent sort, and Ricks has produced a book that deserves to be read by any American who realizes that something other than today's economic news also is of vital interest to the nation.

Ricks begins this sober -- and deeply sobering -- account with the military's heretofore secret report on the massacre of Iraqi civilians by U.S. Marines at Haditha, an incident that stands as exemplar for a strategy that not only was failing tactically but also seriously eroding the morale and morality of the American forces deployed to Iraq. The author then goes on to document the previously untold history not only of the failure of the White House and the Pentagon under then-Defense Secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld but also of the Joint Chiefs and the commanders.

Essentially, this is the story of two insurgencies: One is that of the Iraqis and the Islamists who flocked there after the American invasion; the other has to do with the small number of dissident U.S. officers (of whom Gen. David H. Petraeus was the most prominent), retired officers (particularly Gen. Jack Keane), military historians and conservative defense intellectuals centered on the American Enterprise Institute who mounted a guerrilla campaign to make the Bush administration confront its mistakes and adopt an effective counter-insurgency strategy in Iraq.

... there's also something rather heartening about Ricks' story of the internal military insurgency -- or, more precisely, the loyal opposition -- that appears to have rescued America, at least for now, from defeat in Iraq. In another awful winter, when the Baron von Steuben began drilling George Washington's Continental Army into an effective fighting force, he wrote to a friend back in Prussia about the difference between the soldiers he'd commanded there and his new subordinates. European soldiers, he wrote, simply needed to be told what to do, and they grudgingly would do it. The Americans, he wrote, first needed to be told why something was necessary -- and, if convinced, executed the order vigorously and without further instruction.

May that always be so, for it is in that quality that our national security ultimately resides.

<The full review is at: www.latimes.com/entertainment/la-et-rutten10-2009feb10.0.3655128.story

NOTICE

If at any time you cannot open a link in this newsletter to an article or web page that interests you, please let me know at scCook@vuft; I keep a copy of most of the full articles, or can research an alternative route to the information. [Ed.]

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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