

WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA: Wreaths Across America (WAA) was formed as an extension of the Arlington Wreath Project. The Arlington Wreath project was started by Morrill Worcester. As president of Maine-based Worcester Wreath Company he started the tradition in 1992 with the donation and laying of 5000 Christmas wreaths to Arlington National Cemetery. The cemetery's hallowed ground first impressed Worcester in 1962, when the 12-year-old Bangor [Maine] Daily News paper boy had won a paper-sponsored contest and a trip to Washington. This became an annual journey for Mr. Worcester. It was relatively obscure until 2005 when a photo of the stones adorned with wreaths and covered in snow circulated around the internet. The project received National attention. Thousands of requests poured in from all over the country from people wanting to emulate the Arlington project at their National and State cemeteries. This spurred the creation of "Wreaths Across America". Unable to donate thousands of wreaths to each state, Mr. Worcester conceived the idea of sending 7 wreaths (one for each branch of the military as well as POW/MIA). In 2006 with the help of the Cival Air Patrol and other civic organizations, over 150 locations held wreath laying ceremonies simultaneously. The Patriot Guard Riders volunteered as escort for the wreaths going to Arlington. This began the annual "Veterans Honor Parade" that travels the east coast in early December.

By 2007 the requests for more wreaths grew. The Worcester family established Wreaths Across America as a nonprofit 501-c3 organization to further promote Veterans remembrance. The mission Remember, Honor and Teach characterized the projects goals perfectly. By 2008 over 300 locations held wreath laying ceremonies in every state, Puerto Rico and 24 overseas cemeteries. Over 100,000 wreaths were placed on veterans graves. Over 60,000 volunteers participated. WAA reached out to thousands of children with the message of Remember, Honor and Teach. The importance of honoring each fallen serviceman as an individual is stressed. The wreath laying is now held annually on the second Saturday of December and 13 December was unanimously voted by Congress as "Wreaths Across America Day". WAA would not be successful without the help of the volunteers, many active organizations and the generosity of the trucking industry. At www.wreathscrossamerica.org you can find out how to find a WAA location near you and how to sponsor a wreath. Anyone desiring to volunteer to assist in the distribution and laying of wreaths should coordinate with the location leader indicated at www.wreathscrossamerica.org/Locations [Source: www.wreathscrossamerica.org Dec 09]

U.S. SAVINGS BONDS: The U.S. Treasury reports holding nearly \$17 billion in unclaimed Series E savings bonds purchased between 1941 until 1980. Some may belong to service members who invested in savings bonds throughout their careers. Unfortunately, mature savings bonds may get misplaced or forgotten, and legislation has been introduced to have state treasurers assist in outreach efforts to track down bondholders. The bills are H.R.4198, introduced in the House by Rep. Shelley Berkley (D-NV) & Rep. Kevin Brady (R-TX), and S.827, sponsored by Senators John Rockefeller (D-WV), Pat Roberts (R-KS), and Patrick Leahy (D-VT). Refer to www.savingsbonds.gov/indiv/tools/tools_treasuryhunt.htm to see if you own any of these unclaimed Series E savings bonds. Treasury Hunt's database is limited – it doesn't contain a record of all savings bonds and only provides information on Series E bonds issued in 1974 and after. For additional information or claim submission guidance, visit the Treasury Hunt website: www.savingsbonds.gov. [Source: MOAA Weekly Leg UP 11 Dec 09]

MOBILIZED RESERVE 8 DEC 09: The Department of Defense announced the current number of reservists on active duty as of 8 DEC 09. The net collective result is 2,744 more reservists mobilized than last reported in the Bulletin for 1 DEC 09. 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 107,480; Navy Reserve, 6,243; Air National Guard and Air Force Reserve, 14,652; Marine Corps Reserve, 7,807; and the Coast Guard Reserve, 780. This brings the total National Guard and Reserve personnel who have been activated to 136,962, including both units and individual augmentees. A cumulative roster of all National Guard and Reserve personnel who are currently activated may be

found at <http://www.defense.gov/news/Dec2009/d20091208ngr.pdf>. [Source: DoD News Release No. 959-09 9 Dec 09]

TRICARE USER FEE: In DEC the National Association of Uniformed Services (NAUS) received a letter from Deputy Secretary of Defense (DSD) William Lynn. The DoD letter responded to a NAUS letter sent in October that expressed disappointment about an announced increase in Tricare rates for in-patient hospital care. The announcement was contrary to the President's promise not to increase Tricare and came as a surprise and shock to the military and veterans community. Subsequently, Congress in the last moments of fiscal year 2009 overturned the DoD decision to raise Tricare rates on 1 OCT when it approved the fiscal year 2010 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R.2647). NAUS was one of a number of veteran organizations that had written Lynn on this subject. In his letter of explanation's concluding remarks, Deputy Secretary Lynn wrote, "I look forward to working with you to continue a dialog about how we address the overall increase in the cost of health care while keeping beneficiary contributions reasonable." Note: It appears we have not heard the last of DoD attempts to raise Tricare Fees. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update 11 Dec 09]

FLAG PRESENTATION: Medal of Honor (MOH) recipient retired Army Col. Van T. Barfoot refused to comply with his Richmond, VA neighborhood homeowners association regulations on displaying the flag in hope that common sense might prevail. On 9 DEC, the homeowners association dropped a threat of legal action and Col Barfoot was "allowed to keep" the 21-foot flagpole in his front yard. Prior to that decision, the association had threatened to take Barfoot to court if he failed to remove the pole from his suburban Richmond home by 11 DEC. It had said the pole violated the neighborhood's aesthetic guidelines. Virginia Senators Mark Warner and Jim Webb had rallied behind Barfoot, a World War II, Korean and Vietnam veteran. In a letter, Sen. Webb urged the association to "consider the exceptional nature of Col. Barfoot's service when considering his pride and determination in honoring our flag." Additionally, Rep. "Buck" McKeon (R-CA), Ranking Member on the House Armed Services Committee, has introduced a bill to allow any Medal of Honor winner to properly display a flag at their home in any way they might choose. Col. Barfoot was awarded the Medal of Honor for actions while his platoon was under German assault near Carano, Italy, in May 1944. He was credited with standing up to three German tanks with a bazooka and stopping their advance. He also won the Purple Heart and other decorations, and served in Korea and Vietnam before retiring from the service in 1974. [Source: NAUS Weekly Update 11 Dec 09]

RETIREE ACTIVITIES OFFICES: Retiree Activities Offices currently need volunteers at more than 100 offices at active-duty, Reserve and Guard bases worldwide. Volunteer opportunities for retired military and their family members occur in several areas, depending on the base. Most bases have openings in areas like the hospital, clinic and pharmacy administration sections; thrift shops; legal offices; family support centers and the retiree activities office itself. RAO volunteers assist retirees with several actions including: serving as an information center for space-available travel, Tricare and base services; offering referrals for financial assistance and pay matters; counseling active-duty service personnel nearing retirement; and providing literature on retirement issues. "We've all benefited from our time on active duty, and we've benefited from the training and education that were provided. During that phase of life where you do have some time to give back volunteering, it can be very rewarding to do that," said retired Lt. Gen. Steven R. Polk, co-chairman of the Air Force Retiree Council. "This is the Year of the Air Force Family and that family includes not only our active duty ... so the motto of the retirees is 'still serving,' so where a base needs help, it's important for volunteers to provide that help." Retired activity offices for all services could use more volunteers. Check with your local base to see what you can do to help. For more retiree activities office information and locations near you refer to

- Air force (Afterburner) or <http://www.retirees.af.mil/raos>.
- Navy (Shift colors) or http://www.cposf.org/files/Shift_Colors_Fall_2007.pdf.
- Army (Army Echoes) or <http://www.armyg1.army.mil/rso/docs/RSORoster.doc>.

- USMC call 1-800-336-4649 Option#0
- USCG call 1-800-772-8724

[Source: Defense Media Activity-San Antonio Matthew McGovern article 7 Dec 09]

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STOP-LOSS PAY: After an initial delay caused by software and manpower issues, the first retroactive payments will be disbursed late DEC to soldiers who were retained on active duty involuntarily under the so-called "Stop Loss" program. Army Maj. Roy Whitley, program manager for the Army's Retroactive Stop Loss Special Pay program, acknowledged problems over the program's first 50 days and said officials are working to reduce the current backlog for the thousands more who are expected to file their claims over the next year. "We are going to plow through the backlog as quickly as we can," said Whitley, who spoke with bloggers and online journalists 10 DEC during an Army bloggers roundtable. "We lost time [by] improving the claims end early on. For every day we spent working the claims, we knew we were losing a day on development and case management. We are building it out [and] improving software. [That is] the reason why you are seeing some delay." he said

Parts of the initial Web-based claims program, launched 1 OCT, lacked complete functionality, and many of the claims were processed manually, Whitley said. However, he added, the case-management software is expected to be finalized this week, closing at least 1,000 cases. Those cases will then be forwarded to Defense Finance and Accounting Service for payment. "The latest enhancement gives us the ability to close the cases," Whitley said, and will allow Army claims managers to advise claimants on the status of their claims. He added that he is working on adding more claims managers to his staff of 14. "We saw the volume coming forward," he said, "and we knew we had to make some changes both on software and personnel." As soon as the software changes are tested and finalized, he added, his staff will be better able to ease the backlog. "We are hoping this will knock down on the anxiety caused by our backlog and e-mails," Whitley said. "We are really working through those and trying to focus exclusively on claims clearing."

This means that probably the majority of members due will not see any money until next year. The deadline to submit Stop Loss pay claims is 21 OCT 2010. If you still have not applied use the below to make your application:

- Army: <https://www.stoplosspay.army.mil>
- Navy: Email to NXAG_N132C@navy.mil
- Marine Corps: <https://www.manpower.usmc.mil/stoploss>
- Air Force: www.afpc.randolph.af.mil/stoploss

[Source: AFPS Lt. Jennifer Cragg article 11 Dec 09]

GI BILL Update 64: Amanda Collier started college last August armed with a certificate of eligibility to use Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits that her dad, a Coast Guardsman of 22 years, had earned and transferred to her. In DEC Amanda will take final exams for her first semester at the University of Central Oklahoma. But neither she nor the university has received any GI Bill money yet to cover her tuition, housing or other costs. Amanda is among an unknown number of Post-9/11 GI Bill users still victimized by computer software at the Department of Veterans Affairs that left VA staff unable to process two categories of claims. These cases simply were set aside to await a software upgrade. Impacted students and schools, it appears, never even got a letter to explain why payments were frozen. What might be called a "black hole" for some GI Bill claims hit students whose Post-9/11 GI Bill award levels needed adjusting after the semester began, usually because a student added or drop a course, as Amanda had done. But it also impacted students who had changed campuses or schools, and therefore created "overlapping terms" which the old GI Bill software couldn't handle, said Keith Wilson, director of VA's education service.

Amanda's situation was made more stressful because, as a dependent using transferred benefits she was ineligible for the \$3000 lump-sum emergency payment VA officials began to make in early October to relieve financial stress on thousands of students whose new GI Bill payments were delayed by various start-up challenges. "We don't have the mechanism for them to apply for that," Wilson said. The lump sum payments, he explained, had to be made available quickly. VA computers only held data on veterans, to validate eligibility and track payments, and not on dependents. "Once you start needing to rely on information removed from veterans' status, it becomes infinitely more complex," said Wilson. "So it was a challenge to set something up for dependents in the compressed time we were looking at." Susan Collier, Amanda's mother, said she tried to learn everything she could over the past year about the new GI Bill and transferability so that financing her daughter's education this fall would be smooth. By 9 AUG, she had a GI bill Certificate of Eligibility. But when Amanda dropped a course in September, cutting total credit hours from 15 to 12, VA couldn't process an adjusted benefit award. So Amanda couldn't be paid her book stipend or her housing allowance to cover dorm costs. Her university couldn't be paid promised tuition fees.

To make matters worse, Amanda wants to transfer next semester to a smaller school. But the university, Susan said, "will not give her a final transcript because she still owes them money...All of this means we are on the hook for over \$15,000 since the VA isn't paying." Wilson said the software fix that impacted students like Amanda was installed in early November. VA officials have told Susan the back payments should arrive by mid-December. Wilson couldn't say if the impacted students were notified that their payments weren't coming until after the software upgrade happened. The Colliers said they only learned of the issue after multiple calls to the VA and eventually being assigned a case manager. At a minimum, Susan said, VA could have explained the situation on the GI Bill website but didn't. As of 1 DEC VA had received 340,000 applications for Post-9/11 GI Bill eligibility determinations. Action has been completed on 276,000. Among the pool of applicants found eligible for benefits, 124,000 have enrolled in school. A total of 104,500 students, and their schools, are receiving Post-9/11 GI bill payments. VA has issued the \$3000 advance payments to more than 62,000 students.

One of VA's next big challenges will be to recoup the advance payments from students no longer impacted by payment delays. "We're setting up the mechanics of how that will be done right now," Wilson said. "We will notify the student concerning the amount of the advance payment. Then that [amount] will be recouped out of the future housing allowance and book stipend that would have gone to them." The overall backlog of GI Bill payments is shrinking, Wilson said. "We peaked the second week in September, and it has been going down from that point," he said. Wilson isn't ready yet to say VA won't need the advance payment program next semester. "We will keep it in place as long as necessary," Wilson said. "We are working very hard to make sure we go into the spring enrollment period without a backlog of cases. That's our goal. And if we can meet that goal then there isn't a need for an advance payment process." In October VA had to hire a contractor to help process the easier Montgomery GI Bill claims, to free more VA staff to work on the more complex Post-9/11 backlog. In total, VA has added 760 people to its workforce over the last year to implement the new benefit, Wilson said. A new, fully automated IT system to process GI Bill benefits is scheduled to be operational by DEC 2010. [Source: Military.com Tom Philpott article 3 Dec 09]

MEDICARE HOME HEALTH CARE: Miami-Dade County received about half a billion dollars from Medicare in home health care payments intended for the sickest patients in 2008, which is more than the rest of the country combined, according to a report released 7 DEC. The county accounted for a little more than half the country's claims even though only 2% of those patients receiving home health care live here, according to a report by the Department of Health and Human Services Office of Inspector General. Authorities say it's just another example of Medicare fraud from the county that accounts for more than \$3 billion a year in false claims. In some cases, agencies have billed Medicare for home health services for homeless people. In other cases, home health aides visited patients multiple times a day and did little more than house cleaning. Unlike nurses, critics say the training for aides is minimal in many cases. "The aide becomes a maid," said Cecilia Franco, the Miami field

director for the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services. "Instead of helping patients take a bath, they go to the supermarket for them, they clean the clothes."

A large percentage of the patients are diabetics who claim they are blind and bill Medicare for a day and night nurse to give insulin shots. "What we're finding in a lot of the cases is the patients don't even have diabetes and certainly aren't blind," said Kirk Ogrosky, who heads the Medicare Fraud Strike Force across the United States for the Department of Justice. Medicare outlier payments for home health care related to diabetes in Miami was eight times the national average, according to the report. In many cases, authorities say Medicare is billed for services that are never provided. Patients are paid between \$700 and \$1,400 a month in cash as part of the scam. In one government-subsidized apartment building in Miami, many people billing for home health care services had large plasma-screen TVs - believed to be payment for their participation. In one Medicare scam, prosecutors charged eight Miami suspects with bilking \$22 million from the system. They were accused of recruiting patients for services that were unnecessary, and even faking medical tests to prove they were entitled to the payments. Authorities say Miami scammers have tapped into "outlier payments" reserved for extremely sick patients. When a health care provider bills for more services like occupational therapy and mental health services, it is granted outlier status and can almost double the amount of Medicare reimbursements it receives

The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services doesn't limit how much the agencies can be paid for those extra services, make it an easy target for fraud. It will start capping those payments in 2010 in an effort to curb phony payments. Only about 7% of all home health payments fall under that category, according to the national average. But in Miami, about 60 percent are outlier payments, according to the report. Almost 90% of U.S. patients receiving more than \$100,000 for home health care live in Miami-Dade County. "What's going on that you're going to get that many services in your home?" said Dwayne Grant, a regional inspector for the HHS inspector general. Cleaning up the \$60 billion-a-year fraud in places like Miami-Dade County - an epicenter for scams involving medical equipment and HIV drugs - will be key to President Barack Obama's proposed health care overhaul. The county's Medicare center now sends inspectors to visit homes in the hopes of helping to crack down on fraud and ensure the services it's billed for are actually provided, said Kim Brandt, CMS's director of program integrity group. Medicare paid about \$15 billion for home health services in 2008, a growing sector in recent years as more patients prefer in-home treatment to hospitals and nursing homes. Medical advances have also made it easier to treat patients at home. To combat the growing fraud, the report recommended a system that would immediately review suspicious bills and establishing stricter enrollment standards to weed out phonies. [Source: Florida AP Kelli Kennedy article 7 Dec 09]

STOLEN VALOR WEBSITE: A leading veterans group has launched a special Web site aimed at raising awareness about the growing number of false claims of military service, medals and awards, and helping the general public report such claims to authorities and the media. "We've seen the news stories, and we have a lot of anecdotal evidence — people calling us and asking us about the issue," said Jay Agg, national communications director for American Veterans Association (AMVETS). "What is it? How do I report it? What are the punishments? What constitutes a violation of the Stolen Valor Act?" That is really ... the genesis of this project". Duane Miskulin, AMVETS national commander said, "Veterans have a special place in American society. The brave men and women who answered our nation's call to serve are revered for their tremendous self-sacrifice and courage in the face of daunting odds. Stolen valor is a serious offense — one that cuts into the core of what it means to be a veteran." Miskulin said the 2005 Stolen Valor Act, which makes even false claims of an undeserved medal a federal misdemeanor punishable by up to year in prison and a \$100,000 fine, has not stemmed what he said is a rise, even in recent months, of such false claims.

The new Web site <http://reportstolenvalor.org> provides contact information for the FBI, U.S. Attorneys' offices, inspector general hotlines for the military services, and the Veterans Affairs Department and various media outlets, as well as a sample form letter. It also links to the Military Times Web site, Hall of Valor, created by private

watchdog Doug Sterner. The verified, ever-growing searchable database contains more than 26,100 valor award citations ranging from the Medal of Honor to the Air Force Achievement Medal with Combat "V." It is searchable by service member, award, conflict and keyword. That effort would at least be complemented in some manner by a federal database called for by the Military Valor Roll of Honor Act, which AMVETS also boosts on its new site. The bill, sponsored by Rep. John Salazar, D-Colo., would require the establishment of a searchable public database listing the names of those awarded the Medal of Honor or any other medal authorized by Congress. The legislation now has 48 co-sponsors. The Hall of Valor database "is what has been developed instead, in a void, because the government isn't maintaining these records," Agg said. "I think it's proper that the government should keep an accounting of its American heroes, of its war heroes. It should track military service in general, not just acts of valor." [Source: NavyTimes William H. McMichael article 4 Dec 09]

DFAS TAX STATEMENTS: Military service members, military retirees and annuitants, and federal civilian employees paid by the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS) can expect to receive their 2009 tax statements beginning in DEC 09. DFAS customers with myPay (<https://mypay.dfas.mil/mypay.aspx>) access will be able to retrieve their tax statements electronically up to two weeks sooner than those relying on regular mail delivery. Internal Revenue Service (IRS) forms W-2, 1099R and 1099-INT, along with retiree and annuitant annual account statements for DFAS customers are projected to be distributed by the dates below. The first date shown is the date it is available on myPay and the second is the date they will be mailed via the U.S. Post Office:

- Retiree Annual Statement (RAS): 3 DEC 09 16-31 DEC 09
- Retiree 1099R: 14 DEC 09 16-31 DEC 09
- Annuitant Account: 14 DEC 09 16-31 DEC 09
- Annuitant 1099R: 14 DEC 09 16-31 DEC 09
- VSI/SSB W-2: Not available via myPay 16-31 DEC 09

Tax statements available through myPay are approved for use by the IRS and have several added benefits for myPay users. As long as a user has their log in information, they will never lose their current year tax statements. The statements remain on-line to allow customers to view and print whenever it is convenient for them. Should they need copies later in the year, they are still available. The use of "*restricted access PINs*" allows users to have other family members, tax preparers or other trusted individuals view and print their tax statements without the ability to change any pay account information. This can be of particular interest to military members deployed overseas, retirees, annuitants, or anyone who uses commercial tax preparation services. The restricted access PIN can be established after logging into a customer's myPay account. For those not familiar with the DFAS myPay system the following is germane:

- myPay myPay is a secure Web-based pay information system. One of the many benefits of this system is avoiding risks associated with identity theft.
- myPay has a series of security measures with layers of defense against identity theft. The secure technology provided to myPay customers meets or exceeds security requirements in private industry worldwide.
- Using myPay to access tax statements eliminates the preparation and mailing costs incurred with the traditional distribution methods. Combined with the earlier availability of statements on-line, this makes myPay a better option for many DFAS customers and the Department of Defense.
- If customers have forgotten their personal identification number (PIN) or wish to open a myPay account can do so on the myPay Web site.

Most tax statements are posted to your myPay account. Simply log in and print. Some tax statements, such as replacements and corrections, may not be available on myPay. Replacements and corrections must be requested at your local finance and accounting office, finance and disbursing office, customer service representative or via telephone. These tax statements may apply to military and civilian permanent change of station (PCS) and Do-It-

Yourself (DITY) moves. The below information will help you get the tax statement you need, answer questions, and make sure you have all the information you need to file your tax return:

W-2s

- Active Duty, Reserves & National Guard (Army, Navy, Air Force) and Marine Corps members (Active, Retired or Reserve) call 1-888-332-7411 or On-line via myPay
- Army Student Loan Repayment Program call 1-888-332-7411
- Voluntary Separation Incentive/Special Separation Benefit call 1-800-321-1080
- Civilian employees On-line myPay or SmartDocs
- DFAS & Air Force call 1-800-538-9043 (DFAS-Indianapolis)
- Army call 1-800-538-9043 (DFAS-Indianapolis)
- OCONUS Army, Navy: Fax - 850-473-6450 (DFAS-Charleston - please include your name, SSN, W-2 pay year, your day time phone number & signature)
- Civilian Permanent Change of Station (PCS) and Relocations Income Tax Allowance (RITA) for DFAS, DECA, DLA, DCMA, DRMO call 1-800-756-4571 (DFAS-Columbus)

1099-Rs

- Retired Military and Reserves & National Guard call 1-800-321-1080 or 216-522-5955 (DFAS-Cleveland, Retired/Annuitant Contact Center) or On-line via myPay or SmartDocs
- Retired Coast Guard call 1-866-772-8724
- Retired Civil Service Employees Only call 1-888-767-6738 (Retired Civil Service employees OPM Help Line)
- Vendor Pay (Other)
- Settlements (EEO-MSBP, Grievance, Labor, Mediation): 614-693-0982 or 614-693-1310
- Thrift Saving Plan (TSP) for Military and Civilian call 1-877-968-3778 (TSP Thrift Help Line)
- 1099-INTs Saving Deposit Program call 1-888-332-7411 (DFAS - Cleveland)

[Source: <http://www.dfas.mil/retiredpay/taxinformation/2009tax.html> Dec 09]

VA CONTRACTOR USE: Even as the Obama administration develops an administration-wide effort to increase the federal employment of veterans, the agency responsible for their welfare is being criticized for giving their jobs to outside contractors. The American Federation of Government Employees (AFGE) wants the Department of Veterans Affairs to place a moratorium on the use of contractors, who the union says now do the work veterans once did. The use of outside contractors is widespread in government and organized labor does not object to all of the work they do. But according to a union press release, "the VA -- the agency that strives to be the model employer of veterans -- has contracted out more jobs held by veterans than most other agencies." Before the Bush administration took office, almost all blue-collar VA jobs, in such areas as housekeeping, laundry, food services, and maintenance of hospitals and cemeteries, were held by vets, but now many of those have been farmed out to contractors, union officials said in a phone interview. VA officials did not respond to a request for comment. Last month, the government announced an intensified effort to increase the hiring of vets. Obama issued an executive order creating an interagency council and telling agencies to establish veterans employment plans. They are charged with developing programs to boost the hiring of vets. An AFGE statement said, "Any plan developed by the Council should address the systemic risk to federal civilian employment of veterans posed by the expanded use of for-profit contractors." [Source: Washington Post Federal Diary Joe Davidson article 4 Dec 09]

AGENT ORANGE RECORD of NEGLECT: Dioxins, a group of defoliant chemicals now considered the most toxic ever created by man, are linked to a higher risk of multiple cancers, birth defects and other conditions that are contributing to a dramatic increase in financial compensation for U.S. veterans and their families.

Service-related disability payments to Vietnam veterans have surged 60% since 2003, reaching \$13.7 billion last year, and now account for more than half of such payments the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs provides to veterans of all wars. The average compensation payment for Vietnam vets is 41% higher than that for World War II veterans and 35% higher than for those who served in Korea. Those disability checks do not include the billions spent on health care for Vietnam veterans. The price tag is only expected to escalate as scientists learn more about the effects of dioxin, as veterans are stricken late in life and as the children of veterans discover they are sick. In SEP 09, three more diseases were added to the list of illnesses for which the VA provides compensation -- an expansion the agency estimates will affect roughly 200,000 veterans and cost billions of dollars annually. Meanwhile, untold numbers of Vietnamese -- including many who weren't even alive during the war -- also suffer from maladies associated with the defoliants. Tens of thousands more are at risk today from dioxin that remains in the environment at dozens of former U.S. military bases. Yet in the 30 years since Agent Orange (AO) was recognized publicly as a potential health threat, the federal government has established a record of neglect.

For Vietnam veterans, the ongoing drama over Agent Orange can be broken into three acts. In the first, soldiers are totally unaware of the dangers posed by dioxin-laced defoliants sprayed in Vietnam. With the second comes outrage at the belated discovery of harm. And the third act is frustration with the maddening bureaucracy set up to help veterans seeking compensation for their illnesses which delays adjudication of their claims. As long-dormant effects of Agent Orange begin to surface in many Vietnam War veterans, the backlog of disability claims has been growing fast, despite the VA's adding more than 3,000 employees to handle the traffic jam. "They're overwhelmed," said Joe Moore, a former VA attorney who now represents veterans in cases against the agency. "They simply can't do the decision-making fast enough." A DEC 08 lawsuit, filed by the Vietnam Veterans of America and Veterans of Modern Warfare in U.S. District Court Washington, argues that "thousands of veterans die each year" before the VA acts on their disability claims. The lawsuit alleges the VA takes at least six months to consider an initial request, and appeals can drag on for years. In response the government acknowledged that "certain diseases for Vietnam-era veterans" are contributing to the backup.

In Vietnam, children sing songs of the devastation caused by Agent Orange and government officials wonder how the U.S. can avoid fully addressing the health and environmental havoc wreaked by the chemicals, even as the two nations foster stronger trade and military ties. Since the countries normalized relations in 1995, Congress has allocated just \$6 million for herbicide-related issues in Vietnam, even though Vietnamese officials say addressing them will take tens of millions. The Ford Foundation, a philanthropic organization that has made Agent Orange a focus, has provided \$11.7 million. With assistance from the Fund for Investigative Journalism, the Chicago Tribune spent a month traveling to eight provinces throughout Vietnam, conducting nearly two dozen interviews with civilians and former soldiers who say they were exposed to the defoliants. The newspaper used a database of every spraying mission, mapping software and a GPS device to help corroborate their stories. And in the U.S., the paper researched thousands of pages of government documents and traveled to the homes of veterans to gauge the impact and measure the cost in both dollars and human misery. Their findings support the link between Agent Orange and illnesses of those exposed.

The Operation Ranch Hand study, named for the defoliation effort, has long been criticized for underestimating the impact of the chemicals. More recently, new information has emerged showing that some herbicides used in the war contained even more dioxin than was once thought. Scientists who worked on the study say re-examining the rich data in this light could bring crucial new insights. Last year, Congress directed the VA to provide funding to do just that. So far the money has not been made available. Some scientists remain skeptical that Agent Orange and other defoliants directly cause diseases. But with hundreds of independent studies completed in the years since the war ended, there is strong evidence that people exposed to the herbicides have a higher risk of contracting illnesses such as soft tissue sarcoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The number of medical conditions linked to the defoliants continues to grow. The lingering controversy over the herbicides on both sides of the Pacific Ocean provides a sobering reminder of the often unforeseen consequences of war at a time when the country is

fighting protracted conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. "We do not know the answer to the question: What happened to Vietnam veterans?" said Jeanne Stellman, an epidemiologist who has spent decades studying Agent Orange for the American Legion and the National Academy of Sciences. "The government doesn't want to study this because of international liability and issues surrounding chemical warfare. And they're going to win because they're bigger and everybody's getting old and there are new wars to worry about." [Source: Chicago Tribune Jason Grotto & Tim Jones article 4 Dec 09]

VA SURVIVOR BENEFIT TERMINATION: Upon the death of a surviving spouse, the VA will pay benefits through the last day of the month before the death. Since each month's payment is in advance this means that a payment made for the month in which the survivor dies must be returned to the VA. This was the situation in the case of the widow Ruth McDonald who at age 89 died on 26 JUN after she received \$1,633 widow's pension from the VA. In a letter written by the VA, the agency demanded that the daughter (Flossie Crowther) return the \$1,600 in benefits provided to her mother for the month of June, even though Ruth lived for 26 of the 30 days in the month. Flossie had taken over her mother's finances, which included paying the bill for the assisted living facility where Ruth called home. Her reaction to the demand letter was, "It just seems so disrespectful and petty to me at a time when a family has suffered a loss, to feel like you're being nicked and dined by the VA".

Sen. Patty Murray (D-WA), a member of the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs, was contacted about Ruth's story. Sen. Murray said, "We've been looking into this. This is a serious issue for veterans' families at the end of someone's life, to get hit with something like this because they passed away at the end of the month. Veterans have paid the price. Their families have paid the price and we should be doing everything we can to make sure that they have the support they need and this is certainly a part of it." She promised to meet with the VA to see what she can do to change the law. Crowther hopes change in the nation's capitol will provide the necessary relief for those who gave everything they had for this country. "My hope is that people out there will be as outraged as I am that this is happening to other veterans' families," said Crowther. She has requested if this has happened to one of your loved ones, to contact getjesse@king5.com. She needs the stories of as many people as possible to put in front of lawmakers in D.C., so they can begin the process of writing legislation to change this law. [Source: Seattle King 5 News Jesse Jones article 3 Dec 09]

VA SURVEY 2010: Secretary of Veterans Affairs Eric K. Shinseki announced the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has launched a national survey of Veterans, active duty service members, activated National Guard and reserve members, and family members and survivors to learn if they are aware of VA services. "By hearing directly from Veterans and their family members, we gain valuable information to help us serve them better. We hope those who receive the survey will respond to it," Secretary Shinseki said. In addition to assessing awareness levels, the National Survey of Veterans will collect important health care, benefits, employment, and demographic information that VA will use to inform policy decisions and improve benefits. Recognizing a broader client base than just Veterans, this is the first time VA has included others, such as Veteran family members, in its survey population. The study, to be managed by VA's Cooperative Studies Program, is projected to cost \$5.6 million.

VA is mailing out survey "screeners" to more than 130,000 households to identify potential survey participants. The screener asks if anyone in the household is a member of one of the identified survey groups - Veterans, family members and survivors, active duty, Guard or Reserve members. Eligible survey participants then may be requested to participate in a full-length survey. Participants will be able to select a preferred survey method: through U.S. mail, telephone or a password-protected Internet address. VA expects approximately 10,000 Veterans to complete the full-length survey. This is the sixth VA National Survey of Veterans since 1978. The information collected will help VA in its efforts to design and conduct outreach to Veterans. In addition, it will provide a clearer picture of the Veteran

population's characteristics to help evaluate existing programs and policies and measure their impact. The data collection is expected to be finished by the end of February and the final report released by December 2010.

The study represents to date the most comprehensive examination of a group of women Vietnam Veterans, and will be used to shape future research on women Veterans in future wars. Such an understanding will lay the groundwork for planning and providing appropriate services for women Veterans, as well as for the aging Veteran population today. Women Veterans are one of the fastest growing segments of the Veteran population. There are approximately 1.8 million women Veterans among the nation's total of 23 million living Veterans. Women comprise 7.8% of the total Veteran population and nearly 5.5% of all Veterans who use VA health care services. VA estimates women Veterans will constitute 10.5% of the Veteran population by 2020 and 9.5% of all VA patients. In recent years, VA has undertaken a number of initiatives to create or enhance services for women Veterans, including the implementation of comprehensive primary care throughout the nation, staffing every VA medical center with a women Veterans program manager, supporting a multifaceted research program on women's health, improving communication and outreach to women Veterans, and continuing the operation of organizations like the Center for Women Veterans and the Women Veterans Health Strategic Healthcare Group. [Source: VA News Release 3 Dec 09]

TRICARE PARENT CARE: If your parents or parents-in-law are dependent on you for support, your local military treatment facility (MTF) may be able to help with their health care. Although dependent parents are not eligible for most Tricare benefits, they may be eligible to receive health care at the MTF. Dependent parents can also have prescriptions filled at MTF pharmacies and through the Tricare Pharmacy Program once they become entitled to Medicare Part A and purchase Medicare Part B. Your branch of service will determine MTF care eligibility for your parents or parents-in-law, register them as dependents in the Defense Enrollment Eligibility Reporting System (DEERS) and issue their identification cards. Health care for eligible dependent parents or parents-in-law is available on a space-available basis at certain MTFs based on the facility's capabilities and capacity. Access to care is subject to change for this reason. Also, available space at one MTF does not guarantee available space at another MTF. When moving, you should check with the MTF at your new location to determine whether care is available. Eligible dependent parents or parents-in-law may also enroll in Tricare Plus if your MTF offers it and space permits. Tricare Plus allows them to make primary care appointments at the MTF within the same access standards as beneficiaries enrolled in Tricare Prime. Note: Dependent parents or parents-in-law are not eligible for any Tricare civilian health care services, including emergency care, through Tricare Prime, Tricare Standard, Tricare Extra and Tricare For Life. Tricare will not pay costs for services they receive outside the MTF. You should consider a private, commercial health insurance plan for them if they will need services that the MTF either does not have space available to provide or cannot provide. For more information on MTF care for dependent parents and parents-in-law, refer to www.Tricare.mil. [Source: Tricare Health Matters (North) Issue 7: 2009 ++]

ALCOHOL ABUSE: According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, excessive alcohol use is the third leading lifestyle-related cause of death in the United States—it was linked to approximately 79,000 deaths annually during 2001–2005.¹ The National Highway Traffic Safety Administration has reported that the holiday period is the deadliest time of year for alcohol-related traffic deaths. In the years 2001–2005, the average number of traffic fatalities involving alcohol-impaired drivers during the period between 25 DE and 1 JAN was an astounding 40 percent, compared to about 28 percent for the rest of December. In addition to drunk driving, domestic violence rates increase during the holidays. Financial obligations for gifts or travel and too much family togetherness can cause stress and lead to cases of domestic violence. Alcohol does not cause abuse in a relationship, but according to the U.S. Bureau of Justice Statistics, in 75% of domestic violence cases, the offender is drunk at the time of the offense. Here is a countdown of the top five things you should know to help reduce alcohol abuse during the holiday season:

- **Five ...** It's not the type of alcoholic drink, but the amount of alcohol consumed that affects a person.

- **Four** ... A standard drink contains 0.6 ounces, or 1.2 tablespoons, of pure alcohol. Generally, this amount of pure alcohol is found in:
 - 12 ounces of regular beer or wine cooler
 - 8 ounces of malt liquor
 - 5 ounces of wine
 - 1.5 ounces of 80-proof distilled spirits or liquor (e.g., gin, rum, vodka, whiskey)
- **Three** ... Binge drinking is five or more drinks during a single occasion for men and four or more drinks during a single occasion for women.
- **Two** ... Heavy drinking is more than two drinks in a day for men and more than one drink in a day for women.
- **One** ... The Department of Defense developed a Web site and ad campaign to raise awareness of the negative effects of excessive alcohol use. For details, visit www.thatguy.com. Tricare's awareness Web page is www.Tricare.mil/alcoholawareness. It explains binge drinking, alcoholism and underage drinking.

[Source: Tricare Health Matters Issue 7: 2009]

VIETNAM SERVICE MEDAL: The Vietnam Service Medal was established by Executive Order 11231, dated 8 JUL 65, and the policy for award was promulgated by DOD Directive 1348.15, dated 1 OCT 65. It was awarded to all members of the Armed Forces of the United States serving in Vietnam and contiguous waters or airspace thereover, after 3 JUL 65 through 28 MAR 73. Members of the Armed Forces of the United States in Thailand, Laos, or Cambodia, or the airspace thereover, during the same period and serving in direct support of operations in Vietnam are also eligible for this award. To be eligible for award of the medal, individual must -

- (1) Be attached to or regularly serve for one or more days with an organization participating in or directly supporting military operations; or
- (2) Be attached to or regularly serve for one or more days aboard a naval vessel directly supporting military operations; or
- (3) Actually participate as a crewmember in one or more aerial flights into airspace above Vietnam and contiguous waters directly supporting military operations; or
- (4) Serve on temporary duty for 30 consecutive days or 60 nonconsecutive days in Vietnam or contiguous areas, except that the time limit may be waived for personnel participating in actual combat operations.

Individuals qualified for the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal for service in Vietnam between 1 JUL 58 and 3 JUL 65 shall remain qualified for the medal. Upon request, the individual may be awarded the Vietnam Service Medal in lieu of the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal. In such instances, the Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal will be deleted from the list of authorized medals in the individual's personnel records. No person shall be entitled to both awards for Vietnam Service. Soldiers receiving the Vietnam Service Medal are authorized to wear a bronze star to indicate each campaign. There are 17 designated campaigns during the period of 15 MAR 62 through 28 JAN 73. Units which receive campaign credit for any of the campaigns would display a streamer with inscription as shown on the unit's lineage and honors. The designated campaigns are:

- Vietnam Advisory 1962-1965
- Vietnam Defense 1965
- Vietnam Counteroffensive 1965-1966
- Vietnam Phase II 1966 - 1967
- Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase III 1967-1968
- Tet Counteroffensive 1968
- Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase IV 1968
- Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase V 1968
- Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase VI 1968-1969

- Tet 69 Counteroffensive 1969
- Vietnam Summer-Fall 1969
- Vietnam Winter-Spring 1970
- Sanctuary Counteroffensive 1970
- Vietnam Counteroffensive Phase VII 1970-1971
- Consolidation I 1971
- Consolidation II 1971-1972
- Vietnam Cease-Fire 1972-1973

[Source: www.tioh.hqda.pentagon.mil/Awards/VIETNAM%20SERVICE%20MEDAL1.html Dec 09]

RESERVE/GUARD TRICARE: The activation and deactivation cycle of National Guard and Reserve members can be a challenging process for service members and their families. Tricare now offers many options for recently deactivated guardsmen, reservists and their families to maintain their health during the transition from active duty back to civilian life.

- **TAMP** - After serving in contingency operations for more than 30 days, deactivated guardsmen, reservists and their family members are eligible to receive care through the Transitional Assistance Management Program (TAMP) for 180 days after deactivation. TAMP participants can choose Tricare Standard or Tricare Prime if it is locally available. Under TAMP, Tricare Prime requires re-enrollment for sponsors and family members, but there are no fees associated with enrollment. During TAMP, if a guardsman or reservist has a newly diagnosed medical condition that can be resolved within 180 days of diagnosis and the condition is service-related, he or she may apply for Transitional Care for Service-Related Conditions (TCSRC). To treat the condition TCSRC extends transitional coverage for up to 180 additional days from the date of diagnosis. For more information go to <http://www.Tricare.mil/tcsrc>.
- **TRS** - Tricare Reserve Select (TRS) was created to support reservists and guardsmen and their families while they're not on active duty. TRS is premium-based coverage qualified National guard and Reserve members may purchase at any time. For 2009 premiums are \$47.51 per month for individual coverage and \$180.17 per month for member-and-family coverage, and rates are adjusted annually. Participants can get care from any Tricare-authorized provider and in military treatment facilities on a space-available basis. TRS participants must meet a deductible based on the sponsor's pay grade before cost-sharing of services begins. To qualify for TRS, a guardsman or reservist must be a member of the Selected Reserve of the Ready Reserve and not eligible for, or covered by, the Federal Employees Health Benefits program. Coverage cannot overlap with other Tricare programs such as TAMP. TRS coverage automatically ends when a Guardsman or Reservist is activated. Once deactivated, sponsors can purchase TRS again if they still qualify. For more information on TRS, refer to <http://www.Tricare.mil/trs>. Reservists and guardsmen can qualify for and purchase TRS coverage online at the Guard and Reserve Web Portal at <https://www.dmdc.osd.mil/appj/trs/index.jsp>.
- **CHCBP** - The Continued Health Care Benefit Program (CHCBP) is another health care option for qualified National Guard and Reserve members. Guardsmen and reservists not eligible for Tricare can get more information about CHCBP at <http://www.Tricare.mil/chcbp>.

While covered under TRS, TAMP or CHCBP, Reserve and National Guard members and their families have Tricare prescription drug coverage. They may also purchase dental care coverage through the Tricare Dental Program at any time. To learn more about Tricare options through the activation and deactivation cycle online refer to the Tricare beneficiary portal at <http://Tricare.mil/mybenefit>. [Source: Tricare News release 1 Dec 09]

VA CONTACT NUMBERS: Call VA Benefits: 1-800-827-1000 for:

- Burial
- Civilian Health and Medical Program of the Department of Veterans Affairs (CHAMPVA)
- Death Pension
- Dependency Indemnity Compensation
- Direct Deposit
- Directions to VA Benefits Regional Offices
- Disability Compensation
- Disability Pension
- Education
- Home Loan Guaranty
- Life Insurance
- Medical Care
- Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment
- Beneficiaries in receipt of Pension Benefits: 1-877-294-6380

Education (GI Bill): 1-888-442-4551

Health Care Benefits: 1-877-222-8387

Income Verification and Means Testing: 1-800-929-8387

Life Insurance: 1-800-669-8477

Mammography Helpline: 1-888-492-7844

Special Issues - Gulf War/Agent Orange/Project Shad/Mustard Agents and Lewisite/Ionizing Radiation: 1-800-749-8387

Status of Headstones and Markers: 1-800-697-6947

Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD): 1-800-829-4833

For health care services, contact your nearest VA medical facility.

[Source: <https://iris.va.gov/scripts/iris.cfg/php.exe/enduser/cci/phonenbrs.php> Dec 09]

VA CLAIM DENIAL: Congressman Steve Buyer, the ranking Republican on the Veterans Affairs Committee, has called for a top-level review over benefits for reservists who go to war, but aren't officially activated. This resulted from the case of Lt. Col Steve Avery, a 33-year veteran who suffers from ALS like symptoms plus other ailments, who says his squadron has been unable to prove to the VA they are sick and dying from war illnesses. More importantly, some can't find records to show they even served. The Air Force isn't keeping track of who was suffering from Gulf war related illnesses, so Avery created a roster showing the names of more than 50 squadron members who are sick or dying from similar illnesses. In the case of Lt. Col Steve Avery he was recognized in a newsletter put out by the 315th Airlift Unit in OCT 91. His crew was cited as one of the first reserve units from Charleston, sent to Desert Storm. But the VA confirms it has no record of service for Avery in 1990 or 1991. His squadron wasn't officially activated. The VA says the Air Force Reserve destroyed the service records, leaving the sick reservists caught in the crossfire.

Under current policy veterans are required to prove they were exposed to spent tank shells, uranium dust and unusually high amounts of insecticides in order to get medical benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs. After numerous WTHR inquiries, the VA responded, saying the agency is not privy to records for covert or classified missions. "We would not generally be aware of the existence of those documents," according to VA Deputy Director Tom Pamperin. He says benefit determinations are based in part on what's in the veterans file. The VA and Department of Defense are now creating a special Operations Command with McDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida to help close the gap. The new unit will be able to confirm veterans' service, with data on classified or covert missions, without breaching confidentiality requirements. The official start of the program is expected in

coming days. "We can go to them and ask them if the veteran's service included duty assignments and others that would make their current claim credible," said Pamperin. [Source: WTHR.com Investigates Sandra Chapman article 30 Nov 09 ++]

PTSD Update: The Supreme Court on 30 NOV threw out a death sentence for a decorated Korean War veteran, ruling for the first time that combat stress must be considered by a jury before it hands down the harshest punishment. "Our nation has a long tradition of according leniency to veterans in recognition of their service, especially for those who fought on the front lines as [George] Porter did," the justices said in a unanimous, unsigned opinion. "Moreover, the relevance of Porter's extensive combat experience is not only that he served honorably . . . but also that the jury might find mitigating the intense stress and mental and emotional toll that combat took on Porter." George Porter Jr. was convicted in the 1986 shooting deaths of his ex-girlfriend and her then-boyfriend in Florida during a drunken rage. But the jury that sentenced him was never told -- and his appointed lawyer did not know -- of his military service more than three decades earlier. In the past, the high court has set aside a handful of death sentences because a defense lawyer failed to tell jurors of crucial "mitigating evidence" that probably would have persuaded them to spare his life.

The decision appears to be the first in which the court has said post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) was the type of circumstance that called for leniency. It comes as thousands of U.S. soldiers are being treated for PTSD suffered as a result of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Both the Florida Supreme Court and the U.S. 11th Circuit Court of Appeals in Atlanta had upheld Porter's death sentence, despite his overlooked military record. But the high court said those decisions were mistaken. "George Porter is a veteran who was both wounded and decorated for his active participation in two major engagements during the Korean War; his combat service unfortunately left him a traumatized, changed man," the justices said. The opinion put defense lawyers in capital cases on notice that they have a duty to look into their client's background and to tell jurors about any mitigating evidence that would call for leniency. In Porter's case, his lawyer testified later that he had only one short meeting with his client before the trial and that he did not meet with Porter's family and was unaware of his military record. That information came to light only after Porter's conviction in the Florida state courts. When Porter's case was appealed in the federal courts, a new lawyer contacted his family, looked into his background and found new witnesses to testify for him, including his company commander from Korea.

To escape what the court called a "horrible family life" -- which included his father beating him and trying to shoot him -- Porter enlisted in the Army at 17. He was sent to fight on the front lines in Korea. Twice his division was left to hold back charging Chinese troops while the U.S. 8th Army retreated to the south. Porter's unit fought hand-to-hand combat over five days and nights at Kunu-ri. Less than three months later, Porter's unit was cut off again from the 8th Army and forced to fight alone against a Chinese unit at Chip'yong-ni. Porter was wounded in both battles, and half of his comrades were killed or wounded. Lt. Col. Sherman Pratt testified in a post-conviction hearing that these were "very trying, horrifying experiences." Porter was awarded two Purple Hearts and a Combat Infantryman Badge, along with other decorations. Porter went AWOL after he returned to the United States. He was imprisoned but later honorably discharged, according to court documents, and never adjusted to civilian life. He suffered from nightmares, drank heavily and was prone to violent and impulsive behavior. More than 30 years after his combat experience, Porter was charged with shooting and killing Evelyn Williams and Walter Burrows. There was little doubt of his guilt. Porter first decided to represent himself, and then asked to plead guilty halfway through the trial. That evening, he tried to commit suicide in jail.

The Supreme Court focused only on whether Porter deserved to die or serve a life term in prison. Had the defense lawyer told jurors of Porter's life history, they would likely have spared him the death penalty, the court said. By today's standards, Porter would have been diagnosed as suffering from PTSD, the court said. It cited recent testimony before Congress from Veterans Affairs Secretary Eric K. Shinseki, who reported that 23% of those who

have served in Iraq and Afghanistan and sought treatment through the VA had been "preliminarily diagnosed with PTSD." The court noted that two states -- California and Minnesota -- provide a special sentencing hearing for veterans who are convicted of crimes and may be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. Among the justices, only John Paul Stevens served in the armed forces during wartime. He was a Navy intelligence officer in the Pacific during World War II. Several others, including Justices Anthony M. Kennedy, Stephen G. Breyer and Samuel A. Alito Jr., also served in the military. [Source: Los Angeles Times David G. Savage article 1 DEC 09]

DEPENDENTS & SURVIVORS BENEFITS: The below are available to veteran dependents and survivors who meet the required criteria. For detailed information about all VA benefits and services, refer to www.va.gov:

- **DIC:** Dependency and Indemnity Compensation is payable to certain survivors of servicemembers who died during active service, veterans who died from service-related disabilities, and certain veterans who were being paid 100% VA disability compensation at time of death. DIC is payable to some surviving parents. The benefit is based on financial need.
- **Pension:** Death Pension is payable to some surviving spouses and children of deceased wartime Veterans. The benefit is based on financial need.
- **CHAMPVA:** VA Civilian Health and Medical Program shares the cost of medical services for eligible dependents and survivors of certain Veterans.
- **Education & Training:** Some family members of disabled or deceased Veterans are eligible for education and training benefits.
- **Home Loans:** Certain surviving spouses may be eligible for this benefit.
- **Time Limits:** For education and training benefits, spouses and surviving spouses have 10 years from the date VA first finds them eligible, and surviving spouses of servicemembers who died while on active duty have 20 years. Children are eligible from age 18 to 26. These time limits can sometimes be extended. There are no time limits to apply for the other benefits described above.

[Source: VA Pamphlet 21-00-1 JUL 09]

ENLISTMENT Update: Single Parents are not allowed to enlist in the U.S. Military, period. Except for the Army National Guard, waiver approvals are extremely rare, and most recruiters won't even submit one. In the "old days," some recruits would try to get around this restriction by giving up legal custody of their child(ren) until after basic training and job school, but the military has wised up to this practice. For example, in the Marine Corps, one must give up legal custody (by court order) of their child(ren), and then wait one year or more before being eligible for enlistment. For Navy enlistments, the waiting period is six months and the court-order must make it very plain that the transfer in custody is permanent. In the Army and Air Force, single member parent applicants who, at the time of initial processing for enlistment, indicate they have a child or children in the custody of the other parent or another adult are advised and required to acknowledge by certification that their intent at the time of enlistment was not to enter the Air Force/Army with the express intention of regaining custody after enlistment. These applicants must execute a signed statement testifying they have been advised that, if they regain custody during their term of enlistment, they will be in violation of the stated intent of their enlistment contract. They may be subject to involuntary separation for fraudulent entry unless they can show cause, such as the death or incapacity of the other parent or custodian, or their marital status changes from single to married.

The military's refusal to accept single parents for enlistment is a valid one. The military is no place for a single parent. In the military, the mission always comes first. Absolutely no exceptions are made in assignments, deployments, duty hours, time off, or any other factor for single parents. Single parents in the military are required to have a nonmilitary person (in the local area) on call at all times, 24-hours-per-day, seven-days-per-week, 365 days-per-year, who will agree (in writing) to take custody of their child(ren) at no notice, in the event that the military member is deployed or called to duty. Failure to comply with these "Family Care Plans" can (and does)

result in an immediate discharge. In general, an applicant who has joint physical custody of a child by court order or agreement, and the applicant does not have a spouse, he/she is considered a "single parent." If local or state court allows modification, if the other parent assumes full custody, the applicant is usually qualified for enlistment. In the Army National Guard, a single parent may enlist, if they receive a waiver from the State Adjutant General of the state that individual is enlisting.

While the military no longer allows single parents to enlist, if one becomes a single parent while in the military, due to death of a spouse, separation/divorce, adoption, etc., or a military couple has children, the military will not force them to separate from the service, as long as they meet the family care requirements of DOD and the various related service regulations. In a nutshell, that means such members must have a "family care plan." DOD Instruction 1342.19, Family Care Plans was published in JUL 02, to standardize the requirements of a plan for all of the military services. Military mothers of newborns receive a 4-month deferment from duty away from the home station for the period immediately following the birth of a child. This provision is to assist the member in developing family care plans and to establish a pattern of child care. Single members or one member of a military couple who adopt receive a 4-month deferment from the date the child is placed in the home as part of the formal adoption process. Similarly, Reserve component members receive a 4-month deferment from involuntary recall to active duty. [Source: About.com: U.S. Military Rod Powers article 19 Sep 09]

MEDICARE FRAUD Update: Sioux City IA - A northwest Iowa hospital has agreed to pay \$400,000 to settle allegations that it purposely overcharged federal health-care programs for the care of heart patients after spending more than one million dollars defending itself against the charge. Mercy Medical Center did not admit wrongdoing, but it agreed to pay the money to settle the matter, federal prosecutors said. Bob Teig, a spokesman for the U.S. attorney's office in Cedar Rapids, said this was the first time in Iowa history that a hospital had been prosecuted for overbilling the government under a program that pays extra money for particularly expensive procedures. The "outlier" program is meant to encourage health-care providers to take on unusually complicated cases. Prosecutors accused Mercy of using the arrangement to overcharge Medicare, Medicaid and other federal programs for the care of heart patients. This was the second time this year that federal prosecutors announced a fraud settlement with a northern Iowa hospital. In August, Covenant Medical Center in Waterloo agreed to pay \$4.5 million to the federal government to settle allegations that it dramatically overpaid physicians in an illegal scheme to boost its business. [Source: Fraud News Daily reports 1-15 Dec -09]

VETERAN LEGISLATION STATUS 13 DEC 09: For or a listing of Congressional bills of interest to the veteran community that have been introduced in the 111th Congress refer to the Bulletin's Veteran Legislation attachment. Support of these bills through cosponsorship by other legislators is critical if they are ever going to move through the legislative process for a floor vote to become law. A good indication on that likelihood is the number of cosponsors who have signed onto the bill. Any number of members may cosponsor a bill in the House or Senate. At <http://thomas.loc.gov> you can review a copy of each bill's content, determine its current status, the committee it has been assigned to, and if your legislator is a sponsor or cosponsor of it. To determine what bills, amendments your representative has sponsored, cosponsored, or dropped sponsorship on refer to <http://thomas.loc.gov/bss/d111/sponlst.html>.

Grassroots lobbying is perhaps the most effective way to let your Representative and Senators know your opinion. Whether you are calling into a local or Washington, D.C. office; sending a letter or e-mail; signing a petition; or making a personal visit, Members of Congress are the most receptive and open to suggestions from their constituents. The key to increasing cosponsorship on veteran related bills and subsequent passage into law is letting legislators know of veteran's feelings on issues. You can reach their Washington office via the Capital Operator direct at (866) 272-6622, (800) 828-0498, or (866) 340-9281 to express your views. Otherwise, you can locate on <http://thomas.loc.gov> your legislator's phone number, mailing address, or email/website to communicate with a

message or letter of your own making. Refer to http://www.thecapitol.net/FAQ/cong_schedule.html for dates that you can access your legislators on their home turf. [Source: RAO Bulletin Attachment 13 Dec 09]

HAVE YOU HEARD? Why I Like Retirement

- Number of days in a week: 6 Saturdays, 1 Sunday
- Bedtime: Three hours after falling asleep on the couch.
- Biggest gripe: There is not enough time to get everything done.
- Benefit of being called a senior: The term comes with a 10% discount.
- What is considered formal attire: Tied shoes.
- Why do retirees count pennies: They are the only ones who have the time.
- Common term for someone who enjoys work and refuses to retire: NUTS!
- Reason retirees are so slow to clean out the basement, attic or garage: They know that as soon as they do, one of their adult kids will want to store stuff there.
- What retirees call a long lunch: Normal .
- Best way to describe retirement: The never ending Coffee Break.
- Biggest advantage of going back to school: If you cut classes, no one calls your parents.
- What do retirees do all week: Monday through Friday, NOTHING. Saturday & Sunday they rest.
- Why doing nothing is hard work: You never know when you're done