

April 2005



NORTHLAND VIETNAM VETERANS' ASSOCIATION

P.O. Box 16975

Duluth Mn. 55816
WWW.NVVA.US



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"Dignity Thru Unity"

MINNESOTA VETERANS HOME – SILVER BAY

Looking Back

Greetings from Silver Bay! The last few months have been exciting as I have had the pleasure of working side by side with Dan Smestad. He has been a great teacher, trainer, mentor, and friend. On Saturday, January 29th we gave Dan a grand send off as his retirement party was held at the Two Harbors American Legion. Distinguished speakers included our Administrator - Mike Bond, Minnesota Veterans Homes Board Executive Director - Steve Musser, Minneapolis Veterans Home Director of Public Affairs – Dee Oliver, Retired CVSO Officer and former Board Member– Wayne Sletten, and last but not least, Marie Frey, our faithful volunteer representing the VFW Auxiliary Department of Minnesota. One special note – since Dan entered the service at age 17, he had served his county and fellow Veterans for the past 43 years. What an accomplishment! The NVVA was well represented at the party as Pat, Fletcher, Durbin and their spouses attended. Thanks gang!

Moving Forward

As we look ahead, we will be pursuing the funds to purchase a six passenger surrey. This vehicle would be used for transporting our residents on the trail system that runs adjacent to the Home. This will give us yet another opportunity to take advantage of the natural resources in our backyard.

National Volunteer Week is April 17th through the 24th. We will have our Volunteer Appreciation Banquet some time that week – TBA. In addition, I hope to have quarterly volunteer meetings to review existing policies and look at new challenges.

As spring moves forward, this brings on a different season – *The Convention Season*. Beginning late April, I will bring the “show on the road” as I will be traveling throughout the State to various military conventions about every two weeks through the end of June. This is great PR for our facility and it’s the time to show off what a great place Silver Bay is for our Veterans!

During my short tenure here at the Vets Home, it is very apparent that the NVVA has been critical to our success. On behalf of the residents, their families, and staff, we thank you for your generous support of the Minnesota Veterans Home – Silver Bay. You have touched the lives of many Veterans and have made their quality of life exceptional. Keep up the good work!

Respectfully submitted,

Ward C. Wallin
Volunteer Program Administrator

To add a article to this
newsletter contact

Mike Hanson 624 4474
Noisyguy@chartermi.net

NVA Memberships
178 Members
130 Associates

Don't Forget Party

March 11, 2006

lots more to come

Entertainment
Happy Hour 6:00 P.M.
Dinner @ 7:00 P.M.
Prizes and Fun for all

With in the passing summer days.....
I could feel the clouds rolling in....
I could feel the sun clasping down.....
I could feel the sweet smell of summer fading away as we drive to your town.....
I'd hear you whispering with the light summer winds trying to tell me this is how it has to end.....

It was that late August night in my dream, I could feel you kiss my cheek, as I tried to scream, the tears began to roll, I could see you slowly start to go..... I heard you say..... I love you Honey.....Good-Bye.... For, I had no Control....Wait, Stop, Dad..Dad.. Dad.....Please Please Don't GO?
With In that instant, as I watched you slowly disappear.... my heart dropped and I knew you were no longer here.....

I know you are there when my tears begin to roll and my heart starts to break away and I am out of control Your granddaughter will turn to me and she can see my heartache as she looks at me....she will whip all my tears away "as if she knows"..... I can hear her talking... to you I am sure... I can hear her whisper "Grandpa over here"

At Grand Lake setting you free for that is how you wanted it to be....
As the geese stand and wait for the man they felt was near....
This time they stood there with no fear....
The Geese were waiting and watching as if they knew the man they feared was no longer here, as they stood by to pay their last respects it was as if they knew they wouldn't collect.....

One last party, one last Good-Bye, we raised our beer glasses OH so high...the tears start to roll and then the laughter begins as the night progresses and so do the not so happy grins...people start to bicker...people start to fight...so to me it is time to say Good Night.....I turn to look it seems to me all the people there just need to set you free....The moment I walked out that bar I felt your presence wasn't so far, I knew you wouldn't let me walk it alone... after all it was well over due for some Father Daughter time alone....

As I walk down the streets of Downtown Duluth after paying once last tribute.....on a lonely summer night it seems to me being alone is what set me free that night.... I know you were there to guide me for other wise I would of surely gotten lost....

I heard you sing to me on my way home....my thoughts would stray to the words you would say to me everyday.... it is as if you are right there to guide me to reason like you did each and everyday....

I have this feeling you are all around us.... As I look above in the clear blue sky a lonely hot air balloon slowly waves HI...as I stand out side my house or on my way to work I could almost hear you up above slowly saying Hi...In the lonely Hot Air balloon so far above...

I can't see you smile ... I can't see your laughter ...I can't see why you did this... I can't believe I wasn't there...
I don't know how to move on, with out you there.....
I need to know, I need to hear it from you,
I need to know why??? Why this way without a clue???
The devastation you must have felt.... to end your life in such a way.....To leave this place, instead of just walking away.....
To carry these burden's of your life's tragedies to your grave....

You could have come to me...you could have stayed....I would have been there for you each and everyday.....

In a summer dream, In a passing Hot Air balloon, On a lonely walk, I will only think of you.....
My thoughts are always with you...I Thank-you Dad.... I Thank-You for being my father till the end...

I Love you and miss you Dad each and everyday!!!!
Love Always,

Jennifer Jill Skalsky 2/10/05
Jeffiner – Denny's oldest baby girl

[Source: Department of Veterans Affairs www.va.gov/ Nov 04]

Hello Everyone,

17 January 16, 2005

I hope everyone had a wonderful Christmas and a Happy New Year. Those two holidays are quite different here in Vietnam, but I did enjoy myself. Every year schools and other places ask me to be Santa Claus and hand out gifts to the children. I always have a good time doing this.

Lots of things have happened since I wrote last. The police in Dong Nai Province are doing investigations on the AmerAsians to verify that they really are AmerAsians. I met with Mr. Rockey from the American Consulate, and he is encouraged with this also. It seems things are finally happening. I had a student from Wales contact me also about coming here to take pictures of the AmerAsians for a project to complete his degree. This next story I sent to the Vets I was in Vietnam with in 1968. One of them sent it to a brother who has a radio station on the internet and he is going to get the story out there and try and raise some money for us.

I had an experience the other day that I have to share with you. I am not sure how you will react to it; I wasn't sure about my reactions. Here in Vietnam on the anniversary of a death of a family member they have a celebration. I was invited to one the other day. We were eating and visiting and it came out that I was a soldier at Lai Khe. One of the men seated across from me said he was a VC Commander in that area. We exchanged stories and I held my arms up like it was a rifle and said, "I suppose we were shooting at each other." He said, "Yes we probably were." We both said we were glad we could be friends now. When he got ready to leave he came over to me and shook my hand, gave me a hug, and then kissed me on my cheek. It was an emotional moment for me and you have no idea the amount of healing that went on for me. I have met many former enemies and have had meals with them or at least a toast with them. I have attached a picture of the man. He is 72 years old now.

Bob, a veteran from Minnesota, came here on Friday. Saturday I had to leave him here alone with the housekeeper as I had to go to school. Today, I got him on the motorcycle and we went to Bien Hoa and visited friends there. Right now he is in the kitchen with the housekeeper and Chau and they are teaching him Vietnamese. There is a lot of laughter, so I am not sure what is happening. This is his first trip back to Vietnam, so a lot of things are happening with him. It reminds me of my first trip back and all of the things running through my head and all of the emotions I felt. I think he is doing just fine. As a lot of you know, this was one of my dreams, to have Vets come back and experience some of the same things that I did and get some healing and closer to our experience with war. Keep us in your prayers.

I will be coming home to America around the 9th of February, for our daughter Nicole's wedding. I will only be staying for a short time as I have another Vet coming on 25 February, and then Pearl will come the 1st of March.

Tomorrow, Bill (Dung), the AmerAsain that was in the accident will come and visit us. He is doing much better and is getting his eyesight back now. He is basically 95% back to normal. He heard Bob was here and they want to come and meet him. It is about a 2 hour ride on the motorcycle.

Talk to you later. My next email will probably be after I get back for the wedding, unless something very exciting happens here before I come back.

Love JON

Jon Tinquist
VVA Chapter 352
Hello Everyone,



POW MIA

By Howard Peterson

Korean War MIA Comes Home
30 December, 2004

Korean War soldier finally comes home
Associated Press

HOUSTON - Billy Donahoe's family shed tears of happiness as the Korean War veteran returned home to be buried.

Donahoe was a 26-year-old Army master sergeant when he was declared missing in action 54 years ago after the Battle of Chosin Reservoir.

A POW Medal Sixty Years Later
30 December, 2004

A medal at last for Brockton WWII veteran

BRIDGEWATER - Tonight, more than 60 years after Cpl. Walter "Bucky" O'Brien was captured by German soldiers during World War II, his family will receive the Prisoner of War Medal he earned and was promised so many years ago.

O'Brien died in his sleep in 1987 at age 62, still waiting for the medal to arrive.
02 November, 2004

U.S. Department of Defense
Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense (Public Affairs)
News Release
No. 1098-04
IMMEDIATE RELEASE
November 2, 2004

MIA's Identified from The Vietnam War

Six servicemen missing in action from the Vietnam War have been identified and are being buried as a group at Arlington National Cemetery Friday with full military honors.

They are Air Force Col. Theodore E. Kryszak of Buffalo, NY; Air Force Col. Harding E. Smith of Los Gatos, Calif.; Air Force Lt. Col. Russell D. Martin of Bloomfield, Iowa; Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Harold E. Mullins; Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Luther L. Rose of Howe, Texas, and Air Force Chief Master Sgt. Ervin Warren, of Philadelphia.

Coming Home
04 February, 2005

Soldier's remains coming home

EAGLE PASS, Texas (AP) - More than 60 years after his plane disappeared during World War II, a South Texas soldier's remains are coming home.

Second Lt. James Walter Carver will be buried with full military honors on Saturday at the foot of his mother's grave in Eagle Pass.

An Army navigator, Carver had just turned 22 when his plane disappeared while en route to Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea, after a night raid on a key Japanese base. Seven other men, including another Texan, were on board.

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Lost Soldier Found

10 February, 2005

By JOHN HAUGHEY
Staff Writer, Sun-Herald, FL

Col. Sheldon John Burnett may have been missing in action for nearly 34 years, but he was never lost in the hearts, minds and memories of his children.

Now, he's coming home.

Burnett's daughter, Trish Burnett, of East Derry, N.H., said Friday she was notified Wednesday that her father's remains have been recovered in Laos.

MIA Marine Finally Coming Home

10 February, 2005

Marine killed in Vietnam to finally come home
SUNY to honor star student-athlete's memory
By Gabriel J. Wasserman
For the Poughkeepsie Journal

NEW PALTZ -- Nearly 40 years after he was killed on his first day of active duty, a Marine who left an enduring athletic legacy at SUNY Paltz can be buried in Arlington National Cemetery.

The remains of Second Lt. Heinz Ahlmeyer were identified in January from a tooth filling found at the site of a 1967 skirmish in Vietnam. The platoon commander was believed dead but listed as missing until the recently unearthed tooth was compared to dental records.

After 38 Years, Coming Home

24 February, 2005

After 38 years, remains of sergeant killed in Vietnam positively ID'd
By PAUL MEYER -The Dallas Morning News

PLANO D James Neil Tycz died a hero May 10, 1967, when a hand grenade exploded near his face in Khe Sanh, Vietnam.

Of his seven-member reconnaissance patrol team, only three Marines survived the early-morning firefight with the North Vietnamese army, according to military records. The others were buried under elephant grass on Hill 665, unrecovered but not forgotten.

Remains of KW MIA Recovered & ID'd

26 February, 2005

"Missing Korean War Serviceman Remains found in China After 52 Years" by Soon-Taek Kwon (maypole@donga.com)

The remains of a U.S. soldier unearthed in Dandong, China last June were identified as those of a missing U.S. fighter pilot from the Korean War in 1952.

The U.S. Department of Defense announced on February 26 that the investigation of the unearthed remains in Dandong last June identified them as those of captain Troy Cope, a pilot of a U.S. Air Force F-86 jet who became missing in September 1952.

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MIA Remains Recovered

04 March, 2005

Three names removed from Camp Lester MIA wall after remains are found in Vietnam
By Erik Slavín, Stars and Stripes, Pacific Edition

CAMP LESTER, Okinawa - U.S. Navy Hospital Okinawa personnel said a final goodbye Wednesday to three fallen comrades who went missing during the Vietnam War.

The hospital's honor guard removed the pictures of three hospital corpsmen from their POW/MIA wall after their remains recently were identified.

Corpsmen James Patrick McGrath, Ronald James Manning and Bernard Gause Jr. all died during or immediately after attacks on their air transport, according to Navy records.

VIC (Veterans Identity Card):

The Department of Veterans Affairs has designed a new identity card for veterans that will safeguard confidential information while combating identity theft. The card, formally known as the Veterans Identity Card (VIC), will have veterans' photos on the front and identify them as enrollees in the VA's health-care system. Encrypted on a magnetic tape on the back of the card will be the veteran's Social Security number, date of birth and a control number. The magnetic strip also records whether the veteran has a service-connected disability. Identity theft is one of the fastest growing crimes in the nation. The Federal Trade Commission listed identity theft as the No. 1 fraud reported by consumers in 2003. Requests from veterans and their congressional representatives were instrumental in bringing about these latest changes. Veterans should request the new card at their local medical center. Processing will take five to seven days once eligibility is verified. VA officials hope to complete the conversion to the new, safer card by mid-November. The existing cards will remain valid until veterans receive their new cards.

The two photos I'm sending was taken at the new memorial plaque located across the walk from the statue of the 3 soldiers in Washington DC on the mall. It is dedicated to all the Vietnam Vets that have died since the war from their participation in the war who don't meet the criteria to have their names on the wall. EX: Agent Orange exposure, PTSD, Homelessness. The list goes on and on. The one picture is of plaque with flowers and a small picture of a life member of NVVA who recently passed on and met the criteria to have his name read there at a ceremony later on this month. The other is of Carol, his wife, and his grown children.

I sincerely hope you can print these as Denny and Carol always volunteered for the Blues Fest and other functions they could work into their "traveling schedule.

Scott Cameron



Iraq and Afghanistan conflicts are now showing up in the nation's homeless shelters.

While the numbers are still small, they're steadily rising, and raising alarms in both the homeless and veterans' communities. The concern is that these returning veterans - some of whom can't find jobs after leaving the military, others of whom are still struggling psychologically with the war - may be just the beginning of an influx of new veterans in need. Currently, there are 150,000 troops in Iraq and 16,000 in Afghanistan. More than 130,000 have already served and returned home.

So far, dozens of them, like Herold Noel, a married father of three, have found themselves sleeping on the streets, on friends' couches, or in their cars within weeks of returning home. Two years ago, Black Veterans for Social Justice (BVSJ) in the borough of Brooklyn, saw only a handful of recent returnees. Now the group is aiding more than 100 Iraq veterans, 30 of whom are homeless.

"It's horrible to put your life on the line and then come back home to nothing, that's what I came home to: nothing. I didn't know where to go or where to turn," says Mr. Noel. "I thought I was alone, but I found out there are a whole lot of other soldiers in the same situation. Now I want people to know what's really going on."

After the Vietnam War, tens of thousands of veterans came home to a hostile culture that offered little gratitude and inadequate services, particularly to deal with the stresses of war. As a result, tens of thousands of Vietnam veterans still struggle with homelessness and drug addiction.

Veterans from the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are coming home to a very different America. While the Iraq war remains controversial, there is almost unanimous support for the soldiers overseas. And in the years since Vietnam, more than 250 nonprofit veterans' service organizations have sprouted up, many of them created by people like Peter Cameron, a Vietnam veteran who is determined that what happened to his fellow soldiers will not happen again.

But he and dozens of other veterans' service providers are concerned by the increasing numbers of new veterans ending up on streets and in shelters.

Part of the reason for these new veterans' struggles is that housing costs have skyrocketed at the same time real wages have remained relatively stable, often putting rental prices out of reach. And for many, there is a gap of months, sometimes years, between when military benefits end and veterans benefits begin.

"We are very much committed to helping veterans coming back from this war," says Mr. Cameron, executive director of Vietnam Veterans of California. "But the [Department of Veterans Affairs] already has needs it can't meet and there's a lot of fear out there that programs are going to be cut even further."

Beyond the yellow ribbons

Both the Veterans Administration and private veterans service organizations are already stretched, providing services for veterans of previous conflicts. For instance, while an estimated 500,000 veterans were homeless at some time during 2004, the VA had the resources to tend to only 100,000 of them.

"You can have all of the yellow ribbons on cars that say 'Support Our Troops' that you want, but it's when they take off the uniform and transition back to civilian life that they need support the most," says Linda Boone, executive director of The National Coalition for Homeless Veterans.

After the Vietnam conflict, it was nine to 12 years before veterans began showing up at homeless shelters in large numbers. In part, that's because the trauma they experienced during combat took time to surface, according to one Vietnam veteran who's now a service provider. Doctors refer to the phenomenon as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

A recent study published by the New England Journal of Medicine found that 15 to 17 percent of Iraq vets meet "the screening criteria for major depression, generalized anxiety, or PTSD." Of those, only 23 to 40 percent are seeking help - in part because so many others fear the stigma of having a mental disorder.

Many veterans' service providers say they're surprised to see so many Iraq veterans needing help so soon.

"This kind of inner city, urban guerrilla warfare that these veterans are facing probably accelerates mental-health problems," says Yogin Ricardo Singh, director of the Homeless Veterans Reintegration Program at BVSJ. "And then there's the soldier's mentality: Asking for help is like saying, 'I've failed a mission.' It's very hard for them to do."

Beyond PTSD and high housing costs, many veterans also face an income void, as they search for new jobs or wait for their veterans benefits to kick in.

When Mr. Noel was discharged in December of 2003, he and his family had been living in base housing in Georgia. Since they were no longer eligible to live there, they began the search for a new home. But Noel had trouble landing a job and the family moved to New York, hoping for help from a family member. Eventually, they split up: Noel's wife and infant child moved in with his sister-in-law, and his twins were sent to relatives in Florida. Noel slept in his car, on the streets, and on friend's couches.

Last spring he was diagnosed with PTSD, and though he's currently in treatment, his disability claim is still being processed. Unable to keep a job so far, he's had no steady income, although an anonymous donor provided money for him to take an apartment last week. He expects his family to join him soon.

'Nobody understood ... the way I was'

Nicole Goodwin is another vet diagnosed with PTSD who has yet to receive disability benefits. Unable to stay with her mother, she soon found herself walking the streets of New York, with a backpack full of her belongings and her 1-year-old daughter held close.

"When I first got back I just wanted to jump into a job and forget about Iraq, but the culture shock from the military to the civilian world hit me," she says. "I was depressed for months. I couldn't sleep. I couldn't eat. The worst thing wasn't the war, it was coming back, because nobody understood why I was the way I was."

Ms. Goodwin was determined not to sleep on the streets, and so eventually went into the New York City shelter system where, after being shuffled from shelter to shelter, she was told she was ineligible for help. But media attention changed that, and she was able to obtain a rent voucher. With others' generosity, she also found a job. She's now attending college and working with other veterans who are determined to go to Washington with their stories.

"When soldiers get back, they should still be considered military until they can get on their feet," she says. "It's a month-to-month process, trying to actually function again. It's not easy, it takes time."

Memorial Day 2005

There have been many changes to this year's Memorial Day parade. Rosie is getting wonderful help from Clear Channel Radio to make this the best parade in the 45-year history of the parade. This parade will be a tribute to all war years from WWII to today with the grand marshals of the parade will be the recently returned Units to Duluth.

Here are some of the other changes:

- The traditional ceremony at the West Duluth Memorial will not be held. That is now the beginning of the parade route.
- We, NVVA, will line up in the tenth slot. Any Vietnam veterans that want to fall in behind our unit can do so and be in the parade. We will have our van to carry some that cannot march.
- There will be a tribute to each era at different parts of the parade. Where the tribute to Vietnam is being done this is a place for families to gather. If you have marched in the parade and want to drop out at that point and watch the rest of the parade with your family this too is the place to do it.
- The Memorial Day Ceremony will be at Wade Stadium right after the parade. Everyone is invited and hope to have a good turnout.
- There will be a picnic and concert to follow. Watch for information from Clear Channel Radio.

The NVVA Memorial Day ceremony at the Bunker (weather permitting, or undercover at the Fitger's parking lot) will be at 6:00 pm. This will also mark the thirteenth birthday of the dedication of the Memorial. Followed by the reception for the Memorial Foundation Scholarship recipients.

For more information please contact Durbin M. Keeney 722-88763

Inquirer Washington Bureau Investigation

Disabled veterans' battle for benefits

By Chris Adams, Alison Young and Tom Infield
Inquirer Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON - The waiting can go on for years. Bureaucratic mistakes are far too common, by the government's admission. And when veterans finally do win claims for disability compensation, the amount of money they get may vary by the mere happenstance of where they live.

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs is falling short of its own standards for serving disabled veterans, according to an investigation by the Inquirer Washington Bureau.

The VA admits its processes are slow and prone to errors. The number of veterans who have taken steps to appeal an unfavorable decision on disability benefits has grown from 60,000 in 2000 to 109,000 last year. Patterns suggest that many will ultimately win their claims, but some veterans and their families wonder if the agency is just stalling.

"I think they think, 'Maybe he'll die and we won't have to pay anything out,' " said Carolyn Cabral of Lakewood, N.J., whose husband, Eugene, an Army draftee in the late 1950s, died in January while waiting for his appeal to be decided.

The VA repeatedly has failed to meet internal and external recommendations to eliminate redundant steps in the application and appeals process. An exhaustive review by the Veterans' Claims Adjudication Commission, completed in 1996, declared the claims and appeals process "cumbersome and outmoded" and in need of an overhaul.

"I think things are basically the same," Michael Walcoff, who oversees the agency's 57 regional offices, said of the appeals process. "I wouldn't say that we have changed the system in any major way."

While the VA concedes shortcomings, Anthony J. Principi, who was secretary of veterans affairs until January, said in an interview late last year that things had gotten better since President Bush was elected.

"This agency was under water in 2001," he said. "My people have made tremendous progress... . We are doing everything in our power with the resources that we have to ensure that veterans are treated fairly and equitably."

The Inquirer Washington Bureau investigation was based on interviews with veterans and their families from around the country and on a review of internal VA documents and computerized databases that had never been released to the public. Many of the records were made available only after the bureau sued the agency in federal court.

Among the findings:

Some groups that provide VA-accredited experts to help veterans with their cases have no set training requirements, and the service officers are rarely tested to ensure competence. The veterans service officers work for nonprofit organizations such as the American Legion, as well as states and counties, but their quality is uneven, and that often means the difference between a successful claim and a botched one.

The average wait to get an initial decision in a case is 165 days, well above the agency's goals of the last decade, which have ranged from 60 to 125 days. For veterans who choose to appeal their cases, the average wait is nearly three years, and many veterans wait 10 years for a final ruling. In the last decade, several thousand veterans died before their cases were resolved, according to a Washington Bureau analysis of VA data.

Errors are made in 13 percent of claims, a VA quality-control database shows. This is more than three times the agency's hoped-for rate of 4 percent. That translates to 103,000 errors a year, many that result in either overpayment or underpayment of benefits. Error rates vary by region. At the Philadelphia office, which serves eastern Pennsylvania and South Jersey, the rate is 13 percent, on par with the national average. The error rate in Wilmington is a far higher 23 percent.

The regional offices also produce inconsistent results when it comes to determining a veteran's degree of disability and amount of compensation. The average monthly sum received by veterans through the Philadelphia office is \$682, while the average in Albuquerque, N.M., is \$1,008. In Pittsburgh, it is \$626; in Wilmington, \$616; in Newark, N.J., \$591.

"How a veteran seeking benefits gets treated should not be an accident of geography," said George Basher, the director of the New York State Division of Veterans' Affairs, one of 50 state agencies that help veterans. "Unfortunately, the current system makes that a virtual certainty."

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The VA is a mammoth agency that serves 25 million veterans with a far-flung health-care system and a separate disability and pension operation. The agency spends more than \$60 billion a year, more than \$20 billion of it on disability compensation to 2.5 million veterans.

VA Secretary R. James Nicholson is scheduled to appear before a congressional subcommittee today for a hearing on the VA's budget. The House and Senate veterans committees will hold hearings this week to listen to the annual legislative presentations from national veterans groups.

The agency makes disability payments for injuries as obvious as an amputated leg and as complex as post-traumatic stress disorder. The injuries include combat wounds and peacetime injuries, since military personnel are serving their country whether they are in a humvee in Iraq or in boot camp.

Neither department officials nor department critics can wholly account for the regional differences in error rates and payments.

But one factor may be the wildly varying quality of help that veterans receive in compiling the evidence of their disability from military and medical records, and then properly navigating the VA's thicket of rules and deadlines.

The VA is charged by Congress with making it as easy as possible for veterans to pursue their claims. But James Davison, Pennsylvania's deputy director of veterans affairs, said that "what the VA has done for years is try to push their obligations off onto the states... . The states have chipped in where the feds have essentially fallen short."

Despite years of study, VA officials said, many of the agency's problems remain because of the nature of an ever-changing bureaucracy. Responding to changes in the law and court decisions has made it harder for the VA to accomplish what it set out to, agency officials said. "The system has become more complex," Principi said in the interview.

In addition, attempts to streamline the process could have the effect of cutting off veterans' appeals rights, and therefore have met with resistance from veterans groups.

Counties, as well as states, provide help to veterans in filing claims. The lion's share of help comes from veterans accredited by the VA to help other veterans.

About 40 veterans service organizations, such as the Disabled American Veterans, are authorized to help prepare VA claims.

The Inquirer Washington Bureau found that the network of VA-accredited service officers is a patchwork of well-meaning helpers whose training and expertise vary. Yet the agency prohibits veterans from hiring their own attorneys until after their claims have been denied and they are generally years into the appeals process.

Two-thirds of the veterans who submit claims use service officers, and picking the right one can determine whether they get the full payment they are due, a fraction of it, or nothing.

The VA, through its national accreditation program, is supposed to ensure that all service officers are "responsible" and "qualified." But the VA program simply approves names submitted by veterans groups. About 11,000 service officers are currently on the VA's roster; about 80 percent are accredited through nonprofit groups.

VA regulatory files, obtained after the Inquirer Washington Bureau lawsuit was filed, reveal that the agency has done little in decades to determine the adequacy of the training provided by veterans groups or to check the quality of the claims prepared by their officers. Only rarely does the VA suspend or revoke a service officer's accreditation. When it does happen, it is generally the result of criminal charges rather than incompetence.

"What we do is take it on the word of the service organization that the individual has had sufficient training," said Martin Sendek of the VA's general counsel's office.

At one end of the training spectrum is Disabled American Veterans, which has full-time paid national service officers and a 16-month training and testing program that is so regimented that it qualifies for 10 hours of college credit.

Groups such as American Ex-Prisoners of War and Catholic War Veterans rely largely on part-time volunteers who are not required to complete any courses or pass any tests.

"We don't get paid, so we're not going to be that strict with these people," said Doris Jenks, the national training director for American Ex-Prisoners of War.

Rich Hudzinski, a retired Army major now active in the Lehigh Valley Military Affairs Council, has found from his own analysis of VA data that payments to veterans with similar disabilities are not only inconsistent from state to state but can vary from county to county within a state.

That suggests to him that a veteran's chances of getting a good result may depend as much on the service officer who helps file the paperwork as on what happens in the VA office.

Hudzinski blames the state for not doing a better job of helping veterans win their claims. The Pennsylvania Department of Military and Veterans Affairs has four people on staff whose job is to help disabled veterans file their claims. New Jersey has 22 state employees for that purpose.

The Lehigh Valley veterans' group suggested in a November appearance before legislative committees in Harrisburg that the Pennsylvania department should be broken in two - with one part managing the state's National Guard contingent and the other concentrating solely on veterans' needs.

"What it really comes down to is the number of well-qualified people out there [to help disabled veterans get their benefits] and a unified system that the state has control over," Hudzinski said.

Each of Pennsylvania's 67 counties and New Jersey's 21 counties also has a staff member whose job includes helping veterans with their paperwork.

"The VA isn't that bad," said John Dorrity of Ocean County, who heads the National Association of Veterans Service Officers. He said it was the service officers who varied at all levels, from nonprofit to state to county.

"It's the service officers - what they feed into [the VA]," he said.

The VA says it is unaware of any systemic problems.

Retired Vice Adm. Daniel Cooper, the VA's undersecretary for benefits, said the department fixes any mistakes that service officers might make.

Agency general counsel Tim McClain noted that veterans had extensive appeal rights.

"There are a lot of checks and balances in the system," he said.

Veterans, often not knowing where to turn for help, can end up frustrated.

Gordon Frey, 76, of Bethlehem, Pa., fought for more than 10 years to increase the 60 percent disability rating he received after serving in the occupation of Japan after World War II.

While on guard duty, his appendix had burst. He was found almost dead. That led to five operations and a lifetime of, as he puts it, "not being able to control my bowels."

Later married and a father, he tried his best to work as a door-to-door salesman of cookware. He said he would regularly miss two weeks of work a month. When he did work, he would often have to ask to use the homeowners' bathroom.

"I'm a proud person," Frey said last week. "That was hard."

In the early 1990s, he realized he might be able to claim a 100 percent disability. He was denied.

He continued to work but never earned more than the poverty rate. That meant, under VA regulations, that he technically was not employable.

It took more than a decade - until 2003 - for the VA to agree that he warranted a total disability rating. He got \$40,000 for two years of back compensation, plus a regular check that now amounts to almost \$2,300 a month.

George Wilson, his veterans' group representative, believes Frey was shorted by the many thousands of dollars more he would have received if the VA had not taken a decade to act in his favor.

With the average disability payment now about \$8,000 a year, back-benefit awards can be substantial because an award is calculated as though the VA made the right decision when the claim was first filed. Some veterans with severe disabilities get \$100,000 or more.

Wilson, a World War II veteran who works with the National Veterans Organization of America, said the VA was getting worse in handling claims.

"I see no improvement," he said. "All I see are the letters that come [to veterans] saying, 'We are working on your claim....' I see letters like that every week. It could use some streamlining."

If a veteran dies with his or her case under appeal, the case dies, too.

In the last decade, more than 13,700 veterans died while their cases were in some stage of the appeals process, according to an Inquirer Washington Bureau analysis of VA appeals records database. (While precise estimates are not available, the VA said experience suggested a few thousand of them would not have actively pursued their appeals.)

Eugene Cabral, who died Jan. 25, had been pursuing a claim for an increase in his disability rating for a little more than three years.

A soldier in Korea from 1958 to 1960, he badly injured his back while changing a heavy truck tire. Over the years, he had worked as a civilian truck driver. But by the 1990s, his wife said, he could not even stand up straight. The doctors told him it all went back to his days in the service.

Carolyn Cabral, now alone, says that without the extra income her husband had hoped for from the VA, she isn't sure whether she can continue in her home or whether she will have to move in with her son in Pennsylvania.

"But don't write that this is about money for me," she instructed a reporter. "This would have been money for my husband... but he isn't around."

Contact staff writer Tom Infield at 610-313-8205 or tinfield@phillynews.com.

Where Veterans Can Find Help Military veterans are eligible for a wide range of benefits from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, including health care, disability compensation, burial and survivor benefits, education and home loans.

For more information, contact:

U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, 1-800-827-1000, or go to www.va.gov.

Your state or county department of veterans services. For a list of state offices, go to www.va.gov/partners/stateoffice/index.htm. For a list of county offices, contact the National Association of County Veterans Service Officers at www.nacvso.org/.

A nonprofit veterans service organization. To find one, go to www1.va.gov/vso/.

Veterans applying for VA benefits can get help from various sources, including counselors who are VA employees, veterans service officers who may work for a national veterans charity or a state or county veterans affairs department. It is a violation of VA rules for service officers to request payments, donations or membership in return for help.

Some lawyers may provide help, but VA rules generally prohibit them from receiving payment unless the claim has reached the Board of Veterans' Appeals and has been denied.

Experts suggest veterans shop around before signing a power of attorney with a service officer.

To find a service officer, contact your state or county veterans affairs department or one of the national veterans charities.

"The Veterans Self-Help Guide on VA Claims" is a useful resource and is available from the National Veterans Legal Services Program and can be ordered online for \$7.50 at www.nvlsp.org/publicationslist.htm.

NVVA's Role in the Community Form My View
By
Durbin M. Keeney

NVVA is a very special veteran's service organization. We are one of two Vietnam veterans associations in the state that is not affiliated with a national Veterans services organization. We have been created and governed without some or the strengths and weakness that come with belonging to a national organization. What we do share with organizations like Vietnam Veterans of America (VVA) is a common bond of where and when we served, and more over a desire to make the lives better for all Vietnam veterans and an understanding that our future is limited by our membership. Organizations like ourselves are often referred to as "last mans clubs." This puts us a unique possession and has some what driven what we have done as an organization.

Years ago soon after we completed and dedicated the Memorial we were faced as an organization to really define who we are and to focus on our vision. One issue was the need to establish a foundation to maintain the memorial that we built. This was so that it would be maintained to our standard long after we all are gone. As part of the Northland Vietnam Veterans Memorial Foundation (NVVMF) we raised \$100,000.00 to be the basis to secure the foundation's future. The wonderful bi-product of that is that NVVMF have been able to provide many scholarships over the years. At the same time many requests were coming to us, most very worthwhile, and all looking for support from what was then a much more profitable gambling fund. There were also a small group of us that worked every event that happened at Bayfront Park as well as Blues, and other larger events. We earned along with charitable gambling a good sum of money annually at that time. The board had to recognize this and to set some priorities.

The fundamental tread that of all that we do is really based on the concept of veteran helping veteran. There were certain basic values we did agree on right from the beginning. NVVA was not and never will be political organization. While we may have our own personal views as an organization we never have been, are not now, and never will be political. What we will do is attempt to become knowledgeable about veterans issues and inform our members. We do that through this newsletter, our web site, and our meetings. There are times that we have written, and asked members to contact our political leaders to better educate them on then needs of our members, and for all veterans. A good example is not only did we fund the basic planning for the "wondering room" of the Silver Bay Veterans Home we did as an organization write and ask our members to contact our state legislatures. That certainly falls within who we are.

The next big issue is whom do we fund? It did not take long for us to set some fundamental and very basic priorities that we all could agree on, and ever since has served us very well. Keeping a close eye on which we are organizationally is extremely important.

What was very interesting is that once we agreed on these priorities we have never swerved from them.

These are the NVVA four priorities that were established that guides NVVA:

1. Serve Veterans – First and foremost Vietnam Veterans and then the greater Veteran's community.
2. Veterans and their families – Again, first and foremost Vietnam Veterans and then the greater Veteran's community.
3. Community as it relates to Veterans – This would be something that would improve or enhance the lives of veterans in our community.
4. Community – As a veteran's organization we are members of our community. What could we do to improve our community? Keeping in focus that by our support we would improve our community that would in turn make the lives of our veterans and their families better.

Again the premise of veterans helping veterans has for the most part been fundamental to who we are and who we should be. That is really at the heart of NVVA and I believe that is what makes us a very special and very unusual organization. We have set some very basic values to live by and yet some very admirable ones. To date we have not compromised and I for one hope that we never will.

There are many organizations that I belong to and they all have their place, but NVVA is so true, so honest, to its values it is an example to all the others. It has made a huge difference in the lives of thousands of Veterans and their families. We all can and should take pride in being part of NVVA.

I am proud and humbled to be part of such a wonderful organization and remain committed to the work of NVVA. My hope is that we never change from who we are and when that day comes that we all are only thought of in memory; I hope we will be remembered for not only who we were, but also what we were able to accomplish. What greater legacy for any organization could we have but to have served those who have served this country and done it well.

Northland Vietnam Veterans Association (NVVA)
Membership Questionnaire
March 2005

Dear NVVA Member:

The NVVA Board would like your thoughts and comments about our organization. Please answer the following questions and return your completed questionnaire in the enclosed return envelope (NVVA, PO Box 16975, Duluth, MN 55816) on or before April 25, 2005. Your answers will help keep NVVA responsive to the interests and needs of its members. **(Use other side if needed for your answers.)**

1. What in your opinion is the primary purpose of NVVA?

2. Are you satisfied with the current direction of NVVA?

3. If you are not satisfied, what should NVVA be doing differently?

4. What specific things should NVVA try to accomplish during 2005?

5. Are there any specific activities or events that you think NVVA should get involved with?

6. Any other comments.

7. Would you like an NVVA Board member to contact you about this questionnaire?

Yes No

8. Optional Information:

Name: _____ Phone Number: _____

Regular Member Associate Member