



Federal Update for October 13 - 17, 2014



VA Telehealth Services Served Over 690,000 Veterans in Fiscal Year 2014

WASHINGTON –The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that its national telehealth programs served more than 690,000 Veterans during fiscal year 2014. That total represents approximately 12 percent of the overall Veteran population enrolled for VA healthcare, and accounted for more than 2 million telehealth visits. Of that number, approximately 55 percent were Veterans living in rural areas with limited access to VA healthcare. With more Veterans seeking health care, telehealth is rapidly becoming an attractive option, especially for those Veterans who don't have a VA health care facility close to home.

"We have to adapt to meet Veterans wherever their needs are," said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. "A brick-and-mortar facility is not the only option for health care. We are exploring how we can more efficiently and effectively deliver health care services to better serve our Veterans and improve their lives. Telehealth is one of those areas we have identified for growth."

Currently, there are more than 44 clinical specialties offered to Veterans through VA's telehealth programs. One program at the Miami VA schedules close to 90 clinic connections every week for dermatology, eye exams, the women Veterans program, podiatry, mental health and other clinical specialties.

One tangible example of the success of VA's telehealth program is its burgeoning TeleAudiology program because of large population of Veterans living with hearing loss. The TeleAudiology program has grown from 1,016 Veterans in fiscal year 2011 to more than 10,589 in fiscal year 2014.

For more information about VA's telehealth program, visit www.telehealth.va.gov/.

DoD Pay and Benefits Update ► Pentagon Trim Proposals to Continue

Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work, a retired Marine colonel and former Navy undersecretary, said 30 SEP that the Pentagon will continue pressing to trim military pay, pensions, and housing allowances despite rejections by Congress. The Pentagon will also try again to reform the Tricare health care system and kill the A-10 attack aircraft despite nearly universal opposition from veterans service organizations, Work said at a Council on Foreign Relations forum. "This whole idea of compensation is absolutely critical.

Compensation (reform) is a really big deal" in DoD's efforts to maintain readiness, fight wars in Afghanistan and the Mideast and rebalance forces to the Pacific while working under the budgetary restrictions of the Congressional sequester process, Work said. Matters will come to a head in February when DoD presents its next budget and the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission presents its long-awaited reform recommendations.

He said he expected that Congress will still be working under a continuing resolution on DoD's budget in February. "This is truly the last chance for us to make any moves in this space" on pay, pensions and other cost-cutting measures, said Work. Without the proposed cuts, the Pentagon will be left with a \$70 billion hole in its budget, Work said, but Congress has opposed "what we consider to be reasonable approaches. It's been no, no, no, no, no, no, no" to nearly every suggestion. "This is la-la land," Work said.

The Military Officers Association of America and other veterans groups were bracing for the upcoming fight with DoD on pay and benefits. "I don't expect that the Department is going to ease off on any of these next year," said retired Col. Mike Hayden, MOAA's director of government relations. He said that DoD was "looking at any way to try to offset readiness costs by shifting them onto servicemembers and their families and retirees."

Over the Labor Day weekend, President Obama sent notice to Congress limiting pay increases for the military and federal civilian workers to one percent. The House has passed a bill for a military pay increase of 1.8 percent while the Senate

has yet to act on an amendment offered by Sen. Marco Rubio, R-Tex., for a similar 1.8 percent military pay raise. Work made the comments on pay and benefits in response to questions at the CFR forum. His main topic was the Obama administration's push to rebalance forces to the Asia-Pacific region, with 60 percent of military assets and personnel focused on Asia and 40 percent elsewhere. Work said that Asian allies constantly point to the turmoil in the Mideast and Russian aggression in Eastern Europe to ask him about the Pacific pivot: "Is this rebalance really real?" However, the U.S. had the resources to "stay committed to Europe and the Mideast" while carrying out the rebalance, Work said, but budget constraints could mean that "we might not be able to go as fast as we like."

To underline the administration's commitment to the rebalance, Work said that the F-35 Joint Strike Fighters, when they come on line, would go first to the Pacific along with the new P-8 Poseidon surveillance aircraft. Work said that there also were plans to have the new Zumwalt class destroyer go first to the Pacific – "we hope." [Source: MilitaryTimes | Richard Sisk | Sept. 30, 2014 ++]

DoD MAVNI Program ► Illegal Immigrant Recruitment Policy

A small number of immigrants living in the U.S. illegally will have an opportunity to join the military for the first time in decades under a new Defense Department policy unveiled 26 SEP. The new rules will expand an existing program allowing recruiters to target foreign nationals with high-demand skills, mostly rare foreign language expertise or specialized health care training. For the first time, the program — known as Military Accessions Vital to National Interest, or MAVNI — will be open to immigrants without a proper visa if they came to the U.S. with their parents before age 16. More specifically, they must be approved under a 2012 Obama administration policy known as Deferred Action for Child Arrivals, or DACA. The new DoD policy may be the first phase of a broader government wide effort to ease pressure on immigrants and create new paths to citizenship. President Obama, frustrated with the failure of Congress to pass any substantial immigration reform, has vowed to aggressively use his presidential authority to change the way immigration policies are carried out.

The Pentagon program is capped at 1,500 recruits per year. Officials say it's unclear how many of those might be unlawful DACA status immigrants as opposed to others who are also eligible for military service under MAVNI, including those with legal, nonpermanent visas such as students or tourists. Estimates suggest between 1.2 million and 2.1 million children, teenagers and young adults in the U.S. have no legal immigration status but meet the criteria for the DACA program. Those targeted by recruiters under the MAVNI program likely will be immigrants with language skills critical to national security, such as Arabic, Chinese, Pashto or Persian. But Pentagon officials don't know how many of those immigrants have actually learned their ancestral language to the proficiency required by the military. "We're just not sure how many within that existing population of DACA would have the linguistic skills to qualify," said one defense official familiar with the policy change. "These are kids who entered the country at a fairly young age and have basically grown up in the United States, so the limit of their language talents would probably be the language that they received at home." DACA status is granted by the Homeland Security Department and includes a background check.

On average, the military recruits about 5,000 noncitizens each year, nearly all of them permanent U.S. residents, or so-called "green card" holders. Starting in 2006, DoD began accepting some foreigners with nonpermanent visas, such as students or tourists, if they had special skills that are highly valued. After entering military service, foreigners are eligible for expedited U.S. citizenship. Since 2001, more than 92,000 foreign-born service members have become citizens while serving in uniform. The MAVNI program began in 2008 and remains a pilot program. DoD notified Congress on Thursday that the program, which was due to expire at the end of this fiscal year, will be extended for another two years and will for the first time include DACA-status immigrants. The military services are not required to accept recruits under MAVNI. In recent years, the Army has been the only service to accept a significant number of recruits under the program. The Air Force has accepted only a few and the Navy and Marine Corps have not sought MAVNI recruits in recent years. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Andrew Tilghman | Sept. 25, 2014 ++]

DoD Fraud, Waste, & Abuse ► Reported 1 thru 15 Oct 2014

Afghanistan -- The Army and Marine Corps may have wasted more than \$100 million returning vehicles from Afghanistan that they don't need over just a one-year period, according to a Government Accountability Office report released 29 SEP. The services could have saved the money by blowing up the trucks or turning them over to allies, the report says. Over a one-year period, the Army and Marines returned 1,000 vehicles to the United States that the service didn't need, at a cost of as much as \$107,400 per vehicle. The Pentagon has made some progress in reining in its costs, GAO notes, but not enough.

"However, due to ineffective internal controls, the Army and Marine Corps may be incurring unnecessary costs by returning equipment that potentially exceeds service needs or is not economical to return and repair," the report says.

"This report is a troubling reminder that the Department of Defense has more work to do in managing taxpayer dollars," said Sen. Tom Carper, a Delaware Democrat and chairman of the Homeland Security and Government Affairs Committee. "The Government Accountability Office underscores that the DOD can and should do a much better job in preventing unnecessary costs by taking some common sense steps in managing its surplus military vehicles. We simply cannot afford this type of waste and ineffectiveness."

The military's effort to return gear from Afghanistan is on time and budget, Mark Wright, a Pentagon spokesman, said in response to the GAO findings. The Pentagon expects to spend about \$6 billion to retrieve gear from Afghanistan, Wright said. The Army and Marines may have shipped home some of the vehicles because they did not take transportation costs into account. They made that decision despite Pentagon guidance that requires it, the GAO report says. From October 2012 to October 2013, the Pentagon returned from Afghanistan or destroyed 14,664 vehicles, or an average of 1,128 vehicles per month, the report says. The report notes the difficulty facing the Pentagon in returning gear from landlocked Afghanistan. Urgently needed supplies, including Mine Resistant Ambush Protected (MRAP) trucks had been flown to Afghanistan at high cost. Flying vehicles from Afghanistan to Jordan, for example, and shipping them from a port there has the highest cost at \$107,400 per truck. It is far cheaper to ship

gear from Afghanistan by rail, truck and sea. Out of 9,000 vehicles returned by the Army and Marines, 1,034 were unneeded, according to the GAO analysis. Transportation costs alone ranged from \$5.9 million to \$111 million, depending the size of the vehicle and mode of shipping it home. The GAO urged the Pentagon to ensure that it consider all costs before shipping home gear.

The report appears to miss one potential cost of giving vehicles to allies, said Todd Harrison, a military budget expert at the non-partisan Center for Strategic and Budgetary Analysis. U.S. and allied warplanes have been destroying Humvees given or sold to the Iraqi military that have been captured by fighters from the Islamic State, which is also known as ISIL "The flip side of this is when we leave vehicles with our partners we run the risk of those vehicles falling into the wrong hands, as they have in Iraq," Harrison said in an email. "Now we are spending money to drop bombs on some of the Humvees and MRAPs ISIL stole from the Iraqi military."

The Pentagon's efforts to supply troops in Iraq and Afghanistan has had other major cost overruns. For instance, the Pentagon spent \$620 million on late fees for shipping containers it failed to return on time from Iraq and Afghanistan. It wasn't until this year that the Pentagon got a handle on its inventory of metal shipping containers and didn't have to pay late fees. [Source: USA TODAY | Tom Vanden Brook | Oct. 01, 2014 ++]

DoD MHS Review ► Performance On Par with Private Sector Care

A comprehensive review of the military health care system (MHS) which cares for 9.6 million beneficiaries -- service members, families and military retirees and their families, finds that overall the military health system is functioning on a par with private-sector care. However, patients face broad disparities in appointment wait times and quality of care — and have little way of finding out how their Defense Department hospital or clinic measures up regarding safety or potential harm to their health. The review, ordered in May by Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel to determine whether the Pentagon provides safe, effective care to active-duty beneficiaries, retirees and family members, found that by and large, the system provides “good quality care that is safe and timely” and is comparable to civilian care. But the military system has several notable discrepancies across its

56 hospitals and 361 clinics, with wide variability in timely access to care, patient safety and quality. “The review found pockets of excellence — significant excellence we are very proud of,” Hagel said at a Pentagon briefing 1 OCT. “It also found gaps and facilities that must improve.”

According to the report, at least three of the 17 hospitals surveyed failed to meet national standards for surgical complications and the system as a whole measured poorly on some standards for obstetrics care. The review, led by Deputy Defense Secretary Bob Work, also found that the Defense Health Agency — the Pentagon’s new administrative entity for its health system — as well as the medical departments of the Army, Navy and Air Force, lacked consistent data and statistics on patient access, care and safety, making it difficult to draw conclusions or even measure facilities against one another or against the civilian health system. “Our external experts point out that the MHS generally performs as well as the private sector in the delivery of safe, quality care. I believe our service members, retirees and their families deserve better than average,” Hagel wrote in a memo accompanying the Military Health System Review-Final Report.

Hagel ordered the review partially in response to the scandal over patient appointment wait lists and data manipulation at Veterans Affairs Department hospitals and clinics, a system run by the federal government but separate from the DoD medical system. But the New York Times also has published two articles on patient safety at military hospitals following a yearlong investigation into deaths and severe injuries related to poor care. Earlier this year, the commander of Womack Army Medical Center at Fort Bragg, North Carolina, was fired after several misdiagnoses and mishaps that ended in patient deaths. More recently, Brig. Gen. John Cho, the Western Regional Medical Command chief in charge of 11 hospitals in the Western U.S., was suspended for unspecified causes, becoming the eighth Army medical commander to be relieved or suspended in the past two years. The current DoD review addressed three major areas: access to care, quality of care and patient safety.

- In terms of access: The medical experts conducting the review found that on average, “access to care meets the defined standards.” But it added that because patients reported extreme dissatisfaction with their ability to get timely appointments, further investigation is needed. The reviewers found that while most hospitals meet the access standards for specialty care, they

failed in providing timely primary care for acute conditions, with 11 percent of the 17 hospitals reviewed not meeting the 24-hour standard for an appointment. In “town hall” meetings with patients, the reviewers received an earful on patient wait times. “Every time ... I go to make an appointment, it’s, ‘No, I’m sorry we don’t have anything for 4-6 weeks. I could go to the emergency room but I would like to have my appointment before 4-6 weeks,” one patient said, according to the report. The report also noted that data on access was unavailable for those who get their care at private facilities through the Tricare program.

- Regarding quality of care: The review showed “mixed results” with “considerable variation across the system.” While all medical hospitals and clinics are accredited or certified by external agencies, the review found variances in meeting standards and said that while the system in general meets or exceeds targets, it needs improvement. For example, while most military hospitals exceed national standards for infant mortality and maternal trauma, the system was statistically below standards for postpartum hemorrhage and neonatal trauma. Surgical complication rates also were all over the map, according to the report. Of the 17 hospitals reviewed, one in two had higher than acceptable surgical complication rates. Three ranked in the top tier nationally on that particular issue, while three others had persistent poor performance.
- In terms of patient safety: The review also found that some military hospitals and clinics failed to provide required reports on patient complications and preventable deaths. “The self-reporting of events related to patient safety is a key concern for all health systems,” noted the report, speaking of the Army, Navy and Air Force medical systems as well as the National Capital Region, which encompasses the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center and Fort Belvoir Community Hospital.

The review was conducted by outside experts collecting and analyzing data provided by DoD, the services’ medical departments, military hospitals and clinics and outside reports and sources. The 17 facilities selected represent a range of DoD facilities — large, small, rural, urban, domestic and international. The reviewers recommend that the Pentagon take steps to improve

underperformance, establish clear performance goals and institute changes systemwide. Secretary Hagel has accepted these recommendations and has established milestones for their implementation. Hagel has ordered:

- All military treatment facilities that don't meet access standards to develop action plans to improve timely appointments at both military facilities and through Tricare in 30 days.
- A yearlong study to review appointment access for all Tricare beneficiaries.
- All military hospitals failing to meet quality and safety standards to develop a plan for fixing their problems in 45 days.
- The Defense Health Agency to provide a plan in 90 days for better assessment of quality and safety in private care and to establish a performance management system that will monitor measures.
- DHA to develop a plan to make available all statistics on quality and safety for each military treatment facility.

Hagel said the Defense Health Agency would work swiftly to resolve discrepancies and focus on quality and care, emphasizing the importance of patient safety across the system. "Even small lapses in care can lead to devastating, heartbreaking losses and injuries, so today I'm directing that the military health system take steps to ensure that the system is not 'just average,'" Hagel said. Deputy Secretary Work pledged to "share DoD's performance and progress with the people they serve, with Congress, and with the American public."

[Source: MilitaryTimes | Patricia Kime | Oct. 01, 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Update 38 ► Ongoing Reorganization

ONGOING REORGANIZATION: The work that is ongoing is led by Senior DoD civilian, Alisa Stack, who is the head of a transition team, the Personnel Accounting Consolidation Taskforce (PACT). The PACT reportedly includes government specialists in each area to be addressed, from structure of the new agency, to the number of personnel, budget requirements, interface with other departments and agencies, archival research, strategy and integration and communication with the families. Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel and Assistant Secretary of Defense for Special Operations & Low Intensity Conflict (ASD/SOLIC) Michael Lumpkin both stated that communication with the families must be a very high priority consideration in how the new agency performs. Since her

appointment, Ms. Stack and other PACT members, aided by The Clearing (see below) have been interviewing people, in and out of government, and appear to be focused on ensuring that a wide variety of voices are heard, responsible and irresponsible, rational and irrational, so the outcome could be interesting.

The Clearing, an outside firm, was initially contracted for a reported \$2,000,000, and more recently, an added \$6,689,586 (yes, millions) to obtain input from family members from all wars on their experiences in dealing with various accounting community organizations. In addition to DPMO, JPAC and LSEL (specifically named in Secretary Hagel's restructure directive and by Congress), these include the Service Casualty Offices, AFDIL and DIA's Stony Beach POW/MIA team. The Clearing is reportedly also interviewing and receiving input from all US officials who wish to provide it concerning the overall mission and their own specific agency/organization. Apparently, the number of people willing to talk with The Clearing personnel is significant, and continuing; thus, the need for additional funding to keep them engaged.

The Clearing can be reached by emailing voiceofthefamilies@theclearing.com and is seeking views from all who are willing. Family members from all wars are urged to provide their views and, in light of the comparatively small number of Vietnam War family members, the League is hopeful that ALL Vietnam War families take this opportunity to remind members of PACT, The Clearing and senior DoD officials that uncertainty about Vietnam War missing men remains a significant factor for the families. The greatest uncertainty surrounds Vietnam War missing personnel, though the same can be said of a relatively small number of Vietnam War servicemen who were last known alive or in POW camps, but never returned; therefore, the need for concrete answers is paramount, more so than identifications from remains recoveries of known dead from earlier wars and conflicts. This is particularly relevant to disinterments of personnel buried as "unknowns" in American cemeteries. Their families know they perished, sadly. The League supports accounting for losses in WWII, Korean War and Cold War, as an important, though vastly different mission than ending uncertainty with answers.

Following review and approval by newly confirmed Undersecretary of Defense for Policy (USD-P) Christine Wormuth, PACT recommendations on implementation were provided to recently appointed and confirmed Deputy Secretary of Defense

(DepSecDef) Robert Work. With his approval, implementation began and several timelines were announced. Incremental steps were set to begin, including naming of an Interim Director for the new Defense Personnel Accounting Agency sometime this fall. The first of many adjustments applies to the budget and to communications, with instructions to begin acting now as one agency, with the Interim Operational Capability (IOC) set for January 15, 2015. Full Operational Capability (FOC) is set to occur on January 15, 2016. Until the start-up date early next year, DPMO, JPAC and LSEL, plus all other active elements of the accounting community, have been directed to continue work uninterrupted by plans and implementation for reorganization, transformation, and consolidation.

Since SecDef Hagel personally directed the “complete reorganization” of the accounting community and offered assurance to the League of his personal engagement, it is to him the League will look for confirmation that he is satisfied with the prospects for success of the reorganized community. Several interim briefings have been given, though without details or specifics in which we have been interested.

Another conference call briefing is scheduled for September 26th with recently confirmed Under Secretary of Defense for Policy Christine Wormuth. Hopefully, the briefing from USD(P) Wormuth will provide specifics. Also, hopefully, the PACT will become more transparent and consult knowledgeable, responsible current and former officials, as well as the League and the major national veteran organizations, before plans are finalized. Valid input into the process can help assure acceptance by those most directly impacted, the Vietnam War POW/MIA families and family members of US personnel lost in earlier wars and conflicts.

AMERICANS ACCOUNTED FOR: There are still 1,641 personnel listed by the Department of Defense as missing and unaccounted-for from the Vietnam War, a number that has not changed for several months. The number of Americans announced by DoD as returned and identified since the end of the Vietnam War in 1975 is now 942. Another 63 US personnel, recovered by the US and ID'd before the end of the war, bring the official total of US personnel accounted for from the Vietnam War to 1,005. Of the 1,641 total, 90% were lost in Vietnam or in areas of Cambodia and Laos under Vietnam's wartime control: Vietnam-1,275 (VN-469, VS-806); Laos-306; Cambodia-53; PRC territorial waters-7. Over-water losses on DoD's list of No Further Pursuit cases number well over 600.

SECRETARY OF DEFENSE ON NATIONAL POW/MIA RECOGNITION DAY: At the national ceremony held at the Pentagon on September 19th, Secretary of Defense Chuck Hagel stated in part: “The United States appreciates the ongoing support of many allies and partners across the globe – many represented here today – and on behalf of the men and women of our military, I thank you. You have helped us in recovering our missing. A good example of many of these efforts is Vietnam. Vietnam has been providing an increasing amount of archival documents to support our pursuit of our missing Americans. We appreciate these efforts and will continue to build on this partnership going forward.....As many of you know, earlier this year I directed the Defense Department to organize this effort into a single, accountable operation that has the responsibility for personnel accounting resources, research, and operations....resolving issues of duplication and inefficiency, while also making that organization stronger, more effective, more transparent, and more responsive....DoD has been working closely with everyone who has a stake in this mission – including families, the veterans’ service organizations that are represented here today, and I thank them, Congress, and the agencies’ workforce. We’ve made progress in this transformation, and the new Defense Personnel Accounting Agency will achieve initial operating capability this January.”

JPAC OPERATIONS: On 26 AUG, JPAC hosted POW/MIA Consultations with the Lao that were underwhelming in terms of results achieved, but important in that views were exchanged, and the US request for renewed cooperation by Laos on archival documents was not rejected. Little progress was made on other requests by both governments. The lack of positive Lao responsiveness was somewhat predictable, based on uncertainty within the Lao leadership brought about by the recent untimely death of the Lao Ministers of Defense and Public Security. Another probable reason was the lack of US dependability with on-again, off-again field operations due to budget fluctuations, sequestration and revised JPAC operational plans. Field operations are now ongoing with a larger team, but not yet the full number allowed of 53 US personnel operating in-country at the same time.

Operations in Cambodia have been sporadic at best, and only one field operation occurred in 2014, postponed twice in 2013. The Stony Beach Cambodia specialist is permanently in-country and conducts investigations when and where needed. There are no identified sites currently awaiting recovery; therefore, no JFAs are

scheduled in Cambodia until early 2015. For the first time in over 20 years, technical level talks are not being held with Cambodia in FY2014, but plans are being considered for senior level discussions with Cambodia's POW/MIA Committee leadership before the end of the calendar year.

Another series of field operations took place in Vietnam from August 5th to September 7th that included a Joint Forensic Review (JFR), and it was a busy year in Vietnam with regularly scheduled, implemented joint operations. DIA's Stony Beach is still engaged, but on a rotating TDY schedule that is unacceptable and needs to be made permanent, especially with the ever-increasing, broadening military-to-military cooperation. On September 23rd, JPAC hosted annual Technical Talks with Vietnamese counterparts.

[Source: National League of POW/MIA Families Sept. 25, 2014 ++]

POW/MIA Recoveries

"Keeping the Promise", "Fulfill their Trust" and "No one left behind" are several of many mottos that refer to the efforts of the Department of Defense to recover those who became missing while serving our nation. The number of Americans who remain missing from conflicts in this century are: World War II (73,539) Korean War (7,822) Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,642), 1991 Gulf War (0), and OEF/OIF (6). Over 600 Defense Department men and women -- both military and civilian -- work in organizations around the world as part of DoD's personnel recovery and personnel accounting communities. They are all dedicated to the single mission of finding and bringing our missing personnel home. For a listing of all personnel accounted for since 2007 refer to http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/accounted_for.

For additional information on the Defense Department's mission to account for missing Americans, visit the Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) web site at <http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo> or call (703) 699-1169. The remains of the following MIA/POW's have been recovered, identified, and scheduled for burial since the publication of the last RAO Bulletin:

Vietnam – None

Korea – None

World War II

- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office announced 6 OCT that the remains of U.S. servicemen, missing in action from World War II, have been accounted for and are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors. Army Air Forces 1st Lts. William D. Bernier, 28, of Augusta, Mont., Bryant E. Poulsen, 22, of Salt Lake City, Utah, and Herbert V. Young Jr., 23, of Clarkdale, Ariz., and Tech Sgts. Charles L. Johnston, 20, of Pittsburgh, Penn., and Hugh F. Moore, 36, of Elkton, Md., Staff Sgt. John E. Copeland, 21, of Dearing, Kan., and Sgt. Charles A. Gardner, 32, of San Francisco, Calif., have been accounted for and will be buried with full military honors. Bernier was buried on Sept. 19 in his hometown. Young will be buried Oct. 15 in Prescott, Ariz. The other service members will be buried at dates and locations still to be determined. On April 10, 1944, Bernier, along with 11 other B-24D Liberator crew members took off from Texter Strip, Nazdab Air Field, New Guinea, on a mission to attack an anti-aircraft was shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire over the Madang Province, New Guinea. Four of the crewmen were able to parachute from the aircraft, but were reported to have died in captivity. Following World War II, the Army Graves Registration Service (AGRS) conducted investigations and recovered the remains of three of the missing airmen. In May 1949, AGRS concluded the remaining nine crew members were unrecoverable. In 2001, a U.S.-led team located wreckage of a B-24D that bore the tail number of this aircraft. After several surveys, the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) teams excavated the site and recovered human remains and non-biological material evidence. To identify Young's remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including, mitochondrial DNA, which matched Young's sister.
- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office announced 10 OCT that three U.S. servicemen, missing from World War II, have been accounted for and their remains are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors. Army Air Forces 1st Lt. William P. Cook, 27, of Alameda, Calif., Staff Sgt. Maurice J. Fevold, 21, of Chicago, and Sgt. Eric M. Honeyman, 21, of Alameda, Calif., have been accounted for and will be

buried with full military honors. Fevold will be buried Oct. 20 in Badger, Iowa and Cook will be buried Oct. 25 in Oakland, Calif. Honeyman will be buried at a future date still to be determined. On Dec. 23, 1944, Cook along with five other B-26G Marauder crew members took off from Saint Quentin, France, on a mission to bomb an enemy-held bridge in Eller, Germany. The aircraft was shot down by enemy anti-aircraft fire near Seffern, Germany, near the border with Belgium. Following World War II, the Army Graves Registration Command (AGRC) conducted extensive field investigations and was unable to locate the aircraft and the crew. In May 1949, AGRC concluded the crew members were unrecoverable. In 2006, a group of aviation researchers located the wreckage of a B-26G near Allmuthen, Belgium and notified the U.S. Army Mortuary Affairs Activity – Europe. In 2007, a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) team investigated the site and recommended it for excavation. In 2012 and 2013, JPAC teams excavated the crash site and recovered human remains and non-biological material evidence. To identify Cook’s remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including, mitochondrial DNA, which matched Cook’s maternal-line cousins. To identify Fevold’s remains scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, including, mitochondrial DNA, which matched Fevold’s maternal-line niece. To identify Honeyman’s remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools. [Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Oct. 13, 2014 ++]

VA Telehealth Update ► Programs Served 690,000+ in 2014

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Veterans who don't have a VA health care facility close to home. "We have to adapt to meet Veterans wherever their needs are," said VA Secretary Robert A. McDonald. "A brick-and-mortar facility is not the only option for health care. We are exploring how we can more efficiently and effectively deliver health care services to better serve our Veterans and improve their lives. Telehealth is one of those areas we have identified for growth."

Currently, there are more than 44 clinical specialties offered to Veterans through VA's telehealth programs. One program at the Miami VA schedules close to 90 clinic connections every week for dermatology, eye exams, the women Veterans program, podiatry, mental health and other clinical specialties. One tangible example of the success of VA's telehealth program is its burgeoning TeleAudiology program because of large population of Veterans living with hearing loss. The TeleAudiology program has grown from 1,016 Veterans in fiscal year 2011 to more than 10,589 in fiscal year 2014. For more information about VA's telehealth program, visit <http://www.telehealth.va.gov> .

[Source: VA News Release Oct. 10, 2014 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update ► 60% Reduction since March 2013

More than 1.3 million Veterans received decisions on their Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) disability compensation and pension claims in fiscal year (FY) 2014 – the highest number in VA's history, surpassing last year's record-breaking production by more than 150,000 claims. This second year of record-breaking production comes as VA continues to transform the way it provides benefits and services, to deliver faster and higher quality decisions, to Veterans, their families and survivors. At the end of the year, the disability claims backlog (defined as any disability claim pending longer than 125 days) was reduced by 60-percent from the peak backlog in March 2013 and is at its lowest number in nearly 4 years. Veterans waited, on average, 119 fewer days for a decision on their claim than Veterans did in FY 2013. VA is on target to hit its 2015 goal.

These improvements were not made at the expense of quality. The accuracy of VA's decisions continues to rise from an 83-percent accuracy level in 2011 to a 90-percent accuracy level today. When focusing specifically at the medical issue level, accuracy is at 96 percent. "I am so proud of our employees – more than half

of whom are Veterans themselves – who continue to work tirelessly to deliver the benefits our Veterans have earned through their service to our Nation,” said Under Secretary for Benefits Allison A. Hickey. “But we all also recognize there is still much more work to do to better serve Veterans.”

VA’s move to a web-based electronic claims processing system has enabled a quicker, more accurate and integrated benefits delivery. VA once processed 5,000 tons of paper annually – today it processes 93 percent of Veterans’ disability claims electronically. One in seven Veterans who submit a claim to change the status of a family member now does so online and more than half of those are paid in one to two days. VA’s progress would not have been possible without the support of its strong partners. Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) and State and County Veterans Service Officers embraced the Fully Developed Claim (FDC) program, which enables VA to make faster claim decisions when Veterans submit their claims with all available evidence and certify they have no more evidence to submit. Now, 37 percent of the claims received from VSOs are FDCs. In FY 2014, more than 4.5 million Veterans and survivors received more than \$72.7 billion in VA compensation and pension benefits. For more information on VA’s Transformation, benefits and programs visit: www.benefits.va.gov , www.ebenefits.va.gov and www.benefits.va.gov/fdc.

[Source: VA News Release Oct. 09, 2014 ++]

VA HUD-VASH Update ► More SSVF Grants Awarded | \$207M

In addition to the \$300 million in Supportive Services for Veteran Families (SSVF) program grant awards announced on August 11, 2014 serving 115,000 Veterans and their family members, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald announced 30 SEP the award of \$207 million in SSVF grants that will help an additional 70,000 homeless and at-risk Veterans and their families. The grants will be distributed to 82 nonprofit agencies and include “surge” funding for 56 high need communities. During the brief history of this program, VA has helped tens of thousands of Veterans exit homelessness and prevented just as many from becoming homeless. The “surge” funding will enable VA to strategically target resources to high need communities where there are significant numbers of Veterans who are homeless or at-risk of homelessness.

Under the SSVF program, the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) is awarding grants to private nonprofit organizations and consumer cooperatives that provide services to very low-income Veteran families living in – or transitioning to – permanent housing. Those community organizations provide a range of services that promote housing stability among eligible very low income Veteran families (those making less than 50 percent of the area median income). The grants announced today will fund the fourth year of the SSVF program. “The Department of Veterans Affairs is committed to using evidence based approaches such as SSVF to prevent homelessness and produce successful outcomes for Veterans and their families,” McDonald said. “This is a program that works, because it allows VA staff and local homeless service providers to work together to address the unique challenges that make it difficult for some Veterans and their families to remain stably housed.”

Under the terms of the SSVF grants, homeless providers offer Veterans and their family members outreach, case management, assistance in obtaining VA benefits and assistance in receiving other public benefits. Community-based groups can offer temporary financial assistance on behalf of Veterans for rent payments, utility payments, security deposits and moving costs. In the first 2 years of SSVF operations (through FY 2013), nearly 100,000 Veterans and their family members received direct assistance to exit homelessness or maintain permanent housing, including over 25,000 children. “With the addition of these crucial resources, communities across the country continue a historic drive to prevent and end homelessness among Veterans,” said Laura Green Zeilinger, Executive Director of the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness. “The SSVF program gives Veterans and their families the rapid assistance they need to remain in permanent housing or get back into permanent housing as quickly as possible.”

In 2009, President Obama announced the federal by the end of 2015. The SSVF grants are intended to help accomplish that goal. According to the 2014 Point-in-Time Estimates of Homelessness, homelessness among Veterans has declined 33 percent since 2010. Through the homeless Veterans initiative, VA committed more than \$1 billion in FY 2014 to strengthen programs that prevent and end homelessness among Veterans. VA provides a range of services to homeless Veterans, including health care, housing, job training, and education. More information about VA’s homeless programs is available at <http://www.va.gov/homeless>. Details about the Supportive Services for

Veteran Families program are online at <http://www.va.gov/homeless/ssvf.asp>.
[Source: VA News Release Sept. 30, 2014 ++]