



Federal Update for September 7 - 11, 2015



VFW Membership ► Auxiliary Opens to Male Spouses

The Ladies Auxiliary for the Veterans of Foreign Wars is now accepting men. Membership in the 101-year-old organization, founded to aid the venerable veterans service organization in its community outreach efforts, had been restricted to wives and female relatives of veterans, a policy that has sparked criticism in recent years from some who saw it as an anachronism from the days before large numbers women served in the armed forces. But VFW members voted at their annual convention in July to drop “Ladies” from the auxiliary name and open the organization to male relatives. The group already boasts about 465,000 members, and expects to grow significantly with the change.

“Gender equity is the real issue here,” said VFW National Commander John Biedrzycki Jr. “Right now, nearly 20 percent of those serving are women. We know their family and spouses want to be more involved, so our members overwhelmingly approved this move.” Several local and state chapters had already authorized “Men Auxiliaries” in recent years, and other traditional veterans organizations have founded “Sons of” and related subgroups in response to member requests. But women veterans have long complained that they are assumed to be spouses or daughters of male service members when they attend events with older members, a significant slight as they lobby for better support services from the government and outside groups. “The time has come for this change,” Biedrzycki said. “And this is going to mean more hands, more capacity for the work the auxiliary is already doing.”

Auxiliary program director Cara Day said the change in membership policy will not mean a corresponding update in the group’s goals and mission. “We’re still here to assist the VFW,” Day said. “We’re just making that mission more achievable by adding more people.” Applications for new members are handled by local chapters, so officials don’t know how many individuals have signed up in the first few days of the change. But Day said several VFW and Auxiliary staffers submitted their paperwork as soon as the change was formalized, and in recent days the office has seen a jump in inquiries about joining. Last year, auxiliary officials nationwide raised \$4.6 million in aid for veterans and active-duty charities and volunteered nearly 800,000 hours. The VFW counts about 1.4 million veterans as members. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | August 26, 2015 ++]

Vet Support | Government Update ► Public 2015

Perception Negative

A majority of Americans don't think the U.S. government or American businesses are doing enough to help veterans, and few believe that charities are doing enough to help cover those unmet needs, according to a survey released 18 AUG. Officials behind the research say the findings show both a lack of awareness of support services available to veterans and a lack of confidence that service members are being set up for success when they leave the ranks. "One of the challenges we face is that a lot of corporations and groups are doing great things to help veterans, but we typically are only talking to veterans about it," said Fred Wellman, CEO and founder of the communications and advocacy firm ScoutComms, which partnered on the poll. "We're not doing an effective job informing the American public."

The survey, conducted earlier this month by the research firm Ipsos, found that fewer than one in four had a favorable view of government efforts to support veterans. Conversely, 26 percent of respondents had a "highly unfavorable" view of the federal outreach. The biggest area for improvement respondents identified was providing health care services for veterans. The Veterans Affairs Department has battled numerous care delay scandals for the past 18 months, including records manipulation accusations that forced the resignation of former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki. Almost half of those questioned said they believe troops are not prepared to succeed in the civilian workforce when they leave the military, and only 13 percent said they think corporations are doing enough to support veterans.

That perception comes despite data from the Bureau of Labor Statistics that have shown veterans unemployment staying consistently below the national jobless rate, and despite a rush of corporate and federal programs in recent years to ease that transition. Wellman said many firms he works with are reluctant to advertise their outreach for fear of looking crass or exploitative, even though more awareness of those efforts often would lead to better understanding of veterans' needs and challenges. "There's a disconnect between those of us working with veterans and what the American public sees," Wellman said. Among charities and nonprofits, support for veterans is even less well known. The survey shows that 23 percent of respondents think those groups are providing critical help to veterans, 34 percent think they are not — and 43 percent say they don't know enough about those efforts to make a judgement.

The survey includes responses from roughly 1,000 adults online, with a margin of error of about 3.5 percent. Full results are available at the ScoutComms website. Officials from ScoutComms and Ipsos said they hope to conduct similar polls in coming months, to gauge public awareness on issues like mental health, women in combat, LGBT rights and veteran education benefits. [Source: MilitaryTimes | Leo Shane | August 19, 2015 ++]

Vet Service Dogs Update ► VA Access Rule Change

On 17 AUG the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) announced that it has revised its regulation regarding the presence of animals on VA property. The updated regulation will ensure VA practices remain consistent with applicable federal law. It will also assist individuals entering VA facilities in developing a clear and consistent understanding of the criteria governing facility access for service animals. "As I have traveled to VA facilities throughout the country, I have heard from many Veterans about what a vital role their service animals play in their lives," said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald. "The revised regulation will ensure Veterans and employees have clear guidance regarding the presence of service animals in our facilities. VA remains committed to ensuring America's Veterans have access to the health care benefits for which they are eligible."

Under the revised regulation, only dogs that are individually trained to perform work or tasks on behalf of an individual with a disability will be considered service animals. Other animals will not be permitted in VA facilities, unless expressly allowed as an exception under the regulation for activities such as animal-assisted therapy or for other reasons such as law enforcement purposes. The regulation further confirms that service animals may access VA property subject to the same terms that govern the admission of the public to VA property, and may be restricted from certain areas on VA properties to ensure that patient care, patient safety, and infection control standards are not compromised. In accordance with required practices, the revised regulation was published in the Federal Register in November 2014, to obtain feedback from Veterans, advocacy organizations and other stakeholders. Over the next thirty days, VA will provide training to frontline employees and ensure policies at all facilities are consistent with the new regulation. [Source: VA News Release | August 17, 2015 ++]

Korean War Veterans Memorial Update ► Wall of Remembrance

Sens. Ben Cardin (D-MD) and John Boozman (R-AR) want to expand the Korean War Veterans Memorial in Washington to include a wall of remembrance. The two senators have introduced legislation to authorize adding a wall which would include the names of U.S. soldiers who died during the war, and the number of troops who were wounded in action, taken as prisoners or are missing in action. The wall of remembrance would also include the number of members from the Republic of Korea Armed Forces, including a division that was stationed with U.S. forces, as well as troops from countries that were under the United Nations Command who were killed in action, wounded in action, are missing in action or were prisoners of war. Cardin, in a statement, said that while the Korean War Veterans Memorial is a "moving experience ... missing are the individual men and women who answered the call to serve this nation during this three-year war."

Currently the Korean War Veterans Memorial includes roughly 20 statues of U.S. troops, as well as a wall that includes a mural of U.S. service members. Under the proposal, no taxpayer funds could be used for construction of the remembrance wall. Rep. Sam Johnson (R-TX) has

introduced similar legislation in the House. The idea has the support of Korean War Veterans Memorial Foundation, which helps preserve and make any renovations to the memorial. The group suggested that the wall would help highlight U.S. service members who were killed in action, are missing in action or were held prisoner. "While that message is present in a subliminal sense as was intended by the Pool of Remembrance — sadly, that message is not conveyed to those who visit the Memorial," the foundation says on its website. [Source: The Hill | Jordain Carney | August 17, 2015 ++]

GI Bill Update ► Some Vets Oppose GI Bill Business Grants

Legislation that would allow GI Bill benefits to be used for small-business grants has drawn criticism from some veterans groups who believe it confuses the purpose of the program. A bill sponsored by Sen. Jerry Moran (KS) advanced last month from the Senate Small Business Committee. It would allow 250 veterans to use their GI Bill benefits to start small businesses instead of for education. The initial pilot program would last three years. NGAUS supports the bill, as does the American Legion and Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America. But Student Veterans of America and the Veterans of Foreign Wars oppose it, according to Military Times. Will Hubbard, the vice president of government affairs for SVA, told the publication, "The GI Bill is an education benefit. This is like using a VA home-loan program to pay for medical bills instead of a mortgage." Ryan Gallucci, the director of the VFW's National Veterans Service, said, "Our concern is that those serving in uniform may not be able to use [the GI Bill] in its current form if we keep chipping away at it."

Moran's bill has not been discussed by the entire Senate. And the House has not addressed it. But the critics worry, according to Military Times, that the idea encourages lawmakers to look at the GI Bill as a place to fund other programs. "We don't want people to see [the GI Bill] as a pot of money that can be used for all sorts of things," Hubbard said. [Source: NGAUS Washington Report | August 25, 2015 ++]

Human Cost of War ► 14 Year Compilation

The human toll – military and civilian casualties – of U.S. military operations over the past 14 years was 6,855 dead and 52,251 wounded, according to an August 2015 report compiled by the Congressional Research Service (CRS). Hannah Fisher, the author of the paper, compiled publicly available American casualty figures from a period beginning in October 7, 2001 to July 28, 2015. In her compilation, Fisher includes statistics from the two ongoing missions – Operation Freedom's Sentinel (OFS, Afghanistan) and Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR, Iraq and Syria) – as well as from past operations that include Operation New Dawn (OND, Iraq), Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF, Iraq), and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF, Afghanistan).

Operation Freedom's Sentinel, the operation to "continue training, advising, and assisting Afghan security forces," that started on January 1, 2015 has so far cost the lives of three Americans and wounded 33. Its predecessor, Operation Enduring Freedom (October 7, 2001 – December 28, 2014) resulted in 2,355 dead and 20,071 wounded in action. The majority of

American military and civilian casualties in the last decade occurred during Operation Iraqi Freedom, which began on March 19, 2003 and ended on August 31, 2010.

“A transitional force of U.S. troops remained in Iraq under Operation New Dawn (OND), which ended on December 15, 2011,” the report states, during which an additional 66 Americans died and 295 were wounded. According to the study, “On October 15, 2014, U.S. Central Command designated new military operations in Iraq and Syria against the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant as Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR)” – a campaign that so far has resulted in seven Americans killed and one serviceman wounded.

The grim statistical compilation also includes numbers on post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), traumatic brain injury (TBI), and amputations that occurred in the 2000-2015 time period. The report notes 177,461 cases of post-traumatic stress disorder between 2000 (no month is given for that year) and June 2015 among both deployed and not previously deployed personnel in all services. The total of traumatic brain injury incidents during the same time period is reported at of 327,299 with the majority (269,580) classified as “mild” injuries. In addition, 1,645 men and women had to endure major limb amputation between October 7, 2001 and June 1, 2015. “A major limb amputation includes the loss of one or more limbs, the loss of one or more partial limbs, or the loss of one or more full or partial hand or foot,” according to the Congressional Research Service.

As reported by Fisher, in March 2015, the American military is more or less a middle-class force (See: “Where Are America’s Warrior’s Coming From?” <http://thediplomat.com/2015/03/where-are-americaswarriors-coming-from>). And while the number of total casualties of America’s wars appears high, the Armed Forces will not face a manpower shortage anytime soon because of it. However, the United States could soon have less military personnel available for other reasons. The March report pointed out that the declining health of America’s youth may very well lead to a manpower shortage in the near future. For example, in 2013, according to the report, among the 17- to 24-year-old youth population in the country, there were only an estimated 17 percent “qualified military available” (QMA), i.e. young people not enrolled in college and qualified to enlist in the U.S. military without a waiver. [Source: The Diplomat | Franz-Stefan Gady | August 17. 2015 ++]

75th Ranger Regiment ► USA Premier Airborne Light Infantry Unit

The 75th Ranger Regiment is the US Army’s premier airborne light infantry unit. Specializing in raids and airfield seizures, the Regiment is one of very few units that has been constantly deployed since 9/11, with each Ranger battalion having rotated into a combat zone in the neighborhood of fifteen times each. After completing Basic Training, Advanced Individual Training, and Airborne School, potential Rangers are carefully evaluated in the Ranger Assessment and Selection Program, or RASP. RASP identifies which soldiers have the mental

fortitude and physical toughness required to serve as a member of this elite unit. Additionally, RASP provides training to these new recruits in critical Ranger tasks. Upon graduation of RASP, new Rangers will most likely be assigned to 1st, 2nd, or 3rd Ranger Battalion. Regimental Headquarters and the Regimental Support Battalion are also co-located at Ft. Benning with 3rd Battalion.

Today's Ranger Battalions were stood up on the orders of General Creighton Abrams in 1974. The U.S. Army had suffered a great deal and wasn't looking so great in the Post-Vietnam War years. 1st and 2nd Ranger Battalions were created to be a role model for the rest of the Army, a unit where soldiers would be held to extremely high standards, their commanding guidance derived from the Ranger Creed, penned by Command Sergeant Major Neil Gentry. While the Ranger Creed is a way of life in the Regiment, it also provides important guidance to a Ranger whenever there is a question or doubt about what the correct course of action may be. In these difficult times, Rangers will default to the Ranger Creed.

The Ranger Creed

Recognizing that I volunteered as a Ranger, fully knowing the hazards of my chosen profession, I will always endeavor to uphold the prestige, honor, and high esprit de corps of my Ranger Regiment.

Acknowledging the fact that a Ranger is a more elite soldier, who arrives at the cutting edge of battle by land, sea, or air, I accept the fact that as a Ranger, my country expects me to move further, faster, and fight harder than any other soldier.

Never shall I fail my comrades. I will always keep myself mentally alert, physically strong, and morally straight, and I will shoulder more than my share of the task, whatever it may be, one hundred percent and then some.

Gallantly will I show the world that I am a specially selected and well trained soldier. My courtesy to superior officers, neatness of dress, and care of equipment shall set the example for others to follow.

Energetically will I meet the enemies of my country. I shall defeat them on the field of battle, for I am better trained and will fight with all my might. Surrender is not a Ranger word. I will never leave a fallen comrade to fall into the hands of the enemy and under no circumstances will I ever embarrass my country.

Readily will I display the intestinal fortitude required to fight on to the Ranger objective and complete the mission, though I be the lone survivor.

The Rangers are arguably the oldest existing unit in our military. Rangers fought in a number of American conflicts before the signing of the Declaration of Independence, such as the French and Indian War and King Philip's War. In the Revolutionary War, Francis Marion organized and fought in a Ranger unit against the British. Marion was known as the swamp fox because his men would attack and quickly disappear into the swamps to evade the British military. Six Ranger Battalions fought in the Second World War. It was during D-Day at Omaha beach that the Rangers came upon their unit motto. During the assault, Colonel Norman Cota asked Major Max Schneider which unit he belonged to. When someone replied that they were 5th Ranger

Battalion, Cota replied, “Well, then goddammit, Rangers, lead the way!” Today all Rangers sound off with the unit motto, “Rangers Lead The Way” when saluting an Officer, to which, any Officer worth his salt responds with, “All The Way!”

Rangers also served in the Korean War with distinction, including 2nd Ranger Company, an all African-American company of Rangers. For the first time, Rangers were now Airborne qualified. In the Vietnam War, there were Long Range Reconnaissance Patrol (LRRP) teams that executed some of the hairiest missions of the war. Penetrating deep into the jungle in their distinctive tiger strip uniforms to conduct reconnaissance, ambushes, and more, these men were later reorganized into Ranger Companies. Despite what the press might have said, our Vietnam era Rangers served with distinction and have plenty to be proud of.

With Rangers reformed after Vietnam in 1974, their next deployment was the failed attempt to rescue American hostages in Iran in 1980, known as Desert One. 1st and 2nd Battalion conducted a combat jump into the island nation of Grenada in 1983, where they successfully captured the Point Salines airfield and rescued the American medical students being held on the True Blue facility. 3rd Ranger Battalion was formed shortly after in 1984. In 1989, the entire Regiment jumped into Panama as a part of Operation Just Cause. Alpha and Bravo Company of 1/75 played a role in Operation Desert Storm while Bravo Company of 3/75 participated in Operation Gothic Serpent, the infamous Black Hawk Down incident in Somalia in 1993.

Following the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th, 2001, 3/75 jumped into Objective Rhino in Afghanistan on October 19th. 3/75 Rangers also jumped into Iraq during the opening salvo of Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003, participating in the battle of Haditha dam. Today, Rangers deploy regularly in support of Operation Enduring Freedom while Operation Iraqi Freedom has only recently been scaled back, with Rangers having conducted untold thousands of combat operations in both Afghanistan and Iraq. Meanwhile, one Ranger Battalion always remains on standby while home in the United States, prepared to be recalled for rapid deployment at a moment’s notice. [Source: Military.com | Amy Bushatz | Aug 20, 2015 ++]

F-35 Joint Strike Fighter ► Most Expensive Weapons System Ever

Three years behind schedule and some \$200 billion over its original budget, the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter program is finally set to become operational this month. The fighter jet has been in development for nearly 15 years, weathered half a dozen years of testing and experienced myriad hardware malfunctions and software glitches along the way. Once it's declared ready for combat, it will be the most expensive weapons system in world history. The price tag for the F-35 program is nearly \$400 billion for 2,457 planes – almost twice the initial estimate. To maintain and operate the JSF program over the course of its lifetime, the Pentagon will invest nearly \$1 trillion, according to the Government Accountability Office (GAO). And it could climb

even higher, as the path to its launch has already been strewn with schedule delays and disappointing test results -- and more could be on the way.

The fifth-generation stealth fighter plane was originally conceived in 2001 to upgrade the U.S. military's aging tactical fleet to ensure that rivals couldn't challenge the United States in the air. "Air superiority is an essential tenet in our national defense strategy," said Rep. Jeff Miller, a Florida Republican whose district is home to the nation's primary F-35 training facility. "We have a whole host of aging air platforms, some with technology dating back to the '60s and '70s." He singled out Russia and China as the key reasons the U.S. has been trying to advance its air power while it retires old platforms. "Air superiority was not an issue in Iraq and Afghanistan," Miller noted. "But with the President's strategy to rebalance our forces back to the Pacific, and given China's territorial aggression in the South China Sea and Russia's aggression in Ukraine, having this air superiority proves to be a strategic deterrent against near-peer threats."

In place of the specialized roles performed by older aircraft, the single-seat F-35 can conduct air-to-air combat, air-to-ground strikes, intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance missions, according to Lockheed Martin, the JSF's primary contractor. And it has a host of other innovative features: The F-35 is uniquely designed to allow pilots to immediately share data with one another and their commanders; it can penetrate enemy territory without being detected by radar; and its specialized helmet display gives pilots a 360-degree view of their surroundings. It will be the most advanced aircraft in the sky. The F-35, also referred to as the Joint Strike Fighter, is touted as the most lethal and versatile aircraft of the modern era. It combines advanced stealth capabilities, radar-jamming abilities, supersonic speed, extreme agility and state-of-the-art sensor fusion technology. But after all that time and money, supporters are no closer to quelling the detractors who blast the F-35 as a waste.

The military this month is expected to declare the Marine Corps' version of the F-35 "ready for combat," meaning it is developed enough and has past the proper tests to be flown on combat missions. While the Marines don't expect to actually deploy the plane for another year, the declaration is a major milestone for the program in that it technically is ready for deployment. "The F-35 will deliver revolutionary capability to the U.S. and its allies for decades to come," said Michael Rein, a spokesman for Lockheed Martin. [Source: CNN | Zachary Cohen | July 16, 2015++]

PTSD Update ► Poor Sleep Impact

Poor sleep may impact treatment and recovery in veterans with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI). A review of extensive research on sleep in TBI and PTSD has found that sleep-focused interventions can improve treatment outcomes in veterans. Led by researchers at Boston University School of Medicine (BUSM) and VA Boston Healthcare System, the review article currently appears online in the journal of Clinical Psychology Review. Sleep difficulty is a primary symptom of both PTSD and TBI and has been found to affect the

severity of both conditions. TBI patients can suffer from permanent sleep problems regardless of the severity of their initial injury. Approximately 40 to 65 percent of individuals have insomnia after mild TBI, while patients with sleep difficulties are at a higher risk of developing PTSD.

Despite recent attention, sleep has been understudied in the veteran population. The review found that poor sleep often persists in veterans after resolution of their PTSD and mild TBI symptoms, but few treatments and rehabilitation protocols target sleep specifically. "In these veterans, sleep disturbances continue to adversely impact daily functioning and quality of life." PTSD, TBI, and sleep problems significantly affect functional status and quality of life in veterans returning from combat," explains lead author Yelena Bogdanova, PhD, assistant professor of psychiatry at BUSM add VA title. According to the researchers sleep is critical for restorative processes and evaluation of sleep problems should be integral to the clinical management of PTSD and TBI. "Understanding sleep problems and their role in the development and maintenance of PTSD and TBI symptoms may lead to improvement in overall treatment outcomes," added Bogdanova. "Future research efforts," she proposes, "should target the development of sleep-focused interventions." [Source: Boston University Medical Center | Press Release | August 21, 2014 ++]

TRICARE Prime Update ► Enrollment Fee Increase 1 Oct

Beginning Oct 1, TRICARE Prime enrollment fees will be \$565 for a family and \$282 for a single person. The increases will affect military families and retirees under age 65. Increases to TRICARE enrollment fees are based on the annual cost of living adjustment for retired military pay. Surviving family members of sponsors who died on active duty, and medically retired servicemembers and their family members, are exempt from the fee increases.

Since 2011, beneficiaries have seen TRICARE Prime enrollment fees increase by 23 percent, double the rate of inflation over the same period. Pharmacy copays vary by class, but over the same time span, beneficiaries have seen a 60 percent increase in medication costs. After freezing annual TRICARE fees for 13 consecutive years, defense planners tried for several years to play catch up by proposing rate increases up to 300 and 400 percent over a five year period. MOAA argued that such a dramatic spike in fees could financially devastate retired military families. Congress indexed TRICARE Prime enrollment fees to COLA versus health care inflation in the FY12 defense bill. In the FY14 defense bill, Congress tied pharmacy fee increases to COLA as well.

However, when it comes to pharmacy fees, Congress hasn't been able to follow its own law. In addition to last year's disproportionate pharmacy fee increase above inflation, Congress is now considering increasing pharmacy fees by 66 to 75 percent over the next decade. "Beneficiaries are paying enough," said Capt. Kathy Beasley, USN (Ret), MOAA's Deputy Director for Government Relations. "Congress needs to look at other ways to control health care costs before trying to pass the buck to military families." [Source: MOAA Leg Up | August 28, 2015 ++]

Tinnitus Update ► Army Testing Hearing Loss Drug | D-Methione

Soldiers at Army shooting ranges every few seconds experience piercing noise from M16 rifles for hours on end. With sunrise still an hour away, shell casings litter the ground. The M16 is one of the U.S. Army's quieter weapons, but that isn't saying much. For the shooter, shots from the rifle, even if muffled by Army issue earplugs, register above the noise level hearing experts consider safe. Over 11 days at the range as the soldiers train to become drill sergeants, each will fire an M16 at least 500 times. The Army is worried about hearing loss and is doing a clinical trial to tackle an issue that is both costly and garnering greater awareness in the military: hearing damage. Such damage traces not just to explosive sounds such as an M16 shot—a momentary 155 decibels, far louder than a jackhammer—but also to constant exposure to lesser noise such as that of engines. The trial is testing an experimental drug that might prevent noise-induced hearing loss, in a collaboration between an academic scientist and the military. If ultimately endorsed by federal regulators, the drug would be the first approved to prevent hearing loss. It could have benefits far beyond the military. Factory workers, miners, loggers, musicians, pilots and others who work in noisy industries face high rates of hearing damage. Globally, a billion teenagers are putting themselves at risk through the din of clubs, concerts and even some sports events, the World Health Organization estimates. The compound being tested, a liquid form of a micronutrient called d-methionine that is found in cheese and other foods, was developed into a drug by Kathleen C.M. Campbell, an audiologist and professor at Southern Illinois University School of Medicine. If d-methionine works as Dr. Campbell hopes, the orally-administered drug may help reduce or prevent noise-induced hearing loss and tinnitus (ringing in the ears) for soldiers, recreational shooters, factory workers, and others routinely exposed to loud noises.

D-methione is a micronutrient found in a fermented protein already found in the human diet in dairy food such as yogurt and cheese. Purified and concentrated into an easy-to-take liquid, it beats eating five pounds of cheese to get the same dosage of the micronutrient. Tinnitus and hearing loss are major service-connected disabilities that costs the government millions in compensation, and there have been prior attempts to find drugs to reverse or prevent the damage. A compound called n-acetylcysteine was previously tested using a group of Marine volunteers, but it had no discernible effect. If d-methione works, it could be taken in advance of training and drills where loud noises (such as gun shots or artillery fire) are expected, but Dr. Campbell hopes that it might have an effect after people have been exposed to damaging noises as well. Many recreational shooters suffer from tinnitus or hearing loss after repeated exposure to gunfire, even when using hearing protection. If d-methione works, it could be a welcome relief for millions of shooters... and millions of long-suffering spouses who've dealt with years of hearing "what?" [Source: WSJ | Amy Dockser Marcus | August 21, 2015 ++]

VA More Than Triples Volunteers in Facilities Nationwide through Summer of Service

WASHINGTON – The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) today announced that the 2015 Summer of Service initiative, which launched in May, has exceeded the goals set for community volunteers serving Veterans and the development of new partnerships to reach Veterans and their family members. VA’s Summer of Service mobilized approximately 300,000 citizens across the country to honor the nation’s sacred commitment to caring for Veterans.

“Community by community, state by state, VA and the country came together to serve those who have served this nation. I am incredibly proud of the hundreds of thousands of volunteers who came into VA facilities to stand alongside our hard-working employees to help America’s Veterans,” said Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert A. McDonald. “At VA, we know that there is more work to do to serve America’s heroes. We cannot do it alone. This summer, the American people recognized our vital role caring for those who have borne the battle and joined us in this sacred mission. Committed employees and volunteers, and strong partnerships, are the cornerstone of our efforts to transform this Department into one that Veterans and all citizens can be proud of.”

The Summer of Service built upon the Department’s existing partnerships to grow the number of individuals and organizations serving Veterans in their communities. VA facilities nationwide worked closely with their Congressional partners, Veterans Service Organizations, Mayors and local communities, private sector and non-profit organizations, and VA employees in unprecedented ways to support VA’s commitment to care for those who “have borne the battle” and their families.

Through VA’s outstanding volunteer program, the Department engaged approximately 300,000 volunteers around the country, far exceeding our goal of 100,000 volunteer connections. Through the work of Veterans Service Organizations and other community/civic groups, supplemental services and programs were made available for America’s Veterans.

In May, VA committed to growing our partnerships with new MOUs and expanding current agreements to reach more than 15,000 Veterans and family members. VA’s new, reenergized, and expanded partnerships, with NASCAR, the United States Tennis Association, PsychArmor and many others, reached 40,683 Veterans and their family members, nearly tripling our goal. As part of VA’s Summer of Service, the Department committed to holding VA Open Houses in VA facilities across the country to spur increased local engagement and welcome members of the community interested in supporting the needs of Veterans. Over the course of the summer, VA held more than 130 open houses across the system.

This year, VA has made progress on the many challenges we face in delivering care and benefits to Veterans and their families, completing more than 61.5 million appointments between July

1, 2014 and July 31, 2015 – an increase of 2.36 million more appointments than were completed during the same time period in 2013-2014. VA created over 2.7 million authorizations for Veterans to receive care in the private sector between August 16, 2014, and August 15, 2015, a 21-percent increase in authorizations when compared to the period ranging from August 2013 to August 2014. The backlog of disability claims (claims pending more than 125 days) is 93,674 as of September 7, an 85-percent reduction from its peak of 611,000 claims in March 2013 and the lowest ever in VA's history since 2007, when VA started measuring the backlog.

In an effort to improve the Veteran's customer service experience, VA has begun the most comprehensive re-organization in its history. The initiative, [called MyVA](#), has been guided by ideas and recommendations from Veterans, employees and stakeholders.

VA takes its commitment to care for the Nation's Veterans and their families very seriously, and encourages communities to stay engaged in serving Veterans:

- Look for VA at community events and engage our employees and partners.
- Call your local facility to find out what you can do to help.
- Check out VA on [Vantage Point](#), [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Instagram](#), and join us in caring for America's Veterans.
- To volunteer at a VA medical facility or national Cemetery, visit <http://www.volunteer.va.gov>.
- To join VA full-time, visit <http://mycareeratva.va.gov> or <http://www.usajobs.gov>