Federal Update for April 22 - 26, 2013

Walz Statement on Distinguished Warfare Medal

Washington, DC – Today, Rep. Tim Walz (D-MN) released the following statement after the Department of Defense announced earlier this week Secretary Hagel's decision to cancel the creation of the Distinguished Warfare Medal, which was to be given to drone aircraft pilots and be placed above combat medals such as the Purple Heart and Bronze Star. Instead of a new medal, the Department of Defense will create a new device to affix to existing medals to properly recognize drone operators, cyber warriors and others who are making a tremendous real-time impact supporting troops on the battlefield.

Walz, with over 40 bipartisan colleagues, sent Secretary Hagel a letter urging him to reconsider the placement of the Distinguished Warfare Medal in early March. "While we should certainly honor extraordinary service that directly impacts and supports combat operations on the ground, this honor should not be placed above such medals as the Purple heart and Bronze Star, which are earned on the battlefield. I commend Secretary Hagel for taking swift action to right this wrong," said Rep. Walz.

To read the bipartisan letter Walz sent Secretary Hagel, please see below.

March 4, 2013

The Honorable Chuck Hagel
Secretary of Defense
1000 Defense Pentagon
Washington, DC 20301-1000

Secretary Hagel,

As you step into your new role, you face new challenges. We would like to call your attention to a recent decision that has created substantial controversy.

We have recently learned that the Department of Defense has created the Distinguished Warfare Medal (DWM) to recognize extraordinary service that directly impacts combat operations. While we applaud the intent of the medal, we do not agree with placing the DWM above the Bronze Star and Purple Heart in the order of precedent.

The Purple Heart is awarded to service members who are wounded or killed in an action against an enemy of the United States. The Bronze Star may be awarded to a service member for valor or for meritorious service. It is a requirement that the service member be serving in an area designated by the Department as an imminent danger area in order to receive a Bronze Star. No such requirement exists for the DWM. The DWM is intended to recognize extraordinary service that directly impacts combat operations without regard to geographic location. We are supportive of recognizing and rewarding such extraordinary service but in the absence of the service member exposing him or herself to imminent mortal danger, we cannot support the DWM taking precedence above the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

The current order of precedence for the DWM is a disservice to Purple Heart recipients who have made the ultimate sacrifice for our Country or were wounded while serving in combat. The imminent danger area requirement of the Bronze Star historically means that a service member has been deployed overseas for a military operation involving conflict with an opposing armed force. Our service members who are deployed in support of such military operations are separated from their families for extended periods of time and face the possibility of death or grievous bodily harm. Without any such requirement for the DWM, we also feel it is a disservice to our service members and veterans who have, or who currently are, serving overseas in hostile and austere conditions. We respectfully request that you lower the precedence of the DWM to an appropriate level below the Bronze Star and Purple Heart.

We thank you for your consideration on this matter and look forward to an open and positive relationship moving forward.

Disabled Veterans Sports Clinic

An Iraq war veteran now serving as a senior Department of Veterans Affairs official opened the world's largest and longest-running disabled sports event 31 MAR, and he challenged almost 400 veterans to reach for new heights through teamwork and mental and physical toughness. "We all know the importance of sports and the incredible results that they can play in not only healing our minds and bodies, but our spirits as well," Tommy Sowers, VA assistant secretary for public and intergovernmental affairs, told participants at opening ceremonies for the 27th annual National Disabled Veterans Winter Sports Clinic. "Sports are more than just activity and competition," he said. "They improve us, they teach us, they challenge us and make us stronger -- and they do it in ways that we cannot imagine." Sowers urged the participants, including many that were wounded during operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom, to push their limits as they tackle events designed to help them discover new abilities. "It is you and the mountain," he said. "Good luck. Have a wonderful week -- with determination, with toughness, and with joy."

The clinic, co-sponsored by VA and the Disabled American Veterans, is open to U.S. military veterans with disabilities ranging from spinal cord injuries and orthopedic amputations to visual impairment and neurological conditions. During the six-day program, veterans learn adaptive Alpine and Nordic skiing and are introduced to rock climbing, scuba diving, trapshooting, snowmobiling, sled hockey and other sports and activities. But Larry Polzin, the DAV national commander, emphasized that the clinic is no vacation. "You came here with a mission. Your job is to learn something new [and] to take that and make the most of it," Polzin told the veterans. "When you leave here, it is going to be a totally different feeling for you." Those new discoveries will remain with the participants and help in their rehabilitation long after they return to their communities, Sower told American Forces Press Service. "These sorts of events are absolutely critical, not just for the one week that they are here, but for the 51 other weeks [of the year] as well," he said. "We see the benefits going forward -- not just for the veterans themselves, but also for their caregivers and families."

As the veterans cheer on and inspire each other during the winter sports clinic, Sowers said they're also setting an example for others. He noted, for example, that disabled athletes around the world benefit from adaptive equipment

pioneered at the winter sports clinic, and the techniques taught here. Sowers offered high praise to the DAV, the Snowmass Village and Aspen communities, and the hundreds of volunteers and sponsors who come together to make the clinic a success. "It is not an example, it is THE example of the right type of public-private-local partnership," he said. Each year registration for volunteers begins in June and participants can sign up beginning in August. [Source: APFS | Donna Miles | 1 Apr 2013 ++]

VA Claims Backlog Update

With the backlog of compensation claims at the Department of Veterans Affairs having ballooned in recent years, one would expect major veterans' service organizations to be among VA's harshest critics. If so, they would join a rising chorus. Recently network news programs have turned cameras and commentary on the mountain of 598,000 overdue claim decisions pending, suggesting bureaucratic neglect of returning ill and injured vets from Iraq and Afghanistan. Time magazine columnist Joe Klein even asked VA Secretary Eric Shinseki to resign. One veteran association, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America (IAVA), says the administration isn't doing near enough to end the backlog with its average wait, from filing to decision, now at 273 days and some veterans in the largest cities reportedly waiting more than 600 days. But most veteran service organizations aren't joining that chorus, for perhaps two major reasons.
One, they believe they understand better than the loudest critics why the backlog has grown so. Some contributing factors these veterans' groups actually fought for. Two, criticism of Shinseki and his team rings hollow to many veteran groups given the administration's support over the past four years for robust funding of VA, unprecedented cooperation with vet advocates, and the depth of its commitment to reform a 20th Century paper-driven claims process. That's why groups including Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion came to Shinseki's defense after Klein's call to resign. That's why Joseph Violante, legislative director of Disabled American Veterans, told the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee that VA is moving "down the right path" with many of its reform plans even while "processing over a million claims annually, which in my mind is something phenomenal." Violante described VA leadership as the most open he has seen in almost 30 years working veterans issues in Washington D.C. He had particular praise for Allison A. Hickey, under secretary for benefits. At the

same hearing, Bart Stichman, executive director of the National Veterans Legal Services Program, praised Shinseki.

The NVLSP successfully has sued VA, initially more than 20 years ago, to compensate Vietnam veterans for diseases presumed caused by wartime exposure to herbicides including Agent Orange. Stichman said Shinseki showed courage when, facing a rising claims backlog in 2009, he added three new diseases to VA's list of diseases compensable for Vietnam veterans due to Agent Orange. This required VA to re-adjudicate 150,000 claims previously denied and to process more than 100,000 fresh claims from Vietnam veterans, including for most anyone with heart disease who ever served in Vietnam. The Veterans Benefits Administration put more than 2300 experienced claims staff – 37 percent of its workforce – on the effort for two and a half years, paying out more than $4.5 billion in retroactive benefits. "While the decision was absolutely the right thing to do," Hickey said, "it did have an impact on our ability to keep up with news claims coming in and on aging claims already in the system."

One of Klein's criticisms is that VA should be giving priority to claims from returning Iraq and Afghanistan veterans versus the steady stream of "supplemental" claims from older generations seeking to upgrade ratings. One factor encouraging supplemental claims from military retirees is Congress' decision to lift the ban on concurrent receipt of both retired pay and VA disability compensation for retirees with ratings of 50 percent or higher. That threshold encourages some to file again and again for reconsideration given the financial stakes. Until a retiree is rated 50 percent disabled, their retired pay is offset dollar for dollar by VA disability compensation. VA claims data give some credence to Klein's argument because 52 percent of the current backlog is veterans who had an earlier claim decided in the past five years. But critics also should note only 20 percent of backlogged claims are from Iraq and Afghanistan vets. Vietnam veterans represent 37 percent, 1991 Gulf War veterans 23 percent and 20 percent are claims from World War II, Korean War and peacetime-era veterans. Hickey pointed to several developments that should allow VA to reach its two goals of eliminating the backlog by 2015 and raising the quality of claim decisions to an average accuracy rate of 98 percent, up from 86 percent in 2012. One is electronic claim processing through the Veterans Benefits Management System (VBMS), which will be operating at all 56 regional offices by December. Hickey said this will result in faster and more accurate claim decisions, in the same way

automation was used to end long waits for payments under the new Post-9/11 GI Bill. Also, military services now have teams collecting for the VA service and medical records, including from TRICARE civilian physicians, for former service members filing claims. And these teams are certifying to VA that files are complete and accurate. “That is a game changer,” Hickey said. VA continues a massive project of scanning into computers all paper claims so that adjudicators can use Google-like searches rather than physically flipping pages, to verify information. And VA also has established quality review teams at every regional office to monitor claims processing in real time to catch and correct errors before decisions become final.

All of this is encouraging the support of most veteran groups. But the political pressure on VA remains intense, and the generational rift among advocates likely won’t ease until the backlog is in full retreat. Joseph Thompson, who formerly held Hickey’s job as VA benefits chief, told senators that, for VA to meet its ambitious goals for 2015, every one of its many initiatives must succeed, which is an unlikely outcome. The quantity of claims, the unproven technology solutions and the vast number of other initiatives working, Thompson said, “is the heaviest lift I can imagine.” What VA needs most, Thompson said, “are more people…thousands more.” That is one initiative that Hickey said VA isn’t yet ready to embrace. [Source: Stars & Stripes | Tom Philpott | 4 Apr 2013 ++]

Vet Jobs Update

The Veteran Employment Services Office (VESO) oversees the VA for Vets Program which is a comprehensive career management program that enables Veterans to successfully join the federal civilian workforce. VESO offers a host of tools and resources through this program. It makes no difference if you signed up for a VA for Vets account yesterday, created a resume six months ago, or are currently employed and seeking other opportunities, it could benefit you to periodically check back to see what updates have been incorporated in the system to offer you the best round-the-clock service. Through VA for Vets, participants are offered

- Military Skills Translator - This state-of-the-art translator helps you transfer your military skills, experience, training and any collateral duties into civilian language that can be easily understood in the civilian workplace.

- Resume Builder - Build several resumes that market your skills and abilities and put you in a better position to compete for jobs.

- Career or Reintegration Coaches -These dedicated individuals, many of whom are Veterans themselves, are available to provide you with one-on-one assistance before, during, and after your military service.

With VESO's constant enhancement of tools and resources, vets are provided with the most current job opportunities, training and career development programs, and other guidance on Veteran recruitment, retention and reintegration. VA for Vets exists to serve you and support you in your career endeavors. Visit the website http://vaforvets.va.gov/Pages/default.aspx to explore the many options available for our Nation's Veterans. [Source: VA Secy Vet Group Liason Officer notice 1 Apr 2013 ++]

POW/MIA Update

"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 (73,000+), Korean War (7,900+), Cold War (126), Vietnam War (1,655), 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) 699-1420. 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

- The DPMO announced 5APR that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing in action from the Korean War, were recently identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Master Sgt. Earnest W. Grainger, 28, of Conway, S.C., will be buried April 13, in his hometown. In early July 1950, Grainger, and elements of the 21st Infantry Regiment (IR), 24th Infantry Division (ID), were deployed along the Kum River in western South Korea to maintain their positions long enough for the Republic of Korea (R.O.K) forces to retreat to a more defensible position in the south. From July 10-12, 1950, North Korean forces struck and overran the U.S. positions, inflicting heavy causalities on the 21st IR. During this attack, Grainger was reported missing near the town of Chochiwon. When no further information on Grainger was received by U.S. forces, and when he failed to return to U.S. control during the Prisoner of War exchanges with the Chinese and North Korean forces during the Armistice, a U.S. military review board re-examined his status, and in 1956, concluded that Grainger was presumed dead and his remains non-recoverable. In June 2012, personnel from the R.O.K Ministry of National Defense Agency for KIA Recovery and Identification (MAKRI) were canvassing South Korea towns and villages to find information regarding unaccounted-for R.O.K soldiers from the Korean War, when the team located human remains near the town of Chochiwon. Grainger's remains were among those found and transferred into U.S. custody. To identify the remains, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence, and forensic identification tools such as dental comparison which matched Grainger's records. They also used mitochondrial DNA - which matched Grainger's sister and nephew.
- The DPMO announced 10 APR that that a U.S. serviceman, who was unaccounted-for from the Korean War, has been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Lt. Col. Don C. Faith, Jr., 35, of Washington, Ind., will be buried April 17, in Arlington National Cemetery near Washington, D.C. Faith was a veteran of World War II and went on to serve in the Korean War. In late 1950, Faith's 1st Battalion, 32nd Infantry Regiment, which was attached to the 31st

Regimental Combat Team (RCT), was advancing along the eastern side of the Chosin Reservoir, in North Korea. From Nov. 27 to Dec. 1, 1950, the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces (CPVF) encircled and attempted to overrun the U.S. position. During this series of attacks, Faith's commander went missing, and Faith assumed command of the 31st RCT. As the battle continued, the 31st RCT, which came to be known as "Task Force Faith", was forced to withdraw south along Route 5 to a more defensible position. During the withdrawal, Faith continuously rallied his troops, and personally led an assault on a CPVF position. Records compiled after the battle of the Chosin Reservoir, to include eyewitness reports from survivors of the battle, indicated that Faith was seriously injured by shrapnel on Dec. 1, 1950, and subsequently died from those injuries on Dec. 2, 1950. His body was not recovered by U.S. forces at that time. Faith was posthumously awarded the Medal of Honor – the United States' highest military honor – for personal acts of exceptional valor during the battle. In 2004, a joint U.S. and Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (D.P.R.K) team surveyed the area where Faith was last seen. His remains were located and returned to the U.S. for identification. To identify Faith's remains, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence, compiled by DPMO and JPAC researchers, and forensic identification tools, such as dental comparison. They also used mitochondrial DNA – which matched Faith's brother.

World War II

- The DPMO announced 4 APR that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing in action from World War II, have been identified and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Staff Sgt. Ray E. Thompson, of Portland, Ore., will be buried on April 10, in Pendleton, Ore. On May 7, 1944, Thompson was a member of the crew of a B-24D Liberator that departed Nadzab, New Guinea on a bombing mission. Due to mechanical troubles, the B-24D was delayed in departing the airbase and was unable to join the formation after takeoff. Neither the aircraft nor the nine other crewmen aboard the plane were seen after takeoff. In 1946, the War Department declared all ten men to be presumed dead. In 1973, a Papua New Guinea Forest Department official reported a wartime aircraft in the mountains northeast of the city of Lae. In October 1973, a team of

Royal Australian Air Force (RAAF) responded to the report and visited the site, where they found aircraft wreckage that corresponded to that of a B-24D. At that time the RAAF recovered possible human remains, which were transferred to the U.S. Army Mortuary in Tachikawa, Japan; however, giving the limited technology at the time, no human remains were individually identified. In 1974, the remains were buried as a group at Arlington National Cemetery. In April 2008, a Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) team was sent to investigate and survey the crash site. The team recovered aircraft wreckage, including a radio call sign data plate, that matched the aircraft from a B-24D and additional remains. To identify the remains, scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools such as dental comparisons and mitochondrial DNA, which matched Thompson's cousins. [Source: http: //www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases Apr 2013 ++]

Sequestration Update

More than a dozen Air Force fighter squadrons were grounded 9 APR at U.S. bases around the world, including some in Europe and the Pacific, as the cash-strapped service confronts the effects of steep defense budget cuts brought on by sequestration. About one-third of active-duty Combat Air Force warplanes were to be grounded in connection with the elimination of about 45,000 flying hours by 1 OCT, according to a news release from Air Combat Command. The Air Force's budget for flying hours was reduced by $591 million for the remainder of fiscal 2013, which makes it impossible to keep all squadrons ready for combat, Defense News reported. "We must implement a tiered readiness concept where only the units preparing to deploy in support of major operations like Afghanistan are fully mission capable," Gen. Mike Hostage, commander of Air Combat Command, said, according to the release. "Units will stand down on a rotating basis so our limited resources can be focused on fulfilling critical missions." "The current situation means we're accepting the risk that combat airpower may not be ready to respond immediately to new contingencies as they occur," Hostage said. Additionally, the U.S. Navy has canceled the remainder of the elite Blue Angels demonstration team's 2013 season. The Blue Angels have performed at air shows around the world for more than 60 years. A spokesman for the Navy said team members would be allowed to fly minimal hours to maintain flight proficiency in

the F/A-18 fighter jets, but the six-jet squadron would discontinue group practices for the remainder of the season. Senior Air Force officials had earlier made clear that the across-the-board defense cuts, known as sequestration, would quickly eat away at the service's readiness. "Some of the aircraft that we have that aren't tied to one of the standing missions right now, they will begin to go into a much reduced fly or grounded rate, possibly as early as the middle of April," Gen. Philip Breedlove, commander of U.S. Air Forces in Europe-Air Forces in Africa, said in an interview with Stars and Stripes in March.

The command's fighter fleet, spread among seven of 11 flying squadrons in Europe, will be the first to slow down operations, Breedlove said. The exception would be combat aircraft preparing to go to Afghanistan, those engaged in standing missions, or postured to quickly respond to hot spots in Africa, particularly North Africa, where USAFE-AFAFRICA is still supporting operations in Mali. The same goes for tanker aircraft committed to North Africa, Breedlove said. "We will be able to keep them in the appropriate mission readiness for a much longer time," he said. "We'll be shortening the flying time of the remaining aircraft." Among the Air Force units grounded Tuesday were two F-15 fighter squadrons from the 48th Fighter Wing at RAF Lakenheath in the United Kingdom, F-16s from the 555th Fighter Squadron, according to Defense News. The 81st Fighter Squadron, which flies A-10s, is inactivating in May. [Source: Stars & Stripes | John Vandiver | 9 Apr 2013 ++]