



Federal Update for October 7 - 11, 2013



DoD Issues Shutdown Explanation

The Department of Defense (DoD) has issued guidance to the force for use during the government shutdown. The document gives basic guidance to commanders and directors on how to handle everything from personnel matters to contracts to medical concerns. Military personnel will report to work as normal. DoD can also maintain police, fire, and emergency medical protection since they are labeled as excepted and protected from stoppage. Non-excepted activities must generally stop. Non-excepted DoD civilians will be placed on emergency, no-notice, non-pay furloughs. Training and travel of military and civilian employees will be disrupted unless it is connected to an excepted activity.

VA Claim Error Rate Update

The nation's largest veterans' group is challenging the Veterans Affairs Department's record of accuracy in deciding benefits claims. VA has been telling lawmakers that its performance is improving. In fiscal 2011, VA says it made the correct decision on 83.3 percent of the claims it processed. In fiscal 2013, the accuracy rate climbed to 87.3 percent from Oct. 1 through mid-July and has jumped to more than 90 percent for the last three months. The 2.4 million member American Legion, the nation's largest veterans' group and a partner with VA in processing claims, says these accuracy claims are "inconsistent with our Regional Office Action Review visits nationwide, where errors are found routinely in over half of the cases reviewed," according a statement prepared by Vera Jones, director the Legion's veterans affairs and rehabilitation division. The higher error rate was discovered in a review of cases chosen by VA employees, not by the Legion, Jones said. In cases where the Legion represents a veteran before the Board of Veterans' Appeals, the Legion "successfully argues that VA has either erred or failed to properly develop claims in over 70 percent of claims," she said. Jones' statement, provided 12 SEP to the House Veterans' Affairs Committee's disability assistance panel, feeds a belief among veterans that a VA effort to speed the processing of claims could lead to more errors. Legion National

Commander Daniel Dellinger provided a statement 11 SEP to a joint meeting of the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs committees that also raised questions about the accuracy of claims. Some review teams have discovered errors in two-thirds of claims reviewed at regional offices, Dellinger said. Dellinger said part of the problem could be that the people processing claims are under immense pressure to work quickly. He suggested VA could alter how it measures performance by judging not just how many claims are done on time but "also completing them without errors." "By stressing accuracy as a measure of equal quality with speed of adjudication, VA can promote a culture among employees to get the job done right the first time, thus reducing the backlog," Dellinger said.

VA is processing claims faster than ever, completing more than 1 million this year. The backlog of claims, defined as those pending before VA for more than 125 days, is about 460,000, down 25 percent from its peak in March and its lowest level since March 2011, Thomas Murphy, VA's compensation service director, told the disability assistance panel. Murphy appeared before the panel to talk about an initiative to speed claims processing by encouraging veterans to submit so-called "fully developed claims," in which a veteran gathers most of the required information in order to reduce the burden on VA. Fully developed claims are completed, on average, in 123 days, "less than half the time it takes to make a decision on a traditional claim," he said. VA has a goal of 98 percent claims accuracy, which VA leaders said they intend to meet by the end of 2015 through a combination of better training of claims workers, changes in processing procedures and increased reliance on electronic claims. The end of 2015 also is when the backlog of claims will be eliminated, VA officials said. Responding to the Legion's testimony, VA spokeswoman Victoria Dillon said "accuracy on claims decisions is now over 90 percent with 96.7 percent accuracy for medical issues within the claim." "More than 100,000 veterans are receiving decisions on their claims each month," Dillon said. "VA has completed over a million claims in each of the last three years, historical levels never before reached." [Source: AL Leg Up | Rick Maze article | 16 Jul 2013 ++]

PTSD Update

What if a single needle prick cured post-traumatic stress? Or an ancient remedy stopped suicidal thoughts? Or virtual reality replaced traditional therapy? What may seem like far-fetched ideas now could become viable treatment options not

too far into the future. These are just a few of the cutting edge approaches military researchers are exploring to better treat post-traumatic stress and suicidal ideation that Robert McLay, research director for the Naval Medical Center, San Diego, shared during the 2013 Warrior Resilience Conference. The virtual conference was held in August. “It sounds like fantasy,” McLay said. “But this stuff looks really promising.” However, he cautions that current evidence-based treatments such as cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure therapy and selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors should be tried first. “We know these current treatments really work, but we also know there are service members out there who are not helped by them,” he said. “We need to look at new technology and options. We need to give these service members a helping hand.” Here are a few of the latest research endeavors happening at the Naval Medical Center, San Diego:

- **Stellate ganglion block.** This procedure involves injecting a local anesthetic into the stellate ganglion, which is a ball of nerves in the neck where the “flight or fight” signals from the brain go out to the body. Stellate ganglion block has been used for a long time to ease pain, but now researchers are learning that it also seems to reduce post-traumatic stress. In a pilot study by the center, patients experienced significant drops in post-traumatic symptoms, however, effects faded with time. Research on dosage amounts continues.
- **Transcranial magnetic stimulation.** Brain scans show changes in brains with PTSD. The brain is a neurochemical circuit and post-traumatic stress disturbs this circuit, resulting in changes based on the electrical charge of the brain. Transcranial magnetic stimulation is a new technology that can change the brain’s charge. It already has been approved for use in treating depression. Early studies by the center showed a significant drop in post-traumatic stress symptoms in half of the patients in the study. The improvements gained from the noninvasive method wear off, but they are not completely reversed. Research into this technology continues.
- **Attention retraining.** This computer-based method focuses on how patients look at and respond to different stimuli. The goal is to train patients not to focus on anxiety-inducing or negative thoughts, events or situations. This method is used to treat other anxiety conditions and may be effective for PTSD. The center showed in a recent study that although

patients improved with attention retraining, they often did not continue the treatment as directed, and the gains were lost.

- **Virtual reality assisted exposure therapy.** This intervention builds upon exposure therapy, which is considered currently to be the most effective treatment for PTSD. This therapy creates a realistic, anxiety-provoking simulation that teaches patients to overcome their fears by facing them and talking about them. It aims to make exposure therapy more engaging and effective by using virtual reality as an alternative to traditional methods. Clinical trials at the Virtual Reality Medical Center in San Diego showed that 50 to 75 percent of patients got better and stayed better with this therapy.
- **Caring letters project.** This suicide prevention program sends brief, caring emails and reminders of available treatments to service members following psychiatric hospitalization. Previous studies suggest that repeated, caring communication helps reduce suicide in high-risk patients. The center is conducting a two-year, multisite study of 4,730 patients to study the effect the caring letters project has on suicide rates.
- **Ketamine.** This ancient remedy has been used in developing countries as an anesthetic for years. It also has been touted as a miraculous, short-term antidepressant. The center's researchers have shown that ketamine may be able to help people who are at their very lowest feel better, resulting in reduced suicide and improved long-term outcomes. They studied the use of ketamine with patients with suicide ideation in emergency rooms. Research results so far have shown that most patients who received ketamine felt better almost immediately and that these improvements lasted at least two weeks. These patients experienced reduced feelings of hopelessness, depression and suicidality. The center is conducting more ketamine clinical trials.

Time will tell which of these studies will prevail and lead to successful treatments that can be used at the home front and at the frontline. Regardless, these latest advances in technology and research show more innovative, life-saving treatments are around the corner. "We have shown that we can do something," McLay said. "There is hope." [Source: Health.mil | Dana Crudo | 16 Sep 2013 ++]

WWI 100th Anniversary

World War I started in July 1914 so the 100th Anniversary of “the War to end all wars” is fast approaching. In Europe many countries are creating commemorations and memorials. The French have recently opened a National World War I Museum. In Great Britain there are many projects and debates about the projects. Last week the Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) refused an application to give 92,000 pounds to fund a project to plant poppies across Great Britain. The project originated from a local branch in Greenhithe, Kent of the Royal British Legion but was endorsed by the Prime Minister and Prince Charles. Since the refusal by the HLF to fund the project the National Headquarters of the Royal British Legion has taken over the project and a British chain B & Q has agreed to sell poppy seeds in all stores with proceeds going to the Legion. Charles Byrne, speaking for the Royal British Legion said: “The Royal British Legion is pleased to confirm we are rolling out the Centenary Poppy Campaign, across the UK, and in partnership with national retailer B&Q. ...The idea to distribute poppy seeds to commemorate the centenary of WWI originated in the Legion’s Greenhithe and Swanscombe Branch, who are working with us to establish this campaign on a national level.”

There is very little happening in the United States. Of course we have a little time. The United States did not enter the War until 1917 but there is no National World War I Memorial. There is however, a recently refurbished and beautiful DC World War Memorial honoring the 26,000 DC residents who served during World War I. [Source: TREA News for the Enlisted 23 Sep 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) 699-1169. 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

- The Department of Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office (DPMO) announced 19 SEP that the remains of Air Force pilots Maj. James E. Sizemore of Lawrenceville, Ill., and Maj. Howard V. Andre Jr., of Memphis, Tenn., have been identified and will be returned to their families for burial with full military honors on Sept. 23 at Arlington National Cemetery. On July 8, 1969, Sizemore and Andre were on a night armed reconnaissance mission when their A-26A Invader aircraft crashed in Xiangkhoang Province, Laos. Both men died in the crash but their remains were unaccounted for until April 2013. In 1993, a joint U.S./Lao People's Democratic Republic team investigated an aircraft crash site in Laos. They recovered aircraft wreckage from an A-26. The team was not able to conduct a complete excavation of the site at that time. Twice in 2010, joint U.S./Lao People's Democratic Republic teams conducted excavations of the crash site recovering human remains, aircraft wreckage, personal effects and military equipment associated with Sizemore and Andre. In the identification of the remains, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools, such as dental comparison – which matched Sizemore's records.

Korea

- The DPMO announced 18 SEP that the remains U.S. servicemen, missing in action from the Korean War, have been identified and are being returned to their families for burial with full military honors Army Pfc. Ronald C. Huffman, 18, of Lashmeet, W.V., will be buried Sept. 21, in Princeton, W.V. On Feb. 12, 1951, Huffman and the K Company, 3rd Battalion, 2nd Infantry Regiment fought Chinese forces in a battle near Saemal, South Korea. By June 1951 the Chinese reported that Huffman had been captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp near Changsong, North Korea. American POWs held with Huffman reported that he died in the camp in July 1951. Chinese

officials later confirmed Huffman died on July 22, 1951. In 1954 the United Nations and Communist Forces exchanged the remains of a POW from the Changsong Camp. Attempts to identify the remains in the 1950s were unsuccessful and the remains were buried at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific, known as “the Punchbowl.” In 2012, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) reassessed the possibility of identifying the remains using modern technology and the decision was made to exhume the remains for identification. To identify Huffman, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools including dental records and radiograph comparisons.

- The DPMO announced 18 SEP that the remains U.S. servicemen, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Sgt. Melvin E. Wolfe, 18, of San Diego, Calif., will be buried Sept. 23, in Boulder City, Nev. In late November 1950 Wolfe and members of the K Company, 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT) were deployed along the east side of the Chosin Reservoir in North Korea when they came under attack by Communist forces. The 31st RCT began a fighting withdrawal to a more defensible position near Hagaru-ri, south of the reservoir. Following the battle, Wolfe was reported missing in action on Dec. 12, 1950. In September 2004, a joint U.S./Democratic People’s Republic of Korea (D.P.R.K) team excavated a mass grave south of the Pungnyuri-gang inlet of the Chosin Reservoir. During this excavation operation the team recovered human remains from at least 32 individuals and material evidence such as uniform fragments worn by U.S. service members in the 1950s. In the identification of Wolfe, scientists from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory (AFDIL) used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools including mitochondrial DNA – which matched Wolfe’s nieces.
- The DPMO announced 23 SEP that the remains U.S. servicemen, missing from the Korean War, have been identified and will be returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army Cpl. Armando Alvarez, 20, of

El Paso, Texas, will be buried Sept. 27, in his hometown. In late 1950, Alvarez and elements of the 31st Regimental Combat Team (RCT), were 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. As the battle continued, the 31st RCT, known historically as Task Force Faith, began a fighting withdrawal to a more defensible position. Following the battle, Alvarez was reported missing on Dec. 2, 1950. In Sept. 2004 a joint U.S. and Democratic People's Republic of North Korea (D.P.R.K.) team surveyed and excavated a field south of the P'ungnyuri inlet of the Chosin Reservoir, near the area where Alvarez was last seen, recovering human remains. To identify Alvarez's 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 and mitochondrial DNA – which matched Alvarez's sister.

World War II

- The DPMO announced 25 SEP that the remains of a U.S. serviceman, missing from World War II, have been accounted for and are being returned to his family for burial with full military honors. Army 2nd Lt. Vernal J. Bird, 26, of Lindon, Utah, will be buried Sept. 28, in Springville, Utah. On March 12, 1944, Bird, a member of the 5th Air Force, 3rd Bombardment Group, 13th Bombardment Squadron, was the pilot of an A-20G Havoc aircraft on an attack mission over the island of New Guinea. Other airmen in the formation saw Bird's aircraft lagging behind, and reported the last known location of the aircraft was "about half way down the run over Boram Airstrip." Bird's aircraft did not return to base and attempts to locate the aircraft, both during and after the war, were unsuccessful. In 2001, a team from the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command (JPAC) located an aircraft crash site in a remote area of Papua New Guinea. A local resident gave the JPAC team human remains and four aircraft data plates that correlate to Bird's A-20G aircraft, which he claimed to have recovered from the wreckage. All of the evidence was taken to JPAC's laboratory in Hawaii, for analysis. In 2011, JPAC relocated the crash site, which contained significant amounts of aircraft wreckage. JPAC has not yet completed a full excavation of the site. To identify the remains,

scientists from JPAC and the Armed Forces DNA Identification Laboratory used circumstantial evidence and forensic identification tools including mitochondrial DNA, which matched Bird's sister.

[Source: http://www.dtic.mil/dpmo/news/news_releases/ Sep 2013 ++]

POW/MIA Update 2

On National POW/MIA Recognition Day the Pentagon's top leaders paid tribute 20 SEP to sacrifices made by U.S. prisoners of war and missing in action, including more than 80,000 fallen Americans whose remains haven't been recovered and the one American servicemember in captivity today. Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Martin Dempsey spoke at a Pentagon ceremony that included former POWs and family members of the missing, and promised that the Defense Department personnel who work to find and recover fallen troops would not stop. "Their efforts are fueled by human sweat and ignited by their unwavering determination," Dempsey said. "They keep our nation's promise to never leave a fallen comrade. Their efforts reach deep into the four corners of the globe, into foreign lands and far from home — from World War II battlefields across Europe to the islands of the Pacific, from the Pusan to the Yalu River, from Saigon to Hanoi, and those still missing from our most recent conflict."

Hagel said the U.S. government remains dedicated to bringing home the nation's only known POW, Sgt. Bowe Bergdahl, captured by Taliban in 2009. "Our hearts today are with the Bergdahl family," he said. "Using our military, intelligence, and diplomatic tools, the United States is continuing its efforts to secure Sgt. Bergdahl's safe release." Among others, Hagel singled out Army chaplain Father Emil Kapaun, who died as a POW in Korea in 1951. His fellow prisoners, who remembered Kapaun's self-sacrificing service to fellow prisoners, waged a decades long campaign to have the Catholic priest awarded the Medal of Honor. The effort bore fruit in April — a reminder of the nation's duty to fallen heroes, Hagel said. "For despite the passage of time, the memories of those missing in action still burn bright," Hagel said. "And their stories still inspire new generations of Americans." [Source: Stars & Stripes article 20 Sep 1013 ++]

POW/MIA Update 3

After leading a recent Senate hearing showing POW/MIA accounting efforts in disarray, U.S. Senator Claire McCaskill (D-MO) demanded answers 17 SEP concerning the Oak Ridge Institute for Science and Education (ORISE) fellowship program—a program that the Department of Defense heavily relies on to conduct those efforts. “It’s clear that POW and MIA accounting efforts are disorganized and lacking oversight,” said McCaskill, Chairman of the Subcommittee on Financial & Contracting Oversight and daughter of a World War II veteran. “This fellowship program is taking up significant resources and we need some better information on where this money is going and how it’s aiding recovery efforts. That’s one step toward fixing this, and giving the families of our POW and MIA troops confidence again in these efforts.” McCaskill is seeking information from both the U.S. Secretary of Energy, Ernest Moniz, and the President of Oak Ridge Associated Universities, Andy Page.

McCaskill’s letters seek detailed information on the funding of the program, its participants, as well as documents describing the relationship between the Oak Ridge and the Department of Defense. “I (have) learned that the Joint Prisoner of War/Missing in Action Accounting Command (JPAC)...relies heavily on ORISE fellows to accomplish its mission, and that a significant portion of what JPAC pays for Fellows goes toward overhead,” McCaskill’s letter to Energy Secretary Ernest Moniz reads. A recent report from the Government Accountability Office showed that multiple groups had overlapping authority and control over POW/MIA searches, and lacked a cohesive mission. The report also says that the various operations would be more efficient and transparent if they were centralized under a single command structure. McCaskill, a senior member of the Senate Armed Services Committee, recently demanded answers about an internal report that found that a Pentagon program aimed at finding, identifying, and returning the remains of American troops missing in action has been woefully mismanaged—and that senior officials may have suppressed the critical report. A copy of McCaskill’s 13 SEP letters to Energy Secretary Moniz and Oak Ridge Associated University’s President Andy Page are available online at <http://www.hsgac.senate.gov/subcommittees/fco/letters>. [Source: U.S. Senator Clare McCaskill News Release 17 Sep 2013 ++]

POW/MIA Update 4

On June 12, 1966, Marine Corps radioman Cpl. Gregory Harris and a contingent of South Vietnamese marines were ambushed and overrun in Quang Ngai province. When friendly forces retook the area the next day and recovered the dead, Harris was nowhere to be found. His family's nightmare was just beginning. They watched as Harris was first listed as missing, then declared dead. Months turned into decades of waiting in vain. They say dealing with the military's accounting agencies for the missing — known today as the Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command and Defense POW/Missing Personnel Office — has been nearly as painful as the loss itself. They claim the agencies have withheld information and kept important documents out of Harris' file. Credible leads weren't followed, they say, potential gravesites weren't excavated and important witnesses weren't interviewed. The family believes that Harris was prematurely declared dead and unrecoverable. Harris' family members aren't the only ones dissatisfied with the Defense Department's handling of the search for remains. Other families of the missing contacted by Stars and Stripes accused the agencies of incompetence, lying, withholding information, secrecy about recovered remains and DNA testing, placing foreign policy over the return of the missing and not responding to family members' questions. Many say there is a lack of accountability at the two agencies, a claim backed by recent reports. [Source: Star & Stripes | Matthew M. Burke | 23 Sep 2013 ++]

Following is a Summary of Veteran Related Legislation Introduced in the House and Senate Since the Last Bulletin was Published

- H.R.3087: Veterans Affairs Employee Accountability Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to prohibit the receipt of bonuses by Department of Veterans Affairs employees who violate Federal civil laws or regulations, and for other purposes.
- H.R.3098: Service Disabled Veteran Owned Small Business Relief Act. A bill to amend title 38, United States Code, to enhance the treatment of certain small business concerns for purposes of the Department of Veterans Affairs contracting goals and preferences.

- H.R.3152: Pay Our Veterans and Seniors First Act. A bill to prohibit Members of Congress, the President, the Vice President, and the head of any Executive department from receiving pay for any period in which there is a Government shutdown and to provide for payments to seniors, military and veterans during a Government shutdown.
- S.1547: Review VA Dialysis Pilot Program Report. A bill to require the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to review the dialysis pilot program implemented by the Department of Veterans Affairs and submit a report to Congress before expanding that program, and for other purposes.

[Source: <http://www.loc.gov> & <http://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills> 12 Sep 2013 ++]

Veteran Hearing/Mark-up Schedule

Following is the current schedule of recent and future Congressional hearings and markups pertaining to the veteran community. Congressional hearings are the principal formal method by which committees collect and analyze information in the early stages of legislative policymaking. Hearings usually include oral testimony from witnesses, and questioning of the witnesses by members of Congress. When a U.S. congressional committee meets to put a legislative bill into final form it is referred to as a mark-up. Veterans are encouraged to contact members of these committees prior to the event listed and provide input on what they want their legislator to do at the event.

- **October 1, 2013.** HVAC, Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs is hosting a Member level, Veterans' Benefits Appeals roundtable 10:00 – 12:00 P.M.; 334 Cannon
- **October 9, 2013.** Hearing Topic: Broadly, the hearing will build upon the claims hearing SVAC held in March, which examined progress of VA's claims transformation efforts. 2:00 P.M.; 418 Russell

[Source: Veterans Corner w/Michael Isam 29 Sep 2013 ++]