



# The Veterans Observer

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## Honoring the Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP) of World War II

By: D'Andrea Jacobs & Missina Schallus, Center for Minority Veterans; Center for Women Veterans

For Women's History Month, the Center for Minority Veterans (CMV) and Center for Women Veterans (CWV) join forces to commemorate women Veteran Congressional Gold Medal recipients: the trailblazing Women Airforce Service Pilots (WASP). These courageous women broke barriers and proved that women were just as capable as men at serving as skilled military pilots. Highlighting the WASP's incredible contributions sheds light on women's often overlooked achievements in military history.

During a time when women were prohibited from serving in combat roles, the WASP program provided a rare opportunity for women to fly military aircraft and support the war effort in non-combat roles. These women, who came from diverse backgrounds, exhibited an unwavering commitment to serve their country and to prove themselves as capable pilots; none of these women had ever flown an aircraft before their service.

Trailblazers like Nancy Harkness Love, who established the Women Auxiliary Ferrying Squadron (WAFS), and Jacqueline Cochran, who created the Women's Flying Training Detachment (WFTD), were essential to the WASP's formation. The

WASP program was formed in 1943 when the WAFS and WFTD programs merged, with over 25,000 women applying for the opportunity. Of those applicants, only 1,074 were accepted into the program, undergoing the same training as their male counterparts. Once they completed their training, the women were stationed at various bases across the country where they piloted military aircraft, from fighters to bombers to transport planes; they flew them all!

The significance of the

Throughout their service, the WASP faced discrimination and prejudice, yet they persistently demonstrated their exceptional skills and dedication as pilots, making a substantial impact that could not be denied.

Of the 1,074 WASPs, 38 lost their lives, and despite their sacrifices, the WASP program was disbanded in 1944 with little recognition. It took 33 years of advocacy and lobbying by the women who served as WASPs and their supporters to earn their Veteran status. In 1977, President Carter signed

in March of 2010 when the WASPs were awarded the Congressional Gold Medal. During the ceremony, Lt. Col. Nicole Malachowski, the first female pilot in the Air Force's Air Demonstration Squadron, said, "Today is the day when the WASPs will make history once again if you spend any time at all talking to these wonderful women, you'll notice how humble and gracious and selfless they all are. Their motives for wanting to fly airplanes all those years ago weren't for fame or glory or recognition. They had a passion to take their gifts and use them to help defend not only America but the entire free world from tyranny. And they let no one get in their way." Those are true women Veteran trailblazers who fought with passion, dedication, and unwavering strength during a time when they were not equals.

As we celebrate Women's History Month this year, let us honor the trailblazing women of the WASP and, like them, who, through their bravery and determination, left a permanent mark on the history of women in the military. Their legacy serves as an inspiration for all women. Thank you to the Women Airforce Service Pilots of World War II for their invaluable contributions and unwavering dedication to serving their country.

Happy Women's History Month.



Photograph courtesy of the VA.

WASP's contributions cannot be overstated. They took on a wide range of critical duties that were essential to the war effort. They ferried planes from factories to air bases, tested new aircraft, and towed targets for live ammunition practice. They even played a role in training male pilots and served as test pilots for the military.

a bill granting the WASPs their earned Veteran status, ensuring they received the respect and benefits they had been denied for far too long. These courageous women paved the way for future generations of female pilots and proved that women could excel in aviation just as well as men.

Another major victory was

## Pentagon must move faster to mitigate blast exposure in troops, senators say

By: Svetlana Shkolnikova, Stars and Stripes

Senators stated that the Pentagon must collect better data on troop exposure to blast overpressure and identify those most at risk for traumatic brain injury at a much faster pace to protect the health of service members.

Lawmakers on the Senate Armed Services Committee's personnel subpanel as well as experts on brain injury said the Pentagon has been too passive in addressing and preventing damage caused by shock waves that emanate from exploding weapons, known as overpressure.

The cumulative effect of repeated low-level blast exposure can cause headaches, seizures, hallucinations and increase risks of depression and suicide.

"I want to be a partner but a partner that urges you to move faster and deliver more for our service members as quickly as possible," Sen. Elizabeth Warren, D-Mass., told Pentagon officials during a hearing on the issue. "We need to do better for our troops, and we need to do it right now."

Frank Larkin, a former Navy SEAL who worked for a Pentagon organization focused on improvised explosive devices, said the health risks of blast exposure were a concern 15 years ago, when the U.S. was at war in Afghanistan and Iraq.

Those worries led to the creation of new armored vehicles to survive blasts but the service members inside them were not spared from the invisible pressure waves that rocked their bodies and brains, Larkin said.

"A lot of these folks came out of these vehicles, and they looked fairly normal, and it wasn't until time evolved that we started to see behavioral changes, cognitive dysfunction and so forth," he said.

Larkin said his Navy SEAL son, Ryan Larkin, became a different person after serving as a combat medic, sniper and explosives breacher in four combat tours in Iraq and Afghanistan. He stopped smiling, had trouble sleeping, complained of headaches and became convinced there was something wrong with his head.

Ryan Larkin was prescribed more than 40 medications for

his ailments but in 2017, at 29-years-old, he died by suicide. A postmortem examination showed he had microscopic-level brain injury that was uniquely related to blast exposure, his father said.

"My son died from his injuries suffered both in training for combat and combat operations," Larkin said. "He just didn't die right away."

Traumatic brain injury became known as the "signature wound" of the U.S. war on terror and continues to affect thousands of service members who train on weapons such as artillery and rocket launchers.

The Defense Department provided treatment for such injuries nearly 50,000 times during three months in 2023, according to Warren. More than 20,000 military personnel were diagnosed with traumatic brain injury in 2022, said Sen. Rick Scott, R-Fla.

"The more we learn, the more we come to understand that blast exposure is an ongoing threat to the health of individual service members and to the wellbeing, the morale and the readiness of our entire force," Warren said.

Lawmakers have for years urged the Pentagon to be more proactive in protecting troop brain health, ramping up pressure on officials last year after a New York Times investigation revealed the military's mitigation policies were having little to no effect on the ground.

Pentagon officials on Wednesday said they are taking steps to improve data collection and blast exposure records, which experts said is key for tracking exposure in high-risk occupational specialties and developing strategies to limit exposure in training environments.

The Defense Department only has blast exposure data for 500 service members, Warren said. Some of the highest rates of exposure are seen among training instructors and members of the artillery community.

Dr. Carlos Williams, director of the National Intrepid Center of Excellence at the Walter Reed National Military Medical Center,

(Continued on Page 4 See *Cognitive* )

### The American Legion Internet Observer

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**Still Serving America**

Do you have an ongoing program or activity that serves your community?

Do you have a friend or relative that goes above and beyond the call of duty to help others?

Send an e-mail to [chief1921@comcast.net](mailto:chief1921@comcast.net) and tell us what your story is or how you or this person is demonstrating that they are Still Serving America, but must be received by the 10th of the month, the month prior.

In submitting your information, please be sure to include your full name, address and telephone number. There's a good chance the information you send us will make it into The Internet Observer.

## A Message From Post 123 Commander Winter

### A little of this and a little of that

By: PDC Doug Winter, Commander Post 123

Looks like we made it into March. It has been a tough two months for us as we had to replace our virus software and the computer crashed but we are still back at it.

Our membership is a bit low, but I have always said and have every confidence that if your dues come due, you'll pay them in a timely fashion. The shortcut to paying your dues is Legion.org. That will take you directly to the Nation Headquarters data base as well as give you countless ideas of what is going on at the National level. At the State level everyone is working hard to get the Department on-line, hopefully by convention. Everyone is invited to attend the convention.

Department of Colorado  
June 20-22, 2024, Convention  
Hotel Reservations Information  
Skyute Casino/hotel  
970-366-7777

As you know we are the only virtual post in the Department and should anyone be interested in transferring to a regular post, just email me at PDCDougWinter@2TWR.com and I'll do my best to make it happen.

By now almost everyone is aware of the fractured nature of our Country. While we try to avoid talking about Religion and Politics, sometimes they overlap. As we approach our Presidential election this coming November, the American public has two key issues about which they are overly concerned.

1) Our borders and specifically our Southern border. It should be noted that our Northern border is not without a significant penetration, just not as horrific as our Southern border. We have accepted over 7.6 million illegals into our Country recently.

Overall, we could maybe assimilate into our society, but they have brought with them an enormous number of drugs. It is said that they have brought enough drugs into our Country to not only kill everyone in the USA but in the entire world TWICE over. If that weren't enough, News reports say that housing for Veterans in New York City has been terminated and that our Veterans have been asked to find other accommodations. Not only that but the news reports are that VA money is being spent on the illegals in NYC. This is only the tip of the iceberg all the while we are being told over and over again that our Southern border is "SECURE" (I am not sure Webster's Dictionary would agree).

2) Our economy is in a shambles. Prices are high, availability is limited. Many businesses are going out of business.

I report these facts as information or EDUCATION to you, our Veteran Community.

Keep your eyes open for the OBSERVER. Our new newsletter flash invites all Veterans to learn about Veteran issues and drills into the VA.

I have been asked why are we, Post 123, sponsoring the observer? The quick answers are the group behind the OBSERVER came to us because of our Veteran advocacy but that it takes a legally authorized entity to use the American Legion Logo etc. Hopefully as we grow, maybe, the VFW and other groups may want to add their input and use their logo's, etc. Let's all come together as a group, Veterans serving Veterans.

PDCDougWinter@2TWR.com  
Veterans Serving Veterans

## The American Legion Legislative Agenda for the 118th Congress, 2nd session

### Military Quality of Life

The U.S. military's greatest resources are servicemembers and their families. Without highly qualified and committed men and women, even the most sophisticated weaponry will not provide the deterrence necessary to defend our nation. Factors contributing to quality of life include proper compensation, appropriate housing, quality healthcare, reasonably priced commissaries, and access to childcare services. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation to expand access to affordable childcare, increase appropriations for military construction projects (including barracks and family housing), and ensuring timely access to mental healthcare.

*Military Housing Readiness Council Act (S. 2047)*

### Pay the Coast Guard

U.S. Coast Guard personnel carry out vital national security missions. Still, because the Coast Guard is under the Department of Homeland Security instead of DOD, its members are more likely to experience pay interruptions during prolonged government shutdowns. The common threat of shutdowns brings severe and unnecessary hardship on these men, women, and their families. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation that would guarantee that Coast Guard personnel are paid in case of a shutdown.

*Pay Our Coast Guard Parity Act (H.R. 2693)*

*(Continued on Page 7 See Access )*



*(Cognitive Continued from Page 2)*

said cognitive assessments will be performed on all new troops this year before they participate in training.

“One of the most important things we can do is baseline our members from the moment they come into the military,” he said. “And so that means before they start the military training, and that allows us to follow them over time.”

Lester Martinez-Lopez, the assistant secretary of defense for health affairs, said the Pentagon is looking into how often subsequent testing should be done. Special Operations Command

has determined its members should be tested every three years while the Pentagon is planning on every five years.

Martinez-Lopez said the Defense Department needed to sort through more “data and science” to determine if testing should be more frequent. Kathy Lee, director of the Pentagon’s warfighter brain health policy, said more research was also required before establishing safety thresholds for firing explosive weapons. Warren and other senators said the Pentagon needed to act now.

“We know enough to start moving in the right direction,” she said. “I urge you: better to make your best estimate and get started.”

## How human trafficking is hitting homeless Veterans

*By: Shawn Liu, Director of Communications, VHA Homeless Programs Office, VA News February 26, 2024*

The VA works to identify and support vulnerable Veterans. As a social worker at Battle Creek VA, Katie Papke noticed a growing number of homeless Veterans were victims of human trafficking. She knew of five in Grand Rapids, Michigan, alone.

It was the summer of 2020 and this problem was still flying under the radar. It seemed that Veterans, particularly homeless Veterans, were increasingly at risk of being exploited by human traffickers.

Papke took her concerns to the national social work program office and, from there, VA’s effort to prevent human trafficking was born.

On a recent bonus episode of the Ending Veteran Homelessness podcast, Papke joined Amy Ashcraft of VA’s National Human Trafficking Prevention and Education Committee to talk about these endeavors.

### A vulnerable population

The VA National Human Trafficking Prevention and Education Committee is working to counter misconceptions and preconceived notions around what human trafficking is, who is at risk and how to identify and support victims.

Often portrayed in the media as exclusively sex trafficking, human trafficking is forced labor of any kind, including commercial sex acts and other types of labor, obtained through coercion, force or fraud.

Papke describes it as a crime that’s hidden in plain sight. It happens to people from all walks of life in all areas of the United States and can be perpetrated by strangers, partners, family members, friends and even parents.

Traffickers seek out the most vulnerable and desperate among us. They will target homeless shelters, offering individuals a place to live and false promises in exchange for forced work and using a

person’s fear of returning to the street against them.

“Sometimes individuals in a housing crisis reach out to all types of people and resources and become desperate to find ways to either keep them housed or get them housed rapidly. At these pinnacle times, potential for human trafficking can occur,” Papke said.

### Reducing the risk

In 2020, VA assembled a team to investigate the issue and found that 36% of VA staff had encountered a Veteran who was a victim of human trafficking. After training, 38% of that staff was able to recognize a past missed opportunity to further assess if a Veteran was being trafficked.

It can be hard to spot human trafficking—particularly labor exploitation—especially if the victim doesn’t know it’s a crime.

But that can change with training and education. At an organization

as large as VA where we interact with millions of Veterans across the country, there are many opportunities for staff to spot red flags and provide help.

We’ve launched a two-year pilot program at six VA facilities to implement efforts to address trafficking and we’ll soon see what progress we’ve made.

Through our ongoing work to end Veteran homelessness, we can help Veterans find their way back to stability, reducing their risk of being targeted.

“VA has the resources to connect Veterans to services to avoid being trafficked,” said Ashcraft.

“Through widespread awareness and educational campaigns like this, VA staff can open their eyes to what might be happening in our own backyard and provide support to our Veteran victims and survivors.”

**Learn about VA programs** If you are a Veteran who is homeless or at risk for homelessness, call the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-4AID-VET (877-424-3838).

- If you are concerned that you or someone you know may



Ending Veteran Homelessness written on a wall

be a victim of human trafficking, contact the National Human Trafficking Hotline at 888-373-7888 or text HELP to 233733.

- Visit the VA Homeless Programs website to learn about housing initiatives and other programs for Veterans exiting homelessness.
- Check out the Ending Veteran Homelessness podcast

to learn more about what VA is doing about Veteran homelessness.

- Learn how to get involved with housing homeless Veterans.
- Subscribe to the Homeless Programs Office newsletter to receive monthly updates about programs and supportive services for Veterans experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

## VA National Cemetery Administration dedicates new headstones to honor Black soldiers, correcting 1917 injustice

*From VA News*

Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs' National Cemetery Administration (NCA) is hosting a memorial ceremony in San Antonio, Texas, at Fort Sam Houston National Cemetery righting a wrong of the past by dedicating new headstones for 17 World War I Black soldiers of the 3rd Battalion, 24th Infantry Regiment.

These soldiers were among those executed following the courts martial of 110 Black soldiers charged with murder and mutiny in the 1917 Houston Riots. Consistent with standard procedure of that time for soldiers who were sentenced to death in a court martial, their graves were marked with headstones that listed only their names and year of death – as opposed to full honors. The Army reviewed the cases of these Black soldiers again in 2023 and marked their trials unfair, saying that “these Soldiers were wrongly treated because of their race and were not given fair trials.” The Secretary of the Army set aside all convictions and directed the soldiers' records reflect honorable discharges.

Now, VA has provided these soldiers with new headstones that fully honor their service – including names, state, rank, unit, and date of death – and an updated interpretive sign sharing their story, educating the public, and providing closure for the next of kin.

“Today, we right the wrongs of the past and honor the service of these soldiers – who served our country with honor,” said VA Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Matthew Quinn. “We are proud to dedicate new engraved headstones that include these Army soldiers' ranks, regimental unit, and home states, demonstrating our full commitment to helping correct the injustice of that era.”

Honoring these soldiers is a part of VA's comprehensive work to deliver for all Veterans — regardless of their age, race, ethnicity, sex, gender identity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, or geographic location. As announced last week, using the Agency Equity Action Plan, VA will work urgently to improve outcomes and eliminate disparities in Veteran benefits and health care; increase access to VA services; enhance economic security for all Veterans, including historically underserved Veteran communities; listen to and learn from Veteran communities; and more.

VA operates 155 national cemeteries and 34 soldiers' lots and monument sites across the nation. More than five million Americans, including Veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA cemeteries. Learn more about VA's burial benefits and memorial services.

## American Legion turns 105 on March 15

*By: The American Legion*

The American Legion is turning 105 on Friday, March 15 – the day in 1919 when the first American Legion caucus, held by members of the American Expeditionary Force, convened in Paris.

Each year, Legion posts across the country hold events – public, private or both – to commemorate this anniversary. Posts are encouraged to upload recaps and photos of their birthday celebrations (and other community activities) to [legiontown.org](https://legiontown.org).

A 105th birthday speech has been drafted by the Legion's Media and Communications staff as a way for Legionnaires to emphasize what the Legion represents, both to themselves and to the community at large. They are not meant to be recited verbatim; members are encouraged to amend them to taste and audience. The speech can be downloaded [here](#).

As The American Legion prepares to celebrate its birthday, a perfect way to celebrate is to make Buddy Checks. The American Legion's Buddy Check program initially started for posts to

conduct them twice a year — the week of American Legion Birthday and Veterans Day. Since the program has demonstrated success, posts conduct them year-round.

Buddy Checks are an opportunity to ask your members and other veterans about their wellbeing and how the post can support them. To get started, check out the resources available to assist in performing Buddy Checks, or download our toolkit [here](#). And share your Buddy Check stories on [legiontown.org](https://legiontown.org).



**Department of Veterans Affairs  
Eastern Colorado Health Care System  
1700 N Wheeling St  
Aurora, Colorado 80243  
303-399-8020**

Departments	Scheduling Questions	Clinical Questions
Cardio-Thoracic	720-723-6392	720-857-2710
Ear, Nose and Throat (ENT)	720-857-5404	720-857-5571
Bariatrics	720-723-6363	720-723-4782
Urology	720-723-4775	720-857-5829
OBGYN	720-857-5701	720-857-5377
Vascular	720-723-6392	720-723-4780
Plastics	720-723-3271	720-857-4782
Breast	720-723-6363	720-857-4780
Orthopedics	720-723-6683	720-857-5580
Podiatry	720-857-5406	720-857-5577
Colorado Springs	719-227-4690	719-227-4432
Neurosurgery	720-723-6684	720-723-4782
General Surgery	720-723-6363	720-857-5816

**For other concerns: Dial 303-399-8020 then**

Press 1 for Pharmacy

Press 2 to make or change an appointment.

Press 3 to speak to a Nurse.

Press 4 for Eligibility and Registration

Press 5 for Billing Questions

Press 6 for Community Care and Mission Act information.

Press 7 for Veterans Crisis Line





*(Access Continued from Page 3)*

### **Access to healthcare for overseas military and families**

Military personnel stationed overseas in support of U.S. interests and our alliances provide a key role in deterring adversaries from a myriad of actions. However, even after the realignment of medical services in overseas and remote locations under the Defense Health Agency (DHA), major issues involving access to various types of healthcare continue. Additionally, the lack of access to certain types of care limits overseas assignments and contributes to military families being separated for extended periods of time.

#### ***Health Care Fairness for Military Families Act (H.R.1045)***

### **Improving the military TAP**

The American Legion urges Congress to direct the modernization of Transition Assistance Program (TAP) delivery using technology and performance data to ensure the DOD delivers successful program. The creation of a mobile application, providing servicemembers with an extensive toolkit of on-demand transition-related content would improve participation and increase the benefit of transition resources available. Delivering effective transition assistance will ensure a veteran's proper reintegration from active duty to civilian life and reduce negative experiences. Improved TAP instruction will support our servicemembers in finding education, employment, and entrepreneurship opportunities and send successful citizens back to our communities.

#### ***VET-TEC Authorization Act of 2023 (H.R. 1669)***

### **Protect the American Flag**

The American Legion urges Congress to approve an amendment to the U.S. Constitution that would allow Congress to prohibit the physical desecration of the U.S. flag. Additionally, The American Legion urges Congress to pass the Flag Code Modernization Act of 2021 to amend the U.S. Flag Code to codify common patriotic customs and practices as described in The American Legion Resolution No. 19: Flag Code Amendment.

#### ***Senate Joint Resolution 34***

### **Suicide Prevention & Mental Health**

Suicide remains a top issue in the veteran community. The suicide rate among veterans is nearly double that of civilian counterparts. It is imperative that we simultaneously destigmatize mental health assistance, while increasing access. The American Legion encourages Congress to robustly fund VA's suicide prevention outreach budget and peer support programs. We encourage all Americans to "Be the One" who is willing, ready, and able to have a that difficult conversations about suicide and other mental health issues.

#### ***PFC Joseph P. Dwyer Peer Support Program (H.R. 2768)***

#### ***VA Zero Suicide Demonstration Act (H.R. 1639)***

### **Alternative Treatments**

Data from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health (NSDUH) shows that in 2021, approximately 2.8 million veterans experienced an illicit drug or alcohol use disorder, with 92.4 percent not receiving treatment. More must be done to ensure

veterans have access to the effective treatments they desire. This includes expanding research and access into alternative treatments and emerging therapies.

#### ***TBI and PTSD Treatment Act (H.R. 105)***

### **VA Healthcare Modernization**

The biggest issue in the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Healthcare Modernization is the implementation of the new electronic health record modernization program (EHRM). VA has experienced difficulties as the EHRM rollout has progressed. Some issues identified were the differences in the training software compared to end-user software, along with inexperienced instructors providing the training to VA staff. VA made improvements on these identified issues. As the EHRM rollout is set to resume in 2024, The American Legion continues to call on Congress to provide oversight and to hold VA and other relevant parties accountable for the implementation and functioning of the EHR system.

#### ***The Department of Veterans Affairs Electronic Health Record Modernization Improvement Act (H.R. 592)***

### **PACT Act: Implementation & Oversight**

Since the implementation of Sergeant First Class Heath Robinson Honoring our Promise to Address Comprehensive Toxics (PACT) Act, VA has screened more than 5 million veterans for toxic exposure. The average time to complete a PACT Act-related claim is 157 days. It is imperative that VA fully leverage the resources made available in the PACT Act to assist in the continued modernization of Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA) information technology systems as well as the hiring of additional employees to ensure claims are adjudicated in a timely manner. The American Legion urges Congress to provide the necessary oversight and funding to ensure VA has the resources to properly implement this legislation.

### **Safeguard Veteran Benefits**

Veterans are facing a growing threat from exploitative entities aiming to capitalize on the benefits rightfully earned through military service. These predatory actors range from claims companies charging exorbitant fees to lawyers seeking sizable portions of VA disability benefit payments. The American Legion urges Congress to pass legislation to: restore criminal penalties for persons or companies that represent or charge veterans fees to file, prepare or prosecute initial VA claims without VA accreditation; and to oppose any legislation that would allow unaccredited parties to become legal representatives without completing the accreditation process. The American Legion's advocacy role remains focused on safeguarding the well-deserved benefits of those who have served.

#### ***Veterans Benefits Improvement Act (H.R. 1530)***

### **Concurrent Receipt**

There are currently 42,000 military retirees with combat-related injuries who are eligible for retirement pay from the Department of Defense (DOD) and compensation for service-connected disabilities from the VA. However, retired veterans with a disability rating below 50-percent have their VA compensation deducted

*(Continued on Page 8 See DoD)*

(DoD Continued from Page 7)

from their DOD retirement pay. The American Legion strongly supports ending this inequitable policy, where many military retirees must forfeit their retired pay to receive equal amounts of disability compensation.

### ***The Richard Star Act (H.R. 1282)***

#### **Guard & Reserve GI Bill Parity**

National Guard and Reserve servicemembers are being deprived of education benefits that active duty servicemembers enjoy, despite completing the same duties. According to current law, National Guard and Reserve servicemembers only accrue GI Bill entitlement when called to active duty under federal orders. When Guard and Reserve servicemembers are activated under state orders, they do not accrue eligibility for Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits

like their active-duty counterparts do. The American Legion believes that every day in uniform counts and urges Congress to recognize the service of Guard and Reserve servicemembers as eligible for the GI Bill.

#### **GI Bill for Honorable Service**

To receive most VA benefits, a veteran's character of discharge or service must be "under honorable conditions." However, GI Bill education assistance benefits have a requirement that servicemembers receive an "honorable discharge." If the character of service is "general under honorable conditions," this benefit remains out of reach for these veterans. The American Legion urges Congress to correct this statutory incongruity by amending U.S. Code to allow access to VA educational assistance to veterans with general under honorable conditions discharges.

## **Focusing on quality of life for military members**

By Henry Howard, *The American Legion*

**A** "large number of servicemembers and their family members" are on SNAP or other food assistance programs.

That was among the key takeaways from a presentation by Air Force veteran Patrick Flood, the senior national security policy adviser to Rep. Don Bacon. Flood discussed quality-of-life issues on military bases during the National Security Commission's meeting at The American Legion's annual Washington Conference on Feb. 26.

Flood illustrated how food insecurity plays a role in maintaining a strong national defense.

"If we lose that fight, if we lose that kitchen table conversation, where parents and guardians no longer recommend — or perhaps oppose — military service for our sons and daughters, this enterprise is in jeopardy," he warned. "And we are seeing evidence of that."

Flood, an American Legion member, said the House Armed Services Committee has been researching quality-of-life matters and expects to submit a report by the end of March. It's been roughly a year in the making.

The committee has also been looking at other issues such as pay and compensation, housing, health-care access, child care and spousal support. "These problems are going to require more work than just the Department of Defense," he said. "It's going to require a national commitment."

The American Legion is already playing a major role in the quality of life issue.

In 2022, The American Legion created its Base Assessment and

Servicemember Experience (BASE) program to address quality-of-life matters that affect servicemembers and their families. It is modeled after the Legion's System Worth Saving visits to VA health-care facilities.

The first BASE visit was conducted at Marine Corps Air Station Yuma (Ariz.). The Yuma report, now in its final stage before release, is going through a process to take into account the interviews conducted and observations during the visit, as well as various military services, policies and procedures.

"I owe a tremendous amount of debt and gratitude to The American Legion," said Flood, an alum of American Legion Buckeye Boys State. "The Legion remains in this very vast, large nation of ours, the most important and also the most compelling voice in issues facing the nation. The work you do is so very important."

Commission members also learned about border security from a first-person perspective from retired Marine Chief Warrant Officer Gerard Brinkmann, a member of American Legion Post 24 in Tombstone, Ariz. Brinkmann, who also is a member of the National Security Council

and department American Legion Riders chairman, has worked for the U.S. Border Patrol since 2014.

Brinkmann discussed the various ebbs and flows he has seen in illegal immigration, noting he has arrested the same person three times in one shift

"The rhetoric is what drives illegal immigration," he said. "If you build it, they will come. If you make it seem like they are welcome, they will come. If you start prosecuting, they start not coming in. We need consequences."



Photo by Hilary Ott /The American Legion



The solution is simple, Brinkmann said.

“We need to start enforcing the laws on the books and look at real border reform,” he recommended.

Col. Matthew Coates, the vice chairman of the National Guard Counter Drug Program, outlined how the drug epidemic has changed. He discussed the rise in fentanyl, which is 50 times stronger than heroin.

Coates explained why cartels have pivoted toward the drug, saying it only takes \$800 to produce 415,000 fentanyl pills, which have a street value of about \$1.2 million. It’s also easy to transport. Fentanyl representing the size of a sugar packet equates to about 1,700 doses.

More than 100,000 people have died annually due to fentanyl use.

The infusion of fentanyl into the United States can be linked back to China and Mexico, Coates explained. “There is complicity with the Chinese entities.”

Coates discussed how his unit operates. “Our specific mission is to support the detention, interdiction, disruption and curtailment of drug trafficking and activities,” he said, noting they have trained more than 700 agents at five different centers across the U.S.

Coates, a member of American Legion Post 250 in Middleburg, Fla., said his office is seeking assistance and support from Legion Family members.

“You are our tie-in to the community,” he said. “Part of our prevention line of effort is to get the message out and that’s where you can help.”

## From around the state

### Colorado Sons of the American Legion recognizes 12-year-old member

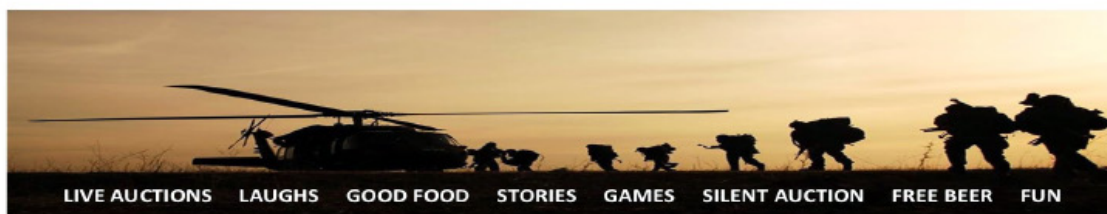
*Submitted by: Mark Kilstrom, Detachment Adjutant*

On November 18, the Detachment of Colorado awarded 12-year-old Teddy Kuntz with the distinguished award of Outstanding Member of the Year. Teddy is a member of Sagebrush Squadron 68 in Brush, Colorado and serves as the Detachment Sergeant-at-Arms.

Following the Marshall Fire, which destroyed over 100 homes in the towns of Louisville and Superior, Teddy collected over \$12,000 in donations of clothes and other items for children that were misplaced because of the fire. Teddy also raised enough funds to purchase 149 A.L.F. Dogs that were distributed to homeless children in northern Colorado by Brown Bag Ministries, a nonprofit homeless advocacy organization sponsored by ALA Unit 22 in Northglenn. Some of the dogs were distributed to junior enlisted military families at a baby shower sponsored by ALA Unit 209 in Colorado Springs.



**BE THE ONE**



## 2 COLORADO BANQUETS

Loveland - Saturday, February 24th

Embassy Suites Hotel

Denver - Saturday, April 27th

Crowne Plaza Hotel

Doors open at 4:30 PM

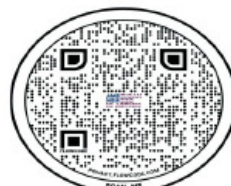
**FREE BEER FROM COORS**

Dinner served at 6:00 PM

**Your choice - Steak or salmon**

Live Auction at 7:00 PM

Tickets are just \$75 per person, or \$125 per couple,  
Scan the QR Code and buy your tickets today!



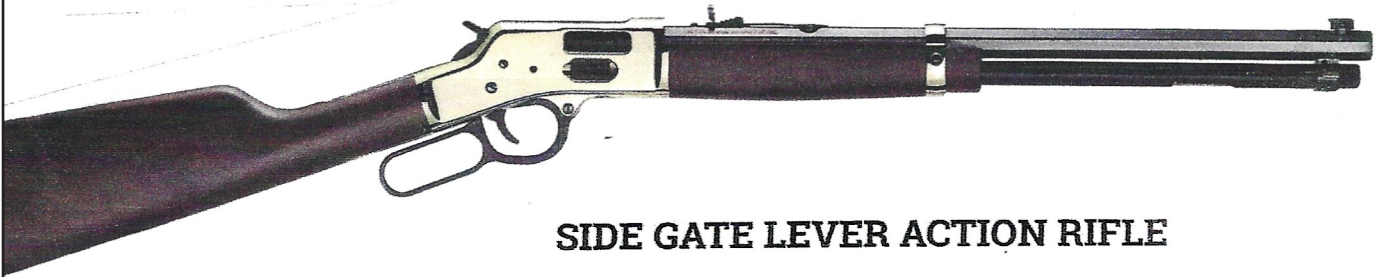
# 2024 GUN RAFFLE

AMERICAN LEGION PAUL C. BECK POST 23

2 WINNERS TICKETS 1 /\$20 OR 3/ \$50

DRAWING JULY 13<sup>TH</sup>, 2024. NEED NOT BE PRESENT TO WIN

Henry Big Boy Classic Side Gate 44 Mag. rifle. Retail value \$1,210



**SIDE GATE LEVER ACTION RIFLE**

Dan Wesson 357, 6 shot double action revolver with 36" holster

Retail Value \$725



For tickets mail check to

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Tickets will be returned to you



## From around the state continued

### The Honor Is Ours

By: Lori Mellinger, Northglenn, CO

On any given Tuesday, if you happen to be at Fort Logan National Cemetery in Denver, Colorado, you will see a group of volunteers providing dignified honors for fallen/departed comrades. They are the honor guard from American Legion Post 22 in Northglenn, Colorado. The administration at Fort Logan reached out to the Post 22 honor guard captain. With honor guards diminishing at an alarming rate, they asked if Post 22 would be willing to commit to Tuesdays for services. Post 22 stepped up and now they do services all day, every Tuesday.

This team is well-rounded. Not only do they perform the 3-round volley and play taps, but they have also stepped up and folded and presented the flag. They are known for their recitation of the 13 folds in conjunction with the folding of the flag. The Post 22 honor guard is made up of Legionnaires. Almost all of them are from the Vietnam War era, many of whom served in Vietnam. The team is comprised of all branches of services.

This team has performed anywhere from 1 to 11 services in one day. This has been done while snow is falling with temperatures below freezing, pouring down rain and temperatures near 100 degrees. Their belief is that it is their duty to provide these veterans with the

proper honors they deserve. To them, “weather permitting” is not an option. In 2023, this team performed 450 dignified honors and other ceremonies. There have been numerous occasions when a funeral home or a family has reached out to request their services. Much of the time these requests come with as little as one day notice. More often than not, Post 22 honor guard is able to provide honors.



American Legion Post 22 Honor Guard receives Certificates of Appreciation from VA Ft Logan

Post 22 honor guard is not limited to the services they perform at Fort Logan. They have traveled to Loveland, Erie, Golden, Brighton, Longmont, Castle Rock and many other areas within Denver Metro area to provide needed honors and perform ceremonies. They have performed ceremonies at senior living centers and visited some of the residents at these facilities. They have presented colors at various locations for memorial dedications and events in Westminster, Thornton and Northglenn, as well as numerous Legion functions. They even

stopped at the “Wall That Heals” to pay tribute and remember comrades lost.

On Veterans Day, they went to Mountain Range High School, presented colors and opened up a Q&A for the students. This team stays busy. They are proud of what they do. Ask any of them.

### VA proposes rule to extend presumed areas of exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides

By: The American Legion

The Department of Veterans Affairs issued a proposed rule outlining plans to expand the locations and time frames for which VA presumes exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. If this proposed rule becomes final, VA will implement a new presumption of exposure to locations where herbicides were tested, used, or stored outside of Vietnam. Specifically, this proposed rule would add locations in the United States (full list of US locations where Agent Orange was tested or stored), Canada, and India to the existing presumptives for Agent Orange in Vietnam, Cambodia, Johnson Atoll, Guam, American Samoa, Korea, Laos, and Thailand.

A presumption of exposure means that VA automatically assumes that veterans who served in certain locations were exposed to certain toxins. Presumptives lower the burden of proof required to receive disability benefits, helping veterans get the benefits they deserve as quickly as possible. This expansion of presumptives will help veterans who served in the specified locations receive health care and benefits for certain cancers and chronic conditions. To be eligible, a veteran must have served in the identified location(s) during a specific time period and currently have a condition(s) presumptively associated with herbicide exposure.

Over the past few years, VA has expanded presumptive service connection for more than hundreds of health conditions related

to toxic exposures under the PACT Act – the largest expansion of veteran care and benefits in generations. Thanks to this historic action, VA is delivering more care and more benefits to more Veterans than ever before in U.S. history.

“This proposed change would make it easier for Veterans exposed to herbicides who served outside Vietnam to access the benefits they so rightly deserve,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough. “Our goal is to provide every veteran – of every era – with the VA health care and benefits they deserve, and this is another step in the right direction.”

Veterans who want to file an initial claim for a herbicide-related disability can visit VA’s website, use VA Form 21-526EZ, Application for Disability



Photograph courtesy of The American Legion.

Compensation and Related Compensation Benefits, or work with a VA-recognized veterans service organization such as The American Legion to assist with the application process. Veterans may also contact their state Veterans Affairs office. Survivors can file claims for benefits based on the veteran’s service if the veteran died from at least one of the recognized presumptive herbicide diseases.

This proposed rule also codifies provisions in the PACT Act, the Blue Water Navy Act of 2019, and the National Defense Authorization Act for 2021.

*For more information about the changes, visit The Federal Register.*

## Eligible Veterans can shop at Defense commissaries

*By Courtney Rogers, Defense Commissary Agency’s Consumer Advocate.*

In 2020, commissary shopping benefits expanded to include more Veterans, as the Purple Heart and Disabled Veterans Equal Access Act of 2018 (part of the John S. McCain National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2019) authorized the Department of Defense to expand access to commissary shopping privileges to additional valued members of the military community.

### Expanding privileges

The law, which took effect January 1, 2020, extends commissary shopping privileges to:

- Veterans with any VA-documented service-connected disabilities.
- Purple Heart recipients.
- Former prisoners of war; and
- Individuals assessed, approved and designated as primary family caregivers to eligible Veterans under VA’s Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.
- Veterans and designated caregivers are encouraged to check their commissary privilege qualifications.

### Obtaining the proper identification

Obtain a Veteran Health Identification Card (VHIC) and ensure it reflects eligibility through one of the required designations: SERVICE CONNECTED, MEDAL OF HONOR, PURPLE HEART or FORMER POW. The card and designation will be required during the commissary check-out process.

### (Checking installation access policies

Contact the commissary’s installation and ask about current installation access policies.

### Checking for “user” fees before paying

The law expanding commissary access also requires charging user fees when shoppers pay for purchases with commercial credit or debit cards. This fee imposes an additional 1.9% for credit cards and 0.5% for debit cards with a PIN. (The 1.9% fee also applies when using a signature debit card, because it is processed as a credit card transaction.)

Shoppers will not be subject to user fees if paying with the MILITARY STAR® card, cash or EBT. Learn more about the MILITARY STAR®

### Enjoying commissary benefits, value

Commissaries serve shoppers who have served our Nation by selling groceries and household products to authorized customers at substantial cost savings. Commissary benefits include:

- A shopping environment exclusively serving the military community with a workforce that understands shopper needs.
- Prices save customers thousands of dollars per year, on average, when compared to commercial store prices.
- Commissary Store Brands offering quality products on par with national brands and even greater savings.
- Convenience of using CLICK2GO for online shopping and curbside pickup.
- Additional savings through digital coupons and promotional sales flyers.

The commissary is here to serve those who have served our Nation. For more information, visit Your Commissary.



**SAVE THE DATE**

**JUNE 20 - 22, 2024**

**DEPARTMENT OF COLORADO  
AMERICAN LEGION CONVENTION**



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