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1. National Academies Link Hypertension, MGUS to Agent Orange Exposure: The VFW is calling on VA to add hypertension and a precursor to multiple myeloma to the current list of 14 presumptive diseases associated with contact with chemical defoliants used in Vietnam, Thailand, and along the Korean DMZ. The VFW's case is bolstered by a new report released by the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine entitled, [Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 11 \(2018\)](#). Said VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence, "There is no doubt in anyone's mind that Agent Orange made veterans sick, it made their children sick, and it brought pain and suffering and premature death to many. Even though it's been a half century since they were exposed, the results of that exposure is something they continue to live with daily," he said. "The VFW thanks the National Academies for continuing to honor the charter that Congress gave them, and we now call on VA Secretary Robert Wilkie to use his authority and recognize the science in the report to swiftly add these two illnesses to the presumptive list so that these veterans can finally receive the assistance they earned and deserve," said Lawrence. The VFW will continue to monitor the progress of the potential two new presumptive illnesses. In the meantime, the VFW encourages all veterans who served in Vietnam, in Thailand, or along the Korean DMZ to contact a VFW Service Officer to discuss whether they are eligible to file a VA claim for Agent Orange exposure. [Connect with a VFW Service Officer](#) or view VA's list of [presumptive diseases](#).

2. VA Rates 70 Percent of its Nursing Homes as Failures: In a joint release, the national commanders of the VFW and American Legion are demanding that VA Secretary Robert Wilkie bring immediate attention to his nursing home program that currently has 70 percent of its 132 homes receiving failing grades by the VA's own rating system. The call by VFW National Commander B.J. Lawrence and Legion National Commander Brett Reistad is in response to a [series of scathing articles](#) by two USA Today and Boston Globe reporters who documented substandard and negligent care at the VA nursing home in Brockton, Mass., which is one of 45

nursing homes that received the VA's lowest rating of one star. Forty-seven homes received two stars, 16 homes three stars, and 15 homes four stars. Only nine nursing homes received the VA's top five-star rating. "While much of the media's attention has been on the proper implementation of VA health care legislation, we cannot forget about 46,000 mostly senior veterans who reside in these nursing homes," said the two national commanders, who collectively speak for more than 4.6 million members and their auxiliaries. [Read the joint release here.](#)

3. GI Bill Oversight Hearing Held: This week, the House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity held a hearing on the delayed payments of GI Bill benefits to student veterans. This summer, VA was supposed to implement technology upgrades to accommodate changes to the GI Bill. VA failed to implement the changes which led to tens of thousands of student veterans receiving delayed Basic Allowance for Housing payments. The VFW called on Congress to hold an oversight hearing to get to the bottom of the problem and what steps VA has taken to avoid this problem in the upcoming spring semester. The VFW appreciates Chairman Arrington and Ranking Member O'Rourke's attention to this issue which is affecting the lives of tens of thousands of student veterans. [Watch the hearing.](#)

4. Hearing on VA's Oversight of Contract Disability Examinations: The House Veterans' Affairs Subcommittee on Disability Assistance and Memorial Affairs held a hearing Thursday on VA's oversight of contract disability examinations. Over the last 20 years, VA has more frequently contracted with private health care providers to conduct disability examinations in order to provide veterans with timely, accurate, and objective evaluations of their medical conditions. While the VFW supports VA's efforts to provide veterans with contract disability examinations, since 2016 when VA executed its latest contract for disability examinations, there have been new problems which prompted the VFW and other veterans service organizations to call for a hearing to better assess the situation. The VFW submitted testimony detailing problems such as late notification of exam appointments, difficulty in rescheduling examinations, unreasonable distance of examinations from the veteran's home, and inadequate time with the health care provider. The VFW appreciates Ranking Member Esty highlighting our concerns and bringing attention to this issue. [Watch the hearing.](#)

5. Blue Water Navy Bill Continues to be Stalled in the Senate: In July, the House of Representatives unanimously passed H.R. 299, the *Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2018*, to end the injustice of denying Vietnam, Korean DMZ, and Thailand veterans who suffer from life-threatening health conditions related to exposure to Agent Orange the care and benefits they deserve. This important bill continues to be stalled in the Senate and the VFW needs your help to make sure this bill is passed before the end of the year. Contact your senators to demand that the Senate passes H.R. 299. [Contact your senators by email](#) or call (202) 224-3121 and ask to be transferred to your senators' offices.

6. First Female Completes Special Forces Assessment and Selection Course: This past week, the United States Army Special Operations Command announced that a female soldier has successfully completed the grueling 24-day Special Forces Assessment and Selection course at Ft. Bragg, N.C. The soldier, whose name was not released, will now attend the Special Forces Qualification Course (Q Course) which consists of four phases and can last from a year to two years, depending on the soldier's specialty and language training. Upon successful completion of

the Q course, soldiers are awarded the green beret and assigned to a Special Forces operational detachment. Since the Department of the Army lifted its ban on women holding military occupational specialties specific to special operations and combat arms in 2016, several women have attempted to complete the course, but were unsuccessful. Despite this, hundreds of women are now serving in infantry, armor, and fire support units, to include the 75th Ranger Regiment, and more than a dozen women have earned the Ranger tab.

7. DHA MSO/VSO Working Group: On Wednesday, the VFW participated in the monthly Defense Health Agency (DHA) MSO/VSO Working Group led by DHA Deputy Director Guy Kiyokawa. The meeting provided updates regarding TRICARE performance, TRICARE Select copayments, and updates concerning the TRICARE and FEDVIP open season. Also discussed was transition from TRDP to FEDVIP, which will take place on Dec. 31, 2018. If you are currently enrolled in TRDP and want to know how you will be impacted by this changeover, visit [BENEFEDS](#) for more information or [compare rates](#) for FEDVIP dental and vision plans.

8. VA Secretary Vows to Improve Military Transition Efforts: The VFW was at the National Press Club last week to hear VA Secretary Robert Wilkie vow to increase coordination between VA and the Department of Defense to improve the transition of military personnel to veterans status, which includes educating service members on the signs of post-traumatic stress, as well as recruiting transitioning doctors and nurses to work for VA. He does not expect the upcoming change in control of the House to impact efforts to improve services for millions of veterans receiving VA health care benefits. He said his department enjoys bipartisan support that has resulted in a record-high budget and legislation that makes possible greater accountability for VA employees and management flexibility. [Read more.](#)

9. TRICARE Prime and Select Open Season: This past Monday, TRICARE kicked off its first open season where Prime and Select beneficiaries can enroll in or change their health care coverage plan for 2019. The open season period will last until Dec. 10 and any changes made during this period will become effective on Jan. 1, 2019. If you are satisfied with your current plan, then your coverage will continue automatically for 2019, as long as you remain eligible for coverage. [Find out more](#) about the open season and how to modify your existing health plan.

10. TRDP and FEDVIP Update: The current TRICARE Retiree Dental Program (TRDP) will end Dec. 31, 2018, and will be replaced by the Federal Employees Dental and Vision Insurance Program (FEDVIP) dental coverage options. Vision plans will also be available to eligible TRICARE beneficiaries through FEDVIP. The first opportunity to enroll in FEDVIP is during the 2018 Federal Benefits Open Season, which began on Nov. 12, 2018, and runs through Dec. 10, 2018. Coverage begins on Jan. 1, 2019. In general, retired uniformed service members and their families who were eligible for TRDP in 2018 are eligible for FEDVIP dental coverage, and if enrolled in a TRICARE health plan, FEDVIP vision coverage, beginning in 2019. Family members of active-duty uniformed service members who are enrolled in a TRICARE health plan are eligible for FEDVIP vision coverage. [Learn more.](#)

11. MIA Update: This week, the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced two new identifications, and the burial date and location for 11 previously identified servicemen.

Returning home with full military honors are:

-- **Army Cpl. Francisco Ramos-Rivera**, 33, of Puerto Rico, whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Nov. 29 in San Juan, Puerto Rico. Ramos-Rivera was a member of Company H, 2nd Battalion, 19th Infantry Regiment, 24th Infantry Division, engaged in combat operations against North Korean forces near Taegon, South Korea. As U.S. forces regrouped after their evacuation, Ramos-Rivera could not be accounted for and was declared missing in action on July 20, 1950. [Read about Ramos-Rivera.](#)

-- **Army Pvt. Robert J. Sipes, Jr.**, 19, of Irvington, Ky., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 5 in his hometown. Sipes was a member of Company L, 3rd Battalion, 7th Cavalry Regiment, 1st Cavalry Division. He was killed in action on Nov. 30, 1950, during heavy fighting between the Chinese People's Volunteer Forces and the 7th Cavalry Regiment near the village of Unsan, North Korea. His remains were processed through a 7th Cavalry Regiment Collection Station on Dec. 1, 1950, and interred at the United Nations Military Cemetery (UNMC) Pyongyang, on Dec. 2, 1950. [Read about Sipes.](#)

-- **Army Air Forces 1st Lt. Eugene P. Ford**, 21, of Latrobe, Pa., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 4 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. Ford was a member of the 765th Bombardment Squadron, 461st Bombardment Group, 15th Air Force. On Dec. 17, 1944, Ford's B-24J, known as the Tulsamerican, led a group of six B-24s on a bombing mission targeting oil refineries at Odertal, Germany. After emerging from a cloud bank near the target, the aircraft were attacked by more than 40 German Me-109 and FW-190 fighters. Three of the six aircraft were shot down and the other three suffered damages. Ford's plane was heavily damaged, forcing him to abort the mission and crash land in the Adriatic Sea near the Isle of Vis in present-day Croatia. Seven crewmembers survived and were rescued, but Ford and two others were killed in the crash. [Read about Ford.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Reserve Staff Sgt. Richard J. Murphy, Jr.**, 26, of Chevy Chase, Md., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 1 in Silver Spring, Maryland. Murphy was a member of 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, which landed at Red Beach, Saipan. Reports provide little information of what happened to Murphy after landing on Saipan, and he was declared missing in action as of June 15, 1944. On May 22, 1945, his status was amended to killed in action. [Read about Murphy.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Pfc. Clarence E. Drumheiser**, 21, of Fresno, Calif., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 8 in Prairie View, Texas. Drumheiser was assigned to Company D, 1st Battalion, 6th Marine Regiment, 2nd Marine Division, Fleet Marine Force. On Nov. 19, 1943, Drumheiser's unit landed on the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll against stiff Japanese resistance. Drumheiser was killed on the third day of the battle, one of approximately 1,000 Marines and sailors killed in the intense fighting. [Read about Drumheiser.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Bert E. McKeeman**, 25, of Council Bluffs, Iowa, whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 1 in his hometown. McKeeman was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including McKeeman. [Read about McKeeman.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 2nd Class Martin A. Gara**, 20, of Chicago, whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 4 in Santa Fe, N.M. Gara was assigned to the USS Oklahoma,

which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Gara. [Read about Gara.](#)

-- **Navy Seaman 1st Class William G. Bruesewitz**, 26, of Appleton, Wisc., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 7 in Arlington National Cemetery, near Washington, D.C. Bruesewitz was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Bruesewitz. [Read about Bruesewitz.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 2nd Class Carl D. Dorr**, 27, of Anderson, S.C., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 7 in Greenville, S.C. Dorr was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Dorr. [Read about Dorr.](#)

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class Albert U. Kane**, 26, of Fort Worth, Texas, whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 7 in Dallas. Kane was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Kane. [Read about Kane.](#)

-- **Navy Aviation Machinist's Mate 2nd Class Durell Wade**, 24, of Calhoun City, Miss., whose remains were previously identified, will be buried Dec. 7 in the Mississippi Veterans Memorial Cemetery, in Newton County, Miss. Wade was assigned to the USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, on Dec. 7, 1941, when the ship sustained multiple torpedo hits and quickly capsized, resulting in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Wade. [Read about Wade.](#)

-- **Marine Corps Reserve Pfc. Nicholas J. Gojmerac** was a member of Company Q, 4th Raider Battalion, 1st Marine Raider Regiment, when his unit assaulted a Japanese stronghold at Bairoko Harbor, New Georgia Island, Solomon Islands. He was reported missing in action on July 20, 1943, after he was last seen crawling through heavy fire to provide medical care to an injured Marine while he was mortally wounded himself. Interment services are pending. [Read about Gojmerac.](#)

-- **Navy Reserve Aviation Machinist's Mate 1st Class John O. Morris** was a member of Carrier Aircraft Service Unit (CASU) 17 and was tasked with securing the small island of Betio in the Tarawa Atoll. In November 1943, U.S. personnel on the island encountered fierce resistance by the Japanese, and almost 1,000 Marines and sailors were killed, and another 1,000 were wounded in the battle. On Dec. 16, 1943, Morris was killed when a machine gun he was test-firing accidentally discharged, resulting in his death. Interment services are pending. [Read about Morris.](#)

To sign up new veterans' advocates, click here: <http://capwiz.com/vfw/mlm/signup.htm>.

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to vfwac@vfw.org.