

VETERANS OF FOREIGN WARS
DEPT SERVICE OFFICE – NORTH DAKOTA
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SERVICE OFFICE REPORT – Feb. 2020

	<u>THIS MONTH</u>	<u>YEAR TO DATE</u>
CONTACTS: (Phone calls, emails and walk-ins)	991	9,035
COMPENSATION: (Service-connected disability)	\$ 1,347,928.08	\$ 12,682,048.20
PENSION: (NSC Pension, Death, Burial and DIC)	\$ 49,832.00	\$ 500,344.69
MISC BENEFITS: (Education, Waivers, etc.)	\$ 33,015.19	\$ 133,666.09
RETROACTIVE:	\$ 228,635.31	\$ 1,835,041.89
TOTAL:	\$1,659,410.58	\$ 15,373,280.63

1. VFW to Deliver Veterans' Voices to Congress: More than 500 VFW and VFW Auxiliary members are arriving in the nation's capital this weekend to urge their respective members of Congress to continue improving the programs and services provided by the Department of Veterans Affairs. Highlighting the annual legislative conference will be VFW National Commander William "Doc" Schmitz's testimony Wednesday at 10 a.m. before a special joint hearing of the House and Senate Committees on Veterans' Affairs in room G-50 of the Dirksen Senate Office Building. Topping his list of VFW legislative priorities is updating the list of conditions associated with exposure to Agent Orange, improving VA health care including for women veterans, and treatment of traumatic brain injuries. Other priorities include improving burn pits research and accountability, allowing military retirees to receive full retirement pay and disability pay without offset, and our obligation to locate and recover our POW/MIA's from past wars.

2. VA Update on Caregivers and Agent Orange: On Thursday, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Robert Wilkie testified before the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs to discuss the fiscal year 2021 budget request for VA. Committee members asked Wilkie when VA will expand the caregiver program and whether it will add bladder cancer, parkinsonism, hypertension, and hyperthyroidism to the list of conditions presumed to be associated with exposure to Agent Orange. Wilkie indicated that VA would release its plan to expand the caregiver program next week and indicated that his father is impacted by Agent Orange exposure so he is working hard to make it right. VFW National Legislative Service Director Carlos Fuentes testified alongside the VFW's Independent Budget (IB) partners DAV (Disabled American Veterans) and Paralyzed Veterans of America. The IB's budget recommendation is more than \$4 billion higher than the Administration's request.

3. Fisher House Foundation President Visits VFW to Discuss New Fisher House: On Wednesday, Fisher House Foundation, Inc. President David Coker and Fisher House Foundation, Inc. Vice President of Communications Michelle Baldanza met with VFW Director of Operations Anthony Lowe, and VFW Director of Communications and Public Affairs Terrence Hayes, to discuss the ground breaking of the Fisher House in Kansas City, Missouri, in July. "The Fisher House Foundation has been, and continues to be, a vital part of military and veteran families' rehabilitation and recovery worldwide," said Hayes. The home will serve as a 16-suite comfort home for military and veteran families who stay free of charge while loved ones are in the hospital. These homes are located at military and VA medical centers around the world

4. Concurrent Receipt Bill Introduced in the House: Today, Congressman Gus Bilirakis (R-Fla.) introduced a VFW-championed bill, H.R.5995, the *Major Richard Star Act* which would expand concurrent receipt eligibility to service members who were medically discharged. The *Major Richard Star Act* would provide total offset relief for certain veterans. The VFW would like to thank Rep. Bilirakis for his leadership on this issue and his continued commitment to America's military and veterans.

5. Phase-Out of the SBP-DIC Offset Frequently Asked Questions:

As a result of the VFW's tireless advocacy, *The National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2020* modified the law that requires an offset of Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) payments for surviving spouses who are also entitled to Dependency and Indemnity Compensation (DIC) from the Department of Veterans Affairs. Under the previous law, a surviving spouse who receives DIC is subject to a dollar-for-dollar reduction of SBP payments, which can result in SBP being either partially or fully offset. The repeal will phase-in the reduction of this offset beginning on Jan. 1, 2021, and culminating with elimination of the offset in its entirety on Jan. 1, 2023.

6. VA Launches Solid Start Program for Newly Transitioned

Veterans: The Solid Start program is a transition program recently launched to proactively contact newly separated veterans by phone during the critical first year of transition from military service. The goal is to provide them valuable benefits information such as health care services, mental health services, home loan information, and veteran employment services. The first year of transition is critical and creates significant stress and pressures. The VA hopes the Solid Start program will ease those stressors on veterans and families while making them aware of the benefits and services readily available to them

7. Legislation Introduced to Study Toxic Exposure at Karshi

Khanabad: On Tuesday, Representatives Mark Green (R-Tenn.) and Stephen Lynch (D-Mass.) introduced H.R. 5957, the *K2 Veterans Toxic Exposure Accountability Act of 2020*. This important legislation would require DOD to conduct a study on toxic exposure at Karshi Khanabad Air Base (K2), Uzbekistan. The legislation would also establish a K2 toxic exposure registry and a framework for providing presumptive

benefits for veterans who developed a health condition associated with toxic exposure at K2. A December 2019 McClatchy article reported that K2 was contaminated with enriched uranium, radiological residue from chemical weapons, and other hazards. On Thursday, the House Committee on Oversight and Reform Subcommittee on National Security held a hearing to discuss hazardous exposures at K2 and their effects on service members. The VFW thanks Rep. Green and Rep. Lynch for introducing this legislation and for their efforts to expand health care and disability benefits for veterans.

8. House Passes Five Veterans' Bills: This week, the House passed five pieces of veterans' legislation. They range from protecting veteran-owned small business from losing contracts due to loopholes, to giving student veterans more information on GI Bill-eligible schools. The bills that passed are: [H.R. 561](#), *Protecting Business Opportunities for Veterans Act*, [H.R. 2227](#), *Gold Star Spouses and Spouses of Injured Servicemembers Leasing Relief Expansion Act*, [H.R. 3749](#), *Legal Services for Homeless Veterans Act*, [H.R. 4613](#), *VA Reporting Transparency Act*, and [H.R. 4852](#) *G.I. and Veterans Education Empowerment (GIVE) Act*.

9. MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced one new identification, and three burial updates for service members who have been missing and unaccounted-for from WWII and the Korean War. Returning home for burial with full military honors are:

-- **Navy Fireman 1st Class James C. Webb**, 23, of Hobart, Arkansas, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Webb. Interment services are pending..

-- **Army Sgt. David C. Sewell**, 30, of Walker, Minnesota, was a member of Company M, 3rd Battalion, 31st Infantry Regiment, 7th Infantry Division. He was reported missing in action on Nov. 28, 1950, in the vicinity of the Chosin Reservoir, North Korea, when his unit was attacked by enemy forces. Following the battle, his remains could not be recovered. Sewell will be buried in Anoka, Minnesota. The date has yet to be determined.

-- **Navy Seaman 2nd Class Everett G. Windle**, 20, of Kansas City, Missouri, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Windle. He will be buried in Honolulu. The date has yet to be determined

-- **Naval Reserve Machinist's Mate 1st Class Paul H. Gebser**, 39, of San Diego, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was

moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits, which caused it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Gebser. The date and location have yet to be determined.