



ENDURING FREEDOM REVIEW

www.VA.gov/GulfWar

Information for Veterans Who Served in Iraq and Afghanistan and Their Families

Vol. 3, No. 1

February 2006

BUDGET REQUEST FOR VA TOPS \$80 BILLION: Continues Commitment for VA/DoD Cooperation on Seamless Transition for New Veterans

On February 6, 2006, Secretary of Veterans Affairs R. James Nicholson announced that President George W. Bush is seeking a record \$80.6 billion for the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, which begins October 1, 2006. The proposal is \$8.8 billion, or 12.2 percent higher than the budget for FY 2006.

“Veterans are a priority,” Secretary Nicholson explained. “With the support of Congress, we can take care of the needs of our newest generation of combat veterans, while honoring our commitment to veterans of earlier eras.”

The budget request is designed to ensure that VA will be able to care for those veterans who count on VA the most. It continues VA’s commitment to work closely with the Department of Defense (DoD) to ensure that service members returning from Iraq and Afghanistan and their families receive timely, high-quality services and benefits.

According to Secretary Nicholson, with this budget, VA will continue providing world-class care for veteran patients, including over 100,000 veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF).

Ensuring Seamless Transition

The budget request provides resources to make certain that service members’ transition from active duty military status to civilian life is as smooth and seamless as possible.

Men and women on active duty will find it easier to access VA benefits when they get close to completion of their military service because of a program that allows early application for disability claims and other benefits.

VA staff are located at 140 military installations around the country, as well as in Korea and Germany, to assist active duty members in applying for benefits before they separate from military service.

Applications from separating service members are now processed at two locations to improve efficiency and consistency of claim decisions. *(Continued on page 2, Budget)*

ALSO IN THIS ISSUE

Congressional Hearing: VA Describes Major Initiatives in Response to Health Care and Other Needs of OIF/OEF Veterans	2
Leishmaniasis Rates Dropping	2
100,000 Gulf War Exams Completed, OIF Registry Statistics	3
Chief Officer Mather Retires	3
How to Get VA Disability Compensation	4
About the Review	4
Disability Compensation Rates for 2006	5
Electronic Notification of Newsletter Availability	5
Address Changes	5
New Comic Book Gets the Word Out to New Combat Veterans; VA Seeking Feedback	6
VA to Survey Veterans for Centers of Excellence Award Program	8
New YOUR STORY Brochure Shows Veterans How to Record Their Military History Online	8
Straight from the Source	9
Readers’ Survey Results	10
New VA Insurance Benefits OIF and OEF Veterans’ Financial Security	10
Help Provided by Military Severely Injured Center	10
The Marines Have Landed	11
WRIISC Offers Transition Course.....	11
Where to Get Help	11

Health Care Increases

In health care, VA has already worked with DoD to transfer several thousand injured service members from OIF and OEF from military medical facilities to VA health care facilities. For VA health care services, the budget proposal is an increase of \$3.5 billion (about 11 percent) more than the Department's FY 2006 level.

CONGRESSIONAL HEARING: VA Describes Major Initiatives in Response to Health Care and Other Needs of OIF/OEF Veterans

On June 19, 2005, a VA representative described major initiatives in response to health care and other needs of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom veterans during a congressional hearing that focused on the Department of Defense (DoD) efforts to collect and analyze occupational health environmental information for deployed forces. The hearing was conducted on the findings of a new Government Accountability Office (GAO) report called "Occupational and Environmental Health Surveillance of Deployed Forces: Tracking Toxic Casualties."

National Security, Emerging Threats, and International Relations Subcommittee Chairman, Congressman Christopher Shays of Connecticut chaired the hearing and offered opening remarks. There were two groups of witnesses. The first group consisted of veterans, including Mr. Brian Scott La Morte, a Company Sergeant Major of the North Carolina Army National Guard; Mr. Raymond Ramos, a retired Army Staff Sergeant; Mr. David Chasteen, an Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) Veteran and Associate Director of Operation Truth; and Dr. Marcia Cross, the Director of Health Care for GAO. The second group consisted of government officials, including Dr. Michael Kilpatrick, Deputy Director of the Deployment Health Support Directorate for the Department of Defense; Dr. Susan Mather, then VA's Chief Officer, Public Health and Environmental Hazards; and Dr. Mark Brown, Director, VA's Environmental Agents Service.

The three veterans gave their accounts of the deployment-related illnesses they have experienced and asked that DoD and VA keep better records of troop location and possible environmental exposures in medical records. They also spoke of a wide range of environmental health concerns, including concerns about long-term

health consequences from exposure to depleted uranium, vaccines, and other materials.

Dr. Mather (who subsequently retired in January 2006, see article on page 3 of this newsletter), described many of the major initiatives of VA in response to health care and other needs of veterans returning from Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF). She reviewed VA's seamless transition activities, points of contact, veteran outreach, the benefits delivery at discharge program, outreach initiatives, training and education, and new clinical tools (you can see these things online at www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents).

Additionally, Dr. Mather explained that VA's goal is to "ensure that every serviceman and -woman returning from combat has access to world-class services, and in every way possible, to hold open the doors to an uncomplicated passage from soldier to citizen." She stressed that in order for VA to reach their goal, VA and DoD need to continue to work together, in partnership, to provide a seamless transition of information that will allow for better care. One way that both VA and DoD have made significant progress is through the Federal Health Information Exchange (FHIE) that lets VA and DoD share health information.

In addition to Chairman Shays, several members of Congress participated in the hearing, providing brief statements stressing the need to adequately communicate health risks and service-related illnesses to servicemen and -women, in addition to veterans.

The above article was drafted by Tiffany A. Anzalone, Summer 2005 Intern, Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities, working in VA's Environmental Agents Service.

LEISHMANIASIS RATES DROPPING

At the beginning of Operation Iraqi Freedom, some health care providers worried that the disease leishmaniasis could be a health problem for servicemen and -women who served in the military in Southwest Asia. In 1990-91, only 32 of the nearly 700,000 veterans of the first Gulf War got this disease. On the other hand, the impact of leishmaniasis on U.S. troops currently deployed to Southwest Asia has been a lot more. Since January 2003, over 600 U.S. troops have been diagnosed with cutaneous leishmania, the mild form of this disease, and several hundred additional soldiers may have been infected. Still, considering the large numbers of troops deployed, this disease is relatively rare.

Furthermore, recent data indicate that rates of leishmaniasis are dropping significantly. Some observers attribute the reduction to DoD's protective measures, specifically pesticide-treated uniforms and bed netting.

Leishmaniasis is transmitted by the bite of infected sand flies. The disease as it appears in Southwest Asia is either in a cutaneous (skin) form or in a visceral (internal organs) form that affects the liver, spleen, and bone marrow.

Leishmaniasis is found in about 90 tropical and subtropical countries and in southern Europe. More than 90 percent of cutaneous leishmaniasis cases occur in Afghanistan, Algeria, Brazil, Iran, Iraq, Peru, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. More than 90 percent of visceral leishmaniasis can be found in Bangladesh, Brazil, India, Nepal, and Sudan. A small number of people in rural southern Texas develop cutaneous leishmaniasis. No cases of the much more serious visceral leishmaniasis are known to have happened in the U.S. Leishmaniasis usually is more common in rural than urban areas, but it can be found in the outskirts of some cities.

Sand flies become infected by biting an infected animal. Because sand flies do not make noise when they fly, they may not be noticed. Also, they are very small and may be hard to see. They are most active from dusk to dawn.

People with cutaneous leishmaniasis usually develop skin sores within a few weeks after they are bitten. People with the visceral form develop symptoms within several months (rarely longer than a year) of when they were bitten. Most cases of cutaneous leishmaniasis will get better on their own and treatments are available.

For additional information about leishmaniasis, including the diagnosis and treatment of this disease and references, see our Web site www.VA.gov/GulfWar, specifically Information Letter 10-2004-013, Under Secretary for Health's Information Letter, dated October 6, 2004, entitled Guidance for the Diagnosis and Treatment of Leishmania Infection.

100,000 GULF WAR HEALTH EXAMS COMPLETED; OIF Registry Statistics

In 1992, VA established a program known as the Gulf War Health Registry Examination to provide free health examinations to veterans of the 1990-1991 Gulf War (that is Op-

erations Desert Shield/Storm). This program is also open to veterans of the current conflict in Iraq (that is, the veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom).


As of January 9, 2006, a grand total of **94,678** veterans have participated in the Gulf War Registry examination program, **85,004** men and **9,674** women. This includes **3,534** Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) veterans (**3,085** men, **449** women).

Some of these Gulf War veterans have requested and received followup examinations. A total of **5,324** followup exams have been completed, including **4,747** for men, and **577** for women. This includes **65** followup exams for OIF veterans (**60** for OIF male veterans and **5** for women).

That means that more than **100,000** examinations, (initial and followup) have been done (**89,751** for men and **10,251** for women). The grand total is **100,002** examinations, including **3,599** for OIF veterans (**3,145** for men and **454** for women).

While OIF veterans are automatically eligible for the Gulf War Registry examination program, Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) veterans are not unless they also served in the Gulf War Theater of Operations (which does not include Afghanistan). OEF veterans may be eligible for a similar examination. Veterans are advised to contact the nearest VA medical facility for personal eligibility information.

CHIEF OFFICER MATHER RETIRES

 On January 3, 2006, Dr. Susan H. Mather retired from Federal Service.

Susan H. Mather, M.D., M.P.H., served as a physician, teacher, manager, advocate, friend, and senior leader in VA since 1979. As Chief Public Health and Environmental Hazards Officer, she led VA's program to provide high quality health care services to veterans of



Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom. She also was responsible for a wide array of "hot topics" including smoking, immunizations, Legionnaires disease, women veteran health, HIV/AIDS, mustard gas, cold injury, atomic radiation, hepatitis, and Agent Orange.

She was the driving force behind the implementation of the Women Veterans' Health Program. Her commitment and dedication to improving health care for women veterans was recognized when she received the 2003 Good Housekeeping /Wyeth Award for Women's Health.

One of only a few women graduating from the University of Maryland School of Medicine in 1965, she later earned a Masters Degree of Public Health and Epidemiology from the Johns Hopkins School of Hygiene and Public Health. She worked for 26 years in VA Central Office.

HOW TO GET DISABILITY COMPENSATION FROM VA

Like all veterans, veterans of Operation Iraqi Freedom and Operation Enduring Freedom are eligible for monthly payments, called disability compensation, from VA if they are suffering with illnesses or injuries that VA determined to have been incurred or aggravated during active military service. Veterans exposed to ionizing radiation also have special access to disability compensation for illnesses or injuries related to exposure to ionizing radiation. The service of the veteran must have been terminated from

military service through separation or discharge under conditions that were other than dishonorable.

The amount of disability compensation varies according to the degree of disability and the number of dependents. Benefits are not subject to Federal or state income tax. The receipt of military retirement pay, disability severance pay, and separation incentive payments known as Special Separation Benefits (SSB) and Voluntary Separation Incentives (VSI) also affects the amount of VA compensation paid. Under current law, the payment of VA compensation will affect the amount received in military retirement pay, disability severance pay, SSB, and VSI.

The disability ratings range from 0 to 100 percent (in increments of 10 percent). For example, in 2006:

- a veteran with a disability rating of 10 percent receives \$112;
- a veteran with a disability rating of 50 percent gets \$690; and
- a veteran who is totally disabled and therefore, evaluated at 100 percent, receives \$2,393 monthly.

(Continued on page 5, Compensation)

ABOUT THE "REVIEW"

This is the fifth issue of the "Operations Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom Review" newsletter. Earlier issues were dated December 2003, June 2004, February 2005, and September 2005. All of these issues are available online at www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents.

The newsletter is written by VA's Environmental Agents Service (EAS) to provide information for former military service members who served in Operation Iraqi Freedom, primarily in Iraq, for veterans who served in Afghanistan in Operation Enduring Freedom, their families, and for others interested in VA programs for these recent combat veterans.

The "Review" describes the health concerns from such service, and VA's programs and action by other governmental units to respond to the medical problems and other concerns of new veterans.

The newsletter is also intended to help provide information to veterans and their families concerned about the

health risks of exposure to various toxic substances. We hope to publish once or twice each year, depending on the amount of news on this subject, budgetary considerations, and reader interest. This newsletter was completed in early February 2006, and does not include developments that occurred after that time. **Publication was subsequently delayed for budgetary reasons.**

Questions, comments, and suggestions for future issues are encouraged and can be sent to the editor of the OIF/OEF Review, Donald J. Rosenblum, Deputy Director, Environmental Agents Service (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC 20420.

Requests for additional copies of the newsletter should also be sent to Mr. Rosenblum. Supplies are limited. Please specify the quantity and issue date requested.

Current and back issues of the "Reviews" are posted on the Internet at www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents.

(Continued from page 4, Compensation)

Veterans with disability ratings between 30 and 100 percent are also eligible for monthly allowances for a spouse ranging from \$40 to \$135, and for each child, \$20 to \$98. (The amount depends on the disability rating of the veteran.)

A veteran who is in need of regular aid and attendance of another person, or who is permanently housebound, may be entitled to additional benefits. VA must make the determination before the veteran can get these benefits.

To determine the eligibility of OIF/OEF veterans for disability compensation, VA adjudicators consider each case individually, looking at a number of factors, including the various exposures, duration of these exposures, elapsed time between exposure and onset of the disease, gender, family history, age at the time of exposure, the extent to which a nonservice-related exposure could contribute to the disease, and the relative sensitivity of exposed tissue.

For a given individual, VA will consider the possibility that various diseases were caused by exposures to numerous risk factors, if supported by medical/scientific evidence. To be eligible for compensation, VA must determine that it is at least as likely as not that a veteran's illness was caused by his/her exposure to toxic substances during military service.

Must Apply to Be Considered

Compensation is not automatically given to any veteran. VA veterans service representatives (VSRs) can provide the necessary application and assist veterans who need help in completing it. VSRs are located at all VA Regional Offices, in VA medical centers, and at most VA clinics. For help in locating a VSR near you, call the following toll-free telephone number: **1-800-827-1000**. You may also apply online at the Web site listed below.

Other Benefits

In addition to the compensation program described above, individual veterans may be eligible for health care and the full range of other benefits offered by VA, including education and training, vocational rehabilitation, home loan guarantees, life insurance, pension, burial benefits, and more.

To learn more about VA's programs, veterans and other interested parties can visit the VA home page <http://www.VA.gov>, or call 1-800-827-1000.

DISABILITY COMPENSATION RATES FOR 2006

No Dependents		Veteran with Spouse Only	
10%	\$112	—	—
20%	\$218	—	—
30%	\$337	30%	\$377
40%	\$485	40%	\$539
50%	\$690	50%	\$757
60%	\$873	60%	\$954
70%	\$1,099	70%	\$1,193
80%	\$1,277	80%	\$1,385
90%	\$1,436	90%	\$1,557
100%	\$2,393	100%	\$2,528

These rates were effective **December 1, 2005 in accordance with Public Law 109-111, enacted November 22, 2005**. Veterans with disability ratings of at least 30 percent are eligible for additional allowances for dependents. Dependents include spouses, minor children, children between ages 18 and 23 who are attending school, children who are permanently incapable of self-support because of disability arising before age 18, and dependent parents. The additional amount depends on the disability rating.

Veterans with certain severe disabilities may also be eligible for additional special monthly compensation. For additional rate information, see compensation rate tables online at www.vba.VA.gov/bln/21/Rates/comp01.htm.

ELECTRONIC NOTIFICATION OF NEWSLETTER AVAILABILITY

You can sign up to receive electronic notification of the publication and availability of future issues of the OIF/OEF Review online by logging on to our Web page, www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents and following the easy instructions.

ADDRESS CHANGES

If this newsletter has your old address, please use this form to update our mailing list. Send the completed form to the OIF/OEF Review, Austin Automation Center (200/397A), 1615 Woodward Street, Austin, TX 78772-0001.

If you have access to the OIF/OEF Review via the VA Web site www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents and wish to discontinue receiving a copy by mail, please complete the form below and return it to the Austin Automation Center. If you are receiving more than one copy of the newsletter, please let us know. Write to the Austin address at the bottom of page 5. Please provide your name, address, and social security number. Thank you.

Check or circle the language that describes your situation.

<input type="checkbox"/>	My address has changed, and I would like to continue to receive the newsletter.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I am receiving more than one copy, but I only want to get a single copy.
<input type="checkbox"/>	I don't need to get the newsletter by mail as I can read it at www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents .
<input type="checkbox"/>	Other (explain) _____
<p>You may use this or other paper. Please indicate which publication that you are receiving as this office puts out 4 national newsletters.</p>	

Please Print your:

First Name	
Middle	
Last	
SSN	
New Street/RFD/ Military Unit	
APO/FPO Indicate which if applicable	
City	
Alpha State/or APO/FPO Code	
Zip Code	

COMIC BOOK GETS THE WORD OUT TO NEW COMBAT VETERANS; VA Seeking Feedback

VA is trying something new to help new combat veterans and their families understand the range of benefits and programs VA offers.

Known around VA as graphical outreach, VA is testing a new comic book approach as a way to get important information about VA programs out to new veterans who may not know about everything that VA can do for them.

Of course, VA also has many other brochures and written materials explaining VA programs, but we think that some veterans may really like the comic book approach!

A Widely Used Approach

Many government agencies and private companies already use comic books for outreach and education. They all have the same goal to give basic information to people that is clear and attractive.

For example, many veterans are already familiar with military comic books and graphical instruction products used for teaching things like weapons and vehicle maintenance. Similarly, the Federal Bureau of Investigations (FBI) has a comic book on avoiding drug use.

In another example, the Epilepsy Foundation has a comic book that talks about dealing with epilepsy in young adults.

In fact, a lot of research shows that comic books are an effective form of training, for example, to promote the benefits of good eating habits and other ways to keep healthy.

Testing the Concept

To test this idea, VA has developed a test comic book called "America's Heroes: Volume 1 Homecoming". We're showing just the cover page here, but you can see the whole thing online at www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents.

Aimed at new veterans returning from Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom, the new comic book



Cover of Test Comic Book.

tries to show military service in a realistic and respectful way. We think it's pretty entertaining, but it also gives great basic information about most of the major VA programs available to veterans.

The comic book shows both men and women veterans who have different interests and concerns for their post-military lives. For example, it shows veterans who take advantage of VA home loan guarantee and educational benefits. It also shows some special programs VA has for veterans who may face problems coming back to civilian life.

Also, the back cover contains a listing of VA contact information for a wide variety of VA programs, for a veteran's future reference. We hope that veterans will find the new comic book so interesting that they will want to keep it for future reference.

This comic book is aimed at a general audience, but we are also considering new comic books for other veteran groups, such as women veterans and veterans from the Reserve and Guard.

You Can Help!

For VA, comic books are a new outreach and educational approach. We think it will be very helpful to veterans and their families. But, we want to make sure that this works!

We are inviting readers to take a look at the new comic book online, and help us evaluate it. Go to our Web site www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents; look for the test comic under the Animation heading (just above "Gilgamesh") at the bottom of the page. Click at the bottom of the page to advance the comic's pages one-at-a-time, or scroll down. You can click or scroll to get a previous page. The image size can be adjusted at the top of the page. Most people will need 100 or higher percent magnification to get a readable script resolution. We want to hear what you liked, what you did not like, and find out if it helped explain VA programs that might be useful to you now or in the future.

Where did you get this newsletter?

What did you like best about the comic book?

What did you like least?

Does it provide useful information about VA programs?

How could we improve the comic book to get this information to veterans?

Did you learn anything about VA programs that you might want more information about?

Would you like to get additional information about VA programs through future comic books? Why or why not?

Do you have any additional suggestions about the comic or outreach to OIF/OEF veterans?

OPTIONAL
Your name

Full Mailing address

Please check all that apply to you:

- I am an Iraqi Freedom Veteran
- I am an Enduring Freedom Veteran
- I am the spouse of an Iraqi Freedom Veteran
- I am the spouse of an Enduring Freedom Veteran
- Other (specify) _____

Please mail your comments to
**OIF/OEF Comic Book Review (131), VA Central Office,
810 Vermont Avenue, NW, Washington, DC 20420.**
Thank you.

VA TO SURVEY VETERANS FOR CENTERS OF EXCELLENCE AWARD PROGRAM

Later this year, VA will make the second round of presentations of the coveted Environmental Health Center of Excellence Awards. These awards are based on survey responses received from veterans who will be contacted by mail next month. The individual veterans being sent the survey had received the Agent Orange, Gulf War, or Ionizing Radiation Registry examination.

The survey will ask veterans to name a VA staff person, including a Registry clinician or coordinator, that has provided them with outstanding customer service. Veterans may wish to acknowledge the facility rather than an individual.

The following 13 centers were identified as exceptional in a similar survey conducted in 2004:

- VA Medical Center (VAMC) Boise, ID;
- VAMC Cheyenne, WY;
- VAMC Durham, NC;
- VAMC Fargo, ND
- VAMC Fresno, CA;
- VAMC Grand Junction, CO;
- VAMC Manchester, NH;
- W.G. (Bill) Hefner, VAMC Salisbury, NC;
- VAMC San Francisco, CA;
- VAMC White River Junction, VT;
- VA Outpatient Clinic (VAOPC) Oakland Park, FL;
- VA Community Based Outpatient Clinic Williamsport, PA; and
- VAOPC Winston-Salem, NC.

Lawrence W. Deyton, M.S.P.H., M.D., recently appointed Chief Public Health and Environmental Hazards Officer, will sign each certificate and request that the Center Directors arrange for display in areas where it could be easily recognized.

Environmental Agents Service (EAS) Director, Dr. Mark A. Brown indicated that EAS has decided to open up the process and welcome nominations from registry participants who do not receive a formal survey. Consequently, any veteran who has received excellent service from VA in the last year or two and would like to share his or her experience with EAS officials, can write to EAS, AWARDS, VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., DC 20420. We welcome your input. Please be specific.

NEW "YOUR STORY" BROCHURE SHOWS VETERANS HOW TO RECORD THEIR MILITARY HISTORY ONLINE

The Veterans Health Administration, the largest component of the Department of Veterans Affairs recently distributed to every VA Medical Center, Vet Center and Regional Office, a new brochure that explains how a veteran can record his or her military history online with "MyHealtheVet." The brochure is also available online at www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents.

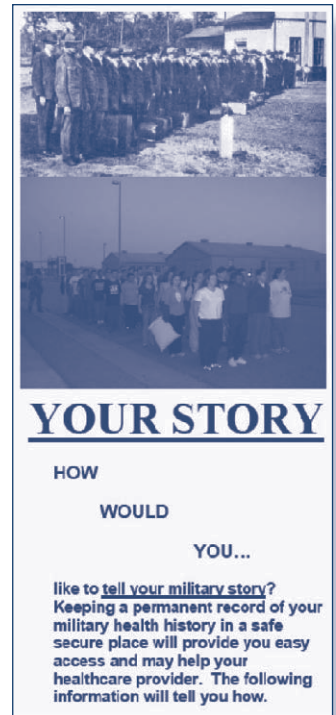
MyHealtheVet is a VA Web site that provides a great deal of health information for veterans and others. It is located at www.myhealth.VA.gov/.

The program lets veterans record their personal military history in privacy and at their convenience. The information is permanently and confidentially retained in MyHealtheVet.

If they wish, a veteran can choose to share their history with their health care providers and others. This is a totally voluntary program. Veterans are not required to participate.

In particular, details of incidents that may involve exposures to occupational and military hazards, including exposure to a wide range of environmental hazards encountered during military service, can be of value to veterans and to their health care providers as part of understanding a veteran's medical problems and complaints, and to help establish rapport.

The new brochure, titled "Your Story: How would you like to tell your military story," describes how to log on to "MyHealtheVet," and to record information about incidents that took place during a veteran's military career. According to VA officials responsible for maintaining the MyHealtheVet Web site, the "Your Story..." is the most popular item.



The program provides an online military history form that allows a veteran to easily record details including the time and location where an incident occurred, branch of service, military occupation and specialties, assignments, military or occupational exposures that may have occurred, and other relevant details.

STRAIGHT FROM THE SOURCE; VA's Environmental Agents Service is Serious About Communicating with Veterans

Communication is an important part of every relationship. For nearly 25 years, VA has been communicating with a special group of veterans who might have been exposed to environmental hazards while serving in combat.

Debuting in 1982, the *Agent Orange Review* was the first VA national newsletter designed to inform Vietnam veterans of health issues specifically related to their military service. It quickly proved to be “an invaluable resource of information for veterans and others,” according Layne Drash, former director of Environmental Agents Service in Office of Public Health and Environmental Hazards.

Back in the early 1980s, there was little knowledge in the veterans community about Agent Orange and the long-term effects of exposure to dioxin, Drash noted. So the newsletter was filling a communication void.

But to be effective, it had to present complicated information in an easy-to-read format. This was one of the toughest challenges, according to the newsletter’s first editor, Donna St. John, who now works for USO.

The VA Office of Public Affairs published the *Review* throughout the mid-1980s. In 1989, responsibility transferred to Donald Rosenblum in Environmental Agents Service. Under his watch, the concept of communicating directly with veterans has blossomed. Veterans want and need this information to protect their health. We give them as much information as we can find,” he explained.

Today, Rosenblum produces four national newsletters for veterans who may have been exposed to

environmental hazards: the *Agent Orange Review*, *Gulf War Review*, *Operation Iraqi Freedom/Enduring Freedom Review*, and *Ionizing Radiation Review*. Each newsletter is published about twice a year, depending on the amount of new information available.

The newsletters are sent directly to veterans registered on VA’s four health registries, which offer physical examinations tailored to address specific health issues, as well as VA medical centers, vet centers, regional offices and other interested parties.

The first issue of the *Gulf War Review* was released in October 1992. It was originally called the *Persian Gulf Review* but the name was changed in 1997 to be sensitive to individuals of Persian ethnicity. It offers up-to-date information on new clinical programs and the research agenda concerning health issues that arose during and after the 1991 Gulf War.

In 2003, Rosenblum began working on a newsletter for veterans of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, because their environmental exposures differed from veterans of the first Gulf War. So far, he has produced three 12-page issues with information on the possible long-term health consequences of military service in Iraq and Afghanistan.

With the publicity on Agent Orange and Gulf War health concerns, a group of veterans involved in the testing of nuclear weapons after World War II recently contacted VA to urge creation of a newsletter relating to their health concerns. In response, Rosenblum started the *Ionizing Radiation Review*.

Veterans seem to appreciate and benefit from the newsletters. One who receives the *Ionizing Radiation Review* responded in a reader survey that he liked having research findings compiled into a single source. He previously had to sift through reams of literature to find information and sometimes had to turn to “relatively obscure sources.”

To read editions of all four newsletters, visit www.VA.gov/Environagents/. For more information, contact: Donald J. Rosenblum, Deputy Director, Environmental Agents Service (131), VA Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, N.W., Washington, DC, 20420.

The above article was jointly prepared by Environmental Agents Service intern Tiffany Anzalone, then a graduate student at Louisiana State University, and Matt Bristol, Assistant Editor of the VA’s Employee magazine VAnguard. It appeared in the September/October issue of the VAnguard.



Donald Rosenblum with the newsletters he produces for veterans who may have been exposed to environmental hazards.

READERS' SURVEY RESULTS

From time to time, the editor of this newsletter takes a brief survey of its readership to ensure that the newsletter is “on the right track” and is responding to the needs of the readers. We ask for suggestions about additions and deletions, and for general comments about the publication. In the third issue of this newsletter, dated February 2005, we included such a survey.

Readers were asked whether he or she was a veteran, spouse of a veteran, or other relation, and whether they were a first time reader of the OIF/OEF Review. They were also asked what they thought of the newsletter, whether it met their needs, what changes they would like to see in the publication, and what additional comments and suggestions they have regarding the newsletter.

The respondents were invited to use the form included in the Review or to use their own paper. More than a dozen replies have been received, with mostly positive comments. Common remarks characterized the newsletter as

“Great,”

“Very informative,”

“Good information,”

“Lot of information, and

“Exceptionally informative.”

Several people questioned why there wasn't more about Afghanistan veterans.

Review editor Donald J. Rosenblum indicated that he was pleased with the survey response, but disappointed that the volume of reply was small. He noted that there were few suggestions offered for improvement of the newsletter.

No Need to Wait

If you have any comments or suggestions, we would really like to hear from you. Send your comments to:

Editor, OIF/OEF Review

Environmental Agents Service (131)

Environmental Agents Service

VA Central Office

Washington, DC 20420.

We read and consider all comments and suggestions, but due to the volume of correspondence received, we are unable to reply to each individual directly.

NEW VA INSURANCE BENEFITS OIF/OEF VETERANS' FINANCIAL SECURITY

VA's new Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance Traumatic Injury Protection program adds to the financial security and well-being of this country's military forces. Prudential Financial, Inc., the program's insurer, is making payments under this program, ranging from \$25,000 to \$100,000, to service members who experienced certain traumatic injuries while on active duty.

The program, which began on December 1, 2005, is designed to provide financial assistance to military families through extended times of medical treatment and recovery. Benefits are payable retroactively to October 7, 2001, for service members and veterans who suffered certain traumatic injuries while serving in Operation Iraqi Freedom or Operation Enduring Freedom.

VA and the Department of Defense are working to identify eligible service members and veterans. Eligibility information is available at www.insurance.VA.gov or by calling the Servicemembers' Group Life Insurance office at **1-800-419-1473**.

HELP PROVIDED BY MILITARY SEVERELY INJURED CENTER PROGRAM

“Seamless support as long as it may take” is the mission of the Military Severely Injured Center program. VA is part of this nationwide effort set up by the Department of Defense to meet the immediate financial, health care, employment and family needs of severely wounded Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

Veterans and family members can call toll-free at **1-888-774-1361** anytime (24 hours a day) for immediate assistance. The center is an advocate for the severely injured. It helps cut red tape, coordinate local assistance, and helps veterans meet the challenges of readjustment.

The Center works closely with local groups – veterans service organizations, businesses, chambers of commerce, religious groups, and other donors – to support the return and long-term reintegration of severely disabled veterans into their communities through Heroes to Hometown Committees. For information on establishing a committee, go to www.MilitaryHomeFront.dod.mil and search “Military Severely Injured Support.”

THE MARINES HAVE LANDED

Alert: The Marines Have Landed. Last year two active-duty Marines Corps officers joined the Seamless Transition Office at VA Central Office. The Marines are working with employees from the major components of VA to ease the transition of military service members to civilian life.

The Seamless Transition Office helps ensure priority access for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan, coordinate patients' health care and benefit needs, identify returning veterans, improve outreach to returning service members, and educate VA staff regarding transition assistance tools and services.

WRIISC OFFERS TRANSITION COURSE

The mission of the War Related Illness and Injury Study Center (WRIISC) is to provide service to combat veterans who have difficult-to-diagnose disabling illnesses through clinical care, risk communication, education, and research addressing potential environmental exposures and adverse health outcomes.

The WRIISC in Washington, DC has developed a Transition and Orientation Class to welcome and orient veterans who are new to the VA system. This class is designed for veterans returning from Iraq and Afghanistan who reside in the DC metropolitan area. The VA medical centers have a multitude of resources to offer new veterans. However, the size of the VA system may leave new veterans a little overwhelmed. The Transition and Orientation Class held at the Washington, DC VAMC is designed to ease the transition from active duty and help new veterans learn to navigate the VA system effectively. The Transition and Orientation Class provides information about many topics of interest to new veterans including:

- Introduction to health care benefits
- Information about filing a claim or troubleshooting an existing claim
- Overview of the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program
- Introduction to the Primary Care System

Speakers include representatives from the Veterans Benefits Administration, the Vocational Rehabilitation and Employment Program, the Social Work Service, and the WRIISC. This class is currently offered monthly, and each class lasts approximately an hour and one half. If you are a new combat veteran and live in the Washington, DC metropolitan area, please email us at wriisc.dc@VA.gov for more information on this class. Due to space limitations, reservations for this class are required. We look forward to hearing from you!

WHERE TO GET HELP

Active duty military personnel with questions or concerns about service in Southwest Asia (including Operations Iraqi Freedom, and Enduring Freedom) contact your commanding officer or call the Department of Defense (DoD) Gulf War Veterans' Hotline (**1-800-796-9699**) for information. DoD also offers the "**Direct Veterans Hotline,**" with the toll-free number **1-800-497-6261**.

Gulf War veterans, including OIF veterans with concerns about their health should contact their nearest VA medical center. The telephone number can be found in your local telephone directory under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. Medical care is available, and a Gulf War Registry examination is also available on request.

The **VA Gulf War Information Helpline** can also provide information and assistance. The toll-free telephone number is **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Check our Web sites for more Gulf War information on health care and other benefits (including those for Operations Iraqi Freedom and Enduring Freedom veterans) at www.VA.gov/GulfWar, www.VA.gov/EnvironAgents, and www.VA.gov.

Gulf War veterans in need of **marital/family counseling** should contact the nearest VA medical center or VA Vet Center, also listed in your phonebook under Department of Veterans Affairs in the "U.S. Government" listings. For additional information about these programs call the **VA Gulf War Information Helpline at 1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Gulf War veterans seeking disability compensation for illnesses incurred in or aggravated by military service can contact a Veterans Benefits Counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility at **1-800-827-1000**, or call the **VA Gulf War Information Helpline at 1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**. You can also start a claim online at www.VA.gov.

Gulf War veterans interested in learning about the wide range of benefit programs administered by VA should contact a Veterans Benefits Counselor at the nearest VA regional office or health care facility at **1-800- 827-1000**, or call the VA Gulf War Information Helpline at **1-800-PGW-VETS (1-800-749-8387)**.

Representatives of **veterans service organizations**, including the American Legion (**1-800-433-3318**), Veterans of Foreign Wars of the United States (**1-800-VFW-1899**), Disabled American Veterans (**1-877-426-2838**), etc., have been very helpful to Gulf War veterans, especially veterans who are seeking disability compensation. *(These organizations are cited as examples. There are many other excellent organizations. VA does not endorse or recommend anyone group over another.)*

County Veterans Service Officers also have been of great help to many military veterans, including those who served in the Gulf War, who are seeking benefits they earned through their service to the Nation.

For additional **Federal benefit** information, see VA's Federal Benefits for Veterans and Dependents booklet. It is updated annually to reflect changes in law and policies. It is available for purchase from the U.S., Government Printing Office, Superintendent of Documents, Washington, DC 20402, Web site: **bookstore.gpo.gov**. VA's World Wide Web pages are updated throughout the year to present the most current information. The VA home page (**www.VA.gov**) contains links to selections on compensation and pension benefits, health care benefits and services, burial and memorial benefits, etc.

**OPERATIONS IRAQI FREEDOM/
ENDURING FREEDOM REVIEW**
*Information for Veterans Who
Served in Iraq and Afghanistan
and Their Families*

February 2006

OFFICIAL BUSINESS
Penalty for private use \$300

Department of
Veterans Affairs
Central Office (131)
810 Vermont Avenue, N.W.
Washington, DC 20420

