

Vietnam Veterans of America

Chapter 324 - PO Box 18631 - Milwaukee, WI 53218

In Service to America



Meeting Notice

19 August, 2020

Elks Lodge 5555 W. Good Hope Rd.

Board Meeting 6:30 p.m.

Chapter Meeting 7 - 8 p.m.

Future Meetings 2020:

16 September, 21 October, 18 November

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National web page: www.vva.org

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John is listed in the phone book - good luck finding one

**ELECTIONS WILL BE HELD AT THE AUGUST MEETING
MEMBERS ARE URGED TO ATTEND - THERE WAS NO QUORUM IN JULY
*PLEASE OBSERVE SOCIAL DISTANCES, AND WEAR A MASK***

VA Debt Relief Extended to End of 2020

VA News Release, July 9, 2020

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) on 9 JUL announced its commitment to extend debt relief to Veterans adversely impacted by COVID-19 to the end of 2020 by suspending certain debt collection actions. The department recognizes Veterans and beneficiaries are still being greatly impacted by the coronavirus prompting the extension of financial relief.

“Veterans and their families should be focused on their health and safety during the pandemic,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “VA is taking action to give those with

pending debts greater flexibility during these challenging times.”

VA is suspending all actions on Veteran debts under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Treasury Department. This includes the suspension of collection action or extending repayment terms on preexisting VA debts, whichever the Veteran prefers. For benefit debts, Veterans should contact the VA Debt Management Center at 1-800- 827-0648. For health care debts, Veterans should contact the Health Resource Center at 1-866-400-1238 or <https://www.pay.gov> for payments.

Union Grove

COVID case count now at 16 in nursing home for veterans

Adam Rogan, Racine Journal Times, Aug. 6, 2020

DOVER — For months, state-run veterans homes have fought to keep coronavirus away from their vulnerable patients. Now, five months after new protocols were put in place, veterans at a Racine County nursing home have fallen sick with the coronavirus.

Sixteen cases of COVID-19 have been confirmed at the Wisconsin Veterans Home at Union Grove, which includes a 24-hour skilled nursing facility for veterans and their families at 21425 Spring St. in the Town of Dover, the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs reported Wednesday.

The first two cases, both of veterans living in the home, were confirmed earlier this week and announced Tuesday. After those two residents, both of whom reportedly were experiencing COVID-like symptoms, tested positive, two staff members and a

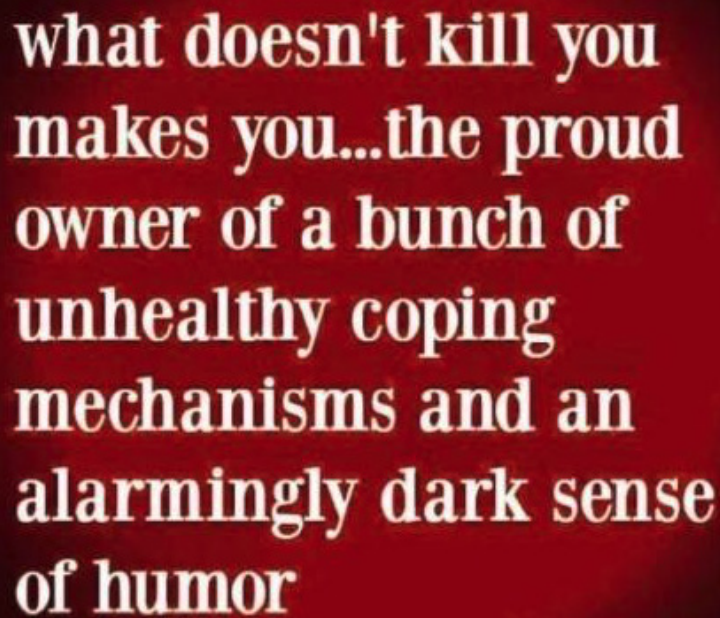
contracted medical professional also found out they had contracted the novel coronavirus. By Wednesday, everyone in the facility was being tested, leading to the discovery of 10 new cases among residents (bringing the total of residents sick with the coronavirus to 12) and a third staff member testing positive.

Nursing homes and similar long-term care facilities have been considered to be in particular danger of COVID-19 outbreaks, the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention has noted, because of the continuous close proximity of many people (staff and residents) and the elevated health risks faced by residents who tend to be older and in poorer health than the general public, and

thus are more likely to die if they contract the novel coronavirus.

“It is with a heavy heart that I share this news,” Diane Lynch, Wisconsin DVA Homes Division administrator, wrote in a letter to community members informing of them of the cases at the nursing home. “Our staff is working so hard to care for the veterans and others who live with us in a very challenging and stressful situation. For five long months, we have successfully beat the odds and through our diligence and steadfast effort we have kept this disease out of our home. Now our mission changes and we will work even harder to prevent its spread.”

The WDVA said that staff and residents at the facility have been routinely tested since March and this week is the first time any resident there has tested positive.



what doesn't kill you
makes you...the proud
owner of a bunch of
unhealthy coping
mechanisms and an
alarmingly dark sense
of humor

The residents who have confirmed cases of COVID-19 will quarantine in their own private rooms and will only be tended to by a “very limited number of staff” members, Lynch said, with their care being coordinated by each individual’s primary care physician. The staff members who tested positive are expected to quarantine at home.

“Please, for those who have served our country and those who support them, stay home whenever you can, wear a mask when you’re out, and try to stay at least 6 feet away from other people,” said Mary Kolar, secretary of the Wisconsin Department of Veterans Affairs. “If not for yourself, will you do it for them?”

Vietnam War veteran mends post-war wounds, one bomb at a time

By Hoang Tao, July 11, 2020

<https://e.vnexpress.net/news/news/vietnam-war-veteran-mends-post-war-wounds-one-bomb-at-a-time-4129057.html?fbclid=IwAR2k7G6rpw9LjKjks5Y08iYgSIR09o-e4Rr12VhCkmfgzIiORxjAHU8yt14>

For the past 25 years, Chuck Searcy has cleaned up explosives and helped disabled children in Quang Tri Province, a prime Vietnam War battleground.

Chuck Searcy is no stranger to the employees of Project RENEW, a Vietnamese organization that deals with unexploded ordnance left from the Vietnam War. His thin stature and silver hair are a stark contrast to his gregarious, lively persona. Traveling back and forth between Hanoi and Quang Tri Province, a major former battlefield in central Vietnam, Searcy has done all in his capacity to mend wartime wounds.

After all, Searcy had helped launch Project RENEW in 2001, now serving as its international advisor. At 75, Searcy joked he's actually 76 in Vietnamese perception and didn't speak the language well since he was lazy and not too bright.

Searcy first came to Vietnam in June 1967 as an officer for an intelligence unit in Saigon. For a year, he had collected all the information he could about the Vietnam War. Thanks to his job, which required him to deal with daily reports, Searcy had gained much insight into local politics, history, and culture.

He said Americans came to Vietnam to win the war. But they understood neither Vietnam nor the Vietnamese people. He realized so many of them had come to Vietnam for nothing, that it was a bad decision none had wanted in the first place.

When he returned to the U.S., Searcy joined the Vietnam Veterans Against the War (VVAW), telling people of the horrible things he had seen and calling for the war to stop. He returned to Vietnam in 1992 with other veterans, this time as a tourist. For a month, he had visited several provinces in the Mekong Delta, then traveled to Hanoi and moved southward from there, just so he could experience the country in its entirety.

He saw Vietnam like he never did before. Talking with locals along his journey, Searcy experienced how Vietnamese were friendly, open and hospitable to him as a tourist. Unlike their much more hostile attitudes upon learning he had been a U.S. soldier who had fought in the war.

He also saw how poor Vietnam had been back then. There were no tourists, no hotels and no electricity. There were, however, bombs. A lot of

bombs.

He saw many locals taking the bombs apart so they could salvage the explosives and metal. Searcy was aghast, shocked at how dangerous it was.

After his trip to Vietnam, he was a changed man. Thoughts about how he could help Vietnamese scarred by the war always occupied his mind. The next time he returned to the country was in 1993, and then in 1995 when Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund (VVMF) organized its first activities in Hanoi to help rehabilitate and employ disabled children. Searcy came along as a representative for the fund.

In Vietnam, Searcy continued to help disabled children, while learning more about local life during the war. He started to realize that even after the war had ended, thousands of Vietnamese still lost their lives to its instruments, the numerous bombs and other unexploded ordnance left behind in battle.

So Searcy called on anyone he could find: U.S. government officials, military officers and fellow veterans, telling them they had to take responsibility for the explosives the U.S. left behind in Vietnam. At first however, it was difficult convincing them as both parties still lacked much-needed trust.

But his efforts paid off in 1996, when the U.S. government sponsored Vietnam a \$3 million bomb disposal device. Then in 2001, Searcy helped found Project RENEW with Norwegian People's Aid (NPA) as a primary partner in Quang Tri. The project aims to cleaning up unexploded ordnance as well as provide medical assistance, rehabilitation and income for bomb and mine victims.

Nguyen Hieu Trung, coordination manager of RENEW, said Searcy has been a long-time friend of Quang Tri. He was the one who had helped expand RENEW's staff from four in the organization's earliest days to around the current 250, and extend the organization's reach to other localities like Quang Binh and Quang Ngai provinces, said Trung.

Today, Searcy, the chairman of the Vietnamese branch of Veterans for Peace (VFP), lives in Hanoi and often drinks coffee with his friends.

But one thing is for sure, Chuck Searcy is here to stay, he pledged. He would continue to help both the people of Vietnam and the U.S. to relieve post-war pain, and to bridge the gaps between the two countries.

VA Surgery Outperforms/Matches Civilian Hospitals

VA Press Release, July 20, 2020

The U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs on 20 JUL announced their hospitals outperform or match neighboring non-VA hospitals in surgical quality and overall patient safety satisfaction. The finding comes from a study conducted by VA and university researchers that was published 26 JUN, in the Journal of Surgical Research. “The prospect of having surgery can be stressful,” said VA Secretary Robert Wilkie. “For Veterans, who often have choices in where they receive care, it is in their best interest to make fully informed health care decisions. This study provides valuable information when faced with such an important choice.”

Researchers at the White River Junction VA Medical Center in Vermont and the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center in New Hampshire completed the study. They identified VA medical centers with at least one non-VA hospital within 25 miles in three U.S. regions: West-Southwest, New England and Deep South. With a sample of 34 VA facilities and 319 neighboring non-VA hospitals, the researchers used benchmarks created by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality.

They also used scores from the Hospital Consumer Assessment of Healthcare Providers and Systems. The results showed VA facilities performed better or as good as non-VA hospitals in overall patient safety indicators (PSIs), which measure potential hospital complications and adverse events following surgeries and other procedures. VA hospitals performed much better in surgery specific PSIs.

The researchers also found VA and non-VA hospitals were about equal in patient satisfaction with overall hospital experience. The data was collected from Hospital Compare, a publicly available database that helps consumers decide where to seek health care. The Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services runs the database. You can visit VA’s Office of Research and Development at <https://www.research.va.gov>.

VA 30 Year Abortion Ban Gets Critical Look

Nikki Wentling, Stars & Stripes, July 1, 2020

The Department of Veteran Affairs’ nearly 30-year abortion ban received a critical look from lawmakers 30 JUN, some of whom argued it was a “harsh” inequity for a growing number of female veterans. A law passed by Congress in 1992 prohibits the VA from performing abortions or counseling women about them. On a VA webpage about women’s health services, the department states, “Please note that we cannot, by law, provide abortion services.” Rep. Julia Brownley (D-CA) juxtaposed the ban with the U.S. Supreme Court decision 29 JUN to strike down a controversial Louisiana abortion law that would’ve closed two of the state’s three abortion clinics. Brownley said the legal battle “highlighted how denying veterans health care within a system they rely on imposes prohibitive, geographic and financial barriers on women.”

“I call on Secretary Wilkie to prioritize reproductive care and expand medical care to include abortion and abortion counseling,” Brownley said. She introduced the Reproductive Health Information for Veterans Act earlier this year, which would require the VA to provide abortion services. Brownley, a member of the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, held a hearing 30 JUN to address gaps in reproductive health care for female veterans, including the ban on abortion

services, limited access to infertility care and a policy that requires copayments for birth control.

Kayla Williams, a senior fellow at the Center for a New American Security and the former director of the Center for Women Veterans, said Congress would need to take action on all three issues, rather than relying on the VA to intercede. The VA “has neglected to take action for so long now that I believe they require congressional attention,” Williams said. Women who benefit from other federal systems – including Medicare, Tricare, the Indian Health Service and the federal prison system – have more access to abortion services, Williams said. “However we feel about abortion, we should not deny it to women veterans just because they use the VA,” she said.

Rep. Phil Roe (R-TN), the ranking Republican on the House Committee on Veterans’ Affairs, opposed any effort to lift the ban. “I will oppose any effort the VA has to expand abortion,” Roe said. “I want to make that part of the record right now. I will oppose that with every effort in my body. I think we need to change hearts and minds. Life is a precious gift from God.” Sen. Brownley’s bill H.R. 5568 was introduced in the House 9 JAN 2020 and was subsequently referred to the Subcommittee on Health by the Committee on Veterans’ Affairs.

VA continues to deny care

DOD knew K2 troops were exposed to cancer-causing toxins

STEVE BEYNON, STARS AND STRIPES July 9, 2020

WASHINGTON — Recently declassified

Defense Department documents show the Pentagon knew troops were exposed to multiple toxins and hazards that have led to hundreds of cancer cases and dozens of dead veterans after deploying to Uzbekistan in the early days of the War on Terror. The Department of Veterans Affairs is denying most of them care and disability.

Karshi-Khanabad Air Base, known as K2, is a former Soviet air base in southeastern Uzbekistan that shares a border with northern Afghanistan. After the 9/11 attacks, the U.S. established Camp Stronghold Freedom at K2, which was used to support combat missions from 2001 to 2005. Veterans described a toxic environment at the post, where pond water glowed green, black sludge oozed from the ground and the government posted massive white and yellow signs warning troops to keep out of certain areas due to chemical agents.

On Thursday, the House Subcommittee on National Security released previously classified documents provided by the military in 2001, 2002 and 2004 that reveal a mountain of evidence that service members were exposed to voluminous health risks including cancer-risking toxins.

Most notably, the former Soviet base had contained chemical weapons, enriched uranium and soil saturated with fuels and other solvents that formed a “black goo.”

The documents were declassified in February, but Defense officials waited until July to alert Congress, according to a release from the House Committee on Oversight and Reform. Former service members who spent time at K2 testified before on Capitol Hill in February that they were aware of at least 400 individuals diagnosed with cancers who served at the base. They said at least 30 have died.

During a health assessment test in 2001, military analysts found the base had “elevated levels of volatile organic compounds and total petroleum hydrocarbons (TPH) were detected at numerous locations throughout Stronghold Freedom, including tent city, eastern expansion area and adjacent to the aircraft maintenance facility.” It also found that ambient air is the “main concern for environmental contaminants.”

A 2002 assessment recommended not to dig “into soil contaminated with jet fuel,” but those areas were populated with tents soldiers slept in and aircraft hangars, according to the declassified document. In the same year, another DOD health risk assessment found “between 50% and 75% of personnel at Stronghold Freedom” would be exposed to elevated levels.”

“The Department of Veterans Affairs continues to deny these illnesses are related and continue to deny benefits,” Rep. Stephen Lynch, D-Mass., said in a call with reporters Thursday. VA did agree to a study on K2 veterans, according to Lynch. “It should not have been this hard to convince VA to make this commitment. ... K2 veterans have time-sensitive needs that need to be addressed now.”

Five months after the United States invaded Afghanistan, air samples at the base found elevated levels of tetrachloroethylene. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, “Studies in humans suggest that exposure to tetrachloroethylene might lead to a higher risk of getting bladder cancer, multiple myeloma or non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, a cancer that originates in the lymphatic system”

An estimated 7,000 troops served at K2 the first four years of the war in Afghanistan. However, the number might not include troops who served there on short, temporary assignments or certain special operators serving highly classified missions.

“K2 was a crime scene in need of an investigation, this is only the beginning of the investigation,” Mark Jackson a veteran who served at K2 said.

The VA’s perceived slow movement and unclear communication on the issue after two decades of Middle East wars have had some compare it to the decades it took for veterans sickened with Agent Orange to finally get benefits.

“We were told by the VA they did not have scientific data to what conditions existed at K2 and how that was connected to conditions,” said Paul Widener, another veteran who served at K2.

“At this time, research does not show evidence of long-term health problems from exposure to burn pits. VA continues to study the health of deployed veterans,” according to the VA’s website. s is more than a year away.



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