

Vietnam Veterans of America

Chapter 324 - 240552 - Milwaukee WI. 53224.

In Service to America



Meeting Notice

18 October, 2023

5555 W. Good Hope Rd.
Board Meeting 6:30 p.m.
Chapter Meeting 7 - 8 p.m.

18 October, 2023

Future Meetings

Nov 15, Dec. 20

2025

Jan 17, Feb 21, Mar 20, Apr 17, May 15

Chapter web page: www.vietnamvetschapter324.com

National web page: www.vva.org

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VIETNAM VETERANS OF AMERICA
Milwaukee Chapter 324
September 20, 2023

Meeting called to Order at 7:00 pm by President Pat Ciofani
Minutes of the July 19th 2023 meeting reviewed and accepted
Treasurer's Report - \$5744.63 balance in our checking account

COMMITTEE REPORTS

Website – Contact Pat Moore with items of interest to the chapter

NEW BUSINESS

Domain Fee – Moved and passed to pay \$237 To maintain our internet domain site
Annual Christmas Party – Moved and passed to have our annual Christmas Party instead of our December 20th meeting. Details will follow.

Adjournment – 7:30 pm

Cobra Pilot Is Awarded Medal of Honor at White House Ceremony

By Steve Beynon, 5 Sep 2023, Military.com

President Joe Biden awarded the Medal of Honor on Tuesday to Capt. Larry Taylor, a Vietnam War pilot who flew his attack helicopter into heavy enemy gunfire until he ran out of ammunition, then led a daring rescue of a small team of soldiers who had been left for dead.

It was June 18, 1968. A four-man, long-range reconnaissance patrol team was surrounded and about to be overrun by more than 100 Vietnamese enemy fighters.

Taylor, flying one of two AH-1G Cobra helicopters, reached the battlefield just northeast of Saigon. He slammed the advancing enemy with rockets and minigun fire for nearly an hour, trying to buy time for a rescue helicopter to arrive. But that rescue mission was called off when leaders determined the four-man team on the ground were certain to die and that rescue craft would be shot down.

Taylor's aircraft was so heavily damaged that it was at a huge risk of losing function, and he was ordered to retreat back to base.

But he refused the order.

Taylor, piloting his two-man attack helicopter, initiated his own unconventional and dangerous rescue attempt.

Taylor was at the White House ceremony on Tuesday, where Biden draped the highest military award for valor around his neck.

He flew over 2,000 combat missions in Cobra and UH-1 helicopters, and was forced down by enemy fire five times.

During the fighting in 1968, Taylor served

with D-Troop, 1st Squadron, 4th Cavalry, 1st Infantry Division.

The soldiers on the ground fired a flare, showing then-1st Lt. Taylor exactly where they were to avoid friendly fire. But doing so also showed the Vietnamese forces their location, inviting more intense, and precise, attacks. The enemy was so close, the helicopters were firing directly in front of the recon team.

The soldiers were directed to open ground, where the Cobra could land. In a typical situation, as the troops on the ground broke away from the enemy, they would be covered by another friendly force -- in this case, attack helicopters -- to rain down fire to keep the enemy pinned down and distracted.

But after some final minigun bursts, the Cobras were out of ammunition. Taylor then flew dangerously close to the enemy and did all the maneuvers of an attack run to draw their fire. Not knowing the helicopter was out of ammo and no longer a threat, the Vietnamese fighters targeted Taylor, giving the recon team time to escape.

"He drew the enemy fire himself, tricking the enemy into thinking he still had ammo," Biden said.

Taylor, with his helicopter painted with bullet holes, landed to retrieve the recon team. But a Cobra has no cargo room for passengers; it has space only for the pilots. So the reconnaissance team held onto the skids and rocket pods outside of the helicopter. Soaked in mud, those would likely have frozen on a flight all the way back to base, so Taylor landed in a safe location, from which they made their way back on foot.

1 in 3 PACT Act Claims Received a 0% Disability Rating

By Patricia Kime, Military.com, 21 Sep 2023

The Department of Veterans Affairs has approved nearly 80% of the 570,000 claims it has adjudicated under the PACT Act, distributing more than \$2.2 billion in disability compensation to veterans or survivors since it began accepting claims last year.

Of the total claims, however, 34% have received a 0% disability rating, meaning that affected veterans have at least one service-connected condition under the law that is not disabling -- for example, hypertension, which has been linked to Agent Orange exposure, that is controlled by medication.

The VA is now reviewing its ratings schedule to determine whether it can revise it to address medically controlled conditions such as hypertension, VA Under Secretary for Benefits Joshua Jacobs told reporters Thursday.

With veterans service organizations and many affected veterans raising concerns about the 0% disability ratings they have received, Jacobs asked his staff "to explore whether we have the flexibility to consider revising the ratings schedule."

The review will include examining medical research and published studies and working with the Veterans Health Administration to determine how to proceed, Jacobs said.

The VA has received more than 1 million PACT Act-related claims and has processed roughly 570,000, according to Jacobs. Nearly 1.3 million additional claims not related to the PACT Act also have been filed this fiscal year, and together with PACT Act claims, they represent a 40% increase over the record-setting number of claims in fiscal 2022.

Still, veterans who fought to have illnesses such as hypertension recognized as service-connected are frustrated that they aren't among those receiving disability compensation.

According to VA, 82.1% of PACT Act-related claims for hypertension have received a 0% disability rating.

Former Army Spc. Jeff O'Malley, a Vietnam veteran whose Freedom of Information Act requests exposed an internal fight within the VA over including hypertension as presumptive condition for Agent Orange, noted that many survivors of cancers included in the PACT Act receive compensation even if their cancer is in remission, but those with hypertension aren't receiving any.

"I'm proud of the PACT Act," O'Malley said

in a text message to Military.com. "I think we need to rethink minimum ratings for approved claims."

Jacobs said many veterans have more than one health condition that qualifies for VA disability compensation, so their total disability ratings are usually higher than the rating for any one illness. He noted that a 0% disability rating entitles veterans to benefits that include health care, prescriptions, co-payment waivers and federal hiring preferences.

Also, Jacobs said, a 0% disability rating can lead to "secondary service-connected conditions." In the case of hypertension, if the condition causes heart disease, the veteran would get service connection for that illness and "would likely have a higher rating," Jacobs said.

That response doesn't sit well with veterans like O'Malley, whose blood pressure is difficult to manage. "I will have a stroke and it will be too late," O'Malley said.

The PACT Act expanded health care and disability benefits to up to 6 million veterans exposed to burn pits and other environmental pollution while serving in the Middle East, Southeast Asia and elsewhere, including post-9/11, Persian Gulf War and some Vietnam-era veterans -- the largest expansion of VA benefits in three decades.

It removed a requirement that veterans or their survivors, depending on where the military member served, prove service connection for more than 23 health conditions, including respiratory diseases, several types of cancer, high blood pressure and more.

The VA has not provided a list of PACT Act-related conditions that have received the 0% disability rating. Based on anecdotal information from veterans service organizations, hypertension appears to be at the top of the list, but some conditions such as asthma, rhinitis and hypothyroidism also can be medically managed.

According to data from the VA provided to Military.com, the average total disability rating for veterans with granted PACT Act claims is 70%. Jacobs said he expects the review to yield information on any ratings change in the coming months, adding that a decision must work within "a very clear framework of legal authorities."

Jacobs said he has heard stories that some veterans have considered going off their medications so that when they receive their compensation and pension exam, their "numbers are off the charts."

Psychedelics Show Promise for Treating PTSD

By Patricia Kime, Military.com., 5 Oct 2023

For eight years, Marine and Army veteran Jonathan Lubecky suffered flashbacks and nightmares, got rip-roaring drunk to quell his troubled mind, took 42 pills a day to address various medical conditions, and attempted suicide multiple times.

An emergency visit to the Department of Veterans Affairs hospital in Charleston, South Carolina, in 2014 changed his life, not because he was able to get treatment -- no inpatient psychiatric beds were available that day -- but because an intern slipped him a note.

It said, "Google MDMA/PTSD."

The intern knew that in Charleston, a researcher for the Multidisciplinary Association for Psychedelic Studies, or MAPS, was conducting a safety trial on the use of MDMA -- 3,4-methylenedioxymethamphetamine, also known as ecstasy or molly -- for treatment-resistant post-traumatic stress disorder.

Nine years later, having enrolled in the study and received three MDMA-assisted therapy sessions, Lubecky has no thoughts of suicide. He has founded his own company, traveled to Ukraine three times for humanitarian work, and lived through several personal traumas without recurrence of his PTSD.

MDMA and the psychotherapy he underwent while using the drug have led him to where he is today.

"I'm now PTSD-free longer than I had it," said Lubecky during the VA's inaugural New Horizons in Health podcast. "It's like doing therapy while being hugged by everyone who loves you with a basketful of puppies licking your face."

Since 2011, MAPS has studied the potential of MDMA to put PTSD in remission, most recently releasing the results of Phase 3 clinical trials in the journal *Nature* that confirmed its safety and efficacy in patients with PTSD.

With those promising results and the organization preparing to file a new drug application with the Food and Drug Administration later this year, the VA is exploring ways to expand research into psychedelic drugs like MDMA and psilocybin -- the active drug in psychedelic mushrooms -- to treat PTSD, depression, substance use disorder and more across the veteran population.

The VA is restricted from conducting large-

scale studies of these medications because MDMA and psilocybin are illegal in most states and at the federal level, where they are listed as Schedule 1 drugs by the Drug Enforcement Agency.

But according to VA Under Secretary for Health Dr. Shereef Elnahal, department researchers have received waivers to support ongoing studies and have conducted research funded with private donations rather than federal money.

VA scientists are interested in exploring the protocols for psychedelics-assisted therapy and how the department can support the research nationwide, as well as build the infrastructure needed for larger clinical trials, according to Elnahal.

"If and when this becomes available," Elnahal said during the New Horizons podcast, "VA will be able to scale it, I think, better than any other health care system because of our focus particularly on veterans."

The VA is invested in novel approaches to treat mental health conditions in former service members because such conditions can be debilitating or even life-threatening. Studies show that PTSD, either alone or when diagnosed with other mental health conditions, is associated with suicide.

Data released last year showed 6,146 veterans took their own lives in 2020, 342 fewer deaths than 2019 and 650 fewer deaths than in 2018. Data for 2021 is expected in the coming weeks.

According to the VA, of the 6 million veterans enrolled in VA health care in 2021, 10% of male veterans and 19% of female veterans were diagnosed with PTSD.

Standard treatments for PTSD include cognitive processing therapy, prolonged exposure therapy, and eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, along with drug therapies such as Zoloft and Paxil.

Lubecky said he tried most standard therapies but, while they may be effective for other veterans, they didn't work for him. MDMA, which increases the release of neurotransmitters responsible for feelings of positivity, energy and alertness, combined with therapy proved to be effective, although he admitted that the sessions were a challenge.

"It's not the MDMA that fixed you. It's the therapist working with you putting in the hard work,"

Continued next page

Psychedelics continued

Lubecky said during the podcast. “The medicine just puts the mind, body and spirit in the place it needs to be so the problem can be fixed.”

According to the results of the most recent Stage 3 clinical trial, nearly 87% of the patients who received MDMA-assisted therapy showed significant improvement in their PTSD symptoms more than four months after treatment.

By the study’s end, 71% no longer met the diagnostic criteria for having PTSD.

Two participants who received MDMA reported having serious thoughts of suicide, although no one involved in the study -- neither the MDMA or placebo group -- attempted suicide.

MDMA is not without its risks. It is linked to high blood pressure, seizures and kidney failure, and its use can cause negative aftereffects such as irritability, depression, anxiety and memory issues, according to the National Institute on Drug Abuse.

Lubecky and VA officials expressed concern that the buzz over its success as a PTSD treatment as well as new research on psilocybin as a potential therapy for PTSD and major depressive disorder will encourage veterans who can’t enroll in a clinical trial to self-medicate.

Given the risk of a negative reaction and potential contamination of black market medications with substances like fentanyl, VA officials warn veterans to steer clear.

“When you are using recreationally, you are finding something on the street. You don’t know what you are taking and what’s in that pill. That’s a risk that I hope that will cause people some pause,” said Dr. Ilse Wiechers, deputy executive director of the VA’s Office of Mental Health and Suicide Prevention, during the podcast.

With MAPS wrapping up more than 12 years of research on MDMA as a treatment for combat-related PTSD, the organization plans to seek approval of the therapy from the FDA in 2024. The agency granted a “breakthrough therapy” status to the treatment in 2017.

The Drug Enforcement Agency also will need to weigh in, removing it from the list of illicit controlled substances.

To date, the DEA has been reluctant to alter that list, known as Schedule 1, to include declassifying medical cannabis, which remains illegal under

federal law but is now allowed either for medical or recreational use in 38 states.

Legislation currently under consideration by Congress includes amendments that would require the Department of Defense and VA to study the use of marijuana to treat PTSD, depression and chronic pain in service members and veterans.

The legislation, part of the House version of the National Defense Authorization Act, also would require the Pentagon to conduct clinical trials on the MDMA and psilocybin for PTSD, traumatic brain injury and chronic traumatic encephalopathy.

The amendments were introduced by Rep. Nancy Mace, R-S.C., and Rep. Morgan Luttrell, R-Texas, a former Navy SEAL.

Lubecky said he would like more veterans to be able to access MDMA therapy, and he has become a proponent, establishing an advocacy firm focusing on psychedelic research.

“I don’t know the date of the first night I didn’t have nightmares. I know the first night I remember I didn’t have nightmares. I don’t remember the first day I didn’t think about suicide, but I remember the day I realized I didn’t and that was an amazing day,” Lubecky said during the podcast.





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