



The Straight Scoop

Department Newsletter of the
Marine Corps League
Department of West Virginia
P.O. Box 11828
Charleston, WV 25339



Volume 10, Issue 12, December 2017

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MERRY CHRISTMAS AND HAPPY NEW YEAR TO EVERYONE

Chaplain's Corner

He hoped his shoes were shinning,
Just as brightly as his brass.
"Step forward now "Marine"
How shall I deal with you."

Have you always turned the other cheek?
To my Church have you been true? The Marine
Squared his shoulders and said, No Lord, I guess I haven't
Because those of us who carry guns, can't always be a saint.

I've had to work most Sundays,
And at times my talk was tough.
And sometimes I've be violent,
Because the world is awfully rough.

But I never took a penny
That wasn't mine to keep...
Though I worked a lot of overtime,
When the bills just got too steep.

And I never passed a cry for help
Though at times I shook with fear.
And sometimes, God forgive me,
I've wept unmanly tears.

I know I don't deserve a place
Among the people here;
They never wanted me around
Except to calm their fears.

If you've a place for me, Dear Lord,
It needn't be so grand;
I never had expected much
But if you don't, I'll understand.

There was silence all around the throne
Where the saints had often trod;
As the Marine waited quietly
For the judgement of his God.

Step forward now, Marine;
You've borne your burdens well
Walk peacefully on Heavens' streets,
You've done your time in Hell

*This probably brings back some memories,
Chaplain Frank*

2018 VA Compensation Rates

Rating	Veteran	Married
10%	\$136.24	\$136.24
20%	\$269.30	\$269.30
30%	\$417.15	\$466.11
40%	\$600.90	\$667.20
50%	\$855.41	\$938.03
60%	\$1,083.52	\$1,182.46
70%	\$1,365.48	\$1,480.74
80%	\$1,587.25	\$1,719.85
90%	\$1,783.68	\$1,932.60
100%	\$2,973.86	\$3,139.67

Department Officer Nominations

Department Sr Vice Commandant Scott Kirby is Chairman of the Department Nominating Committee. The following Department Officers will be elected during the Department Convention in Gallipolis, Ohio on May 5, 2018. Commandant, Sr Vice Commandant, Jr Vice Commandant and Judge Advocate. Nominations for these positions can be submitted to Sr Vice Commandant Kirby commencing January 2018. Floor nominations will be taken at the Department Convention.

Hershel "Woody" Williams Scholarship Foundation Applications

Foundation Chairman John Nanny has mailed out applications to every detachment Commandant in the Department. The applications may be reproduced as needed. The Foundation normally awards four scholarships in the amount of \$1000.00. This is one-time scholarship so prior recipients are not eligible. The deadline for applications must be postmarked no later than March 15th, 2018. Please assure that all portions of the application are completed, all requested materials are included and proof of eligibility from the local Marine Corps League is verified. The application includes additional information required to complete and submit the application properly. Paying attention to detail is necessary in submission of an application. In the seventeen years since the Scholarship Foundation was instituted, 105 scholarships totaling \$87,000 have been awarded.

Department Awards

Department Awards Chairman Don Dearth will send out nomination forms for the following department awards after January 2018. Detachments should be considering those individuals who they desire to nominate for one or more of these awards.

DEPARTMENT HEART & SOUL AWARD is presented in recognition of this Marine Corps League member's outstanding spirit and enhancement of the mission and principles of the U. S. Marine Corps and Marine Corps League from May 2017 to March 2018

COMMANDANT OF THE YEAR AWARD is presented in recognition of this Marine Corps League member's outstanding leadership and guidance in meeting all department and national guidelines, policies and procedures from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT COMMUNITY AWARD is presented in recognition of this Detachment's outstanding public relations contributions and community involvement from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT AMERICANISM AWARD is presented in recognition of promoting patriotism, citizenship, participating in parade activities, and observing all traditions of U.S. Marine Corps and Marine Corps League from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT ADJUTANT/PAYMASTER AWARD is presented in recognition of this Marine Corps League member's outstanding administrative and fiscal practices and procedures in the Marine Corps League from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT SERVICE OFFICER AWARD is presented in recognition of this Marine Corps League member's outstanding service performance and volunteer work to veterans and their dependents from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT NEWSLETTER AWARD is presented to Detachment_____ in recognition for publishing an outstanding newsletter that conforms to the National Newsletter guidelines from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT COMMENDATION AWARD is presented in recognition for displaying outstanding principles and purposes of the U. S. Marine Corps and Marine Corps League from May 2017 to March 2018

DEPARTMENT RECRUITER OF THE YEAR AWARD is presented in recognition to this Marine Corps League member for recruiting the highest number of new Marine Corps League members for the period May 2017 to March 2018

Department of West Virginia Marine of the Year Award

Steve Swenton, President, Department of West Virginia Marine of the Year Society will be sending out an announcement for the 2018 Department of West Virginia Marine of the Year after January 2018. Detachments should be considering and submitting a member for nomination for this prestige award upon receipt of the announcement letter.

After 18 months of Study, VA Delays Adding New Agent Orange Illnesses

After 18 months of review by his department, VA Secretary David J. Shulkin awkwardly announced Wednesday that he plans to "further explore" adding ailments to the list of compensable conditions VA presumes were caused by exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides used during the Vietnam War.

The decision to punt long-anticipated decisions on Agent Orange-related ailments will disappoint thousands of aging veterans with bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, Parkinson-like tremors and hypertension (high blood pressure).

Veterans and survivors were hopeful some or all of those conditions would be added to VA's presumptive list of ailments linked to wartime herbicides, based on the latest and final review of medical and scientific literature on Agent Orange from the National Academy of Medicine (formerly known as the Institute of Medicine).

Instead, on the Nov. 1 deadline date that VA itself had set for this packet of decisions, Shulkin issued a brief statement at 6 p.m. promising only more delay.

"After thoroughly reviewing the National Academy of Medicine (NAM)'s latest report regarding veterans and Agent Orange, and associated data and recommendations from [VA's] NAM Task Force, I have made a decision to further explore new presumptive conditions for service connection that may ultimately qualify for disability compensation. I appreciate NAM's work and the commitment and expertise of [my] Task Force, and

look forward to working with the [Trump] administration on the next steps in the process.”

A last sentence, not attributed to Shulkin, explained that the VA “will begin work with the administration to concurrently conduct a legal and regulatory review of these potential presumptive conditions for awarding disability compensation to eligible veterans.”

In the past, VA began a regulatory review only after the Secretary approved new ailments for the list. Shulkin hasn’t named any new illnesses. In conceding that VA experts already had “thoroughly” reviewed the latest science, however, Shulkin seemed to signal that parties elsewhere in the Trump administration didn’t want a VA announcement at this time rejecting or embracing new conditions.

“We thought we were going to get a decision sometime today,” said Rick Weidman, executive director for policy and government affairs for Vietnam Veterans of America. “Obviously we were mistaken. What they issued, to quote Sarah Huckabee Sanders [White House press secretary], is a Nothing Burger.”

“I am shocked and dismayed if this is the VA Secretary’s decision, to continue to delay,” emailed Carla Dean, who lost her husband, a Vietnam veteran, to bladder cancer last year. Now president of the Bladder Cancer Foundation of Florida, Dean said she remained hopeful that Shulkin will do the “right thing soon.”

One Vietnam veteran from Wisconsin who has fought bladder cancer since 2006 expressed “complete disappointment” with Shulkin’s statement. Asking that his name be withheld, he said he served at a “heavily sprayed” combat base in Quang Tri province. Lifelong residual effects of bladder cancer surgery, he said, include incontinence, impotence, severe weight loss and fatigue. He twice has been denied VA disability compensation because his cancer is not on the “presumptive” list.

“I have talked to many other vets and the general feeling is that if the VA delays long enough, there won’t be any veterans left to worry about compensating for Agent Orange, because we will all have passed,” he said.

A spokesman for Rep. Phil Roe (R-Tenn.), chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, said he is reviewing the VA’s announcement. But Roe “believes veterans waiting for a final decision deserve certainty, and [he] hopes Secretary Shulkin will work quickly to finish the legal and regulatory reviews.”

Dr. Kenneth S. Ramos, associate vice president for Precision Health Sciences and a professor of medicine at the University of Arizona, chaired the committee of medical experts that produced the NAM report that Shulkin has deferred acting on.

Ramos said his “gut reaction” to the statement “is that it’s positive. It’s very encouraging that the recommendations brought forth by the committee were thoroughly evaluated and are being considered for reevaluation by the department.” Ramos added, “The tone suggests receptivity to the seed that the National Academy has provided. When you look at past experience, any change in compensation policies seems to take time moving through the system.”

NAM delivered its report, *Veterans and Agent Orange: Update 2014*, to VA in March last year, after reviewing medical and scientific literature published from Oct. 1, 2012, through Sept. 30, 2014. NAM found evidence to support changing the strength of association between herbicide exposure and several ailments.

For bladder cancer and hypothyroidism, it found “limited or suggestive” evidence of an association to herbicide exposure, an upgrade from “inadequate or insufficient” evidence found earlier. For some ailments, including Parkinson’s and ischemic heart disease, limited or suggestive evidence has been judged strong enough to add the illnesses to the presumptive list. For other diseases, including hypertension, which is common in an aging population, it hasn’t been enough.

The NAM review also looked again at cardiovascular conditions and herbicide exposure. It didn’t upgrade the

link to heart ailments but it did affirm limited or suggestive evidence that hypertension is linked to herbicide exposure.

It also studied whether conditions with Parkinson's-like symptoms should fall into the same limited or suggestive category as Parkinson's disease itself. NAM found "no rational basis" for excluding Parkinson-like symptoms from the same risk category. Parkinson's disease was added to VA's presumptive list in 2010.

Under a law Congress let expire in 2015, the VA Secretary had 180 days to consider a NAM report before deciding whether to expand the list of presumptive diseases to trigger automatic eligibility for disability compensation. Shulkin is under no such deadline. But a VA study group, followed by a VA task force, reviewed the NAM report. At one point a senior VA official predicted that by July 2016 then-VA Secretary Bob McDonald would have what he needed to decide on new presumptive ailments. Yet a year passed and McDonald opted to leave those decisions for the Trump administration. Shulkin had been McDonald's top health official during the NAM review period.

By late summer this year, Shulkin promised a decision on new ailments to the presumptive list by Nov. 1. Weidman said he suspects the White House's Office of Management and Budget blocked any plan to add new ailments to the list.

Weidman said members of Vietnam Veterans of America "are going to be really angry" with more delay, because "there is probably enough evidence now for the Secretary to declare other ailments" as tied to Agent Orange exposure, "glioblastoma first among them." And sailors and Marines who served aboard ship off Vietnam, the Blue Water Veterans, should have been deemed eligible like ground forces for compensation for presumptive ailments long ago, Weidman said.

"The ball is now in Trump's court," he added. "It's not something now that Obama did or did not do."

VA Disability Evaluation System - Back, Neck, & Joint Ratings

In SEP, the court of Appeals for Veterans Claims (CAVC) issued another major decision that is hugely beneficial to disabled veterans. This new decision allows veterans to more easily obtain higher ratings for injuries to the back, neck, and joints. Most veterans who have applied for disability benefits from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) have been sent to something called a Compensation and Pension examination, or they are often called by the VA, "C&P exams." This is an examination orchestrated by the VA to assess the origin and extent of the veteran's disability. Veterans who have been to these examinations know that each C&P examination can be very different. Some examiners are very thorough and listen to the medical problems of the veteran, but other C&P examinations can be simply inadequate

In a recent case called *Sharp v. Shulkin*, the court issued decision that addressed one of the inadequate examinations. In this case, the court decided that a C&P examination is inadequate if the C&P examiner is does not consider flare-ups and pain, even if the veteran is not experiencing it during the examination. This decision further opens the door to even higher disability ratings when the veteran loses some functional ability in these joints due to the flare-ups or pain. Refer to <https://www.lawyers4veterans.com/veterans-disability-blog/2017/10/02/impact-of-a-flare-up> for additional info on flare-up consideration.

The court's decision also helped veterans because it imposes higher standards on the C&P examiners. After this decision, a C&P examination will usually be considered inadequate unless it gives an opinion about how the flare-ups and pain affect the veteran's ability to use the injured body part. In fact, the court clarifies that the only time that a C&P examiner may say that he or she cannot give an opinion of the functional limitations due to pain or flare-up are when the following three factors are met:

- 1) It is clear that the examiner has considered all procurable and assembled data,"

- 2) The examiner thoroughly explained "the basis for his or her conclusion that a non-speculative opinion cannot be offered," and,
- 3) The "medical community at large" is not able to give an opinion without resorting to mere speculation.

Another reason that this decision helps veterans is because it makes it clear that the VA should attempt to schedule a C&P examination during a flare-up, whenever that is possible. While the court does acknowledge that this may be impossible when a flare-up only lasts a day or two, it may, yet, be possible to schedule a C&P examination during a flare-up where a flare-up is known to last a month or longer.

Luckily, this court decision also discussed what a C&P examiner must do if the examination is not scheduled during a flare-up. The decision holds that even if an examination is not able to be scheduled during a flare-up, the C&P examiner is still supposed to give an opinion as to how the veteran would be functionally limited during a flare-up. The examiner can use various pieces of evidence to make this opinion, such as the veteran's own description or other "buddy statements", which are written statements from others about the veteran's condition. What this new court decision means is that veterans can, more easily, obtain higher disability ratings for injuries to their neck, back, knees, or other joints. Overall, the court championed another big win for veterans.

VA Secretary -- Agent Orange Presumptive Ailment Expansion

Veterans Affairs Secretary Dr. David Shulkin said 6 NOV he's decided to expand the list of "presumptive" ailments for Agent Orange compensation subject to approval by the Trump administration. Shulkin didn't disclose the expanded list -- "I'm protecting the sanctity of the process" - but stressed, "I have made a decision. I have passed that on in the process that we follow in the federal government." A VA official later said Shulkin's recommendations on Agent Orange compensation expansion would go to the White House.

Office of Management and Budget and other agencies for approval and analysis of the costs. Shulkin said he expected approval "in a matter of a few months."

Shulkin's remarks on Agent Orange on Monday at the National Press Club were in contrast to the statement put out last week by the VA suggesting that decisions on expanding the list had been delayed yet again. The VA faced its own deadline of Nov. 1 for deciding on whether to include bladder cancer, hypothyroidism, Parkinson-like tremors and other ailments to the list for Agent Orange compensation based on a report from the National Academy of Medicine that had been sitting at the VA for 18 months. After reviewing the academy report, Shulkin said in his statement last week, "I have made a decision to further explore new presumptive conditions for service connection that may ultimately qualify for disability compensation." Shulkin readily acknowledged the confusion on what transpired last week in regards to expanding the list. "I'm glad to clarify this situation, since I think that it may be a little bit murky," he said.

The VA had received the NAM's report in early 2016 and had been required to approve or disapprove of its recommendations within 60 days. The VA failed to meet the initial deadline in another "example of the VA not performing at an acceptable level," Shulkin said. Rather than committing last week to "further explore" an expansion, he had actually decided to expand the list, Shulkin said. "I made a decision," he said. "I'm not announcing it," he said, but "my intention is to do what's right for veterans." Any ailments Shulkin might add to the VA's current list of 14 "presumptive diseases" linked to herbicide exposure, including diabetes, Parkinson's disease, and prostate and respiratory cancers, would make many more thousands of Vietnam War veterans eligible for VA disability compensation and health care.

VA STUDY SHOWS PARASITE FROM VIETNAM MAY BE KILLING VETS

HEROLD, W.Va. — A half century after serving in Vietnam, hundreds of veterans have a new reason to believe they may be dying from a silent bullet — test results show some men may have been infected by a slow-killing parasite while fighting in the jungles of Southeast Asia.

The [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) this spring commissioned a small pilot study to look into the link between liver flukes ingested through raw or undercooked fish and a rare bile duct cancer. It can take decades for symptoms to appear. By then, patients are often in tremendous pain, with just a few months to live.

Of the 50 blood samples submitted, more than 20 percent came back positive or bordering positive for liver fluke antibodies, said Sung-Tae Hong, the tropical medicine specialist who carried out the tests at Seoul National University in South Korea.

"It was surprising," he said, stressing the preliminary results could include false positives and that the research is ongoing.

Northport VA Medical Center spokesman Christopher Goodman confirmed the New York facility collected the samples and sent them to the lab. He would not comment on the findings, but said everyone who tested positive was notified.

Gerry Wiggins, who served in Vietnam from 1968 to 1969, has already lost friends to the disease. He was among those who got the call.

"I was in a state of shock," he said. "I didn't think it would be me."

The 69-year-old, who lives in Port Jefferson Station, New York, didn't have any symptoms when he agreed to take part in the study, but hoped his participation could help save lives. He immediately scheduled further tests, discovering he had two cysts on his bile duct, which had the potential to develop into the cancer, known as cholangiocarcinoma. They have since been removed and — for now — he's doing well.

Though rarely found in Americans, the parasites infect an estimated 25 million people worldwide, mostly in Asia.

Endemic in the rivers of Vietnam, the worms can easily be wiped out with a handful of pills early on, but left untreated they can live for decades without making their hosts sick. Over time, swelling and inflammation of the bile duct can lead to cancer. Jaundice, itchy skin, weight loss and other symptoms appear only when the disease is in its final stages.

The VA study, along with a call by Senate Minority Leader Charles Schumer of New York for broader research into liver flukes and cancer-stricken veterans, began after The Associated Press raised the issue in a story last year. The reporting found that about 700 veterans with cholangiocarcinoma have been seen by the VA in the past 15 years. Less than half of them submitted claims for service-related benefits, mostly because they were not aware of a possible connection to Vietnam. The VA rejected 80 percent of the requests, but decisions often appeared to be haphazard or contradictory, depending on what desks they landed on, the AP found.

The number of claims submitted reached 60 in 2017, up from 41 last year. Nearly three out of four of those cases were also denied, even though the government posted a warning on its website this year saying veterans who ate raw or undercooked freshwater fish while in Vietnam might be at risk. It stopped short of urging them to get ultrasounds or other tests, saying there was currently no evidence the vets had higher infection rates than the general population.

"We are taking this seriously," said Curt Cashour, a spokesman with the Department of Veterans Affairs. "But until further research, a recommendation cannot be made either way."

Veteran Mike Baughman, 65, who was featured in the previous AP article, said his claim was granted early this

year after being denied three times. He said the approval came right after his doctor wrote a letter saying his bile duct cancer was "more likely than not" caused by liver flukes from the uncooked fish he and his unit in Vietnam ate when they ran out of rations in the jungle. He now gets about \$3,100 a month and says he's relieved to know his wife will continue to receive benefits after he dies. But he remains angry that other veterans' last days are consumed by fighting the same government they went to war for as young men.

"In the best of all worlds, if you came down with cholangiocarcinoma, just like Agent Orange, you automatically were in," he said, referring to benefits granted to veterans exposed to the toxic defoliant sprayed in Vietnam. "You didn't have to go fighting."

Baughman, who is thin and weak, recently plucked out "Country Roads" on a bass during a jam session at his cabin in West Virginia. He wishes the VA would do more to raise awareness about liver flukes and to encourage Vietnam veterans to get an ultrasound that can detect inflammation.

"Personally, I got what I needed, but if you look at the bigger picture with all these other veterans, they don't know what necessarily to do," he said. "None of them have even heard of it before. A lot of them give me that blank stare like, 'You've got what?'"

How to Talk to A Vet

Last Veterans Day, the country paused to honor those that have served in the U.S. military including more than 2.7 million veterans of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Yet, as many have noted, fewer than one percent of Americans serve in the military today, and they are growing increasingly distinct and isolated from the remaining 99 percent. Most Americans hold the men and women who have fought in these wars in high personal esteem, yet often struggle to connect with this new generation of veterans.

Starting a meaningful conversation with these veterans of our current wars remains extraordinarily difficult for the vast majority of Americans who have no association with the military. They are often afraid of saying the wrong thing, appearing intrusive, or of somehow offending a veteran and triggering an angry response. And, as Rosa Brooks has eloquently written, ignorance leads many Americans to stereotype military men and women into three different categories: the hero, who is always brave, courageous, and selfless; the villain, who enjoys brutally killing others; and the victim, whose guilt over what he or she has done in war leads to post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) or an increased risk of substance abuse, homelessness, unemployment, and suicide.

Overcoming these stereotypes isn't just a matter of courtesy or kindness, or even of treating veterans fairly. In many ways, this growing gap between soldier and civilian underscores a quietly crumbling facet of American citizenship: the obligation of everyday citizens to understand and take responsibility for our military and its members, and to understand what we ask our men and women in uniform to do on our behalf. Connecting personally with the veterans around us can strengthen that bond and help restore some of that sense of responsibility between soldier and citizen.

To encourage our fellow citizens to reach out and connect with veterans — not only on Veterans Day but every day following suggestions are offered about questions to avoid, questions to ask, how to say "thank you," some lighter questions, and finally some deeper questions to ask once a relationship has been established.

Questions to Avoid

□ ***"Did you ever kill anyone?"*** This is the gold standard for questions never to ask someone who has served in uniform. And yes, it still does get asked, far more often than you would think possible. No veteran who has lived through that searing experience is ever going to want to talk about it to a passerby, and often not even to close family or friends. Those who ask this make themselves look thoughtless, ignorant, and extremely disrespectful. In sum: Never, ever, ever.

□ **“Did you see any dead bodies”** This is another example of insensitivity. Many veterans will have never have seen anyone dead, but for the vast majority of those who have, it’s a sickening snapshot that will never be forgotten. And whether those dead bodies were Americans, enemy soldiers, or innocent civilians, nobody needs that jarring image refreshed.

□ **“What was the worst thing you ever saw”** This is guaranteed to bring back memories that a veteran may be trying hard to forget. Images of dead comrades, the wounded suffering in pain, and the inevitable human carnage of war are pictures and sounds the mind works hard to erase. Asking about them brings these sensations immediately back to the fore, and inflicts the pain all over again.

□ **“I almost joined the military, but…”** Most veterans have heard some version of this refrain, and discount everything after the “but.” Sadly, it never seems to be followed by what that person actually *did* do to serve their country or community in some way — joined AmeriCorps, volunteered at a local food bank, organized sponsors for a deployed unit, or anything else.

□ **“Do you have PTSD”** This is the victim stereotype: “If you served, you must be damaged.” Most veterans do not have PTSD, and the vast majority view their military service in a positive way. This question insults veterans by assuming they are volatile powder kegs of emotions just waiting for a spark to explode. A friend of ours who is a recent combat veteran told us why this question infuriates him so much: “I can tell from the way the question is framed that they usually see me as some suffering, broken human being. It’s obvious they don’t care about me or my service.”

□ **“[Insert your politics here.]”** Do not push your views about whether we should have gone to war in Iraq or Afghanistan, or ask for a veteran’s opinion of current or past presidents. Political statements that impugn the rationale for our recent wars and implicitly project the divisiveness of American politics at home onto the battlefield are unwelcome by almost all veterans. They signed up to defend the country, regardless of their personal views, and bridle at the notion of having their military service used to justify one political position or another.

Questions to Ask

□ **“What service were you in? Why did you choose that one?”** Veterans often appreciate the opportunity to talk about their decision to serve, and every vet identifies with their specific service. The Army, Navy, Air Force, and Marine Corps each have their own culture, history and customs. Not understanding that each service is very different from one another is a common mistake.

□ **“Are you still in the military? What are you doing now? What are your friends doing now?”** These are terrific questions to find out more about the current lives of veterans and to show that you are interested in more than lurid tales of firefights and dead bodies.

□ **“What inspired you to join?”** This is a subtle but important salute to veterans. It is a question that recognizes that each one felt some spark, some impulse that brought them into the recruiting station to embark upon a very different path than most of their fellow citizens. Let them tell you why.

□ **“What was your job? What was the most rewarding part of doing it?”** Most veterans take pride in their military jobs and like talking about the parts that they found most fulfilling. But this is also important because many Americans erroneously believe that all members of the military, especially those in the Army and Marines, directly fight the enemy. The military includes literally hundreds of diverse specialties, from welders to dog handlers to musicians. Asking a vet about the job he or she had in uniform may open a surprising new conversation.

□ **“What surprised you the most about being overseas?”** For most veterans, an overseas deployment was the first time in their life that they visited a part of the world outside of the United States. This is a great opportunity to learn about what that felt like — and you might be surprised by these stories as well.

How to Say “Thank You

“Thank you for your service” has become a common refrain during the recent wars, but veteran reactions to it are decidedly mixed. Some veterans appreciate that many people want to express their gratitude and support, while others — including one of your column authors — react negatively and find it an all-too-easy brush-off of any further need to be involved with our wars. (The recent film with this title, and the book upon which it is based, use the phrase ironically.) If you want to avoid seeming trite, try saying thanks in one of these ways instead.

- *“Thank you for putting the rest of your life on hold to serve your country.”* This shows that you understand the totality of what a veteran has given up in choosing to spend several years in uniform.
- *“Thank you for the sacrifices you made being away from your family.”* This thanks the veteran in much the same way as the previous question, but also adds something specific and meaningful to you.
- *“Thank you for stepping up and choosing to serve when so many others didn’t.”* This demonstrates that you know that the veteran felt a powerful commitment to defend the nation and made truly life-changing choices that others did not.

On the Lighter Side

- *“What is the funniest thing that ever happened to you in the military?”* This opens up all kind of potentially happy memories and comical stories, capturing everything from boot camp humor to unexpected laughs under fire. Every vet has some of these stories and most will enjoy sharing some of their favorites.
- *“Was the food as crappy as we hear?”* This connects you to the human dynamics of everyday life in uniform. Everybody eats, and people in the military have a wide range of culinary experiences that can only be described as interesting — and, thankfully, are rarely replicated in civilian life.
- *“What did you do in your free time while you were deployed?”* Yes, members of the military have down time when deployed, even in combat zones. Soldiers often describe combat as long periods of boredom punctuated by moments of sheer terror. Many soldiers, sailors, airmen, and marines overseas do things in their free time that might surprise you, like making parodies of Carly Rae Jepsen songs or filming other funny and creative YouTube videos.

The Advanced Course: After Your First Conversation

- *“What’s the most important thing you learned from your service?” or “What made you most proud of being in uniform?”* These questions might prompt a long pause, but they are worth asking. Some veterans may have never reflected upon their service in this way. Pondering these questions might help them gain greater insight about their time in uniform — and probably help you learn something important too.
- *“How did the United States change while you were gone?”* Any veteran who spends significant time overseas returns to the United States with a different perspective of the country and its people. Find out what it feels like to come back. (For example, one of your column authors was both struck and disheartened by how much of American culture is dominated by an incessant obsession with sports and entertainment.)
- *“Would you do it again? Why or why not?”* This can be a very tough question, but even some veterans who have been grievously wounded will still answer “yes.” Understanding how and why a veteran chooses to answer this question shines a powerful light on the meaning of service to them — and it helps us all understand each other better.

We hope that you use these suggestions in the future to better understand some of your fellow citizens who have chosen to serve in uniform. Many of them have done extraordinary things, but they still see themselves (and mostly want to be treated) as regular people just like everyone else. As one of our veteran friends explained: “I guess what I really want non-veterans to do is to see us as fellow Americans first and foremost.” Perhaps the biggest sign of respect you can show is to get to know them and their life experiences as you would get to know anyone else in your community. Military service is only one part of their life story — but finding out more

about that part is the best way to express your gratitude for the many sacrifices they have chosen

How the 2018 Tricare Changes Impact Tricare for Life Users

Almost all types of Tricare coverage will face sweeping changes, upgrades and reforms in 2018 resulting from legislation passed last year and a contractor changeover.

The only part of Tricare that won't be dramatically impacted is Tricare for Life.

That's because Tricare for Life, used by military retirees over age 65, isn't like the Defense Health Agency's other plans. Rather than provide stand-alone comprehensive coverage, Tricare for Life pairs with Medicare Part B as wrap-around coverage.

Quick Facts:

- Tricare's major changes impact almost all plans, including active-duty families and military retirees.
- Tricare for Life is almost entirely exempt for the changes.
- **The only change to Tricare for Life is a shift in the annual date deductibles and cost caps reset.**

Like many of Tricare's other plans, Tricare for Life includes an annual deductible that users must pay out-of-pocket when receiving care. Tricare for Life users pay a deductible of \$150 per individual or \$300 per family in circumstances where services are used that Medicare does not cover. Also like other plans, those beneficiaries have a maximum amount they will pay out-of-pocket in any given year of \$3,000, known as a "catastrophic cap."

In the past, both of those costs -- the deductible and the cap -- reset every Oct. 1 with the new fiscal year. But starting in 2018, that will no longer be the case.

That means for the remainder of 2017 only, all users who have hit their cap have an extra three months -- October, November and December of this year -- to receive care without additional fees. Those who have not yet hit their cap or deductibles will continue to pay toward the fee ceilings.

Like Tricare's other plans, starting in 2018 Tricare for Life will instead reset every Jan. 1, bringing the plans in line with the annual calendar used by most health insurers, as well as Medicaid and Medicare

United States Marine Corps Corporal Schmidt's version as printed in *Leatherneck* back in 1991:

Merry Christmas, My Friend

'Twas the night before Christmas, he lived all alone,
In a one-bedroom house made of plaster & stone.
I had come down the chimney, with presents to give
and to see just who in this home did live

As I looked all about, a strange sight I did see,
no tinsel, no presents, not even a tree.
No stocking by the fire, just boots filled with sand.
On the wall hung pictures of a far distant land.

With medals and badges, awards of all kind,
a sobering thought soon came to my mind.

For this house was different, unlike any I'd seen.
This was the home of a U.S. Marine.

I'd heard stories about them, I had to see more,
so I walked down the hall and pushed open the door.
And there he lay sleeping, silent, alone,
Curled up on the floor in his one-bedroom home.

He seemed so gentle, his face so serene,
Not how I pictured a U.S. Marine.
Was this the hero, of whom I'd just read?
Curled up in his poncho, a floor for his bed?

His head was clean-shaven, his weathered face tan.
I soon understood, this was more than a man.
For I realized the families that I saw that night,
owed their lives to these men, who were willing to fight.

Soon around the Nation, the children would play,
And grown-ups would celebrate on a bright Christmas day.
They all enjoyed freedom, each month and all year,
because of Marines like this one lying here.

I couldn't help wonder how many lay alone,
on a cold Christmas Eve, in a land far from home.
Just the very thought brought a tear to my eye.
I dropped to my knees and I started to cry.

He must have awoken, for I heard a rough voice,
"Santa, don't cry, this life is my choice
I fight for freedom, I don't ask for more.
My life is my God, my country, my Corps."

With that he rolled over, drifted off into sleep,
I couldn't control it, I continued to weep.

I watched him for hours, so silent and still.
I noticed he shivered from the cold night's chill.
So I took off my jacket, the one made of red,

and covered this Marine from his toes to his head.
Then I put on his T-shirt of scarlet and gold,
with an eagle, globe and anchor emblazoned so bold.
And although it barely fit me, I began to swell with pride,
and for one shining moment, I was Marine Corps deep inside.

I didn't want to leave him so quiet in the night,
this guardian of honor so willing to fight.
But half asleep he rolled over, and in a voice clean and pure,
said "Carry on, Santa, it's Christmas Day, all is secure."
One look at my watch and I knew he was right,
Merry Christmas my friend, Semper Fi and goodnight.

After leaving the Marine Corps, Corporal Schmidt earned a law degree and was an entertainment attorney in Los Angeles and is director of operations for a security consulting firm.

Pending Calendar

2018 Department of WV Spring Quarterly Meeting will be January 13, 2018 at American Legion Post 16 in Huntington, WV.

2018 MCL Midwinter Staff Conference will be March 1-3, 2018 at the Fredericksburg Hospitality House and Conference Center, 2801 Plank Rd, Fredericksburg, VA 22401. group code: MCLMDWINTER17 Phone: (540) 786-8321 Room rate includes up to 4 breakfast vouchers per occupancy. \$99 per night + prevailing tax (currently 11.3%) Please make your room reservation direct to the hotel at 540-786-8321.

2018 Department of West Virginia Convention will be May 4-6, 2018 at The Quality Inn Gallipolis, 577 State Route 7 North, Gallipolis, OH 45769. Phone: (740) 446-0090. MGM Detachment 1180 will be the host detachment. Rooms rate: \$85.00 plus tax
Banquet includes choice of: Prime Rib \$25, Chicken \$20. Dinners include salad, 2 vegetables, rolls, beverage, and dessert. Amenities: Group Rate includes free WiFi, free parking, free cable, free in-room coffee, free breakfast for two guests per room (each additional guest in a room pays \$6) Breakfast is 6 a.m. – 10 a.m.

2018 Mideast Division Conference will be June 15-16, 2018 at the Turf Valley Resort, 2700 Turf Valley Road, Ellicott City, MD 21042. Phone: 410-465-1500 or 888-883-8873. Room rate: \$109.00 plus tax Use Group Code: 2944UW. Hosted by Department of Maryland.

2018 MCL National Convention will be August 12-17, 2018 at the Buffalo Hyatt, Two Fountains Plaza, Buffalo, NY 14202. Phone: (844) 612-8010. or 716-856-1234 (Ask for Laci) or Call 888-421-1442 for reservations. Cut off date is July 9, 2018. Reservations open 0801 21 August 2017. Buffalo.hyatt.com. Room price \$113 for one and \$130 for 2 people plus room tax. Free parking, free breakfast and free wifi.

2018 MCL National Convention will be August 2019 in Billings, Montana.