



FLORIDA DUSTOFF ASSOCIATION



Rotor and Scalpel

WINTER/SPRING NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2022

LETTER FROM THE VICE PRESIDENT

Another year has gone by and I am hoping this newsletter is finding everyone in good health and spirits. It certainly has been the most interesting year or two to say the least. Roberta and I have been doing the best we can and as most we have transitioned to virtual meetings. We still partake in the VVOF Meetings on behalf of Dustoff and remain on the Executive Board. In addition, we are pleased to announce that Tony Cartledge is now Vice Chair of the Florida Veterans Council. I am still having difficulties with my mobility and get around the best I can, with a lot of assistance from Roberta. We are sure that many, like Roberta and I have lost friends and family due to COVID and ask all of you to be cautious and take necessary precautions for yourself and families and be as safe as possible.

Over the past year or two, with the exception of the passing of Bob Gallagher last year, we have not heard of any additional members having health issues. If you are aware of a member having difficulties, please let us know. Doc Custer and Roberta have been trying to reach out to Art Smith and John Patton/Nancy Church intermittently and have not received a response from them, so please, if anyone has been in contact with them, please let Roberta or Doc know.

The reunion is around the corner and the executive board decided last year due to the decline in attendance on site at Wickham Park

over the past several years we reduced the number of dustoff campsites to two; B69 and B70. We could no longer justify the expense of having more. At the present time, Doc Custer has advised that he and Snake will be on B69 and Glenn Gralton will be on B70; therefore there is room for one more on B70. If you are interested, please contact Doc Custer at 904-788-4061. In addition, we also decided to sell the Dustoff trailer as it had not been used in sometime and with me unable to drive, we had no way of getting it to and from Wickham Park.

The Reunion dates for 2022 are May 5th to 8th, with the Wall Escort being May 1st. For all those interested in camping, the campsites are available April 29th to May 8th. The camping fees remain the same:

**WET SITES: \$40.00 per night per motor home,
camper or tent**

**DRY SITES: \$30.00 per night per motor home,
camper or tent**

We are sure that most of the veteran community in Florida has heard about the recent issues within the VVB and have recently found out that Doc Holiday is the official director of the reunion effective immediately. We certainly wish him the best of luck with this large undertaking.

The agenda for the Reunion is as follows:

Sunday- May 1st

10:00am Wall Escort from Brevard Community College, Cocoa

12:00pm Doc Holiday, Covered Dish Picnic and Wall Set-Up Please-
No Coolers, Glass or Pets in Reunion or Memorial Area.

Monday- May 2nd

6:00pm Presentation of wreaths

7:00pm Opening Ceremonies at the Wall

Thursday- May 5th

12:00 Doc Holiday

3:30-5:00pm Encore

6:00-7:30pm Unit 5

8:30-10:00pm Luna Pearl

Friday- May 6th

11:00am Doc Holiday

3:00pm K9 Demonstration Main Stage Area

3:30-5:00pm Sandalwood Band

6:00-7:30pm Roughhouse

8:30-10:00pm Shovelhed

Saturday-May 7th

11:00am Opening Ceremonies/Massing of the Colors/ LZ Helicopter
Landing

12:00-3:00pm John Steer/Doc Holiday

3:00pm Marines Take The Hill (Main Stage Area)

3:30-5:00pm Blue Diamond Band

6:00pm Suncoast Vietnam Vets "The Last Patrol"

7:00-8:30pm Joshua Campbell And The Whiskey Sunrise Band

9:30-11:00pm The Electric Frogs

Sunday-May 8th

10:00am Church Services with John Steer

11:00am Doc Holiday

2:00-3:30pm Absolute Blue

4:00pm Melbourne Municipal Band at the Wall

5:00pm Closing Ceremony at the Wall

Monday- May 9th

9:00am Cleanup Wickham Park and Wall Take Down Brought to you
by the Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard, Inc. Schedule is tentative
and subject to change.

As this point in time, Roberta and I am unsure if we will be in
attendance at the Reunion, but know if we are not, that we will be
there in spirit !!

DUSTOFF FOREVER

Bob (Doc) Neitzel

From the Editor

Another year has passed and once again...I can't believe it is
Reunion time again and not only that, but the Reunion is entering it's
34th year and I have come to the realization that I been the treasurer
and newsletter editor for Florida Dustoff for the past 20 years!!
Where has all the time gone?

I am e-mailing as many newsletters as possible to keep our printing
and postage costs down, so if you received this by snail mail and
have an e-mail address please e-mail it to me at Hdwizrd8@aol.com
and PLEASE indicate Dustoff in the subject line.

If you are able to participate in the Wall Escort, the information is as
follows: Line-up for the escort is at 9:00 am May 1st at Eastern
Florida State College on Clearlake Road in Cocoa and it will leave at
10:00 am sharp. Arrival at Wickham Park is about 11:00 am. **Please
be advised that 4 Wheel vehicles are allowed in the escort but
please note the speed will only be 20 MPH and if you allow a
large gap you will be told to pull over out of the escort.**The
Vietnam and All Veterans of Brevard will host a COVERED DISH
PICNIC, for those who want to help set up the Vietnam Traveling
Memorial Wall Other Memorials and Displays. It is well worth the
experience if you are able to do so. Please take a look at the reunion
website page at <https://www.floridaveteransreunion.com>.

I would like to remind all members to please pay their dues. If you
are an annual/associate member and would like to pay them now,
please forward your payment in the amount of \$20.00 payable to
Florida Dustoff Association to 2304 Woodland Drive, Edgewater, FL
32141. **Please note – there are only two types of memberships:**
Annual (associate) and Lifetime – that is it.

**Please note that we will have some Dustoff T's for sale. For a
short period of time, we will be selling them for \$6.00 each or 2
for \$10.00. If you wish them to be shipped to you, shipping costs
will be extra. I believe it would be approximately an additional
\$9.00 for priority mail.**

Roberta Neitzel

Important Information to Pass On

We were provided with a website that lists discounts provided to active military personnel and veterans: It is <http://www.militaryconnection.com/deals.asp>. These are businesses that offer discounts on products and services and these discounts vary from 10% to 40%. If you don't have a home computer, but have access to one at a public library or at a friend's home, please access this site and print out a list.

VA claims backlog improves, but still sits far above pre-pandemic levels

After a spike in backlog numbers in recent years, Veterans Affairs officials have seen a steady decrease in the number of overdue disability claims in their benefits system over the last five months, officials said this week.

But they still expect it will take a while before the case numbers return to pre-pandemic levels.

As of this week, the number of first-time claims that were considered backlogged — pending for more than four months — was about 244,000. That's down about 8% from October 2021, when the figure reached about 264,000.

The number of claims left pending for more than four months is expected to rise to more than 260,000 next month.

Veterans who file a disability claim can receive payouts backdated to their date of initial filing, meaning that the slower processing times do not technically cost veterans any of their disability payouts.

However, the backlog means more veterans are delayed in getting those payouts to start, in some cases leaving veterans' finances in disarray for months longer than they anticipated.

The claims backlog became a national scandal in 2013 when the total reached more than 610,000 cases, as a flood of new claims related to new presumptive conditions linked to Agent Orange exposure in Vietnam overwhelmed the system.

In ensuing years, department officials digitized their records and claims system and hired more staffers to bring down those totals. As of early 2020, the backlog figure hovered around 70,000 cases.

But closures of benefits offices because of the ensuing coronavirus pandemic led to a significant increase in processing time for new claims. When additional Agent Orange presumptives and new burn pit illness claims were added last year, the backlog total grew even higher.

Department staffers have processed more than 760,000 cases since Oct. 1, the largest workload in VA history at this point in the fiscal year.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough called the figures encouraging but stopped short of celebrating the progress.

"We're a little ahead of targets, but it's hard to call any of this an improvement because we need to get this backlog down further," he said.

Last fall, McDonough announced plans to hire about 2,000 more processors to help with the backlog problem. On Tuesday, he said about three-quarters of that total have been hired already.

Those workers have begun training that is expected to take several more months before they take on a full workload. VA officials have said it could take until 2024 before the backlog falls below 100,000 cases again.

However, that projection does not take into account any significant new increases in the claims filings. Several Republican lawmakers have voiced concerns about pending legislation to increase benefits for victims of military toxic exposure incidents, saying it could lead to a flood of new cases and even longer wait times.

Plan to drop thousands of caregivers from Veterans Affairs program put on hold

Veterans Affairs officials announced Tuesday that all expulsions from the department's caregiver support program will be halted while officials re-evaluate new eligibility criteria that threatened monthly support stipends for thousands of families.

The move is a stunning turnaround for the department, which for months has maintained the moves are necessary to bring the program's membership into order ahead of a massive expansion in eligible families later in fall 2022.

But following significant criticism from advocates saying that the changes were unfair and endangered veterans' financial well-being, officials reversed course and promised not to drop any program participants for the time being.

"We will not remove anyone from the program or decrease any support before we re-examine our current eligibility criteria," VA Deputy Secretary Donald Remy said during a department leadership press conference Tuesday afternoon.

"There are veterans with moderate to severe care needs who are unable to be admitted into the program or remain in the program, as the regulations currently stand. That's simply not what we want. That's not what the veterans and caregivers need from us."

It had been previously announced that the new eligibility requirements will exclude veterans in need of full-time care and families feared a financial hit as VA caregiver program prepares to drop thousands of vets

About 33,000 families are currently enrolled in the Program of Comprehensive Assistance for Family Caregivers.

Initially the program was open only to post-9/11 veterans, but in 2018 Congress approved expansion to other generations as well.

Individuals who served before May 1975 were admitted starting in fall 2020, and all remaining veterans will be eligible starting fall 2022.

While the program offers a series of legal and support services to families, the most prominent benefit is the monthly caregiver stipend. Currently, a full-time caregiver tending to a veteran who is “unable to self-sustain in the community” can receive the full monthly stipend, while a caretaker for a vet with lesser but still life-altering limitations can receive a partial payment.

The totals vary based on where veterans live, but generally hover about \$3,000 a month for the full Level 2 stipend and \$1,800 for the partial Level 1 stipend.

In 2020, when the Vietnam-era veterans were admitted to the program, VA officials announced changes to eligibility criteria focused on whether veterans can perform “activities of daily living.” In fall 2021, VA officials announced they would review all “legacy” participants — individuals admitted before October 2020 — to ensure they still met criteria for participation.

At the time, officials estimated that about one-third of the nearly 20,000 legacy participants could be dropped from the program because of eligibility changes.

On Tuesday, VA Secretary Denis McDonough acknowledged the actual number of veterans being dropped from the program was “a much higher number.”

VA officials had promised to keep paying benefits through 2022 to families leaving the program, to give them time to adjust to the lost income. But advocates said that for families with loved ones in need of constant care, the extra time would not provide anything more than a deadline for when their financial problems would begin.

McDonough acknowledged that frustration on Tuesday. Remy said the new review — which does not have any public timeline for completion yet — will take into account the missteps of the past changes to ensure families are not hurt again.

“We’ve learned,” he said. “This is not the first time that we’ve stepped back and re-examined our process here. We’re looking at how we can make sure we don’t repeat those mistakes. So this will look different, they will feel different and the result will be different for those caregivers.”

VA officials are scheduled to testify on the issue before Senate lawmakers on Wednesday.

In a statement, Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committee Chairman Jon Tester, D-Montana, praised the department’s for “taking the concerns of veterans and caregivers seriously and implementing changes to ensure they are not unfairly denied access to a program that has made a difference for so many.”

Similarly, Steve Schwab, CEO of the Elizabeth Dole Foundation, applauded Tuesday’s announcement.

“Over the last six months, the foundation and our close partners have held countless discussions with the VA voicing our deep concerns on

the evaluation process and the negative consequences being felt largely by legacy post-9/11 caregivers,” he said.

“Today, because of our collective efforts, thousands of veterans and their caregivers will be reinstated into the program while a new evaluation and eligibility criteria are developed with the full engagement of the community.”

Nearly 20,000 caregivers of injured veterans will have their cases re-examined to see if they still qualify for the benefit.

However, not all advocates were as optimistic about the long-term fate of the families who already had been marked to leave the program.

Holly Ferrell, executive director for Veteran Warriors, an advocacy group that works with more than 3,500 caregivers in the program, said she hopes the new VA announcement amounts to real change and not simply delaying pain for the families.

“Is this a political stunt to get media attention off of the problems, to get caregivers to calm down and to give them false hope?” she said. “We have to remain cautious.

“Our concerns aren’t just about the legacy families, they’re about all the errors in this process. And if these families are evaluated later based on the same flawed criteria as before, that’s not a solution.”

Foundation honors Army women with Hall of Fame induction

FORT BELVOIR, VIRGINIA – Some rose to the rank of general, some carried their passion for the military beyond the uniform, most of them broke multiple barriers and all of them are women who served in the U.S. Army.

Opening the Army Women’s Foundation Hall of Fame induction ceremony on March 22 at the National Museum of the U.S. Army, the foundation president, retired Brig. Gen. Anne Macdonald, framed it clearly.

The women honored were critical members of the Army, “who have changed the course of history through their service.”

The Army Women’s Foundation is a nonprofit organization established in 1969 that recognizes women “who have served in the Army or the Armed Forces and contributed extraordinary service,” through its honors and scholarship programs.

They make those recognitions through induction into the foundation’s Hall of Fame and also through “special recognition” awards bestowed on women military members, veterans and those who have supported or contributed to women in the Army.

Retired Lt. Gen. Nadja West came from a family of service. Her father enlisted in a segregated Army in 1939. Her father and mother raised a family of a dozen children, adopting West while they were stationed in Germany.

West watched as nearly all of her older siblings, men and women, joined the service. Her brother, a U.S. Military Academy at West Point 1976 graduate nudged his little sister to consider the academy when that same year it opened its doors to women.

Still a teenager, she had a few years to wait but found her way to West Point and a decades-long career that saw her become the first woman of color to serve as an Army division surgeon in 1999, then the first woman selected as the Joint Staff Surgeon in 2014, advising the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff on medical issues.

West rose to three-star and served as the surgeon general of the U.S. Army from 2015 to 2019.

In her remarks Tuesday, she paid special homage that struck a personal chord for some in the audience of more than 100 attendees. "I would like to thank the women in the class of 1980 (West Point), just think, there were no women in front of them, showing them that it was possible," she said.

One such graduate who rose when recognized was a fellow honoree — retired Lt. Col. Carol A. Barkalow.

The retired colonel drew a laugh with her comments.

"At 17, I entered West Point, I didn't understand what the big deal was," she said. "I had survived the tortures of my three older brothers. So, it wasn't a problem."

But laughs aside, Barkalow told Army Times in an interview before the event that she along with women in her class and serving in the Army both before and after she joined in 1976 faced a number of discriminations. One such hurdle was that entire job fields were closed to all women.

As a young officer, Barkalow led an air defense unit in Germany in the 1980s but wasn't allowed to perform some of the tasks in the unit because she was a woman.

She marvels at the accomplishments of current female soldiers. "If I could have been a candidate to go to Ranger School, I'd be there in a heartbeat," the college athlete said.

Barkalow and her wife have continued their commitment to the military and veterans with a nonprofit called "Heaven on Earth," which they founded in 2013 to house homeless veterans in the Tampa Bay, Florida area.

Nearly 100 individuals have been inducted into the Hall of Fame since 2009. There are 13 individual inductees this year, along with three special recognition award recipients. In past years, entire units or categories have also received recognition, such as in 2014 with the 14th Women's Auxiliary Corps Band, the last all-female military band. In 2012 and 2013 the foundation honored Army women who served in the Vietnam and Korean wars, respectively.

This year's inductees are the following:

- Lt. Gen. (ret.) Gwendolyn M. Bingham
- Lt. Gen. (ret.) Nadja Y. West
- Maj. Gen. (ret.) Nancy R. Adams

- Col. (ret.) Kirsten V. Brunson
- Col. (ret.) Jeri I. Graham
- Col. Bettie J. Morden (posthumously)
- Col. (ret.) Diane M. Ryan
- Lt. Col. (ret.) Carol A. Barkalow
- Chief Warrant Officer 4 (ret.) Rebecca B. Isaac
- Cmd. Sgt. Maj. Diane G. Cummings
- Master Sgt. (ret.) Constance R. Byzinker
- Master Sgt. (ret.) Lachrishia Parker
- Staff Sgt. (ret.) Stephanie L. Mitchell

Retired Col. Kirsten Brunson saw the Army's 1980s-era "Be All You Can Be" advertisements and took it literally.

The University of Maryland graduate commissioned through an ROTC program at Howard University, then delayed service to attend University of California-Los Angeles Law School. She joined the Judge Advocate General Corps in 1992.

The commercial paid off.

What started as probably a short stint to serve her country and get legal training turned into a 22-year career and so much more. Brunson became the first African American female military judge in U.S. history.

Despite her own achievements, Brunson told Army Times being honored by the foundation wasn't something she ever envisioned. "It's hard to fathom, especially when I look at the women who came before," she said.

Staff Sgt. Stephane Mitchell remembers when she was only about 9 years old and an Army recruiter came to her house for her brother. Both her grandfathers and an uncle had served in the Army. But seeing the uniform right there sparked a drive in the young girl. "I just was fascinated," she said. "That's something I want to do."

Years later as she was finishing school and considering service, a dogged Army recruiter grabbed her attention again. That led to a career in the Army and its medical corps.

While deployed to Afghanistan, Mitchell formed a program to help other soldiers improve their ASVAB scores. It was so successful in raising more than 60 soldiers improve those scores that it became a brigade program and was later taught by all career counselors in the unit.

Over her time in the Army, combat arms jobs opened for women, the first female soldiers served at the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier and the first female soldiers graduated from Ranger School.

"We're still doing a lot of 'firsts,'" she said.

She asked why she was nominated for the Hall of Fame when she learned she would be honored.

Mitchell said she was told by her own mentor, a counselor she'd followed for the second half of her career, that it was for the work she had done over the years, both in the Army and afterward.

When she looks back, it's not the deployments or promotions that stick out, it was the individual work she did with her soldiers, she said.

"The impact that I had, it does not just stay with them," she said. "It's like a ripple effect, it goes out."

VA breaks ground on new Daytona Beach **clinic for primary care, mental health,** **specialties**

As bulldozers and dump trucks rumbled behind her, Dr. Nichole Robinson rattled off some of the ways a new Veterans Administration multi-specialty clinic in Daytona Beach will serve those who served their country.

"We'll be adding cardiology, some (gastrointestinal), possibly some vascular and interventional pain management, just to name a few," Robinson, chief medical officer for the Daytona Beach VA clinic, said after a groundbreaking at the new location, 1776 N. Williamson Blvd., expected to open in 2024.

All of it — plus 750 parking spaces, addressing one of the most common complaints about the William V. Chappell Jr. Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic — sounded good to Rod Phillips, a Samsula member of the Vietnam Veterans of America.

With a rapid expansion of veterans needing service in the Volusia County area, officials have been working toward a new VA clinic in Daytona Beach since 2013. When it opens, in 2024, it will have been more than a decade of planning, procurement and construction.

"Ten years in the making, that's the bureaucracy that it takes, but we're here," Phillips said. "And in a couple of years, this will be a beautiful facility."

The new facility will replace the Chappell clinic as well as an annex at 1620 Mason Ave. It'll be located just south of the Daytona State College Advanced Technology College on Williamson Boulevard.

Services available at the current VA facilities, including audiology, ophthalmology, rheumatology, urology, podiatry, respiratory therapy, pain management, physical therapy, dental, speech pathology and orthopedics, will be moved to the Williamson Boulevard site.

Bigger and bigger

The project's developer, Carnegie Management & Development Corp., Westlake, Ohio, in 2019 estimated the cost to build the new VA clinic would be more than \$60 million.

The Daytona Beach VA serves 30,000 veterans in the Volusia County area, with a staff of about 340, Robinson said. Twenty years ago, when the current clinic was dedicated at 551 National Health Care Drive near Dunn Avenue, The News-Journal reported it had 93 full-time employees.

Of the 1,118 outpatient VA clinics in the United States, Daytona Beach is the 34th largest but had the 14th highest workload, Robinson said.

"In the last year, for instance, we have ...taken on 2,700 additional veterans who are assigned to our clinic," Robinson said.

"We've absolutely outgrown the (Chappell) facility and as you may know, there's been parking issues," she said. "The new facility will have 750 parking places, so we won't have any parking issues."

Healthcare for American Veterans

Retired Brig. Gen. Ernie Audino, district director for Congressman Michael Waltz, provided some perspective.

"I like to compare what we offer our veterans to some of what I've seen elsewhere in the world. There are plenty of people who like to throw barbs and criticize ... but no one's perfect," Audino said. "Guess what? Go to some of these other places in the world, places that are so much less fortunate than us, and see what they're able to do for their veterans."

For Audino, that happened in 2006, in Iraq, where he visited a Kurdish fighter who had been injured and was in a hospital. He said the building appeared to be unsound with cracks in the walls and the families of the injured and sick had to provide their own linen.

Audino turned his focus back on the Daytona Beach VA clinic, which will have 106,826 square feet of usable space and more than 130,000 square feet total, providing primary care, mental health, specialty services, and support services such as radiology and lab.

"This facility here would be an impossible dream in 90% of the world," Audino said. "We have made a commitment to our veterans who have made a commitment to this country. Our veterans have, as we frequently say, written a blank check up to and including the full measure, to this country."

Robinson said that expanded capacity will provide 11 conference rooms for groups, health education classes and meetings — a significant upgrade from the two at the current clinic.

Rustom Khouri, vice president of Carnegie Management, said the building will be a "living and breathing monument that reflects the immense gratitude that we have for our American heroes."

The property's design will include spaces for veterans to take walks "in a serene setting to find peace," he said. Gardens and benches will also be added to the 78-acre site.

"It is about the veterans and improving their experience," Khouri said. "Ultimately, improving the experience and the healthcare outcomes that occur within this clinic is our true measure of success."

Timothy Cooke, director/CEO of the Orlando VA Healthcare System, said he used to take his father, an infantryman who fought in the Battle of the Bulge in World War II, to VA appointments several decades ago.

"I got to participate in what care looked like back in those days," he said, "and I am so very proud to say how far we've come and the direction that we're headed. It's no surprise, though, because we've had such a turn in the way we appreciate what our veterans do."

Veterans Affairs eyes relaxed hiring rules **as staff turnover slowly worsens**

Turnover rates among Veterans Affairs staffers have risen slightly in recent years, and officials worry that could increase dramatically if Congress doesn't help ease the burden of bringing new candidates into the department's workforce.

"We are continuing to see a bit of concern," said Jessica Bonjorni, chief of the Veterans Health Administration's human capital management office, during a hearing on department staffing issues before the House Veterans' Affairs Committee on Thursday.

"Normally at this time in the fiscal year we would have seen growth in our workforce of about 1.5 to 2%. But right now, we're flat. And so we are trending behind because it's becoming more difficult to find people out there for certain occupations."

The department employs more than 400,000 employees across its health care, benefits and memorial services operations. In a typical year, about 9.6% of that workforce — around 40,000 individuals — leaves due to retirement, firings or leaving for new jobs elsewhere.

Over the course of the COVID-19 pandemic that figure has risen slightly, putting several thousand more positions in flux, VA management officials said. While officials emphasized to lawmakers that the issue isn't a major problem yet, they also said they want to find fixes before it becomes one.

Bonjorni said some of the problems stem not from any VA-specific issues but instead from shortages across the U.S. for in-demand specialties.

"Nursing turnover is one area ... where we're seeing increasing turnover," she told lawmakers. "Medical technologists and health techs, we're having some challenges there too."

But other staffing vacancies are increasing among entry-level posts in areas such as food service and housekeeping duties. Bonjorni said officials are looking into whether pandemic burnout could be playing a factor in hiring and retention for those jobs, and expect to issue a report on those findings in coming weeks.

The department also is pushing lawmakers to provide authorities for better pay, expanded benefits and relaxed hiring requirements to help replace those individuals more quickly.

Expedited hiring processes were approved as part of pandemic response, but those authorities are set to expire later in 2022. VA officials want to see them made permanent, saying that too often the regulations surrounding the hiring of new federal workers is overly cumbersome.

But members of the committee have concerns about permanently loosening those hiring procedures. While individuals can start working before things like fingerprinting and credentialing checks are completed, waiting too long to complete those tasks could cause more serious workforce issues down the line.

"It is not difficult to imagine the worst case scenario if those are not completed in a timely manner, VA could end up employing unqualified, clinically incompetent individuals or individuals with criminal backgrounds," said committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-California.

"These are people who would be delivering health care to our veterans while having access to controlled substances and veterans' sensitive health information. And those risks would absolutely have to be mitigated before I could support changing the existing law."

VA officials said they'll work with members of Congress in coming weeks to find ways to address those concerns while still speeding up the process.

"Anything that we can do to extend those authorities would be much appreciated," said Gina Grosso, VA's assistant secretary for human resources operations. "Our ability to have less regulation over hiring, less regulation over caps on retention authorities, and less restrictions on how we pay awards and bonuses will help us be more competitive with the private sector."

Veteran reflects on Vietnam through old **letters home**

Army veteran Dave Olsen found them 26 years ago.

He recognized them immediately while going through his mother's belongings after she died. That was in 1995.

The sight alone took him 25 years into the past. Back to 1969. He never knew, or even suspected, that she had kept them.

But there they were.

The faded white envelopes with "free" written in lieu of a stamp were unmistakable. Almost a dozen letters a 24-year-old version of himself mailed across the world from war-torn Vietnam to small town South Dakota stood preserved, legible as the day he first wrote them.

He just never opened them all.

Until last week.

"I knew what they were," said Olsen, 76, with the letters laid in front of him in his Gillette home on Friday.

"I read a couple of them and I ... I just couldn't get into it," he said, trailing off.

Many men lucky enough to return from Vietnam carried the hard times of one of the United States' most controversial wars home with them. But that wasn't exactly the issue with Olsen. It wasn't the memories of the heat, or the monsoons, or the fear, or the unforgettable smell that made it hard to read line by line through the thoughts of his younger self.

It was the thought of who had read them before him. Who they were addressed to. The same loved one who held onto them for 25 years.

"As I read the letters, I would think of her," Olsen said of his late mother.

More than 50 years removed from his time in Vietnam and 25 years since he last saw his mother, he finally took the time to open each envelope, unfurl each folded parcel and remember the time when his life was on hold.

The letters tell a story that may be familiar to veterans of all wars and the loved ones they wrote home to. There were good times and bad. Words that spoke of boredom and others that spoke of fear. Hopes of returning stateside and frustration at the uncertainties of deployment.

Thoughts and feelings from 50 years ago can easily be warped by memory. His letters may not tell the full story of his time in Vietnam, but they open windows into a pivotal moment for a generation of Americans.

"Dear family, I have been very irresponsible lately and Denny and I have spent the last few evenings good-timing so I'll get this written on my lunch break. Life has been pretty quiet since Ho's birthday."

— An excerpt from a letter Olsen wrote, dated May 31, 1969.

"Denny," who was Olsen's closest friend in the military and remained a lifelong friend afterward, was Dennis Ridout. They entered basic training together after each graduated from separate colleges with, coincidentally, the same major and minor degrees. As fate would have it, they were both assigned to the same company in Vietnam. The 552nd Military Police.

"Ho," of course, was Ho Chi Minh. Olsen wrote of the Vietnamese-revolutionary-turned-president's birthday in one letter and about his death in another.

Olsen was in Vietnam, stationed on the II Corp Toc compound, from mid-March through early December 1969. He was not an infantryman and did not see much direct combat, but his early letters describe the dangers that were still there.

"About a week ago, two [military policemen] on highway patrol stopped a two and a half ton truck with two [U.S. Army soldiers] inside. As they walked up to the truck, one of the [soldiers] grabbed a grenade to throw it at the MPs but somehow he didn't get it out of the truck before it went off and it killed both of them."

"Shrapnel hit one MP in the head and he had six hours of brain surgery and is still paralyzed on one side. The other MP was also hit in the head but wasn't seriously hurt. Damn frustrating when your own buddies, GIs, do it. Actually we have more to worry about from situations like that than we do from Charlie."

— An excerpt from a letter Olsen wrote May 31, 1969.

It's unclear exactly what happened or why the Army men attacked the military policemen, Olsen said. But the grenade hit a metal rail, bounced back into the truck and killed the two soldiers who threw it.

In hindsight, that may have been more information than his parents needed at the time.

"I do remember thinking later, 'I wonder if I should have told them that,'" he said.

Olsen's father fought in World War II, a veteran in his own right. Olsen remembers the day he went off to Vietnam, escorted by his

father onto the tarmac and into the plane. He remembers saying goodbye to his father, and his father, with tears in his eyes, returning the farewell. In his last words to his father before leaving U.S. soil, Olsen promised a safe return.

Although his father knew the King's English well, his mother was the real letter writer. In tiny script, she would fill yellow legal pad pages with multi-day accounts of life back home. On Thursday she did this. On Friday Olsen's father did that. On Sunday his sister did something else. Sign, sealed and shipped to the other side of the world. A concise day-by-day report in idiosyncratic handwriting.

Those letters were lost a long time ago. He didn't clutch onto the letters his mother sent as tightly as she held onto his.

As he spent more time in Vietnam, a certain sense of frustration showed through his correspondence home.

"I see Nixon is going to pull out 25,000 troops by August. I wish I could say that this was a move in the direction for peace but we have yet to see the day the [North Vietnamese Army] and Vietcong will be searching in this direction. If our country has the patience to continue as it has, then in five years we may have found some desirable ends. If not, we better get in here, and get it over or get the hell out. As for myself, I really don't care which of the three we might choose, however it irritates me that after eight years here we still don't have such a policy. Oh well, I give up on this place.

"Of course, I'm not exactly writing that much myself so can't do any complaining. Actually having become fairly well adjusted to this place. It's pretty hard to write anything of interest. Most every day is the same as the next and they are about as boring as this letter. Let's just say as long as I'm smoking, joking and drinking beer at night, that life isn't totally unbearable."

— An excerpt from a letter Olsen wrote, dated June 1969.

Reading through the letters from his past brought some names, faces and images to mind for the first time in years. Accompanying stories from the war flowed out of Olsen between sips of coffee and reciting bits from the old letters.

Sometimes he wrote about the tropical weather patterns and sometimes he wrote about the monotonous existence of a drafted soldier. Some letters had thoughts on both.

"The rain has been starting each day about noon and is then on and off again all day. Come morning the sun is back up and it starts all over again ... Payday just came. Don't know if I'll send any money home this month or not, a few things I may get such as a camera. So probably will wait and see how things go ... and I also want to buy a tape recorder.

"The last month has really been quiet around here as of now. Charlie is supposed to be understrength manpower-wise though we are wary of perhaps a summer offense such as they had last year [Tet Offensive] ... It has really been hard to write lately. In fact, at this moment, I don't really feel like doing so except out of responsibility. I don't know. It's just such a dismal situation, dismal place, it's hard to be able to say anything in words. I very seldom think about anything in relation to the world. There just isn't anything here that can be related to the world.

"Life consists of eating, sleeping, working and hoping that someday you don't lose your sanity. My existence can probably best be described as getting by the best I can and to find whatever happiness and release of emotions are still within the boundaries of intelligence and good common sense. As far as I personally am doing, I am very

boringly doing very, very well. So indeed I am fortunate for so many things that I cannot begin to put them on paper. For now, I'm sorry I'm not writing more frequently but I'm doing the best I can and I very definitely look forward to the letters from home."

— An excerpt from a letter Olsen wrote, dated July 1, 1969.

Letters are often written when there is nothing else to do. Those also happen to be the moments when nothing seems to matter. Not every moment was like that, but enough of them were.

Olsen was a few months into his time in Vietnam, still in the malaise of the jungle.

"I must have been in a funk at that time," he said. "It wasn't always like that, but sometimes it hits you."

Whatever funk he was in didn't last long. It also didn't follow him back from Vietnam as bad as it did many others he served with. By the second half of his deployment, he could see the end in sight.

"For some time I've been aware of a possible change in my duty status but have failed to make any mention of it for a variety of reasons. First of all, the Army is always subject to change so I want to avoid any undue anxiety. Another is that I was unable to actually believe it to ever come about. And another important reason is that I had envisioned the possibility of presenting it all in one big surprise."

— An excerpt from a letter Olsen wrote, dated Oct. 30, 1969.

Olsen was in Vietnam when then-President Richard Nixon ordered the withdrawal of the first 25,000 U.S. troops in the summer of 1969. The war in Vietnam had become more and more unpopular stateside. Dispatches from the television and radio broadcasts painted growing animosity in American politics and culture. He said he and other soldiers openly wondered if they weren't safer in Vietnam than they would be in the U.S.

But he jumped at the opportunity to finish out the rest of his service stateside when it finally presented.

"My orders did come down, my next duty assignment is in Fort Wolters, Texas."

"Now I hope that no one is going to get all hot and bothered about my getting back as I really haven't changed all that much. I will probably be just as ornery and irresponsible as I have always been. However, I'm really looking forward to seeing the whole family again, drink civilian beer, living off the old man's pocketbook, chasing girls or whatever they are and just general messing off. Somehow I just don't think I'm going to know how to act."

— An excerpt from a letter Olsen wrote, dated Nov. 8, 1969.

There may have been other letters he wrote, but the ones laid in front of him last week, the ones his mother kept safe all these years, are some of the most personal accounts of his time overseas. Reading his past thoughts, he said it's hard to imagine where those 52 years since went.

In that time he went back to school, where he met and married his wife, Sandy. Together they raised a family and settled down in Gillette, where he was a longtime educator and principal. Sandy knew about the letters as long as Olsen did. Now that he has read them, she sees the effect that kind of nostalgia trip has on him.

"It just has brought up so many memories and feelings," she said. "These guys came back and there was no fanfare, they left Vietnam

and it was dropped. There was nothing. I think a lot of them just went into their lives."

When he thinks of his time in Vietnam, he thinks of "life on hold."

For two years, he knew he had to pause the future he planned outside of the military. It proved to be the right mindset. He came back to South Dakota and more or less picked up where he left off.

Infantrymen had it worse than his time mostly spent on the compound. The frontlines were blurred in Vietnam in a way that differed from other U.S. wars before it. There was a constant, and warranted, sense of caution. Soldiers walked the line between justified fear and paranoia. They coped with the stressors of war however they could. It took a toll on many minds.

Olsen is able to open a letter and remember those times. But more importantly, he has the privilege of closing those letters and returning to the present.

Inside of each one he can see and hear Vietnam. Outside of each one, he returns to the life he built in the country he can proudly say he fought for.

BITS AND PIECES

As we requested earlier, if you know of someone that is having health issues, or has recently passed, please let Roberta know as not everyone is keeping in touch.

Please take a look at the Vietnam and All Veterans of Florida State Coalition Website (VVOF.ORG). There is a tremendous amount of information and links to other sites.

If you need to express yourself, or have something worth sharing, please e-mail Roberta at Hdwizrd8@aol.com, or call me at 386-424-1989.

THE DUSTOFF PRAYER

Penned by Chaplin Connie Walker

Kind and Merciful Heavenly Father, thank You for "calling" and "sending" DUSTOFF Teams on missions of mercy, under the most hostile conditions, in a deeply Dedicated and Unhesitating Service To Our Fighting Forces of all ages and ranks. Lord, history has us standing on the shoulders of the faithful and courageous DUSTOFF Teams who have gone before. Bless them forever. We follow their stalwart leadership steps. Lord, may each of us hear afresh Your Summons, "Follow Me." Heroic cries like "When I have your wounded..." captivate and ring in our ears, hearts and prayers, even today as we fly on missions of mercy to Life for Life and Hope. Heavenly Father, we trust in Your saving and sustaining Grace, now and forever. In the Name of our Great God, Redeemer and Holy Spirit.

Amen!

ELECTED OFFICERS AND BOARD MEMBERS

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Ron (Doc) Custer	Chairman of the Board	Custer_ron@yahoo.com
Ed (Gunny) Ryan	Board Member	GunnyRyan@aol.com

FLORIDA DUSTOFF

MEMBERSHIP APPLICATION

New _____ Renewal _____ Lifetime _____ Yearly _____ (check one)

Name: _____ DOB: _____ Age: _____

Spouse: _____ DOB: _____ Age: _____

Address: _____

City: _____ State: _____ Zip: _____

Phone: () _____ E-mail: _____ Cell: ()

In what capacity did you serve? Pilot ____ Crew Chief ____ Medic ____ Maintenance ____ Supply ____ Door
Gunner ____ Flight Ops ____ Clerk ____ Commo ____ Cook ____ (check one or more)

Rank _____ Branch of Service _____ Dates of Assignment
(Mo/YrMo/Yr) _____

Attachments _____

If this is a renewal is this a change of address/information ? _____

_____ I know a former Dustoff/Medic/Corpsman/Pilot/Nurse or other potential member and have listed
their name, address and telephone number below.

Enclosed is \$20.00, my membership dues for one year ()

Enclosed is my Lifetime membership dues as follows Age 55 and Below \$100.00 () Age 56-75 \$75.00
() Age 76 and above \$50.00 ()

(Make checks payable to Florida Dustoff Association)

Please attach a copy of your DD-214 (or provide within 90 days) to:

Roberta Neitzel, Treasurer, 2304 Woodland Drive, Edgewater, FL 32141

WWW.DUSTOFFFL.ORG