

## NewsBytes April 19, 2019

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### **AOBWN Bill Introduced in Senate**

Sens. Kirsten Gillibrand, (N.Y.), and Steve Daines (Mont.) have introduced the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (S.1195). The bill clarifies that service members who served off the coast of the Republic of Vietnam during the Vietnam conflict have a presumption for filing disability claims with the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for ailments associated with exposure to the Agent Orange herbicide. The bill also extends the presumption of herbicide exposure for veterans who served on or near the Korean DMZ between September 1, 1967 and August 31, 1971. The legislation provides health care, vocational training, rehabilitation and monetary allowance to a child who was born with spina bifida if at least one of the child's parents served in Thailand between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975. The VA also must determine that at least one of the parents had been exposed to an herbicide agent during that period.

Earlier, the Chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, Rep. Mark Takano (Calif.) introduced the Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act (H.R.299), which is similar to the Senate bill. Last year's House bill had 335 co-sponsors and passed the House (382-0), only to stall in the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and was tabled at the end of the session.

The FRA believes Congress should recognize these veterans who were exposed to Agent Orange herbicide and authorize presumptive status for VA disability claims associated with this exposure. Members are urged to use the [FRA Action Center](#) to contact their legislators to ask them to support these bills.

### **Budget Bill Stalls on House Floor**

The FRA is thankful that the administration's proposed budget provides \$750 billion for Defense spending (\$34 billion more than the current budget). Thanks also goes to the House Budget Committee for voting to lift sequestration spending caps for two years. The House bill (H.R.2021) would provide \$733 billion for Defense spending in FY2020. Unfortunately, different factions in the House could not agree on spending limits and there were not enough votes to pass the measure. The bill was intended to be an opening proposition from House Democrats in budget talks with the White House and Republican-led Senate about spending levels. The inability of the House to pass a measure to lift sequestration spending caps could be a sign of gridlock in the legislative process. Without legislative changes, more sequestration cuts are scheduled for FY2020 that begins Oct. 1, 2019, potentially placing our national security at risk.

Budget cuts mandated by the Budget Control Act of 2011 (known as sequestration) pose a threat to national security and will substantially impact member pay and benefits. These automatic cuts require that 50 percent of the cuts come from the Defense budget, even though Defense spending makes up only 16 percent of the entire federal budget. The FRA believes the FY2020 Defense budget should provide adequate funding for "benefits and bullets."

Members are urged to go to the [FRA Action Center](#) to weigh in on this issue.

### **Protect Bankrupt Disabled Veterans from Losing Benefits**

Sens. Tammy Baldwin (Wis.) and John Cornyn (Texas) have introduced the Honoring American Veterans in Extreme Need (HAVEN-S.679) bill to shield veterans' disability benefits from debt collectors when a veteran declares bankruptcy.

Under current law, when a disabled veteran declares bankruptcy debtors can seize their disability benefits because they are considered disposable income. Yet social security benefits are exempt from being included as disposable income. Disability benefits in any form are not taxable and therefore should not be considered disposable income. The legislative sponsors noted that it is unfair veterans may be forced to give up their disability benefits when declaring bankruptcy, while the general population receiving similar benefits from social security do not.

Sen. Baldwin believes this bill will help veterans with mental health issues by easing their financial burdens. Members are encouraged to weigh in on this issue by contacting their Senators through the [FRA Action Center](#) online.

### **New Navy CNO and Vice CNO Nominated**

The current Chief of Naval Operations Admiral John Richardson is scheduled to step down from his position later this year. Admiral Bill Moran has been nominated by President Trump to become the 32nd Chief of Naval Operations (CNO), if confirmed by the Senate. Moran has been the vice chief of naval operations since May 2016. The CNO is the Navy's top admiral and is a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The CNO reports directly to the Secretary of the Navy.

Vice Admiral Robert Burke has been nominated to be promoted to a four-star Admiral and assigned as the vice chief of naval operations. If confirmed by the Senate, Burke would take over the Navy's number two job from Admiral Moran. Burke, a career submarine officer, is currently the Navy's deputy chief of naval operations for manpower, personnel, training and education.

### **American Forces Travel Discounts**

Service members, veterans and their families can now receive a military discount if they book their travel through American Forces Travel, which is supported by Priceline. The Department of Defense teamed up with Priceline and created an online travel booking site exclusively for U.S. military members. American Forces Travel is a new Morale, Welfare and Recreation (MWR) program that came out of a joint service initiative, which combines the efforts of the five branches of service.