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Tax Laws Benefit Troops, Families

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 22, 2011 - Service members and their families have a few tax advantages at their disposal, as well as a few extra days in which to complete their taxes this year, a Defense Department tax expert said.

Due to Emancipation Day, a holiday recognized by the District of Columbia, government officials have pushed the nation's tax filing deadline from April 15 to April 18, Army Lt. Col. Evan Stone, director of the Armed Forces Tax Council, told American Forces Press Service.

Along with the filing extension, Stone pointed out several new and existing tax laws military members and their spouses should keep in mind as the deadline draws near.

To start, people may have noticed an increase in their take-home pay, Stone said. The government, he explained, reduced the Social Security tax from 6.2 percent of wages to 4.2 percent solely for the 2011 tax year.

"For example, a specialist with over two years of service would probably see about a \$40 increase per month in his pay," Stone said. But while take-home pay is on the rise, tax brackets won't change. Congress extended the 2010 tax brackets through 2011 and 2012, he said.

Other tax laws are specific to military members and their spouses, Stone said, citing the Combat Zone Tax Exclusion as an example. Under this exclusion, for any day a member spends in a combat zone, that entire month's worth of base pay is excluded from gross income for income tax purposes, he explained.

There's no limit to this exclusion for enlisted members and warrant officers, he noted; however, officers are limited to \$7,714.80. "Anything above that would be included in the member's gross income," he said.

Deployed service members and their spouses also have at least a 180-day extension to file or pay taxes from the date they leave the combat zone, Stone said. To invoke this extension, people should write "combat zone" across the top of their return.

Service members on duty outside of the United States also are entitled to an automatic two-month extension, pushing the deadline to June 18. However, unlike with the Combat Zone Tax Exclusion, while they gain an extension to file and pay taxes, the interest on any taxes owed still will accrue from April 18 until taxes are paid, Stone said.

A significant tax break involves military allowances, he said. Under competitive compensation, housing and food allowances are nontaxable for income tax purposes, reducing taxable income at the end of the year and creating a savings of about \$2,000 to \$7,000, depending on salary, he explained.

"This can be significant, with tens of thousands of dollars that aren't taxable," he said.

Turning to state income taxes, Stone noted they can be complicated for service members and their families, who move with greater frequency than many of their civilian counterparts. The Service Members' Civil Relief Act has long granted service members the ability to retain their state of domicile for state tax purposes rather than the state where they are stationed.

For example, a service member may be stationed in Virginia, but owns a home, pays property taxes and votes in Ohio. That member is entitled to claim Ohio has the state of domicile and not file state income taxes for military wages in Virginia.

The government amended this same law in 2009 through the Military Spouses Residency Relief Act. In the past, a military spouse who moved to a new state and established a new residence there typically would claim that state as the state of domicile and pay state income taxes there, Stone explained. Now, spouses who move to a new state, reside there solely to live with their service member and are there pursuant to military orders won't gain or lose a state of domicile for state income tax purposes. Some states, he added, also may require the spouse to have the same domicile as the service member to be eligible.

However, the law is complicated, Stone said, and each state may apply different guidance on the application of the relief act. He suggested spouses discuss their situation with a tax advisor to avoid being double taxed.

To help with this tax law and others, service members and

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their spouses have a host of free, expert tax-preparation services at their disposal, Stone said, from on-base centers to online software.

People can visit most any installation around the world for free, in-person tax-preparation assistance through the Volunteer Income Tax Assistance program, Stone said. The Armed Forces Tax Council oversees this program, which is managed locally by installation legal assistance offices and supervised by their respective service, he added.

Volunteer tax preparers are a mix of military members and civilians with tax experience or just a desire to help, Stone said. All volunteers are trained and certified by the Internal Revenue Service before they're able to prepare taxes.

"It's a very popular program," he said. Last year, "we electronically filed over 250,000 returns."

People can locate their closest military legal assistance office through the Armed Forces Legal Assistance Legal Services Locator at <http://legalassistance.law.af.mil/content/locator.php>.

Service members and their families also can take advantage of free, online electronic tax filing services through Military OneSource. The customized program offers free federal filing and free filing for up to three states.

People can access the H&R Block at Home program by going to Military OneSource at <http://www.militaryonesource.com/> and clicking on "Tax Filing Services." For free tax-related phone consultations, people can call the Military OneSource Tax Hotline at 1-800-730-3802 seven days a week from 7 a.m. to 11 p.m. EST.

The online program is open to active-duty Army, Navy, Marine and Air Force personnel; Guard and Reserve service members regardless of activation status; as well as spouses, dependent children and family members standing in for a deployed service member.

Whether filing in person or online, Stone suggested people take advantage of the free advice offered at military tax centers.

"Even the simplest return may have issues or deductions or credits that a person might not be aware of," he said.

To ease the process, Stone suggested people gather Social Security cards, wage and earning statements, interest and dividend statements, last year's returns if available, bank account and routing numbers for direct deposit, and other relevant information prior to a tax appointment. He also stressed the importance of attention to detail, noting that a common error is for people to enter the wrong Social Security numbers on IRS forms.

For more on military-related tax laws,

people should visit the Military OneSource website or the IRS website, which features a section for service members and their families.

Programs Aim to Support Military Spouses, Families

By Jian DeLeon, Emerging Media, Defense Media Activity



WASHINGTON, Jan. 27, 2011 - A new whole-of-government approach will bring the federal government's vast reach to help millions of service members and their families, a senior Defense Department official said yesterday.

"This is a very exciting time for those of us who have been working hard to support military families," said Barbara Thompson, director of the Pentagon's office of family policy and children and youth, said during a "DODLive" bloggers roundtable.

Thompson said the backing of President Barack Obama, First Lady Michelle Obama, and Dr. Jill Biden, wife of Vice President Joe Biden, behind the effort to garner the support of every federal agency "is really quite amazing."

For the past year, numerous federal agencies and the National Security Council have been working on a report, titled: "Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment." That 23-page report was released Jan. 24 in response to a presidential directive soliciting agencies for a more coordinated, comprehensive approach to improving federal support for military families.

Now, Thompson said, the next step is getting the word out about these new programs to the people they are supposed to support, noting that several teams and committees are in place to ensure an effective strategic communications plan. One of the teams, she noted, has been set up by Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff and a staunch advocate of social media.

"We are working with a variety of entities to make sure that we have a very solid communication plan to get this information down to the military families," Thompson said.

Some of the efforts under way include increasing the availability of child care and expanding spouse-employment programs to all military services. To support those stationed overseas, the spouse employment program has partnered with overseas companies in South Korea, Japan and Germany, Thompson said.

"We're looking at providing more user-friendly information on how to acquire a federal job with [the Office of Person-

nel Management]," she said, "and we'll be tracking how many spouses are employed by the federal government to see if all of the federal agencies who have committed to employing of military spouses see an increase in that availability."

In addition, the Interior Department will open up national parks to wounded warriors to aid in rehabilitation and recovery and will offer more conservation jobs to military youth.

The main focus of the communication plan will be communicating the availability of these new programs and initiatives to the military families they are intended to support, Thompson said.

"We realized how important the strategic communication plan is going to be," she said, "because while we have this wonderful opportunity for the federal government to get behind military families, the military families need to know what is available now to them. So that is going to be the work of the next few months."

This, Thompson said, will save military families from having to go to every federal agency's website to figure out what they're doing to support military families. The concept of having one website has been discussed, she said, but officials realize that people access information differently and have their favorites.

While a dedicated website to these new programs is still up in the air, Thompson said, it's evident that social media and blogs will play a big part in making sure the right people see the information.

"Social networking is the way to go, and we know that," she said. "And I think that it's going to be really important for this to be enduring -- that our families have to take advantage of the programs that are going to be available to them."

Family Matters Blog: DOD Offers Help With Moves

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 11, 2011 - Robert L. Gordon III is the deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy. In this guest blog, Mr. Gordon spotlights an online resource called "Plan My Move," and invites families to join discussion boards to submit questions or share lessons learned. - Elaine Wilson

Moving? Let Us Help with 'Plan My Move'

Robert L. Gordon III
Military Community and Family Policy

Moving again? Even when a move is months away, it's natural to get a little

stressed when imagining everything at home getting packed into a box and shipped off to parts unknown. There is so much to do and so much to plan. That's why we offer "Plan My Move."

Plan My Move features a calendar that you customize. When are you moving? Where are you going? Do you have family members with special needs? The site creates a calendar that walks you through the day-to-day process of moving. You can change the calendar to fit your family's needs. Tasks can be changed, moved or removed. You can add your own tasks.

Along with the calendar, Plan My Move creates travel checklists, arrival checklists, lists of documents to hand-carry and important phone numbers. You can print each of these lists and the calendar.

Plan My Move also links families to a massive amount of information about where you're going and how you'll get there. The site explains permanent and temporary housing options. It goes over the shipment and storage of your household goods. You can read about schools, employment assistance and recreation opportunities. You'll find lots of information about the local community. The site lists websites, phone numbers and e-mail addresses, so you can contact them directly.

Whether it's your first move or your fifth, there are always new challenges. How do I move my pets? How do I find the best day care and schools? What moving allowances will I get? Plan my Move has tip sheets for more than 150 different moving topics.

What moving tips do you have? Join our discussion on Facebook if you have advice to share with other families or if you have questions about a move. We've also started discussions on Facebook on moving with special needs family members and moving with children. I will focus on these subjects in my next two posts. In the meantime, I hope you'll use these discussions to share experiences, advice with others who may benefit. Thank you.

To comment on this blog, or read other posts, visit the Family Matters website.

Microsoft Corp. Helps Veterans' Job Search

By Terri Moon Cronk, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, Feb. 28, 2011 - Communities, nonprofit organizations and companies are reaching out to support unemployed American veterans in their search for work, and one of the companies joining in the effort is information technology giant, Microsoft Corp.

It was last Veterans Day when Micro-

soft kicked off its grant campaign, "Elevate America Veterans Initiative," by awarding \$2 million in cash and up to \$6 million in software and information technology training to six nonprofit agencies that support veterans in varying fashions. And now, these six nonprofits are beginning to open their classroom doors after looking at the needs to better help their local veterans.

Selected from a pool of 100 applicants, each of the six has something different to offer its veterans, across different regions of the country.

The six awardees are:

- Able-Disabled Advocacy Inc., San Diego - San Diego VetWORKS;
- Bellevue College, Bellevue, Wash., - Project SUCCEED;
- Goodwill Industries of the Southern Piedmont Inc., Charlotte, N.C., - Elevate America's Veterans Initiative;
- Gulf Coast Workforce Board, Panama City, Fla., - Mission: 21st Century;
- Per Scholas, New York City and Miami, - Microsoft Veterans Employment Project; and,
- Veterans Inc., Worcester, Mass., - Veterans Inc. Employment and Training Program.

Navy Adm. Mike Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, often cites the many benefits veterans bring to the workplace.

"Veterans bring a maturity," Mullen has said. "They bring leadership. They bring a life experience. They bring a dedication they may not have had when they were 17, 18 or 19 years old."

The most-recent data from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics indicates that unemployed military veterans currently comprise 10.2 percent of the national unemployment rate.

With those statistics in mind, Microsoft awarded the grants to train unemployed veterans, and their spouses who also can't find work, in the latest technology to ready them for the 21st-century job market, said Andrea Taylor, Microsoft's director for North America Community Affairs.

Each of the organizations awarded grants is able to offer more than information technology training over the course of the two-year program. Grant money also can go toward mentoring and resume writing, career counseling and help with child care and transportation.

In developing the programs that would benefit returning veterans and their spouses, Microsoft met with nationally recognized veterans service organizations for guidance and feedback. This advisory group included members from the American Legion, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, Paralyzed Veterans of America, United Service Organizations and the Wounded Warrior Project.

Taylor believes 190,000 individuals could be assisted through the corporation's grants. She also estimates that 40 percent of unemployed veterans also have spouses in need of job training programs.

With training programs just beginning at the six nonprofits, each must address their veterans' individual needs. One of the nonprofits is focusing on training for jobs that promise the most growth in future years.

Veterans Inc., in Worcester, Mass., helps veterans acquire new skills, licenses and certifications for jobs they can hire into now, while working on other skills necessary for jobs in the future.

The nonprofit is promoting information technology training, and "a variety of industries in areas that respond to the demands of the labor market," said retired Air Force veteran Vincent J. Perrone, the president and chief executive officer for Veterans Inc.

Such opportunities might be in "green jobs in energy-efficient building jobs, construction management, network security, computer specialist jobs, project management, health care support, and jobs as security guards, cooks and food preparation workers," Perrone said.

Perrone says Veterans Inc. will offer workshops in resume writing, interviewing for a job, life skills, nutrition, money management, and tips on dressing for success.

"This program will serve veterans, returning service members, and their spouses in need throughout Massachusetts," he said.

"The projected number of participants to receive grant services [at Veterans Inc.] is 130 to 170," Perrone said, predicting that 115 of his group's veterans will find work in the first year.

Microsoft's veterans program is supplemental to government agencies that offer benefits to unemployed veterans, like the Department of Veterans Affairs, Taylor said.

"Our program is intended to build on what's already there," she said.

"Veterans, young and old, seem to be 'invisible members' in our communities," Taylor continued. "The young ones don't have relationships with organizations that can help them," compared to the older set that's connected to groups such as the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars.

"Veterans have served their country and they've served well," Taylor said. "They have excellent training in leadership skills, discipline and preparation. But what they often lack is the ability to transition from those skills in a military atmosphere, into civilian jobs."

Department Reaches Out to Guard, Reserve Employers

By Lisa Daniel, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 10, 2011 - The Defense Department is reaching out to employers of National Guardsmen and reservists with a major survey to find out how the past decade of war and the heavy use of reserve-component forces has affected their civilian workplaces.

The department is distributing the surveys to some 80,000 employers throughout March and April to gain insight into the benefits and challenges of employing members of the Guard and reserves, Dennis M. McCarthy, assistant secretary of defense for reserve affairs, told American Forces Press Service today.

It is the largest survey of its kind since the military entered sustained operations following the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks against the United States, McCarthy said. While surveys have looked into how Guard and reserve members are faring, none have focused primarily on employers and how they've been affected, he said.

"We want to know a little more about them and what their experiences have been," McCarthy said. "We want to know what they've gained, how they see the value of having members of the National Guard and reserve working for them. We want to know what pressures there have been, and the things they've done to deal with it."

The survey also is about sustaining military relations with employers and assessing the value the members of the reserve components bring to a workplace, McCarthy said.

"We want to get some ideas, if they have them -- and I know they will -- of what we can do to sustain their support in the future," he said. "What I hear all the time is that these men and women who serve in the National Guard and reserve are among [their] best employees."

McCarthy said he expects employer responses to be high. Phone calls were placed to about 40,000 of the targeted employers to notify them of the survey, and only about 1,500 asked that it not be sent to them, he said.

The survey is being distributed by Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve, a Defense Department agency created in 1972 to develop and maintain employer support for Guard and reserves service. ESGR hosts annual Employer Freedom Awards to recognize the best employers for those serving in the reserve components. This year, some 3,000 service members have nominated their employers, a record number since the awards

were created 16 years ago, McCarthy said.

The high number of nominees reflects the support Guard and reserve members have felt in the past decade, McCarthy said.

"After 10 years of conflict, where we've mobilized over 800,000 reserves, the level of support by employers in this country has been absolutely phenomenal," he said. "This survey is intended to help us sustain that support ... and maintain a partnership well into the future."

McCarthy added that he hopes the survey results will translate into laws and policies to sustain the strong relationship between the reserve components and employers.

The survey is being distributed to employers of all sizes and industries in every state and territory, ESGR officials said.

Officials Extend Deadline for 'Stop Loss' Pay

American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 21, 2011 - The deadline for eligible service members, veterans and their beneficiaries to apply for special retroactive pay as compensation for involuntary extensions of their military service contracts has been extended to April 8, Defense Department officials announced today.

The deadline extension is included in the continuing resolution President Barack Obama signed March 18 that provided funding for government operations through April 8.

The Retroactive Stop Loss Special Pay was established to compensate for the hardships military members encountered when their service was involuntarily extended under Stop Loss authority between Sept. 11, 2001, and Sept. 30, 2009. Eligible members or their beneficiaries may submit a claim to their respective military services to receive the benefit of \$500 for each full or partial month served in a Stop Loss status.

When the special pay program began on Oct. 21, 2009, the services estimated 145,000 service members, veterans and beneficiaries were eligible for this benefit. Because the majority of those eligible had separated from the military, the services have engaged in extensive and persistent outreach efforts to reach them and remind them to apply, officials said.

Outreach efforts -- such as using direct mail, social networks and media outlets and engaging military and veteran service organizations -- will continue through April 8, officials added.

To apply for Stop Loss pay or for more information, including submission require-

ments and service-specific links, go to <http://www.defense.gov/stoploss>.

Gates: Scouting Instills Principles, Integrity, Honor

By John D. Banusiewicz, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 4, 2011 - Recalling his own experience as an Eagle Scout, Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates last night praised scouting for instilling principles, integrity and honor in tomorrow's leaders.

Gates was the keynote speaker at a Circle Ten Council Friends of Scouting dinner here.

The secretary told the audience of 1,500 that he could fit everything he owned in the back seat of his car when he went to Washington, D.C., at age 22 to work for the CIA. At that time, he said, earning his Eagle Scout badge was the only thing he had done that made him believe he could make a difference.

"It was the only thing I had done that distinguished me from so many other high school kids," he said. "It was the first thing I had done that told me I might be a little different because I worked a little harder, was a little more determined, a little more goal-oriented, more persistent than others. Earning my Eagle gave me the self-confidence to believe, for the first time in my life, that I could achieve whatever I set my mind to."

Much has changed, and not all of it for the better -- especially for young people -- in the 50 years since he was a Boy Scout, Gates said.

"One thing, however, that has remained the same over the years is the positive experience of scouting on boys and young men," he added, "and the ability of so many of them to surprise us and inspire us with their determination, their character, their skills, and their moral and physical courage."

Good homes and good parents produce good boys, but scouting tempers the steel, the secretary said.

"At a time when many American young people are turning into couch potatoes and, too often, much worse," Gates told the audience, "scouting continues to challenge boys and young men, preparing them for leadership."

One way scouting creates leaders, the secretary said, is by presenting new challenges that build confidence, self-reliance and the spirit of adventure. Another benefit, he added, is that Boy Scouts learn the importance of service to others.

"The scouting movement shows dra-

matically that service -- public service -- still beckons the best among us to do battle with complacency, neglect, ignorance and the emptiness of the spirit that are the common enemies of social peace and justice," Gates said. "Adults like you who support scouting are generously investing in our collective future -- in [columnist] Walter Lippman's words, you are 'planting the trees we may never get to sit under.'"

Caring beyond one's self, the secretary added, is fundamental not only to scouting, but also to democracy and to civilization itself.

Scouting also prepares boys and young men to live lives based on unchanging values such as trustworthiness, loyalty, honesty, kindness, and the respect and dignity every person deserves, he said.

"We in scouting believe that personal virtues -- self-reliance, self-control, honor, integrity and morality -- are absolute and timeless," Gates said. "There are in too many places too few people with scouting values -- people who say, 'On my honor, I will do my best to do my duty,' and mean it."

The secretary noted that scouting allows adults who are leaders to teach boys to be leaders.

"In challenging boys to learn skills, to master challenges, to strive to live up to high principles and moral values, to find the greater beauty in a life of cheerful service, to build strong character, scouting tempers them into strong leaders for tomorrow," Gates said.

Former President George W. Bush introduced Gates to the audience. Gates' service as defense secretary dates back to December 2006, during Bush's administration.

Leaders Praise New Approach to Military Family Support

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, Jan. 25, 2011 - Leaders from the top echelons of the Defense Department and other government agencies have stepped forward to voice their unanimous approval of a groundbreaking new effort to support and strengthen military families.

President Barack Obama unveiled yesterday a new, whole-of-government approach to military family support, with agencies uniting to create new resources and support programs for military families worldwide.

From health care to child care to spouse employment, Obama announced the gov-

ernment has made nearly 50 commitments to improving families' quality of life and well-being, with numerous agencies -- ranging from the Veterans Affairs Department to the Education Department -- involved in the effort.

"Through this effort, you now have the entire Cabinet and other agencies literally saying, 'This is one of our top priorities,'" Sarah Farnsworth, deputy assistant secretary of defense for community outreach, told American Forces Press Service today. "This is not a political discussion. ... We all have a responsibility to our military families and our troops."

This effort opens doors for agencies with a longstanding desire to help, Farnsworth noted. "Some agencies that may not have previously realized they could help make a difference now have a way to get involved," she said. And in turn, she added, DOD and VA have access to resources they may not otherwise have been able to tap.

"By having military families elevated in some of the other Cabinet agencies, it brings more federal resources to the table," she said.

While the announcement was made at the government level, Farnsworth emphasized the community-based nature of many of the upcoming support efforts, noting plans for a greater outreach to mayors, business communities and chambers of commerce.

"It's more about reaching out and empowering communities that may not have understood or had the resources to help support military members and their families," she explained. "It's the kind of effort where there's room at the table for everybody. Military families are part of all of our lives, no matter where you sit across the agency or country."

VA officials also stepped forward to voice their approval of the family support effort. Tammy Duckworth, VA's assistant secretary for public and intergovernmental affairs, reiterated in a blog yesterday the department's longstanding commitment to families.

"War takes a toll on families," she wrote. "Therefore, to ensure the families of service members and veterans have programs that meet their needs, the Department of Veterans Affairs has joined the White House and other federal agencies to strengthen services for family members."

VA plans to roll out several new programs and cooperative efforts in the coming months, many of which are outlined in the White House Report, titled: "Strengthening Our Military Families: Meeting America's Commitment."

For example, VA plans to develop and expand family caregiver support programs, expand and enhance services to combat suicide in the veteran population, and, working

with DOD, implement a multiyear mental health strategy to promote early recognition of mental health conditions.

Additionally, VA will continue working with the U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness and the Housing and Urban Development Department to reduce the number of homeless veterans to 59,000 by June 2012, and to end homelessness completely by its goal year of 2015.

This governmentwide effort is "something in which we're very excited to participate," Duckworth wrote.

Education Secretary Arne Duncan pledged to continue expanding educational opportunities for military families yesterday in a news release.

"The men and women who serve in our nation's armed forces place a high value on education and the availability of quality educational opportunities for their children," Duncan said. "The U.S. Department of Education is committed to providing children of military families the support and education they need to thrive, as well as expanding educational opportunities for military spouses and veterans."

The Education Department will focus its efforts on educational opportunities for military children, particularly during deployments and times of transition, a department news release said. The department also will work to simplify the financial aid application process for military families.

Agriculture Department officials also reiterated their commitment to military families and highlighted some upcoming efforts on behalf of military families.

"Military families face many challenges as a result of their commitment to our country, and I believe USDA's programs can play a significant role in helping and supporting these families through their sacrifice," Deputy Agriculture Secretary Kathleen Merrigan said in a news release yesterday. "We are committed to further strengthening our 25-year relationship with the Defense Department and using the resources of the Cooperative Extension Service to serve the entire military community."

The 4-H National Headquarters plans to enhance its relationship with active, Guard and Reserve services to support 4-H clubs and activities for military youth, the release said. And, USDA's National Institute of Food and Agriculture will work with the Defense, Health and Human Services and Education departments to increase child care availability across the nation.

Ken Salazar, secretary of the interior, outlined some of the Interior Department's planned initiatives while expressing his full support of the effort in a statement issued yesterday.

"We must honor the remarkable service and sacrifices of our military families by doing all we can to provide them the support

and quality of life they deserve,” he said. “As stewards of America’s great natural, cultural and historic treasures, the Department of the Interior can help provide our service members, their families, and our veterans with unique opportunities for recreation, rehabilitation and solitude.”

The department plans to work with DOD to offer military families use of Interior lands and recreational facilities for recovery, the statement said, particularly wounded warriors “in their efforts to regain psychological health, reintegrate with family and rehabilitate.”

Also, the department will work with the DOD to expand employment opportunities for military families in conservation, the release said.

“Under President Obama’s leadership and on behalf of a grateful nation, I look forward to working across the federal family to expand opportunities for military families and to honor their commitment to our country,” Salazar said.

Family Matters Blog: Mrs. Petraeus Seeks Financial Feedback From Troops

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 3, 2011 - I was a young airman when I fell for my first scam. I was seeking a loan to purchase some furniture – my credit cards were all maxed – and spotted an ad in the local newspaper. It drew me like a beacon, advertising quick and easy loans to people with shaky credit histories. I figured I could score some cash with minimal stress and pay it back with a military allotment.

I called and gave them my personal information and then was told, since my credit score wasn’t the best, that I’d have to send in a lump sum before I’d be granted the loan. I don’t recall the exact amount, but it was at least \$500. I sent the money off and waited to hear from the loan company -- and waited, and waited. After a few weeks, I called the number again and it was disconnected. No loan and my money was long gone.

I beat myself up over that incident but eventually chalked it up to a lesson learned. I would go on to chase money down several other financial rabbit holes over the years, but along the way, I gained some wisdom and a new outlook on financial well-being. It seems as if shady creditors and scammers are more prevalent now than ever before, with the Internet serving as a hotbed of scamming opportunity. But fortunately, the government is stepping up measures to combat this trend.

This summer, the Consumer Financial

Protection Bureau will formally stand up to “make sure consumers have the information they need to choose the consumer financial products and services that are best for them,” according to its website.

Within that bureau, the Office of Servicemember Affairs also will stand up to educate and protect military members and their families from financial setbacks.

The office will be headed up by Holly Petraeus, wife of Army Gen. David H. Petraeus, commander of U.S. troops in Afghanistan.

I spoke with Mrs. Petraeus earlier this week about her goals for the office, which aims to educate and inform troops and their families so they can make wise financial decisions.

“If I can say that the military is an educated population who can recognize the red flags of a bad deal, then I’ll really feel I’ve been able to make something happen,” she told me.

Unfortunately, military members often are vulnerable target for scammers, Mrs. Petraeus said, since they’re in a population with a guaranteed paycheck. They also prey on the military culture that requires members to pay their debts.

“That gives them a stick to shake at the borrower,” she said. “If you don’t pay, I’ll get you in trouble. That makes them vulnerable to those bullying tactics used by a creditor.”

Mrs. Petraeus plans to travel to military installations across the country to learn about the financial issues military members and their families are facing – such as debt, scams, foreclosure and mortgage issues -- and to solicit suggestions on how to better help them.

In the meantime, she encouraged people to submit their financial issues and concerns via e-mail to military@treasury.gov.

For more on my interview with Mrs. Petraeus, see “Holly Petraeus Aims to Protect Troops’ Finances.”

Plan Bridges Gaps in Homeland Responses

By Lisa Daniel, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 8, 2011 - Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates has agreed to a plan that will allow for one commander to be in charge of both National Guard and reserve forces when they are called up to respond to domestic emergencies.

Gates, along with Homeland Security Secretary Janet Napolitano and the Council of Governors -- a group President Barack Obama formed in January 2010 to represent

all of the states’ governors -- signed off on the agreement, known as the Joint Action Plan, during a March 1 Pentagon meeting, Defense Department officials said.

Paul N. Stockton, assistant secretary of defense for homeland security, today called the agreement “a breakthrough” in the military’s ability to effectively respond to domestic emergencies, whether natural or manmade.

“This will be much more efficient, much more effective, and it will be a partnership that never existed before,” Stockton told American Forces Press Service.

The plan creates a dual-status commander for each state, approved by the president and governor, to have simultaneous authority over both National Guard and reserve forces called up to respond to a state emergency, Stockton said.

Under the Constitution, Guard forces must be under state control for domestic events, and reservists and any active-duty forces must remain in federal control. The dual-status commanders can operate in both the state and federal chains of command without legal changes, Stockton said. In fact, he added, dual-status commanders have been used before for domestic events that are planned months in advance, such as political party conventions.

State and federal officials realized through the response to Hurricane Katrina, which killed thousands of people and destroyed much of the Louisiana and Mississippi coasts in August 2005, as well as in other natural disasters, that better coordination is needed in emergencies, he said.

“During Katrina, leadership didn’t have an understanding of what was happening on the ground,” Stockton said. “We need a better common operating picture of where the units are, their level of readiness, their response capabilities.”

Commanders also need to know the local area, he said, such as roadway and building capacities.

“This is a whole new way to bring life-saving capabilities to bear,” Stockton said. “Those first 72 hours are precious for saving lives.”

The Joint Action Plan will provide uniformity to plans that vary greatly from state to state, he said, and all dual-status commanders are expected to be appointed and trained by early fall. More than 30 dual-status commanders already have been chosen in key locations, he said.

“That commander is the nexus, the coordinating person to ensure that forces work in collaboration,” he said.

A second aspect of the agreement calls for a legislative change to give the president the authority to call up reservists for domestic emergencies -- a change Stockton said is needed to streamline the process. Currently, if federal forces are needed to augment the

Guard, a governor must make the request to the Federal Emergency Management Agency, part of the Homeland Security Department, then FEMA must seek the assistance through U.S. Northern Command, which oversees North America and will oversee dual-status commander training, Stockton said.

Most dual-status commanders likely will be National Guard officers with a distinguished record of command experience, he said.

Play Shares Emotions of Deployments, Reintegration

By Donna Miles, American Forces Press Service



HAMPTON, Va., March 24, 2011 - The "F-bombs" fell fast and furiously yesterday at an otherwise perfectly proper gathering of military health care professionals here as they broke away from their lectures and academic exchanges to watch a documentary play about the challenges many of their patients struggle to overcome.

"ReEntry," co-written by K.J. Sanchez and Emily Ackerman, is based on actual interviews with Marines and their loved ones, and it explores their raw, realistic and often tender experiences related to repeated combat deployments and redeployments. The playwrights spent hundreds of hours interviewing Marines returning from Afghanistan and Iraq as well as their families, then used their exact words in the play.

Navy Capt. Paul S. Hammer, director of the Defense Centers of Excellence for Psychological Health and Traumatic Brain Injury, introduced the play at the first Armed Forces Public Health Conference. Before the actors took their places on the stage, he warned the audience not to be surprised by the play's "salty" and "irreverent" humor.

"This is dialogue from real people and real characters. It is not a composite," he said. "It's about the very real human reaction to the stressful experiences of war and how that impacts the ability to integrate, all told in their own words. It's the use of the arts in telling the story and helping understand the experience."

Two of the major characters in the play are based on Ackerman's brothers who served with the Marine Corps in Iraq. One suffered from post-traumatic stress and even contemplated suicide after returning home, but was saved when his family intervened. The other was wounded in a roadside-bomb attack that killed his best friend and blinded another Marine.

Sanchez initially hired Joseph Harrell,

a former Marine Corps drill instructor, as a military consultant to bring realism to the play. She ultimately signed him on to play the part of the commanding officer – a role Harrell said helped him realize that he, too, had long-undiagnosed post-traumatic stress that wasn't related to combat.

"From researching the character I played, from reading books, meeting clinicians, talking to people, I found out a lot about myself," he said. "And through the process, I started to find healing. I started to find answers, and I mapped out my entire life as a result of this play."

Harrell said he saw "ReEntry" have that same healing effect on the family of a friend as it helped them finally understand changes in him after he returned home from combat.

"That's why I am attached to this play and why I will always be attached to it -- because I know what it can do for people," he said. "There is not a person on this planet that can tell me this does not have healing properties. So I am in it. I am in it all the way."

"ReEntry" explores the many aspects of military service – the sacrifice, the pride, the unity its members feel:

-- A wounded Marine sees his combat wounds as a failure -- "the gunfight I lost" -- and shares the pain of being determined unfit for service. "It stings," he said. "No matter how much you are expecting it, it stings."

-- A sister tells of sending care packages to her deployed brother and trying not to worry about him. She admits to saving his phone messages on the voice recorder. "It might be the last time I hear his voice," she said.

-- A commander worries that he's become impervious to death and developed a "stone mask" that hides what's really inside.

-- A mother shares her need to telephone the family of the fallen Marine who died in her son's arms and the one who was wounded in the attack.

-- A gunnery sergeant's wife says, "I am not just married to a Marine. We are a Marine family." And although she maintains a poker face to the world, she admits to going into the bathroom to cry in private without being discovered.

-- A Marine tells a comrade he thinks he has post-traumatic stress and assures him it's OK to go "straight to see the wizard."

Sanchez emphasized during a panel discussion following yesterday's performance that she doesn't intend "ReEntry" to speak for everyone's experiences. But Hammer called the very real human experiences portrayed in the play a valuable tool to help military members deal with conflict they may feel, and for others to better understand them.

"ReEntry" is an example of the creative use of performing arts to further our

understanding of the challenges faced by, as well as the strength and camaraderie of, our combat warriors and their families," he told the gathering.

The show made its military debut in May at the Navy and Marine Corps Combat Operational Stress Control Conference in San Diego, and is making the rounds at military bases and Veterans Affairs hospitals. The troupe presented it in November at Marine Corps Base Quantico, Va., where it received a standing ovation, and in February at Marine Corps Recruit Depot Parris Island, S.C., where it was mandatory viewing for all drill instructors.

In September, "ReEntry" will go to Camp Lejeune, N.C., and eight family-day performances are on the schedule for reserve units.

"ReEntry" also played at civilian theaters in Red Bank, N.J., and Baltimore. It is scheduled to run in October at a civilian theater in Bethesda, Md., also home of the National Naval Medical Center, to be redesignated as the Walter Reed National Medical Center.

"It resonates with them," Hammer said. "It's telling the story, and allowing audiences to interact with the story."

One Army civilian health care provider fought back tears as she thanked Sanchez following yesterday's presentation for giving her new insights into the men and women she cares for every day.

"You opened my eyes and let me get inside their bodies," she said. "Now I will have a better understanding and appreciation of how they feel."

Red Cross Website Links Japan-based Troops to Home

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 15, 2011 - In the wake of Japan's massive earthquake and tsunami, Red Cross officials are encouraging U.S. service members and families posted there to register

with an online resource intended to keep family and friends back home informed of their welfare.

Military members and their families overseas can relay their status and pass on messages to loved ones through the American Red Cross-sponsored "Safe and Well" website at <http://redcross.org>.

"It's a great online tool," Deanna Swaniher, senior director of service delivery for the American Red Cross' Service to the Armed Forces, told American Forces Press Service yesterday. "Family members back here can visit the website and look up loved ones to

see if they're safe."

Hours after the earthquake and tsunami struck March 11, officials confirmed U.S. military personnel and their families were accounted for. Still, family and friends back home were seeking information.

One woman turned to Misawa Air Base's Facebook page for information that day. Misawa is about 400 miles north of Tokyo.

"Not sure if anyone can find out anything," she wrote, "but my brother is on base and we're trying to figure out if everything is OK over there. Does anyone know?"

To register for Safe and Well, people enter their name, contact information and then choose from a list of standard messages — "I am safe and well," "Family and I are safe and well," or "Currently at shelter" — or they can type a customized message.

While many service members may turn to e-mail or, if available, a phone call to contact immediate family members after a disaster, Swanier encouraged them to also register on Safe and Well so extended family members and friends can find out about their well-being.

"It offers another avenue of communication," she noted.

Family and friends back home can access the messages by entering the service member's pre-disaster phone number or complete home address. They can't, however, register themselves on the site. The site is intended to facilitate communication from inside the disaster-affected areas to families outside, Red Cross officials explained.

While the site offers a quick and easy way to pass on a person's current status, not everyone chooses to register. In this case, officials encourage people to try calling, texting or checking online to see if their loved one is updating their social media page, such as Facebook or Twitter. People who have a loved one with a serious health or mental health condition can initiate an Emergency Information Request by calling their local American Red Cross chapter or calling 1-800-RED-CROSS.

Along with Safe and Well, Red Cross officials also passed on a few other ways to contact U.S. citizens living or traveling overseas.

The International Committee of the Red Cross has launched a special "Family Links" website to help people seeking to re-establish contact with family members and friends. People in Japan and other countries in the Pacific can register at <http://www.icrc.org/familylinks> to inform their family and friends that they are safe and provide their current contact information.

People in the United States looking for loved ones can check the list for information. They also can register the names of family members and friends, encouraging

them to get in touch.

Additionally, people can contact or locate U.S. citizens living or traveling in Japan by calling the State Department's office of overseas citizens' services at 1-888-407-4747 or 202-647-5225.

Course Readies Civilians for Overseas Deployments

By Elaine Wilson, American Forces Press Service



MUSCATATUCK URBAN TRAINING CENTER, Ind., March 8, 2011 - An incoming rocket explodes, shaking the earth and setting off a shockwave of activity.

"Keep your heads down!" a soldier shouts back to a group of civilians standing by a doorway as he scans a half-blown-up parking garage ahead for suspicious activity.

A few soldiers, M-16s in hand, surround the civilians and rush them into a waiting convoy. They load up and the convoy speeds off just as another rocket goes off. A cloud of smoke envelops the rear Humvee as it trails into the distance.

A few feet away, a man shakes his head, unfazed by the flurry of activity around him. Although the scenario went well, the civilians, he noted later, entered the vehicles too slowly.

The expectations are understandably high here, particularly for the civilian students. For most of them, the training grounds here and at nearby Camp Atterbury will be their last stop before yearlong deployments to locations in Afghanistan and Iraq -- where the next attack they experience could be a real one.

"It's a very steep learning curve for some of them, particularly if they have no experience in this environment whatsoever," Rory Aylward, an instructor and subject matter expert on Afghanistan, said of the students. "It's ... like being thrown in a pool of cold water."

Each month, dozens of students converge here for the Civilian Expeditionary Workforce's predeployment course. The course aims to equip civilians with the skills needed to successfully support combat and humanitarian missions in Afghanistan, Iraq and other locations around the world.

Defense Department officials started the course in January 2010, about a year after the CEW formally stood up to augment military forces overseas. Although civilians had been successfully serving in Afghanistan and Iraq, officials recognized the need to better prepare them for the austere environments they'd encounter. With time and lessons learned, the class evolved into what it is

today — a once-a-month training course that runs the gamut from military familiarization to cultural sensitivities to dealing with the stressors of war.

The students are volunteers from around the world and with varying levels of military experience and expertise. Student Erin Dunn, for example, is an education manager for Joint Forces Command's joint public affairs support element as well as an Air Force veteran. Other students come from the private sector without the benefit of military knowledge, but with an in-demand skill, such as contracting or linguistics.

"I got out [of the Air Force] a long time ago, and in this stage of my life, it's not appropriate to go back," said Dunn, who is heading to Iraq after training. "This is an opportunity to serve in a way I would otherwise not get to."

Instructors have just 11 days to prepare this diverse and varied population of students for environments many haven't encountered or seen before.

The students spend the first week here, participating in classes and a series of scenarios that expose them to different cultures and ways of life. They're taught cultural awareness and sensitivities, personal security, counterinsurgency, command structures, how to work with an interpreter, as well as how to become part of a team comprising primarily military members.

The next week, students move to nearby Camp Atterbury, where they're taught how to operate a weapon, although most won't carry one, and take care of numerous details — from finances to equipment -- required before they can deploy.

Still in her first week of training, Dunn had participated in an Iraq-based scenario earlier in the day. She and a few fellow students met with a provincial governor, played by an Iraqi citizen, to discuss topics ranging from stalled construction projects to security concerns. The governor, an imposing figure decked out in a suit and seated at the head of the table with a backdrop of an Iraqi flag, expressed his desire to see an engineering project completed, speaking through a translator seated just behind Dunn.

Dunn listened intently, occasionally taking a sip of her steaming cup of tea. She adjusted her bright yellow headscarf worn out of respect.

"We want that too," she said of the project's completion, nodding in agreement.

An evaluation team studied her every move. Although she performed well, they'll later dissect her performance so the next time she meets with an Iraqi official, she'll have even better odds of success.

Every touch in the room, from the Iraqi flag to cultural decorations, reflects the represented nation and the instructors' efforts to make the training as realistic as possible. Even the role players are authentic. All are

Afghan or Iraqi citizens living in the United States.

The outside environment mirrors the same sense of realism. Each day the students travel by convoy here from an austere, mock forward operating base, called FOB Panther, about 10 miles away. As they drive onto the training grounds, they pass by a stark, white building trimmed in turquoise designed to resemble a mosque, a mock alleyway, and structures made to look like blown-up parking garages.

Mark Parsons, a civilian program manager on Wright Patterson Air Force Base, Ohio, and an Air Force veteran, said he and the other students felt a bit “awestruck” upon their arrival.

“I was expecting something a little more United States-ey,” he said with a smile.

Like Dunn, Parsons soon will head to Iraq where he’ll support overseas travel and training for Iraqi forces. He’ll ensure Iraqis who are going to the United States for training have the proper security and travel arrangements, he explained.

“What we’re learning right now is absolutely paramount to prepare us for going over there,” he said.

Nycoca Hairston, an Army veteran, is familiar with the environment she’s about to enter — she served two tours in Iraq -- but still feels she has more to learn. She had just returned home last March when officials approached her to return again, this time as a civilian. In Iraq, she explained, she had served as the program manager of three reconnaissance management programs and was returning to help manage the logistics drawdown there.

“Being there for the first two years, I didn’t receive this type of training — the intensity, the in-depth [instruction on] culture, customs, land structures,” she said. “I feel more prepared now.

“Just knowing the culture, the customs, is very important when interacting with [Iraqis],” she added.

The single mother of two said she will miss her family, but is proud to be a part of the mission, which she’s dedicating to a fallen boyfriend -- Army Command Sgt. Maj. Jerry Wilson, who was killed in action in 2003 in Mosul, Iraq.

“I plan to go there and support the soldiers in his respect,” she said. “Let me go over there and do it one more time.”

In a few short days, the students will join the roughly 4,000 civilians deployed to Iraq and Afghanistan and about 500 civilians to other locations, such as Djibouti and Qatar.

Dunn said she feels more confident now about what lies ahead. But, as with service members, Dunn also must come to terms with what she must temporarily leave behind. She tears up when speaking about leaving her 9-year-old son, who she called

“my north, my south, my east and my west.”

“It will probably be harder for me than for him,” she said of the separation from her son.

Dunn said she’s inspired by civilians who step up to deploy, particularly those who have served and deployed before.

“They’re making a sacrifice they don’t have to make,” she said.

Parsons said his wife and children supported him 100 percent, even though he’d already deployed multiple times during his Air Force service. They understand his passion for service and desire to serve, he said.

“I want to make an impact,” he said. “I want someone to know that when Mark Parsons left that he served his country and he did all he could.”

Dunn echoed his passion to serve. “I want to make a difference in someone’s life with a mission that’s bigger than me,” she said.

DOD Improves Troops’ Access to Quality Education

By Elaine Wilson
American Forces Press Service



WASHINGTON, March 3, 2011 - Defense Department officials are taking extensive measures — from education reviews to agency partnerships -- to ensure service members have access to quality education and learning opportunities in their off-duty hours, a DOD official said.

Robert L. Gordon III, deputy assistant secretary of defense for military community and family policy, outlined these efforts for members of a Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs subcommittee yesterday.

Each year, one-third of the nation’s service members enroll in post-secondary education courses leading to associate’s, bachelor’s and advanced degrees, Gordon said. And this past year alone, officials tallied more than 857,000 course enrollments and more than 45,000 service members who earned a degree or certification.

Service members are nontraditional students, attending school part time during off-duty hours, said Gordon, noting that oftentimes “military missions, deployments, transfers and family obligations impinge on their ability to continue their education.”

This can result in an interruption of studies or breaks of months and even years between courses or in completing degree requirements, he said.

To better accommodate their work schedules and demands, the military is turning to technology to create more opportunities than ever before, Gordon said. Colleges

and universities deliver classroom instruction via the Internet and on military installations around the world.

“There are no geographical confines,” he said. “Courses are offered on board ships, submarines and at deployed locations.”

From spring 2009 to 2010, for example, 432 service members in Iraq and Afghanistan graduated from post-secondary schools, Gordon said.

With such a widespread educational offering, officials are working to ensure that tuition assistance dollars, intended for off-duty education, are well spent. All institutions participating in tuition assistance programs must be accredited by an accrediting body recognized by the Education Department, Gordon said. And colleges and universities on installations must adhere to additional criteria.

The Defense Department, Gordon said, also contracted with the American Council on Education to conduct the Military Installation Voluntary Education Review, which provided a third-party independent review of the DOD’s on-installation programs.

Officials are pursuing another contract, to be awarded by Oct. 1, that will have an “enhanced quality criteria,” Gordon explained, and include all modes of course delivery as well as all institutions on and off military installations participating in the tuition assistance program. Officials will track third-party recommendations for this new review, he added, and monitor corrective actions to ensure ongoing improvement.

To further bolster educational services, officials will implement a new policy, effective Jan. 1, 2012, that requires every institution participating in the tuition assistance program to have a memorandum of understanding with the Defense Department. This MOU includes an agreement that institutions must participate in the new review process, he said.

The Defense Department also is working with the Education Department on a “sharing agreement,” Gordon noted, which will enable officials to receive reports from accrediting agencies, school-monitoring reviews and requirements for state authorizations of schools.

The department will apply this information within the DOD’s voluntary education programs and prior to issuing tuition assistance funds, he explained.

To garner feedback, officials have developed an online, automated tracking system to document issues and concerns, Gordon said. Students, DOD personnel and schools can submit their comments on a Web-based system, which will track submissions and record resolutions, he said.

“The information gleaned will be used to address improper behavior or questionable practices by an institution participating in the TA program,” Gordon said.

The Government Accountability Office recently conducted a detailed examination of the tuition assistance program, Gordon said. "I'm pleased to say that I believe their report on our management of this large and complex program was favorable," he said.

The accountability office made five administrative recommendations, Gordon said. "We concurred with all of them and are implementing them now," he said.

The Origin of the AR-MEDCOM - A Soldier Remembers

By Col. Carol L. Zieres, AR-MEDCOM Command Inspector General

Editor's Note: The following is provided as entertainment and information, but is not to be construed as or confused with, the official AR-MEDCOM history.

I was asked to write one final article in my own words, before I retired on February 11, on how this organization known as the Army Reserve Medical Command or "AR-MEDCOM" came into existence. I felt qualified to write this article since I was the first Soldier officially assigned to work actions on behalf of the AR-MEDCOM beginning on 23 October 2003. Working out of the Army Reserve (AR) Surgeon's Office (FWD) in Crystal City, Virginia as a Special Projects Officer for the Chief, Army Reserve (CAR), then, LTG James R. Helmly, my job was to be the catalyst to "get the ball rolling" on creating the new AR-MEDCOM. This unique experience was a project that every staff officer only dreams about; to be a change agent for an organization and participate in something new and different. It not only changed the direction of my Army career, but I feel confident in saying it also changed the course of events in our AMEDD's history by creating unique employment opportunities for the many fine Soldiers and Civilians who have walked through the doors of the CW Bill Young Armed Forces Reserve Center - Nothing like this organization had existed before in the Army. This article gives me the closure I've been longing for as I close out my 30th year as a career AMEDD Soldier.

As any Force Programmer knows, every new organization starts with a concept plan. I had just completed three years in OCAR Force Programs as the AMEDD Force Integrator (FI), TDA Team Chief, and Chief of the FI Division. I was at the right place, at the right time, when the concept of a functional AR medical command was conceived by two great Army leaders: the former CAR, LTG James R. Helmly and then, Army Surgeon General, LTG James B.

Peake, during the summer of 2003. This mammoth task was handed to MG Kenneth Herbst, who was then, Deputy Surgeon General for Reserve Affairs. MG Herbst was a leader with extraordinary vision and initiative. He hand-picked the best and the brightest staff officers to assist him with the development of the concept plan and later activation of the AR-MEDCOM. Many folks were involved in the initial design and development of the organizational structure and as you can imagine, each power point briefing "morphed" several times before we thought we had the right structure. It would be impossible to mention all of the names here in this limited space of those who contributed their fair share, but from my humble perspective, two officers in particular deserve a great deal of credit: MAJ Fred Boettcher, The OCAR, AMEDD Force Integrator, who then carried the AR-MEDCOM approval memorandum to the CAR for signature on 7 August 2003 to provisionally establish an AMEDD functional command to assume command and control over all Army Reserve AMEDD MTOE and TDA units. LTC Don Donahue from the Army Reserve (AR) Surgeon's Office (FWD) in Crystal City, VA, drew up the blue prints for vetting the new functional medical command, and simultaneously developed the structure for a new medical training command. He also developed the design for a shoulder sleeve insignia and a distinctive unit insignia, the Latin motto for the unit: "CIVIS MILITIS MEDICUS" or "CIVILIAN SOLDIER MEDIC," was unanimously approved by The Department of the Army Institute for Heraldry. LTC Donahue retired shortly after we had started to gain great momentum in the AR Surgeon's office. I had just moved downstairs to the AR Surgeon's office from OCAR Force Programs and up until this point, I had been in a "right seat ride" mode shadowing LTC Donahue at meetings in the Pentagon and OTSG. I was flattered when he had recommended me as his replacement to continue the good work he had started on AR-MEDCOM; however, there was one problem: my PMO decided it was time for me to PCS and leave Washington, DC. I received orders to go to the other Washington on the opposite coast, the Western Regional Medical Command (WRMC) to be their Force Integration Officer. I did not want to leave Washington, DC, but my report date was 10 September 2003. I owe a great deal of gratitude to COL Bas Oskam, then Director, Force Programs, who "fixed" the problem and the very next day, I had a revocation order for WRMC and a new reassignment order to the AR Surgeon's Office (FWD) at OCAR. This enabled me to "carry the torch" for AR-MEDCOM and indeed I did run with it, working directly for MG Herbst (my senior rater) and COL Jeffrey Johnson, OCAR Surgeon FWD (my

rater). We were running on an accelerated timeline to stand up this new command by October 2005.

The first step was to have the CAR sign a directive officially appointing MG Herbst as the Program Manager for the establishment of the new AR-MEDCOM, which gave the AR Surgeon's office even more leverage in staffing actions between OCAR, USARC, and OTSG. I gained approval from MG Herbst to establish implementation cells, both in Washington, DC and Atlanta, GA that were staffed with about five officers and NCOs (AGR Duty-detail and ADSW) in each location. We organized our first formal Inprocess Review (IPR) meeting at the John Mosby Army Reserve Center near Fort Belvoir, VA on 9 December 2003. The four Integrated Process Action Teams (IPATs): Personnel, Stationing, Training and Integration, were established whose primary charters were to staff actions pertaining to their subject area as required. The IPAT members were all ad hoc or "borrowed" manpower assets from other units who graciously volunteered their time for an initiative they truly believed in. At this point, I was the only one on permanent orders to work AR-MEDCOM issues (Directed Military Overstrength-DMO) as we had not yet finalized an authorization document (TDA) for HQ, AR-MEDCOM. MG Herbst was mobilized at OTSG on an extended tour of Active Duty which enabled him to provide oversight and focus on the establishment of AR-MEDCOM. The AR-MEDCOM concept plan was approved by HQDA on 11 February 2004 to activate a 652-member AR-MEDCOM (inclusive of AR-MEDCOM HQ, APMC, MRTC, and MARSGs) on 16 October 2005, but we had no programmed operating budget for supplies, TDYs, or contracts.

Lesson learned: How does one prepare a new organization to open its doors for business with no operating budget? I compare this to the old adage; "which came first, the chicken or the egg?" Start-up funding is critical to establishing a new organization and the IPATs, with input from the implementation cells, developed the lion share of unresourced requirements (URRs) that were wholly justified to the Army leadership. One of our first URRs, was for a start-up contract initially awarded to Bearing Point to assist with the myriad of tasks assigned to the Implementation Cells in Atlanta and Washington, DC. We quickly found out how valuable the contractors were to our team because they were trained and ready to hit the ground running to perform the required tasks specified in the statement of work (SOW). Hudson Booker (Ret SGM) was the first contractor to work in the AR Surgeon's Office (FWD) and was my "right arm" for many months. I was the Contracting Officer Representative (COR) for that

first contract. I had no previous experience dealing with contracts, so I sought the expertise from COL Allen Schmidt, who was then the Medical Reengineering Initiative Project Implementation officer (MRI PIO) at Fort Belvoir and also the lead for the Integration IPAT. COL Schmidt and I spent untold hours at his Ft. Belvoir office plotting timelines and milestones, finalizing tasks to be incorporated in the SOW, and reworking briefing slides for the CAR. Each time MG Herbst would return from briefing the CAR in the Pentagon, we knew that we had our work cut out for us which would require us to do more research and make more changes to the briefing slides.

It became clear that the AR-MEDCOM TDA needed to be modeled after a Regional Readiness Command (RRC) since the HR IPAT determined that managing 28,000 Soldiers in 258 units would require fairly robust Full-time manning to cover down on the same functions that the RRC HQs were supporting on behalf of our medical units. We used the 88th RRC TDA document as the template to build a strawman TDA for AR-MEDCOM and held another IPR in East Point, GA in February 2004 to develop the first draft of the Organization and Functions (O&F) Manual and refine the TDA authorizations/requirements.

We developed a marketing campaign to spread the word about the AR-MEDCOM concept. The first public briefings occurred in November 2003, when MG Herbst asked me to brief all of the RC AMEDD General Officers at the General Officer Medical Advisory Committee (GOMAC) during AM-SUS at the San Antonio Convention Center, and COL Bob Tabaroni, Assistant Chief Medical Service Corps, asked me to give the AR-MEDCOM concept brief at the MSC plenary session, as well. The room was packed with my fellow MS officers, standing room only. While in San Antonio, MG Herbst briefed the AR-MEDCOM concept to the AMEDD community at USAMEDCOM, AMEDD Center and School, and AMEDD Personnel Proponency Division (APPD). Communication with the Active Component was vital to the success of this new concept, AR-MEDCOM.

In between IPAT workshops, we held weekly telephone conference calls with the implementation cells and the IPATs, that were renamed the AR-MEDCOM Task Force. MG Herbst and the USARC Surgeon, COL John Fruendt, concurred that I needed to spend more time in Atlanta to facilitate the “battle hand-off” from the National Capital Region (NCR) Task force and IPATs to the USARC staff as we were transitioning from concept plan phase to the implementation phase to stand-up the AR-MEDCOM. For two months, I rotated TDY trips between Atlanta and my home base in Washington, DC. Alternat-

ing every other week, I boarded a plane on Sunday night from Washington National Airport to travel to USARC and returned to Washington, DC on Saturday night, to spend the next week at my OCAR office. The USARC Force Programs Directorate was kind to give me a cubicle and a phone to facilitate my liaison responsibilities with the USARC staff. During my two-month stint at USARC, I was also tasked to brief the status of the provisional AR-MEDCOM on a Video-teleconference (VTC), which felt more like a “state of the union address” projecting from the USARC Command Conference Room to update all OCAR and USARC staffs, OTSG, MEDCOM, FORSCOM, and the Regional Readiness Command (RRC) DCSFORs. I remember so well the tremendous pressure that I was feeling at that time – nervous? You bet. From the top levels of leadership to the field commands, all eyes and ears were fixed on this Lieutenant Colonel whom they expected would have all of the answers to their questions.

Another big dilemma was where would the new AR-MEDCOM be stationed? Most people do not know, Pinellas Park, FL was not among the initial proposed locations. The proposed locations were: St. Louis, MO; Ft. Belvoir, VA; Atlanta, GA; Ft. Meade, MD; San Antonio, TX; Dallas, TX, and Ft. Dix, NJ. Until now, it has been a well-kept secret that in February 2004 to escape the Washington winter cold, I had taken a weekend pass to visit some friends in Safety Harbor, FL for a little R&R. Through my Force Programs connection, I had learned that a Military Construction Army Reserve (MCAR) Project was planned for the construction of a multi-million dollar Armed Forces Reserve Center in Pinellas Park, FL. I immediately added a side trip to my “Places to see while on vacation” and drove to Pinellas Park to view the new Reserve Center in its phase of construction. This center would be shared by the Florida Army National Guard and the 73rd Field Hospital that was at that time based in St. Petersburg, FL. I knew that the 73rd Field Hospital was slated for inactivation in the FY06 Command Plan. It was logical, so I thought, to put the new AR-MEDCOM HQs in the new CW Bill Young Armed Forces Reserve Center in Pinellas Park, FL. I was excited about the prospect of standing up the AR-MEDCOM on the scenic west coast of Florida and upon my return to Washington, I immediately briefed my boss and recommended adding Pinellas Park to the Top-10 list of stationing options. At first, the Army leadership was reluctant to put a Command & Control HQs in a hurricane prone state and not in favor of the Pinellas Park option, so I encouraged members of the Stationing IPAT to go down to Florida and arranged for an on site

tour of the \$47M facility. After a persuasive site survey comparison analysis with other proposed locations, and after more power point briefings, the CAR finally approved the permanent stationing of the AR-MEDCOM HQs in Pinellas Park, FL. This was a major milestone accomplishment. AR-MEDCOM was no longer just a written concept on a piece of paper, but the organization actually had an identity with an approved TDA document, UIC, and now a “home” had been identified to begin permanent personnel assignments and purchasing furniture for the offices. By this time, the implementation of AR-MEDCOM was really “spinning up” and there was much interest from Soldiers in the downtrace units. At times, my phone was ringing off the hook with Soldiers inquiring about a job with the new AR-MEDCOM.

The next significant strategic planning workshop was held at the Lovejoy Army Reserve Center in Tampa, FL in August 2004. COL Carol Gaddy, based in the Atlanta Implementation Cell, had been selected to be the new Chief of Staff, AR-MEDCOM. She brought the AR-MEDCOM Task Force to Florida for a team-building exercise and everyone had the opportunity to tour the Pinellas Park Army Reserve facility. Bearing Point Consultant, Mr. Al Whittle from Lakeland, FL, facilitated the workshop and we laid the foundation for the transition plan for the RRCs and TOE Medical Brigades. We identified functional transition task lists and timelines by proponent and emerged with a product for presentation at the next major planning meeting at the end of August at Fort Gillem, GA. The Ft. Gillem meeting was expanded to include key stakeholders from the USARC G-staff, ARFP, Surgeon and other Special Staff, NAAD, ESA, IMA, OCAR; PAE, RTD, CFMO; and 88th RRC, etc for development of the AR-MEDCOM Operational Transition Plan. We were organized into six groups or functional areas: 1. Organize the Force, 2. Man the Force, 3. Equip the Force, 4. Train/Mobilize the Force, 5. Sustain the Force, and 6. Force Readiness. Each group briefed MG Herbst and after much vetting and receiving his guidance, all of this work culminated in to an Operations Plan.

On 15 November 2004, I was reassigned to Pinellas Park, FL to serve as dual-hat, Secretary of the General Staff and DCSFOR. It was a euphoric feeling to walk into the newly finished building on that first day. The GINN group had been awarded the second contract providing 15 contractors to assist with the activation of AR-MEDCOM. The first twelve AGRs arrived on or about that same month and most functioned in each Division as a staff of one for several months until reinforcements arrived. MG Herbst referred to these first twelve Soldiers as the, “The A-Team”

because they were the first AR-MEDCOM Staff Directorates. The A-Team consisted of: The G-1: LTC Gary McAllister and Major Rachel Carnell, The G2/6: Major Michael Ellerbe, The G-3: Major Greg Kolb, The G-4: Major Carl Murray, The G-7: MAJ Jimmi Pillow, The G-8: MAJ Angela McCargo, The DCR: COL Allen Schmidt and SGM John Johnson, The Command Group: First Commanding General: MG Ken Herbst, Chief of Staff: COL Carol Gaddy, Command Sergeant Major: CSM Joe Baker, and SGS/DCSFOR: LTC Carol Zieres.

As the ramp-up of Soldier assignments continued, we held a series of workshops for the transition of the functions previously performed by the ten RRCs and traveled to each RRC location to brief their staffs on the Memorandums of Agreement. Similarly, we visited each Medical Brigade HQ to prepare for the migration of the Medical Brigades, (2d Med, 8th, 330th, 332d Med Bde, and 807th MEDCOM) under AR-MEDCOM. The 3d MEDCOM remained a direct reporting unit to the USARC. On 1 June 2005, the 332d Med Bde was the first major subordinate command to transfer under HQ, AR-MEDCOM. The AR-MEDCOM officially activated on 16 October 2005 with the migration of the National AMEDD Augmentation Detachment (NAAD), renamed the AMEDD Professional Management Command (APMC), commanded by COL Deborah Kelly-Hoehn. The following years 2006-2007, the AR-MEDCOM was fully operational with 260 FTS and 114 TPU, having command and control over 258 medical units and 28,000 Soldiers. The four Medical Area Readiness Support Groups (MARSGs), TPU O6 commands, stood up as augmentation elements to the TOE Medical Brigades until the September 2008 reorganization of AR-MEDCOM made the MARSGs directing reporting commands to

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AR-MEDCOM and the TOE Medical Brigades migrated to the Medical Deployment Support Commands (3d and 807th MDSCs). The Medical Readiness Training Command (MRTC) activated in October 2006 with BG Richard Stone as its first Commander and three new Medical Training Brigades came online offering the first ever, Brigade level command opportunities for AMEDD O6 AGR Officers. I proudly served in one of them (Feb 2006 – April 2008) as the first commander of the 3rd Medical Training Brigade (Exercise Support) in San Antonio, TX, but that's another story for another day.

What a ride it has been over the last 30

years! I have learned that military organizations are not permanent, nor stagnant; they change with the needs of the Army. They grow and they downsize, they reorganize and they right-size, and sometimes they inactivate when no longer needed. Although, AR-MEDCOM is a lot smaller today than was originally envisioned, the concept still remains; Warrior Medics – Trained and Ready, taking care of Soldiers - and that will never change. To my fellow Warrior Medics, I salute you for a job well-done!

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President George W. Bush welcomes Cpl. Frank Woodruff Buckles, the last known surviving American-born WWI veteran, to the Oval Office Thursday, March 6, 2008. The President told the 107-year-old, "...One way for me to honor the service of those who wear the uniform in the past and those who wear it today is to herald you, sir, and to thank you very much for your patriotism and your love for America." White House photo by Eric Draper

Last American WWI Veteran Dies

By Fred W. Baker III, American Forces Press Service

WASHINGTON, Feb. 28, 2011 - Frank Woodruff Buckles, the last surviving American World War I veteran, died yesterday at his West Virginia home. He was 110.

Sixteen-year-old Buckles enlisted in the Army on Aug. 14, 1917 after lying to several recruiters about his age.

"I was just 16 and didn't look a day older. I confess to you that I lied to more than one recruiter. I gave them my solemn word that I was 18, but I'd left my birth certificate back home in the family Bible. They'd take one look at me and laugh and tell me to home before my mother noticed I was gone," Buckles wrote in 2009.

Buckles tried the Marines and Navy, but both turned him away. An Army recruiter, however, accepted his story.

"Somehow I got the idea that telling an even bigger whopper was the way to go. So I told the next recruiter that I was 21 and darned if he didn't sign me up on the spot!" he wrote.

Buckles earned the rank of corporal

and traveled England and France serving as an ambulance driver. After the Armistice in 1918, Buckles escorted prisoners of war back to Germany. He was discharged in 1920.

In 1942 Buckles worked as a civilian for a shipping company in the Philippines, where he was captured in Manila by the Japanese the day after they attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. He spent three and a half years in the Los Baños prison camp. He was rescued on February 23, 1945.

Buckles married Audrey Mayo of Pleasanton, Calif., in 1946. The couple moved to his Gap View Farm near Charles Town in January 1954 where Buckles reportedly continued to drive his tractor until he was 106.

On February 4, 2008, with the death of 108-year-old Harry Richard Landis, Buckles became the last surviving American World War I veteran. Since, Buckles championed veterans' causes, was invited to the White House and honored at the Pentagon.

In March 2008 Defense Secretary Robert M. Gates honored Buckles during a Pentagon ceremony in which officials unveiled a World War I veterans' exhibit.

"Whoever views this display will, I am sure, feel a connection to Mr. Buckles and his comrades-in-arms," Gates said. "We will

always be grateful for what they did for their country 90 years ago."

Buckles, then 107, received a standing ovation from the mostly military audience.

"I feel honored to be here as a representative of the veterans of WWI and I thank you," Buckles said.

Buckles is survived by his daughter, Susannah Buckles Flanagan. His wife, Audrey, died in 1999.

In a White House statement issued today President Barack Obama and First Lady Michelle Obama saluted the fallen veteran.

"Frank Buckles lived the American Century," the President stated. "Like so many veterans, he returned home, continued his education, began a career, and along with his late wife Audrey, raised their daughter Susannah. And just as Frank continued to serve America until his passing, as the Honorary Chairman of the World War I Memorial Foundation, our nation has a sacred obligation to always serve our veterans and their families as well as they've served us.

"We join Susannah and all those who knew and loved her father in celebrating a remarkable life that reminds us of the true meaning of patriotism and our obligations to each other as Americans."