

If you served in Viet Nam (as I did) check this out:

<http://www.vietnamwar50th.com/>

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## **Senate Panel unanimously approves VA secretary nominee**

*The Hill*, by Rebecca Kheel, Feb 7, 2017

The Senate Veterans Affairs Committee unanimously approved David Shulkin to be Veterans Affairs secretary Tuesday.

Following a breezy hearing last week, the committee voted Tuesday to send Shulkin to the full Senate for what's expected to be an easy confirmation vote, given that he's received praise from Republicans, Democrats and veterans alike.

Shulkin, who has been the VA's undersecretary of health since 2015, flatly pledged not to privatize the VA, while promising change despite the fact that he is an Obama administration holdover

His answers pleased Democrats and veterans who had worried President Trump's campaign talk of expanding veterans' access to private healthcare would be a step toward privatization of the system.

They also found favor with Republicans who feel reform has come too slowly after the 2014 wait time scandal and other issues that have plagued the VA in recent years.

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WWII CORAL SEA VETERANS SOUGHT

Military.com | Week of January 30, 2017

The May 4-8, 1942, Battle of the Coral Sea between U.S.-Australian forces and the Japanese Imperial Navy was a defining moment in World War II. U.S. and Australian veterans of the Battle of the Coral Sea are being sought for the 75th anniversary commemoration at the USS Intrepid Sea, Air and Space Museum in New York City on May 4, 2017. Each veteran of the Battle of the Coral Sea and one family member can receive expenses-paid travel and housing to the event, scheduled for May 4, from

6 p.m. until 10:30 p.m. Those wishing to attend are encouraged to contact Debbie Chappel by email at debbie.chappel@aaanyc.org or by phone at (212) 338-6860, ext. 203, before March 1.



VVA to Obama: Why pardon felons and not suffering vets?

Military Times, by: Leo Shane III, January 18, 2017

A group of veterans advocates wants to know why President Barack Obama commuted the sentence of Chelsea Manning and other felons but won't act on a pardon for thousands of veterans with post-traumatic stress disorder.

“We continue to hold out hope that President Obama, in his final days as commander-in-chief, will not forget the thousands of veterans with PTSD who have been denied access to health care and treatment from the Department of Veterans Affairs,” Vietnam Veterans of America John Rowan said in a statement late Tuesday. “As pardons are being issued to people who have been convicted of serious felonies, veterans who served their country in combat wait to be offered the same clemency.”

On Tuesday, Obama commuted the sentences of 209 prisoners and issued 64 pardons in one of his final acts as president. The majority of the decisions were for lower-level drug offenses, an issue that has been among Obama's top executive actions in recent years. But the list also included Manning, a former Army intelligence analyst sentenced to 35 years in prison for leaking sensitive information, and James Cartwright, a former Marine Corps general convicted of lying to the FBI about the release of sensitive intelligence information to reporters.

VVA officials have been pushing both Obama and President-elect Donald Trump to address the issue of “bad paper” discharges for troops who suffered from post-traumatic stress, traumatic brain injury, military sexual trauma or other mental health issues.

They estimate as many as 300,000 of veterans of the recent wars have been barred from receiving health benefits and other VA support programs because of unfair dismissals, which failed to take into account health problems related to military service.

Instead of being kicked out of the ranks for alcohol abuse, drug use and suicide

attempts, those individuals should have received counseling or health services from the military, VVA officials argue.

Exactly how such a pardon for those veterans would work remains unclear. Because there is no standard list for what veterans would be eligible for a discharge upgrade, Obama's staff would have to work out a deal with Trump's staff to keep enrollment open for months or years.

That seems unlikely, given the few remaining hours of Obama's presidency. Still, Rowan said he is hopeful White House officials will consider a last-minute action. "We cannot wait another four or eight years for an outgoing president to take action to help the most vulnerable veterans in the country," he said.

Leo Shane III covers Congress, Veterans Affairs and the White House for Military Times. He can be reached at lshane@militarytimes.com.

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## **U.S. agrees to pay billions to Marines affected by toxic water**

*Marine Times*, by: Hope Yen, The Associated Press, January 12, 2017

The Obama administration has agreed to provide disability benefits totaling more than \$2 billion to veterans who had been exposed to contaminated drinking water while assigned to Camp Lejeune in North Carolina.

The decision was quietly made public Thursday with a notice in the Federal Register, the government's official journal.

Beginning in March, the cash payouts from the Department of Veterans Affairs may supplement VA health care already being provided to eligible veterans stationed at the Marine base for at least 30 days cumulative between Aug. 1, 1953, and Dec. 31, 1987. Veterans will have to submit evidence of their diagnosis and service information.

[Military Times](#)

[Marine families raise concerns their children's cancers may be linked to South Carolina base](#)

Outgoing VA Secretary Bob McDonald determined that there was "sufficient scientific and medical evidence" to establish a connection between exposure to the contaminated water and eight medical conditions for purposes of awarding disability compensation.

The estimated taxpayer cost is \$2.2 billion over a five-year period. The VA estimates that as many as 900,000 service members were potentially exposed to the tainted water.

"This is good news," said retired Marine Master Sgt. Jerry Ensminger, whose daughter Janey was born in 1976 while he was stationed at Lejeune. Janey died from leukemia at age 9. Ensminger now heads a veterans group, The Few, The Proud, The Forgotten, which advocates for those seeking disability compensation.

"This has been a hard, long slog," said Ensminger, who says the government must go further in covering additional diseases. "This is not the end of the issue."

The new rule covers active duty, Reserve and National Guard members who developed one of eight diseases: adult leukemia, aplastic anemia, bladder cancer, kidney cancer, liver cancer, multiple myeloma, non-Hodgkin's lymphoma and Parkinson's disease.

Documents uncovered by veterans groups over the years suggest Marine leaders were slow to respond when tests first found evidence of contaminated ground water at Camp Lejeune in the early 1980s. Some drinking water wells were closed in 1984 and 1985, after further testing confirmed contamination from leaking fuel tanks and an off-base dry cleaner. The Marine Corps has said the contamination was unintentional, occurring when federal law didn't limit toxins in drinking water.

Spurred by Ensminger's case, Congress in 2012 passed a bill signed into law by President Barack Obama extending free VA medical care to affected veterans and their families. But veterans were not automatically provided disability aid or survivor benefits. The issue has prompted lawsuits by veterans organizations, which note that military personnel in Camp Lejeune housing "drank, cooked and bathed" in contaminated water for years.

"Expanded coverage is making progress, but we also need to know whether the government may be purposefully leaving people out," said Rick Weidman, executive director of Vietnam Veterans of America.

Affected veterans who were stationed at Camp Lejeune may now submit applications for benefits, once the rule is officially published Friday. Roughly 1,400 disability claims related to Lejeune are already pending, and will be reviewed immediately, according to the VA.

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Pentagon readies aggressive ISIS proposals

By [Barbara Starr](#), CNN Pentagon Correspondent, January 17, 2017

Washington (CNN)

The Defense Department is prepared to provide the new administration with military options to accelerate the war against ISIS in Syria that could send additional US troops into direct combat, CNN has learned.

These options would inherently increase the risk for US troops compared to what President Barack Obama was willing to accept. The options will be ready for President-elect Donald Trump to consider as soon as he takes office and would be presented by James Mattis as the new defense secretary and Gen. Joe Dunford, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. They would have the final say on any details being briefed to the new president for his approval.

Options to deal with other hotspots, including Iran, are also being prepared, according to the defense official.

The options had already been worked up by the military during the Obama administration, but the authorities to carry them out were never approved by President Barack Obama. New authorizations by Trump, needed to act on any of the proposals, would mean the US is expanding both its military strategy on fighting ISIS and signal the Trump White House is willing to take on increased military risk. None of the options being discussed contradict positions taken by Mattis publicly at this point.

Discussing ISIS on the campaign trail, Trump pledged to "bomb the s--t out of them." And in September, he said, "I am also going to convene my top generals and give them a simple instruction: They will have 30 days to submit to the Oval Office a plan for defeating ISIS."

US military planners and intelligence officials have now mapped virtually every airstrip and location in Syria that might have to be used by US troops, according to the official directly familiar with the details. One option would put hundreds, if not thousands, of additional US troops into a combat role as part of the fight to take Raqqa.

Depending on progress in arming and training the full Syrian Democratic Forces -- a local fighting force -- in the coming months, the Pentagon could put several US brigade-sized combat teams on the ground, each team perhaps as many as 4,000 troops.

There is no consensus on the size of any US deployment being proposed, because a final decision on how many to send would depend on what is done with issues like arming the Kurds, who are also US partners in the fight. The US troops would not enter Raqqa but would focus on territory outside the city, calling in airstrikes and controlling roads and towns around Raqqa.

In addition, heavily armed US Special Operations Forces could be put in a direct combat role for the first time, beyond their current mission to advise and assist local forces. Another key option is for Trump to authorize the Pentagon for the first time to arm Kurdish fighters, who would be used to control villages and roads around Raqqa. The move would be highly controversial because it would surely anger Turkey -- a NATO ally -- which does not want to see Kurdish elements gain further military strength, the official said.

But the Pentagon believes that the Kurds and Arabs who make up the Syrian Democratic Forces are the only local fighters able to take the ground around Raqqa, ISIS's self-declared capital and its most important stronghold in the country. Arab elements of the SDF are the ones who would eventually enter Raqqa, a predominantly Arab town. Currently, the SDF has about 50,000 fighters. The Kurdish YPG portion of the SDF is about 27,000, though it includes some Arabs. The Syrian Arab Coalition portion of the SDV has 23,000 forces, with some Kurds in the mix.

Trump will be briefed on efforts to capture or kill ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi. There have been multiple intelligence tips in recent weeks about Baghdadi's whereabouts, the official said. But none of them have been "real-time" sightings, only tips on where he had recently been seen. Military and intelligence officials are now working through that data to narrow down a possible location. A recent mission by the US Expeditionary Targeting Force outside Deir Ezzor was specifically aimed at capturing an ISIS operative who was believed to have intelligence on Baghdadi, but the person opened fire on the American troops, who then killed him.

Another set of options aims to counter Iran's growing influence in the region, something Mattis has already indicated is one of his top priorities. US military commanders would like more authority to stop Iranian weapons shipments into Yemen through the Bab al-Mandab waterway between Yemen and the Horn of Africa, the official said. This authority could extend to trying to stop the buildup of shore installations along the Yemen coast using Iranian-supplied weapons to attack shipping and US military vessels transiting through the area.

In October, the US conducted missile strikes against coastal installations being run by Iranian-supported fighters to attack US Navy ships. Additional options are being updated to ensure the Strait of Hormuz cannot be shut down by Iran.

One area of increased US military activity in the coming days that Trump has not yet had a role in is Afghanistan. Within days, Afghan forces -- with support from US air and ground units -- will launch a series of operations in southern and eastern Afghanistan against the Taliban.

These are likely to be the first intensified military operations of the Trump administration but have been long planned by the Pentagon, the official said.

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## **PURPLE HEART WOULD RECEIVE MORE PROTECTION WITH NEW LAW**

Military.com -Northwest Florida Daily News, by Jennie Mckeon Jan 17, 2017

The Purple Heart is more than just a medal -- especially to the recipients who have sacrificed while fighting for their country.

"It gives me a distinguished feeling," said Sam Houston, who was awarded a Purple Heart in 1970 after his service in the Vietnam War. "No matter where I go, if I'm wearing a Purple Heart hat, people always stop me. There's that saying, 'all gave some and some gave all.' "

This year, a piece of legislation is expected to come up in Congress that could help protect the Purple Heart and preserve that distinguished feeling. Rep. Paul Cook, R-Calif., plans to introduce the Private Corrado Piccoli Purple Heart Preservation Act this session. The bill would penalize the sale of any Purple Heart awarded to a member of the Armed Forces by imprisonment up to six months or a fine, which would be determined by the Department of Justice based off the federal fine schedule.

"The purpose of the bill is to see the Purple Heart protected and to ensure medals find their way back to families or homes of honor," Cook, himself a veteran, said in an emailed statement to the News Herald in Panama City. "It's wrong to turn profits on the sacrifices of our service members. These medals are powerful symbols of selflessness in defense of our nation. They deserve to be cherished by families instead of being traded like a pack of baseball cards and auctioned to the highest bidder."

Piccoli's medal was purchased in an antique mall for \$100. The woman who purchased the medal gave it to her son, Capt. Zachariah Fike, who served in the Vermont Army National Guard. Fike then founded Purple Hearts Reunited, a nonprofit that returns lost or stolen military medals of valor to veterans or their family.

Cook introduced the bill last year, but it was at the end of the congressional session, and no action was taken. He is optimistic it will pass this time and expects it to get

referred to the Subcommittee on Crime, Terrorism, Homeland Security and Investigations as it was last session.

In 2013, President Barack Obama signed the Stolen Valor Act, which makes it a federal crime to fraudulently claim to be a recipient of certain military decorations or medals to obtain tangible benefit.

Houston, who is chapter commander of the Sgt. Timothy Padgett 811 Military Order of the Purple Heart, said that it "happens quite often" that a military medal may end up in a pawn shop or antique store. Those who find one should turn it in to a local chapter of Purple Hearts Reunited, advised Houston.

Awarded since 1917 to those wounded or killed while serving in the U.S. military, the Purple Heart is an important badge of honor in military service and should be regarded as such, Houston said.

"It's the oldest continually used medal in our history," he added. "It's the only medal given out strictly for combat wounds, that's what makes it prestigious. As a recipient, I'm glad they're trying to get a handle on this. People should not be able to buy any military award for heroism or wounds. It takes away from what it truly means."

Panama City News Herald Reporter Collin Breaux contributed to this report.

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America's First Step toward Reclaiming Naval Power

The National Interest (<http://nationalinterest.org>) by Robert C. O'Brien, Jan 17, 2017

The Senate Armed Services Committee, under the leadership of chairman John McCain, has taken up President-elect Trump's challenge to make America great again and rebuked President Obama in his final days in office. The committee's white paper, "Restoring American Power: Recommendations for the FY 2018-FY 2022 Defense Budget," was released this week. McCain and the committee lay out a solid series of recommendations to strengthen the nation's armed forces after the Obama administration's defense-sequestration program that hollowed out the military. While the white paper touches on topics that range from the clear necessity of setting aside the 2011 Budget Control Act to the best approach to cyber security, the section dealing with the Navy is both timely and critical.

As I wrote in *Politico* magazine in February 2015, the Navy is in crisis, as the fleet is simply too small to fulfill the missions it has been assigned by our national leadership. Recognizing this reality, the SASC wants an increase of \$98 billion in the Navy's budget over the next five years that will yield at least eighteen more ships than that Obama administration's current plan. Giving heed to President-elect Trump's recent conversations with leaders of defense manufacturers, "Restoring American Power" also calls for a fiscally prudent "high-low" mixed procurement strategy by purchasing 167 additional tactical aircraft, many of them fourth-generation planes.

Three of the committee's recommendations deserve special notice: the need for a new small surface combatant, the need recommendation for a new class of aircraft carrier, and the need to quickly bring an unmanned aerial strike platform to the carrier air wing in order to extend its range and lethality.

Showing disappointment in both the performance and armament of the Littoral Combat Ships now under construction, the white paper calls for an end of procurement of these ships with the twenty-eighth ship. The twenty-eight ships of the mono-hulled LCS-1 Freedom class and the "trimaran" aluminum hulled LCS-2 Independence class can still play an important role in the fleet. They should be designated for antisubmarine warfare surveillance and mine-hunting missions—missions that their hull designs are well suited for, respectively. They should not be tasked for frontline surface warfare combat roles, for which they are ill suited.

The SASC calls upon the Navy to begin design work immediately on a new frigate, that is able to "(1) attack enemy surface ships at over-the-horizon ranges with multiple salvos; (2) defend nearby noncombatant ships from air and missile threats; (3) conduct long-duration escort or patrol missions, including anti-submarine warfare, without frequent refueling; and (4) survive in contested environments." The committee wants the frigates in production no later than 2022. In my view, this timeline is too long. Purchasing an up-gunned Coast Guard National Security Cutter, which is currently in production in the United States, and can readily be fitted with VLS cells and sonar, or the Italian-designed FREMM frigate, that can be built under license in American shipyards, could put ships in the fleet earlier than 2022. First Lady Melania Trump should be breaking a bottle of champagne over the bow of the first of these new frigates before the end of President Trump's first term.

The second key initiative would have naval shipbuilders transform the Navy's current large-deck amphib—the America-class amphibious assault ships—into

light, conventionally fueled aircraft carriers. Already 850 feet long and one hundred feet wide, the Americas could be modified with catapults and arresting gear to allow them to launch up to fifty or sixty sorties a day of FA-18 Hornets to perform what the committee calls “day-to-day” missions of sea control, close air support and counterterrorism missions. These missions would be at a lower cost than the Nimitz- and Ford-class nuclear-powered supercarriers, which could focus on the growing maritime challenges posed by our near-peer competitors, China and Russia.

Third, the supercarriers would be bolstered by the white paper’s recommendation that the Navy accelerate the development of a long-range, unmanned combat vehicle that is capable of penetrating advanced anti-access/area denial defenses to deliver large payloads of precision-strike weapons. This recommendation could be accomplished if the Navy leveraged the lessons learned from the X-47B unmanned test aircraft and applied them to the new MQ-25 unmanned carrier-based tanker now under development. The MQ-25 was engineered to evolve into a strike aircraft, and that evolution should start now and be on our carrier decks within four years.

It is noteworthy that the committee appears to draw on the writings of retired navy captain Jerry Hendrix, one of the lone conservative voices at the Center for a New American Security. The need for a new frigate, the pursuit of a high-low mix in carrier and aircraft procurement, and the importance of adding an unmanned strike aircraft to the carrier air wing have all been themes in his papers. Hendrix would be a great addition to General Mattis’ new team at DOD.

“Restoring American Power” is an important contribution by the Senate Armed Services Committee to making the American armed forces great again, and the report provides President-elect Trump and Secretary of Defense Mattis with the legislative foundation to rebuild our defenses starting on day one—this Friday.

Robert C. O’Brien is a partner at Larson O’Brien LLP. He served as a U.S. Representative to the United Nations General Assembly. O’Brien was also a Senior Advisor to Governors Scott Walker and Mitt Romney as well as Senator Ted Cruz during their presidential campaigns. His book *While America Slept: Restoring American Leadership to a World in Crisis* (Encounter Books) was released in September. He can be followed on Twitter: [@robertcobrien](https://twitter.com/robertcobrien).

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**Plan Dropped to Register Women for Selective Service**

## Military Times

Lawmakers have officially dropped plans to make women register for the draft, instead opting for a review of the ongoing need for the Selective Service System. The controversial provision had been part of early drafts of the annual defense authorization bill, and narrowly passed a House Armed Services Committee vote last spring. A Senate panel followed suit a few months later. But conservatives in both chambers objected to the provision and stripped it out of the final legislative draft. Under current law, men ages 18 to 26 are required to register for possible involuntary military service with the Selective Service System. Women have been exempt, and past legal challenges have pointed to combat restrictions placed on their military service as a reason for their exclusion. Early in 2016, then Defense Secretary Carter removed those restrictions, opening combat posts to women for the first time. In response, a collection of military leaders and women's rights advocates said they would support requiring women to now register for the draft. Instead, the final authorization bill draft calls for a review of the entire Selective Service System, to see if the idea of a military draft is still realistic and cost-effective. The system has an annual budget of about \$23 million, but watchdog groups have questioned whether the system could assemble a list of draftees if a national emergency were to arise. And military leaders have repeatedly insisted they have no desire to return to the draft to fill the ranks. No Americans have been pressed into involuntary military service since the last draft ended in 1973. Though Democrats are likely to renew debate on the issue this year, it's unlikely to progress far with Republicans controlling both chambers of Congress and the White House.

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VA Cemeteries: Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility Program

VA News Release

VA now provides eligibility determinations for interment in a VA national cemetery prior to the time of need. Through the Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility Program, upon request, individuals can learn if they are eligible for burial or memorialization in a VA national cemetery. Interested individuals may submit VA Form 40-10007, Application for Pre-Need Determination of Eligibility

for Burial in a VA National Cemetery, and supporting documentation, such as a DD Form 214 (if readily available) to the VA National Cemetery Scheduling Office by: toll-free fax at 1-855-840-8299; email to Eligibility.PreNeed@va.gov; or mail to the National Cemetery Scheduling Office, P.O. Box 510543, St.Louis, MO 63151. Form 40-10007 can be completed on line and downloaded at www.va.gov/vaforms/va/pdf/VA4010007.pdf.

VA will review applications and provide written notice of its determination of eligibility. VA will save determinations and supporting documentation in an electronic information system to expedite burial arrangements at the time of need. Because laws and personal circumstances change, upon receipt of a burial request, VA will validate all pre-need determinations in accordance with the laws in effect at that time. VA operates 135 national cemeteries and 33 soldiers' lots in 40 states and Puerto Rico. More than 4 million Americans, including Veterans of every war and conflict, are buried in VA's national cemeteries. VA also provides funding to establish, expand and maintain 105 Veterans cemeteries in 47 states and territories including tribal trust lands, Guam, and Saipan.

For Veterans buried in private or other cemeteries, VA provides headstones, markers or medallions to commemorate their service. In 2016, VA honored more than 345,000 Veterans and their loved ones with memorial benefits in national, state, tribal and private cemeteries. Eligible individuals are entitled to burial in any open VA national cemetery, opening/closing of the grave, a grave liner, perpetual care of the gravesite, and a governmentfurnished headstone or marker or niche cover, all at no cost to the family. Veterans are also eligible for a burial flag and may be eligible for a Presidential Memorial Certificate. Information on VA burial benefits is available from local VA national cemetery offices, from the Internet at <http://www.cem.va.gov>, or by calling VA regional offices toll-free at 800-827-1000. To make burial arrangements at any open VA national cemetery at the time of need, call the National Cemetery Scheduling Office at 800-535-1117.

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**And finally – in the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” category**

**Marines may replace 'The Few. The Proud' recruiting slogan**

## Marine Corps Times

The Marine Corps may retire one of its most iconic recruiting slogans: “The Few. The Proud. The Marines.” When the service’s new recruiting campaign begins in 2017, it may have an entirely new slogan that better describes what the Marine Corps does, said Marine Corps Recruiting Command spokesman Lt. Col. John Caldwell. “‘The Few, The Proud’ does a great job distinguishing ourselves from the other branches and making us prestigious to recruits, but it doesn’t say anything about what we do or why we exist,” Caldwell told Marine Corps Times in September. “We believe the new campaign products require a unique tagline to achieve the effort’s objectives.” As of early December, no new recruiting slogan for the upcoming advertising campaign had been developed, Caldwell said. The first two television ads for the new campaign are expected to air between January and March. Other recruiting material will be released on Marines.com and social media. “The new ads will center on the irreducible essence of Marines, which is our fighting spirit - both at the individual and unit levels,” Caldwell said in December. “As with previous advertisements, we will use the narrative framework of the longer Marine Corps story, which includes the following three themes: **We make Marines, we win our Nation's battles, and we develop quality citizens.**”