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THE ORIGINS OF MILITARY APPRECIATION MONTH

By Rikki Almanza
Staff Writer

National Military Appreciation Month is observed annually in May, encouraging U.S. citizens to unite in honoring the contributions and sacrifices of both current and former members of the U.S. Armed Forces. This month-long commemoration stands as a tribute to those who have



Vietnam War 1967 - U.S. Forces Advance (Photo: Rick Merron)

serves as a reminder of the sacrifices and historical legacy that have shaped the nation. Through various events and observances, Americans are encouraged to reflect on the impact of military service on the nation's history and development. The month of May provides an opportunity to honor the spirit and resilience of the military community, fostering a renewed sense of appreciation and understanding among the general public.

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made the ultimate sacrifice for freedom. May holds significance as a period set aside to honor the contributions and sacrifices of military personnel throughout the nation's history, both within and outside the Armed Forces.

National Military Appreciation Month can be traced back to a humble idea of gathering the American population to remember, honor, and appreciate those who have made the ultimate sacrifice in defense of freedom. In 1999, Senator John McCain took this vision a step further by introducing formal legislation to designate May as National Military Appreciation Month. The Senate and House of Representatives subsequently adopted resolutions endorsing this initiative, urging President Bill Clinton to issue a proclamation calling for national observance.

The selection of May as Military Appreciation Month is deliberate, as it aligns with numerous

milestones and key events in American Military history while serving as a tribute to the sacrifices and achievements of the U.S. Armed Forces both past and present. These events include Loyalty Day, Victory in Europe (VE) Day, Military Spouse Appreciation Day, Armed Forces Day, and Memorial Day.

May also coincides with commemorations such as Children of Fallen Patriots Day and the anniversary of bringing Osama bin Laden to

justice. By commemorating these events, as well, Military Appreciation Month serves as a catalyst for understanding and acknowledging the challenges faced by the military community, while also providing an opportunity for reflection and remembrance.

Amid concerns about the commercialization and dilution of the significance of holidays commemorating historical military events, National Military Appreciation Month

Throughout Military Appreciation Month, the military may engage with local communities, promoting awareness. This serves as a reminder of the commitment of military personnel, who stand ready to defend the nation's interests wherever they may be called upon. Many communities may celebrate and recognize their local military community with festivities. Local sports teams may give Veterans and military families free admission, while some businesses may offer discounts.

Military Appreciation Month plays a role in fostering awareness, understanding, and appreciation for the military community's contributions and sacrifices. It serves as a conduit for education and dialogue, shedding light on the experiences and challenges faced by Service Members and Veterans. Through a combination of national observances and grassroots initiatives, Military Appreciation Month honors the enduring legacy of the U.S. Armed Forces while fostering greater public understanding and support.



Senator John McCain (Photo: Rona Proudfoot)

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 - Submissions to the Department website can be made at any time by visiting caLegion.org/ugc (please email the editor to let them know you've submitted online)
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For more information on mandatory forms and their due dates, visit calegion.org/online-forms/

All Legionnaires and guests are invited to attend. If you have any questions, please contact us at (559) 875-8387



For all Department Convention information, visit <https://calegion.org/105th-department-of-california-convention/>

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Ribbon-cutting ceremony on Apr. 25 for the new Richard A. Pittman VA clinic. (Photo: Clifford Oto / The Stockton Record)

NEW VA CLINIC OPENS IN THE CENTRAL VALLEY

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

In the heart of the Central Valley, a long-awaited VA outpatient medical center has opened its doors, catering to Veterans residing in San Joaquin, Stanislaus, Calaveras, and Tuolumne

counties.

Situated at 6505 S. Mantley Rd. in French Camp, adjacent to Interstate 5 near San Joaquin General Hospital and the newly established Victory Gardens—a supportive housing project for

homeless Veterans—the Richard A. Pittman VA Clinic offers primary care and specialty health services, including addiction and substance abuse treatment, mental health care, PTSD support, smoking cessation programs, and physical and occupational

therapy.

With the capacity to accommodate nearly 210,000 Veterans in the region, it is the first VA facility of its scale in the entire San Joaquin Valley, as affirmed by David Stockwell, the medical center director for the VA Northern California Health Care System. Services provided at the 158,000 square foot facility range from primary care to surgical facilities, pharmacies, physical therapy, dental care, to mental health services.

For Gina Pittman, Richard A. Pittman's daughter, the opening holds deep personal significance. Reflecting on her father's service in the Marine Corps during the Vietnam War, where he was awarded a Medal of Honor in 1968, Gina expressed pride in seeing his legacy honored.

The clinic's inauguration was celebrated with a ribbon-cutting ceremony attended by hundreds,

marking a momentous occasion for the community. As the clinic welcomed its first patients, plans for future expansion are already underway. These plans include the integration of urgent care services and the establishment of a 120-bed community living center. The clinic represents not only a vital resource for Veterans but also a testament to the sacrifices of Veterans and their families.

The opening of the clinic addresses a longstanding grievance among San Joaquin County Veterans regarding the distance they had to travel for VA medical treatment. Previously, many had to make the arduous journey to clinics in Palo Alto or Livermore. With the establishment of the Richard A. Pittman VA Clinic, Veterans can look forward to shorter commutes and easier access to essential healthcare services. This achievement, decades in the making, is a significant step forward in fulfilling the needs of local Veterans.

SENATOR WARREN CALLS FOR ACCOUNTABILITY IN VA DISABILITY EXAMS

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

U.S. Senator Elizabeth Warren (D-Mass.) is urging the VA to conduct a thorough review of the quality of its privatized disability benefits examinations. This call comes in response to what she characterizes as troubling accounts of insufficient and unprofessional treatment of Veterans.

In a letter addressed to VA Secretary Denis McDonough, Warren has pressed for a response by May 14, seeking clarification on a range of issues concerning VA compensation and pension, C&P, exams administered by private contractors. Citing “numerous complaints”

received from both her constituency and nationwide sources, Warren states instances where contractor examiners purportedly neglected to review Veterans' service treatment records prior to appointments.

Additionally, she points to alleged instances of medical questionnaires being shredded instead of being included in Veterans' medical files, reportedly due to VA policy constraints prohibiting examiners from augmenting medical records. In her communication, Warren also reveals reports of Veterans being directed to unconventional exam locations, such as broom closets, co-working offices, and hotel rooms, raising concerns about

the professionalism and appropriateness of the examination environment.

The VA acknowledged Warren's outreach and commits to providing a direct response. The department pointed out that more Veterans than ever before are receiving VA benefits and that it is processing claims at a record rate.

“VA's mission is to provide every Veteran with the benefits that they have earned for their service to our nation, and we will never settle for anything less,” said VA Press Secretary Terrence Hayes. “Whenever a Veteran applies for benefits, our goal is to provide them with the best experience

possible — and do everything in our power to get to ‘yes.’”

C&P exams are an essential step in the disability benefits claims process; they help determine whether a disability is service-connected, which in turn helps determine disability ratings. The outsourcing of these examinations to private contractors, a practice authorized by Congress in 1996 to alleviate the VA's workload, has expanded significantly in recent years, with approximately 90% of all VA disability exams now conducted by contractors. While intended to streamline operations and reduce claims backlogs, the privatization of exams has been fraught with challenges,

as stated by government watchdog reports.

Reports from the VA inspector general and the Government Accountability Office, GAO, have identified systemic issues with the oversight and quality assurance of contractor-conducted exams, raising concerns about the accuracy and reliability of claims decisions. Warren's letter draws attention to these reports and echoes the frustrations voiced by Veterans and constituents regarding prolonged wait times, logistical challenges, and the emotional toll of denied or delayed claims due to inadequate examinations.

AMERICAN LEGION KARL ROSS POST 16 MEMBER IS ONE OF THE FEW SURVIVING WWII MARINE RAIDERS

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Residing in Lodi, California, Frank S. Wright, is one of the few surviving WWII Marine Raiders. He proudly affiliates himself with the Stockton Marine Corps Club and the American Legion Karl Ross Post 16.

His entry into the military began in 1942, amid the chaos of World War II, when he decided to enlist rather than finish high school. Wright attributes his selection of the Marine Corps to their uniform, a sentiment shared by many in his generation.

Like countless others, Wright's determination to serve was catalyzed by the fateful bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Just a month after this event, driven by a sense of duty, the then-16-year-old Arkadelphia, Arkansas native offered his allegiance to his country. Wright recalled the words of President Franklin D. Roosevelt, rallying the nation to arms against the Japanese. Inspired, he

embarked on his journey to enlistment, only to encounter initial rejection owing to his age and slight frame.

Determined, he improvised by stashing bananas in his pockets to meet the enlistment criteria. Thus began his journey in the Marine Corps, marked by rigorous training in San Diego before his deployment to Astoria, Oregon. Assigned to guard duty, Wright's aspirations for frontline action were later fulfilled when he volunteered for the 4th Marine Raiders, a decision that led him under the command of President Roosevelt's son, James Roosevelt.

With a small group of comrades, Wright embarked on a mission to reclaim the Solomon Islands. Tasked with securing strategic positions and repelling Japanese advances, he and his comrades confronted the harsh realities of jungle warfare. Amidst the perils of combat, Wright was tested when he contracted malaria, a setback that threatened to sideline him.

He defied orders to remain in a field hospital, determined not to be separated from his brothers-in-arms.

His valor was tested further during the Battle of Guam, where he sustained severe wounds but continued to fight for the liberation of the island. Despite the grim realities of war, Wright fondly recalled a lighthearted moment when he and fellow soldiers stumbled upon untouched cases of sake. Unable to take it with them, Wright and his comrades buried the cases. (Upon returning, Wright discovered that a base post office had been built on top of their buried treasure.) Wright and his comrades pressed on, ultimately landing on Iwo Jima, where he witnessed the iconic raising of the American flag on Mount Suribachi.

Following the war's end, Wright continued to serve as a Marine Drill Instructor before his honorable discharge in 1946. Post-war, Wright transitioned into civilian life. Over the years, he has been awarded



Frank S. Wright

numerous military honors, including a Navy Unit Commendation, the Presidential Unit Citation with two stars, a Purple Heart with two stars, the American Campaign Medal, the Asiatic-Pacific Campaign with three service stars, the Fleet Marine Force with four stars, the Marine Corps Expedition Medal, a Combat Action Ribbon with four stars, the Victory Medal, and a Good Conduct Medal. In recognition of his service, Wright was honored as the San Francisco 49ers' "Frontline

Hero of the Game" at the NFC Championship Game, fulfilling a lifelong dream of attending a live game.

Despite his struggles with PTSD, he eventually found solace in writing about his experiences in his book, "Battles in the Pacific: World War II, My Personal War Causing PTSD." Today, at the age of 98, he continues to inspire others through his lived experiences of unwavering commitment to duty and honor.

Supreme Court Ruling Sides with Veteran's Entitlement to Dual Education Benefits

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

On Tuesday, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of Army combat Veteran James Rudisill, who was in a legal battle against the VA regarding his entitlement to education benefits under both the Montgomery GI Bill and Post 9/11 GI Bill.

In a 7-2 ruling, the Court supported Rudisill's contention that he deserved benefits from both programs, totaling up to 48

months, rather than being restricted by the individual time constraints of each bill.

Justice Ketanji Brown Jackson, delivering the majority opinion, stated that Rudisill had rightfully earned separate entitlements to educational benefits through his service in the military, spanning nearly eight years across multiple periods. Jackson emphasized that Veterans, like Rudisill, who accumulate benefits under both the Montgomery and

Post-9/11 GI Bills should be entitled to receive benefits from both programs.

Rudisill's military journey involved serving as both an enlisted soldier and later as an Army officer. During his service, he used 25 out of 36 months of his Montgomery GI Bill eligibility to pursue college education. Subsequently, he enlisted in the Post-9/11 GI Bill upon returning to the Army but did not use it during his active duty as an officer. Upon leaving the Army with the

rank of captain, Rudisill intended to pursue further education at Yale Divinity School, aspiring to become an Episcopal priest and later rejoining the Army as a chaplain. He planned to finance his education using Post-9/11 benefits, believing he had 23 months remaining. However, the VA said that he was only eligible for 11 months under the program, leading to the legal dispute.

Rudisill's argument rested on a Korean War-era law, contending that Veterans

could combine benefits from multiple programs for a total of 48 months. In contrast, the federal government argued that Veterans eligible for both bills must choose one, with a combined maximum eligibility of 36 months. Rudisill's legal team stated the potential impact of the decision, suggesting it could affect approximately 1.7 million Veterans, although the VA disputed this figure, citing a lack of similar cases.

see **DUAL EDUCATION BENEFITS** page 9

CALIFORNIA AMERICAN LEGION COLLEGE 1-2024

YOLO POST 77 | WOODLAND, CA



Congratulations to California American Legion College 1-2024 graduates.

CALC 1-2024 was held at the ever-gracious and awesome Yolo Post 77 in Woodland, California.

We salute the graduates for committing to 2.5 days of reviewing, learning, and collaborating on topics that focus on making us

more efficient in “Doing Something that Matters, For Something that Matters” in our respective communities.



Karen Baysinger



Kristine Chase



Kennedy Cooper



Lorie Franceschi



Jeffrey Freeman



Mikael Green



Jonathan Hitesman



Mark Kirby



Karleen Kurys



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department officer CANDIDATES



Officer selections will be made at the 105th Department Convention in Visalia, CA in June. For more candidate info, visit <https://calegion.org/officer-candidates/>



DANIELLE DUFFAUT
SERGEANT-AT-ARMS CANDIDATE

Danielle Duffaut grew up in Los Alamitos,

California. Her eligibility was established when she joined the California Army National Guard at the age of 23 and was assigned to various duty stations during her 20 year career in Southern California on active duty as an Active Guard Reserve Soldier. Danielle retired from the military at the rank of Sergeant First Class (E7) in May of 2007.

After her discharge she joined Hollywood Post 43, but looked for a Post where she could display her leadership skills. She was referred to Los Angeles

Post 8 which was on suspension. With help she was able to turn the Post around.

Danielle is from Los Angeles Post 8 which is the charter tenant of Patriot Hall and one of the oldest Posts in the Legion in District 17, Area 4. She has been a Post Adjutant, and Post Commander as well as District Chaplain, District Adjutant, Vice Commander, and Commander of District 17. Danielle is currently on the Executive Board at the District level. She has served as the Los Angeles County

Council Chaplain, Vice Commander for Women and Vice Commander and on the Executive Committee and as Commander.

Danielle has volunteered to be an Assistant Sergeant At Arms for the National Convention for the last six years and she has volunteered to be an Assistant Sergeant At Arms for Department for the last five years which includes the State Convention and DECs.

She has also been endorsed by the Committee to Elect, her Post,

District 17, various Past Department Sergeant At Arms, and numerous Department Commanders.

An election to this position would place her as the second female to be the Department Sergeant At Arms in California's history. I am asking for your support and your vote at the upcoming Department Convention in Visalia.

Thank You



MARILYN RIDEAUX
ALTERNATE NEC CANDIDATE

I am an Air Force veteran, having served six years of active duty from 1977 to 1983. I am a 34-year PUFL member of the American Legion, the Teamin' 23rd District, Jackie Robinson Post 252. I am honored to be running for this office and do not take this opportunity lightly. If elected, I will make every effort to represent the Department of California in a most professional manner. I have the endorsement of my Post and District.

For your consideration, my accomplishments are:

- Department of

California Vice-Commander Representing Women Legionnaires, Chair of the Publishing Commission, Department Historian, Aide to a host of Department Commanders, Department Sgt-at-Arms, California American Legion Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Foundation (CAL-VAR), and Editor of the California Legionnaire,

- Attended all National conventions since 1999 and served the National American Legion as a member of the National Legislative Committee for two years, and Vice-Chair of the National Americanism Commission,
- Served Los Angeles County Council as Public Relations Officer, Editor of the F.Y.I. newsletter, Personnel Commission, Vice-Commander Representing Women Legionnaires, Vice-Commander Representing the 23rd District, and currently as the Ways & Means Chair,

- Served Area 4 as Assistant Adjutant, Adjutant, and Department Vice Commander,
- "Teamin' 23rd" District Adjutant for more than 20 years, Americanism Chair, Scribe, Assistant Adjutant, 2nd Vice Commander, 1st Vice Commander, and District Commander,
- PUFL member of Jackie Robinson Post 252, District 23, and has been an active member of The American Legion for the past 34 years,
- First female Commander of Jackie Robinson Post 252, 1st Vice-Commander/2 years, and Post Adjutant,
- A member of the Post's Color Guard, Honor Guard, and served on a host of post committees,
- Member ALA Unit 252,
- Membership in ANA-VICUS for over 19 years,
- A member of the Honor Society of Women Legionnaires, Echelon 1 California,

- and past Editor of The National Jeep,
- Past Secretary of the Past Commanders Club of CA,
- A member of 40+8 Voiture #1450, currently serving as Chef de Gare.

Other contributing experience:

- Monitored the status of legislation of interest to the EMS system (emergency medical services) in Los Angeles County daily for 11 years,
- Responsible for compiling input/opinions of EMS personnel regarding legislation and disseminating those opinions to the State EMS Authority for consideration,
- Managed the annual Conflict of Interest Program for Los Angeles County EMS staff compliance as well as the EMS Commission members,
- Monitored and coordinated revisions/updates to the EMS Policy Manual which governed emergency medical protocol for

- first responders and emergency department staff in Los Angeles County,
- A member of the National Association of Black Military Women (NABMW) – Los Angeles Chapter.

I have put in a lot of thought and time into self-evaluating of my qualifications for this office prior to seeking the nomination for Alternate National Executive Committeeman, and I look forward to the challenge of serving as backup to the National Executive Committeeman (NEC) representing the Department of California. I am fully aware of the importance of the role of NEC as a part of the governing body of the National American Legion. I will make every effort to trail the NEC to National meetings in Indianapolis, Washington DC, and legislative sessions at the State Capitol in Sacramento to provide my assistance and support as needed.

"Mentoring Future Leaders to Create a Strong Legacy"



LARRY LEONARDO
NATIONAL EXECUTIVE COMMITTEEMAN CANDIDATE

Larry Leonardo, Sr., is a native Californian. Larry joined the US Navy under the “Delayed Entry” Program, he reported to active duty one month later.

Upon graduating from Boot Camp in San Diego, California, Larry reported to Great Lakes for Engineer “A” School. Larry reported aboard the USS Mobile LKA-115, his duty station for the next 4 years. While serving aboard the USS Mobile, an Amphibious Attack Cargo Ship (aka; Gator Freighter), Larry attended Amphibious Assault Craft Engineering School at NAB Coronado and training in JP5 Fuel System Management (a highly refined aviation, marine and shipboard generator fuel). Larry participated in numerous Amphibious exercises in CONUS and while on two Westpac Cruises to Southeast Asia. Larry continued his training and received a secondary MOS in Air Conditioning/Refrigeration. Larry obtained the rank of Engineman Petty Officer 2nd Class (E-5).

Larry participated in Operation Frequent Wind (evacuation of Saigon) before his enlistment was over. Larry was transferred to the Naval Reserve in 1976.

Larry joined Mission City in 1977, after his soon-to-be Father-in-Law invited him to a

Post meeting. He’s been a member of Mission City Post 564 in Santa Clara, CA, since.

During those beginning years, Larry traveled with his Father-in-Law to visit the Posts within the District, where he learned more about the American Legion and Post operations. While raising a young family, it was a struggle to be an active Legionnaire while trying to be an active dad, however Larry became active in the Post’s operation and leadership, and eventually, “going-through-the-chairs”, finally becoming Post Commander in 1989, the youngest Post Commander up to that time and the fourth Viet Nam Veteran to become Post Commander.

In the late 70’s and early 80’s, Larry continued his college education through the GI Bill and also became an Emergency Medical Technician (EMT-1), specializing in Auto and Motorcycle Racing and occasionally, High School Football Sports Trauma. In the mid 80’s Larry decided it would be beneficial to teach Motorcycle Safety, he became a certified Motorcycle Safety Foundation Instructor, teaching basic motorcycle safety skills and helped develop advanced Motorcycle and Motorcycle Touring Safety Classes at De Anza College in Cupertino and Sunnyvale Calif. Larry caught the mentoring bug when his students appreciated the instruction they received.

In 2002, Larry got involved in the District leadership, again “going-through-the-chairs” and becoming District Commander in 2007. During those years, he was active in Post leadership mentoring training, helping at the various VA Hospital Patient events, and the various Children and Youth programs and local University’s ROTC

programs sponsored by Post 564.

Larry became active in the Dept. of California’s Aerospace Commission starting in 1985 until 2011, taking time off from the Commission while he was Post Commander then District Commander. When the Navy moved out of NAS Moffett Field, the Navy would have to leave behind their 3-week community Outreach program called The Moffett Field Aviation Summer School Program, a summer school program for public school children 10 through 13 years old. With the guidance of then Commission Chairman, Guy Marchner, also an Aerospace Educator, the commission convinced the Navy that the American Legion could continue the program utilizing their tried and true curriculum. Larry became the Program Coordinator and ran the program for 3 years until the arrival of the West Coast “Space Camp” program at Moffett Field. The mystic and lure of the famous “Space Camp” program was more than the Aerospace program volunteers could muster up. The program conceded to the famous program after three years.

Eventually, Larry became Area 2 Dept. Vice-Commander in 2011 and then ran for Dept. Sgt.-at-Arms in 2013 where he realized there was a large gap in protocol, ritual, and traditions. Larry still writes articles on those subjects as he realized an informed, educated membership is important and an integral part of a strong American Legion leadership foundation.

Having served as the Centennial, Department of California Commander in 2018-2019, Larry led the Department to an 11th place standings in membership with a 100.4% membership goal. Under

Larry’s leadership the Department was awarded the prestigious “General Henri Gouraud” Trophy, a first for California since the Trophy’s inception in 1930, the “Culture of Growth” Award and the “One Hundred Percent Membership” Award.

In 2022, Larry campaigned and was elected the Alternate Executive Committeeman representing the Department of California. Larry has attended the numerous NEC meetings alongside California’s NEC Robert Heinisch at American Legion Headquarters, National Conventions and during Emergency Virtual Meetings. During his time as Alternate NEC, Larry continues to travel to make reports at various Post, District and Area meetings, on the proceedings of the last NEC meeting and discuss the resolutions that were adopted and were of concern and interest to the members of the Department of California.

In 2023, Larry was asked to run for the National Executive Committee position for 2024-2026. As Larry continues to visit Post, District and Area meetings, he discusses the importance of Membership, Communications and Mentoring. During these visits he has also campaigned for himself and for the Department Leadership Team endorsed by the Committee to Elect.

Before his retirement in 2016, Larry has been employed by Thermal Mechanical after 39 ½ years starting as a Service Technician and advancing all the way to Automation Control System Engineer.

Larry has been married to Pat 44 years and are the parents of two sons, Larry Jr. & Leonard, both Charter members of Squadron 564. Larry and Pat have two granddaughters, Carissa 25, and Alice 9.

“I would appreciate your support as you have given me in the past. Continued qualified leadership for the Department of California and the American Legion is vital for the growth of the organization, and continued support for our Veterans, their families, our communities and Nation. I ask for your vote this coming June at our Department Convention in Visalia.

Thank you.”

VETERANS SERVICE ORGANIZATIONS:

National

- Alternate National Executive Committee, 2022-2024
- National Legislative Council, 2017 – 2019
- Distinguished Guest Committee, 2011-2012
- ANAVICUS, Inducted 2011

Department of California

- Dept. Commander, 2018 – 2019
- Dept. Sergeant at Arms, 2014 – 2015
- Dept. Vice Commander, Area 2, 2011
- Dept. Aerospace Commission, 1985 – 2011

District 13

- District 13 Commander, 2007 – 2008
- District 13 Judge Advocate, 2007 – 2009
- District 13 Rider, Charter, 2007– present

District 12

- District 12 Judge Advocate, 2022 – present

Post 564

- Post 564 Commander, 1989 – 1990
- Post 564 1st & 3rd Vice Commander
- Post 564 Sgt. at Arms, 1985-86
- Post 564 Adjutant, 2007 – 2018

To read the rest of Larry Leonardo’s statement, visit <https://calegion.org/candidate-for-national-executive-committeeman-larry-leonardo/>





Museum-goers can interact with AI replicas of WWII Veterans at the National WWII Museum in New Orleans (Photo: The National WWII Museum)

Exhibit at National WWII Museum Allows Visitors to Interact with AI Replicas of World War II Veterans

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

At the National WWII Museum in New Orleans, an innovative exhibition titled “Voices From the Front” offers visitors a unique opportunity to engage with the past through artificial intelligence.

The experience features life-sized video renditions of 18 individuals who served in diverse roles during World War II, ranging from Veterans to home front workers and nurses. Museumgoers can ask the replicas questions, triggering the AI program to select the most fitting responses from a repository of pre-recorded videos.

Veterans like 102-year-old Olin Pickens, who served with the 805th Tank Destroyer Battalion in Tunisia, shared their personal stories, contributing to a rich tapestry of wartime experiences. Each of the 18 participants had answered as many as 1,000 questions. For Pickens and others, the exhibition is not only a means of preserving history but also a source of pride in being able to share their experiences with the world.

As the number of living World War II Veterans dwindles, the museum wanted to preserve their narratives in an authentic and engaging manner. With only a fraction of the millions who served still alive, the exhibition serves as a reminder of the

urgency to capture and preserve these firsthand accounts. Stephen Watson, president and CEO of the museum, said honoring the sacrifices made by these individuals is significant, and this interactive experience provides a powerful way for future generations to connect with the past.

However, the AI replicas are not without limitations. Visitors may encounter moments where responses are delayed or the AI confesses its inability to answer certain questions. Despite some limitations in the AI’s comprehension and response speed, the program is expected to evolve over time and improve its effectiveness in engaging with guests. The exhibition was made

possible by a generous \$1.5 million donation and produced in collaboration with StoryFile, a company specializing in AI conversational videos by blending cutting-edge technology with historical preservation.

For participants like 98-year-old Navy Veteran, Tolley Fletcher, who participated in the D-Day invasion and anti-submarine operations, engaging with their virtual counterparts elicits a mix of emotions, from amusement at their likeness to the surreal experience of conversing with oneself. Tragically, some participants passed away before the debut of their virtual personas, including Hershel Woodrow “Woody” Williams, the last surviving

World War II Medal of Honor recipient. The exhibition ensures that heroic deeds and legacy such as Woody’s endure, offering visitors a rare opportunity to interact with these American heroes.



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HOUSE LAWMAKERS DEMAND ACCOUNTABILITY OVER MCKINSEY AND COMPANY'S ROLE IN VA OPIOID PRESCRIPTIONS

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

House lawmakers are pressing the VA for explanations regarding the involvement of consulting firm McKinsey and Company in the department's decisions to prescribe opioids to Veterans. This occurrence happened while McKinsey and Company was simultaneously advising opioid manufacturers on how to sell these medications to the VA.

Lawmakers expressed their concern over this apparent conflict of interest in a letter, spearheaded by U.S. Rep. David Valadao (R-CA) and signed by several other representatives. The letter criticized McKinsey and Company's ability to influence VA decision-making in favor of its opioid manufacturer clients, potentially harming Veterans. They stated the societal damage caused by prescription opioids, noting the staggering death toll and the significant number of Veterans prescribed these medications.

While McKinsey and

Company denied any conflict of interest, the lawmakers emphasized the severity of the issue, particularly given its extensive involvement in VA contracts, totaling approximately \$117 million since 2009. They called for a thorough investigation into McKinsey and Company's past consulting contracts with the VA to identify any similar conflicts of interest and proposed a review of the VA's vetting procedures for its advisers.

The lawmakers cited McKinsey and Company's work with opioid companies Purdue Pharma and Endo, revealing presentations designed at boosting sales of opioids to institutions like VA hospitals. They expressed disbelief that the VA would entrust significant decision-making to contractors like McKinsey and Company, whose primary objective is profit rather than Veterans' well-being.

Despite McKinsey and Company's assertion of innocence, recent lawsuits and settlements have raised further questions about its role in the opioid epidemic. The lawmakers

demand accountability from both McKinsey and Company and the VA, seeking assurances that the department will prioritize transparency and accountability in its contracts moving forward.

In response to inquiries, a representative from the VA asserted that the department did not perceive any overlap between McKinsey and Company's advisory position within the opioid industry and its contractual obligations to the VA. However, the lawmakers remain steadfast in their pursuit of answers, emphasizing the need to put the well-being of Veterans first and ensure that conflicts of interest are properly addressed.

With recent reports indicating potential lapses in the VA's conflict-of-interest procedures for McKinsey and Company contracts, alongside the firm's additional involvements, lawmakers have heightened their scrutiny and await a response from VA Secretary Denis McDonough regarding how the department plans to prioritize transparency and accountability in the future.



(Photo: Cindy Shebly)



James Rudisill in 2023 at Richmond's Virginia War Memorial (Photo: Steve Helber/AP)

Ruling Made on Dual Education Benefits

from **DUAL EDUCATION BENEFITS** page 4

In response to the Supreme Court's decision, Rudisill expressed gratitude for the opportunity to advocate on behalf of fellow Veterans who had encountered similar challenges in accessing promised benefits post-service. The ruling is hailed as a victory for fairness and accountability within the Veteran community.

The VA acknowledged the ruling and pledged to review its implications, reaffirming its commitment to assisting Veterans in accessing education benefits. The GI Bill, a cornerstone of Veteran education support, is significant in facilitating successful post-military careers by minimizing financial barriers to education.

While the statute prohibits concurrent use of GI Bill programs, the introduction of the Post-9/11 GI Bill during a period of overlap with the Montgomery GI Bill led to complexities in eligibility. The Supreme Court's ruling clarifies that Veterans eligible for both programs should not be unduly restricted in accessing their entitled benefits.

Justice Brett Kavanaugh provided a separate concurring opinion, while Justices Clarence Thomas

and Samuel Alito dissented from the majority decision. The legal team representing Rudisill, including attorneys from Troutman Pepper and Dominion Energy, hailed the verdict as a significant victory for Veterans' rights, affirming its enduring impact on the Veteran community.



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***Don't forget photos!**



(Photo: Pete Fosselman)

HAVE YOU BEEN LEFT OUT? IT'S TIME FOR A FIX: THE STORY OF A NATIONAL GUARDSMAN / RESERVIST DENIED THE RIGHT TO BE BURIED WITH HIS FAMILY

By SFC Pete Fosselman, CA ARNG, U.S. Army

A few years ago, my family and I went to the Presidio of San Francisco National Cemetery to bury my uncle next to his wife who predeceased him. While in the Presidio office, I was reading the eligibility requirements posted on a wall and it struck me that I perhaps do not qualify for National Cemetery burial. Prior to reading that notice, I had always thought I would someday be buried at Riverside National Cemetery along with my mom and dad and other immediate relatives.

Having read this information, I wrote to the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs regarding my situation. Their response indicated that the Veterans Affairs Department has no statutory authority to make

any changes to the current policies. They informed me that only Congress has the authority to change the current requirements.

Currently, the existing eligibility requirements single out many military reservists and National Guard members and prevents them from being buried in a National Cemetery. Even though they have voluntarily served our country and their respective branches of service, unless they are activated and sent to some specific assignment beyond training or serve 20-plus years to earn a military retirement, they are not eligible. While my interest in this request for a change is personal, I know it affects many others in this country.

My dad was a WWII U.S. Navy Veteran, and he

passed away 12 years ago. We buried him at Riverside National Cemetery where one of my uncles and his wife are also buried. My mom is still with us at 104 years old and someday she too will be buried at Riverside National Cemetery along with my dad. The National Cemetery guidelines allow for spouses of Military Veterans to be buried there if the other spouse is buried there or will be buried there.

In October 2018, my younger sister passed away from cancer at a very young age. My family was able to bury her at Riverside National because her husband was in the Navy, and he is eligible. As mentioned before, my aunt is buried at Riverside National since my uncle was in the Air Force during World War II. My mom will someday be buried in

Riverside National along with my dad. Neither my aunt, sister nor my mom served at all. But due to their marriage, they are eligible, and this is a great benefit.

However, I served for 13 years, was honorably released, and I am not eligible.

There are some eligibility requirements where reserve members of the military organizations can be buried in a National Cemetery. They include obtaining a retirement pension after a minimum of 20 years of service, being killed or disabled while on military training or duty, or dying from an injury sustained while on training or duty. There are a few other extenuating circumstances but there is no need to address them.

After high school, I enrolled in college. During my second year, I got sick and was forced to drop out of college and I lost my student deferment. My dad owned a family business, and he was talking to another businessman in town. That person happened to be a first sergeant in the California National Guard. My dad told him how I lost my student deferment and he asked that I come talk to him.

A few days later I met with the first sergeant, and I joined the National Guard in 1969. A few months later, I was off to basic and advanced training. After completing my training, I returned home and was a member of a National Guard unit where I had the customary weekend drills and summer camps.

Four years after joining the Guard, I joined the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department. As a new employee with very little seniority, my regularly scheduled days off were weekdays and not the weekends, which I needed

once a month to attend my drills. Taking a Friday, Saturday, and Sunday off once a month to attend my drill obligations used up most of my vacation time. Additionally, I needed two to three weeks off during the summer months to attend summer camp. As you can imagine, the time off I needed each summer was prime vacation time for the more senior employees. This caused a lot of personal issues with those individuals in the Sheriff's Department.

During my initial six years in the National Guard, I received regular rank promotions. At the end of my six-year obligation, I opted to reenlist for another year and shortly thereafter, I was promoted to sergeant first class.

After completing my seventh year in the Guard, I was offered a position at the 63rd ARCOM (U.S. Army Reserve Command) in the Provost Marshal's office by a friend employed by the Los Angeles Police Department. I left the National Guard and transferred to ARCOM, where I remained for six more years.

During my tenure in the National Guard and Army Reserve, we all knew we were subject to deployment and/or activation. As individual reservists, there was no way to avoid it. Vietnam was still going and would not end until my final year in the Guard. I was ordered to active duty twice and sent to Central and Northern California to assist in fighting out-of-control forest fires, but I was never activated for any other military assignment.

In my final year of the military at the ARCOM, I was a rookie patrol deputy at one of the Sheriff's Stations. Unlike today, the Sheriff's Department was not favorable or supportive of persons in the military reserve branches.



Veteran's Memorial in San Dimas. Pete Fosselman fourth from the left. (Photo: Pete Fosselman)

It was about this time after submitting a time off request for a weekend drill, the scheduling sergeant called me into his office. He told me rather simply that I needed to decide to be a sheriff's deputy or continue in the military with all the weekend and summer commitments. In no uncertain terms, he told me to pick one or the other.

My spontaneous decision at the time seemed rather simple. I had completed my military obligation and my department career was just starting. Without any additional knowledge or knowing the benefits I was leaving, I opted out and continued my department career.

On one of my return visits to Riverside National Cemetery, I went into the office and specifically inquired about being buried in a National Cemetery. The clerk gave me some forms to mail to the U. S. Department of Veterans Affairs. A couple months later, I received copies of my records and promotions, a copy of my DD214 indicating an Honorable Discharge, and some included correspondence indicating that lacking any "activations for other than training" [meant] I was not eligible to be buried in a National Cemetery. Once again, this basically confirmed what I had read at the Presidio.

Personally, this seems wrong, and it affects other reservists who were never deployed. We joined up willingly and we did serve. We were subject to activation, but we were never activated to meet the current requirement for National Cemetery burial.

Currently, the various reserve components are short-handed. It seems that it would be a big recruiting benefit if persons joining the reserve components knew they could become eligible for National Cemetery burials.

According to the correspondence I have received and my research, it will require action from Congress to modify the current eligibility requirements. I am unaware of why this regulation even exists. It seems prudent that if someone serves their country in any military capacity, fulfilling their military obligation, and is discharged under honorable conditions, they should be eligible.

Title 38 of the Code of Federal Regulations defines a Veteran as "a person who served in the active military, naval, or air service who was discharged or released under conditions other than dishonorable." This definition explains that any individual who completed a service for any branch of the Armed Forces is

classified as a Veteran if they were not dishonorably discharged.

I have sent correspondence to several different Congressional members and to date, all my letters have fallen on deaf ears. When I develop a lead that a particular person might be helpful and I correspond with them, they simply refer me back to my local congressperson, where I have not been able to gain any traction.

I am a member of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's

Star Post #309. I hope to gain some additional support on the local and state levels in approaching Congress to make this change. Two different directors of National Cemeteries have told me that "at the time of death," an exception can be made for burial in a cemetery. While that might be helpful, I certainly do not want my family having to barter over my burial in one of the cemeteries. They will have enough issues to deal with, and getting an exception should not be one of them.

When Congress passed the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2018, which was signed by President Trump, it included the Hmong Veterans' Service Recognition Act. It allows certain Hmong Veterans who supported the U.S. Military to be buried in a National Cemetery. I have nothing but praise for those members of the Hmong Veterans who supported the U.S. Military.

However, it appears the U.S. Government feels

that certain members of the Hmong military are more important than our own National Guardsmen and Reservists. I beg you to ask, why don't our own National Guardsmen and Reservists who have faithfully served and supported our US Armed Forces get the same privilege?

Here's how you can help. Copy and print this article and send it forward. Ask that this unintended injustice be fixed by passing legislation. Call it to the attention of your American Legion post and ask that they get involved. Then send this request to your U.S. Representative and to our U.S. Senators. I submitted a resolution through my Star Post #309. It got some traction at the state level but failed at the National Convention. There was no definitive response on why it failed.

If you need more information or are willing to assist, please contact Pete Fosselman, pdogmist@yahoo.com.



(Photo: Pete Fosselman)



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LEGIONNAIRES INVITED TO JOIN 'TERRA SEARCH PROMISE'S NEXT POW/MIA MISSION IN GERMANY

By **Rikki Almanza**
Staff Writer

Department of California Judge Advocate, Amado C. Salinas II, has been traveling, and visiting various Veteran events. Last October, he was invited to the USS Midway where he was awarded Volunteer of the Year by the Vietnam War Ear DOD Team. It was there that he crossed paths with the Founder of TERRA Search Promise, sparking a conversation about the work carried out by The American Legion and Terra Search Promise's efforts in recovering missing soldiers.

Currently, TERRA Search Promise, the nation's first Service-Disabled-Veteran-owned and operated nonprofit organization dedicated to the task of POW/MIA research, recovery, and repatriation. The group is gearing up for its next deployment mission, scheduled June 17 to July 17, near Stuttgart, Germany.

The mission aims to recover a missing World War II Service Member, providing long-awaited closure to their family. Veterans, their families, and professional first responders are invited to participate, with no prior experience necessary.

Salinas II believes that there are Legionnaires who may have both the passion and financial capability to participate in this worthy cause.

"I am invited to this

current Mission, and I am hoping others may wish to volunteer to help," said Salinas II.

TERRA Search Promise, established by retired Colonel PJ Dermer in October 2020, is the first Veteran organization to open its doors to the wider Veteran community, inviting families and supporters to participate in their mission.

Aspiring volunteers must demonstrate a team-oriented mindset and physical resilience to work in outdoor environments. TERRA Search Promise ensures the well-being of deployed teams, providing accommodations, meals, and transportation.

Volunteer opportunities are available in various categories, including fully supported, partially sponsored, and third-party sponsored deployments. Those interested in joining can find more information on their website, terraresearchmia.com.

In a time where the priority lies with caring for living Veterans, the issue of missing soldiers can sometimes fade from focus. Terra Search Promise was established to ensure that the nation's promise to never forget remains steadfast for generations to come. In the words of TERRA Search Promise, MIA recovery missions offer a sense of fulfillment, allowing participants to "give back," while exploring the past and shaping the future.