

THE ALABAMA VETERAN



Kay Ivey
Governor

Summer 2018

W. Clyde Marsh
Commissioner



DATES TO REMEMBER

- * Independence Day
July 4, 2018
- * Alabama All Veterans
& Family Reunion,
Tuscaloosa
August 18, 2018
- * Labor Day
September 3, 2018
- * POW/MIA Recognition Day
September 22, 2018

INSIDE THIS EDITION

Annual Award Winners	2
Meet Your VSO	3
Governor Ivey Signs Bills	4
Red Nose Day	4
Never Forget	5
Benefits of Good Conversation	6
Memorial Day at the Homes	7
Pre-registration Available at the Veterans Cemetery	8



Commissioner's Corner



We will celebrate our nation's Declaration of Independence this week and the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA) salutes our nation's military veterans who, since the first battles of the American Revolution, have fought to preserve the liberties we hold so dear.

Americans have courageously served in the defense of our great nation, and in turn, it is vital that we continue to work to ensure that our veterans, their families, and survivors receive the care and benefits which they deserve.

Memorial Day was observed on May 28th throughout our great state. Memorial Day is always a solemn occasion, but a necessary one. It is a tradition and indeed a tribute which must be made in honor of our veterans, heroes, forefathers and mothers so that we never forget the tremendous sacrifice they made not only for us, but the world.

To all those who worked hard to insure that Memorial Day was focused on its true purpose—honoring our fallen heroes—thank you.

To those who serve in the county veterans service offices, claims division, veterans homes as well as headquarters staff, you are making progress toward improving conditions for veterans. We must continue to look for ways to improve our partnership with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs, other agencies, and veterans outreach efforts at the grassroots level in our state.

Along those lines ADVA will be conducting a staffing and responsibilities review. The renovations of the two oldest state veterans homes will commence in late summer or early fall 2018. The construction of a new memorial wall and cortege lane at the Alabama State Veterans Cemetery is expected to commence in late summer.

I challenge you to follow your passion and continue to strive for excellence in being the best veterans advocate you can be. Let us also commit to celebrating the service of all of our veterans—as well as those currently wearing the uniform.

Keep up the good work, but remember there is still more that needs to be done. We have an obligation to remind our fellow citizens that freedom is not free.

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Annual Awards Winners Announced

The Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs recently announced the department's annual awards winners. These employees have gone beyond their call of duty and exemplify ongoing public service and advocacy efforts, demonstrating exceptional contribution and service to the veteran community in 2017.

Amari Gunn, an administrative support assistant (ASA) in Tuscaloosa County, won in the ASA category. Her nomination package notes that she is always willing to go above and beyond what is expected of her to fulfill the mission of the department.

The office was understaffed for more than a year and Gunn assisted the veterans service officer (VSO) in every way possible to support and serve veterans. The veterans and their family members received millions of dollars in financial and educational benefits during 2017 because of her well-developed applications.

Two winners were selected in the VSO category.

Robert Foshee, Covington County VSO, has assisted in filing hundreds of disability and pension claims, and has a 0 percent reported error rate. He proactively identifies and resolves challenges that could interfere with obtaining compensation and other VA benefits for his veteran population.

His skills do not end with his office work. Foshee initiated and attended numerous outreaches—during and after the work hours—to reach veterans and inform them about veterans benefits.

Angela Hunter is over the county with the largest population of veterans in the state—Jefferson County (Birmingham). She and her staff had approximately 9,531 personal contacts and filed 401 original compensation and 279 original pension applications resulting in VA financial awards for Jefferson County veterans.

During the year, Hunter experienced significant management and leadership challenges due to extreme personnel shortages and turnover, as well as having the highest workload of all field offices. She met the challenges and fulfilled all responsibilities associated with her position.

Hiliary Hardwick, director of the Col. Robert L. Howard State Veterans Home, won the veterans home super star of the year award. She has extensive knowledge of VA benefits, which she uses to go above and beyond in helping veterans and their families.

She coordinated this year's annual Veteran's Day program and participates with the home's activities program and helps coordinate community volunteers. Most importantly, Hardwick shows compassion to each and every one of the veterans entrusted in her care, and knows them and their families personally.

Also, the Commissioner's Excellence Award goes to Lynda Jenkins, District III manager, for outstanding leadership of district III and innovative veteran outreach initiatives and employee support.

Meet your VSO

For 10 years, Angela Hunter has assisted veterans in the county with the largest population of veterans in the state—Jefferson County.

As the veterans service officer (VSO), she and her five-person staff work hard to get veterans any available state or federal veteran benefits. The Jefferson County VSO office is a bit shorthanded presently but still have more than 1,000 personal contacts each month.

“That’s not all the contact we have though. Sometimes people just drop in to ask a general question in the hallway and we don’t write that contact down,” Hunter said. “We are very busy.”

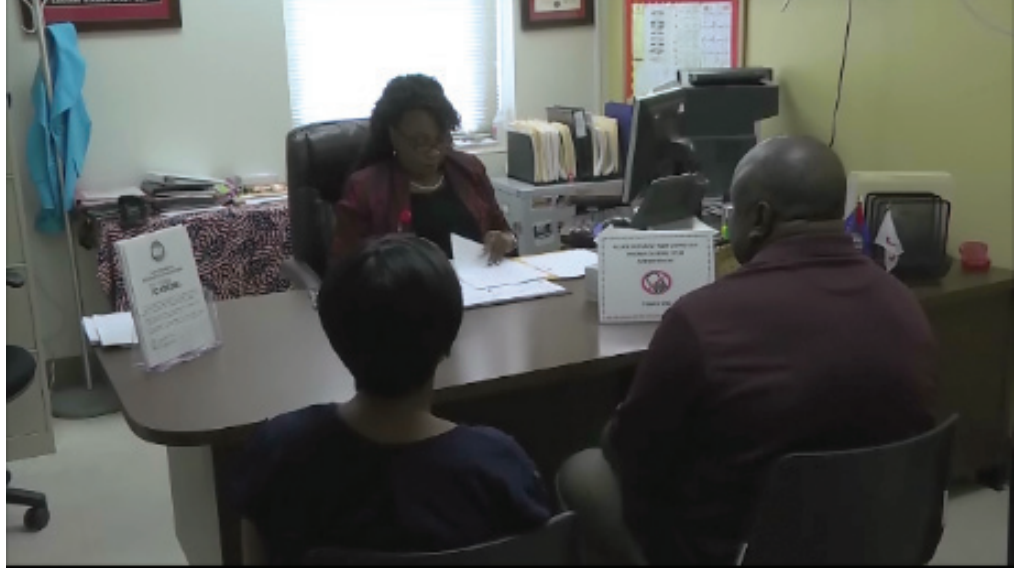
The retired Marine Corps Gunnery Sergeant said that her duties as a recruiting instructor for 4th Marine Corps District helps in her current job. “Recruiting helped me to work with people. You learn how to communicate respectfully,” she said. “In recruiting, you have to listen to the need; as a VSO you also have to listen to a need.”

Hunter goes above and beyond the call of duty, making relationships with each veteran while providing the best possible benefits. “I really like helping people,” she said. “We help veterans get their benefits, such as compensation and pension or something for their dependents. If we can’t help them, we know where to send them for assistance.”

Hunter stressed that veterans should use a VSO to file for benefits. “It is very important that you know exactly what you are doing when you file because if you don’t, you’ll just slow the process down. We have the knowledge to file the claim.”

She said that the most satisfying aspect of her job is when the veterans receives their benefits. “It’s very rewarding when someone walks into your office who are 20 percent, and then they end up receiving 80–100 percent,” she said.

Many veterans don’t know what they are entitled



Angela Hunter helps a couple with the claim.

to. Recently a veteran, who had just been awarded 50 percent, came to see Hunter to add his wife and daughter. “His daughter was 19 so I asked if she were in school. He said that she was at UAB in her second year,” she said.

Hunter looked at his DD214, saw that his home of record was Alabama, and asked if she was using the Alabama Dependent Scholarship. “He said that he wasn’t aware of that. He was so excited and brought her in the very next day,” she continued. “They had been taking out loans to pay for her education. He almost cried when he found out about the scholarship.”

Although all her veterans stand out, she remembers one Air Force veteran who had an other than honorable discharge and a clemency hearing. He had his DD214 upgraded by the Air Force board and the discharge review board overrode the clemency. “The VA would not give benefits because of the clemency. We had to go all the way to the Board of Veterans Appeals in order to get him benefits,” she said. “They had denied him benefits for about 20 years. I worked with him for more than eight years and he received his benefits last year. We did not give up.” The VA paid benefits for the last 10 years.

“It is very rewarding when we receive a ‘thank you’ and see veterans who are very excited to receive their award,” she said. “It’s great to see the smiles on the veterans faces.”

Governor Ivey Signs Five Bills Supporting Military, Veterans, and Their Families

Governor Kay Ivey recently signed four bills supporting veterans and the military—House Bills 58, 83, 88 and 92. In May, the governor also signed into law House Bill 388, the Military Family Jobs Opportunity Act, at Maxwell AFB.

“Throughout my career, I have advocated for our service men and women, and I will continue to do all I can as governor to offer my support to those who have given us so much,” Governor Ivey said. “Alabamians are steadfast in their support for the military, and I am proud to strengthen Alabama’s bond with the military through these five bills I have signed into law.”

HB 58, known as the “Parks for Patriots Bill,” grants free admission to active or retired service members, who are Alabama residents, to state parks operated by the Department of Conservation and Natural Resources. An appropriate active or retired military identification card, a driver’s license with a military veteran designation, a valid Department of Defense Form or any other documentation prescribed by law or administrative rule must be shown to obtain free admission. In November 2017, Governor Ivey announced that entry into Alabama’s state parks was free for all veterans. At that time, Rep. Dickie Drake said he planned to file a bill in the 2018 regular session that would permanently codify Governor Ivey’s Parks for Patriots plan into law.

Governor Ivey also signed HB 83, the Veterans Employment Act, and HB 88, which gives preference in competitive bids on state government contracts to businesses owned by veterans. Representative Drake also sponsored HB 88. The Veterans Employment Act, sponsored by Rep. Connie Rowe, gives a tax credit to small businesses that hire unemployed veterans.

“This was an opportunity to help both our veterans and small businesses at the same time. Incentivizing the hiring and retention of our military veterans by Alabama small businesses allows us to acknowledge their service and provide them with more job opportunities,” Representative Rowe said. “Small businesses will benefit, not only by qualifying for the tax incentive, but also by bringing employees into their businesses with the admirable traits and skills acquired during military training and service. It’s a win-win piece of legislation.”

HB 92, sponsored by Rep. Barry Moore, allows a person who meets the military service and award requirements to be issued a windshield placard displaying an appropriate military honor or veteran status. The placard will permit parking in designated military parking places. The bill makes it unlawful for a person to park in these designated military places without the distinctive placard.

“In our great nation, we recognize that freedom is a right given by God, but we also know that right is protected by those who fight for it,” Governor Ivey concluded. “I am grateful for the hard work and support of the Alabama Legislature for passing strong legislation supporting our service men and women.”

Through the Military Family Jobs Opportunity Act, professional licensing boards are required to issue licenses and certificates to military spouses who hold licenses and certificates from other states. In the case a state has lesser requirements, the state will issue temporary licenses. Sen. Gerald Dial and Rep. Thad McClammy were the sponsors of this legislation.

Headquarters Celebrates Red Nose Day



The ADVA Headquarters staff got together on May 24th to celebrate Red Nose Day. Red Nose Day is dedicated to ending child poverty, both in the United States and in some of the poorest communities in the world. The money raised has benefited programs for children and young people in all 50 states and in 34 countries internationally. Globally, Red Nose Day has raised over \$1 billion.

Never forget: Annual ceremony honors POWs, MIAs



You Are Not Forgotten—that’s the central phrase behind POW/MIA Recognition Day, a day to honor the sacrifices made by America’s prisoners of war, those who are still missing in action and their families.

A ceremony to mark National POW/MIA Recognition Day will be held September 22 on the south lawn of the State Capitol. The day’s events, hosted by the American Legion of Alabama, Rolling Thunder of Alabama and various veterans service organizations, begin at 10:30 a.m. with a motorcycle POW/MIA Honor Ride from the VA Regional office to the capitol.

The point of POW/MIA Recognition Day is to ensure that Americans remember to stand behind those who serve and to make sure we do everything we can to account for those who have never returned.

This year’s guest speaker will be Capt. Gary Michael Rose, a Vietnam War medic who repeatedly risked his life and exposed himself to enemy fire to ensure the safe return of dozens of fellow soldiers during a bloody four-day mission in Laos.

Scores of the men in the company were wounded over those four days, but only three died, with Rose alone credited with treating as many as 70 wounded fighters. Captain Rose was awarded the Medal of Honor on October 23, 2017.

Maj. Gen. James Livingston—awarded the Medal of Honor for heroic actions in 1968 during the Vietnam

War—will provide the keynote address. He served on active duty in the Marine Corps over 33 years before retiring on September 1, 1995.

General Livingston served as Commanding Officer, Company E. On May 2, 1968, the company launched a determined assault on the heavily fortified village of Dai Do, which had been seized by the enemy on the preceding evening isolating a Marine company from the remainder of the battalion. He maneuvered his men to assault positions across dangerous open rice paddy while under intense enemy fire.

Although wounded twice by grenade fragments, he refused medical treatment and led his men in the destruction of over 100 mutually supporting bunkers, driving the remaining enemy from their positions, and relieving the pressure on the stranded marine company. He then maneuvered the remaining effective men of his company forward, joined forces with the heavily engaged Marines, and halted the enemy’s counterattack. Wounded a third time and unable to walk, he remained in a dangerously exposed area, deploying his men to more defensible positions and supervising the evacuation of casualties. Only when assured of the safety of his men did he allow himself to be evacuated.

“This annual program serves as our dedication to keep this cause in the forefront of the minds of elected officials and America at large,” Donna K. Stacey, state commander of the American Legion, said. “Although forensic science has improved significantly over the recent decades, time and the mortality of battle-site witnesses and surviving relatives add to the challenge to ensure we have a full accounting and repatriation of remains of our fallen U.S. service members lost in war.”

The American Legion and other veteran organizations support Joint POW/MIA Accounting Command activities to locate and repatriate all recoverable remains of U.S. military personnel who have died in captivity or are missing in action.

According to the Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA), 82,368 Americans are still considered missing, including 72,934 from World War II; 7,704 from the Korean War; 1,598 from Vietnam; 126 from the Cold War; and six from the Gulf Wars and other conflicts. Alabama has 1,116 still missing from WWII, 148 from the Korean War, 30 from the Vietnam War, two from the Cold War and one from the Iraq Theater.

Efforts to find those missing, identify them and bring them home are constant. For example, the DPAA said that in 2017, it accounted for 98 men missing during World War II, the Korean War and the Vietnam War.

The Benefits of a Good Conversation

By Dan Lawless
Claims Reviewer

One of the primary goals of the ADVA and our county veterans service officers (VSO) is to ensure that our veterans receive all the benefits they are entitled to under the law.

However, some veterans come to our offices focused on a specific possible benefit. Too often the veterans who come to us have no idea what they may be entitled to.

This is why VSO's know that truly helping veterans starts with a good conversation that involves active listening on our part. Here's a scenario of how listening can open up a world of benefits:

A veteran comes to the VSO stating he is service connected at 10 percent for arthritis in his left knee (a compensation check of about \$150 a month). He uses a cane and is in pain. He served on active duty from 1971 to 1973 but was never overseas. He asks if he could receive an increase in the percentage rate because over the years, the pain in his knees has gotten worse. He states that it has become harder because he can hardly walk some days and his wife was recently diagnosed with Alzheimer's. When asked who helped the veteran do his original claim, he states he did it on his own.

Should the VSO submit a claim for increase on the knee? Sure. But, what else was gleaned from the conversation?

To begin with, most veterans don't realize all the claimable conditions. So, a thorough examination of the veteran's in-service medical records should be reviewed.

The veteran is not wealthy and he served during a war-time period. He sounds like a prime candidate for a pension. Remember, his current disability compensation is about \$150. A pension would be closer to the \$700–\$1,000 range. Additionally, a pension request (when prepared correctly) can be processed faster than most compensation claims. So, this avenue could quickly bring more money into the household. An Aid and Assistance benefit could also provide care for his wife as well as possible benefits and assistance for long term care.

Now, back to that service-connected knee. During the conversation, the veteran stated that sometimes his knees (plural) hurt too bad to walk. One injury can often lead to another as we age. A bad knee can develop arthritis, degenerative joint disease or another condition, causing a limp. That limp puts additional strain on the ankle, hips and back and can cause strain on the other

joints. Over time, these body parts develop conditions too. These are potential "secondary claims" which is a common method to be granted claims.

The review of the veteran's medical records uncovered that the veteran was seen on five different occasions for sinus issues and associated headaches. He was diagnosed with sinusitis and associated migraine headaches in 1979 and has been on medication for it. The VSO informs him this is a valid claim.

Researched and processed correctly, the veterans current 10 percent overall compensation rating could potentially turn into a 50, 70 or even a 100 percent claim. For this scenario, let's assume a year later, the veteran gets a letter stating he is now rated at 70 percent (about \$1,600 a month).

The veteran came in a year ago receiving \$150 monthly compensation. If the VSO had simply processed a request for an increase on the knee—he might now have \$300 if evidence showed the knee worsening. Instead, two months later, a properly submitted pension request turned his monthly income into \$900. Ten months later, the veteran has a compensation rate of \$1,600 a month. The VA also informed him he would also receive a retro payment to cover the months it took to process his claim. That gave the veteran some extra money to do repairs around the house and get his car fixed.

The veteran is also eligible for other possible benefits. His wife's condition has deteriorated but now he can afford a person to come in and help a few days a week. And if her condition worsens, he knows who to turn to for help. As the veteran leaves he thanks the VSO for helping him get signed up to get his sinus medicines from the VA. That saves him another \$50 a month and they send it right to his home!

Two weeks later, the VSO received a thank you card from the veteran and his wife. The VSO displays it in the office and it means more than any Employee of the Year award ever could.

This is an example of a success story and the reader may be thinking VA policies don't always make it this easy. That is very true but as the saying goes, nothing ventured, nothing gained. With the guidance and dedication of our county VSO's, it does happen. And it all starts with a good conversation.

** A veteran can receive a pension or compensation; they cannot receive both. A veteran can choose between the greater financial benefit of the two.

Memorial Day at the Homes



Top Left: Mr. John Weaver (in the kilt) and Mr. Terry Yenour enjoy the Memorial Day activities at Colonel Robert L. Howard Veterans Home.

Top Right: Mr. Ralph Mark renders honor to the flag during the Memorial Day event at Colonel Howard.

Left: Maj Gen Neil Thurgood chats with resident veteran Gary Hallman at the Memorial Day event at the Floyd E 'Tut' Fann State Veterans Home.

Pre-registration Available at the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort

Veterans and spouses are now able to better plan for their end-of-life wishes, by pre-registering for burial in the Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort.

Pre-registering allows a veteran and their spouse to establish, in advance, their eligibility for burial. There is no cost for pre-registration and it does not obligate the veteran to be interred at the cemetery. Pre-registration is intended to simplify and assist the veteran's next-of-kin at the time of death. The key items needed for pre-registration are a copy of the veteran's discharge certificate (DD Form 214) and, for married veterans, a copy of the marriage certificate.

For veterans who are determined eligible, the burial includes a two-person gravesite, opening and closing of the grave, a grave liner, ongoing care of the gravesite and a government-furnished headstone or marker. These benefits come at no cost the veteran or his or her family. A small fee is charged for spouses or dependent children.

To learn more about pre-registration and the cemetery, contact Tony Ross, cemetery director, or

Joseph S. Buschell, assistant cemetery director, at (251) 625-1338. Pre-registration forms and more information are available at <http://va.alabama.gov/spanishfort.aspx>.

The Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery receives full staffing and operational funding from the state through the Alabama Department of Veterans Affairs (ADVA), its parent state agency, and does not rely upon private individuals or fund-raising organizations for agency operations and services.

However, ADVA recognizes and appreciates the voluntary contributions received from other organizations, veteran families, and individuals including The Alabama State Veterans Memorial Cemetery at Spanish Fort Foundation, Inc. (Foundation).

The Foundation is a separate, nongovernment, nonprofit organization which promotes the mission of the cemetery and supports other veteran organizations, activities, and programs which promote the welfare of veterans and commemorate the honorable service provided by veterans.

VA Provides Reorganization Plan

The VA recently announced specific recommendations in the president's "Delivering Government Solutions in the 21st Century Reform Plan and Reorganization Recommendations."

The plan is the result of President Trump's Executive Order 13781—"Executive Order on a Comprehensive Plan for Reorganizing the Executive Branch," signed March 13, 2017. The executive order directed all federal agencies to submit a plan to improve efficiency, effectiveness and accountability of the executive branch of government.

The proposed recommendations seek to modernize VA by reducing bureaucracy, increasing accountability and improving delivery of services to America's veterans and their loved ones.

"Under President Trump, we are embarking on the largest transformation and modernization effort in recent

history. As part of this effort, we are tackling head-on issues that have lingered for years," said Acting Secretary of Veterans Affairs Peter O'Rourke.

The plan outlines five modernization initiatives intended to enable VA to more effectively deliver benefits and services to America's veterans. These initiatives include: electronic health record, community care, appeals modernization, financial management business transformation and legacy IT system modernization.

Additionally, the plan calls for the transfer of 11 military and veterans cemeteries from the Department of the Army to VA's National Cemetery Administration. The transfer would increase efficiency, limit mission overlap and ensure that these cemeteries are maintained to national shrine standards. VA will develop a proposal for the transfer, continuous care and operation of these 11 sites.