

From Military-Veterans Advocacy, Please "Like" our FB page and follow us on Twitter @MVadvocacy. Report from Capitol Hill June 2018. We had planned to spend the week of 17 June on the Hill but the trip was extended until June 27. It was highlighted by the House vote on the Blue Water Navy bill, HR 299 on June 25th. The bill passed the House 382-0 and has been sent to the Senate. MVA Deputy Chief of Staff for Congressional Liaison Susie Belanger and Fleet Reserve Association National Executive Director Tom Snee accompanied MVA Executive Director Commander John B Wells USN (Retired). Also present were Ernie Belanger and Joe Priest. The bill now goes to the Senate where Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson of Georgia has promised expedited consideration.

On June 27 Ernie and Susie Belanger and I attended the confirmation hearing of Robert Wilkie. I had met Mr. Wilkie when he worked for Senator Tillis and we chatted briefly prior to the hearing. He was agreeable to a meeting post-confirmation to discuss implementation of the Blue Water Navy bill, once enacted and other issues dealing with toxic exposure. During the confirmation hearing he fielded questions from Senators of both parties. His responses were impressive and he appears to have a good grasp of the myriad of problems within the VA. He was conversant with the Blue Water Navy situation and indicated he would implement the program.

The previous week I was accompanied by Raymond Toney, a military law attorney from Colorado. We met with the staffs of Members of Congress and Senators serving on the Military Personnel Subcommittee of the Armed Services Committee. The purpose of the meeting was to request a GAO audit of the military correction boards. Both statistical and anecdotal evidence have shown that the correction boards are becoming less and less receptive to the needs of service members. Although directed to give liberal consideration to those suffering from Post Traumatic Stress (PTS) and Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI), compliance has been abysmal. Human Rights Watch has prepared a comprehensive report documenting unfair treatment of sexual assault victims. We found the staffs to be receptive to our request for a GAO study. I met with Congressman Walter Jones personally as well as Congressman Ralph Abraham. Both felt that this was an area that definitely needed to be explored.

I also met with Congressman Gus Bilirakis, Vice-Chair of the House Veterans Affairs Committee to discuss the future of Guam. We are all anticipating the publication of the GAO report and hope that it will sustain our belief that Agent Orange was used for vegetation control on that island as well as American Samoa and the Northern Mariana Islands. Congressman Bilirakis is interested in introducing a bill to cover these areas next Congress.

Congressman Bilirakis is also introducing a burn pit bill that will require presumptive exposure for those exposed to burn pits. Often called the Agent Orange of the 21st Century, burn pits have wreaked havoc on our forces deployed to Afghanistan and Iraq. Military-Veterans Advocacy has promised Congressman Bilirakis that we will support this bill.

Another goal for the 116th Congress will be support for a reintroduction of HR 4843/S 2105 to grant benefits to those who served on airbases in Thailand. Spina bifida benefits for their children were included in HR 299 Unfortunately, the Congressional Budget Office has scored the bill at

\$1.6 billion over ten years. We feel that they have failed to account for those who also served in country Vietnam or actually were onboard aircraft that landed in Vietnam. We need to ask for a review of that score and I think that it will be significantly reduced.

Of course funding remains a problem. We will continue to work with Congress to devise ways to fund veterans bills. We are still fighting the battle for radiation survivors, Gulf War veterans and Agent Orange victims in Laos, Cambodia, Okinawa and Panama. Toxic exposure in places like Camp Lejeune and Fort McClellan are also on our radar. To cover all of these areas we need a dedicated source of funding.

July 2nd brought us back in Washington to meet with the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee permanent staff. I was again accompanied by Tom Snee, National Executive Director of the Fleet Reserve Association. Although there was talk of asking for a unanimous consent in the Senate on HR 299, Chairman Isakson, for good reason, chose to use regular order. That means there will be hearings on the bill similar to what happened in the House. I am not at liberty to discuss or speculate on the reasons for regular order so please do not ask. I am convinced that the Chairman had good reason. He has promised to expedite hearings and we must take him at his word.

As a reminder when calling the Committee do not refer to S 422. That bill does not contain the offset or the geographical points we have inserted.

The Committee will meet on July 10 to vote on the confirmation of Secretary-designate Wilkie. Military-Veterans Advocacy supports that confirmation.

At this point we ask you to contact your two Senators and ask them to support HR 299. We also ask that you contact the Committee and request that they conduct hearings on HR 299 in July and that the American Legion, Fleet Reserve Association and Military-Veterans Advocacy be invited to testify live before the Committee.

Military-Veterans Advocacy will present a seminar/workshop later in the year for Blue Water Navy appeals. The date will be determined by how fast the bill moves through the Senate.

In the next few months Military-Veterans Advocacy will be undergoing structural changes to increase our ability to litigate, legislate and educate on behalf of Members of our armed forces and veterans. I will provide more information at a later date.

Have a happy and safe Independence Day!

Commander John B Wells USN (Retired)
Executive Director