



Statement of
The Fleet Reserve Association
On
Pending Benefits Legislation
Submitted to the
Senate Armed Services Committee
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The FRA

The Fleet Reserve Association (FRA) is the oldest and largest organization serving enlisted men and women in the active, Reserve, and retired communities plus veterans of the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. The Association is Congressionally Chartered, recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) and entrusted to serve all veterans who seek its help.

FRA was started in 1924 and its name is derived from the Navy's program for personnel transferring to the Fleet Reserve or Fleet Marine Corps Reserve after 20 or more years of active duty, but less than 30 years for retirement purposes. During the required period of service in the Fleet Reserve, assigned personnel earn retainer pay and are subject to recall by the Secretary of the Navy.

The Association testifies regularly before the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees, and the Association is actively involved in the Veterans Affairs Voluntary Services (VAVS) program. A member of the National Headquarters' staff serves as FRA's National Veterans Service Officer (NVSO) and as a representative on the VAVS National Advisory Committee (NAC). FRA's NVSO also oversees the Association's Veterans Service Officer Program and represents veterans throughout the claims process and before the Board of Veteran's Appeals. For 2014, 144 FRA Shipmates and members of the Auxiliary provide 13,470 volunteer hours of support at 59 VA facilities throughout the country, enabling FRA to achieve VA's "Associate Service Member" status.

FRA became a member of the Veterans Day National Committee in August 2007, joining 24 other nationally recognized Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) on this important committee that coordinates National Veterans' Day ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. The Association is a leading organization in The Military Coalition (TMC), a group of 33 nationally recognized military and veteran's organizations collectively representing the concerns of over five million members. FRA senior staff members also serve in a number of TMC leadership positions.

The Association's motto is "Loyalty, Protection, and Service."

Introduction

Distinguished Committee Chairman Johnny Isakson, Ranking Member Richard Blumenthal and other members of the Committee; thank you for the opportunity to present the Association's views on specific pending and draft legislation, and recommendations 11 and 12 of the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC). Before addressing specific issues, it's important to note that veteran's benefits are earned through service and sacrifice in the defense of this great Nation and are not "entitlements" or "social welfare"

programs. FRA will oppose any across-the-board budget driven cuts that lumps veteran's programs with unrelated civilian programs and completely rejects any efforts that would ask veterans to do their "fair share" in deficit reduction.

Agent Orange Blue Water Navy Reform (S. 681)

The Association wishes to thank Senator Kristin Gillibrand (N.Y.) for introducing the "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act" (S. 681). Representative Chris Gibson (NY) is sponsoring identical legislation in the House (HR 969) that was introduced with 131 original co-sponsors and currently has 218 co-sponsors. This legislation clarifies a presumption for filing disability claims at the VA for ailments associated with exposure to the Agent Orange herbicide during the Vietnam War. This legislation would reverse current policy so Blue Water veterans who only served on ships off the coast and have health problems commonly associated with herbicide exposure will be eligible for service-related VA medical and disability benefits. Many of these veterans are now senior citizens and the time to help them is now!

From 1964-1975 more than 500,000 service members were deployed off the coast of Vietnam, and many may have been exposed to Agent Orange, a herbicide used in Vietnam. Past VA policy (1991-2001) allowed service members to file claims if they received the Vietnam Service Medal or Vietnam Campaign Medal. But VA implemented a "boots on the ground" limitation on obtaining an Agent Orange presumption connection.

FRA is concerned about the December 2013 report from the National Academy of Sciences on the health effects from exposure to herbicides used during military operations in Vietnam. The study is mandated by the Agent Orange Act of 1991 (P.L. 102-4) and the Veterans Education and Benefits Expansion Act of 2001 (P. L. 107-103). This provision in the public law sunsets September 30, 2015 and should be extended.

The study provides limited or suggestive evidence that some Vietnam veterans exposed to Agent Orange herbicide have a higher incidence of stroke after age 70. The study also notes that the possibility of adverse health effects in offspring of Vietnam veterans is a high priority with veterans, but notes that this is a very elusive outcome to establish or refute.

The Association appreciates the establishment of a presumptive service-connection for Vietnam veterans who have B cell leukemia, Parkinson's disease or ischemic heart disease. These diseases are related to exposure to Agent Orange. Former VA Secretary Eric Shinseki's decision is a major step in the right direction, but FRA is advocating for a broader Agent Orange service-connection.

However, a January 2013 VA statement referencing a careful review of another IOM report in 2011, entitled, "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans and Agent Orange Exposure," indicates that

there is insufficient evidence to establish a presumption of exposure to herbicides for Vietnam veterans who served off the Vietnam coast during the conflict.

FRA believes that decision maintains the status quo regarding disability claims of these so-called “Blue Water” veterans and that the IOM report validated the 2002 Royal Australian Navy study that confirmed the desalinization process used on Australian and U.S. Navy ships actually magnified the dioxin exposure. The Association continues to seek a legislative remedy to reverse current policy so Blue Water veterans and military retirees who have health problems commonly associated with herbicide exposure will be eligible for service-related VA medical and disability benefits.

The Association notes the VA’s efforts to expand presumption to ships exposed to Agent Orange during the Vietnam era. In January 2012, the VA added 47 ships to its list of Navy and Coast Guard vessels that may have been exposed to the Agent Orange herbicide. The list expanded as VA staff determined that a ship anchored, operated close to shore or traveled on the inland waterways and was exposed to the toxic herbicide. While the expanded VA policy to include veterans who sailed on “inland waterway” ships is significant, FRA believes it does not go far enough. The Association has received hundreds of calls from “blue water sailors” and their surviving spouses, stating that due to service on “their ships” in Vietnam waters (Tonkin Gulf), they too suffer or have died from many of the illnesses associated to presumed exposure to herbicides as their “brown water” and “boots on the ground” counterparts. Many want to forget about the Vietnam War. But we should never forget those who served during the Vietnam War.

GI Bill Fairness (S. 602)

FRA wants to thank Senators Ron Wyden, (Ore.), and John Boozman, (Ark.), for introducing the “GI Bill Fairness Act” (S. 602) that would ensure wounded Guardsmen and Reservists receive the GI Bill benefits they’ve earned.

Members of the Guard or Reserve who are wounded in combat are often given orders under 10 USC 12301(h) for their recovery, treatment and rehabilitation. Unfortunately, federal law does not recognize such orders as eligible for Post-9/11 GI Bill education assistance, meaning that unlike other members of the military, these Reserve Component members actually lose benefits for being injured in the line of duty. The GI Bill Fairness Act would end that unequal treatment and ensure these service members are eligible for the same GI Bill benefits as active duty members of the military. FRA believes this is common sense legislation to fix a problem and ensure these service members get the benefits they deserve.

FRA has signed onto a Military Coalition (TMC) letter of support for the “Military Spouses Equal Treatment Act” (S. 270) and the Association has not taken a position on S. 627.

MCRMC Background

The FY 2013 National Defense Authorization Act (H.R. 4310 – P.L. 112-239) establishes the Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission (MCRMC), but limits its recommendations from being a BRAC-like endorsement, as originally proposed, in its review of the current compensation and military retirement system. FRA believes it's important that this distinguished Committee and its House counterpart maintain oversight over commission recommendations that fall under its jurisdiction. While FRA supports many of the Commission's recommendations it was noted that no enlisted personnel were appointed to serve on the Commission. Nearly 75 percent of the current active force is enlisted and therefore should have representation on this Commission.

FRA wants to thank the members of the Commission and their staff for allowing FRA to have input while the report was being written. The Commission met with 97 other advocacy groups as well. The MCRMC visited 55 military installations, received more than 150,000 survey responses from active duty and retirees, and held eight Town Hall meetings in their efforts to understand the complexity of the military compensation and retirement systems.

MCRMC Final Report

The report makes 15 major recommendations intended to improve the cost-effectiveness of quality benefits for those who currently serve, have served and will serve in the future. This Distinguished Committee has asked for FRA's position on recommendation 11 and 12.

MCRMC Recommendation 11 proposes that Congress "Safeguard education benefits for Service members by reducing redundancy and ensuring fiscal sustainability of education programs." FRA supports consolidating multiple educational benefit programs into a single package with benefits eligibility and scope based on the length and type of duty performed.

The Commission recommends a number of steps towards reducing redundancy in GI Bill programs. FRA supports many of the specific proposals and offers these comments for the Committees' consideration.

Montgomery GI Bill (MGIB) and the Reserve Educational Assistance Program (REAP) should stop any further enrollment and permit those currently using these programs to complete their studies. Those only using the Post-9/11 GI Bill should receive a full or partial refund of the \$1,200 they paid to become eligible for MGIB benefits.

MCRMC also recommends eligibility requirements for transferring Post-9/11 GI Bill benefits should be increased to 10 years plus an additional commitment of two years. FRA opposes this change in that it devalues the program. Currently, service members must serve 6 years and agree to serve 4 more to make dependents eligible for transfer of benefits.

MCRMC further recommends that housing stipends for dependents be eliminated. FRA again opposes budget-driven cuts to benefit programs. The Association also supports restoring the Reserve Montgomery GI Bill benefits to at least 47 percent of active duty MGIB benefits. The Reserve MGIB program paid 47 percent of the Active Duty MGIB for the first 14 years of its existence (1985 – 1999). Thereafter, the National Guard and Reserve components reduced funding down to 21 percent of the Active Duty MGIB. The reason for the steep decline in these benefits is that the program competes directly for funding against annual discretionary reserve pay and benefit accounts. The Active Duty MGIB and the Post 9/11 GI Bill, are mandatory funding programs.

Consistent with the MCRMC's basic recommendation about educational benefit programs redundancy, FRA could support a Reserve MGIB program as an initial entry benefit for reservists that was part of an overarching military education program that would include benefits adequate enough to maintain and support the All-Volunteer Force.

FRA supports MCRMC Recommendation 12 and suggests that mandatory GPS should also include spouses and that the program should be adjusted to include programs that benefit the entire family. Further local branches of military/veterans organizations should also be involved in the transition from military to civilian life. Affiliating with one or more of organizations can provide critical transition assistance such as contacts in the local community, and camaraderie with fellow veterans.

Draft Legislation

FRA wants to express its appreciation for having the opportunity to comment on draft legislation that includes provisions from other bills. The draft bill includes provisions from the "Veterans Small Business Opportunity and Protection Act" (S. 296), sponsored by Sen. Dean Heller (NV), that recognizes the surviving spouse of a service-connected disabled veteran, who acquires the ownership interest in a small business of the deceased veteran as such veteran.

When a Veteran small business owner with a service-connected disability of less than 100 percent dies from causes unrelated to service, the spouse immediately loses those benefits. FRA supports this legislation, sponsored by Sen. Dean Heller (NV) that will help veteran owned family businesses remain eligible for small business benefits.

The Association supports the "Honor America's Guard-Reserve Retirees Act" (S. 743), which recognizes service members in the reserve components the status as a veteran. Under current law, a reserve component service member who has served honorably for twenty or more years, earning the right to retire, is not considered a veteran. FRA believes that for those who serve honorably in the Guard or Reserve components for 20 or more years and who have met the requirements as a retiree should be granted the title as veteran.

FRA supports the “Quicker Veterans Benefits Delivery Act” (S. 666), sponsored by Sen. Al Franken (Minn.) that intends to improve the disability claims backlog by removing bureaucratic red tape that allows Veterans to see local doctors for their initial diagnosis and avoid long wait times at VA hospitals.

The Association supports the “Dignified Interment of Our Veterans Act” (S. 695), sponsored by Sen. Patrick Toomey (Penn.) that requires the VA to report to Congress on issues relating to the interring of veterans’ unclaimed remains in national cemeteries under the auspices of the National Cemetery Administration. The Missing in America Project conducted research that suggests there are remains of about 47,000 veterans stored throughout the United States that have yet to be identified and/or claimed.

FRA supports the “Ruth Moore Act” (S. 865), sponsored by Sen. Jon Tester (Mt.) that makes it easier for veterans to qualify for disability benefits by reducing their burden of proof for incidents of military sexual trauma. The legislation is named after Navy Veteran, Ruth Moore, who is a survivor of military sexual assault. This legislation will also require the VA to report military sexual trauma claim statistics annually to Congress.

Conclusion

In closing, allow me again to express the sincere appreciation of the Association’s membership for all that you and the Members of the Senate Veterans’ Affairs Committees and your outstanding staff do for our Nation’s veterans.

Our leadership and Legislative Team stand ready to work with the Committees and their staffs to improve benefits for all veterans who’ve served this great Nation.



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Thomas J. (Tom) Snee is the Twelfth National Executive Director (NED) for the Fleet Reserve Association (FRA), in Alexandria, VA. In his scope of responsibility, he serves over 60,000 Shipmates and family members; is the managing officer of the National Headquarters with authority to endorse standing rules and regulations approved by its National Board of Directors. He also serves as the Chairman for Legislative Services.

Snee was born in Cleveland, Ohio where he grew up in nearby Willoughby, having graduated from Willoughby South High School in June 1965. Snee then enlisted in the United States Navy completed Recruit Training (boot-camp) at Great Lakes, IL. He initially served as a Yeoman, however changed to the Navy Counselor rating in 1973, viewing an opportunity to be an advocate for keeping sailors and their families informed of their benefits. Tom retired in September of 1996 as Force Master Chief, Navy Recruiting Command, in Arlington, VA. As a Master Chief Navy Counselor (Surface Warfare) he served in many leadership and managerial positions, both on ships, staffs, and shore commands, including as: Force Master Chief, Navy Recruiting Command, Arlington, VA; Command Master Chief of USS AMERICA (CV 66) & Navy Recruiting District Chicago; Director of Training and Education for Instructors, in Career Development, Counseling and Recruiting curricular plans and procedures for students afloat, shore, and staff development. He is a graduate of the Navy's Senior Enlisted Academy, (Class 009, KHAKI Group), Naval War College, Newport, RI.

Following his Navy retirement, Snee worked at the FRA Headquarters as Veterans Service Officer and Membership/Branch Development. After three years, Snee pursued a change in careers becoming a Middle School Teacher for the Arlington VA Catholic Schools. His educational leadership and management responsibilities were furthered facilitated as a Middle School Lead Teacher, for student, curriculum development, analytical/course assessments and development, high school placements, and school accreditation. Mr. Snee taught Social Studies (American History, Civics, Geography, and Economics) and Religion classes, in Falls Church, and Springfield, VA, spanning a 13 year teaching career until his retirement in June 2013.

Mr. Snee holds a M.Ed in Educational Leadership from George Mason University, Fairfax VA; BS in Liberal Arts/Psychology, Excelsior College, Albany, NY; and AS in Liberal Arts, Mohegan Community College, Norwich, CT. Mr. Snee has been a mentor for the "Leadership in the New Generations Ethics for Middle School Students", at George Mason University; currently serving on the Board of Educators at Mt. Vernon and Gunston Hall Associations, (historical sites), Alexandria, VA; on the Board of Directors, for the United States Navy Memorial, Ex-Officio; and as "Ambassador" for Excelsior College, Albany, NY.

Mr. Snee's memberships include the Knights of Columbus, Surface Navy Association, Fleet Reserve Association, Boy Scouts of America and the National Eagle Scout Association (NESA).

His recognitions have been with: Covington WHO's WHO; Strathmore WHO's WHO Worldwide, Leadership/Achievement in Industry and Profession; WHO's WHO Executives, American Teachers and Business Professionals. He was named Teacher of the Year in 2011; as a Distinguish Alumni Hall of Fame, Willoughby-Eastlake Schools, Ohio.

Mr. Snee is married to the former Karen A. Habina of Willoughby, OH who works in Branch Operations, Navy Federal Credit Union, in Vienna, VA. The Snee's have four children; Janet M. Basselgia, teacher, Burke, VA; Denise J. McCready, teacher, Kittery, ME; Commander David T. Snee, U. S. Navy, OPNAV, N9I, Naval Integrated Fire Control – Counter Air Lead; and Timothy F. Snee, Office Depot, Woodbridge, VA. They also have five grandchildren and reside in Burke, VA.