

Chairman Daniel K. Akaka

Aloha and welcome to today's hearing, the first in a series of hearings I intend to hold to review veterans= disability compensation.

Today our focus will be on the recommendations of the Veterans= Disability Benefits Commission. I am grateful that we are joined by General James Terry Scott, Chairman of that Commission. I was pleased to speak before the Commission more than two years ago, and feel that we have come full circle with General Scott's appearance today. General Scott, I publicly thank you and your fellow Commissioners for all of your dedicated work on the Commission and I especially thank you for your continued work, such as appearing here today, following the end of the Commission's formal activity.

I would like to take this opportunity to offer my condolences on the passing of Commissioner Butch Joeckel, a decorated Marine and combat veteran, who died during October of last year, shortly after the Commission completed its work.

The review of veterans' disability compensation that we embark on today falls into three separate issue areas: first, the question of what should be compensated generally, which encompasses quality of life issues, the current rating schedule, and the development of presumptions, among a host of issues; second, how can the current adjudication system be improved to yield more timely, more accurate decisions and how will efforts on this front be impacted by the efforts to deal with the questions under the first category; and third, how can Congress and the Executive Branch promote greater coordination and consistency between the VA and DOD disability processes.

These are complex and far-reaching questions and I do not believe they can be dealt with quickly. Congress must undertake a thoughtful and deliberate review and analysis of the many matters at issue and then work to develop legislation that will result in appropriate reform of the disability compensation system.

The Veterans' Disability Benefits Commission's report is a significant part of the roadmap that will enable the Committee to better understand and address these three separate issue areas. I hope that at the end of today's hearing, we will better understand the work that went into the report, the input that was received, and the Commission's recommendations.

I thank the representatives of veterans advocacy organizations for their presence here today. It is my hope that they will share their organizations response to the Commission=s recommendations so that we might better understand the potential impact of implementing any of the Commission=s recommendations.