



**Statement of the**

**Fleet Reserve Association**

**On**

**The “Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act”**

**Presented to the:**

**United States Senate**  
**Veterans’ Affairs Committee**

**By**

National Executive Director  
MCPOC (SW) Thomas J. Snee, USN, (Ret), M.Ed

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## **The Fleet Reserve Association**

The Fleet Reserve Association, FRA, is the oldest and largest sea service association serving our enlisted men and women in the Active, Reserve, Retired, and Veteran components of the United States Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard. Congressionally Chartered in 1996, FRA is also recognized by the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) for its entrusted service for all veterans who seek there assistance.

The FRA was founded on November 11, 1924 in Philadelphia, PA. Its name was derived originally from the enlisted personnel, within the Navy Department, who were transferred to the Fleet Reserve or Fleet Marine Corps Reserve having served for 20 or more years of active duty but with less than 30 years of service for retirement purposes. During the required period of service in the Fleet Reserve, assigned personnel earned a retainer pay, associated benefits and subject to active duty recall, when needed, by the Secretary of the Navy. Today, the FRA continues to represent all enlisted Sea Service personnel from the Navy, Marine Corps, and Coast Guard.

The Association regularly testifies before the House and Senate Veterans' Affairs Committees and, actively serves as a Veterans Affairs Voluntary Services (VAVS) program participant. A National Headquarters' staff member serves as FRA's National Veterans Service Officer (NVSO) and as the representative on the VAVS National Advisory Committee (NAC). FRA's NVSO also administers the Association's Veterans Service Officer program and represents all veterans with their claims processing before Board of Veterans Appeals (BVA).

In 2016, FRA's membership overwhelmingly approved the establishment of the *Fleet Reserve Association Veterans Service Foundation* (VSF). Its objective and strategy is to further enhance continued awareness opportunities in positive growth within the FRA Veterans Service Officers (VSO) program. The newly formed foundation has a 501(c) (3) tax exempt status and nearly 800 accredited service officers with FRA.

FRA became a member of the Veterans Day National Committee in August 2007. FRA, along with 24 other nationally recognized Veterans Service Organizations (VSO) committees, coordinates the National Veterans' Day ceremonies at Arlington National Cemetery. The FRA is also a leading organization within The Military Coalition (TMC), a group of 33 nationally recognized military and veteran's organizations that collectively represent the concerns of over 5.5 million members. FRA senior staff members also serve in key TMC co-chair positions. The Association's motto is: "***Loyalty, Protection, and Service.***"

## **Certification of Non-Receipt of Federal Funds**

Pursuant to the requirements of House Rule XI, the Fleet Reserve Association has not received any federal grant or contract during the current fiscal year or either of the two previous fiscal years.

## **Introduction**

Distinguish Chairman Johnny Isakson, Ranking Member Jon Tester, and members of the Veterans Committee, we thank you, for the opportunity to present the FRA's views on, The "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act of 2018," sponsored by Rep. David Valadao (R-CA) and other legislation listed on the agenda. We would like to recognize and thank Rep Valadao for his leadership and direction in the recent House passage of this Bill, (382-0) on June 25, 2018. FRA also thanks Senator Kirsten Gillibrand (D-NY) for her companion legislation (S. 422), to (H.R. 299) as it was introduced in the House. The House bill has 330 co-sponsors and the Senate bill has 51 co-sponsors. FRA also thanks House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Dr. Phil Roe (Tenn.) and Ranking Member Tim Walz (Minn.) for working in a bi-partisan manner to pass the legislation out of committee and that recently passed in the House.

## **Agent Orange/Blue Water Navy Reform**

The "Blue Water Navy Vietnam Veterans Act" (HR 299) not only clarifies, but further defines eligibilities for sea service personnel that served on ships in the coastal waters off the coast of the Republic of Vietnam. This bill also provides a presumptive eligibility statute for disability claims submission to the VA for disease and ailments from the toxic exposures of the Agent Orange herbicide. FRA requests that Congress recognize all "Blue Water" veterans who were exposed to the Agent Orange herbicide and to authorize immediate and presumptive status for VA disability claims submissions. Current presumption of service connection only exists for Vietnam veterans who served in-country, on land and inland waterways, but limited to those who served off its coastal waters. Enactment of H.R. 299/S. 422 will ensure a well justified and earned treatments and benefits to the thousands of Navy/Marine Corps/Coast Guard personnel who may have been denied service connected claims by the VA since 2002.

Upon passage of this bill, these service members will no longer have to continually prove direct exposures from Agent Orange, and be eligible to receive the consideration from the VA for benefits associated from presumptive and known associated health conditions incurred from exposure from this defoliant while serving on these ships. From 1964-1975 more than 500,000 deployed service members serving off the coastal waters of Vietnam may have likely been openly exposed to the chemical herbicide Agent Orange in the daily performance of their shipboard duties. In response to this concern, Congress passed the Agent Orange Act of 1991, (P.L. 102-4) under President George H. W. Bush.

Based upon the 1991 Agent Orange Act, the VA policy (1991-2001) only recognized service member file claims if they received the Vietnam Service Medal/Vietnam Campaign Medal with a "boots on the ground" status. These restrictions of service were not applicable to sea service personnel on ships in the coastal waters. Agent Orange presumption connections were never extended for those shipboard personnel in the performance of their daily duties. The herbicide's primary use was to destroy foliage on river banks and shores where the Viet Cong hid, in order

to fire upon passing ships and small vessels. The chemical sprayed found in those rivers, eventually had a “natural” runoff into the coastal waters off Vietnam. As a result, shipboard desalination processing, as used daily for bathing, drinking, laundering, dish washing, and other onboard daily use were never considered from this contamination. It was later determined, that the onboard desalinization process for water intensified the toxicity in the amounts used in the daily use from these herbicide exposures. In addition, consideration must be taken into account from these same sprayings, the atmospheric surroundings that were affected on these ships.

FRA is grateful to the 14 Senators, who in joint 2016 letter to the Secretary of Veterans Affairs, requested that the VA reconsider its ban on presumption for those who served on ships off the coastal waters as well as to those who had “boots on the ground”. The FRA strongly endorsed this letter with its reassurances in the lifting of those restrictions. This same letter referenced the recent *Gray v McDonald* decision by the Court of Appeals for Veterans Claims that found that VA’s exclusion of Da Nang Harbor from the definition of “inland waterways” to be “arbitrary and capricious”. FRA was disappointed that the VA issued a court-ordered and “clarified” definition of inland waterways for the purpose of determining presumption for coverage that still maintained its exclusion of the “Blue Water” Vietnam veterans. For the VA, to state with such confidence that the toxin, Agent Orange, could not cross from inland water ways and harbors into open coastal waters is a total ‘rejection in itself to the laws of nature’. It was as if some imaginary line drawn across the mouth of any river or bay had the ability to stop the herbicide from entering into coast waters and currents from flowing.

### **House Amendments to Agent Orange Legislation**

This current legislation, as amended in the House Veterans Affairs Committee, now extends the presumption of herbicide exposure for veterans who served on or near the Korean DMZ between September 1, 1967 and August 31, 1971. This legislation will now permit and allow extended health care, vocational training & rehabilitation and monetary allowances to children born with spina bifida, provided that at least one parent of the affected child served in Thailand between January 9, 1962 and May 7, 1975 as determined by the VA Secretary and had been exposed to the herbicide Agent Orange during that period.

This bill also will allow improvements to the VA’s home loan program. Currently, VA-designated appraisers rely solely on information from approved third parties, who, for an example, would use a desktop appraisal, when determining a home’s value for a VA home loan. This new method would combine traditional appraisal methods with modern data analytics and market data to expedite and improve VA’s appraisal process. This bill also eliminates the current conforming loan limit on the price of a loan that VA can guarantee. This rate is set by Freddie Mac and the amount of the current cap varies depending on the cost of living in a particular area. Any veteran who chooses to their benefit to purchase a home above the current cap would be required to pay a funding fee unless they were rated at the 100 percent service connected level.

## **Other Legislations**

FRA would like to briefly indicate its position on the other legislative proposals being reviewed at this hearing. The FRA's position on the other legislative proposals is as follows:

- FRA supports the draft legislation sponsored by Senator Bernie Sanders (VT) to authorize a pilot program for expanded dental services for certain veterans;
- FRA has no position on Senator Michael Bennet's (CO) legislation (S. 3184);
- FRA supports the draft legislation sponsored by Senator Michael Crapo (ID) that addresses the streamlining the Transition Assistance Program (TAP).
- FRA has no position on Senator John Boozman's "VA Hiring Enhancement Act";
- FRA has no position on Rep. Jack Bergman's (MI) "Veterans Affairs Medical-Surgical Purchasing Stabilization Act" (H.R. 5418);
- FRA strongly supports Senator Gary Peters (MI) the "BRAVE Act", (S. 1596) that increase benefits for burial, funeral and other death related expenses;
- FRA strongly supports Senator Diane Feinstein's (CA) "Mare Island Naval Cemetery Transfer Act", (S. 2881);
- FRA supports Senator Jon Tester's (MT) "VA Financial Accountability Act" (S. 1952);
- FRA strongly supports Senator Jon Tester's (MT) "Dependency and Indemnity Compensation Improvement Act" (S. 1990);
- FRA strongly supports Senator Dan Sullivan's (AK) "Medal of Honor Surviving Spouse Act" (S. 2185);
- FRA supports the draft legislation, sponsored by Senator Bill Cassidy (LA), to require the VA to create a program to provide grants for persons to provide and coordinate provisions of the suicide prevention services for certain veterans;
- FRA strongly supports Senator Bill Cassidy's draft bill "Modernization of Medical Records Access for Veterans Act"; and
- FRA supports Senator David Perdue's "No Hero Left Untreated Act" (S.514).

## **Conclusion**

In closing, please allow me again, to express our sincere appreciation on behalf of the Association in allowing FRA to express its views on legislation at this hearing.

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## **FORCM (SW) Thomas Joseph Snee, USN, (Ret), M.Ed**

Thomas J. (Tom) Snee is the Twelfth National Executive Director for the Fleet Reserve Association (FRA), headquartered in Alexandria, VA. In his scope of many responsibilities, he serves over 50,000 Sea Service and family members on various boards and committees for military and Veterans benefits. He is the managing officer of the National Headquarters Staff, National Board of Directors, and Co-Chairs the Military Coalition representing over 33 veteran organizations/associations, of 5.5M Active Duty, Reserve, Veterans and Retirees.

Mr. Snee is a retired Navy Master Chief /Surface Warfare Specialist, Vietnam Veteran with over 30 years of naval service. He has testified before the House and Senate Armed Services and Veterans Affairs Congressional Committees. In 2014, he served as a panel member for the Senate Congressional Educational Reform for Educators. A champion for military and family benefits, he is a dedicated, compassionate leader, while spearheading key initiatives on their behalf for earned benefits that influence members at the Departments of Defense, Homeland Security and the Veteran Affairs.

A Cleveland, Ohio native, he grew up and graduated from Willoughby South High School, Willoughby, OH. He is an Eagle Scout, was a newspaper carrier for the *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, and served as a lifeguard/water safety instructor and playground supervisor. He continues to be a mentor and advocate for local Boy Scout Troops.

After graduating from high school, Tom enlisted in the United States Navy. He served as Force Master Chief, Navy Recruiting Command, Washington, DC; Command Master Chief, USS AMERICA (CV 66) and Navy Recruiting District, Chicago. He was the Curriculum Director/Course Supervisor for the Chief of Naval Technical Training, Millington, TN and Program Manager, for the Chief of Naval Personnel Command for Senior Enlisted development. As course manager, he was charged to develop measureable resources in joint leadership curricular studies to enhance qualitative training while reducing student attrition. Mr. Snee is a graduate of the Navy's Senior Enlisted Academy, at the Naval War College, Newport, RI.

Mr. Snee holds an M.Ed, in Education Leadership from George Mason University and a BS in Liberal Arts/Psychology from Excelsior College. In 2016 he was bestowed an Honorary Bachelor's Degree for *Alumni Services*, from Excelsior College.

Following his Navy retirement, Snee worked at the FRA Headquarters as the Veterans Service Officer and Membership/Branch Development Coordinator. In August of 2000, he transitioned careers to become a Middle School Teacher and Administrator. With his strong

education and training background, he was charged with managing curriculum development, for student assessments, appraisals, and reviews, for incoming high school freshmen. He currently serves on the Commonwealth of Virginia's Catholic school certification, DFE Team. He taught American History, Government, Geography, Economics, and English for over 15 years.

He is a member of the Fleet Reserve Association, Knights of Columbus, Surface Navy Association (SNA) and National Eagle Scout Association (NESA). His many cited accolades have been from the many *WHO's WHO* circuits that includes: ***“Worldwide Leadership/Achievement in Industry and Profession; American Teachers; Business Professionals, Executive of the Year Award for 2018-2019”, 2018 WHO's WHO, “Lifetime and American Achievement Award for Perseverance, Commitment and Extraordinary Accomplishment”, “The American Achievement Award for 2018”***; also the 2011 ***“Teacher of the Year”***; he was inducted into the ***“Distinguish Alumni Hall of Fame Award”*** from the Willoughby-Eastlake Ohio Schools. More recently he was awarded the ***“2018 Top 100 Registry for Business Leaders and Professionals Lifetime Achievement Award for Veteran Affairs”*** and in April 2018, named the ***“2018 Top National Executive Director of the Year”*** by International Association of Top Professionals, (IAOTP).

Mr. Snee serves on many boards of directors including: Excelsior College, Albany, NY; Navy Memorial Foundation, Washington, DC and; Board of Educators at Mount Vernon/Gunston Hall (historical sites). He is the author of the book, ***“What's Up, Life”***, by MindStir Publications of North Hampton, NH. His second book, ***“You Raise Me Up”***, is scheduled for publishing in the summer of 2018.

Mr. Snee was married to the late Karen A. Habina for 46 years, from Willoughby, OH. The Snee's have four children: Janet, of Springfield, VA; Denise, of Goose Creek, SC; David, a U. S. Navy Captain, Norfolk, VA; and Timothy, of Woodbridge, VA. They have six grandchildren and he currently resides in Burke, VA.

His life has been noted with many professional “footnotes”. One bestowed by parents and students alike is from Robert H. Shaffer: ***“We must never view young people as empty bottles to be filled, but as candles to be lit”***. His favorites are, ***“It's always too soon to quit”***, and ***“Output is the success of total commitment and involvement”***! He personally coined the phrases, ***“I am but a humble servant for the success of others”***, ***“To Serve is a Virtue, to be served is a Blessing”*** and, ***“To Listen, Lead, Love, Let Go Mentor, Coach, and then Manage”***!