



**VETERANS STRENGTHENING AMERICA
NATIONAL SECURITY DIVISION'S WEEKLY REPORT**

Mario Marquez, Director
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Dec 16, 2023– Jan 5, 2024

STAFF ACTIVITY

- NS Staff attended the Navy Full Honors Funeral of Medal of Honor Recipient Seaman First Class (S1c) James Ward at Arlington National Cemetery. Seaman First Class Ward received the Medal of Honor for his actions aboard the U.S.S. Oklahoma at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, on December 7th, 1941. When it became apparent that the U.S.S. Oklahoma was going to capsize and the order was given to abandon ship, S1c Ward remained in a turret holding a flashlight so the remainder of the turret crew could see to escape, thereby sacrificing his own life. You can read more about the hero [here](#).
- NS Staff begins planning the annual Washington Conference in late February 2024.
- NS Staff drafted NS-related legislative priorities for the 2024 congressional session, which will be circulated at the upcoming Washington Conference.
- NS Staff began planning for the Annual ANAVICUS Breakfast at the Washington Conference, with the invitation letters now prepared and ready for distribution.

POW/MIA

- **Dec 21, 2023**, Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Hurst, R.)
- **Dec 18, 2023**, Soldier Accounted for from WWII (Mitchell, H.)

DPAA identified/repatriated [144](#) servicemembers in 2023.

PROGRAMS (The American Legion Military Surplus Equipment)

- Processed request: Ammo – 12,400; Rifles – 21; Clips – 0; Static Displays – 1
- Participants: Posts – 9; Departments – 9

TIP OF THE WEEK

Military Service Records, Awards, and Unit Histories: A Guide to Locating Sources

The [Congressional Research Service](#) (CRS), a federal legislative branch agency located within the Library of Congress, issued a report this week titled: “Military Service Records, Awards, and Unit Histories: A Guide to Locating Sources.” CRS reports provide Congress with anticipatory and on-demand research and analysis to support their legislative, oversight, and representational duties and are available to the public.

This guide, at the link below, provides information on locating military unit histories and individual service records of discharged, retired, and deceased military personnel. It also provides information on finding and replacing military awards and medals. Included are contact information for military history centers, websites for additional research sources, and a bibliography of other publications, including related CRS reports.

The 14-page guide is available here: [RS21282 \(congress.gov\)](#)



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Jan 6 – Jan 12, 2024

STAFF ACTIVITY

- NS Staff participated in an MSO/VSO roundtable hosted by the Acting Undersecretary of Defense for Personnel and Readiness, where we engaged in comprehensive discussions on enhancing the safety and economic well-being of servicemembers and their families. These discussions spanned topics from improving safety protocols and healthcare services to bolstering financial stability and support systems for military families.

Force Safety and Occupational Health Policy

The Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs is pivotal in enhancing service members' and veterans' safety and well-being. This is achieved by overseeing the Department of Defense's safety and occupational health policies, governance, and strategies. Key initiatives include implementing the first-ever DoD safety and occupational health strategic plan and monitoring department-wide injuries, illnesses, and mishaps, such as aviation accidents. The office also advises the Secretary of Defense, focusing on strengthening the DoD's safety culture. This involves prioritizing critical issues like blast overpressure, integrating safety leading indicators into policy, and proactive analysis to maintain adequate safety programs. Additionally, collaboration with agencies like the FAA, OSHA, and EPA is integral to their strategy, with new campaigns highlighting safety and health advancements beginning with a visit to Fort Liberty.

DoD Warfighter Brain Health Strategy and Action Plan

Over two years ago, discussions began on the DoD Warfighter Brain Health Strategy and Action Plan, which has now evolved into a comprehensive roadmap addressing various brain health threats. These include blast overpressure, anomalous health incidents like Havana Syndrome, and head impacts from activities such as parachute jumps. The plan emphasizes enhancing the training environment safety, especially concerning blast exposure. It is part of a broader initiative focusing on traumatic brain injury (TBI), a field where the department is a global leader. Formalized in 2022, the plan, strategy, and action approved by the deputy secretary have garnered congressional attention, leading to significant advancements in cognitive monitoring. In the summer of 2024, recruit training will initiate this monitoring to improve brain health in the short and long term.

Military Personnel Policy, Servicemembers Economic Well-Being

In recent years, the Congress/Department of Defense has significantly improved the economic security of service members. This includes a 10% increase in basic pay, a 17.5% rise in the Basic Allowance for Housing, and a 13% increase in the Basic Allowance for Subsistence. On average, service members now receive an additional \$10,000 annually. A new service member in 2024 earns about \$50,000 annually, reaching \$57,000 by the end of the first year. By the third

year, earnings are approximately \$64,000, and an E5 earns about \$77,000 by the fourth year, surpassing U.S. median incomes. These figures don't account for compensation/benefits like healthcare, dental, the post-911 GI Bill, and paid vacation time/leave. The DoD is also reviewing the entire compensation system to ensure fairness and effectiveness, considering aspects like dual earners in military families and outdated housing profiles for BAH.

Food Security Initiatives for Service Members

The DoD's strategic roadmap launched in July 2022 prioritizes addressing food insecurity among service members. Recognizing the complexity of this issue, the DoD is focusing on junior unaccompanied service members and single-income households. Efforts include modernizing food accessibility with online resources, updating military leader toolkits, and extending commissary hours. The reinforcement of federal nutrition assistance programs ensures members know their eligibility. A comprehensive review of service member pay and benefits, including impacts of military spouse unemployment and childcare costs, is underway. Initiatives like the military spouse accelerator pilot and the military spouse employment partnership are being implemented to improve employment outcomes for spouses.

Defense State Liaison for Military Families

The Defense State Liaisons Office operates across eight U.S. regions, representing the DoD in state-level policy discussions for the well-being of military families. Collaborating with stakeholders like MSO/VSO, the office establishes nonpartisan policy priorities that respect state sovereignty and minimize fiscal demands. Over 18 years, the DSL has addressed nearly 70 issues, constantly adjusting its agenda based on stakeholder consensus and analysis. The office's flexibility allows it to evolve and set priorities that support the changing needs of military families. It maintains a focused top-ten list of policy priorities and ensures that issues not currently on the agenda are still recognized for their importance.

- NS Staff spoke with a Legionnaire representing minority veterans who focuses on advocating for the deported veterans of color. The veteran works to force the Department of Defense to enhance its efforts in educating non-citizen servicemembers about obtaining citizenship through military service. The conversation highlighted the need for systemic changes to support those who have served the nation but face challenges in gaining citizenship.
- NS Staff actively continues the planning process for the annual Washington Conference. This ongoing effort focuses on detailing and organizing various aspects of the conference.
- NS Staff is finalizing the After-Action Report detailing the Commander's recent travel to the Pacific. This document is essential for reviewing the outcomes and insights gained from the trip.
- NS Staff continues planning for the Annual ANAVICUS Breakfast, focusing on finalizing arrangements and details.

POW/MIA

As of January 12th, 2024, no new servicemembers have been identified/repatriated.

PROGRAMS (The American Legion Military Surplus Equipment)

- Processed request: Ammo – 3,720; Rifles – 21; Clips – 50; Static Displays – 0
- Participants: Posts – 5; Departments – 4

TIP OF THE WEEK

Director's update and remarks:

Happy New year from the National Security Division Staff. I'd first like to welcome our new administrative assistant, Ms. Ikea Witcher who joined the team prior to the holidays, and we look forward to her support and engagement in support of the Commission. We have welcomed two new Chairman to the Commission: Chairman Guillen to the National Guard and Reserve Forces Committee and Chairman Landcamer for the Foreign Relations Committee that we are supporting.

The Division Staff is busy closing out a few tasks from the end of the year last year while simultaneously working on the written inputs for the year's legislative agenda and upcoming National Commander's testimony. Our legislative priorities include Military quality of life (QOL), Ensuring the Coast Guard is paid, and Access to medical and mental healthcare for our oversea active-duty servicemembers and their families. Members of Congress have increased their focus on military quality of life issues and this year will prove to be an important period for our advocacy and awareness as we plan to conduct four quality of life assessment visits across the United States.

For those who may not be aware, National Security Staff accompanies the National Commander on foreign travel to the Pacific and Europe and multiple recent visits have revealed the need for our advocacy efforts on behalf of our overseas military population. We will continue to include overseas visit findings in our quality-of-life lessons learned/portfolio. I do want to state that the unique aspect of National Staff running the QOL program is much more than producing a report upon completion. Your staff has direct access to Congressional policy makers, other government decision makers and DoD officials in Washington D.C. who we meet regularly. As a result, your Staff engages those officials immediately after a QOL visit, meeting to rectify issues even before a report is published, so we have access and outputs that bring relevance and immediate impacts to each visit. I look forward to the Team's work in 2024.

Our work and engagement with DoD involving the national recruiting crisis is going to be a game changer for us during 2024. As America's largest veterans organization, we have taken the lead on recruiting crisis efforts and have already met with senior military officials from various branches to discuss our work, recommendations and upcoming tactics which will be revealed in the near future. Our Foreign Relations and National Guard/Reserve Forces portfolio is being updated under the new Chairman and we will have their plans and priorities within a few weeks.

Be looking out for increased engagement on border security, foreign policy and other key areas during 2024!

Sincerely,

Mario A. Marquez
Director, National Security Division

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GRASSROOTS ACTION UPDATES

The American Legion is urging Congress to include vital language in the Defense Supplemental to support our Afghan allies. To support the Legion's efforts and protect the brave men and women who fought by our sides, please click [here](#).

Last session, three critical bills began picking up speed in the House of Representatives: The *Elizabeth Dole Home Care Act of 2023* (H.R. 542), the *HOME Act of 2023* (H.R. 3848), and the *COPE Act* (H.R. 3581) bill. If the Senate agrees to pass this Legion-backed legislation, Congress has an opportunity to provide indispensable support for our Nation's veterans and their family caregivers. If you would like to contact your representatives in support of H.R. 542, H.R. 3848, and H.R. 3581, you can visit our [grassroots actions center](#) to identify and email your elected official.

The American Legion supports the Pay our Troops Act and encourages all Legionnaires to contact their members of Congress and ask them to support the legislation. Click [here](#) to reach out today.

LEGISLATIVE WINS FOR THE LEGION IN 2023



The 118th Congress was challenged by an onslaught of unprecedented challenges in 2023. While these obstacles were certainly a hindrance to House and Senate's [productivity](#), many lawmakers worked hard to pass legislation for veterans in spite of the chaos.

While The American Legion hopes to see more of our priorities passed during the second session of this Congress, we are extremely grateful that many of our priorities were included in the NDAA and two stand-alone bills were signed into law by President Biden. With support from the Legion, S. 777 and S. 30 became public law this summer less than 6 weeks apart.

The bills, both of which were introduced by Senator Jon Tester (D-MT), take critical steps to ensure the financial and physical wellbeing of our nation's veterans. *S. 777*, also known as the *Veteran's COLA Act of 2023*, requires the Department of Veterans' Affairs (VA) to increase wartime disability compensation, clothing allowances for disabled veterans, and certain compensation for dependents and surviving spouses and children. The amounts payable must increase in conjunction with the cost-of-living increases. As law, this will directly improve the quality of life for veterans and military families across the country.

S. 30, the *Fiscal Year 2023 Veterans Affairs Major Medical Facility Authorization Act*, reached the President's desk about a month after the *Veteran's COLA Act of 2023*. S. 30 approves the construction of

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several VA hospitals and medical facilities and provides the budget to do so. According to the Senate Committee on Veterans' Affairs (SVAC), the aim of this bill is to improve upon the "historic infrastructure investments" that came with the PACT Act.

The second session of the 118th Congress will commence in the coming week, and there are at least 12 bills with Legion support that have passed one chamber. 10 bills have passed the House and are waiting their turn in the Senate, and 2 have passed the Senate and must be approved in the House. S. 316 aims to repeal the authorizations for use of military force (AUMFs) in Iraq, a long-standing priority for The American Legion. On the other hand, S. 656 would establish commercial driver educational programs through VA if it were to pass the House as well.

Of the bills that have passed the House, 2 provide support for caregivers, 4 strengthen education and employment benefits, 2 focus on disability compensation and benefits, 1 ensuring that veterans have equal access to the second amendment, and 1 improving housing allowances and aid for homeless veterans.

CONGRESS NEGOTIATING BUDGET AS DEADLINE LOOMS

After narrowly avoiding government shutdown in the fall of 2023, Congress passed a novel and slightly controversial short-term funding measure.

This solution is known as the "laddered" continuing resolution (CR). Rather than extending 2023-level spending through one set date for government programs, as a traditional CR would, the laddered approach provided 2 separate expiration dates for 2023-level spending to provide Congress with more negotiation time for certain programs. The deadlines are January 19, 2024 and February 2, 2024. The latter deadline applies to Homeland Security, Labor-HHS-Education, Homeland Security, and a few other bills.



On the other hand, the quickly approaching January 19th deadline provides for Transportation-HUD, Agriculture, Energy-Water, and finally, Military Construction-VA (MilCon-VA) appropriations. The House and Senate have reached a deal on a \$1.59 billion topline for spending, but the details of how this money will be spent is still up in the air.

The original Senate version of Milcon-VA appropriations includes \$19 billion for military construction projects and \$134.7 billion in discretionary funds for VA. On the other hand, the

House budget provides \$17.4 billion for military construction and fully funds the VA by providing \$137.755 billion.

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In the next few weeks, the House and the Senate will attempt to pass all 12 annual spendings, either as individual bills or as packages. Senator Patty Murray (D-WA), pictured above, pleaded with her fellow congressmen saying, “We have to come together, do the hard work of governing, and hammer out bipartisan spending bills that actually reflect what we think our nation needs.”

If Congress is unable to pass all of the spending bills or a combination of them, they will either be forced to pass another CR or to shut down the unfunded parts of the government. Even if MilCon-VA is not passed, VA will continue to operate medical centers, process VA benefits and applications for headstones and burial benefits, and make decision at the Board of Veterans’ Appeals. However, these operations will adhere to 2023 appropriations levels. Moreover, without congressional authorization, Department of Defense construction and maintenance projects could become inactive without the proper funding.

Although some lawmakers remain skeptical that Congress will successfully meet these deadlines, leaders in both chambers and parties seem to agree that a compromise on the top line needs to be made as soon as possible.

LEGIONNAIRE OF THE WEEK

In an effort to recognize the weekly accomplishments of our Legionnaires, we will spotlight an individual every week. These individuals demonstrate exceptional grassroots activism by meeting with/contacting their Congressional Representative/Senator to advocate for veterans. Efforts like these truly make a difference and give veterans a voice in Congress.

K. Robert Lewis, Department of Connecticut

Congratulations to the first Legionnaire of the week for 2024, Mr. Robert K. Lewis of the Department of Connecticut!

Mr. Lewis has been selected to join Congressman Joe Courtney’s (D-CT-2) Veterans’ Advisory Roundtable. As part of this role, Mr. Lewis met with Congressman Courtney’s staff this week to discuss predatory actors and the increase in claims that has occurred since the PACT Act’s passage. Finally, Mr. Lewis brought up the approaching funding deadlines and how his home state would be affected during a shutdown.

Mr. Lewis, thank you for helping us start strong for 2024. Your advocacy and participation is crucial to a successful session.

If you have made a grassroots effort and would like to be considered for next week’s “Legionnaire of the Week,” please fill out the Congressional Contact Report Form [here](#). You can also email me at kryan@legion.org.

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LEGISLATIVE DIVISION UPDATES

This week, Legislative Division (LegDiv) staff returned to the office on Wednesday, focusing heavily on Washington Conference. LegDiv staff began inviting members of Congress and speakers for the event, and detailing the run-of-show for the Commander's Call.

LegDiv staff also completed a variety of quote requests for congressional press releases this week.

Finally, LegDiv staff worked with other divisions to finalize priorities for the second session of the 118th Congress.

As part of our ongoing grassroots efforts, NLD staff will be traveling to posts around the country to provide **grassroots training** tailored to the hosting department's needs. If you are interested in hosting a grassroots training event, please contact grassroots@legion.org or ejohnson@legion.org.

UPCOMING CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS

On January 17th at 2:00 p.m. ET, the House Veterans' Affairs Committee Subcommittee on Oversight and Investigations will hold a hearing titled, "VA Revolving Funds: Are Veterans Being Shortchanged?" This hearing can be watched [here](#).