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## History of the Department of Veterans Affairs Part 6

### Vietnam War

Congress at first limited benefits for the Vietnam War to veterans whose service occurred between Aug. 5, 1964, and May 7, 1975. Congress later expanded the period to Feb. 28, 1961, for veterans who served in country. During this period, more than 6 million Vietnam-era veterans were separated from military service. A major difference of Vietnam-era veterans from those of earlier wars was the larger percentage of disabled.

Advances in airlift and medical treatment meant that many wounded and injured personnel survived who would have died in earlier wars. By 1972 there were 308,000 veterans with disabilities connected to military service.



*A nurse tends a patient just out of surgery in the intensive care ward of the hospital ship USS Repose (AH-16) off the coast of Vietnam.*

The return within days of veterans from combat zones to civilian life also was new. The cultural shock of suddenly being back in civilian life caused veterans greater adjustment difficulties. The anti-war climate at home also presented special readjustment problems for returning veterans. Many veterans reported feeling isolated and alienated from their peers and society in general.

The U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam coincided with an economic recession at home. As a result, large numbers of veterans were unemployed.

The nation responded to the problems of Vietnam veterans with a number of programs. To address educational needs, Congress in 1966 passed

the Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act, called the Vietnam GI Bill, which restored educational benefits to veterans. Under this act, veterans who had been on active duty for more than 180 consecutive days were entitled to one month of educational assistance for each month of service. This was later increased to one and one-half months for each month of service.

The education program for Vietnam veterans was highly successful. About 76 percent of those eligible participated, compared with 50.5 percent of World War II veterans and 43.4 percent of Korean Conflict veterans. By 1980, the Veterans' Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966 had trained 5.5 million veterans.

A second program for Vietnam veterans was Servicemen's Group Life Insurance. The program began with \$10,000 maximum coverage. This was increased over the years to the December 1992 maximum of \$200,000. Unlike previous military insurance programs, the new program was not administered directly by the VA. The VA purchased a group policy from a commercial insurer.

Coverage was increased to include not only armed forces members but also Reserve and National Guard members, students at the service academies and Reserve Officer Training Corps members. Similar coverage was extended to veterans under the Veterans Group Life Insurance program.

To assist the disabled, Congress in 1971 provided for a program of mortgage life insurance for severely disabled veterans who receive grants for specially adapted housing to accommodate their disabilities. Known as the Veterans Mortgage Life Insurance program, the insurance covered mortgages up to a maximum of \$30,000. By 1992 coverage had increased to \$90,000.

To assist all Vietnam-era veterans, the VA adopted new outreach measures to bring benefits to their attention. Veterans assistance centers were established in 21 cities to help recently separated servicemembers. VA representatives in 1967 were assigned to duty at Long Binh, Vietnam, to assist servicemembers before they were discharged. The VA in 1967 also installed toll-free telephone service to regional offices in each state.



*The VA in 1968 initiated Operation Outreach to make veterans more aware of their benefits.*

The VA cooperated with the Defense Department to disseminate information to troops not only in Vietnam but also in other areas where military personnel were stationed. Counselors were stationed at separation centers. The VA sent special letters informing discharged veterans of benefits. Follow-up letters were sent to those who did not respond.

In the field of vocational rehabilitation, meanwhile, a fundamental change was taking place. This change culminated with legislation in 1980 that provided disabled veterans with training that also included suitable employment and independence in daily living.

### **Agent Orange**

A special medical issue of the Vietnam War was the health problems that veterans felt resulted from exposure to Agent Orange. Since 1978, the VA has been offering special access to medical care, including physical exams, to Vietnam veterans with Agent Orange health concerns.

The VA in 1981 established a special eligibility program which provides free follow-on hospital care to Vietnam veterans with any health problems whose cause is unclear.



*The herbicide Agent Orange was used extensively to defoliate trees and remove cover for the enemy.*

At first, the only allowable claims related to Agent Orange were for a skin rash, chloracne. The VA in 1991 recognized for claims purposes two other ailments, soft-tissue sarcoma and non-Hodgkin's lymphoma. The Agent Orange Act of 1991 provided for presumptive service connection for disabilities resulting from exposure to herbicides used in Vietnam during the Vietnam Era. VA in July 1993 announced that Vietnam veterans suffering from Hodgkin's disease and porphyria cutanea tarda (a liver disease) would be entitled to disability payments based on their presumed exposure to Agent Orange and other herbicides. This decision followed the release of a National Academy of Sciences study

which concluded that sufficient evidence existed establishing an association between herbicide exposure and five specific conditions.

Following a VA task force review of the results of the study, the list of diseases qualifying for disability compensation was expanded in September 1993 to include respiratory cancers (lung, bronchus, larynx and trachea) and multiple myeloma (a cancer involving bone marrow). VA later announced it would include acute and subacute peripheral neuropathy and prostate cancer as presumptive diseases.

VA in March 1997 made an agreement with Shriners Hospitals for Children to provide medical care to children of Vietnam veterans who suffer from spina bifida. VA initiated the program after a study that reported evidence children of Vietnam veterans face an elevated risk of the birth defect.

In 1997, VA set up a program for the children of Vietnam veterans with spina bifida. That program provides health-care benefits, vocational training and a monthly allowance based upon the severity of the illness. In 2001, 940 people with spina bifida were receiving these VA benefits.

Health problems associated with atomic radiation also have received attention. The Radiation-Exposed Veterans Compensation Act of 1988 authorized disability compensation for veterans suffering from a number of diseases associated with radiation. This specifically included veterans claiming exposure to atomic radiation during the detonation of nuclear test devices or during the U.S. occupation of Hiroshima and Nagasaki between September 11, 1945, and July 1, 1946. Earlier legislation in 1981 authorized VA to provide medical and nursing home care to veterans exposed to ionizing radiation.

### *End of Part 6*

VA operates hundreds of medical facilities, issues millions of checks for education, disability and pensions, and supervises 120 national cemeteries. With approximately 236,000 employees, VA is America's second largest federal agency. When eligible dependents and survivors are included, approximately 63 million people -- about one-quarter of the nation's population -- are eligible for VA benefits and services.

On July 21, 2005, VA celebrated 75 years of serving America's veterans. VA is providing this 10-part "History of the VA" to help observe this 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary year.