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VA designates flexible funding to support homeless Veterans



The Department of Veterans Affairs disbursed \$20 million in American Rescue Plan funds, Dec. 21, 2021, to VA Medical Centers to provide critical and life-saving emergency assistance to Veterans experiencing homelessness or those enrolled in the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development-

Veterans Affairs Supportive Housing program during the coronavirus pandemic.

Through a time-limited congressional authority, VAMCs can use these funds to bring help required for safety and survival and to support stability and health for transportation and communications equipment and services.

“This unprecedented authority allows the Department of Veterans Affairs to meet the immediate needs of Veterans who lack stable housing, transportation to medical appointments, food and other essentials – all while helping them to achieve long-term housing and financial stability,” said VA Secretary Denis McDonough.

“COVID-19 transmission continues to rise this winter in many communities and these resources will help VA use these flexibilities to protect the health and safety of homeless and at-risk Veterans.”

In 2021 VAMCs across the country helped more than 24,000 Veterans from May through November thanks to the expanded authorization described in section 4201(a) of the Johnny Isakson and David P. Roe, M.D. Veterans Health Care and Benefits Improvement Act of 2020 (Public Law 116-315). VAMCs have purchased groceries, meals, apartment start-up kits, furniture, merchandise vouchers and laundry vouchers for Veterans experiencing homelessness. In addition, these funds have allowed for the creation of a nationally coordinated rideshare program which offers support to Veterans who need transportation to meet health, housing, legal and employment needs.

Veterans experiencing homelessness should visit their local VAMC for assistance and to take advantage of the support made possible by this authorization. These life-saving services are available to eligible Veterans who are experiencing homelessness or those participating in the HUD-VASH program.

For immediate assistance contact the National Call Center for Homeless Veterans at 877-4AID-VET (877-424-3838).

Meetings

Chapter 120 membership meeting will be held on Thursday, February 3, 2022 at 7:00pm in the Machinists Union Hall, 357 Main St., East Hartford. *State and East Hartford COVID-19 guidelines apply.*

The Board of Directors will meet on Thursday, February 24 at 7:00pm. Call the Chapter office for any changes in schedule. Chapter members are welcomed to attend.

Notice

If you have moved or changed your address, PLEASE notify us immediately. Call the Chapter Newsletter Editor at (860) 282-7470, or e-mail the Newsletter Editor at ctchapter120@aol.com.

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CHAPTER 120 OFFICE 568-9212

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Paul Barry	569-3530
Peter Galgano	828-1999
Leigh Lovering	528-8312
Frank Zizzamia	569-0705

Executive Officers

Bob Burgess, President	646-0205
Phil Morneau, Vice President	930-2122
Phil Morneau, Treasurer	930-2122
Peter Lund, Secretary	644-9770

VVA Service Representatives

John Cutler	568-9212
E-Mail: VVA.Service.Rep@att.net	

Gerald Fabry, MD	884-7271
E-Mail : gerfab@comcast.net	

Gary Waterhouse	656-0430
E-Mail : gwaterhouse@cox.net	

Membership

Frank J. Mello, Jr.	604-3879
E-Mail: Fmello336@yahoo.com	

Women Vietnam Veterans

Patricia Dumin	620-4131
----------------	----------

Product Sales

Leigh Lovering	528-8312
lhlovering@gmail.com	

Newsletter/Website

John Cutler	282-7470
E-Mail: ctchapter120@aol.com	

Notary Public

Gary Gazdzicki, Sr.	812-5703
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Vet Centers

Hartford (Area Code 860)	563-8800
New Haven (Area Code 203)	932-9899
Norwich (Area Code 860)	887-1755
Danbury (Area Code 203)	790-4000

All Telephone Numbers are Area Code 860 unless otherwise noted

Chapter/State News

Tom McAllister – Chapter 120 Life Member



Tom McAllister, 75, born in Glenwood Landing, NY, passed away peacefully and surrounded by his family in Manchester on January 17, 2022. Tom leaves behind his loving wife of 30-years Mary McAllister, Son Mark and his wife Tracy, of Bedford, NH; Son Michael and his wife Leslie of Auburn, NH; Daughter Carrie of Glastonbury, as well as his beloved grandchildren Payton, Ethan, Chase and Cameron, and great-grandson Gavin. In addition, Tom is survived by his sisters Ann Stoddard, Margaret Woolard, Patricia Brazauskas, Elizabeth Comparetto and Adeline Hannah. Tom is predeceased by his parents George and Ann, and his sisters Georgine and Joan.

Always a humble veteran, Tom proudly served his country in the United States Air Force for two tours in Vietnam. Later in life, he eventually settled in Connecticut and started his family. He was employed by the United States Postal Service as a letter carrier for over 34 years and leaves behind an extended postal family. Tom retired in 2010, embracing life as a grandfather and doggy daycare specialist.

Tierney Funeral home in Manchester hosted calling hours on Thursday January 20th, with funeral services at Tierney on January 21st, followed by burial at Hillstown Veterans Cemetery in Manchester with full military honors. The family wishes to thank UCONN Health Center for their ongoing care, as well as Masonicare Hospice Services of East Hartford. In lieu of flowers, please consider donating to the local veteran charity of your choice. For online condolences, please visit www.tierneyfuneralhome.com

Extracted from USA Today

Free COVID test kits website officially launches



Thousands of Americans got an early chance to order free COVID-19 testing kits from the federal government on January 18.

The website is COVIDTests.gov, which then directs people to a U.S. Postal Service site.

Americans are able to order four kits per address. Once ordered, tests are expected to be mailed within seven to 12 days.

On Tuesday Jan.18, some users immediately identified at least one problem with the website. Orders made by different people living in the same apartment building but in different units were rejected as duplicates, according to some tweets.

Some Twitter users reported one workaround is to put your apartment number in the street address field.

The tests are part of the Biden administration's purchase of 500 million tests last month to help tackle a record surge in infections.

Birthday Wishes

Birthday wishes go to our members born in February. May you have many more!

Vernon Bertrand	Paul S. Egan
Michael Kane	Kathryn M. Lechause
Richard Linnon	Robert Longworth
Diana Mello	George T. Miller
Joseph Rinaldi	Roger Rowley
Robert Savino	Earl J. Schofield
Francis T. Schulze	Timothy M. Siggia
Joe C. Visco	

Happy Birthday!

POW/MIA News



Pilot Accounted For From Vietnam War

The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency (DPAA) announced on Jan. 13 that U.S. Naval Reserve Cmdr. Paul C. Charvet, 26, of Grandview, Washington, killed during the Vietnam War, was accounted for March 1, 2021.

On March 21, 1967, Charvet was the pilot of an A-1H Skyraider airplane assigned to Attack Squadron 215 aboard the USS Bon Homme Richard. During a mission near Thanh Hoa Province, Vietnam, his plane disappeared in an area of low cloud cover and fog a kilometer northeast of Hon Me Island. His remains were not recovered after a search of the area. On March 22, Radio Hanoi Broadcast reported an American aircraft was shot down the day before off the coast of Thanh Hoa Province. Charvet's plane was the only U.S. aircraft loss in that area March 21. Charvet was considered missing in action until Dec. 2, 1977 when his status was changed to "Presumed Killed in Action."



On Sept. 24, 2020, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam turned over presumed human remains and material evidence to the U.S. Additional material evidence was turned over Oct. 15, 2020. The remains and evidence were turned over to DPAA's laboratory at Joint Base Pearl Harbor-Hickam, Hawaii.

To identify Charvet's remains, scientists from DPAA used dental and anthropological analysis, as well as material evidence. Additionally, scientists from the Armed Forces Medical Examiner System used mitochondrial DNA (mtDNA) and autosomal DNA (auSTR) analysis.

Charvet's name is recorded on the National Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., and the American Battle Monuments Commission's Courts of the Missing at the National Memorial Cemetery of the Pacific in Honolulu, along with others who are unaccounted-for from the Vietnam War. A rosette will be placed next to his name to indicate he has been accounted for.

Receive "The Connection" by E-Mail

The monthly Chapter 120 newsletter, *The Connection*, is available by e-mail. Currently, 100 members receive the newsletter by e-mail, saving the Chapter over \$1,600 in printing and postal fees annually. The newsletter is available in Adobe format (.pdf), attached to your e-mail. If you wish to receive the newsletter via e-mail, please e-mail the newsletter editor at ctchapter120@aol.com

On The Hill



From Military.com

House Approves Bill to Automatically Enroll Vets in VA Health Care

Eligible veterans would be automatically enrolled in the Department of Veterans Affairs health care system under a bill passed by the House on Thursday Jan. 20.

The House voted 265-163 to approve the Ensuring Veterans' Smooth Transition, or EVEST, Act. The vote fell largely along party lines, though 44 Republicans joined Democrats to support the bill.

Right now, veterans must proactively apply for health care benefits at the VA. The bill approved Thursday would require the department to instead automatically enroll veterans who meet existing eligibility criteria for VA health care. The VA would also have to provide a way for veterans to opt out of coverage.

The bill, which does not change who is eligible for VA health benefits, would apply retroactively to veterans discharged 90 days before it becomes law. The bill must still be voted on by the Senate before being sent to the president to be signed into law.

Supporters of the bill touted it as a common sense measure that will help ease the transition from the military to civilian life.

"We know that the months following transition out of the military can be very stressful and particularly risky for new veterans in terms of mental health," House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Mark Takano, D-Calif., who sponsored the bill, said Thursday on the House floor. "This helps simplify the process and prevents veterans from potentially missing out on lifesaving care. It also keeps veterans from having to opt-in to VA care later and attempt to navigate a new bureaucracy on their own."

The bill could affect about 58,000 veterans annually who might otherwise not enroll in VA health care, according to estimates from the Congressional Budget Office, or CBO.

The bill could cost about \$3.1 billion over the next five years, the CBO estimated.

In a statement last week, the White House said it supports the "goal" of the bill of "seamless enrollment in health care coverage." But the White House also expressed concern that "there may be challenges implementing this bill as drafted," adding that the administration "looks forward" to working out the issues with Congress.

Republican opponents of the bill pointed to the White House statement as they argued automatic enrollment could exacerbate existing issues with VA health care, such as long wait times and staffing shortages.

“Leaving the military wasn’t easy,” Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., the ranking member of the House Veterans Affairs Committee and a Marine veteran, said on the House floor. “It can leave new veterans feeling adrift and alone. I’ve been there.”

Bost said he wants troops to get the services they need in a “seamless manner” when they end military service. “I am not at all confident that this bill will accomplish that goal without harming services to other veterans and adding to the national debt,” he said.

Veterans Affairs News



From Government Executive

Biden Administration Punts on Deadline to Recommend Sweeping Changes to VA Health Care

Initial proposals for VA’s BRAC-style review delayed due to COVID-19 case surge.

The Biden administration is delaying its recommendations to “modernize and realign” the Veterans Affairs Department, punting for six weeks required proposals that could drastically reshape the agency’s footprint and workforce.

VA announced the postponement Friday, citing the more than 10,000 employees currently unable to work due to COVID-19. The recommendations required under the 2018 VA Maintaining Internal Systems and Strengthening Integrated Outside Networks (MISSION) Act are ready, VA officials said, but Secretary Denis McDonough does not want to make them public until he and his team can spell out the details to the workforce. VA will eventually send its proposals for where to expand health care options for veterans and potentially close existing facilities to the Asset and Infrastructure Review (AIR) commission.

Given the potential impact on the workforce, a VA official said, McDonough is delaying the announcement until senior staff can

safely communicate the plans through town halls in each of VA’s regions. The department has a statutory deadline to post its recommendations in the Federal Register by Jan. 31, but will push that into mid-March due to the surging COVID-19 cases. The proposals are also supposed to go to the commission by that time, but the panel does not yet exist as all of the nominees have yet to be submitted to the Senate for consideration and approval.

Once it is stood up and receives VA’s suggestions, the commission will then have a year to review that plan, conduct its own hearings and investigations, make its own proposals and send them to the White House. President Biden can then reject the plan or sign off on it and send it to Congress. Similar to previous Base Realignment and Closure efforts at the Defense Department, Congress will have to accept all of the recommendations or none of them. Lawmakers must proactively vote down the proposals to void them, however, as inaction would allow them to take effect.

In making recommendations, VA and the commission will consider whether a site is meeting VA standards, the potential cost savings from a closure, when those savings would occur, if it would harm VA’s ability to carry out its mission and input from local stakeholders. The department has held listening sessions around the country to solicit feedback from veterans on their current and future needs and since 2018 engaged in market assessments to fully understand what and where services are available through its own facilities, other government centers (such as the Defense Department and Indian Health Services) and in the private sector.

The nominations for the AIR commission were due months ago, but VA has said the last few slots are out of its hands.

A VA official on Friday stressed that VA wants to do all it can to retain its employees regardless of how the commission shakes out. Given that it is the “biggest look at VA health care since World War II,” the official said, it is critical that “the first blush of this is heard by the workforce.” Regional leadership told headquarters those efforts were not possible right now, due to the focus on the pandemic.

From Military.com

VA Tests New Automated System that Could Speed Up Claims Decisions



Department of Veterans Affairs officials are hoping a new automated system that helps render decisions on disability claims will accelerate the process and decrease the backlog of claims

applications.

The automated system being considered by the VA has proven to shorten the disability claims review process from 100 days to two under certain circumstances and conditions, according to the agency.

A pilot run of the VA Automated Benefits Delivery System, launched in December, looked at claims filed by veterans seeking upgrades to their disability ratings for hypertension and cut 98 days from the process for those with complete files.

VA officials said the program is part of a plan to address 260,000 current disability claims, including 59,000 that are older than 125 days and are considered backlogged.

“We saw an opportunity to look at our traditional disability claims process and see how we can better leverage the data we have ... to introduce business-process automation,” explained Rob Reynolds, acting deputy undersecretary for the VA’s Office of Automated Benefit Delivery, during a press conference with reporters on Jan.18.

The system takes electronic or paper claims and uses algorithms to determine whether the file contains enough data and information to render a decision. It then weighs the information against the rules that govern disability claims and makes a recommendation whether to approve or disapprove the claim.

The system’s recommendation is reviewed and validated by a rating veterans’ service representative. If at any time the system decides that more information is needed -- the veteran needs a comprehensive medical exam or more data is required to render a decision -- the claim is sent to a claims reviewer for traditional processing, Reynolds said.

“The algorithm is pulling the necessary data we need. The rater is the final decision maker,” he said.

After the pandemic began, the number of backlogged claims rose from 70,000 to 211,000. While the VA reduced that to roughly 180,000 by mid-2021, the number grew again as veterans applied for benefits under an expansion of covered conditions, including illnesses related to Agent Orange and airborne pollutants.

VA Secretary Denis McDonough said Tuesday Jan.18 that the department has hired more than 1,000 new claims processors and plans to hire roughly 1,000 more by the end of spring. The department is paying its personnel overtime to process claims, and working with the National Personnel Records Center and National Archives to digitize records needed to make claims decisions.

The new automated system could further accelerate the process.

“The initiative has the potential to dramatically reduce the time it takes to process individually,” McDonough said.

With the program proving successful for hypertension claims, the department is now building algorithms to assess other common conditions in veterans, including asthma, sleep apnea and prostate cancer, Reynolds said.

The goal is to add three new conditions per quarter, he said. But, Reynolds added, at no point in time will the decisions be left up to the system and the algorithms.

“We will ensure that our employees continue to supervise and validate the rules associated with the automation, the algorithms, to ensure that all statutory regulatory and procedural guidance are adhered to and [they] have the ultimate decision control for the process over the claim,” he said.

The VA is anticipating that more post-9/11 veterans will be filing claims in the future. The department announced last August it planned to add three conditions -- asthma, rhinitis and sinusitis -- to the list of conditions fast-tracked for health care and disability compensation and is reviewing more illnesses as possibly related to exposure to burn pits and other pollution in deployed settings.

Decisions on several respiratory cancers and constrictive bronchiolitis are expected this year.

McDonough urged veterans thinking about filing a disability claim to do so, despite the backlog.

“Please, please submit your claims,” McDonough said. “I promise you that we will stop at nothing to work through this backlog and get you timely access to the benefits.”

Anchors aweigh! Retired U.S. Navy destroyer headed for Jacksonville



The USS Orleck, a former U.S. Navy destroyer that saw combat in the Korean and Vietnam wars, is heading to Jacksonville to begin a new life as a floating military museum.

The Jacksonville Historic Naval Ship Association announced Tuesday Jan.11 that it has acquired the ship and that it will soon be Jacksonville-bound after passing a seaworthiness inspection last month in Texas.

Plans call for the Orleck to be towed from Port Arthur, Texas, to Jacksonville in late February or early March. It is to be berthed at the westernmost pier at the Jacksonville Shipyards, near the Berkman Tower. The ship will be docked perpendicular to the shoreline, with its stern facing inward.

Daniel Bean, president of the association, said the Orleck will become a museum focusing on the U.S. Navy during the Vietnam era. “Unlike any other warship on display in the United

States, our focus will be on Vietnam,” he said Tuesday in a ceremony at Manifest Distillery.

The 390-foot ship has a long and colorful history. It’s a Gearing Class destroyer that was built in Texas and launched in May of 1945, near the end of World War II, at a cost of \$6.3 million. It operated as part of the Seventh Fleet during the Korean War, then underwent extensive renovations under the Navy’s Fleet Rehabilitation and Maintenance program in 1962.

During the Vietnam War, it earned the nickname “Gray Ghost of the Vietnam Coast” and fired more rounds in support of ground troops than any ship in the Navy. The ship earned 18 Battle Stars, four during the Korean conflict and 14 during the fighting in Vietnam.

It later served as a training ship and appeared in the TV miniseries “Winds of War.” In 1982 it was transferred to the Turkish Navy, where it was renamed the TCG Yücestepe, serving until 2000.

From The Maritime Executive

Storied Carrier USS Kitty Hawk Towed Away for Scrapping



The decommissioned carrier USS Kitty Hawk has departed Bremerton, Washington for a scrapyard in Brownsville, Texas. She will be taking the long way around, as she is too large to fit through the Panama Canal.

The vessel had her hull cleaned at Puget Sound Naval Shipyard to remove fouling prior to transit. Still, the speed of the tow will be low, and the 16,000-mile final voyage will take up to four months - a far cry from the 30-knot pace she used to muster with her steam turbines.

Two groups had lobbied the Navy to donate Kitty Hawk for use as a museum ship, but the effort was not successful. In October, International Shipbreaking Ltd. of Brownsville won the contract to demolish Kitty Hawk and near-sister ship USS John F. Kennedy for the amount of \$0.01 each.

The vessels will be scrapped and recycled in a secure facility. For former Kitty Hawk crewmembers and naval enthusiasts, International says that it will have challenge coins created from the brass scrap removed from the ship and will make these

available for sale, along with 3x5" sections of steel plate from the hull. There will also be a commemorative ceremony at the end of the demolition project.

The carrier has a storied history. She was delivered in 1961 by New York Shipbuilding Corporation and decommissioned in 2009 after nearly 49 years of service. Though she was the first vessel in her class, she outlasted all three of the follow-on vessels - Constellation, America and John F. Kennedy - to become the last conventionally-powered carrier in operation in the U.S. Navy.

Over the span of her career, Kitty Hawk had multiple combat deployments. Her first combat flights over Vietnam began in November 1965, and she rotated in and out of combat operations “on the line” in the Gulf of Tonkin through 1972. During that period, her air wing flew tens of thousands of sorties against Vietnamese forces, delivering millions of pounds of ordnance. The ship received the Presidential Unit Citation for her role in beating back the Tet Offensive in 1968.

In October 1972, towards the end of her participation in the Vietnam War, a race riot broke out on board Kitty Hawk. After a series of run-ins between black and white members of the crew, a group of black crewmembers armed themselves with makeshift weapons and assaulted their crewmates. In all, 50-60 crewmembers were injured, and three were medevaced for treatment. The riot was widely covered in the media and led to an acceleration of the racial reforms begun by then-CNO Adm. Elmo Zumwalt.

Kitty Hawk’s other combat deployments included multiple airstrikes against Iraqi forces in 1990s, after the First Persian Gulf War, and again in 2003, when she contributed to the massive naval strike operations at the outset of Operation Iraqi Freedom. She wrapped up the last years of her career by serving as the Navy’s sole forward-deployed carrier, based out of Yokosuka, Japan.

How special operators from Down Under made their mark alongside US commandos in Vietnam



Unlike the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria, where US troops have fought as part of multinational coalitions, the Vietnam War was almost exclusively an American affair.

Only a few steadfast US allies contributed troops to the war. Australia and New Zealand were among them, sending their best troops.

The Australian Special Air Service Regiment (SASR) and New Zealand Special Air Service (NZSAS) are those two countries’ top special-operations units.

Both units trace their roots to World War II's North Africa campaign, three years of bitter back-and-forth fighting in the desert between Allied and Axis troops.

During that campaign, Lt. David Stirling, an enterprising British officer, pitched and then created the Special Air Service to go after German and Italian supply lines and airfields. The unit recruited from across the Commonwealth nations, including Australia and New Zealand.

After the war, the Australians and New Zealanders who had served in the British SAS went home and argued to create their own versions of the unit.

The Long Range Desert Group (LRDG), another special-operations unit that worked closely with the SAS, was composed predominately of New Zealanders and influenced the NZSAS.

SASR and NZSAS in Vietnam

The SASR deployed to Vietnam in 1966 as part of the Australian Task Force, a brigade-size formation. Two years later, when New Zealand committed troops, the NZSAS joined the Australian unit and worked under the Australian SAS squadron.

Each of the three SASR Sabre Squadrons rotated to Vietnam for a year-long tour, completing two deployments each.

Before deploying to Vietnam, SASR and NZSAS went through extensive training. The selection processes and follow-on operator training courses focused on patrolling and small-unit operations.

“All SAS operators have to do a Patrol Course as part of their ongoing training to become fully qualified to wear the sandy beret,” Sam McDonald, a former Australian SAS trooper who served in Vietnam, told Insider.

The primary mission for the SASR and NZSAS was to conduct long-range reconnaissance patrols to collect intelligence for the Australian Task Force. However, as the war progressed, their assignments grew to include offensive missions, including kill-or-capture and direct-action operations, rather than just gathering intelligence.

By 1971, when the last NZSAS trooper left, the Kiwis had participated in 169 patrols, and their Australian counterparts had racked up about 1,200 operations. Their operations accounted for more than 500 enemy killed or captured, while they had only two troops killed in action.

Phantoms of the jungle

The Australian and New Zealand special operators quickly developed a reputation of bravery and professionalism in Vietnam.

NZSAS and SASR troopers took pride in their ability to remain undetected in the jungle for long periods of time. They were so

stealthy that their North Vietnamese enemies nicknamed them the Ma Rung, or “phantoms of the jungle.”

The two units have developed a reputation for toughness, adaptability, and resourcefulness — a reflection of their countries' history. SASR and NZAS operators are held in high regard by their foreign counterparts.

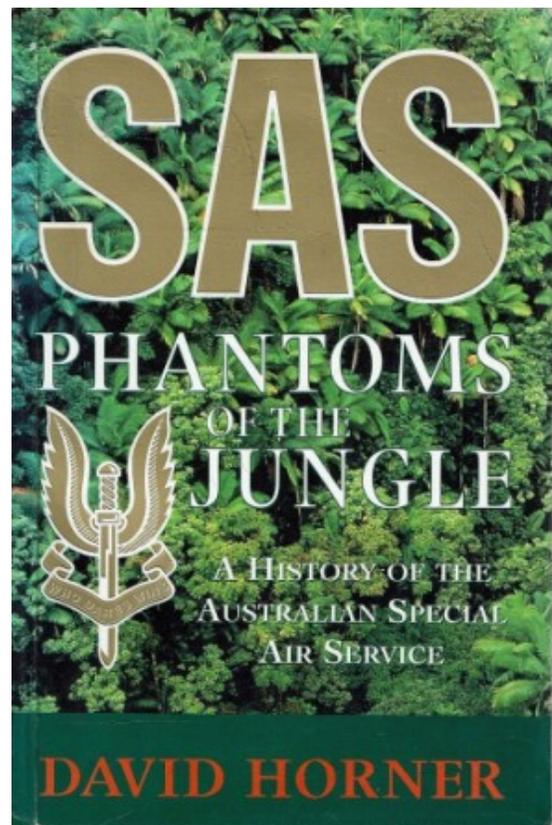
“I’ve only worked with Australians, and they are excellent soldiers. Really top-notch. Tough as they come and resourceful. They sometimes reminded me of the Marines' [US Marine Corps] motto ‘make do,’” a retired Delta Force operator told Insider.

“I’ve also heard good things about the New Zealanders, though I never worked with them. Both units have a solid reputation” in the special-operations community, the retired operator added.

The relationship the US built with Australia and New Zealand remains strong. The two countries were the first to send troops to Afghanistan after the September 11 terrorist attacks. As in Vietnam, these troops were SAS commandos.

Phantoms of the Jungle – available at Amazon.com

Based on patrol reports and interviews with participants, this Australian military classic tells the fascinating story of the formation of the SAS, its secret role in Borneo during confrontation with Indonesia and its operations in Vietnam. The SAS operated deep behind enemy lines, conducting surveillance at close range, poised to spring into violent action at need. It was with good reason the Viet Cong came to call them Ma Rung – ‘phantoms of the jungle’.



Helping Hands for Our Fellow Veterans



Won't You Please Give a Helping Hand to a Brother or Sister Veteran?

Several veterans have contacted Chapter 120 asking for help in paying the most basic of needs for themselves and their families. These veterans are those who do not qualify for regular federal, state or local assistance – they fall into that financial category where they make too much to qualify for assistance, but not enough to afford basic needs for their families, like food, fuel for heat, or clothing for their children.

Chapter 120 has decided to ask you – our members – to lend a helping hand to your fellow veterans and their families. Won't you please consider donating for this worthy cause? Even a small amount of \$5 can make a difference – or more if you can afford to help a fellow veteran and his or her family.

Please send your generous gift, made out to Connecticut Chapter 120, to:

Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc.
 Connecticut Chapter 120
 Attention: Helping Hands for Veterans
 P.O. Box 4136
 Hartford, CT 06145

Chapter 120 has established a separate line item in the budget to collect donations to assist these fellow veterans and their families in need. *And don't forget, your donations are tax deductible.*

Newsletter articles/ stories/photos

Any articles, stories and/or photos submitted for the newsletter must be received by the "cut off" date for any given month. Photos must be accompanied by text which describes the event, names, dates and any other pertinent facts so our readers understand the story behind the photo(s). The newsletter editor will announce the "cut off" dates at each Chapter meeting. The "cut off" date for our March 2022 newsletter is 18 February 2022. Due to space availability, the editor reserves the right to include or not include photos for a given month.

This newsletter printed by



97B Pierson Lane
 Windsor, CT
 print@printhubct.com
 www.printhubct.com
 860-580-7907

Hartford Vet Center



25 Elm Street, Suite A
 Rocky Hill, CT 06067

Phone: (860)-563-8800
 Fax: (860)-563-8805



Vietnam Veterans of America, Inc.
 Greater Hartford Chapter 120
 P.O. Box 4136
 Hartford, CT 06145