

Scott County Iowa Veteran Affairs
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Welcome Home

VA secretary promises 'urgency' in implementing new Agent Orange presumptive benefits rules

Veterans Affairs Secretary Denis McDonough on Tuesday promised an "urgent" review of new rules regarding presumptive benefits status for Vietnam veterans suffering from serious illnesses related to toxic chemical defoliant exposure, but offered no specific timeline for when veterans may see those changes put in place.

"We're under the gun on this, and I think that's a good thing," McDonough told reporters during a press conference on Tuesday. "I feel some urgency on this ... and we are trying to get spun up on it."

In January, officials from President Donald Trump's VA leadership team said it could be months or years before veterans suffering from bladder cancer, hypothyroidism and Parkinson's-like symptoms — three new conditions added presumptive benefits list by Congress last year — would see any benefits from the change in law.

Veterans advocates for years have fought for years to force the change, which would give about 34,000 Vietnam veterans a faster path to receiving disability benefits.

Past VA officials have argued against the move in part because of lingering questions about connections between the illnesses and chemical defoliant exposure (although National Academies of Sciences, Engineering and Medicine officials have said the science linking the two is conclusive) and in part because of the potential cost of the move, estimated at about \$8 billion over the next 10 years

But Congress sided with the veterans advocates, putting language in the fiscal 2021 National Defense Authorization Act forcing the change.

Following the bill's passage, VA officials said the regulatory process to implement the new rules can take up to 24 months. McDonough indicated he hopes to move much quicker.

"So many of the vets have been waiting while on this," he said.

McDonough also promised to re-examine a related issue: the connection between hypertension and Agent Orange exposure, one that medical experts have said is strong but not as conclusive as the other approved illnesses.

Adding high-blood pressure to the presumptive list could potentially more than double the cost to VA, and benefit as many as 160,000 veterans.

"People often are inclined to focus first on the cost," McDonough said. "I want to focus first on the facts and on the data."

- Are you newly discharged from the military? Were you injured or do you have health issues that may be related to your service? Make an appointment to see if you qualify for disability compensation.
- Are you a service member, veteran, or the surviving spouse of a service member? Make an appointment to see what types of benefits may be available to you.



SCOTT COUNTY VETERAN AFFAIRS

The Veteran Services program provides assistance to all veterans and their dependents in applying for federal and/or state benefits and other related matters. Federal benefits include:

Applying for:

- Compensation (Service connected disability)
- Pension (Non-service connected disability)
- Widow's Benefits
- Survivors Benefits Plan
- Certificates of Eligibility for Home Loans
- Aid and Attendance for Nursing Home and Housebound Veterans
- Iowa's Veteran's Home Admittance
- Apportionments
- Overpayments
- Appeals
- Obtaining military records and medals
- Upgrading discharge
- Distributing grave markers and flag holders

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100-year-old Army veteran recalls fighting on Hacksaw Ridge, getting shot twice on Okinawa

James Chapman witnessed events of world importance during his 100 years.

Chapman, who was to mark his centennial on Sunday with a small group of relatives at his home, was born in Chapman, near Louisa in Lawrence County. His parents were Joseph and Nora Chapman. The centenarian said he dropped out of Louisa High School to voluntarily serve in World War II. Chapman served in the infantry in the South Pacific. As a staff sergeant, he was wounded twice and received two Purple Hearts. Chapman describes that he was "halfway" drafted. He explained he received a draft notice from the Army and went to the recruiters' office.

On Oct. 20, 1942, recruiters were loading other young men on the bus to take them to Huntington for an exam. "They all got on the bus but me and (the recruiter) said, 'We can't take you,'" Chapman said. "I said 'Nah, I'm here. I'm going.' And I got on the bus." "He didn't have to go because his brothers were drafted, but he said he wanted to go," said Lisa Hutchinson, his granddaughter. After basic training in Georgia, Chapman went to the west coast to further train before heading to the Pacific War, or the fight across the Pacific toward mainland Japan. "I went to the Hawaiian islands and I took jungle training over there for about a month," Chapman said.

Chapman said his unit trained for an invasion of Yap Island, an invasion that never came. Yap Island was leapfrogged during the island-hopping campaign of the Pacific theater. "They said they had a bigger project for our company," Chapman said. "We went and hit the Philippine islands."

That was where Chapman earned the first of his two Purple Hearts. "I got shot in the left shoulder in Okinawa," he recalled. "I got blown out of a hole with an artillery shell in the Philippines. 'I couldn't hear for weeks.'" That injury is responsible for much of his hearing loss now. Chapman was then ordered to Okinawa. His company hit on April 1, 1945, Easter Sunday morning. "What all I saw was pretty rough. Okinawa was something else. They say it was one of the bloodiest islands in World War II," Chapman said. "I got shot twice on there, but one time it was just marks." Chapman's unit fought on Hacksaw Ridge. He explained the Japanese had dug into the island and had tunnels and passages connecting underground. "They had a rock crest hollowed out and they could climb up there with field glasses and see the whole island, where everyone was," Chapman said. "That island was honeycombed; there were caves all over it."

Chapman said the Japanese used these caves to be able to hit troops from behind. It was these dug-in locations where Chapman was shot, earning him his second purple heart. "I went too far, I was out ahead of my men," said Chapman, who was a staff sergeant at the time. "I was out ahead when I got shot." Chapman said he went over the hill and up a holler where the Japanese had machine guns slightly buried into the ridge about 200 yards in front of him.

"I got in behind a rock. Every time I'd move they'd turn those machine guns on me," Chapman said. "My BAR gunner ... I heard something and here he came a crawlin' down the hill to me. He'd been hit and blood was running down his face and this, that and the other. He wiped it off and he got a towel out of his backpack and he bandaged me up.

"He said 'What are we going to do? We can't get out of here, every time we move they turn them machine guns loose on us.' I said, 'We'll just work it out 'til it gets dark.'"

Chapman said once it got dark, the two managed to get back over the hill and headed toward the command post. The post had moved, but the pair was picked up by a jeep. After the vehicle transported him to the aid station and then the field hospital, Chapman was put on a ship and taken to Saipan, where he underwent surgery to remove the bullets.

"It healed up on the outside but didn't heal up on the inside," Chapman said. "I had to go back and have another operation and they found one stuck in behind the shoulder blade. It still gives me problems."

After the operation, Chapman returned to his unit in preparation for the next stage of the war.

"We went back to the Philippines after Okinawa and were getting all new equipment, loading the ships, we were going to hit Japan," Chapman said. "We were all real happy it was over.

"I just thank the Lord that I got through," Chapman added. "You had to lean a whole lot on (your faith while deployed)." He said any holiday free or any chance he got, he would go to church while overseas. In 1945, the two major Christian holidays — Easter and Christmas — played pivotal roles in Chapman's life; Easter was the day he landed on Okinawa and Christmas was the day he got out of the Army.

He returned to Lawrence County where he grew up with the woman he would marry — Katherine Robinette — and with whom he'd have five children: June Roberts, of Mount Sterling; Alberta Baldrige, who is deceased; Curt Chapman, of Raceland; Mark Chapman, who is deceased; and Sharon Tackett, of Willard, Ohio. He also has nine grandchildren; 26 great-grandchildren; and seven great-great-grandchildren. Mrs. Chapman died in 2003 after 61 years of marriage.

Chapman's civilian career consisted mostly of work for the U.S. Corps of Engineers. He worked at the dam in Catlettsburg until it was razed, and then at the Lloyd dam until it was razed. Finally, he spent 35 years at the Greenup Locks and Dams, from where he retired. He worked odd jobs until he was in his 70s. His daughter Sharon recalled joking about their life as a "dam" family. She said the Corps provided housing for the operator and his family. "I told my teacher my dad works at the dam and my teacher would say, 'Where do you live?' and I'd say 'the dam house,'" she said, noting while living in Catlettsburg, the family experienced the 1957 flood. Daughter Sharon Tackett remembers it: "We had to take a boat to the front door and push it to the steps to get upstairs." As keeper of the dam, his duties sometimes required diving for sunken boats or to make repairs. The most difficult task of his career was to dive in search of the Floyd County school bus that veered off the road in Prestonsburg and sank in the Big Sandy River in 1958, killing 26 students and the bus driver. It was the third deadliest bus accident in the country. "He said it was worse than being in the war," Hutchinson said.

Now, life is less complicated. Chapman enjoys watching television and won't miss a ball game, especially UK basketball. He attended the opening of the World War II Memorial in Washington, D.C., in 2004 with his caretaker granddaughter and her daughter. He also likes to cook, two of his favorites being biscuits and gravy and brown beans, fried potatoes and cornbread.

Despite life's tragedies, from the loss of his spouse and two children to serving in the military to bus accident recover efforts, his granddaughter said he has a positive attitude.

"After everything he's been through, he doesn't have PTSD," she said. "He's not scared of anything."