

**Department of Veterans Affairs  
FPOW Advisory Committee**

**Minutes of the Meeting  
April 11-13, 2005**

**Present:**

Thomas M. McNish, M.D. (Chair)  
Giles R. Norrington (Executive Secretary)  
Charles A. Stenger, Ph., D., member  
Michael R. Ambrose, M.D., member  
Col. Rhonda L.S. Cornum, Ph.D., M.D., member  
Robert W. Fletcher, member  
Clarence E. Derrington, member  
Fernando A. Tellez, M.D., member  
Henry J. Wilayto, member  
Paul E. Galanti, member  
Walter Cox, Ed. D., Educational Consultant  
Laurent S. Lehmann, M.D., Veterans Health Administration Consultant  
Dennis K. Rhoades, Committee Manager and Designated Federal Officer

**Monday, April 11, 2005**

The meeting was held in Room C-7, at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, Washington, DC 20420.

Dr. McNish called the meeting to order at 9:00 a.m., April 11, 2005.

Dr. McNish opened the presentation by stating that three items ought to be coming out of the meeting:

1. The effect on the POW community of the new presumptives – heart disease and stroke.
2. Review of Walter Cox's FPOW VA Employee Education Program
3. A chance for the Committee to hear from Secretary Nicholson, who was conducting a VA Senior Leadership Retreat offsite.

Dr. McNish then introduced the members of the Committee, and then asked the guests at the meeting to introduce themselves. They included:

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Robert Hain, M.D.	Director, Robert Mitchell Center
Nadine Gray	VA Employee Education Service
Robert Ballard	American Ex-POWs
Lily Trewelk	VA Medical Center, Detroit
Patricia Benker	American Ex-POWs
Shannon Middleton	The American Legion
Pauline Derrington	
Helen Wilayto	

The first speaker was Mr. Robert Epley, Associate Deputy Under Secretary for Policy and Program Management, Veterans Benefits Administration (VBA).

Mr. Epley discussed recent activities both in VBA and VA in general. He indicated that the FPOW workload was an issue closely followed by the Under Secretary for Benefits (USB).

Mr. Epley said that the overall general disability claims workload was now at an historic high. In excess of 600,000 claims have been processed since Fiscal Year (FY) 2000. The number of overall claims is rising 5000-7000 claims per month. 74,000 claims were rated last month (March 2005), and "we're just holding our own."

In response to this increased workload, VA will hire several hundred new claims examiners in the coming months. VBA needs additional funding.

Mr. Epley then described the modernization process for claims processing. He stated that national performance standards are being adopted for Regional Office Directors and Division Chiefs. In addition, there will be an increased emphasis on Quality Assurance, since VBA is not yet doing well enough. The current 88% accuracy needs to be 95%.

Mr. Epley then turned to the problem in the Chicago Regional Office which recently appeared in the press. He acknowledged that there was a consistency problem, particularly with adjudicating claims for such conditions as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), hearing loss, and musculo-skeletal problems.

Mr. Epley described the Seamless Transition process for returning veterans from Afghanistan and Iraq. He emphasized that this was the way VA has to do business from now on.

Three different commissions were studying disability programs within VA. Epley described this as a "seachange," and emphasized how unusual it was to have three commissions operating simultaneously.

Mr. Epley turned to Concurrent Receipt, stating that there was continuing interest in Congress to liberalize the practice of offsetting military retirement by VA compensation. There is a lot of pressure on how VA (and DoD) pay benefits.

A new bill has just passed Congress to increase Serviceman's Group Life Insurance (SGLI) from \$250,000 to \$400,000. The bill would also increase the DoD death gratuity to \$100,000.

1 million VA home loans have been made in the past 3 years – many of them involving refinancing because of current low interest rates.

During the Question and Answer period, Mr. Ambrose stated that neither the rank and file VA or DoD physician know enough to give a POW discharge exam.

Dr. McNish observed that the Seamless Transition program was in the same place as the POW program was 10 years ago. He credited Dr. Walter Cox as responsible for this turn around. He recommended training similar to that given by Dr. Cox for Seamless Transition.

Mr. Epley responded by citing the new Benefits Delivery at Discharge (BDD) Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), and stated that locally executed MOUs will insure consistent standards.

Dr. Tellez stated that he had observed a disparity between VHA exams and VBA rating activity. Mr. Epley said that VBA is outbasing more raters at VA Medical Centers (VAMCs), and these assignments should help with any problem.

#### **Dr. M.A.**

Mr. Fletcher raised the issue of VAMC ID cards no longer identifying Ex-POWs prominently on the face of the card "like the old ones did." He asked why it was removed in the first place. Dr. M.A. promised to followup on the question.

Dr. McNish added that the Committee should probably make a recommendation to resume putting "Ex-POW" on medical ID cards.

Dr. McNish recessed at 12:00 noon for lunch

**Wednesday, April 30, 2003**

The meeting was held in Room C7A, at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) Central Office, 810 Vermont Avenue, Washington, DC 20420.

Dr. McNish called the meeting to order at 9:00, April 30, 2003.

Committee members recommend all denied FPOW's claims be reviewed by Coach or designee being sending to veteran.

Committee members decided fall meeting will be held at the Greater Los Angeles Healthcare System, from October 6, 2003 through October 8, 2003.

Committee members Medical and Administrative working groups breakout to complete interim report for final report.

Dr. McNish recessed at 12:00noon for lunch

The meeting reconvened at 1:15 p.m. on April 30, 2003, in Room C7A.

Medical and Administrative Working groups discussed reports.

The meeting adjourned at 4:00 pm.