



## History of the Department of Veterans Affairs Part 8

### Cabinet-Level Status

Proponents seeking Cabinet-level status for the Veterans Administration had long stressed that the VA was the largest independent federal agency in terms of budget and was second only to the Defense Department in the number of employees. Because one-third of the U.S. population was eligible for veterans benefits, proponents argued, the agency responsible should be represented by a cabinet secretary having direct access to the president.



*President Reagan signing legislation elevating VA to Cabinet status*

President Reagan signed legislation in 1988 to elevate VA to Cabinet status and, on March 15, 1989, the Veterans Administration became the Department of Veterans Affairs. Edward J. Derwinski, VA administrator at the time, was appointed the first Secretary of Veterans Affairs.

As reorganized, the department included three main elements: the Veterans Health Services and Research Administration, which was renamed the Veterans Health Administration; the Veterans Benefits Administration; and the National Cemetery System.

### Persian Gulf War

The Persian Gulf War, which began in August 1990 as Operation Desert Shield and became Operation Desert Storm in January 1991, created a new climate in U.S. society favorable to military personnel and veterans benefits. As of July 1, 1992, there were 664,000 Persian Gulf War veterans, not including Reservists called up for active duty. Of these, 88,000, or 13.2 percent, were women.

Congress in March 1991 passed the Persian Gulf Conflict Supplemental Authorization and Personnel Benefits Act, which considered the conflict a war for determining eligibility for veterans' benefits.

The legislation extended to Persian Gulf War veterans eligibility for wartime-only pensions, medical treatment, educational benefits, housing loans and unemployment payments. It offered psychological counseling at Vet Centers for veterans having trouble readjusting to civilian life.



*M-1A1 Abrams main battle tanks in northern Kuwait during Operation Desert Storm.*

The Gulf Act contained a provision authorizing increases in the monthly educational benefits provided by the Montgomery GI Bill. The death benefit paid to families of those killed in the Persian Gulf War was doubled to \$6,000. At the same time, the maximum group life insurance for servicemembers and veterans was doubled to \$100,000.

Gulf War veterans, even before the hostilities ended, began complaining of symptoms with no readily identifiable cause. The symptoms included fatigue, skin rash, headache, muscle and joint pain, memory loss and difficulty concentrating, shortness of breath, sleep problems, gastrointestinal problems and chest pain.



*Kuwaiti oil wells set afire by retreating Iraqi troops following Operation Desert Storm.*

Scientists examining symptoms of the undiagnosed Gulf War illnesses concluded that there was no single disease or illness affecting Gulf veterans. VA nevertheless initiated a number of research studies to determine the health consequences to veterans of military service in the Gulf War. A number of possible causes for the symptoms have been under examination, including chemical and biological warfare agents, as well as smoke from oil well fires, vaccinations, infections, chemicals, pesticides, microwaves and depleted uranium.

VA began a Persian Gulf registry, which is a voluntary health assessment offered at all VA medical centers. Veterans are interviewed about their medical history for the registry and their possible exposure to environmental hazards. The results of these examinations are given to the veterans and are analyzed for use in research.

Congress in 1993 authorized medical care for Gulf War veterans for conditions possibly related to exposure to toxic substances or environmental hazards.

Veterans who could not be diagnosed at a local VA medical center were referred to one of four VA Gulf War referral centers located across the country. Congress, on VA's recommendation, in 1994 authorized compensation to veterans with chronic disabilities resulting from undiagnosed illnesses, if the illness appeared during active duty in the Gulf or within a presumptive period after Gulf service.

*End of Part 8*

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.