



March 1, 2023

VETERANS

MONTHLY INFORMATION PACKAGE

FLAGLER COUNTY

DAVID LYDON

County Veterans Service Officer

PHONE: (386) 313-4014; FAX: (386) 313-4114;

Email: DLydon@flaglercounty.org

Feel free to make copies and distribute throughout your organization.

VA TO AWARD \$16 MILLION IN GRANTS TO HELP VETERANS AND SERVICE MEMBERS WITH DISABILITIES PARTICIPATE IN ADAPTIVE SPORTS

WASHINGTON — Today, the Department of Veterans Affairs announced the availability of nearly \$16 million in grants to qualifying organizations to help more than 13,000 Veterans and service members with disabilities participate in [adaptive sports](#). This funding will help these organizations plan, develop, manage, and implement a variety of sports and equine therapy activities, including life-improving programs for Veterans and training for providers. More information about these grants can be found in the two [Notices of Funding Availability](#).

Adaptive sports are competitive or recreational sports and activities customized to fit the needs of persons with disabilities, including paralympic sports, archery, cycling, skiing, hunting, rock climbing, and sky diving. These activities allow Veterans to rehabilitate through recreation and encourage an active and fit lifestyle.

“Adaptive sports improve Veterans’ physical and mental health,” said **VA Director of the National Veterans Sports Programs and Special Events Leif Nelson, DPT**. “These VA grants will help ensure that Veterans with disabilities have access to sports and activities that build independence, well-being, and quality of life.”

“Without [the VA Adaptive Sports Grant] program, I never would have believed that I could ski with my disabilities,” said **U.S. Army Veteran and retired infantry sniper Landon Ranker**. “This program opened new doors for me in that way and allowed me to be a part of an active and athletic world that I never thought possible.”

In 2022, [VA awarded \\$16 million](#) in adaptive sports grants to 108 organizations headquartered in 32 states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. VA has awarded a total of \$100 million in adaptive sports grants in the last eight years to improve Veterans’ well-being and independence.

To be eligible for a grant, an organization must be a non-federal entity with significant experience in managing a large-scale adaptive sports program for persons with disabilities. Applications must be submitted online at www.grants.gov by 3 p.m., ET, April 11, 2023. VA will announce award decisions this fall based on a competitive selection.

Details of the Notice of Funding Availability, including frequently asked questions and additional information can be viewed at [VA Adaptive Sports Grant Program](#).

Veterans can now access their disability benefit decisions online

WASHINGTON — Veterans can now access their disability benefit claim decision notice letters electronically on VA.gov, empowering them to quickly and easily see their disability decisions.

Before this option was available, Veterans had to wait for a paper copy of their decision notice to be mailed to them. While previous iterations of VA.gov allowed Veterans to access benefits summary letters, they could not access the full copy of these decision notification letters from their electronic claims folders.

This service became available to Veterans on VA.gov on Jan. 17. Since launching, nearly 280,000 decision notice letters have been downloaded.

“Veterans now have access to their benefits decisions anytime, anyplace – right at their fingertips,” said **VA Secretary Denis McDonough**. “VA disability benefits can also open the door to other federal and state benefits, so quick and easy access to a decision means quicker access to the additional benefits Veterans deserve.”

The new electronic option is also expected to reduce calls to the National Call Centers, freeing up call center respondents to answer other questions and requests from Veterans and their families.

To access their decision letters, Veterans can log in to VA.gov and [check the status of their claim](#). For more details, visit [VA News](#).

VA's National Cemetery Administration leads all public and private organizations in 2022 customer satisfaction ratings

WASHINGTON — VA's National Cemetery Administration (NCA) — which provides Veterans and their families with burial benefits and memorial services — led all organizations, public or private, in the prestigious American Customer Satisfaction Index (ACSI) for 2022. NCA received a score of 97, the highest score ever achieved by any organization rated by the ACSI. This is the seventh consecutive time NCA has ranked first overall in customer satisfaction.

The ACSI ratings are “the only national cross-industry measure of customer satisfaction available in the United States.” NCA's score for 2022 is based on ACSI's surveys of Veterans and their families.

NCA provides burial and memorial benefits to eligible Veterans, their spouses, and their dependents — at no cost to the family. This includes a gravesite in any of VA's national cemeteries with available space, opening and closing of the grave, perpetual care, a government headstone, marker or medallion, a burial flag and a Presidential Memorial Certificate. Some Veterans may also be eligible for burial allowances.

“These ratings show that Veterans and their families trust VA to provide the lasting resting places they deserve,” **said Under Secretary for Memorial Affairs Matt Quinn**. “Veterans and their families, not us, are the ultimate judges of our success — and we will always be here for them in the times when they need us most.”

In 2022, NCA laid 145,737 Veterans and family members to rest. NCA is now providing 94% of Veterans with burial sites within 75 miles of their homes. Additionally, NCA manages the Veterans Legacy Memorial, the nation's first digital platform dedicated to the memory of more than 4.5 million Veterans interred in VA's national cemeteries and VA-funded state, territorial, and Tribal Veterans cemeteries. VLM allows family, friends and others to preserve their Veteran's legacy by posting tributes, uploading images and sharing their Veteran's achievements, biographical information, and historical documents.

The ACSI ratings began in 1994, and measure more than 400 companies in 47 industries and 10 economic sectors, including various services of federal and local government agencies. ACSI is an index score not a percentage. The objective

of the survey is to measure customer satisfaction with a score of 0-100. The federal government average ACSI score was 66.3.

Veterans: What's Taxed and What's Not on Your Federal and State Returns



23 Feb 2023
Military.com | By [Amanda Miller](#)

Veterans who receive a variety of special pays thanks to military service could be shielded from big federal or state tax bills, depending on whether they served all the way to retirement, received education benefits, have a service-connected disability or live in a state with special rules.

Here's what to expect on your federal taxes when it comes to several types of compensation commonly received in relation to a veteran's service, according to the U.S. [Department of Veterans Affairs](#) (VA), [AARP](#) and the Defense Finance and Accounting Service (DFAS).

Many states follow the same tax rules as the federal government, but you'll need to consult your state's tax laws -- or [reach out for help](#) -- to be sure.

VA Disability Pay

Neither the federal government nor any states tax [disability payments](#) from the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. The same can't be said for Social Security disability, which the federal government and some states tax [above a certain income threshold](#). Eligibility for VA disability payments often qualifies veterans for full or partial discounts on their property taxes in their state.

Military Retirement Pay

The federal government taxes military retirement pay, but many states have exempted it partly or entirely. If you need to change your withholding amount, call the Defense Finance and Accounting Service at 800-321-1080.

Survivor Benefit Plan Premiums

While you were on active duty, Survivor Benefit Plan (SBP) coverage was free, but retirees who opt in pay monthly contributions. The government generally deducts these premiums -- never more than 6.5% of your gross retirement pay -- from your gross retirement pay on a pre-tax basis, lowering your federal taxable income. After you're gone and when a beneficiary begins receiving their annuity -- lifetime payments -- those are usually treated the same way as military retirement income.

VA Education Benefits

Payments received under any GI Bill program are tax free for veterans or any dependents or survivors who may receive the benefits. These include payments for tuition, training, testing for licenses and certifications, tutoring, work study, books and housing.

Other VA Benefits

The federal government also doesn't tax a number of other income benefits veterans may receive from the VA, including:

- Combat-related special compensation
- VA grants to modify a home
- Interest from VA life insurance policies
- VA dependent-care assistance
- VA post-9/11 survivor benefits
- Income received in the VA Compensated Work Therapy program

Lawmakers Want to Restore Gun Rights to Some Disabled Veterans



3 Feb 2023

Military.com | By [Patricia Kime](#)

Fifty House Republicans have resurrected a bill that would allow some veterans considered to be mentally disabled to buy and own firearms, saying a Department of Veterans Affairs policy unfairly strips them of their Second Amendment rights.

Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., chairman of the House Veterans Affairs Committee, introduced legislation Thursday that would bar the VA from reporting certain veterans to the FBI's national background check database without first getting a judge's consent.

The bill, the Veterans 2nd Amendment Protection Act, or H.R. 705, would add a step to the VA's process of reporting information to the National Instant Criminal Background Check System on veterans who receive help managing their finances and benefits.

By law, veterans who are incapable of overseeing their own bills may be assigned a fiduciary who manages a veteran's financial affairs -- assistance the VA reports to the background check system as a disability that may preclude the veteran from purchasing a firearm.

Bost said VA staff's ability to decide that a veteran who can't manage their bills is a danger to themselves or society is a form of discrimination that he argues may

actually hurt a veteran by preventing them from seeking care and benefits from the VA.

"No VA bureaucrat should have the ability to instantly strip a veteran of their 2nd Amendment Rights simply because they use a fiduciary to help them manage their benefits. I have heard from veterans that this current policy stops them from going to the VA for care and services," he said in a statement Friday.

Bost previously introduced the bill in 2021, but it was not considered by the House Veterans Affairs Committee in the majority Democrat House. He told Military.com on Monday that he thought objection to the bill was a reflection of increased partisanship on military oversight committees.

"When I first came in, the VA committee was one of the most nonpartisan committees that was out there," he said. "I have all intention of making sure it's that way."

The legislation last gained traction in 2018 when it was introduced by then-Committee Chairman Rep. Dr. Phil Roe, R-Tenn. It passed the House 240-175, with a dozen Democrats joining the majority but never was considered by the Senate.

In the Senate, similar legislation has been proposed by Republican Chuck Grassley of Iowa and Democrat Joe Manchin of West Virginia.

Under the Brady Act, the Justice Department may collect information from federal agencies of anyone whose ownership or position of a firearm would violate federal law, including those who are a danger to themselves or others; who lack the mental capacity to contract or manage their own affairs; or have been found insane by a court or incompetent to stand trial.

Bost said the direct reporting process for veterans who require a fiduciary violates their due process rights.

"For far too long, the men and women who have fought to protect every American's constitutional right to bear arms have wrongfully been discriminated against," Bost said.

The VA is required by law to inform veterans assigned a fiduciary of the possible impact of their acceptance of a financial manager.

Supporters of the VA's process say it protects veterans and note that the department is following the law spelled out in the Brady Act, thus contributing to public safety.

Speaking on the House floor during debate on the legislation in 2017, Rep. Mark Takano, D-Calif., now the House Veterans Affairs Committee ranking member, noted that two-thirds of veteran suicides occur by firearm, including the death of his uncle, a Vietnam veteran.

"To be clear, there are veterans currently flagged in the background check system who should not be there, and we need to create a fair and streamlined process for veterans to appeal their status," Takano said at the time. "But there is a balance between protecting veterans' Second Amendment rights and protecting veterans who are a danger to themselves or others."

In 2020, 6,146 veterans died by suicide, 68% by using a firearm. As part of its suicide prevention initiatives, the VA has launched a public safety campaign encouraging the safe handling and storage of firearms.

The Veterans of Foreign Wars and the American Legion both issued statements Friday in support of Bost's bill.

According to Kristina Keenan, the VFW's deputy legislative director, the organization opposes the reporting practice because it deprives veterans of due process.

"The VFW is also concerned that this practice stigmatizes mental health by forcing veterans to choose between seeking the care they need to cope with injuries and illnesses sustained through military service and their ability to keep their firearms," Keenan said in a statement.

"Veterans should not be concerned that they could lose their Second Amendment rights when seeking mental health assistance," agreed American Legion National Commander Vincent Troiola in an issued statement. "If it is necessary to have a fiduciary appointed to assist them, any transmittal of a veteran's personal information to the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Instant Criminal Background Check System should be done by a judicial authority, not a bureaucrat."

In 2017, more than four dozen groups came out in opposition of the legislation, including Blue Star Families, an advocacy organization for active-duty military personnel and their families.

-- *Patricia Kime can be reached at Patricia.Kime@Military.com. Follow her on Twitter @patriciakime*

All Combat-Injured Vets Would Keep Their Full Retirement, Disability Pay Under Proposal



28 Feb 2023

Military.com | By [Patricia Kime](#)

Since 2004, military retirees with a Department of Veterans Affairs disability rating of 50% or higher have been able to receive their complete military retired pay and their full VA disability compensation without being docked for collecting both.

But veterans who were medically retired and who served less than 20 years, or those with a lower disability rating, are subject to offsets, ensuring that they don't collect more each month than their military retirement pay.

Members of Congress are again trying to change that, eliminating the dollar-for-dollar penalty for medically retired combat veterans -- a change that could add thousands to the pockets of an estimated 50,000 veterans each year.

Montana Sen. Jon Tester, the ranking Democrat on the Senate Veterans Affairs Committee, and Rep. Gus Bilirakis, R-Fla., called on their fellow lawmakers Tuesday to pass the Maj. Richard Star Act, a bill supported in the last Congress by more than 335 House members and 66 senators. The bill failed to pass after attention turned to the \$280 billion PACT Act, which expanded VA health care

and services for millions of veterans sickened by environmental exposures overseas.

"This is a top priority for nearly every veterans service group ... and so we will take our marching orders from them," Tester said Tuesday during a press conference at the U.S. Capitol. "They are the folks who served."

Army Maj. Richard Star, for whom the bill is named, was a combat engineer with deployments to Operation Desert Storm, Iraq and Afghanistan. He died in 2021 of lung cancer, a disease that has been linked to toxic airborne pollutants such as burning oil fields and burn pits.

As a result of his illness, Star was medically retired, known as a Chapter 61 retirement, before he reached 20 years of service; as such, he was ineligible to receive both his retirement and disability pay, known as concurrent receipt.

Bilirakis has tried for years to get a change through Congress without success.

"This is not a partisan issue," he said during the press conference. "This is a great injustice that must be corrected."

The cost is expected to be roughly \$7 billion over the next decade, but during the press conference, Tester said the funding is a cost of war.

"People are gonna argue that this cost too much money, and I respect that, except for the fact that if we're going to send them off to war, we take care of them when they get home or otherwise we shouldn't send them off to war to begin with," Tester said.

The bill is supported by veterans service organizations that include the American Legion, Disabled American Veterans, Paralyzed Veterans of America, Iraq and Afghanistan Veterans of America, and The Military Coalition, which represents 35 military and veterans service organizations.

While the proposal had broad bipartisan support in the last Congress, the landmark PACT Act took precedence for both lawmakers and veterans service organizations, given the scope of those set to be affected.

Bilirakis said the next step will be for committees to hold hearings on the bill and then hold votes in both chambers.

House Veterans Affairs Committee Chairman Rep. Mike Bost, R-Ill., told Military.com last month that he believes the bill should be considered by the House and Senate Armed Services Committees.

"I know that there's a lot of veterans out there that are concerned about it. I'm concerned about it, as well. And so we're gonna watch the process and see how they handle it over in that committee and, when it comes up on the floor, I'll make my decision based on the language that is in it," Bost said.

Bilirakis described optimism for the latest attempt to get the bill passed.

"We're going to get this done," he said during the press conference.

-- *Patricia Kime can be reached Patricia.Kime@Military.com. Follow her on Twitter @patriciakime*

Trading on Patriotism: How Extremist Groups Target and Radicalize Veterans



22 Feb 2023

Military.com | By [Travis Tritten](#) , [Konstantin Toropin](#) , [Drew F. Lawrence](#) and [Steve Beynon](#)

This article is the first in a series looking at how extremist groups target veterans for recruitment and the paths toward and away from radicalization. Sign up [here](#) so you don't miss our next major report.

Ken Parker had been out of the [Navy](#) for about two years and was struggling to find a good job when he went to his first Ku Klux Klan rally.

Advertisement

He'd watched TV shows about white supremacists, and saw that the KKK had planned a rally in a small North Carolina town that wasn't too far away, billed as a "family event for whites only" with a cross-burning at dark, according to [local media reports](#).

Parker, frustrated over a lousy economy and a lack of job prospects, went to the 2012 gathering, which had been chased across the border into rural Virginia by protesters.

Chris Barker, a KKK leader in North Carolina who litters his racism with near-constant references to Scripture, took the stage that night and preached to the gathered crowd that all Jewish people represent Satan and should be killed, Parker remembered during a recent interview with Military.com.

Parker hadn't realized that the KKK was antisemitic, but something clicked for him.

"I was like, I'm gonna get my Bible and prove this guy wrong and change the way he thinks on that topic, but everything else seems OK so far," said Parker, who is no longer involved with hate groups and now works as an HVAC technician in Florida. "But, you know, within a matter of weeks, I was reading my Bible trying to cherry-pick things out to hate Jews."

The rally crystallized his racist thinking and began a years-long journey starting with the KKK and culminating in a leadership position with the National Socialist Movement, the modern incarnation of Naziism in America.

Parker had put in 11 years of service on submarines in the Navy and rose to the rank of chief petty officer, but it just didn't seem to count for much when he got out and tried to find a job in the civilian workforce in 2010, searching in the wake of the last great financial crisis.

He moved to Georgia and tried for a job on a military base, but his anger grew when he realized that was mostly out of reach.

"They would end up giving it to an active-duty guy because they can pay them way less. I was so mad and frustrated that I couldn't find a decent job anywhere," he said. "And you're sitting around drinking beer, and you're applying for jobs to keep your unemployment going."

Parker is just one of the countless veterans and service members who have been swept up into a new wave of extremism, the latest chapter in the country's long history of hate and violence.

The issue of extremist groups has gained attention after the riot on Jan. 6 aimed at preventing the peaceful transfer of the presidency in 2021, violence that was spearheaded by several groups that actively recruit veterans. But this latest rise of white supremacy, antisemitism and anti-government activity goes much deeper.

"I don't think it's an exaggeration to say 'explosion,'" said Pete Simi, associate professor in the sociology department of Chapman University in California and an author who has studied extremism for 20 years, categorizing the latest wave of extremism. "You have just growing numbers of people that are talking about the

use of political violence as a legitimate way to resolve conflict, the idea that, within the near future, a civil war is actually a realistic outcome that could occur."

Parker's story shines a light on how those who take the oath to serve and protect America can be pulled into the orbit of extremist groups. And those organizations are hungry for members with the skills and prestige that military service brings.

The National Socialist Movement and Oath Keepers, among others, have turned predatory, wooing troops and veterans with psychological tactics such as appealing to their sense of patriotism and drive to serve a purpose larger than themselves.

While there's no evidence that veterans participate in extremist groups at a higher rate than the general public, they often play significant leadership roles and are thrust into the spotlight when those groups threaten violence.

Over the past five years, particularly, the extremism threat has surged, fueled by a deeply divided country and a population plugged into internet silos where extreme, hateful and violent messaging and recruiting have flourished.

All along, there have been warning signs. Many experts now point to the 1995 bombing of the Oklahoma City federal building by [Army](#) veteran Timothy McVeigh that killed 168 as a sign of the risks tied to radicalized veterans. An [FBI report from 2008](#) that was subsequently withdrawn under political pressure said that white supremacists and other hate groups were recruiting members with military experience who had "the potential to reinvigorate an extremist movement suffering from loss of leadership and in-fighting during the post-9/11 period."

Just since December, Oath Keepers leader Stewart Rhodes, a veteran, and five members of his extremist group were convicted of seditious conspiracy for the insurrection on Jan. 6, the first time a group had marched on the U.S. Capitol and forced its way inside since the War of 1812. Five members of the Proud Boys extremist group -- including an Army combat veteran with a [Purple Heart](#), two former Marines and a sailor recruit [who washed out in boot camp](#) -- are being tried for seditious conspiracy for their roles.

So, how do service members become involved with these groups, and what part does military experience play?

How Veterans Get Lured into Extremist Groups

Extremist groups have long urged members to join the military to get training in weapons, tactics and leadership. Other troops are radicalized while in the military by extremists already in the ranks, such as Wade Page, a neo-Nazi who was believed to have been initiated into the movement at [Fort Bragg](#), North Carolina, while in the Army. Page walked into a Sikh temple in Wisconsin in 2012 and fatally gunned down six people and wounded four others.

The most common route to extremism may be post-service, when veterans such as Parker struggle to make peace with their time in the military and try to forge a new life as a civilian.

"After their time in the military, they may feel some kind of disconnect," Simi said. "They may be suffering from various kinds of trauma, especially if they've been in combat."

Groups, such as Patriot Front, Atomwaffen, Oath Keepers and the Nazis, ape the military and actively recruit members and veterans because they see them as an asset to whatever cause they are pursuing, whether it be eliminating ethnic minorities or overthrowing the government.

"We were sending people in to get the training and things like that and said don't recruit on base, keep it quiet," Jeff Schoep, the former leader of the National Socialist Movement, or NSM, said in a recent interview. "Of course, there were certain people that did try to recruit on base, and there were some times they were thrown out or discharged."

Schoep was in the Nazi movement for more than two decades, rising to the top before leaving in 2019. He has now founded a group, Beyond Barriers, aimed at combating extremism.

He spent years recruiting for the Nazis and said military experience was a key component.

"When I was in the NSM back in, say, the early 2000s, late '90s, approximately about 10% of the organization had military service," Schoep said. "It went from 10% military experience to closer to 40% to 50% with military experience by the time I left because that was something that we were specifically focusing on." The Nazis found that members with military experience made better leaders, and they were often tapped for regional or state positions in the group, according to

Schoep. The structure of the National Socialist Movement was similar to the military's hierarchy as well, including uniforms, so the group felt service members and veterans could easily adapt.

"This was something that we had on our application forms and, in later years, we would ask people to send in their DD-214s, so we could see what branches they were in and what ranks they had, things like that, because we specifically were targeting the military to get them involved," he said, referencing the DD-214 form given to service members when they leave military service.



Marchers bearing the insignia of the white supremacist group Patriot Front parade through Boston Common on Saturday, July 2, 2022, in Boston. (AP Photo/Michael Dwyer)

While Nazi recruitment relied partly on paperwork, another extremist group, Patriot Front, relies on the internet.

On a sleek website, the group advertises its core ideology -- domination of the U.S. by whites of European descent -- and offers a sign-up page proclaiming, "Your nation needs you," an echo of years of military recruiting posters going back to World War II. Its members always appear masked in public, hiding their true identities. The group claims the current U.S. government is illegitimate and must be overhauled or abolished.

"An unwavering resistance will meet all enemies of the people and the nation, both foreign and domestic," the group's website says, repurposing language from the oath of enlistment taken by everyone who serves in the military.

Five members of Patriot Front, who were [arrested in June for allegedly making plans to disrupt a gay pride parade in Idaho](#), had military backgrounds, and one was in the [National Guard](#). The men were riding in a U-Haul truck and had shin guards, riot shields and a smoke grenade, according to authorities.

"I was always very fascinated with their military organization and structure. They seemed very well organized at the time. They marched in step, they had drums, they had flags -- I found it very interesting," Christopher Semok, 19, told Military.com in a recent interview, his speech sprinkled with youthful interjections of "you know" and "whatnot."

In photos posted by anti-fascist activists, Semok is a thin, young kid with bleached blonde hair. His profile becomes distinctly more menacing in photos taken at rallies where he donned a black leather jacket over old military camouflage and a Nazi combat helmet.

After years of gravitating toward militaristic extremism and white supremacy, by age 17, Semok considered himself fully radicalized.

He first joined the Patriot Front and then moved on to the National Socialist Movement. The Nazi group, which follows Adolf Hitler's example, summed up the year 2022 on its website: "We are the storm on the horizon that the Jew can no longer ignore."

In Semok's experience in the groups, there were always reminders of the military. In Patriot Front, members who were veterans referenced their experience and used it for group training.

"In Tallahassee, there was a training camp, where we had a guy, who I think was an [Air Force](#) lieutenant in the past, kind of walk us through basic drill and basic drill commands like, left face, right face ... and how to properly march in step," Semok said.

Semok had come from a broken home -- a father who went to prison and mother who was a drug addict -- but the relationship with his family finally snapped and

he was kicked out of the house for going to a Nazi rally in Orlando in January 2022.

A higher-up in the Nazi group, who took him in, was a former Marine. Still, Semok said he began to question why he was involved in white supremacy. Last fall, Semok was approached by a Marine [recruiter](#). It seemed like an opportunity to start over. He enlisted in the Marines and claims he cut ties with the Nazis.

But the [Marine Corps](#) booted him from its delayed-entry program after discovering his membership with Patriot Front and the Nazis. Anti-fascist groups exposed Semok's participation in the groups and [dug up evidence that he committed vandalism and harassment in Florida](#), as well as the photos of him in a World War II-era German military helmet.

The Broader Boogaloo Movement and Violence

Neo-Nazis aren't the only ones to make headlines in recent years for their efforts to recruit veterans. A number of those who have donned the uniform have become followers of the anti-government Boogaloo movement, which seeks another U.S. civil war.

Steven Carrillo was an Air Force sergeant and Boogaloo adherent when he murdered a federal security officer and injured another in Oakland, California, in 2020. Last year, he was sentenced to 41 years in prison.

An Air Force veteran, Navy veteran and a member of the Air Force reserves in Nevada were charged with conspiracy against the government in 2020 for allegedly plotting to blow up a power station and attack a Black Lives Matter protest as part of the Boogaloo movement.

But potentially most alarming is the neo-Nazi Atomwaffen Division -- described as "terroristic" by the Southern Poverty Law Center -- which has attracted military followers.

Brandon Russell joined the Florida National Guard less than six months after founding the hate group in Tampa in 2015. After his roommate murdered his two other roommates, police discovered Russell's connections to Nazi ideology, and he was sentenced to five years in prison in 2018 for possessing a high explosive used by terrorists, along with pounds of other bomb-making materials, empty shell casings, fuses and electric matches.

On Feb. 3, Russell was arrested again along with his girlfriend and charged by federal authorities with a [plot to destroy substations](#) to bring down the electrical grid in Baltimore. He allegedly touted white supremacist literature during the planning. Russell had pushed for multiple attacks on substations to amplify the effect on the city, cutting off residents at times of intense cold or heat when lack of access to electricity could be deadly.

In another case, three former Marines were charged in 2021 in a plot to blow up power stations in the northwestern U.S., possibly with homemade Thermite explosives. Two who were charged had met on a neo-Nazi online forum, and the men also allegedly made an Atomwaffen propaganda video.

Nearly all of these extremist groups advertise membership as another way to serve the country, but participation is always turned toward their own hateful or destructive goals, such as harassing racial minorities, pushing for America to become a white ethno-state, sparking a civil war or attacking the federal government.

For Parker, the Navy veteran who was first inspired by a Klan rally, the white supremacy at the heart of his extremism never came from his service.

"I didn't really see too much racism, I mean, especially on submarines. You have to count on every single last person on that boat to do their job if they need to," Parker said. "Otherwise, the entire ship is going to die.

"When I left, I didn't consider myself a racist person," he said.

Extremist groups know that dynamic, the reliance on the person in the foxhole next to you, and they've preyed upon it successfully.



Stewart Rhodes, founder of the Oath Keepers, center, speaks during a rally outside the White House in Washington, June 25, 2017. (AP Photo/Susan Walsh, File)

Of all the extremist groups, the Oath Keepers may be the most blatant about their veteran recruiting.

"The messaging is always we're a community of veterans," Jason van Tatenhove, the former national media director for the Oath Keepers, said in an interview. "Part of the MO was going after people that were vulnerable, that were having some difficulties in life and felt isolated and alienated.

"Because those are the people that you can come and say, 'Hey, we have an important mission for you and that's to help save the country,'" he said. Rhodes, an eye patch-wearing Army veteran and Yale Law School graduate, was the charismatic leader of the group who directed the activity and outreach, eventually leading a group of members to Washington, D.C., on Jan. 6, 2021. He was found guilty in November of seditious conspiracy as the mastermind of a plot to block Congress from certifying President Joe Biden's election win.

Former service members "yearn for that community again," and Rhodes was able to provide it through Oath Keepers activities such as community preparedness teams and training, according to van Tatenhove.

"Usually, 95% of the time, it was on military techniques," he said. "Anything from land navigation to, you know, field-stripping rifles to rappelling to small team tactics."

Jessica Watkins was among the group of Oath Keepers dressed in military-style gear who pushed through the rioting crowd in a "stack" formation -- a tactic used by military units -- to breach the Capitol building on Jan. 6.

During her own November court trial, she testified about the trauma of struggling secretly with being transgender while deployed to Afghanistan and how she went AWOL out of fear it would be discovered.

Watkins had served as an [Army Ranger](#), and an early dismissal from the service "haunted her for the duration of her life," her attorney told the court, according to The Associated Press.

Watkins, an Ohio member of the militia, went to the Capitol after being steeped in online lies about the 2020 election being stolen. As she broke into the building, amid the riot in her military gear and hand radio, she testified that she felt involved in a "very American moment."

But by the time she stood trial, the spell had broken. Watkins called her participation really stupid and told the court she was "just another idiot" at the Capitol. Her attorney asked her on the stand whether she was proud of what she did.

"Not anymore," said Watkins, who was convicted of conspiracy to obstruct an official proceeding and other charges.

-- Travis Tritten can be reached at travis.tritten@military.com. Follow him on Twitter [@Travis_Tritten](#).

-- Konstantin Toropin can be reached at konstantin.toropin@military.com. Follow him on Twitter [@ktoropin](#).

-- Drew F. Lawrence can be reached at drew.lawrence@military.com. Follow him on Twitter [@df_lawrence](#).

-- Steve Beynon can be reached at Steve.Beynon@military.com. Follow him on Twitter [@StevenBeynon](#).



ACTION CORPS WEEKLY



February 27, 2023



House Introduces Bill to Crack Down on Claim

Sharks: Reps. Aumua Amata Coleman Radewagen (AS), Chris Pappas (NH-01), Brian Fitzpatrick (PA-01), and Jeff Van Drew (NJ-02) have introduced the VFW-supported *Governing Unaccredited Representatives Defrauding VA Benefits Act*, known as the *GUARD VA Benefits Act*. Reintroduced in the new Congress with sixty-nine cosponsors, this bipartisan legislation would reinstate criminal penalties for unaccredited claim representatives who charge unauthorized fees for helping veterans file claims for VA disability compensation benefits. These companies are incentivized to operate outside of the law due to the lack of penalties. Cracking down on Claim Sharks is one of the VFW's top legislative priorities for the 118th Congress. [Read more.](#)



VFW Legislative Conference App Now Available:

As the official guide to the 2023 VFW Legislative Conference, the VFW has launched its updated mobile event app to give attendees the tools needed to make the most of their visit to our nation's capital. The **VFW Events** mobile app is available now for download at both the [Apple App Store](#) and the [Google Play Store](#). For assistance and instructions on how to download and update the app, view our [VFW Events App Quick Start Guide](#).



VFW Participates in Semiannual Congressional

Staff Training: The VFW and PsychArmor, in collaboration with the For Country Caucus, held its third training for congressional staffers on how to connect with organizations like the VFW, as well as national, state, and local resources. The overarching goal of the training sessions is to help military and veteran legislative staff better meet the needs of service members, veterans, families, caregivers, and survivors. Topics included current policy issues, the importance of hosting veterans town halls, and reaching out to accredited service officers.



MIA Update: The Defense POW/MIA Accounting Agency announced one new identification for a service member who has been missing and unaccounted-for from World War II.

-- **Navy Electrician's Mate 3rd Class Cecil E. Barncord, 24**, was assigned to the battleship USS Oklahoma, which was moored at Ford Island, Pearl Harbor, when the ship was attacked by Japanese aircraft on Dec. 7, 1941. The USS Oklahoma sustained multiple torpedo hits causing it to quickly capsize. The attack on the ship resulted in the deaths of 429 crewmen, including Barncord. Interment services are pending. [Read about Barncord.](#)

[Click here to view this week's edition.](#)

[Click here for past editions of the VFW Action Corps Weekly.](#)

[Click here to sign up new veterans' advocates.](#)

As always, we want to hear your advocacy stories. To share your stories or photos with us, simply email them directly to vfwac@vfw.org.

AMERICAN LEGION POST 115 CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT

CHARITY GOLF TOURNAMENT REGISTRATION

OCTOBER 3, 2022 @ GRAN HAVEN GOLF CLUB
PLAYERS MAY REGISTER AS SINGLED, DOUBLE, TRIPLE, OR
FOURSOME. UPON REGISTRATION, PLEASE INCLUDE ALL PLAYER
NAMES BEING REGISTERED IN THE "PLAYER NAME(S)" FIELD

FEES: \$100 PER PLAYER

REGISTRATION OPENS @ 7AM / SHOTGUN START @ 9AM/AWARDS
LUNCHEON @ 1PM

SPONSORSHIP OPPORTUNITIES

Scroll down for Opportunity Descriptions and Online Payment

PRESENTING SPONSORSHIP - \$3500

- Exclusive Title Sponsorship of the Golf Tournament
- Opportunity to place company literature in gift bags distributed at registration
- Company logo & link placed on Grand Haven Golf Club Website
- Opportunity to display company product(s) and/or information on day of tournament
- Four player entries into tournament
- Sponsorship of two separate hole signs (choice of location)
- Logo on scoreboard
- Banner at tournament (supplied by sponsor)

GOLF CART SPONSORSHIP - \$750

- Exclusive sponsor of cart signs in all golf carts during golf tournament

- Opportunity to place company literature in gift bags distributed at registration
- Company logo & link placed on Grand Haven Golf Club website
- Two player entries into golf tournament
- Sponsorship on two separate hole signs
- Logo on scoreboard
- Banner at tournament (supplied by sponsor)

TEE MARKER SPONSORSHIP - \$750

- Exclusive sponsorship of the tees with custom logo tee markers
- Opportunity to place company literature in gift bags distributed at registration
- Company logo & link placed on Grand Haven Golf Club website
- Two player entries into golf tournament
- Logo on scoreboard
- Banner at tournament (supplied by sponsor)

SCORE CARD SPONSORSHIP - \$300

- Exclusive sponsor of all scorecards of players during golf tournament
- Opportunity to place company literature in gift bags distributed at registration
- Company logo & link placed on Grand Haven Golf Club website
- Sponsor of one hole sign
- Logo on scoreboard
- Banner at tournament (supplied by sponsor)

HOLE SIGN SPONSORSHIP - \$150

- Sponsor sign approaching tee box customized and designed by Grand Haven Golf Club
- Opportunity to place company literature in gift bags distributed at registration

OTHER OPPORTUNITIES AVAILABLE: Coupons / Gift Cards / Bag Stuffers, etc.

[For Questions Regarding Sponsorship, Please Phone or Text Richard "RJ" Card @ \(949\) 395-2578](#)

\$45
ADVANCE

\$50
AT DOOR

Vietnam Veterans

4th Annual

Casino Night

SPONSORED BY:
CCI COMMERCIAL COVERAGES, INC.

SUPPORTING VETERANS AND MILITARY FAMILIES

MARCH 25, 2023

NATIONAL GUARD ARMORY
1000 AVIATION DRIVE
PALM COAST, FL 32164

CCI
Commercial Coverages, Inc.
A Full Service Insurance Agency
386-446-2330

DAV
FULFILLING OUR PROMISES
TO THE MEN AND WOMEN OF THE ARMY

**For Tickets: DAV Chapter 86, 27 Florida Park Drive or
Terry Larkin (386) 569-5883 or tjltool03@hotmail.com**

MARCH 25, 2023

6:00 PM - 9:00 PM

ADVANCE TICKETS: \$45

AT THE DOOR: \$50

Includes Hors D'Oeuvres, Snacks
& \$100 in Chips to Play

****Limited Number of Tickets Available****

CASH BAR

GAMES OF CHANCE

ROULETTE, CRAPS, BLACK JACK

TEXAS HOLD 'EM

Additionally: 50/50 & Silent Auction

NATIONAL GUARD ARMORY
1000 Aviation Drive - Palm Coast, FL 32164

For Tickets, contact:
DAV Chapter 86, 27 Florida Park Drive or
DAV (386) 439-2122
Terry Larkin (386) 569-5883 • tjltool03@hotmail.com



VFW POST 8696

**MEMORIAL DAY
EXTRAVAGANZA**

**T-Shirt Sponsorship
Opportunity**

Display your organization/
business' support of VFW
Post 8696 and our Veteran
Community on this year's
Memorial Day T-Shirts!

MAY 29 MONDAY

47 Old Kings Rd | Palm Coast, FL



AARP Foundation®

TAX-AIDE

Free tax assistance for those who need it most

taxprepfree.net

386-313-4048

*Begins on February 1st * Appointments Required**

Our Locations

UNITED METHODIST CHURCH

1520 S. Daytona Ave
Flagler Beach 32116
Tuesday and Friday:
9:00 am – 2:45 pm

PALM COAST LIBRARY

2500 Palm Coast Pkwy NW 32137
Thursday: 9:30 am – 2:15 pm

GOVERNMENT SERVICES BLDG.

3rd floor
1769 Moody Blvd.
Bunnell 32137
Tuesday and Wednesday:
9:00 am – 2:45 pm

PALM COAST AQUATIC CENTER

*Formerly Frieda Zamba Pool Activity
Center*
339 Parkview Drive
Palm Coast 32164

Monday: 9:00 am – 2:45 pm
Friday: 9:00 am – 2:45 pm
Saturday: 9:00 am – 2:45 pm