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**STATEMENT OF**

**MR. TOM MCGRIF**  
**AMVETS NATIONAL COMMANDER**

**BEFORE THE**

**COMMITTEE ON VETERANS' AFFAIRS**  
**UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**CONCERNING**

**THE HOUSE VETERANS' AFFAIRS COMMITTEE**  
**ACCOMPLISHMENTS IN FISCAL YEAR 2007**  
**AND LOOK AHEAD TO FISCAL YEAR 2008**

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**WEDNESDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2006**

**A M V E T S**

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Chairman Buyer, members of the Committee:

Earlier this month, we paused to remember the men and women who lost their lives on September 11, 2001. We watched in horror as American Airlines Flight 11 crashed into the north tower of the World Trade Center. Later, many of our worst fears were realized when three more planes were hijacked. The attacks against the World Trade Center, the Pentagon and the failed attempt in rural Pennsylvania began a new era in American history. This era is marked by a new kind of patriotism our nation has never known. Instead of the fear and hopelessness the terrorists of 9/11 hoped to plant, courage and valor have grown. We rebuilt and regained our strength, and we will never let the images of the crashed planes, falling buildings and burning countryside fade from our memories.

Today, this nation is engaged in a different kind of war. We have a new generation of brave American's once again deployed around the world, answering the call to arms. When they return home with physical and psychological wounds – most of which will never heal – we have a great moral obligation to care for them. I sincerely believe that an elected official has no greater duty than to provide for and be attentive to those who have bravely defended our nation and our freedoms.

Mr. Chairman, the focus of today's hearing is to look at what the Committee has accomplished this year, and look ahead to next year. We certainly thank you and the Committee for its work in passing measures aimed to restrict protests at military funerals, enhance the Servicemembers' Life Insurance program, provide veterans with a COLA, improve veterans housing, strengthen VA's information technology, and other matters. But I think it is more important to look at where we are today, and examine the areas that need to be improved so VA can care for *all* veterans seeking care. I will focus my remarks on four issues: assured funding, veterans mental health, the claims backlog, and the veteran's attorney legislation.

## **Assured Funding**

First, assured funding. Every time we send our young men and women into combat, we are asking them to make a huge sacrifice for the rest of us. Their lives and their healthcare are the real follow-up cost to any war. The VA budget for fiscal year 2007 was a step in the right direction, but sadly, it does not go far enough to meet the needs of all veterans. Members of Congress touted that this is the first year The Independent Budget has been used to tabulate VA's budget. I ask why? The Independent Budget has been in existence for over twenty years, and has been proven time and time again to be the most accurate estimate of VA's funding requirements. If you are really serious about meeting the needs of veterans, use The Independent Budget's figures in fiscal year 2008.

Veterans' healthcare is an ongoing cost of war, and should be treated as such. No veteran should have to fight for the care he or she has earned by virtue of military service. But that is exactly what many veterans are forced to do. Access to quality health care has been compromised by budget shortfalls, rising medical costs and a sharp and steady increase in demand for services. The current discretionary funding formula pits VA against other agencies and billions in pork barrel projects. Over the years, this process has proven its weakness in providing for the needs of enrolled veterans. Frankly, the system needs to be fixed. The only way VA can fulfill its mission is for Congress to guarantee the funding it needs to operate.

Contrary to some belief, Congress would not lose oversight if assured funding is instituted. As with other direct funding entitlements, Congress would retain its current supervision of VA programs and healthcare services. Additionally, VA would still be held accountable for how its funds are being spent and how well its healthcare programs are managed. In fact, most federal healthcare programs are funded through mandatory funding. Isn't it only fair to put our nation's sick and disabled veterans on the same level as these other entitlements? The cost of freedom does not come cheap. Caring for veterans is an American responsibility, and one that should not be subject to an arbitrary and time-consuming process.

## **Mental Health**

Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF) and Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF) have resulted in the deployment of hundreds of thousands of troops since 2002. It is estimated that approximately a third of military personnel will need mental health treatment upon returning from these operations. For those who served in Iraq, 35 percent requested mental health services one year after deployment or leaving the service. We've learned from past conflicts that war has long-lasting psychological effects. Mental and emotional problems can be just as devastating as physical wounds. But getting a handle on PTSD and other disorders is tremendously difficult. The effects vary for each person. Some never show symptoms, others show them immediately.

Unfortunately, VA has had an uneven record of service to veterans with mental health needs. We applaud Congress for having codified into law special safeguards to ensure VA gives priority to the needs of veterans with mental illness. But more needs to be done. VHA must invest resources in programs that aid patients' recovery rather than managing and treating symptoms. VA should develop a continuum of care that includes case management, rehabilitation, peer support, work therapy, and other support services with an overarching goal of recovery. Additionally, VA must work hand-in-hand with DoD to help returning service members obtain treatment for war-related mental health problems. We are learning more everyday about the effects of war and the toll PTSD has on soldiers' lives, and I encourage this Committee to continue its efforts to help VA assist veterans on the long road to recovery.

## **Claims Backlog**

VA continues to experience challenges processing veterans' disability compensation and pension claims. The backlog is at a critical stage, with significant errors numbering about 100,000 per year. The average initial claim takes more than six months to complete, and appeals of denied claims can take as long as three years.

VBA is also faced with many experienced claims processors reaching retirement age. According to VBA, it takes 2 to 3 years of experience for claims decision-makers to achieve a fully productive level of expertise. Currently, about half of VBA's staff has 3 years or less of decision-making experience. VBA needs to tackle this problem now so they are not faced with even more inexperienced staff when the Baby-Boom generation retires. That means hiring and training new employees immediately. AMVETS believes VBA is capable of reducing backlogs and improving error rates, but only if and when new technology, better training, more staff, and real accountability is implemented. That takes time and money, not budget cuts and staff reductions, which have been proposed in recent budgets.

In fact, AMVETS is so passionate about looking at claims and other VBA challenges, we are hosting a National Symposium for the Needs of Young Veterans in mid-October. The Symposium's goals are to reach a consensus on the key problems facing veterans, offer solutions that will modernize the system, and suggest how to enhance benefits for the National Guard and Reservists. In November 2006, the Symposium will publish an action plan that will define, describe and prioritize the steps needed to provide a modern benefits program and an effective delivery system.

Our goal is quite clear – to raise public discussion about veterans benefits to a whole new level. One of the greatest and largely unrecognized challenges facing America is how we will provide for the needs of young veterans, namely those who are currently serving in Iraq, Afghanistan and other parts of the world today. If you are concerned about the future of veterans' benefits in America, then I encourage you to support us in this endeavor and seriously study our action plan. I am confident the Symposium will provide Congress and VA with a realistic report that will improve the system now and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## **Veterans Choice in Representation Legislation**

AMVETS has many serious concerns with the House and Senate veteran's choice of representation bills. As you know, the Senate passed their version, S. 2694, with a number of other non-controversial veterans benefits enhancements attached to it. We support the added language now contained in the Senate bill and urge its passage, but only without the attorney provisions.

Veterans service organization provide, free of charge, excellent representation and a broad range of services to any veteran - member or not - within the community. AMVETS has specialty-trained representatives stationed around the country to assist veterans wanting to file a claim. We have access to the VA system, know exactly who to contact, and are acquainted with the people who make the decisions. We feel we provide a greater and more efficient service than any lawyer could.

If lawyers are allowed into the system, it would overturn veterans protections that have been in place since the Civil War. It will not improve the procedure or make it more efficient. Just the opposite would be true. A good lawyer will do what they can to lengthen the process, potentially exploiting the system in order to maximize the result. The benefits system was designed be a non-adversarial, open, informal process to ensure veterans received the benefits promised to them. Adding lawyers to the mix will create a potentially hostile situation between the veteran and VA.

Furthermore, VA cannot handle lawyers. The VA benefits system is a labyrinth of laws and regulations that takes years of experience and training to understand and navigate. Most lawyers do not have an understanding of the complexity of veteran's law, the vast VA bureaucracy, or even know what is rightfully due to a veteran. VA will no doubt be inundated with calls from legal aides wanting to know exactly how VA works and how to navigate through the department. VBA is financially strapped as it is, and claims backlogs continue to grow without this added burden.

Mr. Chairman, before you consider this provision, I would ask the Committee to explore ways to reduce pending cases by fixing staffing shortfalls, improving training programs, and holding claims processors accountable for the quality of their work. That is what is going to solve VA's internal problems and claims backlogs, not attorneys.

We have many challenges ahead. Record deficits are setting the stage for future budget cuts and many program efficiencies. While I certainly agree the federal government needs to get its fiscal house in order, I do not agree this should come at the expense of veterans and their families. I encourage this Committee to put aside political differences and political pressures and work together to create a budget that guarantees the care of all those who defend this nation. Veterans deserve a government that is committed to the same values they fought to preserve.

In closing Mr. Chairman, AMVETS looks forward to working with you and the Committee to ensure the earned benefits of all of America's veterans are strengthened and improved. We must remain vigilant in our fight against those who would take away the freedoms for which so many veterans have fought. We must remain firm in our support of American troops at home and abroad and never forget their daily sacrifices.

I would like to say a special "thank you" to these members of the Army, Navy, Marines, Air Force, Coast Guard, National Guard and Reserves who continue to defend our nation. America is truly the land of the free and the home of the brave because of what you do.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you again for the opportunity to present our views, and I would be happy to answer any question you might have.

**Tom McGriff**  
**AMVETS National Commander**  
**2006-2007**

Tom McGriff was elected national commander of AMVETS on Aug. 20, 2006 at the organization's 62<sup>nd</sup> national convention in Reno, Nev.

A life member of Post 76 in Irving, Texas, near Dallas, Commander McGriff has held leadership positions at national, state and local levels of AMVETS, including national first vice commander, national second vice commander, national finance officer, state department commander as well as commander of Post 76. He joined AMVETS in 1991 after spending more than 30 years with the US Navy.

Commander McGriff has dedicated his life to military service and to helping veterans. Born Dec. 15, 1940 and raised in the farming community of Three Rivers, Texas, halfway between San Antonio and Corpus Christi, he entered the U.S. Navy in 1959. He was initially assigned to the USS Tiru, a World War II diesel electric submarine based in Pearl Harbor. He patrolled waters off the coasts of the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan and received an Armed Forces Expeditionary Medal for his involvement in a skirmish that took place in the disputed islands of Quemoy and Matsu in the Taiwan Strait.

Commander McGriff was subsequently assigned to the USS Ethan Allan, the nation's first in its class Polaris submarine, which was armed with 16 nuclear missiles. Serving as a fire control technician, he patrolled the North Atlantic as part of a deterrent force during the Cuban Missile Crisis. He was also involved in the first and only test firing of a live Polaris nuclear missile in the Pacific Missile Range. He later served on the USS Patrick Henry and completed two terms as a Navy recruiter before retiring from the military in the late 1980s. He currently resides in Mesquite, Texas, with his wife, Linda.





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September 20, 2006

The Honorable Steve Buyer, Chairman  
House Veterans' Affairs Committee  
Cannon House Office Building  
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Buyer:

Neither AMVETS nor I have received any federal grants or contracts, during this year or in the last two years, from any agency or program relevant to the September 20, 2006 Committee oversight hearing on veterans benefits and related matters.

Sincerely,

Tom McGriff  
AMVETS National Commander