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THE DISPATCH

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Turner touts newest GI Bill to restore educational benefits

National Commander Turner

"If we really want to say thank you to Persian Gulf veterans, we can do it with a new G.I. Bill that will given them the opportunities their fathers and grandfathers had," said National Commander Robert S. Turner.

Turner's comments were made in response to questions at a Friday news conference on the eve of the 1991 National Convention in Phoenix. Turner, whose term will end next week after the election of a new National Commander explained to reporters the Legion-proposed Desert Storm Serviceperson's Readjustment Act of 1991, which proposes sweeping changes in education benefits.

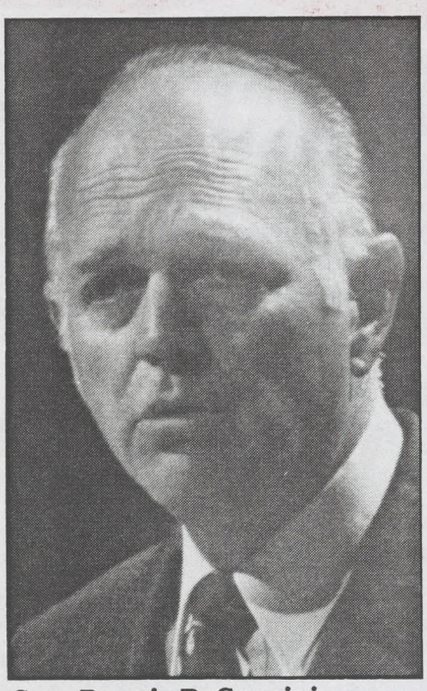
The Legion bill, which has yet to be introduced in Congress, would increase monthly education benefits to $777 from $350, and the duration of the program would be 36 months. Turner said the lower amount doesn't begin to cover the costs of tuition, books and living expenses of veterans attending college on a full-time basis.

"What we seek with our bill is parity, nothing more and nothing less," Turner said.

Turner was asked where the money should come from to fund the increased benefits, given the national deficit and other important domestic spending programs.

"Find it somewhere," he responded, adding that vet-

Senator supports Legion plan



Sen. Dennis DeConcini

Arizona Sen. Dennis DeConcini says it's time to give today's wartime veterans the same educational opportunities as past generations of America's veterans, endorsing the Legion-proposed Desert Storm Servicepersons' Act of 1991.

"It's time we do something to bring the GI Bill into the 20th Century. I applaud your commander for bringing out this issue," DeConcini told Legionnaires. The Democratic senator addressed a joint meeting of the National Legislative, Foreign Relations and Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation commissions at the convention center Saturday.

The American Legion is seeking a sponsor for the proposal, which will improve education benefits for veterans so they can become more productive members of society. Under the plan, benefits for an eligible, full-time student would be $777 per month, up from the present $350 per month under the Montgomery GI Bill.

DeConcini also praised Legion efforts to focus congressional attention on the POW/MIA issue. "We cannot forget them and it's time to clear the air. We have to open up the files," he said, citing the recent formation of a 12-member Senate committee to investigate live sightings and the government's efforts to put the matter to rest. "I thank The American Legion for not forgetting their suffering and that of their families, and to see that this is finally resolved."

The events rumbling through the Soviet Union prompted DeConcini to urge Americans to support the forces of democracy active in the breakaway republics. He said he supports immediate diplomatic recognition of the Baltic republics --Latvia, Estonia and Lithuania-- once independent nations before the infamous Hitler-Stalin pact of 1939.

"For 50 years we have not and we will not accept the willy-nilly annexation of two dictators," DeConcini said. He said the United States must adjust to the new realities resulting from the disintegration of the communist hierarchy in Moscow. "We can't tie ourselves just to Gorbachev, we have to deal with whatever elected officials are there," he said.

DeConcini cautioned against carte blanche economic aid, citing the volatile political situation and Ameria's own pressing budget deficit. "We have to say to the Soviet Union: 'Don't look to the United States as a Sugar Daddy because we don't have it.' We are not going to back a blank check for the Soviet Union."

DeConcini was scheduled to appear at the regular convention session, but had to cancel because of a trip to the Baltics and Soviet Union. DeConcini, a member of the Helsinki Commission, said the group plans to monitor Soviet compliance with the 1975 Helsinki Accords guaranteeing human rights.

DeConcini did not comment on proposed increases in the non-profit postal subsidy for third-class mailers like The American Legion. He is chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee subcommittee on Treasury, Postal Service and General Government.

Turner

(continued from Page One)

erans' benefits are earned and not government handouts.

The Georgia National Commander said that passage of the proposed benefits package probably wouldn't occur overnight.

He said the Legion-written 1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act -- the original G.I. Bill -- was slow to gain approval in Congress.

"There will be opposition to the (new) bill," but I can assure you The American Legion doesn't begin a project like this without intending to see it all the way through," Turner said.

Turner also fielded questions about allegations of the U.S. government covering up information about American MIAs.

"We haven't closed the door on the POW-MIA issue," Turner said. "Families have the right to know what happened to their loved ones."

Legionnaires blast VA care plan

Dr. John T. Farrar got an earfull from Legionnaires Saturday about VA's proposal to allow non-veterans to be treated at VA medical centers.

Farrar, deputy chief medical director for VA, tried unsuccessfully to defend the pilot program to treat non-veterans in up to five rural VA medical centers in the next three years.

The plan calls for Medicare funds to be used to reimburse VA for providing medical care to non-veterans. The Legion is opposed to the measure, claiming veterans are being denied care because of VA funding shortfalls.

"I think of The American Legion as our partner," Farrar said. "We don't want you to be our antagonist," he said. Responding to a Legionnaire's question about VA opening its doors to non-veterans, Farrar expressed his own doubts the project will ever get off the ground.

"We are not going to spend money allocated to veterans on non-veterans," Farrar pledged. "From what you and other people here tell me, this initiative may be dead on arrival, it may not fly," Farrar said.

"We hope not," said Legionnaire A.V. "Bubba" Akin of Georgia, who objected to VA's failure to consult veterans' groups before launching their latest initiative. "We can't find anybody who asked us for input," said Akin, adding Legionnaires are upset the proposal comes in the face of continuing cutbacks in VA medical care spending.

The proposal was recently unveiled by VA Secretary Edward J. Derwinski and Health and Human Services Secretary Dr. Louis Sullivan as a means to raise more revenue and meet the health-care needs of rural Americans. Derwinski is scheduled to address Legionnaires at the convention center at noon Tuesday.

Farrar also took some heat from Texas Department Service Officer Wes Vaughn, who asked why VA is sticking to its policy of charging a $2 co-payment for subscriptions for non-service connected disabled veterans.

Drive to Baghdad unnecessary

While many have criticized operations in the Persian Gulf for not pushing into Iraq and toppling Saddam Hussein from power, a top Marine commander says that action was unnecessary.

"Our mission was not to destroy Iraq but to remove it from Kuwait and its threat to the Mideast region," said Maj. Gen. Mike Myatt, commanding general of the 1st Marine Division, which saw combat in Operation Desert Storm.

Myatt's comments were made at a joint session of the National Security-Foreign Relations commissions Saturday morning.

"Before the war started, the Saudis and other Arab allies in the coalition counseled that it wasn't necessary to push on to Baghdad." Myatt told thje 300 commission members and other Legionnaires. "It was, I believe, a good decision and it was made in the interest of future stability within Iraq and throughout the Mideast.

Myatt detailed the buildup of his division and the months leading up to the conflict, and how his troops were used in the 100-hour ground war. Myatt's unit was deployed to northern Saudi Arabia in August 1990, just days after Hussein's troops invaded Kuwait. His division and the 2nd Marine Division faced 11 Iraqi division, including armored units.

"They expected the main attack would be an amphibious assault near Kuwait City," Myatt said, pointing to slide projections of bunkers and other beach fortifications.

The 1st Division took 22,000 Iraqi prisoners, destroyed 322 tanks and capture more than 300 tanks and armored vehicles, including Soviet-made T-72 models.

But the largest threat looming before Marines as they crossed the border into Kuwait was not Iraqi sharpshooters, according to Myatt. The Iraqis had planted several minefields.

"The average minefield had roughly 10,000 mines in a 300-yard area," Myatt said.

During their eight month deployment, the 1st Marine Division lost 22 troops, 14 of whom were killed by "friendly fire."

"Every Marine's death is a tragedy," Myatt said, adding that the friendly fire incidents is something "we will never be able to eliminate completely, Myatt said.

"Thanks Bob, for the memories"

Legionnaires and their families will take a trip down memory lane today and thank Bob Hope for all of the memories he has given Americans who have served in uniform.

Freedom Fest 1941-1991 gets under way at 2 p.m. at Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum. Dubbed as the "Celebration of the American Spirit," the event, which is sponsored by Sprint, will be capped with a special salute to one of America's best-known comedians,

Hope, who was entertained GIs with variety shows from World War II to the Persian Gulf War, will be accompanied by "Hope gypsies," Frances Langford, Patty Thomas and Hope's traditional musical backup group, Les Brown and His Band of Renown.

Legionnaires arriving at the coliseum will be greeted with the spirited sounds of the Post 4 band of Keene, N.H.

The American Legion talent show will kick off at 2 p.m., featuring a range of entertainment from singers to color guards. Among the talent slated is Heidi Higgins, "Miss Junior America National Talent 1991," and the "The Andrews Sisters," hailing from Post 160, Pascagoula, Miss.

At 3:30 p.m., the beat of a different drummer will begin with the Parade of Champions. The traditional National Convention parade, which normally is held outside, has moved inside this year.

Legionnaires and their families also will have the chance to attend the Patriotic Memorial Service at 4 p.m. The non-denominational service honors those Americans who have died while serving in uniform. Music will be performed by The Goads.

At 5 p.m., guests will travel back in time when "Legends" takes to the stage, with "visits" from Marilyn Monroe to Elvis.

The salute to Hope will begin at 5:45 p.m., and the evening will end on a patriotic note, as Legionnaires sing "God Bless America."

Finally, Legionnaires will want to check their ticket stubs and see if they have winning numbers in a drawing for a 1992 Buick Roadmaster.

Contact your Department adjutant for further details about the festival and bus transportation to and from the coliseum.

TODAY AT CONVENTION

- Wayne Blanchard, Federal Emergency Management Agency, "The Family Protection Program," 9:30 a.m., Yuma 33, Plaza South.
- American Legion Talent Show, 2 p.m., Arizona Veterans Memorial Coliseum.
- Patriot American Legion Memorial Service, 4 p.m., coliseum.
- Salute to Bob Hope and the Gypsies, 5:45 p.m. coliseum.

THE AMERICAN LEGION
NATIONAL HEADQUARTERS
P.O. BOX 1055
INDIANAPOLIS, IN 46206

The American Legion