



Fact Sheet

April 2008

VA Benefits for Former Prisoners Of War

Former American prisoners of war (POWs) are eligible for special veterans benefits, including enrollment in Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) medical care for treatment in VA hospitals and clinics without copayments as well as disability compensation for injuries and diseases that have been associated with internment. These benefits are in addition to regular veterans benefits and services to which they, as veterans, are entitled.

Records show that 142,246 Americans were captured and interned during World War I, World War II, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Gulf War, the Somalia and Kosovo conflicts, and Operation Iraqi Freedom. There were no servicemembers reported missing in action from the Bosnia deployment or recent Afghanistan operations. Of the 125,214 Americans surviving captivity, about 22,649 were estimated to be alive at the end of 2007.

American Prisoners Of War at End of 2007

	Captured and Interned	Died while POW	Returned to U.S. Military Control	Refused to Return	Alive at end of 2007
GRAND TOTAL	142,246	17,009	125,214	21	22,649
WW I	4,120	147	3,973	--	--
WW II	130,201	14,072	116,129	--	20,327
Korean	7,140	2,701	4,418	21	1,739
Vietnam	725	64	661	--	550
Gulf War	47	25	21	--	21
Somalia	1	--	1	--	1
Kosovo	3	--	3	--	3
Iraq	9	--	8	--	8

Congress defined a prisoner of war as a person who, while serving on active duty, was forcibly detained by an enemy government or a hostile force, during a period of war or in situations comparable to war.

With nine out of 10 former POWs having served in World War II, the estimated number of living POWs decreased from nearly 29,000 to 22,600 during 2007 due mainly to the death rates for World War II and Korean POWs.

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Compensation

As of November 2007, there were 15,367 former POWs receiving compensation benefits from VA.

Studies have shown that the physical hardships and psychological stress endured by POWs have life-long effects on health and on social and vocational adjustment. These studies also indicate increased vulnerability to psychological stress. The laws on former POW benefits recognize that military medical records do not cover periods of captivity. For many diseases, unless there is evidence of some other cause, VA disability compensation can be paid on the basis of a presumption that a disease present today is associated with the veteran's captivity or internment.

For POWs detained for 30 days or more, such eligibility covers any of the following illnesses that are found at a compensable level (at least 10 percent disabling): avitaminosis; beriberi; chronic dysentery; cirrhosis of the liver; helminthiasis; irritable bowel syndrome and malnutrition, including associated optic atrophy. Also covered are: pellagra and any other nutritional deficiency; peptic ulcer disease; and peripheral neuropathy, except where directly related to infectious causes. Several categories of diseases are presumptively associated with captivity without any 30-day limit: psychosis; any anxiety state; dysthymic disorders; cold injury; post-traumatic arthritis; strokes and common heart diseases.

The rate of VA monthly compensation, according to degree of disability, ranges from \$117 to \$2,527 per month. Veterans rated as 30 percent or more disabled qualify for additional benefits based upon the number of dependents. Dependents of those rated 100 percent disabled may qualify for educational assistance.

Spouses of veterans who die as a result of service-connected disabilities are eligible for dependency and indemnity compensation. Spouses of former POWs who were rated 100 percent disabled and who died of a condition unrelated to their service also may be eligible, depending on the date of death and how long the veteran held the 100 percent disability rating. Those non-service-connected deaths prior to October 1999 are covered if the former POW had been 100 percent disabled for at least 10 years. More recent non-service-connected deaths are covered under a law that provides the benefit when the former POW was 100 percent disabled for a year or more.

Medical Care

Former POWs receive special priority for VA health-care enrollment, even if their illness has not been formally associated with their service. Former POWs are exempt from making means test copayments for inpatient and outpatient medical care and medications, but they have the same copay rules as other veterans for extended care. They also are eligible for dental care without any length-of-internment requirement.

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VA periodically has provided training for its medical staff about former POWs, and an online curriculum is maintained at <http://www1.va.gov/VHI/page.cfm?pg=9>.

Resources

POW coordinators are assigned to each VA regional office and medical center and are available to provide more information. Former POWs may contact VA regional offices with general benefits questions at 800-827-1000. Medical eligibility questions may be directed to 877-222-8387. Additional information for former POWs also is available from VA's Web site at <http://www.vba.va.gov/bln/21/Benefits/POW/>.

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