



**Department of
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Fact Sheet

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VA Benefits for Former Prisoners Of War

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

Nearly a third of the 125,213 Americans surviving captivity were estimated to be alive as of January 2004. Records show that 142,219 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 from Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan. Of the total POWs returned to U.S. military control, an estimated 35,900 were living as of the end of 2003.

American Prisoners Of War

	Captured and Interned	Died While POW	Returned to U.S. Military Control	Refused to Return	Alive at end of 2003*
GRAND TOTAL	142,219	16,984	125,214	21	35,900
WW I	4,120	147	3,973	--	--
WW II	130,201	14,072	116,129	--	33,050
Korean	7,140	2,701	4,418	21	2,150
Vietnam	725	64	661	--	591
Gulf War	21	--	21	--	21
Somalia	1	--	1	--	1
Kosovo	3	--	3	--	3
Iraq	8	--	8	--	8

* Note: The estimate of the number alive from World War II and the Korean War at the end of 2003 is based on mortality estimates from VA's Office of the Actuary that are rounded to the nearest 50. Because of the advanced age of World War I veterans, estimates of those alive would be too unreliable to report.

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Congress has 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 ten former POWs having served in World War II, the average age of former POWs alive today is 84.

Compensation

As of March 2004, there were 21,345 former POWs receiving compensation benefits from VA. Nearly 14,000 of them are rated as totally disabled.

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. For former POWs who suffered from swelling of the legs or feet during captivity, ischemic heart disease (sometimes known as "wet" beriberi) is also covered. Several categories of diseases are presumptively associated with captivity without any 30-day limit: psychosis; any anxiety state; dysthymic disorders; cold injury; and post-traumatic arthritis.

The base rate of VA monthly compensation, according to degree of disability, ranges from \$106 to \$2,239 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 those 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 POWs was 100 percent disabled for a year or more.

Medical Care

Former POWs receive special priority for VA health-care enrollment without any length-of-interment requirement, 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.

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

Outreach Campaign

In collaboration with its Advisory Committee on Former Prisoners of War, VA launched a campaign in 2003 to ensure that eligible former POWs are aware of their VA benefits. Direct mail was used where addresses could be found for these veterans who were not currently on the rolls. For those already receiving benefits, they were reminded of the possible availability of increased compensation if a condition has worsened and they also were alerted to the improvement of benefits in recent years. In addition, to seek former POWs for whom VA could not locate an address, or to reach widows of veterans who may have died of a service-connected condition, VA issued news releases and provided interviews to alert the public to expanded presumptive service-connection policies. Brochures, exhibits and VA Web sites were improved to provide more information to former POWs and the public.

By early 2004, there had been 356 veterans added to the rolls, former POWs who had not previously been drawing financial benefits to which they were entitled, and the number receiving higher ratings as totally disabled was up by more than 1,000.

Additional 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. Callers are automatically connected to the nearest VA regional office. 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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