

*The*  
**SHORT  
TALK  
BULLETIN**®



**WE SALUTE BROTHER  
HARRY W. COLMERY**

## THE SHORT TALK BULLETIN

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## **WE SALUTE BROTHER HARRY W. COLMERY**

*by Simon R. LaPlace*

Armed Forces Day in the United States falls on the third Saturday in May. It is a day to honor all the military serving our country. Our Brother Harry W. Colmery (1890-1979) not only transformed military benefits, but he transformed our country as well.

Since the beginning of the Revolutionary War, some military Veterans were allowed retirement compensation for their service. First officers, then disabled and poverty-stricken enlisted men and widows qualified. Finally, in 1828, the law was expanded to include any soldier who served. The last Revolutionary soldier to die was Daniel F. Bakeman, who passed on April 15, 1869, at the age of 109 years. Esther S. Damon, the last Revolutionary War widow on the pension list, passed away November 11, 1906, 123 years after the end of the War.

"Old Soldiers Homes," also known as Veterans retirement homes, sprang up in various states to care for veterans of the War of 1812 and the Mexican American War.

The Civil War resulted in so many disabled Veterans that states set up Veterans Homes. Many eventually evolved into Veterans

Hospitals supervised by the by the national government, the first being in 1868 in Togus, Maine.

The Pension Building in Washington, D.C., now the National Building Museum, opened in 1887 to accommodate over 900,000 Union pensioners. In the 1880's nearly a third of the United States budget was consumed with pension-related expenses. Anticipating the influx of soldiers who had lost a limb, it is perhaps the first building designed for the disabled. Stairways have deep treads and short risers to accommodate those on crutches.

Today, there is still one daughter of a Civil War soldier who receives a pension. There are sixteen widows and children of soldiers who fought in the Spanish-American War of 1898.

In 1921, Congress created the Veterans Bureau to consolidate programs managed by three agencies — the Bureau of War Risk Insurance, Public Health Service and the Federal Board of Vocational Education. The consolidation still left two other agencies administering veterans benefits — the Bureau of Pensions of the Interior Department and the National Homes for Disabled Volunteer Soldiers. In 1930, all the departments were combined under the new Veterans Administration.

In 1932, thousands of World War I Veterans, the "Bonus Army,"

marched on Washington demanding redemption of bonus certificates issued them by Congress but not due to mature until 1945. In 1936, Congress voted to redeem nearly two billion dollars of certificates and thus diffused the situation.

Fearing a similar problem would occur at the end of World War II, the American Legion and the Veterans of Foreign Wars favored a broad-reaching plan. Brother Harry Colmery of Swissvale Lodge No. 656 in Swissvale, Pennsylvania, led the charge. He was a past national commander of the American Legion and a life-long advocate for Veterans.

Between World War I and World War II, he served on the American Legion's national legislative board and helped to expand Veterans benefits to include non-service related illnesses.

At the Mayflower Hotel, using stationery and napkins, he wrote the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, better known as the "GI Bill of Rights." It provided returning Veterans with college tuition, low-cost mortgages, and business loans, as well as unemployment compensation.

His testimony before the Congressional Committee explained that "first we believe it to be the duty, the responsibility, and the desire of our grateful people, to see to it that those who served actively

in the armed services in the War, not only shall not be penalized as a result of their war service, but also that, upon their return to civil life, they should be aided in reaching that place, position, or status, which they normally expected to achieve, and probably would have achieved had the war service not interrupted their careers."

Brother Colmery's legislation had far-reaching effects that probably weren't even imagined at the time. It has been found that for every dollar expended for Veterans seven dollars was returned to the government in the form of economic growth and a deeper tax base.

In 1962 when John F. Kennedy announced that America would put a man on the moon, his challenge was to engineers and scientists educated through the GI Bill. Veterans built homes in the suburbs and started businesses and gave them opportunities they might never have had. Before the War, the Depression was a constant fear. After the War, prospects for success gave hope for a brighter future. The GI Bill has been credited with creating the American middle class.

Within a consolidated VA, a separate department of medicine was created to provide for outpatient services, research, and affiliations with medical schools. VA researchers developed the nicotine

patch and other therapies to help smokers give up the habit. VA pioneered electronic health records as the largest healthcare system in the United States. The first heart transplant was performed by VA surgeon, Dr. Michael DeBakey, and the aspirin regimen was developed by VA researchers.

Harry Colmery took 640 resolutions and combined them into a ten-point bill. The ten points were:

- Educational opportunity
- Vocational training
- Readjustment compensation
- Home and business loans
- Discharge review
- Adequate hospitalization
- Prompt settlement of disability claims
- Mustering-out pay
- Veteran employment services
- All Veteran Services under one roof

The *Washington Post* recently listed five myths about VA care.

1. *The claims process is slow because of VA bureaucrats.* The truth is there are 75,000 veterans waiting for VA to decide if they qualify compared to 600,000 five years ago.

2. *Wait times to see a doctor at VA are an exceptional problem.* Surveys and studies indicate the average American waits five to seven days to see a doctor while most VA Medical Centers offer same day urgent care.

3. *VA delivers mediocre care or worse.* "VA offers specialized

polytrauma and rehabilitative care for veterans that cannot be obtained at any price elsewhere."

4. *VA should offer patients a maximum choice of doctors.* The VA has addressed this with the Choice program and, while not perfect, it is far less expensive than having every Veteran seek care from any doctor.

5. *Allowing Veterans to see private doctors means 'privatizing' VA.* Dr. David Shulkin, the outgoing secretary of Veterans Affairs, recently wrote: "privatization is a political issue aimed at rewarding select people and companies with profits, even if it undermines care for Veterans."

On Southwest Topeka Boulevard in Topeka, Kansas, where he moved to practice law, is a Memorial to Harry Colmery. The America Legion recognized his contribution to the American way of life and how it fundamentally changed the face of our country.

The Memorial shows a statue him saluting six uniformed Veterans, each representing a branch of the armed services. Behind him is a relief of those same Veterans in the different occupations they transitioned into, thanks to his GI Bill.

Brother Harry Colmery said, "In a true sense we are not giving anything to the Veteran. We are making a token payment on a debt we owe him."