

# Service Officer News

By Sebastian Rodriguez, Service Officer



## Budget Proposes Manpower, Pay, VA Fee Increases

The \$2.9 trillion budget proposal the President sent to Congress this week includes \$481 billion for defense and \$87 billion for the VA. Some specifics:

**Army/USMC Manpower:** We're pleased to see that the new budget would avoid the previously programmed drop in Army and Marine Corps force levels for FY2008 and instead would raise the strengths of those services by 7,000 each year and 5,000 each year, respectively, through 2012. We remain concerned by budget-driven cuts to Navy and Air Force personnel.

**Military Pay Raise:** The budget calls for a 3% January 2008 pay raise and a 4.2% increase in housing allowances. The 3% raise tracks to the percentage increase in private sector pay last year. Veteran's Organizations believes the pay raise should be at least 3.5% to continue recent progress toward restoring full comparability between military and private sector pay. Every year since the "military pay gap" bottomed out at 13.5% (with attendant retention problems) in 1999, Congress has authorized military raises at least one-half percentage point above private sector pay growth. As of 2008, the gap has been reduced to 4%. With the force bearing such vast wartime sacrifices, and having seen their last two raises more than eaten up by inflation, this is not the time to stop making progress toward full comparability.

**VA Health Care/Fees:** We're happy that the FY2008 VA budget includes \$34.2 billion for health care -- \$3 billion more than budgeted for FY2007. That's a far more realistic budget than those sent to Congress in recent years. Unfortunately, for the fourth year in a row, this budget also proposes significant fee increases for certain non-disabled veterans enrolled in the VA health care system. It would nearly double pharmacy copays (from \$7 to \$15) for such vets and impose a new annual enrollment fee of \$250 to \$750, depending on family income. MOAA has not supported such fee increases in the past, in part because the VA health care system offers no guaranteed access standards, and has extended waiting times for appointments at many facilities.

**Can the Nation Afford It?** At the budget press conference, the Pentagon's Comptroller observed that this defense budget represents 3.9% of national spending (Gross Domestic Product). MOAA notes that's relatively modest, compared to past experience. Over the past 60 years, the defense budget has averaged more than 5% of GDP - in peacetime, excluding the Korea, Vietnam, and Gulf War I years. Our Nation can certainly afford this defense budget and more. A government that expects our military to carry out these kinds of superpower responsibilities has to acknowledge that can't be done on the cheap.



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# Building Committee News



by Dennis Ducharme, Comm. Chair.

The Building Committee's Charter was approved at the April General Membership Meeting.

We need everyone to get involved. Please come to the meetings and volunteer your time and talents. We meet every third Tuesday at 7:30 pm and more often as circumstances warrant. Please check the website for more information at [www.Post593.org](http://www.Post593.org) or stop by the Post.

*Dennis*

## Chili Cookoff Raffle Tickets On-Sale Soon



By Marcelo Buckley, Comm. Chair.

Good morning all – we are raffling off tickets for a free night stay at one of the local hotels. This raffle is to support the cost of the trophies, music, and misc (my beer drinking tab – just kidding) for the 2008 January CASI Chili Cook-Off at our Converse American Legion Post 593. You do not have to be present to win. Raffle is open to anyone that has money. Just write down your full name and a good phone to call in the event that you win on the ticket that you give back to me.

My team - Brad Smith, Michelle Drake, Suzana Buckley, Marissa Albergaria, and I will be coming by the Post and asking you to donate for this worthwhile event. Just think if you win a chance - \$1.00 ticket for a free night stay at one of the hotels listed in the attached flier. We have a few other offers also listed. We should get a few more hotels participating and will be added to the list by 15 May 2007.

## War Dead Receive 'Dignified' Return

In an about-face by the U.S. government four years into the war in Iraq, America's fallen troops are being brought back to their families aboard charter jets instead of ordinary commercial flights, and the caskets are being met by honor guards in white gloves instead of baggage handlers with forklifts.



That change - which took effect quietly in January and applies to members of the U.S. military killed in Afghanistan, too - came after a campaign waged by a father who was aghast to learn that his son's body was going to be unloaded like so much luggage.

John Holley said an airline executive told him that was the "most expeditious" way to get the body home.

"I said, 'That's not going to happen with my son. That's not how my son is coming home,'" said Holley, an Army veteran from San Diego whose son, Spc. Matthew Holley, was killed by a roadside bomb in Iraq in 2005. "If it was 'expeditious' to deliver them in garbage trucks, would you do that?"

Kalitta Charters of Ypsilanti, Mich., won the Pentagon contract to bring the war dead home, and has returned 143 bodies since Jan. 1.

More than 3,500 Americans have been killed in Iraq and Afghanistan. Before the new law was passed by Congress, the dead that arrived from overseas at the military mortuary in Dover, Del., were then typically flown to the commercial airport nearest their families.