



# Potter County Veterans News

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## Brig. Gen. Jerry Beck: Passionate About Veterans



As Pennsylvania's Deputy Adjutant General for Veterans Affairs, Brig. Gen. Jerry Beck has primary responsibility for services affecting the 950,000 military veterans in Pennsylvania. He retired from active Army duty in 2011 after 34 years of service and two deployments. Beck, who succeeded Brig.



Gen. Michael Gould in July, said one of his top priorities is reaching out to the roughly 700,000 veterans not registered with U.S. Dept. of Veterans Affairs (VA).

"We're committed to getting more veterans registered so they can qualify for the benefits and services that they're entitled to," Beck said. "They also need to know what's available for them. Outreach is very important to us." Key allies in that mission are county directors of veterans affairs, such as Will Worthington in Potter, Tim Cleveland in Tioga and Matt Windsor in McKean.

"Our directors are trained and they can connect directly with the VA," Beck advised.

"With online resources and the network of connections they have in place, they are in a key position to help any veteran." Pennsylvania has taken big strides, he pointed out. The Pennsylvania Veterans Trust Fund (VTF) supports organizations that help veterans facing special challenges, from post-traumatic stress disorder and traumatic brain injury to homelessness and temporary economic crisis.

Recent law changes that allow Pennsylvanians to designate \$3.00 to the VTF through check-offs on driver's license and vehicle registration applications should provide a healthy treasury. A portion of the revenue from sales of the new Honor Our Veterans license plates will also support the VTF.

Beck said the Veterans Trust Fund is one option for those who want to directly support veterans with serious needs. Contributions are tax-deductible.

Pennsylvania's challenges are stiff, the deputy pointed out, because of the high proportion of older veterans. About 70 percent of the state's vets are older than 50; some 30 percent are older than 70. That will result in a growing strain on Pennsylvania's six long-term care homes, for which Beck is responsible.

On the flip side, Pennsylvanians have a long tradition of helping veterans, fueling hope for successful private/public partnerships.

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## Beck: Passionate About Veterans *(continued from front page)*

“Pennsylvanians are generous and supportive of their veterans,” Beck observed. “For instance, some health care professionals will provide services at no charge. There are any number of these quiet acts of charity. We have also found that local American Legion posts, VFW posts and other veterans’ service organizations go out of their way to help those veterans who are in need.”

Most recently, a Governor’s Advisory Council on Veterans Services has been appointed to improve operations and suggest new initiatives, with Brig. Gen. Beck serving as chairman.

“One thing that keeps me awake at night is trying to bring all of the pieces together to help every veteran who needs help,” Beck said. “I want to have the resources and the services readily available. There are a lot of elements out there that need to come together to achieve that.”

## National Honors For LEEK Preserve!



Potter County’s LEEK Hunting and Mountain Preserve has received national recognition. LEEK, located in a valley near the village of Oswayo, is winner of the U.S. Defense Department’s Zachary and Elizabeth Fisher Distinguished Civilian Humanitarian Award. The non-profit, charitable organization provides wounded and injured service members a way to enjoy therapeutic outdoor recreational experiences and activities. The Fisher Award honors those who have demonstrated exceptional patriotism and humanitarian concerns for members of the Armed Forces and their families.

For the last five years, LEEK has provided an environment for wounded and injured service members to re-engage with outdoor activities, re-establish confidence, enjoy fellowship, receive counseling, and avail themselves of time for spiritual reflection.

LEEK provides a safe, handicapped-accessible, family-style camp environment for hunting and fishing where wounded and injured service members can assist each other through the healing process, both mentally and physically, and transition back into society. A network of volunteers consists of many military medical facilities, communities of northern Pennsylvania and western New York, Patriot Guard Riders, the Pennsylvania Game and Fish & Boat Commissions, churches, military service organizations and others.

LEEK is owned by brothers Ed and Lew Fisher and their wives Kate and Elaine. The Oswayo facility’s name comes from the first letters of their first names. Volunteers and supporters are always welcome. More information is available online at [leekpreserve.org](http://leekpreserve.org).

*(Above: A Wounded Warrior and a volunteer with LEEK Hunting and Mountain Preserve pose during a pheasant hunt last month in Oswayo. LEEK has been chosen to receive the prestigious Fisher Distinguished Civilian Humanitarian Award.)* U.S. Navy photo by Cmdr. Steven MacDonald

## Helping Veterans Transition To Labor Force

*By Julia Hearthway, Secretary, Pa. Dept. of Labor and Industry*

Pennsylvania has 937,000 veterans. Some 466,000 of them are in the labor force, either working or looking for work.

Our unemployment rate in Pennsylvania for veterans is actually lower than the general unemployment rate – 6.7 percent for veterans, whereas the state has averaged 7.5 percent. Nationally, the veterans' unemployment rate hovers at about 10 percent.

But these are just statistics. What we have in raw numbers are 31,000 unemployed Pennsylvania veterans who are looking for jobs.

Our agency sees it as our job to find every one of them a job. With that often comes the support services they may need to adjust to the civilian lifestyle.

One new program that could be very helpful is a “military translator” available on our website. A veteran can go in and give his or her job title. Each military job has a number code. The translator will automatically convert that military position to civilian terms. It will describe the skills in a form that a civilian employer will understand.

It could be logistical abilities, leadership abilities, mechanical abilities, computer abilities and so on. It will help translate for every veteran what his or her experience in the service can provide for an employer.

And we're working to refine the service so that employers can list the skill sets they need and sync that with the division of the military that has provided the same or similar training. Most of the state's 65 Pennsylvania CareerLink offices offer specialized services for veterans looking for employment opportunities.

There are hundreds of programs available in Pennsylvania. The key is getting that information out. In the CareerLink offices, each of the specialists we have on staff is familiar with veterans' services in the area, whether they are to assist in living/health needs, shelter, or employment. They are well-versed with what is available in that area. All service providers are urged to connect with your local CareerLink.

These are among the programs we are working on to ease a veteran's transition into the civilian workforce.



## Post 192 Auxiliary Falling In For Veterans



Members of the American Legion Post 192 Auxiliary in Coudersport have been especially busy in their outreach to veterans who are disabled or face other challenges. Over the holidays, Auxiliary held its third annual Help a Veteran drive (sometimes called the Pajama Drive) to collect household items for veterans in need and their families. Now, the volunteers are preparing to launch the “Adopt a Veteran” program to help vets with yard work, laundry service and other chores. A system for regular visits to veterans in hospitals or personal care homes is also in the

works. “They were there for us and we want to be there for them,” said Auxiliary president Jeanette Wragg. She acknowledged the full support of Legion Post 192 and the Sons of the American Legion. Helie Rounds, chair of the Veterans Affairs and Rehabilitation Committee, is also actively involved.



## Recent Legislation Pertaining To Pa. Veterans



Several bills affecting veterans and/or active-duty personnel have recently moved through the state legislature. Act 82 recently became law. It allows PennDOT to waive certain testing requirements for commercial driver's license applicants who are either active members or veterans of the Armed Forces and who have operated an appropriate vehicle for at least two years prior to the application. Meanwhile, the following bills have been approved by the Pennsylvania House and are awaiting consideration by the Senate:

- **Military Education Consideration:** HB 107 ensures a service member's military education and training is taken into consideration in fulfilling requirements for professional credentials.
- **Veterans Job Tax Credit:** HB 159 establishes a \$4,000 annual tax credit to taxpayers that hire veterans to work at small businesses they own.
- **Tuition Assistance for Veterans:** HB 472 provides in-state tuition rates at community colleges and state institutions of higher learning for veterans, military and civilian personnel, along with spouses and children.
- **Higher Education Accessibility:** HB 1164 requires colleges, universities and institutions of higher learning to provide current military service personnel and honorably discharged veterans with priority registration.
- **National Guard Leave:** HB 88 clarifies the law on leaves of absence for Pa. National Guard members and prohibits an employee from being required to return to duty within 18 hours of being relieved of active duty.

## VA Offering Dental Insurance Program

VA is partnering with two providers to allow eligible veterans, plus family members receiving care under the Civilian Health and Medical Program, to purchase affordable dental insurance. Vets enrolled in VA health care can choose to purchase one of the plans. This benefit is designed for veterans with no dental coverage, or those eligible for VA dental care who would like to purchase additional coverage. Participation will not affect entitlement to VA dental services and treatment. There are no eligibility limitations based on service-connected disability rating or enrollment priority assignment. People may apply online through either Delta Dental, [deltadentalvadip.org](http://deltadentalvadip.org), or MetLife, [metlife.com/vadip](http://metlife.com/vadip). Coverage begins Jan. 1, 2014. Services vary by plan and include diagnostic, preventive, surgical, emergency and endodontic/restorative treatment. Enrollment is voluntary. Participants are responsible for all premiums, which range from \$8.65 to \$52.90 per month for individual plans. Copayments and other charges may apply. Historically VA's free dental services have gone to veterans with dental problems connected to a medical condition that's certified as "service-connected." Free dental services will continue for those veterans. For more information, visit [va.gov/healthbenefits/vadip](http://va.gov/healthbenefits/vadip) or contact Delta Dental at 1-855-370-3303 or MetLife at 1-888-310-1681. Vets not enrolled in the VA health care system may call 1-877-222-8387.





## Bridge Named In Memory Of Spc. Stonemetz



Area veterans and other citizens attended an emotionally gripping Veterans Day ceremony honoring a local Vietnam War soldier who made the ultimate sacrifice for his country. U.S. Army Specialist Gerald Duane Stonemetz was memorialized with the bridge carrying Rt. 44 over the Oswayo Creek in Shinglehouse Borough being named in his honor. The ceremony,

hosted by Rep. Martin Causer (far right) and Shinglehouse American Legion Post 530, was held at the bridge site.

Among speakers, in addition to Rep. Causer, was Specialist Stonemetz's brother, Ken (right), who discussed his family's rich tradition of military service. Like others who have entered military service, Ken Stonemetz said, his brother was aware of the risks and accepted them as a condition of serving his nation. Gerald Stonemetz of Shinglehouse served in the U.S. Army and died in a vehicle crash in Vietnam on Jan. 8, 1969 at age 21. Dan Antonioli (bottom, right), representing American Legion Lost 530, recognized Specialist Stonemetz's sacrifices. Oswayo Valley High School Marching Band presented patriotic selections.



## Veterans Economic Opportunity Act (HR 2481)

The Veterans Economic Opportunity Act (H.R. 2481), now before Congress, would create an office within the VA to administer vocational, education and small business assistance programs for veterans. The bill would clarify foreclosure and refinancing protections and extend homeless veterans reintegration programs for five years. It would also expand education benefits for certain survivors of deceased service members and protect the rights of active-duty members of the military in child-custody cases when the service member is deployed.



Also in Washington, Sen. Bob Casey (D-Pa.) has introduced the Veterans Education Counseling Act of 2013. Many veterans are not aware they are eligible for educational counseling. The act directs the VA to make clear the process to qualify for Chapter 36 Educational Counseling (which all GI Bill users are entitled to) and the Chapter 31 Vocational Rehabilitation program. The measure also allows veterans to apply for counseling online, such as through the eBenefits portal, which is gradually becoming a one-stop shop for veterans as the VA continues to transition to electronic records.

## Students Reach Out To Service Members



Students in Coudersport Elementary School learned about military traditions and service during library class. They also heard about the history, traditions and modern-day observances of Decoration Day/Veterans Day. To show their appreciation for active service members, the students created holiday cards to be sent to them. Shown clockwise from bottom left are Kylie Hanna, Savannah Myers, Gavin McNamara, Jacob Tubbs, Madyson Dubots-Angood and Kaylea Empson.

## Services Expanded At Local VA Medical Clinic

Bath (N.Y.) VA Medical Center operates a clinic at Mapleview, just off Rt. 872 in Coudersport. Services are now available two days per week, Mondays and Thursdays, from 8 am to 4 pm. The clinic is staffed by personnel trained to process new enrollments; update patient information; conduct screenings; provide medication, prescription renewals and lab work; and deliver primary care and/or referrals, depending on each veteran's needs. Staff members are Jonathan Barber, medical provider and nurse practitioner; Tina Wesneski, registered nurse; and Liz Dyer, licensed practical nurse. Veterans interested in being seen at the Coudersport office should call 814-260-9342. Specialty services beyond primary care are available through the Bath center. Potter County is looking to continue building its affiliation with the Bath VA Medical Center in hopes of expanding services available locally.





## Remembering Spc. Donald Stiles



Efforts are underway to have a bridge in Potter County named as a memorial to Sp/4 Donald L. Stiles. A similar measure would name a bridge in memory of Pvt. Edwin Tubbs, who was featured in the Oct.-Dec. edition of *Potter County Veterans News*. Specialist Stiles, a Coudersport native, was the community's first fatality in Vietnam. He was killed in action in Binh Duong Province, South Vietnam (see map), on April 2, 1968. "Donnie" was an atomic demolition munitions specialist, serving with A Battery, 1st Battalion, 7th Artillery, 1st Infantry Division. He was hit by bomb fragments after stepping on a land mine. The son of Colella Stiles, Donnie was raised by his grandparents, Edward and Belle Austin Stiles, and attended Coudersport schools. He enlisted in the Army at age 17. His wife, Linda, was living in New Jersey at the time of his death. His uncle, the late Ted Stiles, recalled in 2008, "They gave him a two-week leave. He came home, got married, went back and was killed. He had taken the place of another soldier on the mission. My mother and father raised him and they thought the world of him."



## Special Flag Displayed At Gunzburger Building



A special flag is now on display in the main hallway of the Gunzburger Building in Coudersport. It was presented to the Potter County Department of Veterans Affairs by A1C Eric Delong of Coudersport. An accompanying certificate tells the story. The flag was flown onboard a C-130 throughout Afghanistan and Germany with American troops in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. It represents the American resolve following the terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on Sept. 11, 2001, and bears witness to the destruction of terrorist forces threatening the freedom of the United States and the world.

## County Working On Vietnam War Projects

Potter County Department of Veterans Affairs is compiling information on each of the county men who lost their lives in the Vietnam War. Purpose is twofold:

- To be sure they are properly memorialized at the Education Center at the Wall in Washington DC (*Potter County Veterans News*, April/June 2013)
- To prepare for a memorial service, similar to the Korean War project, as part of a Vietnam Veterans Recognition Dinner.



Details will be announced as these projects move forward. For more information, contact Will Worthington at 274-8290, extension 210.

## Reduced-Fee Hunting License Bills Passed



Two bills passed by the State Senate would offer disabled Pennsylvania veterans reduced-fee hunting and fishing licenses. Senate Bill 1102 would reduce the cost of annual fishing licenses for disabled veterans to \$1.00. Senate Bill 1090 would reduce the cost of annual hunting licenses for disabled veterans to \$1.00. Currently, Pennsylvania law allows

for free hunting and fishing licenses only for veterans who are either certified as 100-percent disabled, or who have lost the use of one of their arms or legs. Any Pennsylvania veteran eligible for disability compensation as determined by the VA would qualify for the \$1.00 licenses. Veterans certified as having a total disability would continue to qualify for free licenses. Pennsylvania currently offers \$1.00 hunting and fishing licenses to certain active-duty military personnel, as well. The bills are now before the House and are forecasted to pass in early 2014.

## Lions Clubs Recruiting Veterans



U.S. veterans have made so many great contributions and sacrificed so much to serve our country. Many service members being honorably discharged are seeking an opportunity to get involved in their communities. Lions International has launched a new initiative to welcome veterans to local clubs' ranks. Coudersport Area Lions Club is among the participants. Lions Clubs recognize that many veterans possess practical skills, leadership skills, innovative ideas, dedication, loyalty and commitment. They also understand the importance of teamwork.

As part of the initiative, veterans receive an entrance or charter fee waiver when joining a Lions club.

## 'Honoring Our Veterans' Plate Available



An "Honoring Our Veterans" license plate is now available to all Pennsylvania motor vehicle owners from PennDOT. The plate features an American flag and an eagle with the words "Honoring Our Veterans." Cost is \$35, with \$15 from each sale going to a Veterans Trust Fund administered by the Pa. Dept. of Military and Veterans Affairs to provide grants to veterans' service organizations and other veterans' causes.

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**Potter County Veterans News** is a publication of the Potter County Veterans Affairs Dept. Copies are available for download from the county's website, [pottercountypa.net](http://pottercountypa.net). For more information, contact Paul Heimel at 814-274-8290, Ext. 203.