

THE FUTURE IS BRIGHT FOR MOST COMMISSARIES, OFFICIALS EMPHASIZE

Defense Department officials are emphasizing that DoD strongly supports commissaries as an important benefit of military service and that there are no plans to close them.

John M. Molino, Deputy Undersecretary of Defense for Community and Family Policy, said, "The future of the commissary benefit is very sound, very healthy. The department is committed to maintain a commissary benefit."

Calling some recent press coverage of the commissary issue "slanted and inaccurate," Secretary Molino said the controversy goes back three years to when, shortly after arriving at the Pentagon, Secretary of Defense Donald H. Rumsfeld asked whether the Defense Department should be running a chain of grocery stores.

"We did a detailed analysis of whether or not there were other ways to deliver the commissary benefit," Secretary Molino said. "The conclusion was that the commissary needs to stay (as) something we do within the Department of Defense, even though it is outside our core competency."

WAR TROPHIES NOT ALLOWED TO BE RETURNED FROM IRAQ, AFGHANISTAN

Defense Department officials have warned service members returning home from Iraq and Afghanistan not to bring weapons, ammunition, and other prohibited items with them.

Officials say that under no circumstances can individuals take as souvenirs objects that were formerly in the possession of the enemy. "We didn't go into Iraq or Afghanistan to conquer them, but to liberate them," said Marine CAPT Bruce Frame, a Central Command spokesman. "Taking articles from those countries sends the wrong message."

2004 DIVIDENDS ARE ANNOUNCED FOR 1.5 MILLION POLICYHOLDERS

The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) has announced the distribution of more than \$517 million in dividends to 1.5 million active policyholders of veterans' life insurance.

Over the next year, veterans will receive payments on the anniversary date of their

policies with the specific dividend amount varying according to age, type of insurance, and length of time the policy has been in force.

Dividends will go only to veterans with government life insurance policies who served between 1917 and 1956. Veterans enrolled after 1956 are covered by VA term insurance programs that do not pay dividends.

The largest group receiving payments in 2004 will be 1.2 million veterans of World War II with National Service Life Insurance ("V") policies. Total payments are expected to reach \$416.8 million.

Dividends totaling \$1.8 million will be paid to about 11,000 veterans holding U.S. Government Life Insurance ("K") policies.

Nearly 200,000 Korean War era veterans who have maintained Veterans Special Life Insurance ("RS" and "W") policies can expect to receive dividends totaling \$83.9 million.

Veterans with questions about their policies may call the VA Insurance toll-free number at 1-800-669-8477.

APPLICATION DEADLINE NEARS FOR SCHOLARSHIP PROGRAM

February 18 is the deadline for the 2004 Scholarships for Military Children program which benefits Reservists, active-duty people, and retirees.

The academic scholarships, worth \$1,500 each, are provided by the Defense Commissary Agency. Now in its fourth year, the program has awarded nearly \$2.5 million to some 1,500 children of U.S. service members and retirees.

Funding comes from manufacturers and suppliers whose products are sold at military commissaries. Details are available at local commissaries.

ORGANIZATION BRIEFS RESERVISTS ON THEIR RE-EMPLOYMENT RIGHTS

The National Committee for Employer Support of the Guard and Reserve (ESGR) is briefing members of the National Guard and Reserve on their civilian reemployment rights while they are still serving in Kuwait and Iraq and preparing to return home.

"We want these people to know what their rights are and how we can help them. We believe the best place to tell them is in Kuwait, and even in Iraq, while they are

preparing to return to their homes," said Air National Guard MSGT Bob Krenke, an ESGR spokesman.

"It is a good way to get to the people when they are most concerned about reemployment issues," SGT Krenke added. "There are a lot fewer distractions over there than there are when they get to this country, when they are a lot more interested in being with their families than they are in sitting through a bunch of briefings."

The representatives are telling the Reservists about their basic reemployment rights when they return to their civilian lives. They are also telling them that the employment and reemployment rights act applies to all employers, regardless of the size of their businesses, and that it protects most part-time and probationary positions.

Here are some of the law's key provisions for returning service members:

- (1) They are entitled to prompt reemployment.
- (2) They are entitled to seniority and seniority-related benefits, including pensions, status, and rate of pay, as if they were continuously employed during their military absence.
- (3) They are entitled to immediate reinstatement of health insurance for themselves and previously-covered dependents.
- (4) They are entitled to training or retraining by their employers if necessary to qualify them for reemployment.

FORE AND AFT:

As of 24 December, there were 87,431 members of the Naval Selected Reserve; 151,399 in the Ready Reserve; and 1,530 Naval Reservists on active duty American Airlines has invited military men and women under the Iraqi Freedom Rest and Relaxation (R&R) Program to spend time between flights at the company's elegant Admirals Club facilities worldwide President Bush has directed executive departments and agencies to grant five days of uncharged administrative leave from civilian duties to federal employees returning from active duty to reserve status It is now possible for veterans and family members of deceased veterans to obtain copies of DD-214's on-line by going to the National Personnel Records Center's Web site. ⚓