

VETERANS DAY A TIME OF HONOR

Practical Laws and Policies Affecting Veterans Go Beyond Speeches

History of Veterans Day

In the United States, Veterans Day is the annual holiday to honor those who served in the armed forces and the sacrifices they made for their country.

Veterans Day began as Armistice Day on November 11, 1918, a time set aside by the United States, Great Britain and France to commemorate the ending of World War I. After World War II, it became a day of tribute to the veterans and dead of that conflict as well. In Canada, the holiday was known as Remembrance Day and in Great Britain, the Sunday nearest November 11 was proclaimed Remembrance Sunday, to honor the dead of both World Wars. After the Korean War in 1954, November 11 was officially designated as Veterans Day, in the United States, to honor all who served in the military.

The day is commemorated with parades, speeches and floral tributes laid on veterans graves or memorials. In the United States, group naturalization ceremonies have come to be an important part of the celebration as well as special services held at Arlington National Cemetery in Arlington, Virginia, the Vietnam Veterans War Memorial and in similar shrines in other countries.

However, there is also a business side to veterans affairs.

A Network for Veterans

All businesses are required to provide certain rights to those active in reserve military duty. (See sidebar.) Other companies have found ways to honor veterans in a very practical way.

One such employer is the former NYNEX, the east coast telecommunications giant covering New England and New York, which is now part of Bell Atlantic. Bell Atlantic sponsors a Veterans Advisory Board (VAB), which brings together veterans employed by the company and their families to help address the needs and problems of veterans and to recognize the contribution veterans have made to their country. The VAB is active in the entire Bell Atlantic territory, which covers 13 states and the District of Columbia. Bell Atlantic is represented by the ten IBEW unions belonging to System Council T-6. Chaired by IBEW member David Thistle, Local 2222, Boston, Massachusetts, the VAB also informs veterans of their rights under the law and the assistance programs available to them. Unlike other company organizations, the VAB consists of management and non-management employees.

The board was established in 1991, when Steve Sperman, the former VAB chairman, began networking with other veterans who had a common desire—to share their experience. The idea for the organization came to him after a discussion with a fellow worker, Pat Hanson, whom he'd known for years. During their conversation, Steve discovered that Pat had served in Pleiku during the Vietnam War, not far from where he had served. Soon after, Steve wondered how many other employees he had worked with over the years were fellow veterans. After finding that the company personnel department had incomplete information about the veterans it employed, Steve and fellow veteran Luke Magliaro located many veterans throughout NYNEX by talking to fellow employees.

Since that time, the VAB has published a Veterans Directory in which all veterans who are self-identified, are listed by branch of service. All NYNEX veterans are listed with their current company location and phone number, as well as their rank, decorations, command/unit and locations. The directory, which is being revised for the year 2000, has been used by many veterans to locate company employees with whom they served in the military. The VAB has received many letters of appreciation from veterans and their families since the directory has been published.

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Attending the dedication of a memorial park at the National Veterans Cemetery in Bourne, Massachusetts, are members of the Veterans Advisory Board at Bell Atlantic, as well as the members of the IBEW and veterans who made the event possible. The VAB donated the first memorial stone for the opening of the park.

and Ceremonies

The directory also contains useful information such as how to write for medals, lists of veterans administration offices and medical centers, how to make requests for military records as well as the company self-identification form.

The VAB has heightened the awareness of the company's workforce to the special needs of veterans:

- The organization was instrumental in ensuring that American and POW flags fly in the lobby, on the roof or on a flagpole in at least 40 major locations within the Bell Atlantic territory to remind everyone of the veterans who have sacrificed their lives to ensure that all people can live in a free county.
- Memorial plaques have been mounted in New York City, New York; Boston, Massachusetts, and Tewksbury, Massachusetts, and most corporate buildings in the former NYNEX area for former Bell Atlantic employees killed in action or who died from war-related wounds.
- A memorial was conducted for PFC Louis Willett, who, while officially employed by New York Telephone, received a Congressional Medal of Honor during the Vietnam War. Today, a bronze plaque honoring Willett is displayed at 140 West Street, New York City.

- The VAB worked endlessly with NYT and New England Telephone to get medical departments to recognize problems like Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Seminars have been held about PTSD to educate the company medical personnel as well as veterans and their co-workers.
- The VAB has worked with the Department of Veterans Affairs to apply educational veterans' benefits to the Bell Atlantic apprenticeship program.
- The VAB assisted the then-NYNEX Human Resources Department when employees were activated for service in the Gulf War. The VAB was instrumental in identifying activated employees, establishing a hotline for reservists' and their families' questions, informing activated employees of their extended benefits and organizing Welcome Home Celebrations. NYNEX was awarded the Department of Defense Desert Storm Certificate of Employee Recognition for its support of activated troops.

For further information about the Veterans Advisory Board, contact David Thistle at 1-800-286-4838 or 978-975-7398. ☐

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'Military Mail' Campaign

Interested in sending greetings of cheer to U.S. service men and women based overseas and throughout the United States? *Friends of Our Troops*, a nonprofit organization based in Fayetteville, North Carolina, annually conducts a Military Mail campaign that generates and distributes morale-boosting cards and letters from thousands of people across the country to U.S. troops serving in all branches of the military.

The present mail campaign was started by a member of the former Brotherhood of Railway Clerks (now the Transportation-Communications International Union), as a continuation of the Vietnam Mail Call program. Groups of all kinds participate by gathering to write letters, which are then packaged together and mailed to the Military Mail office for processing and distribution to the troops by military officers, Red Cross personnel and service organizations.

Mailings are conducted three times a year—at Christmas, Valentine's Day and mid-summer. For detailed information about how to participate, send a first-class postage stamp (no return envelope required) for a copy of the Military Mail-Gram to: Friends of Our Troops, P.O. Box 65408, Fayetteville, North Carolina, 28306-5408. ☐

VETERANS DAY

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Reservists: Know Your Rights Under the USERRA

The air war in the Balkans may be over, but the need for military reservists is greater than ever.

Since the end of the Persian Gulf War, the U.S. active-duty ranks have been thinned by a combination of defense budget cuts and personnel leaving their military careers for a life in the private sector. Reservists are increasingly being recalled to active duty to perform these military jobs.

Employee/reservists and employers should be aware of the Uniformed Services Employment and Reemployment Rights Act (USERRA) of 1994, which strengthens and clarifies the Veterans Reemployment Rights (VRR) Statute of 1940.

The last time U.S. employers dealt with a large-scale activation of military reservists was nearly ten years ago during the Persian Gulf War. A sizable portion of the half-million troops who answered the bugle call were reservists

who left behind families and careers to face the Iraqis in a desert showdown. As thousands of men and women redeployed home at the war's end, some faced job problems as a direct result of their military service. One of the objectives of USERRA is to prevent such occurrences. It covers all employers, including small employers and federal, state and local governments.

USERRA protects returning service members, reservists and National Guard personnel from discrimination based on their active military duty or training commitment. The law covers past, present or future military obligations. It extends this job protection to most areas of employment, including hiring, promotion, re-employment, termination and benefits. Upon their return to civilian employment after active duty, service members, reservists and National Guard members must be reemployed in the same job they left—or a similar one—with the same seniority, status and pay they would have attained had they not been absent for service. The law also requires that reasonable efforts be made (such as training or retraining) to enable returning service members to refresh or upgrade their skills to help them qualify for reemployment. In addition, the law

clarifies health and pension plan coverage for service members.

The law expands to five years the cumulative length of time that an individual employee may be absent from work for military duty and retain reemployment rights. There are some important exceptions to the five-year limit, but employees should keep careful records of the length of their military service to document their rights.

USERRA provides enhanced protection for disabled veterans, requiring employers to make reasonable efforts to accommodate the disability. Under this law, service members recovering from injuries sustained on active duty may have up to two years to recover before returning to their jobs.

The U.S. Department of Labor administers the USERRA through its Veterans Employment and Training Service (VETS). VETS provides assistance to individuals who experience service-related problems with their civilian employment. VETS also maintains a web-based Employee/Employer Advisor to answer questions about the rights and responsibilities of both employees and employers under USERRA. For additional information, visit the web site at www.dol.gov/elaws/userra.htm

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