



CMSGT LANI BURNETT, USAF (RET.) • REA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

Schooling the Nation

I'm extremely pleased that an article on the Montgomery GI Bill in this issue of *THE OFFICER* (page 28) was authored by Air Force Reservist and REA member SSgt Kris Winder. His comprehensive "lessons learned" report will be valuable to those currently in school or planning to use MGIB benefits in the future. Unlike me, who realized after retiring that I didn't have any education benefits to use, you should arm yourself with information to take better care of yourself. If I knew then what I know now!

Historically, education benefits have been used to address significant changes or events within the military. Today Congress believes we are at the precipice of another of those moments. At a Feb. 28 hearing of the House Armed Service Committee, Subcommittee on Military Personnel, subcommittee Chairman Rep. Vic Snyder (D-Ark.) paid homage to the G.I. Bill, stating that it had established America's middle class. Higher education was never the same after the original bill put the possibility of receiving a degree into the hands of many Americans who previously would never have been able to attend college. Rep. Snyder himself took advantage of his military education benefits to earn a degree.

Education benefits for the military began in 1944 when the Servicemen's Readjustment Act (also known as the G.I. Bill) provided education benefits for returning World War II veterans. This bill came at a crucial time: still recovering from the Great Depression and with World War II ending, the country faced an economic setback with an influx of separating veterans looking for employment.

Two decades later, the next major impact to education for the military occurred with passage of the Veterans Readjustment Benefits Act of 1966. It extended education benefits to veterans who served during times of war and peace. This was an important piece of legislation in response to the Vietnam War and the need to encourage the American public's support.

Another 10 years passed before the Reserve and Guard were provided an education benefit. The late Rep. G.V. "Sonny" Montgomery, as chairman of the House Committee on Veterans' Affairs, gained support for the Veterans' Educational Assistance Act in order to

bolster the all-volunteer force and encourage recruitment and retention.

Now, 25 years later, members of Congress in many hearings have almost universally recognized that the military landscape has changed and the operational use of the Guard and Reserve warrants a change in benefits. Said Rep. Snyder at the February hearing: "It is necessary to modernize the Reserve Montgomery GI Bill to reflect a changing military. We now have a Total Force, and the Guard and Reserve are no longer just a strategic reserve to be called up in case of a global war. They have become an operational force on whom we rely constantly. Members of the Guard and Reserve Components of our Armed Forces continue to make an essential contribution to support our missions in Afghanistan, Iraq, and elsewhere around the world. However, although Reservists are being called to duty and mobilized for an average of 18 months, when they leave the Reserves they do not receive the same educational benefits as the Active Duty Soldiers, Sailors, Airmen and Marines that they serve alongside."

Rep. Snyder also discussed the disparity in benefit increases despite the "nation's increased reliance upon our Selected Reserve.... The value of their standard MGIB benefits has fallen over the last 20 years from 47 percent to 29 percent of Active Duty benefits." The MGIB benefit is also the only benefit Selected Reserve members cannot access once they separate from service.

Rep. Stephanie Herseth (D-S.D.), chairwoman of the Committee on Veterans Affairs, Subcommittee on Economic Opportunity, has voiced concern that eligible members were losing the use of their benefit because it had become so complicated. A bill introduced by Rep. Snyder intends to clarify the benefit and put in place a standard benefit adjustment so Guard and Reserve members will see their entitlement keep pace with increasing education costs.

MGIB benefits are certainly a recruiting and retention incentive. With education benefits you and the military benefit by having an educated force. So, as you support this nation, REA will continue to work toward making improvements and keeping you informed in this area and others affecting your life. ▀