

Veterans Group

For more information, go to nalc.org/veterans

A special note about the November issue

In the November issue of *The Postal Record*, we will name all of the members of the Veterans Group to thank them for their service.

To make sure that your name is included, take action now and join at nalc.org/veterans. If you are a member of the group and wish not to have your name listed, please email your request to veteransgroup@nalc.org.

Rights and benefits for veterans with ALS

Seventy years ago, baseball legend Lou Gehrig gave his name to a mysterious and rare disease called amyotrophic lateral sclerosis (ALS). Today, we know that, besides being a hero, Gehrig had something else in common with the men and women serving in the armed forces of our country—his disease.

ALS is a neuromuscular disease that affects up to 30,000 people. It is almost always fatal and, currently, there is no known cure. ALS causes muscle weakness, muscle stiffness and atrophy—which is the partial or complete wasting away of a part of the body.

Early symptoms of ALS may include:

- difficulty swallowing
- cramping
- stiffness of affected muscles
- muscle weakness affecting an arm or a leg
- slurred speech

As the disease progresses, most people lose their ability to walk or use their arms and hands. They also lose the ability to talk and swallow food.

The Institute of Medicine reported that U.S. military veterans appear to have an increased risk of developing ALS. The report recommends additional research to further assess the relationship between ALS and military service, and to determine what factors of military service may cause the disease.

NALC learned of this connection from the late Lorain, OH Branch 583 member and Army veteran **Bruce Barnard**, who had ALS and wanted other veterans to know about the benefits offered by the Veterans Administration (VA). (See the January 2017 *Postal Record*.)

Existing evidence supports the fact that people who have served in the military are at a higher risk of developing ALS and dying from the disease than those with no history of military service. The study demonstrates this fact to be

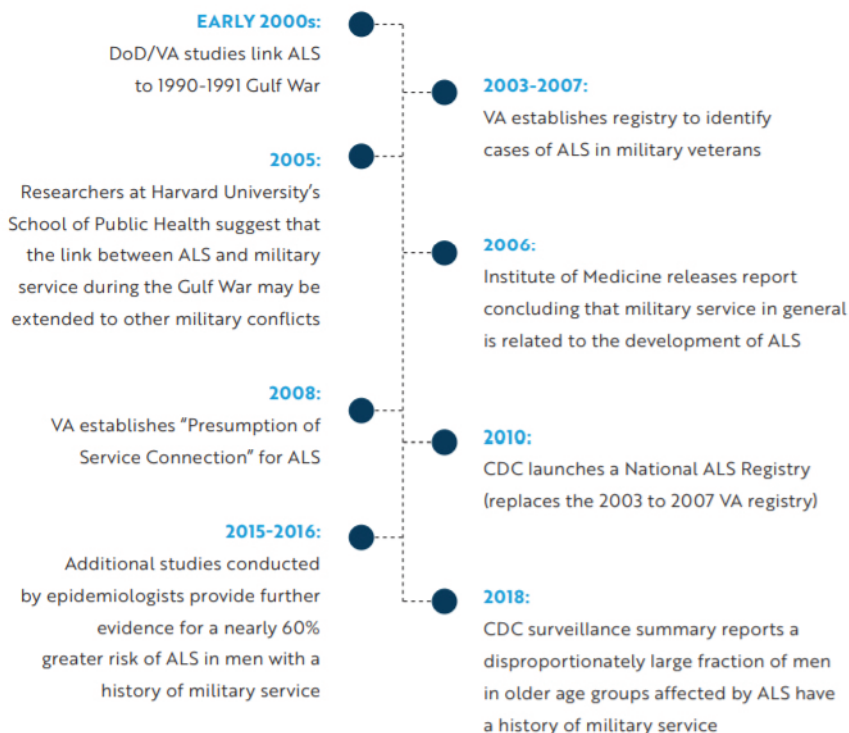
true: If you serve in the military, regardless of the branch of service, regardless of whether you served in the Persian Gulf War, Vietnam, Korea or World War II, and regardless of whether you served during a time of peace or a time of war, you are at a higher risk of developing ALS than if you had not served in the military. Why are those who have served or are serving at a higher risk of ALS? And what are we, as a nation, going to do about it?

For veterans who have been diagnosed with ALS and who have been determined eligible (eligibility for benefits is determined by the Veterans Benefits Administration), the Veterans Benefit Administration provides a monthly monetary compensation. Af-

ter evidence showed a growing number of veterans affected with ALS, the VA defined ALS as a service-related condition in 2008 and provided benefits to help veterans receive the care they need. Today, an eligible veteran diagnosed with ALS is presumed to have a service-related condition and is granted a service-connected rating.

Thanks to so many people's hard work, ALS has been listed as a disease entitled to presumptive service connection. What does this mean? If a service member is diagnosed with ALS, their condition is presumed to have occurred during, or been aggravated by, military service and therefore they are entitled to service connection and full benefits.

TIMELINE OF REPORTS LINKING ALS TO MILITARY SERVICE





Rights and benefits for veterans with ALS (continued)

You can see the ALS guide for veterans at youralsguide.com/veterans-with-als.html.

Thanks to your service, you should qualify for generous benefits that will help pay for the majority of your expenses associated with ALS.

According to 38 CFR Sec. 3.318: “[T]he development of amyotrophic lateral sclerosis manifested at any time after discharge or release from active military, naval, or air service is sufficient to establish service connection for that disease.”

These benefits are available because the VA listed ALS as a service-connected disease in 2008. Military veterans—particularly of the Gulf War—are twice as likely as civilians to be diagnosed with ALS.

If you have been diagnosed with ALS, served in the U.S. military for 90 or more consecutive days of active duty and have been honorably discharged, you will likely be eligible for service-connected benefits. If you qualify, you can receive numerous benefits through the VA, including:

- **VA ALS clinics**—visits with ALS specialists at your nearest VA medical center
- **Durable medical equipment**—devices for your respiratory, mobility, communication, daily living and other needs
- **Disability compensation**—a monthly tax-free payment that you can use as you wish
- **Specially-adapted housing grant (SAH)**—money to help build, buy or remodel a home that meets your disability requirements
- **Automobile grant**—a one-time payment of up to \$20,000 to buy a disability-accessible vehicle
- **Aid and attendance allowance**—additional money to help pay for care at home

The ALS Association goes into greater detail on service-connected benefits at alsa.org/als-care/veterans/service-connected-benefits.html.

VA medical centers and outpatient clinics around the country provide veterans with access to medical care. A growing number of VA medical centers have ALS clinics with teams of ALS specialists who provide coordinated care for veterans. Attending one of these clinics can extend your life and improve your quality of life.

If you have been diagnosed with ALS and have 90 days of continuous active duty, you should be eligible for service-connected benefits. But you cannot make an appointment with ALS clinics at the VA until you have been approved for service-connected benefits and enrolled in the VA system. We recommend taking these steps:

1. To apply for your service-connected benefits, we strongly recommend reaching out to a veteran’s service organization like the Paralyzed Veterans of America (PVA) or Disabled American Veterans (DAV). Navigating the VA system on your own can be a confusing and frustrating process. PVA or DAV will become your advocate—they will explain your benefits, answer questions, give you tips, help you with paperwork and expedite your application, which may take 90 days or so to get approved.
2. While waiting for your benefits, you should get connected with either your local ALS Association or Muscular Dystrophy Association chapter. Ask for recommendations for an ALS clinic outside the VA, make an appointment, and begin attending the clinic. Follow the team’s recommendations and do not stop attending until you fully

transition to the VA. Search for an ALS Clinic at youralsguide.com/als-clinics-directory.html for an ALS clinic near you.

3. When the VA accepts your application and approves your service-connected benefits, you will automatically get an appointment within 30 days. You will also be assigned a social worker/case manager and primary doctor.

You can find details on ALS treatment and other benefits on the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs website at va.gov.

I want to thank you, my brothers and sisters, for taking off one uniform and putting on another to serve this country. So when you raise money for MDA, remember it could be going to one of your fellow NALC members who has served or is serving in the military. Thank you, again, for allowing me to serve you, my brothers and sisters.

This month’s column was written by Assistant to the President for Community Services Christina Vela Davidson.

Join the NALC Veterans Group

The NALC Veterans Group is designed to provide NALC members—both active and retired letter carriers—who are also military veterans the ability to connect with fellow NALC veterans and stay informed on issues of importance to letter carrier veterans. It is free to join.

Members receive a pin as a symbol of gratitude for your military service and membership in NALC.

If you are interested in joining the group, complete the sign-up card at nalc.org/veterans.