

Ratings

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The Army and Air Force had 12-point gaps. But the difference was most stark in the Navy — 39 percent of injured officers got ratings of 50 percent or higher, compared to 22 percent of injured enlisted members.

Those numbers may reflect a greater deference shown to officers going through the system, as well as the possibility that officers are more knowledgeable about the system and can better advocate for themselves.

Senior officers, however, lay the blame not on the people operating the system, but on the system itself. They say convoluted disability ratings charts and regulations combine to form a bureaucratic thicket that has forced soldiers recovering from war wounds received in Iraq and Afghanistan to fight a new war in Washington.

But those explanations don't account for what some troops believe were intentional decisions to leave them with lower disability ratings than they think they deserved.

And they don't explain why, as Army Chief of Staff Gen. Peter Schoomaker said, a "perfect" case took at least six months to get through the Army's medical and

DISABILITY RETIREMENTS, 2003-05

An analysis of military disability retirement decisions from 2003, the year the Iraq war started, through 2005, the latest year for which data is available, shows that officers get higher percentage disability ratings — and thus a higher percentage of their basic pay in retirement — than enlisted personnel in every service, by a significant margin. The proportions of officers and enlisted members who received ratings of 40 percent and below, and 50 percent and above, by service, from 2003 through 2005:

Disability ratings	Officer	Enlisted
Army		
40% and below	67%	79%
50% and above	33%	21%
Navy		
40% and below	61%	78%
50% and above	39%	22%
Marine Corps		
40% and below	70%	80%
50% and above	30%	20%
Air Force		
40% and below	63%	75%
50% and above	37%	25%

Source: Defense Department Office of the Actuary, Military Times calculations

physical evaluation board processes even before the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan began, while the Navy completed processing most

of its cases in just two months — using the same disability charts and rules.

"At the end of the day," Army Vice Chief of Staff Gen. Richard Cody acknowledged in a recent congressional hearing, "it looks unfair, and quite frankly, we're being stingy as a nation."

A bureaucratic mess

In the wake of the Walter Reed Army Medical Center controversy — which has exploded into calls for a review of the entire military health system and particularly its disability evaluation processes — Sen. Carl Levin, D-Mich., chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, has proposed reopening all past military disability cases for review.

That could provide thousands of troops with the chance to increase their disability ratings. But in an already-overwhelmed system, the results could be disastrous — and expensive.

"If they admit they're wrong, they've got thousands of cases to go through — billions and billions of dollars," said Army Lt. Col. Mike Parker, who began sounding the alarm on the problems more than a year ago.

Yet the numbers seem to beg for a fresh look. For example, the Army had 5,500 more soldiers going through the physical evalu-



SHEILA VEMMER/STAFF

Army Surgeon General Lt. Gen. Kevin C. Kiley and former commander of Walter Reed, Maj. Gen. George W. Weightman, testify before the national security subcommittee of the House Oversight and Government Reform Committee.

ation board process in 2005 than in 2001 — but only 79 more soldiers were placed on permanent disability retirement in 2005 than in 2001.

Cody said soldiers face a confusing bureaucratic mess for a variety of reasons, not least of which is that their disability ratings are based on the degree to which their injuries prevent them from serving in uniform, not the degree to which the injuries might prevent them from living a seminormal civilian life — a distinction poorly understood among troops.


"If you're lower-enlisted, you'll

probably fare better from the VA," Cody said.

But Parker and others argue the issue can be larger than that: Those with multiple injuries get disability ratings based on only one of those injuries — and many say it tends to be the one that merits the lowest rating.


For example, Army Sgt. Michael Pinero is going blind. He must wear contact lenses not so that he can see, but to hold the shape of his eyes. "He's nondeployable because of the contacts," said Ron

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