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negative evidence which does not satisfactorily prove or disprove the claim. It is a substantial doubt and one within the range of probability as distinguished from pure speculation or remote possibility. It is not a means of reconciling actual conflict or a contradiction in the evidence. Mere suspicion or doubt as to the truth of any statements submitted, as distinguished from impeachment or contradiction by evidence or known facts, is not justifiable basis for denying the application of the reasonable doubt doctrine if the entire, complete record otherwise warrants invoking this doctrine. The reasonable doubt doctrine is also applicable even in the absence of official records, particularly if the basic incident allegedly arose under combat, or similarly strenuous conditions, and is consistent with the probable results of such known hardships.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501)

[50 FR 34458, Aug. 26, 1985, as amended at 66 FR 45630, Aug. 29, 2001]

§ 3.103 Procedural due process and appellate rights.

(a) *Statement of policy.* Every claimant has the right to written notice of the decision made on his or her claim, the right to a hearing, and the right of representation. Proceedings before VA are *ex parte* in nature, and it is the obligation of VA to assist a claimant in developing the facts pertinent to the claim and to render a decision which grants every benefit that can be supported in law while protecting the interests of the Government. The provisions of this section apply to all claims for benefits and relief, and decisions thereon, within the purview of this part 3.

(b) *The right to notice—(1) General.* Claimants and their representatives are entitled to notice of any decision made by VA affecting the payment of benefits or the granting of relief. Such notice shall clearly set forth the decision made, any applicable effective date, the reason(s) for the decision, the right to a hearing on any issue involved in the claim, the right of representation and the right, as well as the necessary procedures and time limits, to initiate an appeal of the decision.

(2) *Advance notice and opportunity for hearing.* Except as otherwise provided in paragraph (b)(3) of this section, no award of compensation, pension or dependency and indemnity compensation shall be terminated, reduced or otherwise adversely affected unless the beneficiary has been notified of such adverse action and has been provided a period of 60 days in which to submit evidence for the purpose of showing that the adverse action should not be taken.

(3) *Exceptions.* In lieu of advance notice and opportunity for a hearing, VA will send a written notice to the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary at the same time it takes an adverse action under the following circumstances:

(i) An adverse action based solely on factual and unambiguous information or statements as to income, net worth, or dependency or marital status that the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary provided to VA in writing or orally (under the procedures set forth in § 3.217(b)), with knowledge or notice that such information would be used to calculate benefit amounts.

(ii) An adverse action based upon the beneficiary's or fiduciary's failure to return a required eligibility verification report.

(iii) Evidence reasonably indicates that a beneficiary is deceased. However, in the event that VA has received a death certificate, a terminal hospital report verifying the death of a beneficiary or a claim for VA burial benefits, no notice of termination (contemporaneous or otherwise) will be required.

(iv) An adverse action based upon a written and signed statement provided by the beneficiary to VA renouncing VA benefits (see § 3.106 on renouncement).

(v) An adverse action based upon a written statement provided to VA by a veteran indicating that he or she has returned to active service, the nature of that service, and the date of reentry into service, with the knowledge or notice that receipt of active service pay precludes concurrent receipt of VA compensation or pension (see § 3.654 regarding active service pay).

(vi) An adverse action based upon a garnishment order issued under 42 U.S.C. 659(a).

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501(a))

(4) *Restoration of benefits.* VA will restore retroactively benefits that were reduced, terminated, or otherwise adversely affected based on oral information or statements if within 30 days of the date on which VA issues the notification of adverse action the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary asserts that the adverse action was based upon information or statements that were inaccurate or upon information that was not provided by the beneficiary or his or her fiduciary. This will not preclude VA from taking subsequent action that adversely affects benefits.

(c) *The right to a hearing.* (1) Upon request, a claimant is entitled to a hearing at any time on any issue involved in a claim within the purview of part 3 of this chapter, subject to the limitations described in § 20.1304 of this chapter with respect to hearings in claims which have been certified to the Board of Veterans Appeals for appellate review. VA will provide the place of hearing in the VA office having original jurisdiction over the claim or at the VA office nearest the claimant's home having adjudicative functions, or, subject to available resources and solely at the option of VA, at any other VA facility or federal building at which suitable hearing facilities are available. VA will provide one or more employees who have original determinative authority of such issues to conduct the hearing and be responsible for establishment and preservation of the hearing record. Hearings in connection with proposed adverse actions and appeals shall be held before one or more VA employees having original determinative authority who did not participate in the proposed action or the decision being appealed. All expenses incurred by the claimant in connection with the hearing are the responsibility of the claimant.

(2) The purpose of a hearing is to permit the claimant to introduce into the record, *in person*, any available evidence which he or she considers material and any arguments or contentions with respect to the facts and applicable

law which he or she may consider pertinent. All testimony will be under oath or affirmation. The claimant is entitled to produce witnesses, but the claimant and witnesses are expected to be present. The Veterans Benefits Administration will not normally schedule a hearing for the sole purpose of receiving argument from a representative. It is the responsibility of the VA employee or employees conducting the hearings to explain fully the issues and suggest the submission of evidence which the claimant may have overlooked and which would be of advantage to the claimant's position. To assure clarity and completeness of the hearing record, questions which are directed to the claimant and to witnesses are to be framed to explore fully the basis for claimed entitlement rather than with an intent to refute evidence or to discredit testimony. In cases in which the nature, origin, or degree of disability is in issue, the claimant may request visual examination by a physician designated by VA and the physician's observations will be read into the record.

(Authority: 38 U.S.C. 501)

(d) *Submission of evidence.* Any evidence whether documentary, testimonial, or in other form, offered by the claimant in support of a claim and any issue a claimant may raise and any contention or argument a claimant may offer with respect thereto are to be included in the records.

(e) *The right to representation.* Subject to the provisions of §§ 14.626 through 14.637 of this title, claimants are entitled to representation of their choice at every stage in the prosecution of a claim.

(f) *Notification of decisions.* The claimant or beneficiary and his or her representative will be notified in writing of decisions affecting the payment of benefits or granting relief. All notifications will advise the claimant of the reason for the decision; the date the decision will be effective; the right to a hearing subject to paragraph (c) of this section; the right to initiate an appeal by filing a Notice of Disagreement which will entitle the individual to a Statement of the Case for assistance in perfecting an appeal; and the periods in

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which an appeal must be initiated and perfected (See part 20 of this chapter, on appeals). Further, any notice that VA has denied a benefit sought will include a summary of the evidence considered.

(Authority:38 U.S.C. 501, 1115, 1506, 5104.)

[55 FR 13527, Apr. 11, 1990; 55 FR 17530, Apr. 25, 1990, as amended at 55 FR 20148, May 15, 1990; 55 FR 25308, June 21, 1990; 57 FR 56993, Dec. 2, 1992; 58 FR 16360, Mar. 26, 1993; 58 FR 59366, Nov. 9, 1993; 59 FR 6218, Feb. 10, 1994; 59 FR 6901, Feb. 14, 1994; 66 FR 56613, Nov. 9, 2001]

§ 3.104 Finality of decisions.

(a) A decision of a duly constituted rating agency or other agency of original jurisdiction shall be final and binding on all field offices of the Department of Veterans Affairs as to conclusions based on the evidence on file at the time VA issues written notification in accordance with 38 U.S.C. 5104. A final and binding agency decision shall not be subject to revision on the same factual basis except by duly constituted appellate authorities or except as provided in § 3.105 and § 3.2600 of this part.

(b) Current determinations of line of duty, character of discharge, relationship, dependency, domestic relations questions, homicide, and findings of fact of death or presumptions of death made in accordance with existing instructions, and by application of the same criteria and based on the same facts, by either an Adjudication activity or an Insurance activity are binding one upon the other in the absence of clear and unmistakable error.

[29 FR 1462, Jan. 29, 1964, as amended at 29 FR 7547, June 12, 1964; 56 FR 65846, Dec. 19, 1991; 66 FR 21874, May 2, 2001]

§ 3.105 Revision of decisions.

The provisions of this section apply except where an award was based on an act of commission or omission by the payee, or with his or her knowledge (§ 3.500(b)); there is a change in law or a Department of Veterans Affairs issue, or a change in interpretation of law or a Department of Veterans Affairs issue (§ 3.114); or the evidence establishes that service connection was clearly illegal. The provisions with respect to the date of discontinuance of benefits

are applicable to running awards. Where the award has been suspended, and it is determined that no additional payments are in order, the award will be discontinued effective date of last payment.

(a) *Error*. Previous determinations which are final and binding, including decisions of service connection, degree of disability, age, marriage, relationship, service, dependency, line of duty, and other issues, will be accepted as correct in the absence of clear and unmistakable error. Where evidence establishes such error, the prior decision will be reversed or amended. For the purpose of authorizing benefits, the rating or other adjudicative decision which constitutes a reversal of a prior decision on the grounds of clear and unmistakable error has the same effect as if the corrected decision had been made on the date of the reversed decision. Except as provided in paragraphs (d) and (e) of this section, where an award is reduced or discontinued because of administrative error or error in judgment, the provisions of § 3.500(b)(2) will apply.

(b) *Difference of opinion*. Whenever an adjudicative agency is of the opinion that a revision or an amendment of a previous decision is warranted, a difference of opinion being involved rather than a clear and unmistakable error, the proposed revision will be recommended to Central Office. However, a decision may be revised under § 3.2600 without being recommended to Central Office.

(c) *Character of discharge*. A determination as to character of discharge or line of duty which would result in discontinued entitlement is subject to the provisions of paragraph (d) of this section.

(d) *Severance of service connection*. Subject to the limitations contained in §§ 3.114 and 3.957, service connection will be severed only where evidence establishes that it is clearly and unmistakably erroneous (the burden of proof being upon the Government). (Where service connection is severed because of a change in or interpretation of a law or Department of Veterans Affairs issue, the provisions of § 3.114 are for application.) A change in diagnosis