[EDITORIALS]

Valid Ebola concerns

More than 500 U.S. troops are in Liberia, conducting humanitarian missions in response to the Ebola epidemic. Nearly 3,000 more are being deployed. President Obama says reservists and National Guardsmen will be needed for Operation United Assistance, aiming to ease the crisis as cases there number into the thousands and more are expected in the coming days.

On the homefront, a Marine who flew on an airplane with an infected nurse voluntarily entered quarantine. A sick tourist outside the Pentagon triggered another scare.

Fears and confusion over Ebola have quickly become an issue among military families. During the Association of the U.S. Army’s annual meeting, many spouses and family members expressed concern over how the military was involved in the Ebola response and what health risks their loved ones faced overseas.

These are understandable questions that all the services must do a better job of answering. Military officials have been quick to point out that service members are not working directly with sick patients and are at a low risk of contracting the disease. Most of the work involves building treatment centers and an equipment-staging base in Senegal, and deployed soldiers are being trained in precautionary measures and equipped with personal protection.

Even so, there is an inherent risk with every deployment a soldier makes, and this one is no different. Leaders cannot dismiss the worries of troops and family members and must make clear communication with them a top priority.

Who’s kidding whom?

The next time you hear a four-star shine to Congress about how military pay and benefits are wreaking havoc on the defense budget and must be rolled back, think to yourself about this issue buried deep in the news mix last week.

According to the Washington Post, a few years ago the Defense Department spent nearly half a billion dollars of U.S. taxpayer money to buy 20 Italian cargo planes for the Afghan Air Force. The planes turned out to be highly defective, with problems in performance, maintenance and spares. Sixteen were sold for scrap — at a return of 6 cents a pound. The others are parked at a U.S. air base in Germany and likely will never see service.

DoD spent $486 million on the planes, junked most of them, and recouped just a paltry $32,000. But it’s you, Pfc. Jones, and your costly benefits, that are destroying the defense budget.

In truth, the military-industrial complex about which President Eisenhower warned the nation decades ago is in full flower. DoD wastes this kind of money on hardware all the time; it’s now a collective $400 billion over initial cost estimates on current weapons acquisition portfolio.

And according to Watchdog.org, the major defense contractors that profit so handsomely from these overruns shower lawmakers with about $65 million a year in lobbying cash. So forget about Congress providing any fixes.

Unfortunately, the only thing likely to alter this rigged game is troops voting with their feet — as they did in the ’90s, the last era in which defense leaders habitually squeezed pay and benefits, to the point of sending recruiting and retention off the cliff. It took many years, great effort and a lot of money to fix that damage.

At a time when security threats are multiplying around the globe at a frightening rate, what a disservice the brass would do to service members — and the nation — if they shortsightedly repeated that glaring mistake.

[LETTERS]

Community members take a pause during a ceremony at Carlisle Barracks, Pa., to dedicate a youth center named in honor of a fallen soldier from the area. An Army War College professor writes of the community’s spirit of service.

ONE TOWN’S ARMY PRIDE

The transition from summer to fall seasons is always bittersweet. It is especially poignant for members of Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania, as we recall the service and sacrifices of those who have been a part of our community. In August, Maj. Gen. Harold Greene (“Harry” to us) became the most senior U.S. casualty while deployed since the Sept. 11 attacks.

Although Harry was no longer assigned to Carlisle Barracks after his 2003 graduation from the Army War College, his wife, Sue, remained part of our faculty team for several years until her military retirement.

Maj. Gen. Greene was laid to rest in the same Section 60 of Arlington Cemetery as Sgt. Patrick Hawkins, a 2007 graduate of Carlisle High School, who was killed in Afghanistan as he rushed to aid his comrades.

His parents — retired Col. Roy and fiercely supportive mother Sheila — have remained an integral part of our community. In September, they joined in the dedication of Carlisle Barracks’ new Sgt. Andrew H. McConnell Youth Center.

Andrew was the first of our military community to fall in Afghanistan in September 2009. His father, Scott — a retired colonel and former Army War College staff member — and sister Amelia spoke of his enduring legacy with Carlisle Barracks families.

Four other fallen service members who called the area home died in Iraq: Maj. Wesley J. Hinkley, Staff Sgt. Kimberly A. Voelz and Marine Lance Cpl. Nicholas B. Morrison hailed from Carlisle, and Sgt. Timothy Hayes fell near Newville home. A stretch of Route 233 in Cumberland County was renamed in his honor.

These soldiers and their families were on my mind as I watched the Army’s Spirit of America show in Hershey. This pageant affirms that the history of the Army is inseparable from the history of our nation. I was deeply moved by the talent, discipline and diversity of the soldiers from the 3rd Infantry Regiment and the U.S. Army Band — “Pershing’s Own.”

I envisioned a young Andrew and Patrick accompanying their fathers to such a show. They and their families, and dual-military couples like Harry and Sue, are role models to the next generation of citizens who will fill the ranks of our armed forces.

Such families and others embody the true spirit of America. It is they who inspire our sons and daughters to serve the nation and to offer the “last full measure of devotion,” as Abraham Lincoln said, to its ideals.

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