

Top enlisted retirees push back on COLA cuts

By Patricia Kime Staff writer

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Kent and Campa MWM 20130109

**Top row: Carlton Kent, Charles Bowen, Joe Campa.
Bottom row: Jack Tilley, Jim Roy, Vince Patton (Staff
and file photos)**

Chip Hoynes retired from the Coast Guard in 2007, landing a high-paying job with a defense contractor in the same field he worked in on active duty.

But several years later, the company went bankrupt, and Hoynes, a former chief operations specialist, found himself jobless. After a few stints doing defense contracting work, he joined Home Depot, but the entry-level position didn't match the 22-year veteran's expectations for responsibility,

challenge or remuneration.

He left the big-box store and has been job-hunting ever since.

Hoynes and his wife, who live in Dawsonville, Ga., rely on his \$1,600-a-month military retirement pay (after taxes, health care and insurance payments) and her small retail salary to pay the bills.

But in a town where the median home price is more than \$200,000 and a gallon of propane heating fuel shot up this year from \$1.90 to \$3.25 a gallon, the buying power of Hoynes' pension doesn't go far.

"We definitely aren't living high on the hog here," Hoynes said.

If the cost-of-living adjustment reduction to military retired pay included in the Bipartisan Budget Act goes into effect in December 2015, the retired chief, now 50, stands to lose as much as \$55,000 in retirement pay over his lifetime.

The forfeiture doesn't sit well with Hoynes or many of the more than 840,000 working-age retirees who will see a 1-percentage-point cut to their annual retirement pay increases starting in 2016.

It also doesn't impress six retired sergeants major, master chiefs and chief master sergeants who spoke to Military Times on behalf of those who will be affected if the cuts are not repealed by Congress. They are:

Retired Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Roy

Retired Sergeant Major of the Marine Corps Carlton Kent

Retired Master Chief Petty Officer of the Navy (SW/FMF) Joe Campa

Retired Sergeant Major of the Army Jack Tilley

Retired Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Charles “Skip” Bowen

Retired Master Chief Petty Officer of the Coast Guard Vince Patton

“You don’t join the military to get rich. There are a lot of sacrifices. There are PCS moves. There are bullets flying overhead. We’re still fighting a war, and now we are talking about reducing the COLA? I don’t get it,” recently retired Chief Master Sergeant of the Air Force James Roy said.

In interviews, Roy and the others denounced the reductions, calling them unfair to the average enlisted troops who often struggle to find decent-paying jobs when they leave the service.

The six senior enlisted leaders said they decided to speak out after four retired generals and flag officers issued a statement Jan. 13 voicing support for the cuts.

Writing for the Bipartisan Policy Center, retired Marine Gen. James L. Jones, retired Marine Maj. Gen. Arnold Punaro, retired Air Force Gen. Chuck Wald and retired Navy Adm. Greg Johnson said the planned reduction, which they later described in an op-ed piece in The Hill newspaper as “modest and reasonable reform,” is “an important first step in tackling” rising military personnel costs.

“Very generous health care and pension benefits for able-bodied, working age (38-62) military retirees — benefits that have no parallel in either the private or public sectors — cannot remain the same without causing damage to our war-fighting ability in an era of constrained resources,” they wrote in the editorial.

But the senior enlisted advisers said the pending changes are an assault on what they consider a benefit they’ve already earned — the promise of retirement pay that will keep up with inflation.

“I’ve been in and out of Afghanistan 16 times ... and was fighting in the streets of Saigon when I was 18 years old. When you have people like myself who have dedicated our lives to the military and then they want to start cutting on benefits, it’s sort of unfair,” Tilley said.

“I think people inside the [Capital] Beltway forget that most military retirees are not making huge amounts of money,” Bowen said. “They are working day-to-day jobs just to get by.”

The enlisted leaders argue that the changes to retirement have shaken the foundation of those currently serving and worry the legislation could damage readiness and retention.

Without people, they said, there would be no one to run the hardware the Pentagon wrangles to fund or fight wars.

“The mission is always going to be first, but you can’t complete a mission without taking care of your people first. There’s many places they can cut the budget vice going after military personnel,” Kent said.

According to Military Times calculations, a service member who retires as an E-7 with 22 years of service would see an average loss of \$100,000 by the time he or she reached age 62, while an O-5 stands to lose \$121,000.

Of the enlisted leaders who spoke out, Tilley would be unaffected by the cuts because of his age. Kent and Patton would face two to three years of COLA reductions while Bowen, Roy and Campa would all see

at least five years of COLA cuts.

None of the flag officers who spoke in favor of the cuts would be affected by the reductions. The three four-stars will earn, combined, more than \$560,800 in retirement pay in 2014.

Yet the senior enlisted group said they don't take issue with those or any other officers' retirement pay. Instead, they believe someone needs to let lawmakers know that many retired service members do not have high-paying second careers and lack the education or experience to get one.

"God bless 'em," Patton said, referring to the general officers. "They've earned what they get, and we're not knocking them. But we served with an agreement that our retirement pay would keep up with inflation, and to use a COLA to control defense spending is ridiculous. I think we've already paid at the office."

Members of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, including Army Gen. Ray Odierno, were surprised when news of the COLA reduction emerged during debate on the budget act, co-authored by Rep. Paul Ryan, R-Wis., and Sen. Patty Murray, D-Wash.

But Defense Secretary Chuck Hagel said the move opens a dialogue with Congress to "realign priorities and address needed reforms."

The Military Compensation and Retirement Modernization Commission is in the process of reviewing the current pay and benefits packages and is expected to make recommendations on reform by 2015. Meanwhile, military support and veterans organizations are pressing for repeal of the COLA reductions.

President Obama signed the omnibus spending bill, which included a provision to overturn the cuts for medically retired personnel and survivors receiving annuities under the Survivor Benefits Plan. And several lawmakers have proposed legislation that would undo the cuts for all retirees.

The Senate Armed Services Committee will conduct a hearing Tuesday on the impact that the reductions, which are expected to save the federal government \$6 billion, would have on retirees.

Campa said he will watch the legislation closely.

"I've heard people say it's not a big deal — it's not that much money. But if it's not a lot, don't do it, because the cost of doing this is too high a price to pay."



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