

How the FIRST GI BILL Was Written

(PART I)

By R. B. PITKIN

TODAY, IF A BUM should approach you for a handout, you'd most likely type him as an alcoholic from skid row. But in the years after WW1 and before WW2, any vaudeville act might have represented him as a war veteran, and any audience would have accepted the "type."

It was hardly a true picture of war veterans, but there was enough truth in it to hurt. A fraction of all our armies since the Revolution had found themselves adrift and apart from civilian life on their return. Nobody worried about them more than the other veterans. Most made the adjustment, many with difficulty. Enough to attract notice never realized their civilian potentials after war service. They found the world changed, while those who hadn't gone to war were ahead of them in wealth, training, careers and social advancement.

Not so today. Now it would seem strange to see a beggar typed as a veteran. It is only in the last 25 years that this has been so, though we now have more than 23 million veterans in civilian life—the most in all history.

The GI Bills are responsible for the change. They have been revolutionary. After the battle to get the first one passed for WW2 veterans (it was signed 25 years ago—on June 22, 1944), the others have been virtually automatic. The Korea GI Bill sailed through Congress, and with the development of warfare in Vietnam still a third one was enacted almost routinely.



That wasn't the case with the first one. Opposition to it and distrust of its novel concepts abounded.

Its successful passage in less than a year stands as the greatest single organized achievement of The American Legion in its first 50 years.

The WW2 GI Bill itself ranks with the most progressive and beneficial laws ever enacted by any nation.

There was drama in its passage. It was saved from failure in Congress by a "midnight ride" comparable in romance to Paul Revere's.

Though it was the first veterans' law that was devoid of "handout" (you had to help yourself to get GI Bill help): it was opposed by many who had cried long and loud against veterans' "hand-outs."

A coalition of sister veterans organizations openly joined in attacking the Legion's efforts to have it passed. They trained their guns on what proved to be its greatest feature, the educational aids.

Even some leading educators attacked the same features with cynicism and ridicule.

The whole concept was simply too new for the times. Never before had we had a law to help *all* war veterans get back on their feet. Something, usually too little, was done for the visibly disabled after previous wars. Under pressure, others could get pensions, usually in their old age. But nothing had ever been done to "readjust," immediately on discharge, all whose lives had been uprooted by war service. And every war proved they needed that.



House Speaker Rayburn gets cartons of petitions supporting GI Bill from Legion Cmdr Warren Atherton on Capitol steps, 1944.

THE NEED TO PROTECT THE RETURNING WWII VETERANS WITH A LEGION SPONSORED GI BILL WAS BROUGHT HOME BY THESE SAD EXPERIENCES



Case 9. Paralyzed on Guadalcanal and sent home to his dependent mother, Army pay stopped and no more was done.

The proper name of the WW2 GI Bill was "The Servicemen's *Readjustment* Act of 1944." That was brand new language.

How did the first GI Bill come to be?

Almost all the features of the first GI Bill could be found in many diverse resolutions adopted by the Legion's 1943 National Convention in Omaha. They were not yet in one package. Warren Atherton was named National Commander at Omaha. He is a prominent Stockton, Calif., lawyer and civic leader, whose bona fides as listed in "Who's Who in America" are somewhat long for this space.

Right after the Convention, Atherton went to Washington to discuss his big handful of convention mandates with the late Francis Sullivan, the Legion's acting Legislative Director.

Sullivan told him his problems. The country was barely in the war in 1943. Everyone was thinking "war." Nobody was thinking "veteran."

Disabled men were being discharged with precious little being done for them, while many were in terrible need.

Says Atherton today: "Francis Sullivan told me that our most urgent problem was for right then, not later. Cash was needed for disabled, discharged veterans. Hundreds were being released weekly without a cent in their pockets and no provision for support or care. Hundreds of thousands of service records had already been destroyed in battle incidents on land and sea. Under then existing laws, the services were not paying dischargees whose records weren't in order. Service pay for some was a year and more in arrears."

Atherton mentally added up what this immediate problem meant, when piled on top of the many different Legion resolutions to seek education; job training; home, farm and business loans; special training for the disabled, and many other novelties of that time which the Legion sought.

He groaned inwardly at ever getting so



Case 12. Totally blind and discharged in June, 1943, nothing further had been done for him on Nov. 29.

many new laws enacted while the nation was straining at the seams to win the war. It seemed impossible, especially since the biggest part of the Legion's package was



Case 13. Discharged to his family insane in April, he had not been examined for compensation in November.

made up of brand new concepts for Congress.

Sullivan noted something else. Many Congressmen had already introduced separate bills that jibed with some of the things the Legion wanted. They expected Legion support, so a shotgun approach involving a large number of separate bills was well under way.

There was something even worse. Though all these bills affected veterans, their revolutionary character related them to subjects that came under many committees of Congress. They might find their way into separate committees that considered mortgages, education, employment, unemployment benefits, etc.

If they didn't all go to the veterans committees, some would die, others would be altered, and some might come out in conflict with each other. Even if most of them were passed, different agencies of government might then administer them—a situation that had been so disastrous for veterans after WW1 that



Cmdr Atherton and House vets affairs chairman Rankin lay plans to prevent GI Bill from being split among many Congressional committees and thus fail.

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the Veterans Administration had been set up as a single agency to which veterans could go, instead of being passed from pillar to post.

Atherton instructed Sullivan, T. O. Kraabel (the Legion's Rehabilitation Director) and others of the staff to try to assemble all these problems.

Then on Nov. 18, the Legion's Nat'l Executive Committee met at Indianapolis. There the late John Stelle of Illinois—a dynamic, forceful bull of a man who had two sons in service—urged that a temporary committee make immediate recommendations aimed at getting prompt and sweeping action.

It was already growing late, for Sullivan had had to proceed to introduce bills in Congress. Thus the Omaha Convention's mandate that the Legion seek college aid for all WW2 servicemen had already been put in as a separate bill.

Stelle headed the temporary committee. It reported back next day with three main points. (1) That the Legion seek to have all veterans bills considered in Congress by the veterans committees. (2) That it impress on Congress that all veterans programs be handled by the VA, whether they deal with jobs, mortgages, education or what not. (3) That Commander Atherton be given free-wheeling powers to make things happen.

On Nov. 26, Atherton sent telegrams around the Legion for local reports on disabled WW2 discharges who were already suffering neglect. Within 24 hours, he had on hand case histories of more than 1,500 disabled veterans of WW2 who, in 1943, had been forced to wait as long as 11 months for compensation.

The cases were so shocking that they couldn't wait for Congress to get to a more general program for all WW2 veterans. Atherton took a report on 1,536 cases to Congress on Nov. 29, and read from them to the House Veterans Affairs Committee. He demanded that \$500 mustering-out pay go to all discharges *immediately* so that they could survive the red tape that inevitably followed their discharge. The next day he named a special Legion Committee, headed by Stelle, to shape up everything else the Legion was seeking, while he plunged ahead to get the mustering-out act passed.

The late David Camelon, who covered those events for the Hearst newspapers, described Atherton's battle for mustering-out pay on these pages in 1949. Here is a digest of Camelon's account:

It was a shocking, incredible story of disabled men that Atherton took to Congress—their minds twisted, bodies torn in battle—shunted out of hospitals, out of the armed forces into a world of callous reality, of

heartbreaking delay and neglect—even, in far too many cases, of actual distress. Everybody was going to "do something" for the veterans "after the war."

It seems impossible to believe, now, that thousands of disabled men discharged during the war were forced to depend upon charity for their very existence for months before the country they had fought to defend got around to caring for them.

Bill Smith [not his real name] enlisted in the Army, July 13, 1940. He went to Guadalcanal, and there met the grenade that all but ended his life. The grenade smashed in the right side of Bill's head, messed up the delicate nerves in his brain, and left his left side paralyzed.

Bill was declared "unfit for service" on January 13, 1943. From that date on, the Army knew Bill would never fight again, and that after his discharge he would need help. He was discharged from the hospital and the Army on July 3, six and one half months later.

There were plenty of laws on the statute books to take care of Bill after his discharge.

The trouble lay in making those benefits available to him. After his discharge, Bill had to make a claim for disability rating and compensation. Before his claim could be acted upon, his service record and medical record had to be certified to the Veterans Administration, a rating board had to consider his case, and his condition and need had to be determined.

You'd think that in the six months Bill lay in the hospital—the six months that elapsed between January 13, when he was called "unfit for service," and July 3, when he was discharged—someone would have looked ahead: would have anticipated Bill's needs, and would have assembled all the necessary records so that his claim might be handled immediately.

But it didn't happen that way.

They handed Bill his discharge—and nothing else. No money, no clothes, nothing but a warning that he could wear his uniform for only 90 days, and after that he'd have to find some civilian clothes.

On the day he was discharged, his army pay stopped. So did the allotment he had been sending his mother—the only money she had. They sent Bill home paralyzed, and penniless—to wait four long months before his claim was adjudicated. He was, finally, rated 50 percent disabled, and vocational rehabilitation was recommended.

How did Bill and his mother live during those months?

No one seemed to know, or, apart from the Legion, to care. Perhaps he was able to drag his paralyzed body to his neighbor's door for a handout.

With controlled fury, Commander Atherton presented the records of 1,536 men—men who had been discharged from the armed forces after the start of WW2, who had been forced to wait for periods ranging from three to eleven months before compensation was allotted to them.

"This list is far from complete," Commander Atherton said. "It is only a quick sampling."

He presented the details of many of those 1,536 cases:

"Case No. 12. In this case, the veteran, totally blind, was discharged from an Army hospital on June 30, 1943. The Army regional records were not received in the regional office (of the Veterans Administration) until the week of November 22. Therefore the veteran has not yet (November 29) received the pension check to which he is entitled, and probably will not for 30 days.

"Case No. 13. This veteran was discharged insane, unable to sign his discharge. Claim was filed April 12, and we have not yet been able to get this veteran examined. While it is true that the Veterans Administration wrote his sister and a service officer, no letters were written to either, or to anyone else, in September or October.

"Case No. 17. This veteran was discharged from service July 27, 1943, with diagnosis of dementia praecox, paranoid. The handicap estimate by the rating board is 100 percent. Action toward releasing payment on the veteran's claim is not expected until the character of his discharge is officially attested. It seems quite evident that he served honorably, but the authorization unit has refused to release payment until officially informed the discharge was honorable."

In fairness to the Veterans Administration, it should be pointed out that the delays were caused, in some degree, by the immense volume of work piled on the VA, and the wartime shortage of manpower.

"Having no other income," Commander Atherton stated, "the disabled dischargee must rely upon financial assistance from private or charitable sources. Such a situation, especially for the combat disabled, should not be tolerated.

"Even a convict who is discharged from prison is given more money and a suit of clothes. The veteran, when he is discharged from a hospital or separation center, is given neither."

The Legion didn't ask much for them. Just some money to live on, enough to buy clothes, to insure them something to eat and a place to sleep: enough to bridge the gap between discharge and adjudication of their claims or re-employment.

The report was shocking and infuriating. But it was only the opening gun in the Legion's fight for justice for the veterans of WW2—a fight not alone for mustering-out pay, but for the broader, more sweeping benefits of what was to be known as the Legion's "GI Bill of Rights"—the greatest, most effective, most carefully prepared veterans' program ever enacted.

That fight was to last for seven months, against the toughest kind of opposition. To win it, the Legion pledged its every resource.

"We didn't organize The American Legion to be a savings bank to finance a last man's club," Commander Atherton said. "The best way to use every dime in our treasury is in assistance to the veterans coming out of this war."

On December 1, National Commander Atherton appeared before the Senate Military Affairs Committee to repeat his demand for immediate enactment of mustering-out pay. The committee had before it a bill,

sponsored by Senator Barkley, calling for a maximum of \$300. Commander Atherton asked that the pay be "adequate"—and urged that the maximum be placed at at least \$500.

The Legion's publicity division, headed by Jack Cejnar, sent the Commander's report on the 1,536 cases of delay and neglect to every daily newspaper in the United States—together with a letter from the Commander which called the situation "a national disgrace."

The report caused a nation-wide sensation. Hundreds of newspapers backed the Legion's demand with editorials and news stories. At the same time Commander Atherton telegraphed all Department officers to "leave no stone unturned" to bring all possible pressure on Senators and Representatives to put an end to the deplorable condition the Legion had disclosed.

Within a matter of hours, the tremendous forces of the Legion began to mobilize. Department officers contacted their Posts; and telegrams, letters and phone calls by the thousand poured in on members of Congress. Seldom, if ever, before had any organization spoken so forcefully, and so frankly, on behalf of the disabled veteran. The effect was immediate.

"I never realized that anything approaching this situation existed," said Senator Johnson of Colorado, chairman of a subcommittee of the Senate Military Affairs Committee studying veteran's legislation. "It is almost unbelievable that this nation should permit those boys to go for months without money, food or clothes, except what they can beg.

"You can't explain away a situation like that. You can't brush it off, or forget it. We must act immediately to put money into the hands of every man who is discharged, the instant he is discharged.

"I am informed we are discharging as many as 75,000 men a month, and that the totals will steadily increase. All of them face an immediate problem on discharge, when they feel lost and alone. And that apparently, is just the time we have been neglecting them—when their need is the greatest."

Senator Johnson's indignation was sincere, as his actions were to show, and reflected the opinion of a vast majority of the Senators and Representatives. But there were others in Congress—some in positions of influence—who rendered only lip-service to the cause of the disabled man.

"This is incredible!" said Andrew Jackson May of Prestonburg, Ky., Chairman of the House Military Affairs Committee. "Shocking is the only word to describe it. The sick and the wounded from the battlefields are the very men who are most entitled to expect every assistance the nation they have defended can give them."

Those were fine and noble words. We were to remember them when, a few days later, Mr. May almost singlehandedly prevented the enactment of mustering-out pay before Christmas. Mustering-out pay was not presented as a veterans' matter. It dealt with an extension of military pay, and Mr. May's Military Affairs Committee was in a key spot to boost it or block it.

Mr. May's attitude represented a hard core of opposition, within the Congress, to doing anything for the veterans—an attitude



Thirteen of the "first team" that quarterbacked the creation and passage of the first GI Bill. Front row, left to right: Lyon W. Brandon (Miss.); Roane Waring (Tenn.); Rep. John Gibson (Ga.); Harry W. Colmery (Kans.); Pat Kelley (Ga.); Frank Reilly (Mass.). Back row: Frank Sullivan (D.C.); John Stelle (Ill.); David Camelon (N.Y.); Sam Rorex (Ark.); Jack Cejnar (Ind.) and T. O. Kraabel (N.Dak.)

No photo was ever taken of the whole group. Of those shown, Stelle was chairman of the Legion's original GI Bill committee, while Colmery and Rorex were members. Camelon and Reilly were assigned by Hearst newspapers to help. Sullivan, Kraabel and Cejnar were key Legion staff members in the drive. Rep. Gibson made the "midnight ride" from Georgia to cast the deciding vote that saved the bill from final defeat in Congress. Waring and Kelley helped get him there. Rep. Gibson's melodramatic adventure is told in next month's chapter.

that was, at first, beyond the ordinary citizen's comprehension. It was an attitude that was to be reflected, not much later, in the speech of one Congressman, who arose on the floor of the House to oppose adequate mustering-out pay with the words:

"America's boys didn't go to war for money—for dollars! They went out of patriotism. And America is grateful to them. Why, when a boy dies, America gives him a flag to drape over his coffin!"

At first, after Commander Atherton had made his report, we did not dream that such opposition would develop. His request seemed utterly reasonable, and the Senate Military Affairs Committee confirmed that thought. On December 10, it rewrote the Barkley mustering-out pay bill,

to conform with the Legion's request for a \$500 maximum.

On the House side of the Capitol, meanwhile, Chairman May had started public hearings.

It seemed certain that the House would not draft a weaker version than the Senate committee was writing. Many of us believed that the House committee might improve it.

"The post-war period has started," Rep. Walter Ploeser of Missouri said. "It is here now. Not tomorrow, not next year, not after the war, but now."

Walter Ploeser, and a few others, saw the gathering opposition for what it was. But many could not believe it until it was suddenly demonstrated a few days later. On



More members of the team with members of the Senate Finance Committee who co-sponsored the GI Bill in the Senate. Left to right, front row: Senators George (Ga.); and Lucas and Brooks (Ill.), then Legionnaires Stelle, James P. Ringley and Lawrence J. Fenlon, all of Illinois. They are welcoming thousands of petitions.

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December 13, Mr. May said on the floor of the House:

"I do not know if we will be able to draft a veteran's mustering-out pay bill and get it to the floor before Christmas!"

He said he'd named a sub-committee, headed by Rep. John M. Costello of California, to "study and draft legislation." That was a death-sentence to any action prior to Christmas. The decision to study a proposal on which the evidence of need was so clear could only result in delay.

National Commander Atherton promptly let the people study it. He gave the case of disabled veterans over a national radio hook-up from San Francisco and, in a press statement, said:

"There'll be no Merry Christmas for these men unless Congress moves speedily to help them.

"Some mustering-out pay must be made immediately. It must be done before Congress adjourns for Christmas.

"Whether or not Congress does do that will mean the difference between a Merry Christmas and no Christmas at all to the men who have returned, sick and wounded, from the war fronts."

But there was no action before Christmas. On December 15, Mr. May went back home to Prestonburg for his own Christmas.

"And in May's absence," I wrote for all Hearst newspapers at that time, "went all hope that decent mustering-out pay could be enacted this year; all hope that there will be a little money, a little hope and cheer, this Christmas, for the veterans who have been mustered out of the Army without a cent in their pockets, without a suit of clothes.

"May slipped out of Washington. Few knew he was leaving. And, in his absence, no member of the House Military Affairs Committee can call a meeting or report out any legislation."

The Senate committee, meanwhile, unanimously approved the bill with a \$500 maximum. But all efforts to force action in the House failed. On the 18th, Republican Leader Joseph W. Martin, Jr., of Massachusetts, asked:

"Is there any chance at all that we can have a mustering-out pay bill on the floor before we go home?"

John McCormack of Massachusetts, Majority Leader, who had favored action before Christmas had to answer:

"I am sorry, but there is no chance."

A few members of Congress protested. Edith Nourse Rogers called it "cruel and callous" for Congress to go home without providing for the disabled veterans. John Rankin, chairman of the World War Veterans Committee, said he would oppose any adjournment until mustering-out pay had been considered.

Their efforts were futile. But the public protest was too much for Mr. May. On December 20, from his home in Prestonburg, he telephoned Sam Rayburn, Speaker of the House, to say that his committee would report out a bill "within two or three days after the House reconvenes January 10."

Mr. May came back to Washington

January 4, (it was now 1944), inwardly seething from the lashing he had taken from public opinion.

"We are going to dispose of this matter in very short order," he said.

His committee did report out an inadequate bill with a maximum of \$300-\$200 below the figure the Legion had asked, and the Senate had adopted.

The measure was sent to conference between representatives of the House and Senate to compromise the difference in the figures. On the first day the conferees met, I was waiting outside the committee room in the Capitol with Frank K. Reilly, correspondent for the Boston American. As May left the room, Reilly and I went up to him to ask what progress had been made.

"I'll give no more interviews to you, Camelion," he told me. "Why did you say that I sneaked out of Washington?"

"Because," I told him, "you left without notice, and because you left the Military Affairs Committee without authority to function. Mr. May, you consider yourself a big man who can deprive the veterans of proper mustering-out pay."

"I am a big man in Washington," May retorted. "I'm sufficiently big to tell you that if you say any more about me sneaking out of Washington, you make arrangements with the undertaker before you do!"

With that threat, May turned, and strode off down the corridor.

May's threat to Mr. Camelion ultimately did more good than bad. Furious at what was happening to veterans, and furious again at the personal threat to their reporter, the Hearst newspapers entered the fray with the Legion as full-fledged partisans. Hearst assigned two others besides Camelion to full-time work at the Legion's elbow, and ran their stories in the whole Hearst chain. They rendered such service in rallying public support for the GI Bill that was to follow that when it was all over the Legion gave



Warren Atherton today. As Legion Commander in 1943-44 he led GI Bill fight to final victory.

William Randolph Hearst its Distinguished Service Medal.

May's stubbornness further alerted the Legion to the kind of resistance it might meet for the bigger fight ahead, forewarning it against complacency when things might seem to be going well. May

also strengthened the Legion's resolve to prevent, at all costs, the division of the final GI Bill among numerous committees of Congress. Finally, he made the Legion inflexible on the question of including unemployment benefits for 52 weeks for any WW2 veteran who couldn't get a job on discharge.

In the end, May succeeded in whacking another billion dollars from his \$300-maximum mustering-out bill by giving less to a man with service in the States than abroad, less for service under



Harry Colmery today. During Christmas season, 1943-44, he penned first version of WW2 GI Bill in longhand in his rooms at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington.

60 days than over 60 days. In vain did Atherton cite the case of a sergeant who lost both hands and one eye in a grenade accident in Texas, to be sent home alone and wait interminably for the care and benefits due him. What difference where he served or how long he was in? The damage and neglect were the same, whether at home or abroad, whether after one day or 60. But May's bill passed, and in the Legion's Washington office a grim group of men prepared for a bigger fight.

On Nov. 30, 1943, Commander Atherton had named a special committee headed by Stelle to steer the fight for the rest of the Legion's major package for WW2 veterans, while he pushed ahead on mustering-out pay. It held its first meeting in Washington, D.C., on Dec. 15.

Serving with Stelle were Legion men with long experience in veterans affairs and legislation. John Stelle had been Lieutenant Governor, then Governor, of Illinois. Sam Rorex had served in the Arkansas legislature even before WW1. Past National Commander Harry Colmery, of Kansas, was an able attorney, with offices in Topeka and Washington (and he would soon pen the initial draft of the first GI Bill of Rights in

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longhand in his rooms in the Mayflower Hotel). Secretary of the special committee and ex-officio member was Robert Sisson, of Arkansas, who was the Legion's Rehabilitation chairman. W. Bea Waldrip was a Michigan banker, a valuable man for a group that was about to propose guaranteed home mortgages, farm loans and business loans for veterans for the first time in history. Robert M. McCurdy, a disabled WWI infantry captain and Assistant City Manager of Pasadena, Calif., had made service to disabled veterans an avocation ever since 1919. Serving ex-officio were the Legion's Legislative and Economic chairmen—Harvard Law graduate Maurice Devine, of New Hampshire, and Larry Fenlon, of Chicago.

Let's return to Mr. Camelon's eyewitness story.

They met first in Washington, December 15, 1943, and by January 6 had completed the first draft of the bill. In those weeks they held an intensive series of meetings with authoritative figures in every field covered by the bill, men in and out of the government. When their task was done, the broad outlines of the bill were completed—never to be changed or abandoned through six months of continuous struggle.

The bill called for 10 essentials, the first five of which were brand new and made the GI Bill a genuine revolution.

1. Educational opportunity.
2. Vocational and on-the-job training.
3. Readjustment allowances (unemployment compensation.)
4. Loans to aid the veteran in purchasing a home, farm or small business.
5. Review of discharges (a provision that was to become increasingly important.)
6. Adequate hospitalization.
7. Prompt settlement of disability claims.
8. Mustering-out pay. (Eliminated from the GI Bill of Rights following its enactment separately by Congress.)
9. An effective Veterans' employment, or placement service.
10. Concentration of all veterans' functions in the Veterans Administration, which was given top priority, second only to the armed forces, in obtaining the personnel needed for efficient operation.

That was the GI Bill of Rights. That was the rock bottom. That much, the Legion said, *must* be passed. It's basic principle and purpose was expressed by Colmery:

"The American Legion proposed this bill first because we believed it to be the duty, the responsibility and the desire of our grateful people to see to it that those who served actively in the armed services in this war not only should not be penalized as a result of their war service, but also that upon their return to civil life they should be aided in reaching that position which they might normally have expected to achieve had the war not interrupted their careers.

"And second, we urge its enactment as sound national policy, for the good of the nation."

Opportunity. That was the keynote of the GI Bill of Rights. The Legion, through the GI Bill, proposed to restore the citizen soldiers, as nearly as possible, to a competitive position in the pursuits of normal civil life equal to that of those who had stayed home.

The Legion wanted no be-ribboned apple-peddlers after World War II. It had seen too many of those after the other war.

"Never again," Harry Colmery said, "do we want to see the honor and glory of our nation fade to the extent that her men of arms, with despondent heart and palsied limb, totter from door to door, bowing their souls to the frozen bosom of reluctant charity."

The completed bill needed a name; a name to fire the imagination of Americans. Jack Cejnar, the Legion's acting Director of Public Relations, gave it that.

"It's a bill of rights," he almost shouted. "The GI Bill of Rights!"

The name was something close to genius. It was short, punchy, easily grasped. It told the whole story—and it became a fighting slogan from coast to coast.

It was not a hastily prepared measure. Before the educational provisions were written, the Legion had conferred with representatives of the Association of Land Grant Colleges, the National Education Association, the American Council on Education and other leading educational groups.

Into the title on loans went the suggestions of real estate associations, building and loan associations, the Federal Housing Administration, leading bankers and other important financial organizations. But the man behind the loan provision, the man who prompted it and fought for it, was Bob McCurdy of Pasadena, California. It was not, in its final form, exactly as he wanted it. But Bob, more than anyone else, is responsible for the fact that it is there at all.

Outstanding help came from Stan Rector, then chairman of the legislative committee of the Interstate Conference of Employment Security Agencies, an official group representing the States.

Stan worked long hours with the Legion committee, and with Harry Colmery in particular, in preparing the titles on veterans' placement, and unemployment compensation.

The state representatives—and the Legion as well—were determined that veterans' placement, unemployment compensation, and educational opportunities should be set up in a manner compatible with existing state systems. They were determined that the veterans should not become entangled in new, costly and confusing federal bureaucracies and agencies.

After all that mass of material had been gathered from experts in and out of the Legion, the Legion's committee faced the task of studying it, and selecting from it the principles that should be incorporated in the GI Bill.

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HOW THE FIRST GI BILL WAS WRITTEN

(Continued from page 51)

Harry Colmery, in the end, did the seemingly super-human task of taking the material selected by the committee, and drafting it in the form of a bill. As John Stelle said:

"Harry Colmery jelled all our ideas into words."

Colmery's hand wrote the bill—Stelle was the driver who led the fight for its passage.

The Legion, and its special committee, were well aware of the magnitude of the task it faced in seeking enactment of the bill. It was an "omnibus bill," incorporating many topics, many aspects of the veteran's problem.

"No such all-inclusive omnibus bill has ever passed Congress," the Legion was told. "Your bill will be lost in committee jealousies and jurisdictional strife. Tear it apart—submit it piece by piece, and you'll have a better chance of getting it through."

The Legion had no intention of tearing the bill apart. To do so would have violated the very heart of the Legion's policy; that the problem of the readjustment and rehabilitation of the returning veterans was a unified problem; one that had to be enacted as a whole program not in pieces, that had to be treated by one committee of the House and Senate, and by a single governmental agency, the Veterans Administration.

Yet, through conflicting influences of committee jurisdiction, of the pride of individual Congressmen in their pet measures, the Legion's committee had to steer a difficult, tortuous path.

The bill was introduced in the House on Jan. 10 and in the Senate on the 11th.

In the end, it benefitted the nation in ways still unmeasured and unmeasurable. In fact, the prosperity of the nation since 1945 might have been recession without the vast economic impact of the WW2 GI Bill. If it seems fantastic that such a small group could have whipped together so important an act in less than a month, there were reasons. As the Legion publicly announced, the bill contained the lessons it had learned in 25 years of struggling with the postwar problems of veterans and the nation. It also contained the wisdom and advice of leading legislators who co-sponsored it. In the House they were John Rankin and Edith Nourse Rogers, ranking Democrat and Republican of the veterans committee. In the Senate, Bennett Champ Clark, of Missouri, introduced it. He had been a Legion founder, and was chairman of the Senate veterans sub-committee. Joining him were Senators Tom Connally of Texas; David I. Walsh of Massachusetts; Walter F. George, of Georgia; Owen Brewster of Maine; Chan Gurney of South Dakota; Scott Lucas and C. Wayland Brooks of Illinois; Arthur Vandenberg of Michigan, and Hattie Caraway of Arkansas.

President Roosevelt had already favored some of its provisions and consulted with Atherton and others on the roadblocks it might face in Congress.

In spite of the bill's distinguished sponsors, the trouble Rep. May was then giving mustering-out pay left no illusions that the bigger package would have easy sledding.

Taking no chances, the Legion launched a nationwide publicity campaign, and called on all its members for active support. It distributed 400 spot radio announcements, some from wounded servicemen, others from Atherton. Legion posts carried them to their local stations. [True to Mr. Hearst's orders, Mr. Camelon was part of the team to get the bill passed, not just report what happened. He and the other Hearst writers joined in producing the publicity materials.]

More than 125 two-minute movies were shown in local theaters. War news scenes, from Salerno to Tarawa, were shown, followed by public appeals to back the GI Bill. Legion posts took these, too, to their theaters.

News releases went out by the hundreds, and many independent newspapers ran them in full, adding coupons for readers to send their Congressmen urging passage. In brief sentences, many editors urged their readers that the bill was "simple justice" for the fighting men and "should be enacted quickly."

In the Legion's Washington office, a chart went up to show where every Congressman stood on the bill. Hearst's Frank Reilly conducted the poll, directly phoning legislators in their offices to ask them bluntly where they stood on the GI Bill. He'd then mark the big Legion chart "Yes," "No" or "Doubtful."

Gradually, Frank's chart began to reveal a minority undercurrent of opposition to the GI Bill in Congress that was deep-seated and dangerous.

Every afternoon, we had a council of war before the chart; John Stelle, Frank Sullivan, Bob Sisson, Sam Rorex, and other members of the committee who chanced to be present; Jack Cejnar, Frank Reilly, Roy Topper and I. Frank Reilly would report:

"I'm running into some resistance in . . ."

he'd name a State, perhaps two or three. Stelle, Sullivan, Sisson and the others had just come back from the Capitol where they'd been doing their "Fuller brush act," going from door to door, fighting, cajoling, pleading for votes. Perhaps they'd challenge Frank's report.

"I saw Senator X," John Stelle would say. "He's for us."

Frank Reilly would shake his head. "When I telephoned him," he would reply, "he was hesitant."

Stelle and the others might argue for a moment. But we couldn't take chances. If there was any doubt about where a member of either House stood, we had to mark him off as questionable.

At the end of the conference, each night, telegrams would go out to Legion officials in the States, or districts, in which the doubtful votes were found. The telegrams would give names, and urge the local Legion forces to direct a flood of public opinion against the hesitant legislator.

Sometimes, a member of Congress would grow resentful of the pressure put upon him by his constituents; would protest against "the powerful Legion lobby." But those protests were quickly answered from the floor of the House itself. Representative Fred Busbey, of Illinois, said:

"I do not know what they have reference to by that 'powerful lobby,' unless it may have been the energy that has been displayed by members of The American Legion in behalf of the men and women serving our country in this war."

Representative Edith Nourse Rogers added:

"With reference to calling it a lobby, . . . it seems to me it is an all-over-the-country lobby."

She was right, of course. All we had to do was carry the story of the GI Bill of Rights to the people. They did the rest.

The bill had powerful support, apart from the public. General Frank T. Hines, Administrator of Veterans Affairs, gave it his wholehearted approval. Throughout the country city councils, legislatures and other public and private groups adopted resolutions urging its passage.

The weight of America's educational experts was thrown behind it on February 15, when Dr. George F. Zook, President of the American Council of Education, appeared before the subcommittee of the Senate Finance Committee, representing 21 leading educational associations. He enthusiastically endorsed the educational provisions to the last detail.

* But powerful opposition to the bill was mobilizing, as well.

The Army and Navy objected to some provisions, particularly to a section establishing a board to review the nature of discharges—a thing, the military representatives said, which had never been permitted.

The Legion needed the support of the military, and even more of its powerful friends in Congress. But it was inflexible on this. Commander Atherton marshalled cases to show that the military had given disabled men "undesirable discharges" for trivial and unfair reasons. A serviceman had no appeal from an undesirable discharge. If his offense were worse, if he were given a dishonorable discharge by court martial, he could appeal. He might win or lose his appeal, but if he were "undesirable" he was marked for life with an administrative or "blue" discharge, neither honorable nor dishonorable. The Legion insisted that a board be created to review all discharges. For the same reasons it demanded that GI benefits go to any veteran with a discharge "other than dishonorable." The military opposed that too, and insisted on benefits only for those with honorable discharges.

On March 9, after representatives of the War and Navy Departments had appeared before Congressional committees to oppose this and other sections of the bill, John Stelle invited their representatives to meet with the Legion at the Legion's headquarters in Washington. He specified that they come prepared to reach a definite agreement on all disputed sections of the bill.

The conference lasted for more than six hours. At last the Army and Navy representatives—fifteen officers in all—started to get up.

"We'll have to confer with our superiors," they said.

John Stelle exploded.

"Gentlemen," he said, his face purple, his fist pounding the table, "our understanding was that you would come here with authority to reach a decision. If I had

known that you didn't have that authority, I wouldn't have wasted the time of my committee here tonight.

"The provisions we have been discussing are important to the men who have been fighting our battles. The American Legion proposes to see that this bill is passed, and passed as it stands."

Few men ever said so to John Stelle when he got his dander up. He was that kind of man. The War and Navy Departments must have been convinced that he would fight them to a showdown—and probably win. In any event, from that time forth the military unreservedly supported the GI Bill.

But our real troubles were yet to begin, and the first shocker exploded on Feb. 16.

On that day four other veterans organizations sent a joint open letter to Sen. Bennett Clark—our best friend in the Senate. They opposed the GI Bill, and particularly attacked its very heart—the educational provisions.

The letter was signed by Omar B. Ketchum for the Veterans of Foreign Wars; Millard Rice for the Disabled American Veterans; Frank Haley for the Military Order of the Purple Heart, and W.M. Floyd for the Regular Veterans Association. This was just the thing to give a springboard to the strong little knot of opposition we had found in Congress.

(To be concluded next month.)

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