

Military OneSource Podcast — Military Leave and How to Take It

Military Personnel Policy Program

Episode transcript

Intro voiceover:

Welcome to the Military OneSource podcast. Military OneSource is an official program of the Defense Department with tools, information and resources to help families navigate all aspects of military life. For more information, visit militaryonesource.mil.

Bruce Moody:

Welcome to the podcast. I'm Bruce Moody. Yes, today we're talking about how to take leave. Yep, some things seem obvious from a distance, but when you take a closer look, things start to look a little bit more complicated and that's what we're talking about today. Leave is definitely one of those things. So helping us get through the types of leave and some of the new rules about the leave you earn is Sergeant Major Steve Minyard. He is senior enlisted advisor at the Defense Department's Manpower and Reserve Office. Sergeant Major, it is great to have you back on the podcast.

Steve Minyard:

Thank you, Bruce, and I am thrilled to be here to talk about leave.

Bruce Moody:

Great. Great, and we're going to get into this. There is a new policy about leave and it basically says, "Use it or lose it." We're going to get into that in just a little bit, but first, leave can be somewhat complicated. There are categories, and so to start us off, what I would like to ask is for you to go through the different types of leave and what their intended purposes are?

Steve Minyard:

There are really two main categories of leave. The first is chargeable leave, which is charged against the amount that you accrue each month, and then we have nonchargeable leave. So this is leave that the military give our service members to take that is not charged against it. The next category of leave we have is emergency leave. That's leave that is chargeable, and it's when it's something that's completely unplanned. So the service member can be granted for some type of family emergency. Next, we have advanced leave. This is when there's a situation where a service member needs to take leave above and beyond the amount that they have already accrued.

Bruce Moody:

I'm so glad to be having this conversation with you as a senior enlisted leader who has worked with troops over the years. What I'd like to do is summarize what you went over. There are a lot of types of leave beyond just the annual leave. There's different types of leave for different types of services. When life happens and you need to spend some time away from the unit, away from the command, there's a type of leave. I think, and maybe you could speak about this, we're certainly going to put a link in the program notes where people can read specifically about each type of leave, but really, I think the best thing a person can do is decide that they need to take leave because they need some downtime or they need to go home because there is an illness or something in the family happening. What I'd like for you to do is just to explain usually the best first step for a service member to go to their chain of command, explain what's happening and say what's my best course of action to take here?

Steve Minyard:

Sure. Yeah. So really, their first piece of information is let their supervisory chain know whatever that situation is, and let them know as early as possible because sometimes your unit may have some additional administrative requirements for you to go through to make those happen. And then the next is planning what you need to do as a service member to get to wherever you need to do or to do whatever you need to, to accomplish. I would say that another step would be to talk to the folks within your command team that may be able to help you with that. Next would be getting through and looking at your travel options. If it's leave, that's simply just a normal time of leave when you want to take a vacation, look at some of the great benefits that we have through Military OneSource for travel options, for assistance in buying airline ticket and all of the other things that are opened up in the MWR universe for you to take advantage of.

Bruce Moody:

On that note, I want to talk about the new DOD policy, and when I say new, I mean it went into effect a few months ago, and it's got a very, very official government title, but we're going to call it the use it or lose it policy, and I'd like you to explain it to us?

Steve Minyard:

Sure. Yeah. So this is really a reduction of the amount of special leave accrual that service members have been accruing for the last couple of years. So in a nutshell, if you go into the Defense Finance Accounting Service, DFAS, and you pull down your leave and earnings statement and you see that you've got 73 days, and it is Sept. 30 of 2022, tomorrow is going to be the beginning of the next fiscal year, you're going to lose those 13 days of leave unless those 13 days have been accumulated under special leave accrual or SLA.

So in certain circumstances, you can go a little bit above the 60, but most service members are going to lose the days that are above 60. This is driven by law. This actually isn't the Department of Defense or your service doing it, the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, Coast Guard, Space Force. This is Congress. Congress jumped into this space. They're very much attuned into our benefits, and so their intent was limiting the amount of additional leave that service members can accumulate. So take a look at your LES and make sure, and there's a box on there that says, "Use or lose." That will calculate for you how much you need to be taking now so that when the end of the fiscal year, which starts 1 October, when you get to that 1 October date, you don't lose days because those days are gone.

There are some circumstances where a service member can cash in leave. They can actually get cash into their pocket for it. You can generally do that once in a career, but you don't want to be doing that, and you certainly can't do that every year. You're just going to lose leave. So take leave, get that time to recharge and get motivated and ready to do the best that you can when you come back to work.

Bruce Moody:

On that note, I really want to get your perspective. I think this would be really valuable to hear as a leader, as someone who has been a leader of service members and with an eye on the mission and an eye on the people. How would you describe the benefit of leave and the purpose of leave?

Steve Minyard:

Yeah, so this is one of the times where I am thrilled to actually read out of a DODI, something I don't do very often and probably don't get a whole lot out of a podcast, but it is written by someone that's like, "Wow, they really get it." DOD's official policy, just reading through here, "Is to obtain the maximum benefit from the objections of the annual leave program. Commanders and supervisors shall provide service members the opportunity to take frequent periods of leave when possible, at least one extended leave period each year of approximately 14 days within the constraints of operational requirements. Service members shall be allowed to take authorized time to tend to emergency situations and purposes outlined in this instruction. Implementation of this will increase positive contributions to morale, level of performance, career motivation and cost savings."

So I couldn't have said it any better, and with a focus on the morale, being able to detach from what can be a very challenging job environment for us in the military and absolutely thrilling and awesome work environment, but you need to be able to recharge so that you can give 110% of yourself and that your family can do that as well. Our families don't have the full benefit of us 24/7 all the time here because we have operational missions that pull us away. We have temporary duty, we have schools. When we can break away from our work and spend that quality time with our families, engaging in a hobby, taking advantage of MWR assets that are... If we're on a military installation or taking advantage of some of the things that veterans and service members have like free access to a national park, you got to take leave to get out there and do that and really just recharge.

As a leader, you've got to enable your subordinates, the folks that work within your organization to be able to do that because it will in general, as the DODI said, it increases morale. It is a flat benefit. It's just like a benefit like our basic allowance for housing or our basic allowance for subsistence. Not taking it, especially if you lose it at the end of the fiscal year, is just like leaving money on the table. It's leaving morale on the table. It's leaving motivation on the table for your service members. So as a leader, don't do it and as a service member, take it so that you can keep that fire going in that all of us have in military service to motivate us to do the best that we absolutely can and to be ready for the day when the nation calls and we're not going on leave. We're going to go and do something and go into harm's way and do whatever the nation called us to do.

Bruce Moody:

So on that note, regarding what the nation calls us to do, I want to push back just a little bit because we're in the military and we have very important jobs, and we all understand that our mission is paramount. So on that note, what would you say to someone who says they're too busy to take leave or this is not a great time to take leave, or what they're doing is too important? In other words, is someone demonstrating excellence by not taking leave and staying on the job and attending to the mission?

Steve Minyard:

I would say no, in a nutshell. Kind of the same philosophy that I apply to eating and dining facilities. If I'm a leader and my subordinates aren't seeing me eating in a dining facility, then they may not be as inclined to do that. So they need to be seeing leaders take leave and showing the right way to take leave. So to unpack that, as you had talked about the... And I've been there as the service member that said, "I'm just too busy. I've got too much going on." One of the things that we need to do as leaders, and this is talking to anybody wearing more than a single stripe, is to replicate whatever talent, knowledge, skills, abilities that we have into our subordinates and those that work with us so that we can take leave and they can jump into those other roles.

And typically, that will be if I'm a leader and I'm leading and I've got a more junior service member working for me, they're going to be able to step into my role, really learn a whole lot of other things and whatever my job is, and I can be confident that the job is being done because I've replicated that. I've done some cross-training within my organization so that you have a defense in depth so that folks can go off and take and be gone, and we can genuinely leave them alone so that they can go off and do all the awesome things that they need to do or the very serious things that they need to be doing while they're on leave. If you recall, the different categories of leave here, most of those are times, especially if they're nonchargeable, you want to leave someone alone to be able to deal with whatever they have going on with themselves or their loved ones.

Now as far as, "Hey, it's just not a good time," a good command team in a unit will sit down and plan and know the times when they are going to be engaged and ready to go off to some type of collective training event or for a mobilization when it's, "Hey, it's all game on," but packed around there in their yearly training schedule as they sit and plan that out, they will have blocks of times where the unit is given generally a more minimal manning guidance, I think is the DOD-flavored word, but where we don't need to have everybody all hands on deck to accomplishing a mission, and this is a really good time for you to be taking leave, holiday period, times around Thanksgiving Memorial Day, Veterans Day times, when you have clustered around the four-day weekends, we're right in the heart of that time right here in the middle of November where the up-tempo for a lot of the military is going to be a little lighter, but a good command team will plan out when you can go in.

And as a good service member, when you sit down and you look at that leave form at the beginning of the year or whenever you come in, plan on when you want to take leave. And if you're flying somewhere, it's always helpful to get your tickets and everything else scored away as early as possible, and then get your leave documents in so that your command team can know that you're gone so that they can plan to make sure that they, again, replicate the talent in your organization so you can be gone and be left alone so that you're not constantly checking emails while you are gone, which is just not a good way to spend all of your leave.

Bruce Moody:

Regarding ways to spend your leave, you mentioned this earlier in the podcast, some of the things to do. Perhaps as we wrap up our conversation, you could return to that and maybe talk about some of your ideas. We're not telling people whether they should go to the beach or go to the mountains, but maybe you have some ideas about tools people can use, ideas people may consider when they're trying to put together some leave time for the family?

Steve Minyard:

Yeah, so I would say that the first is to look at a lot of the benefits that are afforded to service members by local communities, by our partners across the federal government, like the National Parks Service, like the Department of Agriculture, opening up the ability to go to things like a National Parks or National Memorial for free. Those are awesome and they are an additional benefit of being a member of the service. That can be one way of really spicing up a good period of leave.

Another opportunity is I recently toured some of the MWR facilities that we have on Fort Belvoir and was amazed at all of the different facilities. So taking advantage of some of the things that are just local to where a lot of us are, but not available. I mentioned mountain climbing. I'm one of those types, and there are probably folks listening to this as well that I think about work a lot.

So one of the ways that I have done to detach from that very early after probably 15 years ago, I started doing this with our first child was going out and going camping and find that hobby or thing that is really good for you to just detach and your mind will just go into a different place. And then do that and plan to do that as much as you can while you're on leave around whatever, the other things that we take care of leave like doing to-do lists and working our finances or taking care of our education or whatever. But that will help you, whatever that one thing is, whether it's a hobby or something that just really engages all of your heart, your mind and your soul in doing, and you'll get so much more recharging out of that when you go back to work.

The last thing that I'll put onto that as any leader, to ensure that you are planning for the return of a service member that is taking an extensive period of leave so that they don't come back and they're just bombarded with whatever that you've accumulated for them to do so that they have a nice soft landing. So the next time that they go on leave, they don't spend their leave just dreading going back to work. So as leaders, it's our responsibility to make sure that they come in and that experience of reintegrating back into the team, into all the things that have gone on since they've been gone, we're cognizant of that and we make it a nice soft landing and then get them integrated into the team, the daily functions that they've been not a part of for the last couple of days or weeks that they've been gone and doing the right thing and taking care of themselves.

Bruce Moody:

Excellent. We'll leave it there. Sergeant Major, thank you so much. Always great to have you on the podcast.

Steve Minyard:

Thank you. I really appreciate it, Bruce, and really appreciate the opportunity to talk about leave.

Bruce Moody:

Fantastic. Sergeant Major Steve Minyard is the senior enlisted advisor at the Defense Department's Manpower and Reserve Affairs Office. Always good to have him on the podcast. And want to remind you that Military OneSource is an official resource of the Defense Department, and we have a link. Click on that link to send us any questions, comments or ideas for a future podcast episode. And be sure to subscribe to this podcast wherever you listen to your podcasts because we cover a wide range of topics that help military families navigate military life. I'm Bruce Moody. Thank you for listening. Take care. Bye-bye.