

Vet may not get unused leave

By Brian Bowling

Pittsburgh Tribune-Review

(Washington, DC) - The Army hasn't decided whether to keep or pay a local wounded Iraq war veteran his unused leave.

Former Pfc. Jason Fox, 21, of Mt. Lebanon said Wednesday the Army has dropped its original demand that he reimburse the Defense Department part of his enlistment bonus. His war injuries forced him to leave the Army early.

While the Army no longer wants the \$2,800, it hasn't decided whether to pay Fox \$2,100 in unused leave.

"I'm still not sure if I'm going to receive any of that. They're still working that issue," he said.

Despite the aggravation, Fox said the situation hasn't soured him on the service.

"It's a system run by humans. We're all imperfect," he said.

Fox said he's glad the case is getting national attention because it might correct some problems in the Army. On the other hand, he'll be glad when it's over.

"It's been crazy. My phone hasn't stopped ringing," he said.

Army spokesman Maj. Nathan Banks said the military bureaucracy is looking at Fox's case and hasn't decided whether it will keep the pay as partial reimbursement on Fox's enlistment bonus.

The Army paid Fox \$10,000 for enlisting. After taxes, the bonus came to about \$7,500, he said.

Fox enlisted in April 2006 and deployed to Iraq in October 2006. He was medically discharged in September because of the wounds he suffered in a roadside bomb explosion.

A few weeks later, the Army sent him a letter saying he had to return \$5,000 of the \$10,000 bonus because of his early departure from the service.

Banks said the letter was automatically generated by the Army's computer system and shouldn't have gone out. The Army corrected the error the same day Fox called its 24-hour hot line to challenge the claim, he said.

"We thank Private Fox for bringing it to our attention," Banks said.

The Army doesn't have any figures on how many similar claims have been challenged by combat-wounded veterans, he said.

U.S. Rep. Jason Altmire, D-McCandless, believes the problem is widespread. A presidential commission that studied veteran issues earlier this year discovered an Army policy that stops bonus payments once a soldier is wounded.

"They just stop making the payments once you're injured and out of the Army," he said.

Altmire has introduced a bill with 219 co-sponsors that would order all branches of the military to pay the full amount of bonuses to combat-wounded veterans regardless of how early they leave the service. In talking to his colleagues, many of them knew of soldiers ordered to reimburse bonuses, he said.

Someone who receives a permanent wound in battle has more than fulfilled their obligation to the country, he said. Fox's case should help move the bill through Congress, he said.

"When you have a face out there to go with the issue, it really paints it in a personal way for people," Altmire said.