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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

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Architect of multi-million-dollar education fraud involving scuba dive shops sentenced to years in federal prison

Three additional defendants previously sentenced; two await court dates

SAVANNAH, GA: A defendant who supervised a scheme to defraud more than \$6 million from the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) education programs through scuba diving schools has been sentenced to more than four years in federal prison.

Kenneth Meers, 55, of Altamonte Springs, Fla., was sentenced to 54 months in prison after previously pleading guilty to Conspiracy to Commit Wire Fraud, said David H. Estes, U.S. Attorney for the Southern District of Georgia. U.S. District Court Judge Lisa Godbey Wood also ordered Meers to pay restitution of \$6,085,918.08, and to serve three years of supervised release upon completion of his prison term. There is no parole in the federal system.

"The VA administers a robust program to provides educational benefits for those who have served their country, opening access to substantial career and enrichment opportunities for veterans," said U.S. Attorney Estes, a retired U.S. Army Colonel. "Kenneth Meers and his co-conspirators circumvented the rules designed to protect that funding, purely for their personal enrichment, and they justly are being held accountable for their crimes."

The six defendants charged in the case, all of whom have entered guilty pleas in U.S. District Court, are owners, managers, and/or instructors at Scooba Shack in Savannah and Richmond Hill, Ga., or at Diver's Den in St. Marys, Ga. In those capacities, the individuals caused false submissions to be made to the Department of Veterans Affairs, misstating the businesses' compliance with VA regulations, dates of students' attendance, and hours of instructions, among other misinformation. Some of the defendants also participated in creating fictitious scholarship programs to provide the appearance that a required percentage of non-VA students participated in those classes. The businesses billed the VA up to more than \$20,000 per veteran student enrollee for the classes.

Meers was a school certifying official and course director at Scooba Shack in Savannah and Richmond Hill, Ga., from about May 2018 to April 2021, and became a consultant at Diver's Den in St. Mary's, Ga., around May 2020 and an instructor from about June 2021 to February 2022. Meers prepared and submitted Scooba Shack's application and course catalog for VA approval, and developed Diver's Den's program, knowing that those applications contained false information. He also directed other defendants to create the fake scholarships that were used to mask the percentage of students receiving VA education benefits.

Judith Lanoue, 59, and **Robert Lanoue**, 63, both of Savannah, operated Scooba Shack and were previously sentenced to prison after pleading guilty to related charges. They were also ordered to pay \$3,228,921.53 in restitution. Their employee, **David Anderegg**, 42, of Richmond Hill, Ga., was previously sentenced to probation and ordered to pay \$20,497 in restitution.

Two other defendants – **Theresa Whitlock**, 55, of St. Marys, Ga., and **John Spyker**, 39, of Yulee, Fla., await sentencing after entering guilty pleas. Whitlock operated Diver’s Den and served as a school certifying official, providing false information to the VA about Diver’s Den’s diving programs, and submitting claims to the VA for tuition payments totaling more than \$1.1 million, while Spyker, a School Certifying Official and Director of Training at Diver’s Den, admitted submitting false and fraudulent information to the VA for tuition payments totaling \$722,399.19.

“Safeguarding Post-9/11 GI Bill education benefit funds is a priority, and our investigators work diligently to ensure this vital program is not exploited for financial gain and greed. This significant sentence holds the defendant accountable and highlights the severity of the penalties of such fraudulent activities,” said Special Agent in Charge **David Spilker** with the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General’s Southeast Field Office. “The VA OIG remains committed to working with our law enforcement partners to hold accountable those who would defraud VA’s programs and services.”

“This sentencing sends a strong message to those who defraud programs that benefit our veterans,” stated Special Agent in Charge **Darrin K. Jones**, Department of Defense Office of Inspector General, Defense Criminal Investigative Service (DCIS), Southeast Field Office. “DCIS will continue to work closely with our investigative partners and the U.S. Attorney’s Office to ensure individuals who selfishly enrich themselves at the expense of our veterans and military personnel are brought to justice.”

The case was investigated by the Department of Veterans Affairs Office of Inspector General and the Defense Criminal Investigative Service, and is being prosecuted for the United States by the U.S. Attorney’s Office for the Southern District of Georgia.

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