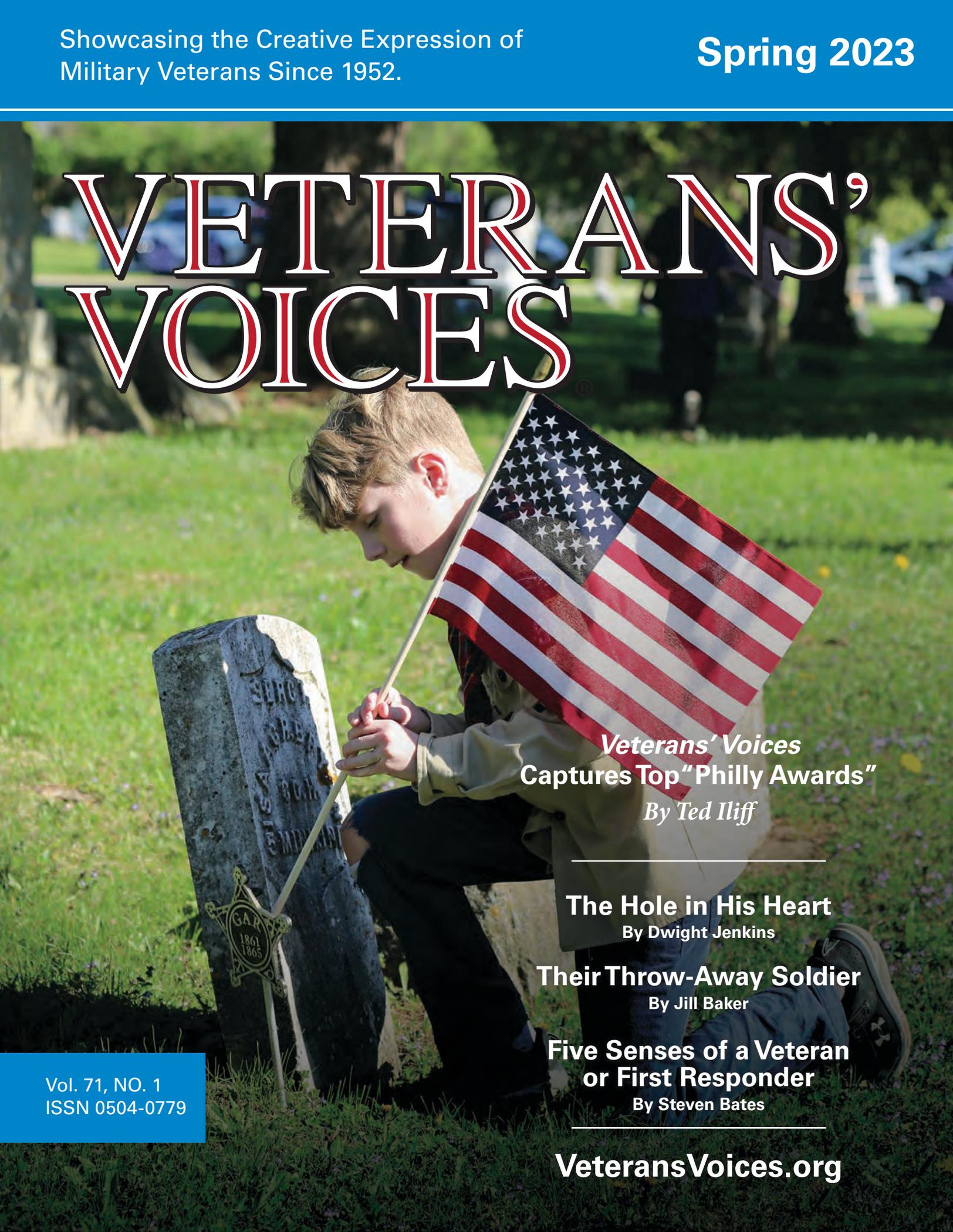


# VETERANS' VOICES



*Veterans' Voices*  
Captures Top "Philly Awards"  
By Ted Iliff

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**The Hole in His Heart**  
By Dwight Jenkins

**Their Throw-Away Soldier**  
By Jill Baker

**Five Senses of a Veteran  
or First Responder**  
By Steven Bates

Vol. 71, NO. 1  
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**VeteransVoices.org**

# Veterans Writing Help

By Ted Iliff

VVWP Board Vice President



Jason Kander

Like too many veterans, Jason Kander's after-action battles at home were far more daunting and debilitating than anything he had experienced in Afghanistan.

It took 10 years of untreated trauma and the flame-out of a once promising political career to shove Kander onto the path toward understanding and healing.

The former Missouri secretary of state and Army intelligence officer also came to realize the power of writing and storytelling as therapy for veterans who struggle with the unrelenting mental torture of combat memories that won't fade away.

Kander, 41, was the keynote speaker for the Veterans Voices Writing Project annual Veterans Pen Celebration Nov. 12 at the National World War I Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Mo. The suburban Kansas City native's comments centered mostly on the transformational experience of writing his latest book, *Invisible Storm: A Soldier's Memoir of Politics and PTSD*.

Kander told his mostly veteran audience that day he had not connected the concepts of writing and

therapy until he started preparing his remarks. Then he realized the linkage.

"In the process of writing (the book), what ended up happening is that I had to really work hard to crystalize what it was I had learned," he said. "I had to take what I had learned from therapy and sand it down and get it to a place where I could pass it on to other people, put it in a real book, and that was sort of therapeutic in and of itself."

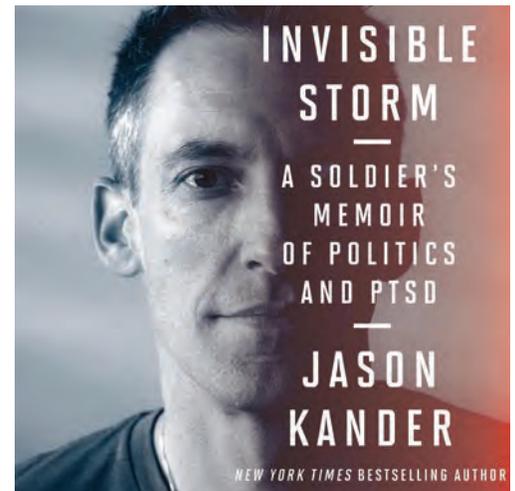
He cited the second chapter of his book, telling the story of one of his days in Afghanistan, as an early revelation of the power of writing.

"That ended up being very therapeutic for me because when you're in the middle of telling a story like that, you're there," he said. "There was a therapeutic element. It wasn't the easiest to release."

As the writing evolved, he said, other revelations popped up from the effort. "For me it wasn't just therapeutic because it forced me to clarify my own concepts of what I had gone through for myself," he said. "But it also provided a lot of value because there were certain ideas that I wanted understood. I realized as I was writing that there were ideas that I wanted to communicate."

One idea centered on his discomfort with the often-quoted line for PTSD-afflicted veterans that seeking help

**"Getting help works, is helpful and will actually make a difference."**



is an act of strength, not weakness. While not dismissing that concept, he said other forces are at work that keep veterans away from the treatment they need. He said not enough emphasis is given to the fact that "getting help works, is helpful and will actually make a difference."

He added that during the 10 years before he sought help, the public portrayal of PTSD didn't help.

"I was looking at the depictions of PTSD in the news and on a screen, and it was pretty much always the same thing. It was a combat veteran careening downward, robbing a bank after they shoot up heroin. It's what I refer to as, pardon the expression, PTSD porn. It's just constantly

# Veterans' Voices®

Spring 2023 Vol. 71, No. 1

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This issue of *Veterans' Voices* was made possible with assistance from Dr. Robert T. Rubin.

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The Mission of **Veterans Voices Writing Project** is to enable military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction through our writing program. Our Vision is a world where people appreciate that writing can both heal and entertain.

## History

VVWP was established as Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project in 1946 by **Elizabeth Fontaine** with the support of the Chicago North Shore chapter of Theta Sigma Phi (now The Association for Women in Communications) to address the physical, recreational and therapeutic needs of veterans returning from World War II. In 1952, journalists **Margaret Sally Keach** and **Gladys Feld Helzberg**, with assistance from the Greater Kansas City chapter of Theta Sigma Phi, established *Veterans' Voices* to provide a national outlet for writing produced by the project's participants. The three founders believed that writing could do everything from entertaining bedfast veterans to helping others conquer mental health issues.

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## Magazine Guidelines

Manuscripts, photographs and artwork submissions are accepted online. Follow the guidelines on pages 64 and 65 of the magazine or as listed on the web site.

The editors reserve the right to edit copy for grammar, clarity, accuracy, style and length, as well as cultural and personal sensitivities. By submitting writing for the magazine, authors agree to this condition.

The opinions expressed in the stories and poems published in *Veterans' Voices* are not necessarily those of the publisher, editors or sponsors.

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# Veteran Author Examines Connections Between Writing, Healing

showing over and over again this tragic tale. And in therapy what I learned was that when you commit to the program, the vast majority of people who do that get better. They are able to reach some post-traumatic growth, and they're able to manage their symptoms of PTSD. It's way more common than the first example I gave—the voyeuristic example.”

The military also shares some responsibility by the way it conditions new recruits from day one of basic training to think that what they do in uniform is “no big deal” because others endured or are enduring far worse. While conceding that form of indoctrination is necessary, he said it can lead to chronic and sometimes lethal mental health problems when combat veterans are suddenly reinserted into civilian life with no preparation for the bewildering social and cultural differences from the day they enlisted.

“The problem is, when I came home, nobody disabused me of that (it's no big deal) notion,” Kander said. “So as a result, all that time that our society could see me not getting help and considering it as some form of weakness, actually what I was doing was going ‘I have it on good authority that what I did was no big



deal, so it (PTSD) can't possibly be connected to my service.”

“And if you believe what you did was no big deal, then you believe, quite reasonably, I think, that going to get help for this wound, this injury...is the last thing any of us are going to do. Writing about it, crystalizing this idea was helpful to me to be able to see that and then be able to communicate it.”

Kander expressed deep concern for what he called the “civil-military divide” in this country and recommended veteran storytelling as one potential antidote. He said combat veterans famously refuse to talk about their experiences because they fear they won't be understood by civilian relatives and friends who have never served. The only time they feel comfortable talking about combat, he said, is in the company of other veterans.

“We have to get to a place in order to heal that civil-military divide, where that gap isn't so great and (a veteran)

feels like they can talk about it,” Kander said. “We expect them to be the same person they were before the war. That is not a reasonable expectation.

“I understand why people want to sanitize war. But I think we all understand that when you sanitize war you make it more likely you will go into war, and

you make it a lot harder for those who have returned from war to feel anything but isolation, particularly in a (nation) where less than one percent of the population serves.”

Kander said he appreciated the “public affirmation and reception” he has received for seeking help and writing about it. He said veterans who tell their stories will discover what a difference they can make and how infectious it can be.

“If you make the choice to be public about what you're doing in terms of getting treatment,” he said, “you're giving a permission slip to someone in your life to go and do the same. And that might save a life.”

**If you or someone you know is interested in starting a writing group for veterans, please contact Lori Kesinger, VVWP Outreach Director, at [support@veteransvoices.org](mailto:support@veteransvoices.org)**

# A Tribute to My Mom

By William Snead  
—Iron Mountain, MI

It was fall. The swirling, bronzed leaves blew hither and thither as the shining sun hid behind billowy white clouds.

I was five years old, and as I looked up at the door and through the portal, there appeared the bronzed face of my beautiful Mom.

She called, “How about your breakfast? Come in and eat!” And the little boy scrambled for eggs when he was called in for his meal.

After breakfast, beautiful Mom walked me to school on my first day. As we walked, a squirrel hustled for his nest.

In school, we stood up to say the Pledge of Allegiance. Then our teacher, Miss Brown, sat at the piano and played “Old MacDonald Had a Farm,” and we all sang the song. Then we studied colors and letters.

After two hours, the school bell rang, and Mom was standing in the doorway with a smile on her face. She said, “Time to go home where we’re never alone.”

Years later, on Mother’s Day, my brother and sisters gathered with me. Mom and Dad were not around. They probably went to town. We were preparing for Mom’s return, and we baked a chocolate cake. We made potato salad, baked beans, and a gift of puppy love in a small dog named King.

When Mom returned and walked through the door, she saw King. As tears streamed down her face, she held the puppy close and said, “Thank you for all you’ve done!” King licked her tears away.



One by one, the years went by, and we all left home. Mom encouraged our family to do our best. Her encouragement was like a lighthouse beacon for all of us to follow into the world of success. We did just that.

I missed her very much and called and spoke to her at least once a week. Her voice warmed me from top to bottom. It was like a warm wind blowing in from heaven to clean up all the smog in the air.

As Mom grew old and Dad passed, my sisters and brother were concerned about Mom’s health. One day while in the basement, Mom fell and broke her right hip. It required surgery. After 30 days, Mom was gathering her belongings to come home. While arranging her clothes, her sweater got caught in the walker wheel, and she fell and broke the left hip. All of us were devastated. Mom would need another surgery. The good news was Mom made a full recovery.

When home, Mom needed assistance, so I went to live with her. I worked in the local paper mill, and Mom appeared to be progressing and doing fine.

One morning when I awoke, she was holding her stomach and grimacing in

pain. I rushed her to the hospital emergency room. The prognosis was not good; at 90 years of age, she needed to have surgery. But would she live through it?

I gave consent. The surgeon removed three inches of infected colon, and she would need a colostomy bag. Mom made a partial recovery and had to live in a nursing home.

In time, Mom adjusted to life at the nursing home, and she seemed content, but dementia was beginning to take its toll. The doctor put her on an anti-depressant because of the state of her mind and mood. He put her on various medications, and there were any number of side effects.

After weeks of prescribing different medicines, one was found that actually had a partial effect. She seemed somewhat better, but the dementia grew progressively worse. At 95, she developed full dementia and at times didn’t know who she was. She would talk about her mother, father, sisters, and brothers.

The doctor decided to make a change in the anti-depressant. He weaned her off the medication. The next day she suffered a severe stroke, and the day after she passed away.

We all loved my mother, the greatest Mom ever.

Because of a change in medicine, Mom lost her precious life. She left behind this world so filled with stress and strife.

Then she walked through that last portal to meet her closest friend.

# An Outlaw's Demise

By Jim McQueen  
— Rapid City, SD

Here's a tale of Outlaw Jim.

Back when the James Boys and Youngers were doing their thing, he was out and about doing his. There were some things blamed on the James Gang that weren't altogether true. Some of that stuff was done by you guess who.

One day Outlaw Jim stole a horse after robbing and killing its owner. Needing someplace to lay low for a while, he chose a bordello in New Mexico. Now while ol' Jim was taking full advantage of the services offered, his horse at the hitching rail was smelling a filly that was "primed."

Outlaw Jim decided he wasn't paying but would rob the place instead. But when trying to escape, to Jim's demise, his horse was doing "nature's course."

His headstone reads as follows:

Here lies Jim, a Badman. He had us outrun by three steps, but his horse was four strokes behind!



# The Mystical Jaguar

By Charles L. Carey  
VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV

They walk in quiet and so silently still,  
One predator of nature in the noiseless hills.

Through time it remains, in stories to unfold  
Like a shaman priest, a mystery untold.

In the Amazon, hidden, a jaguar's home  
Where hunters hunt, a scary zone.

They say their eyes are green like fire.  
Beneath the darkening shadows, one jaguar.

*Onca, Onca*, he'll take your breath away,  
You the hunter, you the prey.

They stalk by day and they stalk by night,  
Intertwined with human fears, their dwindling plight.

A beast that kills with just one leap  
Where monkeys scream and anacondas creep.

Charismatic cats, some brown, tawny and black.  
A campfire burns one empty shack.

They're elusive in the night, elusive in the day.  
I want to be the jaguar of your mountain and take you away.

## Animal Tracks

By William H. Anderes  
—Cresskill, NJ

Animal tracks in the snow  
Where do they lead?  
Where do they go?  
On white fields and forest floor,  
rabbit, fox, racoon and deer  
look for shelter, food and more,  
leaving tracks both where and when  
that may not show where they are,  
but always show where they've been.

# Back Home

By Gary Jenneke  
—Minneapolis, MN

I was two years older than my cousin, Billy. I had enlisted in the Navy at age 17, and by the time of my discharge at age 21, the war in Vietnam was raging. I hadn't been home long when Billy received his draft notice. Although he had been drafted, somehow he ended up in the Marines. After that he became a proud Marine, wearing his dress uniform home on leave. Of course, he eventually ended up in Vietnam. The family worried about him, but Billy wasn't much of a letter writer so little was known. After about a year word was received that he was in a hospital back in the States, recovering from an injury, not wounds.

At this time I was enrolled in college under the GI Bill. Billy's father was a farmer, and since Billy had left home his father had purchased a new farm about 25 miles south of the state college I attended. This took place in the spring of 1968. It was a Sunday night in early April, not exactly a pleasant time of year in Minnesota. That night was chilly, wet, with a nasty wind. I had just gotten home from studying at the library when the phone rang. I was shocked to hear Billy's voice; I hadn't even known he was coming home.

"Can you come out and see me?" he asked. Something about his voice made my decision easy. "Yeah, man, I'll drive right out."

Later I learned more of the story from my younger sister, Mary. Not knowing how to get to his family's new farm, Billy took a Greyhound bus from Minneapolis to the small town where he knew my sister went to a Lutheran high school.

Mary was in a typing class when one of her girlfriends said there was somebody tapping at the window. Mary looked over to see Billy motioning for her to come out. She received permission and when she got outside he was pressed against the side of the building, as if not wanting to be seen. He was wearing his green Marine uniform, and Mary said he kept looking around. He had two requests—one, could our father pick him up, and two, he needed to talk to me and wanted my phone number. Of course, my father came and drove him and Mary back to our house. My father said he would take him to his family's place, but Billy said no, he wasn't ready to see them yet. He also turned down an offer to see our grandmother, simply saying "Not yet."

After Billy called me, I made the half-hour drive and arrived at the farmhouse around 9 p.m. Even though I hadn't been in combat, he said he felt he could talk to me as a fellow vet. He and I sat at a table in the kitchen. The house was dark except for one overhead light in the kitchen. The wind howled outside, and the rain turned to sleet. We had one beer apiece for the whole night as Billy talked and I listened. I won't repeat any of the stories Billy told me that night, for I've never gotten his permission, and I never will. My cousin Billy passed away from prostate cancer (Agent Orange?) several years ago. What I will say is it changed my outlook on Vietnam. Up to that night I supported America's involvement in Vietnam; after that night I became anti-war.

I still have an image in my mind of that night. Two young men sitting at a table facing one another. We played cards without keeping score, some game Billy

had played in Vietnam. Some kind of focus, I guess, something to do with our hands and eyes. His eyes were cold and the humor hard, mirthless.

Billy's tour in-country was almost finished when he severely injured his back jumping out of a helicopter on a combat mission. The helicopter hovered off the ground and the Marines had to jump onto tree branches. The branch Billy grabbed broke, and he injured his back in the fall. He told me story after story after story, stories never again repeated to me, or anybody else as far as I know. It was like he purged himself that night. Maybe that had been his intention when he asked for my phone number. Finally, in the early morning, Billy stopped talking, and I left to return to school. The only time Billy spoke about Vietnam after that was an occasional dark-humored joke.

My mother employed him later that summer to build a patio onto our house. At day's end she'd bring a beer out to him, and they'd talk, not about the war, just talk. He said the first couple of months back were pretty rough, and she helped him out. Billy became one of the hardest workers imaginable, employed by a phone company, helping out local farmers and later in life at his son's construction company. Maybe it was a way to keep memories at bay.

Postscript to this story: The girl in typing class who alerted my sister that somebody was outside asked about him. My sister introduced them, and they were married for 48 years. R.I.P., cousin.

# Enjoy Peace and Happiness

*By Gene Groner*

*VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO*

In my home there is a very old sampler with the words sewn on it that carry an important reminder. I read these words every day. This is what they say:

1. Never give up
2. Be nice to one another
3. Think good thoughts
4. Try to do better
5. Say please and thank you

I must confess that I don't always follow these rules, but when I do try to follow them, I find that my day goes much better and I enjoy peace and happiness.

So why don't I do them daily? Well, nobody's perfect, right? This much I do know: if you want to have a better life and improved relationships every day, following these simple rules just might give you what you are looking for.

This sampler is simple but profound. I believe that following these simple guidelines is a sure way to find peace and happiness. It works!

## Haiku Stranded

*By Charles L. Carey*

*VA Medical Center—Martinsburg, WV*

Mountains, valleys, sea,  
Worlds unknown to myself and me,  
Just stranded with me.

## Borderland of Peace-Seeking

*By James Allen Breitwieser*

*VA Medical Center—Honolulu, HI*

Fast-mover Blue Angels' roar  
reverberates, resonates along  
concrete canyons, glorifying  
Fleet Week. Below,

peace-clamoring agitators  
crane necks to catch elusive  
glimpses of warbirds rocketing  
across the Frisco terrain.

We're war-weary soldiers returned  
from rendering downrange trauma  
care, who seek succor and join the  
peace collaborators' march.

But their braying placards held high  
declare ritual conspirator intrigue  
as they chant, "Hey-hey, ho-ho,  
bring the baby-killers home."

We find no solace here.  
Disenthralled with fellow  
travelers, we retreat to the  
Ferry Terminal wine bar.

## Scud Hole

*By James Allen Breitwieser*

*VA Medical Center—Honolulu, HI*

Gape into the mesmerizing crater  
where oily, brackish water collects,  
covering its bottom,  
disguising the depth  
to which the Scud blasted

a chasm where the DFAC once sat,  
where we routinely congregated  
to consume meals often interrupted  
by the prophetic, wailing sirens  
of impending calamity.

# It Don't Mean Nothing Brother. Nothing at All

By Richard Wangard  
VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

In September of 1971, President Richard Nixon awarded the Presidential Unit Citation to the 834th Air Division—it's second one. The action taken to receive such an award must be studied over time to see if it is earned, and it is given to every man in the entire unit. Nobody, in the three times I was in Vietnam, ever did anything for such a medal. We just wanted to survive. We flew

so many missions, and nobody counted except the guys you lost. That took a toll on us who flew like nothing you can imagine.

I was medivaced out of Nam in October of 1970 after serving in six of the 13 different campaigns in the Vietnam War, all with Detachment 1 of the 834th Air Division at Tan Son Nhut, Cam Ranh Bay and Phu Bai. All three flew all over Vietnam and were permanent status duty stations. All three were ignored by the Air Force and left off the order for the Presidential Unit Citation.

Why? In 1969 there was a huge build-up of troops in Vietnam. Protests were in full swing and by now the Vietnam vet was hated stateside. I just got sergeant stripes in April of 1970. I was 19, went in at 17.

Why were the three permanent attachments of the 834th not on that order for the Presidential Unit Citation, basically ignoring what thousands of airmen who paid the price in death and wounds? From April 1970 to June of 1970



we did the impossible, with impossible equipment, against impossible odds and against a superior enemy force when the Cambodian invasion went south and the North Vietnamese counterattacked. We flew nonstop in our C-130As to rescue as many as possible during the retreat for a period of three months, both the build-up for the invasion and the retreat.

You see, the Air Force didn't want the public back in the States to know about the huge build-up of troops in Vietnam. The Air Force paperwork is pure B.S. I have documents and pictures to prove it.

In April 1970 I came home from Nam on a 30-day leave before going back for the third time, this time permanent duty for a year. I hated that leave and never finished it. I was tired of being mocked, hated and scorned. I got back to the only place I understood. Turned 20 and responsibility just grew and grew. My assignment was to fly anywhere to fix broken aircraft. But we had many, many mid-air diversions for medivacs

because some unit was just in a firefight and to get needed troops to hospitals ASAP. So we dropped our resupply load and rigged the plane for medivac. Another problem: none of us were medics. All we could do for the 100 wounded was our best—all five or six of us. Guys died en route. Just a hair stressful, huh? No wonder we all drank like fishes off duty, except there hardly was any off duty.

So I inquired 50 years later through my senator to the Air Force Board in D.C. Remember, I had the orders, all the paperwork and pictures as well as letters from fellow airmen. It took forever; things were lost, had to be redone. Finally, two years later I got a one sentence answer. The detachments did not receive the Presidential Unit Citation.

We didn't fly for medals or glory. We flew because someone had to. But thousands of airmen, all great guys who put all they had on the line, were ignored by the Air Force, just another chapter of the war nobody even cared about until I researched it and was denied by the Air Force Board. Do you really think the Air Force is going to admit anything?

The only thing that would square it is an act of Congress, and we all know what they do. Nothing. So as my Army brothers say, "Brother it don't mean nothing. Nothing at all."

# Cadence Call

By Kenneth Harrod  
—Emerald Isle, NC



In 1984 and '85, our unit guidon bearer in Hanau, West Germany's Fliegerhorst Kaserne was nicknamed Alley Oop. He was a tall, lanky fella who could run forever and was perfect for taking his place at the front of the unit on every run.

I was a sergeant first class and headquarters platoon sergeant. I enjoyed calling cadence for the unit during our morning physical training (PT) runs. Most of the calls were traditional. The person calling cadence kept the unit in step by counting in a loud command voice which could get pretty boring during a long run at "double-time." There are cadence calls which are familiar to most Army personnel.

*"Ain't no use in going home. (Repeated by the troops in unison to the cadence of the march.)*  
*Jody's got your girl and gone. (Repeated)*  
*Ain't no use in goin' back. (Repeated)*  
*Jody's got your Cadillac. (Repeated)*  
*Am I right or wrong? (You're RIGHT)*  
*Am I going strong? (You're RIGHT)*  
*Sound off (1-2) Hit 'em again (3-4)*  
*Bring it on down (1-2-3-4 — 1-2-3-4)"*

This one is called a "Jody Call," and there are many of them. Some are not polite enough to be used in the streets of the garrison, but you might hear them on the long road to the rifle range. I won't repeat any of those here.

I did write an original cadence call which seemed to satisfy the troops and keep them going. I've often wondered if anyone used my original "Alley Oop" cadence call after I left to go home and retire in 1985.

*"Alley Oop was a fighter, some folks say. (Repeat)*  
*He could whip the whole tribe and only take one day. (Repeat)*  
*If we had a guidon for Alley Oop to hold, (Repeat)*  
*He'd want to put the flag on a telephone pole. (Repeat)*  
*He'd swing it to the left and swing to the rear, (Repeat)*  
*He'd swing it all around and keep the roadway clear. (Repeat)*  
*If the Cobras had to go; if they had to fight, (Repeat)*  
*Alley Oop, on foot, could keep them all in sight. (Repeat)*  
*He could rearm, refuel, and check their glass. (Repeat)*  
*P.O.L. and Armament could go on pass. (Repeat)*

At any time during the cadence call some of the troops might get out of step with the rest of the unit. If that happened, I'd just do a "numbers call." Once everyone was back in step, I'd continue the "Alley Oop" call.

I must have done that call a few times, because tonight, after more than 37 years of not calling cadence, it jumped into my head, and I was able to rattle it off with only a couple of hesitations. It was a good memory for me.

If you've never heard 150 (or more) troops sounding off with a cadence call on an early morning run, you've missed a special treat.

# Joining Up: Sharing My Woundedness

By Dave Redmon  
—Manhattan, KS



Like a lot of veterans, I feel uneasy whenever I hear folks tell me “Thank you for your service.” This is a story about my military experience.

I was born a little past the midpoint of World War II, the third of four children in a farm family native to southeast Kansas. All of us came to life at home except for me. I was born in a California hospital because a fire burned down our barn, destroying our draft horses. So, in 1943 my dad moved his family west to be near his sister and her husband in the Bay Area where he took a job helping build ships for the Navy.

After the war ended, the family came home, able to buy some rocky farmland and put money down on our first real tractor, a used Farmall Model M. Not two years later, my 41-year-old father was dead, the victim of a farm accident. Three months after, my 34-year-old mother gave birth to my sister. With my brother and another sister, 11 and 12 years older than me, we hung on until extreme heat and drought forced a sellout in 1954. By then my mother had remarried and my older siblings had moved away and started families, but the rest of us moved to Parsons, a railroad town of 13,000 Anglo, Black, Hispanic and Indigenous people just 23 miles north of the Oklahoma line. I was in fifth grade.

As a loner in a new place, “rube” and “hayseed” were some of the names I heard while adjusting to my new life. I could rely on a mother with a factory job to bring home the bacon, a cute if bothersome little sister, a stepfather who loved to play the role of Santa Claus every December and an old bike to get around town. I adopted a baby raccoon he had found and brought home, learned to swim, went hunting

and fishing, played baseball, got a paper route and found out how to meet customers in their homes to collect their 35 cents a week. I met my best friend in seventh grade when he gave me a ride home on his bike after I discovered a flat tire on mine. Not long after, he invited me to church with his family. (We still go biking together.)

Barely 12 years had passed since the war ended, so veterans were everywhere. Some were parents of classmates, while others served as schoolteachers, coaches, church leaders or owners of grocery stores, where soon I would go to work part time for Bob Brewer, who owned an IGA with his twin brother Bill, also a veteran. Some, like my one-armed math teacher Mr. Hudgins, had suffered visible wounds. My stepfather Frank served as a Navy Seabee with Marines at Guadalcanal and on other islands in the South Pacific, where he was gravely wounded before spending many months in a hospital bed. Amidst a growing economy and among hometown heroes who had helped defeat Hitler and Hirohito, I looked up to these guys, like everyone else.

We got our first television set in 1953 in time to watch “Victory at Sea,” a new documentary series based on extensive film footage of battle scenes shot during World War II. During my most formative years, I watched those 26 documentaries time and again come Sunday evening. Coming of age, it dawned on me that I could seek adventure while doing my



patriotic duty. A few weeks after high school, it surprised no one when that old buddy and I found a recruiter and joined up. We reported for Navy boot camp on Aug. 5, 1962—coincidentally the day Marilyn Monroe died.

I wanted to attend flight school but flunked the physical because of stuttering (which I eventually came to view as a blessing). So after graduating from Kansas State with a history degree, I joined 5,000 men aboard an aircraft carrier that included dozens of sleek jets—a bristling arsenal at sea. We crossed the North Atlantic and visited several ports around the Mediterranean, departing just weeks before Israel’s Six Day War. Returning to Virginia, we took leave to visit our families but in November 1967, 260 members of our air squadron flew to San Diego to join another carrier bound for the South China Sea. There we would pound a tiny former French colony (Vietnam) whose name I’d never even heard of just four years earlier when I joined up.

I was part of an all-Navy Personnel Accounting Computer Installation working as a remote mail-in correspondent

onboard a floating fortress, so I had only a little skin in the game. But it wasn't long before our outfit lost friends we knew well, a crew of two whose A-6 bomber was shot down over Hanoi and never heard from again. In January, the Tet Offensive shocked everyone, as did President Lyndon Johnson's announcement that the U.S. would pause bombing in North Vietnam and that he would not run for a second term because of the sagging popularity of this undeclared war. Even though we were far from home and cut off from all mass media except worn copies of *Time* and *Newsweek*, I could feel a growing resentment. We had been lied to, and we were heartbroken. Our anger was palpable.

I took leave in April to visit Japan and a friend from college born in China while her father had been a newspaper editor there. One morning at breakfast in a Tokyo suburb, listening with her to an English-language radio broadcast, we heard the terrible news of the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in Memphis. After nearly six years of active and reserve duty, I flew home in mid-May to a different country. As I began graduate studies at the University of Kansas in Lawrence, news of another assassination

rocked the world. This time it was Bobby Kennedy. Massive, bloody demonstrations in Chicago that August marked a turning point in history. The world—large parts of it anyway—seemed on fire. But I was too busy being me. So, like most, I remained in denial.

I'd studied the disconcerting history and methods of propaganda and censorship in the mass media and popular culture before beginning to practice journalism at *The Kansas City Star*. Slowly it dawned on me that even though I was in the news business, I was first a consumer of mass media and thus the incomplete news we call propaganda. I struggled to admit that I/we had been duped and deceived, played as suckers. And even though it still brings tears to my eyes, I recognized that my beloved Victory at Sea suite was instrumental in glorifying the acceptability of war to further national goals and ambitions, which I now rejected. It was difficult handling my cognitive dissonance until I learned to salute all ordinary people



who suffer and serve while doing their best, whether guardians and rescuers, builders, custodians, nurses and caregivers, teachers, artists, musicians or missionaries, because none of us ever knows the real score until it's all over and we gather by the river on the other side.

Looking back, I acknowledge my role in supporting the machinery of violence, but despite the continuing woundedness I regret none of my personal experiences. I still salute all those, in uniform or not, who sacrifice themselves in love for something greater than themselves.

## Out of the Kitchen

*By Carl Palmer*  
—University Place, WA

Responding to my desire for learning how to throw a wicked curve ball, my mom says, "You just need to wait until the baby bottles finish boiling. But you can help me by taking them from the kettle."

Handing me the tongs, she says, "Put them on the counter to dry while I get Little Dori from her rocker and dress to go outside. And grab my mitt."

Later, the Little League coach, Mr. Temple, praises my winning performance, saying I'm his new star pitcher.

"What a great curve ball, Ace," he says. "I bet your dad is really proud."



# Not Playing With a Full Deck

By Melvin Brinkley  
—Davis, CA

Military orders are often amended. In 1995, during my first deployment, I was detached from my home unit and reassigned to higher headquarters. A new batch of amendments to my original orders was written, which said that I had to stay longer in the former Republic of Yugoslavia than what my original orders indicated. When I told my wife that I would not be coming back as early as my original

orders had stated, she took it well and came up with a clever way to show our daughters how much longer I would be gone.

My wife told our daughters, “We are going to play a game each week. This game will start with us tacking up some ordinary playing cards on the kitchen cork board. At the end of each week, we will take down one card. When all the cards have been taken down that means your daddy will be coming back home.”

The day my home unit went home without me and a new command staff arrived, I felt more abandoned than I had ever felt in my entire life. I didn’t know anyone in this new crowd. I had already been living for more than half a year without my family. I cringed inwardly when my new commander introduced me to his staff as his “continuity asset.” That chillingly accurate phrase made me feel like a tiny cog in the vast machinery of our military, which was true enough, but I did not need a reminder of that fact.

When I finally got back home, I asked my wife how her card game with our



make it for us. Our badge of honor had “Stay. Sit.” stitched above an embroidered picture of a dog looking up pitifully. That little bit of rebellion and coping skill got me through that extended tour. Before I called my family to tell them, I kicked a tire until I had vented as much of my frustration as possible, so that I would not pass on to them any of my angst. Luckily, I had on a pair of steel-toed boots.

I am still learning what happened on the home front

while I was gone. My wife told me the other day that she never bothered with the deployment-calendar-card-game after Beth dismantled it. When I asked her why, she said, “Anyone who thinks a gimmick like that is going to help anybody cope with the vagaries of a deployment is not playing with a full deck.”

I could not have said it better. What a woman!

Postscript: Those I knew who did not come back home alive from their deployment, I will never forget. How young, how smart, how dedicated and how brave they all were. It is my fervent hope that my fellow American citizens will take into account the sacrifices of those who served our country, and especially take into account those who died serving our country, and then treat all their fellow Americans accordingly—with humility, grace and justice. In my estimation, that’s the best way any civilian who has never served in the military can thank me and my fellow veterans for our service.

daughters had gone. She told me that Beth, our youngest, had taken down all the playing cards after the third week, thinking that would speed up my homecoming. Imagining Beth doing her magical-thinking best to get me back home in a hurry hit me like a thunderbolt. I had missed everyone’s birthday; I had missed everyone’s Christmas; I had missed taking Beth to her ballet lessons; I had missed going to Katie’s basketball games; I had missed my wedding anniversary. I had missed my family and they had missed me. And the kicker was there was no way to get any of those key moments back.

Almost a decade later, in the middle of my last deployment, we were told we had to stay put in the midst of the murderous Taliban until Operation Iraqi Freedom stabilized. Let me share this hard-won wisdom from toughing it out in Afghanistan: being in the company of the miserable does not in any way soothe the ache of being homesick.

Some of us who had our orders extended designed a patch for our uniforms and commissioned a local Afghan tailor to

# Seeking Support and Understanding

*By James Janssen  
—Wichita, KS*

We all joined the service for a myriad of reasons, reasons too numerous to mention. But more importantly, we all entered a different way of life where discipline and training were the main focus.

Being prepared to fight the enemy, knowing how to take orders, following military law, hand-to-hand combat, drills, obstacle courses, etc., become ingrained as that new way of life. Those experiencing war learn a whole new set of values of camaraderie, watching each other's back, survival and a lot of praying.

Then at term we either re-up or return to civilian life. Our course of action can require another change to another way of life again. Some now have PTSD; some become suicidal, and some suffer from ongoing physical wounds.

Taking one of these changes of life for discussion, let's center on returning to civilian life. The change of a veteran returning home is often perceived when experiencing societal mores and values that have shifted to a different set as compared to those prior to induction. A sense of frustration is felt until a new understanding and adjustment takes place. In all scenarios our emotions, physical and spiritual, are affected. In most cases this takes place through local VA programs and counseling.

Another great source veterans and the public have is The Veterans and Military Crisis Line. The respondents are available 24/7 and lend exceptional support in two ways:

1. They never judge or take any issue with the veteran.
2. They specialize in making the veteran feel better.

These are crucial means that lead to quality support. It is vital to each veteran to understand and feel how important and special they are having served and experienced traumatic moments that became internalized and not conveyed.

Veterans pay high prices, often wearing their broken hearts on their sleeves. Then they return to a life they once knew only to find much of it has changed. They served with their lives on the line with honor, dignity and a strong desire to preserve a way of life and freedom we enjoy and take for granted every day. Veteran or civilian, may we all join together to lift the veterans' spirits up, letting each one know just how special they are for the prices they paid for each one of us.

Veterans and Military Crisis Line: dial 988 and select 1, or text 838255.



## It's Never Too Late

*By Jason Kirk Bartley  
VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH*

It is never too late,  
while you're breathing your breath,  
to cry out upon Jesus.  
You'll never see death.

It's never too late  
to bring Him into your heart.  
You'll have a clean slate  
and a brand new start.

It's never too late.  
You're never too gone  
to cry out in your weakness  
to the only begotten Son.

It's never too late,  
till your soul has been raptured,  
to allow Jesus in.  
Your whole heart will He capture.

It's never over  
till God says you're done.  
He's made a way;  
this life is in His Son.

It's never too late.

## My Plea

*By Nila K. Bartley*

*VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH*

The air is bitterly cold as I step outside.  
The wind is sharp and cutting and my coat  
offers little warmth on such a day.  
The snow is ankle deep  
with patches of ice here and there.  
My spirits plummet downward as I think  
of what awaits me on the long drive ahead.

How I long for it—springtime and all that it entails.  
My thoughts take me back to earlier this year.

The flowers in full bloom  
giving off their intoxicating aroma  
wafting through the air.  
The aroma awakens my nose and other senses  
as I am entranced by the beauty of the flowers.

The Almighty making the leaves of the tree  
dance to and fro by exhaling  
as if to blow the earth a kiss.  
The cool invigorating breeze  
that ensues from the kiss  
is a balm to my body and soul.

The warm caress of the sun on my face  
soothes me as the gentle touch of a lover.

I watch a squirrel steal some seeds  
from a bird feeder  
and scamper hurriedly up a tree.  
The earth is teeming with life.  
Everything is green and lush.

Reality bites me back to the present  
in the form of a frigid wind  
taking its revenge upon my face.  
Oh, how I dread winter.

Springtime, come early and stay late is my plea.

## The Party Is Over

*By Scott Lehman*

*VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO*

Buy the last beer!  
One for the road!  
Heading home!  
Buy a six-pack for the road!  
All of a sudden you have a clone.  
You're not alone!  
You're in the danger zone!  
A blackout!  
The place is jail.  
You have a pile of charges.  
The last thing you remember  
was being at the bar.  
You pinch yourself  
to see if this is a dream!

## Vagabond

*By Scott Lehman*

*VA Medical Center—St. Louis, MO*

I follow the clouds,  
I don't like crowds,  
I'm a Vagabond.  
Wander everywhere,  
All I want is my share,  
I'm a Vagabond.  
Can't you tell,  
Been there,  
Done that,  
Got nine lives  
Like a black cat,  
I'm a Vagabond.  
Running to and fro,  
I'm always on the go,  
I'm a Vagabond.  
On the highway,  
Like Frankie said,  
I did it my way,  
I'm a Vagabond.  
I'll never stop,  
Spin like a top,  
Down the road.

# Marriage Moguls

By Melvin Brinkley

—Davis, CA

While celebrating my fortieth wedding anniversary, my oldest daughter asked me for any marital advice I might have gleaned through the years. We had been discussing how my wife had single-handedly raised her and her sister while I was gone on my many deployments.



I said, “My steep learning curve started on the first day of our honeymoon, on the slopes of Colorado. When my bride fell off the T-bar, this accident kicked off a series of other honeymoon mishaps. You might not know what a T-bar is since only a few of the most rustic skiing outfits use them now. A T-bar requires two people to half-squat on either side of an uncomfortable metal bar that’s shaped like a T. The T-bar is attached to a cable that pulls the skiers up the mountain. There is no lifting or sitting like you would if you were on a regular ski lift. Your skis never leave the snow.

“I got off the T-bar when my wife fell, realizing I would have to be an accomplished acrobat to stay on that antiquated rig without a counterbalance. I began to wonder if I had made a mistake in buying the cheaper skiing packet. Places with modern ski lifts were more expensive. I kept my concerns to myself. No need to bring up how my thriftiness had backfired. Luckily, a ski patrol dude came by and helped my bride get back down the mountain. That tumble really rattled her for the rest of the day.

“I, on the other hand, felt pretty smug about how I had not made one disparaging remark about my bride not mastering the T-bar. That smugness about what a great guy I was evaporated when she accused me of flirting with some college girls at the lodge. In my mind, I wasn’t flirting. I was being my affable self. Instead of arguing with her, I

stormed out of our cabin feeling completely bewildered. I thought we were supposed to be lovey-dovey on our honeymoon.

“After walking about half a football field from our cabin, I sat down on a snowbank. I had a lot of thinking to do. First of all, I regretted ever getting married. Second of all, I seriously contemplated throwing my wedding ring away. Third of all, I noticed that I was shaking violently, not from anger but from the penetrating cold of the Colorado mountains in the middle of winter. I had left our cabin in such a funk I hadn’t bothered putting on anything except my thin cotton pajamas.

“As I descended into hypothermia, I had a moment of clarity, which I understand happens when people are actively dying. A voice as clear as a bell started arguing with me, ‘You shouldn’t tell your wife that she had flirted with the handsome ski patrol guy, that is, if you ever see her again in this life.’

“Hmm,” I said, “I hadn’t thought of that. They did seem awfully chummy when I met them at the base of the mountain.”

“The voice tried again to talk some sense into me as I transitioned to the great beyond, ‘So what if you have a similar accusation you could toss back at her? What good is that going to do you now that you are freezing to death? If she ever figures out that you skimmed on the ski package, you’ll definitely

be in more hot water.’” “This conversation went on for a while.”

“Luckily, my new bride came out to look for me. Maybe she wanted to avoid answering any nosey questions from the police like, ‘Why did your newly married and poorly dressed husband freeze to death only 50 yards from your cabin?’

“Through chattering teeth, I apologized for my flirtations with the coquettish coeds. My wife volunteered, without any prompting from me, that she had ‘sort of’ flirted with the ski patrol guy. The evening ended with us patching up our shockingly shaky marriage.

“As we were getting ready to leave the mountains of Colorado, I had a conversation with an older gentleman and learned that he and his wife had just celebrated their golden wedding anniversary. I asked that kind soul for any marital advice he might have, much as my daughter would ask me 40 years into the future. He said, ‘Never let the sun set on your anger.’

“The older gentleman’s advice has rung true through the years. If my wife and I can summon the courage to make a sharp turn toward forgiveness instead of barreling down in an avalanche of anger, then we stand a pretty good chance of gliding gently toward a decent night’s sleep. I would like nothing better than to celebrate my golden anniversary with my golden girl. For that to happen, we realize that we have to navigate the marriage moguls as a team, and, last but not least, avoid flirting, unless it’s with each other, of course.

“In my second month of marriage I learned...”

# Sprout the Evergreen

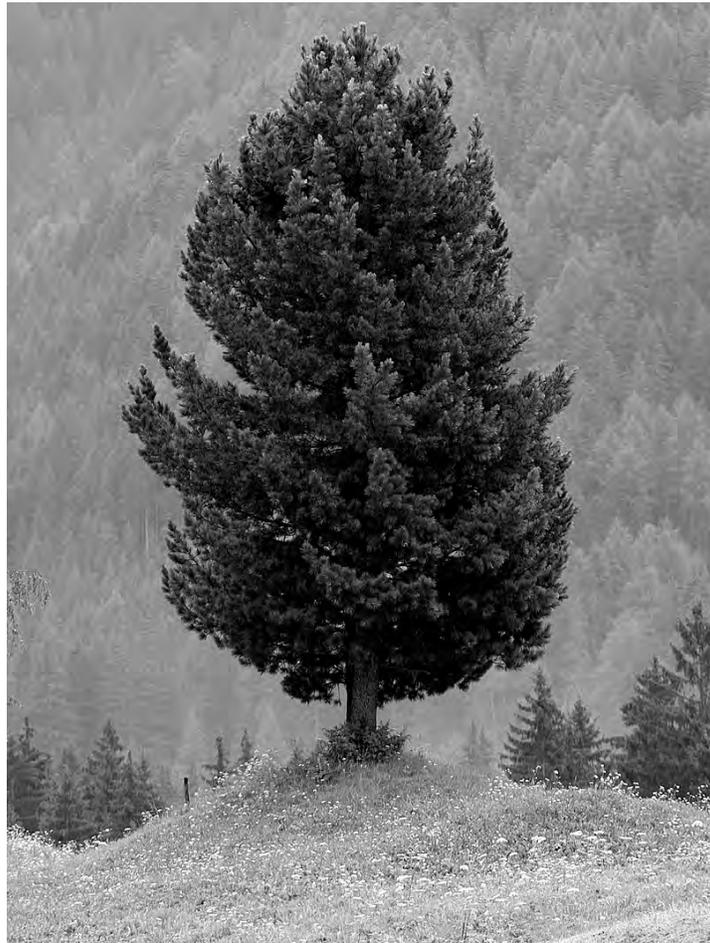
By *Kenneth Harrod*  
—*Emerald Isle, NC*

Once upon a time, in a land far away, there was a great forest of giant trees. In the very middle of the forest where the sun could only shine for a little while every day, a tiny “Sprout” popped up and began to grow. None of the trees or plants knew where Sprout came from or how Sprout was planted in their forest.

Perhaps the seed came on a great wind from far away. Maybe the tiny seed was stuck in the mud on the back of a tortoise passing slowly through. A low-hanging branch could have swept the seed off the shell of the tortoise so it could settle on the floor of the forest.

The warmth of the sun for a short time each day, and the dampness from the rain was enough to cause tiny Sprout to stretch out a root and begin to grow. None of the ferns or other small plants cared for the little newcomer. They didn’t understand Sprout and thought the plant was pushing them around as it began to grow.

When Sprout did begin to grow tiny branches, the branches curled upward toward the great heaven unlike any of the other trees of the forest, whose branches leaned down toward the ground. Even the very highest branches of the greatest trees pointed down. Sprout didn’t care about the ferns and didn’t listen to them when they made fun of its little branches. Sprout quickly outgrew the ferns and became taller than the other plants who didn’t understand why this little tree (for



matter what the other trees said to the little tree, it wouldn’t stop growing and getting taller and taller until the little tree became a great tree too. Its branches stretched and curled up on the ends and its leaves were like needles of green.

As the tree in the center of the great forest got bigger, it could be seen above many of the other great trees. There were mountains in the distance, and the air was quite cold as the wind blew, but the tree with the upswept limbs grew strong and tall. It could bear the weight of the snows when they came, and it loved to feel the rain on its branches. The other great trees of the forest began to respect the tree at their center for it was strong and tall and provided shelter below for the animals of the forest.

Sprout was beginning to look very much like a little tree to all the other plants) had branches that curled up. After a few years, the great trees began to notice the little tree and began to question where the little tree came from. When they saw the way the limbs of the little tree pointed up, they laughed and laughed at the little tree. The wind was full of their laughter. They asked how the rain could wash off the little tree, and they warned the little tree that the snow would catch in its upturned branches and make them too heavy to hold up.

Little Sprout just kept growing and raising each branch up toward heaven where the warm sun felt so good and where the wind dipped down to tickle its branches. No

One day, an eagle flew to the center of the forest and circled high above the tree with the upturned branches. He called out e...EE e...EE? That meant: where did you come from “Arolla Pine?” All the great trees began to turn and sway in the breeze and pass the name “Arolla” from one to the other. Finally, all the plants and trees of the forest knew the name of the tree they had watched grow up among them. It was a great Arolla pine from the far mountains surrounding their forest. Arolla was happy to be there in the forest and to know the eagle knew its name. “Arolla” would never be called by its nickname, “Sprout,” again.

# Trapping Heals the Wounds

By Steven Dillman  
—Harvard, NE

Being a veteran from the Iraq war, I was able to attend a veteran retreat called Huts for Vets located in Aspen, Colo. The founder, Paul Anderson, is very supportive of veterans and is helping them heal by using literature and the wilderness.

While there, I was able to share my combat experience and get heavy burdens off my shoulders that I carried for a good 10 years. A few of the experiences they offer are sleeping in teepees as well as doing a 10-mile hike up and a 10-mile hike down the rigorous terrain. Another session was pretending to be Sacagawea and Lewis and Clark. We would spend about two hours exploring the environment, writing about what we encountered and how we felt during the exercise for mental and spiritual health. Doing this gave me a great respect for the frontiersman before me. I gained much interest in legendary icons, such as Jedediah Smith and John Colter.

We also participated in another exercise where we were left alone in the mountain wilderness and had to write our thoughts or be in deep meditation. I drew my surroundings in my journal, including full details about the terrain, distance and anything that would be landmarks; I also added scripture. When I reported back to share what I did, others asked me if I was a sniper. I didn't know what to think about that, but I was not. I was a truck driver and a machine gunner, nothing like a sniper. But when we were on tower guard in combat, we would draw our sectors and share them with the next person on the watch.

Coincidentally, after returning home to Nebraska from the retreat, the state of

Nebraska added fur harvesting to the Resident Disabled Veteran Lifetime Legacy Permit, which is free to Nebraska resident veterans rated at 50 percent or more for Veteran Affairs disability. I do not believe I would have attempted trapping if the permit were not offered and I had not attended the retreat.

My two sons enjoy hunting and fishing greatly. I know I can shoot a deer and catch a fish, but I would rather watch others enjoy doing it. Trapping fits me just right. I play chess, which helps me understand the skills of finding footprints, trails, dens and areas of food and water—in other words, understanding animal habitation.

After scoping them out and asking permission from the landowner, I put up trail cameras. I have captured raccoon, opossum, skunk, badger, mink, rabbit and a coyote. I joined the National Trappers Association and ordered subscriptions to *Fur Fish Game*, *The Trapper*, *Trappers Post* and *Nebraska Fur Harvesters*. I proudly wear the patch on my vest. All this is to further the education and knowledge of what others have done and are willing to share.

Next, I cleaned out a space in my barn and called it the trapping room. It is the command center of the four-month trapping season. It starts at midnight on Halloween and ends on the last day of February (my birthday). I have the traps hanging on the wall with a work bench for daily tools and equipment. There is also a cabinet for frontier books and trapping magazines. I even learned how to walnut dye traps for seasonal preparation.

Formerly, I was a sergeant in the Army, and I miss leading and training soldiers. So the next step was for me to share my knowledge and passion that has helped me heal from combat trauma. I did what it took to become a Nebraska Hunter Education Instructor. Being a volunteer with Nebraska Game and Parks is quite an experience. It allows me to stay calm and teach youth or even at times young adults the skills of outdoor adventures using guns, bows, traps and overall safety.

Speaking about safety, my very first animal in a steel foot trap was a raccoon. I baited it with Skittles. I attempted to hold the animal down and release it. However, that did not go too well. With its back legs it scratched and clawed me on my right forearm, laying it open. Also, he bit a few of my fingers. Somehow, I dispatched it and then went to the emergency room. I got a rabies shot and had an allergic reaction that put me back in the ER a few days later. That prepared me for trapping. I was not hindered by the blood and scars from the raccoon. It made me be more mindful and in the moment of the life of the animal.

Dispatching and skinning does not bother me. It is very therapeutic and relaxing. You want a clean kill so there is no suffering and no damage to meat or fur. I say a prayer before dispatching to show I am thankful and it is not just a kill. I will cook something from it to avoid waste. What is left over will be bait for other traps.

Thank you for allowing me to share my story of how trapping has helped me heal from combat. It keeps me close to God and allows me to enjoy the outdoors.

# Vietnam Blues

By Albert Hernandez  
—El Paso, TX

Ever get the “blues?” about anything? A bad relationship. A troubled marriage. Problems at work. Family conflict. Finances. Politics. War. World affairs. Sickness. Any one of these can give you the blues. But for the typical Vietnam veteran, the blues are real. His mind cannot erase what he saw and went through. It will torment him for the rest of his life. The day will come when his health will fail him. There will be days when he will not feel good. Getting out of bed will be



a challenge. He is up in age, an age he did not expect to reach. But he did. Good or bad, he copes with life the best way he can. Yes, he's got the VA, but for what? Pills and more pills? Drugs? How about alcohol? For most vets, that's the norm. But hey! Give him a vodka and a pill, and he's ready for the manure, that is, the world. At least that's his perception of it. So, he goes through the motions of life. If he believes in God, he normally goes to church (“normally”). If he gets sick, he goes to his VA. If he has a few bucks in his wallet, he'll go buy something, anything. When he gets tired of the slop he's been eating, he'll go to a nice restaurant. He'll do anything to get himself out of the rut he's in, at least for a little while.

His life is a series of battles, trials and tribulations. He merely plays the cards he was dealt. But for the tough and determined vet, it's not enough. He goes on living. If he's smart, he'll take advantage of what he has or what he can get. But if he's not, he'll end up in the street and become a member of the mob known as

the homeless. Or he'll join the others in the grave.

I'm talking about the Vietnam vet. But why the Vietnam vet? What about the other war vets? Because the Vietnam vet was dealt cards he didn't ask for. He was thrown into a brutal and senseless war, a war he couldn't win. Today's soldiers and Marines are called “heroes.” The Vietnam vet was called “baby killer.” So, of course he's bitter, angry and sick. “What did that damn Agent Orange do to me?” asked one vet. Diabetes and cancer. Four out of five vets are dying from those two major diseases. That's too many. And that doesn't account for the 22 vets committing suicide every day, most of them being Vietnam vets (according to latest reports).

I was a Navy hospital corpsman, Fleet Marine Force (FMF), 3rd Marine Division. I was a frontline combat medic. It's by the grace and mercy of God that I am still here, alive, writing these words. Let me tell everyone something: there is nothing

glorious or famous about a torn body or a traumatized mind. There is certainly no glory or fame in the grave. There is only a casket and a dead body. And that flag draped over the casket means nothing to the one in it. So let us remember that the next time we mourn over the fallen, they're dead; they're gone. We're still here, alive.

You see, it's easy to be patriotic until you've felt the sting of battle. It's easy to fly the flag proclaiming to be a proud American until you've seen the blood and guts of what used to be a human life. This is what the American warrior sees and goes through in defense of his country, in war. This is the reality that most don't see. But I do.

The “blues” are a way of life for many Vietnam vets. Not for me. I've dealt with my demons. But I do have my days. And when I do, I take it with grace. Each day is a gift from God. I count my blessings every day. I am grateful for what I have. But I give myself some credit too. I didn't quit. I moved on. So, to all my fellow vets: don't give up. Life is too precious. Our days are numbered. Let's live them to the fullest. Got a roof over your head? Have food on the table? You're better off than most of the world, if you do.

That's how I deal with “Vietnam Blues.”

## The Man in the Wheelchair

By Jason Kirk Bartley

VA Medical Center—Chillicothe, OH

There once was a man in a wheelchair.  
He just needed a little push to get him over bumps  
and by the briary bush,  
but never did he ask and seldom did he complain.  
He rolled with his old arms, the wheelchair, even in the rain.  
You could see him rolling down the streets  
and coasting down the hills.  
His countenance was always joyful,  
his kindness a catching wave.  
Never did we see feeble legs,  
but only that he was brave.  
We'd hear his kind, kind voice,  
and then we'd see him from afar.  
He was such a gentleman, a joy to have around  
and as rare as a shooting star.  
Never was he negative and ever did he try  
to be a positive light and a really, really nice guy.  
His character was phenomenal,  
his charisma just as good.  
He was a bright light we could depend on  
in our neighborhood.  
He would always be so friendly;  
his disability would never get him down.  
He'd catch and kill you with kindness,  
and greet you around the town.  
The only disability we all have is not the one we see.  
God created us all equal, if we want to be.  
You choose how you will spend your life  
and the way you look at things.  
Choose to look at brighter days,  
not the sufferings.

## Thank You\*

By Deborah Ann Cole

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Thank you from the bottom of my heart.  
You have given me HOPE from the very start.

We know this task is not an easy one,  
But you go wholeheartedly until the task is done.

This task is not done by one or two.  
It takes the whole team to get us through.

Some of us might fall by the wayside and that's not God's will,  
So God gives us this time to pray and be still.

He shows His love through each heart  
Which gives us strength as He did Mozart.

Mozart showed God's gift through music, you know,  
Just like you all do, and every day it shows.

So I take this time to THANK YOU again  
For lending us your helping hand.

*\*Dedicated to everyone who served our country.*



# Their Throw-Away Soldier

By Jill Baker  
—Sioux Falls, SD

She was not silent when an Army superior very nearly assaulted her on guard duty. She sought protection higher up the chain of command and was rewarded with a promotion to favorite cat toy for male colleagues to ridicule, tease and taunt for the remainder of her military service.

Half a century later, her life is still impacted by the Army's decision to deal with her military sexual trauma by NOT dealing with it. She is their throw-away soldier.

Their throw-away soldier entered the civilian world when she was 21 years old. She imagined herself to be free and ready to create a new life far different from the one she had left behind. To her angst, she struggled to fit in with classmates at university and with colleagues after graduation.

She tried very hard to squeeze into the mold of how she thought a girlfriend was supposed to act, and then a wife, and then a mother, a sister, a friend. She felt hollow inside no matter what she did to compensate for the pain and sorrow of being thrown away.

Their throw-away soldier still doesn't know how to act "just right." She is either too hard or too soft. Acting "just right" in a civilian space means fitting into a stereotypical feminine mold, and she is certainly not that at her core. Acting "just right" in a veteran space demands conformity to a military culture that denied her both purpose and justice.

Yet despite this, all is not lost. She has found peace, acceptance and love at home, and that success stokes the flame of promise that her place in the greater world is still waiting patiently around the corner for her to find.

## A Memorable Day

By Donald Chase  
VA Medical Center—Brockton, MA

The soldiers trooped aboard the ship  
In a seemingly endless file,  
Their youthful banter filling the air,  
Faces crinkled with smiles.

But behind the smiles and banter  
Was the knowledge they were going to war  
When this ship completed her journey,  
Leaving them on some distant shore.

Also present was the nagging thought  
That many might never return.  
And just how fate would decide this  
Led feelings inside to churn.

In time the ship is loaded,  
Then slowly starts to sail  
While observers standing on the pier  
See thousands lining her rail.

Many looked through glistening eyes  
As these young men sailed away,  
But whether aboard the ship or the pier,  
All would long remember that day.



# The Reality of Cog Fog

By Paul Nyerick  
—West Haven, CT

My brain sometimes feels like it's floating in Jello. Thoughts and memories get stuck in the ooze, preventing them from being communicated in a coherent manner. These blocked messages, though still there, remain in limbo, impatiently waiting to break free.

Sometimes the Jello parts, and thoughts escape its suction. The recapture can take place within moments, while others take their sweet time. This makes for embarrassment and a blank look from those on the other end of the communication. Frustration takes over all emotions, while the confusing look on other people's faces adds to the dilemma, creating more frustration.

After priding myself in the ability to communicate with nearly total recall, I must now realize the brutal fact that MS is robbing me of what was one of my strongest attributes, having a handle on the English language.

Thoughts and words flowed from the well of knowledge neatly stored between my ears, like the current of a mighty river. Now that torrent is a trickle. If I can survive this onslaught, cog fog must be dealt with by attacking this thief with extreme prejudice. I must launch a full campaign to preserve what remains. By the way, I pledge that keeping my thoughts flowing is paramount to not just surviving, but to still making a contribution to what is truth and beauty.

## Boys Into Soldiers

By Donald Chase  
VA Medical Center—Brockton, MA

Called into the Army while young and naïve with visions of adventures not hard to conceive, feelings of awe at this new chapter in life, yet determined to make good whatever the strife.

The settings were strange with many things new, including men from all walks to be soldiers, too. Those who were bashful, timid and somewhat shy, each in their own manner learned to get by.

This getting used to each other took a while, but for every frown there was also a smile. Good friendships developed as was slowly found that many of like mind were all around.

The days went by quickly, sometimes with fun, while learning about soldiering under a warm sun. Training sessions soon end; men are sent everywhere. Many new adventures are what all will share.

Battlefields claim most, where they see firsthand the brutality of war when it scorches the land. These scenes and experiences leave all much older and completes the transition from boys to soldiers.



# The Missing Wallet

By Galen Murray  
—Lawrence, KS

October 1959. The USS Hornet had just pulled into Pearl Harbor on its way to the Orient. Those who had shore leave were busting their buns, getting ready to go see Waikiki Beach. I, having the dirty duty, lay in my rack, envying the others as they frantically scurried about, afraid they were going to miss the piping of the colors.

I noticed Brewer had left his wallet on his top bunk while he rushed off to take a shower. When he came back, the wallet was gone. He stood stock still, trying to remember where he saw it last. I watched him as he searched around his bunk and on the deck and then ran away to ransack his locker, feeling in every nook and cranny. Then he went back to his rack and began the whole process all over again. The longer he went, the madder he got. Then he began to curse. Just about the time he was ready to blow a gasket, I decided to intervene. I jumped out of my rack and asked him what the problem was. What I got was a barrage of rhetoric I can't print here.

“Tell me Brewer, how much money did you have in it?”

His face turned white and he swallowed hard as he recalled the amount. “Eighty bucks. Did you see anybody hanging around my rack?”

I milked it for all it was worth. I put a finger to my cheek as if I was trying to form a mental picture. “I did see somebody, now that I think about it.”

Brewer exploded. “Who was it?” he yelled.

“It seems to me the guy reached up and grabbed your wallet and then went over here,” I said, leading him to a row of lockers. I paused as if I was trying to recall which locker the thief got into. “I think it was this one.” I flicked open the door, and laying right in plain view was Brewer's wallet.

He grabbed it in an instant and clutched it to his chest. “Who's locker is this?” he bellowed in anger and relief.

I smiled at him. “It's ... mine.”

Then it dawned on him what had just happened. A trusted friend had watched his back while he was being stupid. He flashed a sheepish grin. “Thanks Murray.”

I patted his shoulder. “That's what buddies do, look out for each other.”

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GLADYS FELD HELZBERG  
MEMORIAL AWARD

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## Five Senses of a Veteran or First Responder

By Steven Bates  
—Athens, AL

I've seen things no man should see  
and heard the screams that haunted me.  
I've tasted death with a kiss of life  
and touched the pulse of the afterlife.  
I've smelled the stench of the slipped away  
and cried when death has claimed its prey.  
I've served in ways I can't describe  
for fear of rambling in a diatribe.  
But I survived it all and lived to tell  
what life is like in earthly hell.  
And though my dreams still show the strain,  
I'd live it all, each day of pain.  
I'd fight the evil, the sick, depraved  
to know, just once, a life I saved.



## Do Not Pigeon-Whole Me

*By Penny Lee Deere*  
*VA Medical Center—Albany, NY*

Here I am: a square peg.  
They are trying to place me in a round “whole.”  
Don’t you love how they try to “pigeon-whole” us.  
One size fits all. NOT!

The world is like a puzzle.  
We search for the next piece,  
that right position to be placed,  
that perfect soul mate.  
But we are people; we have hearts.

Seems like I am doing a mean two-step  
while others waltz their way.  
Maybe ‘cause I beat to my own drum,  
dancing down a path of life.

I don’t walk the party line;  
I refuse to be a sheep.  
Our brains are ours to be used:  
take in information,  
process, evaluate,  
accept or decline,  
not to just believe propaganda  
and half of what we see.  
It is up to us to question and find the truth.

Think about it:  
can you be placed in a slot,  
do you fit just right,  
what beat do you dance to?  
Or are you an individual wanting to be heard?

## Welcome Home

*By Penny Lee Deere*  
*VA Medical Center—Albany, NY*

We return home,  
something other than our previous selves.  
Others ask, “What’s wrong with you?”  
Hah! I wish I knew; if I did, it could be fixed.  
Part of me left behind from where I came.  
Those others say, “Come on, get over yourself.”  
No longer part of a team of one.  
Who now am I?  
Others who have not walked in my shoes  
express, “You need to get out of your own way.  
You have lost.”

But now what? I ponder!  
“Is this the key to unlocking the anxiety  
that plagues, the distress within,  
to find a place to belong,  
to be part of one of them?  
Who are they?”  
Not just me, here alone.  
Welcome home.

## A Familiar Face

*By Lenny Ellis*  
*—Madison, WI*

As I walked  
through the park,  
I looked up in a tree  
and saw a bird  
looking at me.

“Oh, it’s you,” he said.  
“Come on up  
and feed me.”

So I did.

## My Friend the Sun

By Lenny Ellis  
—Madison, WI

It's been a long time  
since I've looked at the sun.  
And I thought to myself,  
"Hey, we are one!"

We both shed light  
and warmth all around.  
Not even the clouds  
dare make us frown.

You, of course  
are stronger than I.  
But, nevertheless,  
you don't make me cry.

Your light is magnificent  
and so is your touch.  
How radiant you are;  
you give life as such.

You're constantly there,  
no matter what time.  
Your brother, the moon,  
just happens by.

Far away as you are,  
I still feel your touch.  
Millions of miles  
can't separate us.

We're both warm and gentle  
and kind to life.  
But you, my friend,  
are much more alive.

I am your child  
and you nurture me.  
You ease my shivers  
and I smile at thee.  
Thank you, my friend,  
for showing me how  
to shine upon others.  
You should be proud.

## I Always Wanted to Talk With God

By Lisa J. Farabelli  
VA Medical Center—Lebanon, PA

Holding a pocketful of whys.  
Pain is my confession.  
You were forced on me.  
Always prayed to die.  
Did you ignore my craziness?  
Prayers were never answered—  
no angels watched over me.  
I dream of your arms around me.  
I still wait for an answer.  
I said my rosary.

## I Put Flowers on My Mother's Grave

By Lisa J. Farabelli  
VA Medical Center—Lebanon, PA

You came to me in a dream.  
I hardly knew you.  
Wishing I had a father.  
No one could take your place.  
Remembering our walks,  
with strawberry ice cream.  
Everyone has said that I look like you.  
Hating other men wasn't the answer.  
You left me too soon.  
Pain was the only thing you left.  
I put flowers on my mother's grave.



# Going Home

By Paul David Gonzales

VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

The words of the poets of rhythm and rhyme are all around.  
The faded lessons written with chalk on the black slate  
at the abandoned Catholic school vaguely reveal  
the story of teachings past.

Prayers of “Hail Mary Full of Grace”  
and “I Pledge Allegiance to the Flag”  
recited in unison by high pitched voices of children  
can still ring clear.

The Pennsylvania and Lake Erie train  
was absent on my visit  
but I saw the rails circling the hollow.  
Sounds of the wheels of steel seem so surreal.  
The steel furnaces no longer billow smoke,  
a sign of yesterday’s strong hands’ work.

The small church is empty now;  
no parishioners’ heads do bow.  
The wooden pews are vacant;  
no echoes in the church I hear.

The stations of the cross still hang there all in a row,  
showing Jesus with his cross in tow.  
The confessional doors are open  
without sinners kneeling there,  
no priest to lend a listening ear.

The repetitive sounds and patterns of life all around.  
People moving about.  
Living all seems the same  
as when I left but change fills the air.

Vague resemblance of youthful faces are seen,  
stolen by age that time wiped away.  
The radiance of youth,  
only subtle remnants of yesterday I see.  
I should look in the mirror.  
Is there someone to blame  
for this mundane moment in time,  
or is it me who transcended time?

I stood at the doorstep of my past  
but none of yesterday did I hold fast.  
I opened my fist to let it all fly;  
now many decades have gone by.

What once was is no longer;  
only vague memories now linger.  
I wonder if my thoughts are true?  
There’s nothing new for me to view.  
I yearn to find the answer to the questions  
of my life. Was it all real?

I see flashes of familiar beings with noises  
of the city sounds all around.  
Structures show age with stories untold  
locked in their brick and mortar.  
Those structures speak a language  
inaudible to others’ ears,  
a whisper only I can hear.

The cobblestone streets are remnants  
of yesterday’s pathways. I can still hear  
the rubber tires of those old cars  
bouncing over those stones.

I knocked on the door of a childhood friend.  
No answer.  
I wondered if his presence is still there  
or has he left on wings of air?

I held the past in the palm of my hand  
and felt the warmth of yesterday.  
What more can I ask?



## The Street Is a-Talk'n

By Paul David Gonzales  
VA Medical Center—Albuquerque, NM

Do ya hear the street talk'n? It's say'n,  
Lord, there's trouble walk'n over me,  
many feet a-stomp'n hard.  
Lord, there's trouble walk'n over me,  
a regiment of boots, blue and green,  
are standing over me.  
Lord, there's war march'n over me,  
heavy wheels of authority.  
Lord, there's trouble roll'n over me,  
sticks and stones, smoke and bullets.  
Lord, there's blood run'n over me,  
riots, unrest, tires flaming above.  
Lord, there's fire burn'n over me,  
angry people scream'n and chanting.  
Lord, there's hate run'n over me,  
statues falling, paint in my face.  
Lord, there's anger walk'n over me.  
Lord, I'm just a street—

a flat spread of stone  
marred with blood and tar  
always looking up and see'n  
Your face from afar.

## Papa, I Love You

By Gene Allen Groner  
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

Today my grandson hugged me  
And it filled my heart with joy.  
I hugged him back and almost cried  
As I told him he's such a fine boy.

I think that I shall never find  
Any gift that is so divine  
As when my grandson hugged me  
And said, "Papa, I love you."

## Right Side of Dirt\*

By Kimberly Green  
—Fort Smith, AR

I woke up on the right side of dirt,  
Took my helmet off cuz my head sure did hurt.  
Took me a minute to dust myself off,  
Over and over I told myself I was tough.  
Wishing I was back home chasing skirts,  
I woke up on the right side of dirt.  
I shivered and shook, my mouth dry,  
I was sure lucky I didn't die.  
Tried to light a cigarette with my cold hands,  
Roadside bomb we hadn't planned.  
My ears ringing, I guess I was a little hurt.  
I woke up on the right side of dirt.  
Then I remembered I wasn't alone.  
That's when I heard the low moans,  
A platoon of soldiers, some near death.  
I'd rather be where I was last Christmas instead.  
A little blood won't hurt ya on your battle-dress undershirt.  
I woke up on the right side of dirt.

*\*Dedication: Never forget the sacrifices of our forefathers  
in times of war and unrest.*

## The Birds in the Trees

By Charles Fredette  
VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA

The birds in the trees  
Are many, it seems.  
They sing many tunes  
And sometimes it seems like dreams.

They sing one song  
And then another.  
They don't notice us;  
It seems no bother.

They come early morning  
And stay till it's dark.  
They often sing together  
And sometimes sing alone.  
I cherish them all summer  
And wish they'd never go home.

## Worms in My Coffee\*

By Kimberly Green  
—Fort Smith, AR

I drank worms that were in my coffee today.  
It didn't make me flinch.  
Glad to get a cup of Joe,  
Drank it in a tight pinch.

Figured I needed the protein,  
Might help me survive  
Cuz I'd been blown up and kicked,  
Took a bullet to the side.

Really never thought I'd be  
In this position as I am now.  
War makes you do things  
You never thought you could do—somehow.

I might make it home  
And I might not.  
I've committed to my position;  
I'd rather die than be caught.

Yah, so this ole hardened soldier,  
twenty-six-years-old, I am,  
Drank worms from my coffee,  
Prone on the ground in another land.

### *\*Dedication:*

*Never forget the sacrifices of our forefathers  
as they went through hell  
so that our pathway of freedom—  
that we walk every day—remains unhindered.*

## Where Can I Find God

By Gene Allen Groner  
VA Medical Center—Prescott, AZ

Where can I find God?  
Every gardener knows  
By tilling the soil  
and planting a rose.

Where can I find God,  
the Creator of all?  
by creating a garden  
and trimming it well.

Where can I find God?  
Developing a plan,  
preparing the soil  
and bringing the rain.

Where can I find God?  
Among lilies and bluebells,  
growing plants of beauty  
with loving hands and heart.

Where can I find God?  
In the garden of Eden,  
creating a better world,  
making everything wonderful.



## Genocide

By Diane Wasden

VA Medical Center—Augusta, GA

The walls on which our country was built  
have begun to collapse.  
“One Nation Under God” has become a thing of the past.  
The threads that binds you as an American  
wear and start to unwrap.  
Freedom. What is freedom today, I’m afraid to ask.  
I’m watching every day on the news  
how those of different races bicker and fight.  
Political bashing. The left can’t get along with the right.  
There are those who do not see an embryo with a heartbeat  
as a human life.  
Washington keeps lying to us all and has others  
doing their dirty work to justify their evil ways.  
They blame it all on poor genes or upbringing.  
No, it’s our nation’s new DNA—SIN!  
We teach the children that God is not real,  
so religion is no longer spoken about in schools.  
We replace God’s love with teaching our children how to hate.  
No one any longer knows what respect is,  
so now life and authority have no value.  
We have children killing children.  
The White House wants to take your guns.  
Remember what happened to the Jewish people  
and attacks on our own Capitol building  
By our own people by both parties.  
Remember family units falling apart,  
children killing their parents, spouses killing each other.  
Read your Bible; it’s all in there.  
We put trust in the news media who slowly brainwash us all  
with their lies and false posts; they know how to spread fear.  
So this is what the new freedom looks like.  
Well now that we know everything,  
LET THE GENOCIDE BEGIN.  
DAVA State Dept. of Florida Award

## The Wall Still Heals

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

Sitting in a lawn chair, the sun at ten o’clock,  
his tired and heavy eyes hide pain and old shell shock.  
He doesn’t say a word, stares at that wall of black.  
One name has his attention, igniting a flashback.

For five days in a row, he’s glad that he is here.  
His feelings on his sleeve, he doesn’t hide a tear.  
He got two hours of sleep though ten were spent in bed,  
just to relive memories of darkness and bloodshed.

A trip to our nation’s capital was never meant to be.  
Thus, that wall of granite was one he’d never see.  
So, when he heard that wall would be here in mid-May,  
his kids made him a promise to bring him every day.

From the weathered cap I wore, he knew I was a vet.  
When asked why he was there, he said, “I can’t forget.”  
I knelt down beside him, said, “I don’t know what you’re  
feeling,  
but give this wall a chance; it’s capable of healing.”

From his threadbare vest he pulled a black and white,  
said, “That’s Scooter on the left; me, I’m on the right.  
We were both just twenty, consumed by real fears.  
It was both the saddest and the worst of years.

“My wife had never met him, but she knew his name.  
Sarge said it wasn’t my fault, but I take the blame.  
Each year on August 2, I stay inside and cry.  
That was the day that Scooter woke up just to die.

“I don’t talk about the war unless I’ve had a few  
and I’d rather talk to Scooter, no offense to you.  
I’ve no medals on a shelf; I’m just an old draftee,  
while memories of Scooter still live inside of me.”

# Visual Arts Initiative



## **Cigars and Uncle Sam**

By Jack Tompkins

—Marshalltown, IA

The editors of *Veterans' Voices* asked for your visual art and Dr. Robert Rubin, Los Angeles, Calif., promised to help us publish that art in full color.

Our writers and readers responded with generous amounts of artwork and we are pleased to share it with you in this ongoing section of the magazine.

We believe that this promotion complements VVWP's writing as therapy mission and offers the veteran another means of healing through artistic expression. Please continue to send us your artwork as well as your writing.

— *The Editors*



## **On the River**

By Jack Tompkins

—Marshalltown, IA



**Momma Is Blue**  
By Gary Walker  
—Leawood, KS



**Three Game Birds**  
By Jack Tompkins  
—Marshalltown, IA



**Texas**  
By Daniel Strange  
— San Antonio, TX



**Someone To Look Up To**  
By Ty Andrews  
— Lincoln, NE



**A Mother Weeps**  
By David Staffa  
— Orlando, FL



**Strange 6**  
By Daniel Strange  
—San Antonio, TX



**Lady Liberty**  
By William Shepherd  
VA Medical Center — El Dorado, KS



**One Tour Vietnam**  
By Kenny Trujillo  
—Las Vegas, NV



**Not Listening**  
By Ty Andrews  
—Lincoln, NE



**Home on the Road**  
By Katherine Iwatiw  
VA Medical Center — Kansas City, MO

# A Piece of Living History

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

I was a member of the Woman's Army Corps. I am very proud to be a WAC. Basic training was the start to a brand new way of life, more than a career. I became something bigger than just me. I was one of them!



Our basic training in 1975 was at Fort Jackson, S.C.

That was something new for the service, which was originally headquartered at Fort McClellan, Ala., since 1943 but was shut down because it had become a toxic waste dump.

We all fell in from different walks of life. We learned together all the terms we would need to make it through the next weeks of basic training. Each member of this "cherry unit" knew her place. We were called on by last name only. They tried to tear me down from what I once was, a naive country girl looking for something different, only to rebuild me into the best of the best WAC – someone with pride, endurance, confidence, respect and grit.

We were one of the first platoons to have a male drill sergeant in the brigade; our unit was all female. There were no coed basic training options; men and women were completely segregated for training. This obviously was a completely new concept for us and for our drill sergeant as well. He didn't know how to treat us; he had only worked with male recruits before. If we did a good job on our inspections, Sgt. Gates would address us as "sweet peas," but if our efforts were less than stellar you would hear

in DI voice, "Hamburger-heads, get down and give me 20 push-ups," female push-ups, which meant you were actually on your knees and only extending your arms up and down.

We would march and sing, "When they tried to make a WAC out of me..." Some of the classes really surprised me: how to apply make-up properly, personal hygiene and professional etiquette. Most of the women in the service during this time were traditionally nurses and or administrative personnel. We were treated like young ladies, and we were expected to act accordingly. There were high standards. Yes, we qualified with M16s, went to gas chamber and went on bivouac like our counterparts, despite being ladies.

We would march out to the parade field where we would conduct physical exercise. Our uniform for physical training was an ironed blouse, tucked, with a wraparound skirt and a pair of shorts underneath the skirt, bobby socks and sneakers.

It was not until we were in our appropriate location and ready to commence our exercises that we would disrobe by

unwrapping our skirts, placing them right next to us folded. There they would remain until our exercise routine was complete. Then we would again wrap our skirts around ourselves to completely cover up, ready to return marching to the barracks.

As WAC recruits, we were not allowed to be married or have children. If you happened to already have children, you would need to give custody to someone else while serving in the WAC.

It would take another three years to be completely integrated into the Army. The WACs were disbanded in 1978. WACs were all required to update their contracts if they elected to stay in the service or had the option to be honorably discharged. From then on we marched to the beat of a new drum; the changes were many.

Looking back, I now realize what it took to step out of my comfort zone. I am from upstate New York, very country, secluded. We are basically a bunch of white people trying to hoe out a living. I had no idea that the Army would help me become part of a complex, diverse culture.

But I was once told that "I was worth the pound of salt it took to plant me." I choose to believe these words. I have grit. I knew when I left my childhood home that I would do at least 20 years and be retired by age 39, and that is what I did. The Army would mold me into that lean, mean fighting machine. I was a force to be reckoned with. I still am.

## A Picture of You

*By Kim Gwinner*

*VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH*

I have a picture of you  
That I'm able to talk to.  
It seems to help me  
Because I'm alone, you see.

My new therapist hasn't called as of yet,  
So there's no appointment set.  
It's only been a week since our last session.  
I know I have no reason to be bitchin'.

I have a picture of you  
That I'm able to talk to.  
It seems to help me  
Because I'm alone, you see.

My trauma season began today.  
The sun was out but I didn't go play.  
My pup wanted to, so bad.  
I think he knows that I am sad.

I have a picture of you  
That I'm able to talk to.  
It seems to help me  
Because I'm alone, you see.

I do have my battle buddies to connect with.  
I'm sure they wouldn't mind to chat or sit.  
They are aware of this particular trauma,  
But it feels different. There's no drama.

I have a picture of you  
That I'm able to talk to.  
It seems to help me.  
I'm not alone, I see.

## Switching My Tracks

*By Kim Gwinner*

*VA Medical Center—Cincinnati, OH*

Here I am not knowing what to do.  
Sitting here hurting and not being able to move.

It's both physically and mentally that has me trapped.  
Come now, Kim, let's switch these tracks.

Let's make southbound going back to my past.  
I don't want to go there so I have to act fast.

And northbound will be into my future.  
With unknown journeys these thoughts I need to nurture.

So where to begin is what I'm asking me.  
A sign from above would help me, please.

What is it I need to conquer first?  
Help me to tame my hunger and thirst

For doing something healthy to get me through this day.  
Outside it's wet, cloudy and gray.

When I get motivated that will be okay  
For I was in the Army for more than a day.

If getting wet and muddy should be my calling,  
To help keep myself from bawling,

Then that is my plan for today.  
Do you want to come out and play?



# The Hole in His Heart

By Dwight Jenkins  
—Rensselaer, NY

“Oh my God, don’t you get hot in those? It’s like a 190 degrees! Why don’t you wear shorts?”

He stopped digging for a moment, wiping his forehead with the back of a leather-gloved hand and laughed, looking deep into the earth, far off to a distant but happy childhood.

“That’s what people used to ask my father all the time. He would just say that he didn’t like shorts. End of

story. Next topic. My mother is the one who told us the truth: he felt like his legs were too skinny. They were shiny white and thin, compared to the rest of him. He was a tough guy.”

“What did he do?”

“About his legs?”

“Nooo! For a living! What was his job, silly?” She said it in such a way that he wanted to answer, and answer, and keep answering. He loved when she asked him questions like that, unorthodox or impertinent questions that saw past his own chiseled, brown exterior and lingering scowls. Anyone else might have felt his father’s hard look, the one that ended conversations.

“He was a construction worker. They don’t wear shorts.”

“I bet they did on weekends.”



She was probably right. Again, all he could do was grin and lean into his shovel. “Yeah, you’re probably right. Maybe I’m more like him than I realize.”

“My mother was an alcoholic, a very functional one. You’d never know.”

He screwed his face up at the comparison and looked over at her, sunbathing on the pool deck in nothing but a thong bottom and tiny pink triangle top. He couldn’t see her eyes behind her sunglasses, but that was essentially true for every day that he’d ever known her, which was about three weeks. She swam and sunned while he worked on the fence. They’d met at a friend’s solstice party, when it was dark enough that her eyes remained hopeful glimmers of light. He didn’t even know what color they were.

The conversation that led them to this poolside was lengthy, vast, intensely

innocent and staggeringly deep in places, but without pretense. She was, perhaps, the most ‘real’ girl he had ever met, completely incapable of artifice and completely at ease with the eight-year difference in their ages. She was also exquisitely beautiful and perfectly comfortable wearing next to nothing while he labored just feet away under an old cowboy hat, limp filthy painter’s pants, and dusty boots. His face was pock-marked in places but neatly covered by a grizzled beard, and his body was taut,

even while relaxing. It did exactly what he wanted it to do.

“And how does your mother’s alcoholism relate to my father’s skinny legs?”

“I don’t drink. You don’t have to wear long pants when it’s hot.”

She arched her neck back to look at him while she said this and smiled when she saw him nod his head in acknowledgment. She faced back toward the distant mountains. “We can be whoever we want to be.”

She heard the clank of his shovel again, and over it the playful response: “Well, I guess I just want to be that guy who wears pants in the hot sun.” He didn’t hear her laugh or see her shake her blonde waves. But he knew she did.

Silent minutes piled up like dirt as he dug out a large outcropping of shale about two

feet down in his latest hole. She could hear the grunting of his efforts. "Do you think you'll be done by the time I start work?"

He was breathing heavily: "And when is that?"

"They go back right after Labor Day. I think you knowww thaaaat..."

Now he was working the long, heavy, rusted wrecking bar, pounding it into the crumbling rock inside his hole. "Sorry... it's...been...a long...time...ugh...since... come on, come onnn... since I was in... that's it, come onnnn... uhhhhh, yeah, there we go... school. Good lord..."

She arched back to see him again. "Were they all that hard?"

He laughed again as he took off his hat to wipe his brow, moving down the line to a shaded part of the fence in front of her. His pulsing forearms hung over the top rail, streams of muddy sweat working their way down the veins to his knuckles before falling to earth. "Depends on what you mean by 'hard,' but yes. Only five more to go though and we'll be done."

"Did you just say we?"

Now he pinched the bridge of his nose and shook his head: "I'll be done. Me."

She lifted her sunglasses and smiled as if to bait him: "You had me worried for just a minute." Beads of crystal clear perspiration were forming on her forehead and running down the sides of her cheeks and neck. "Do you like this one?"

It was a little game she played with him ever since she started visiting. Hearing about his pool that night at the party, she half-jokingly invited herself over as a "consultant" while he worked on his fence. "Sure," he told her, nodding his head, "Yeah,



of course. I'm out there every day. Just come by whenever you'd like, not a problem..."

He honestly didn't think she would, and he wasn't sure if he should be terrified, depressed or exultant at the prospects. But there she was, two days later, in a bright red one-piece. Settling into a deck chair, she lifted her sunglasses, smiled, and asked if he liked it. His answer was always the same: a clipped laugh, a nod of the head and, "Yes, it's very nice." She never wore the same suit twice, and each time she came the suit got smaller and smaller, revealing more and more. "Do you like it?"

"Yes, it's very nice..."

"Do you think he's gay?"

"Nooo, I don't think he's gay!"

"So he's straight but just not into you?"

"God, that's depressing. I don't know. I mean, we talk about... everything!"

"Well clearly not EVERYTHING. You said he's a loner?"

"Kind of, but I did meet him at a party, so he can't be, like, completely anti-social."

"Maybe he's going to kill you and stuff you into one of those holes. Ever think of that?"

Yes, I did, but only the first day. Spend five minutes with the guy and you'll see what I mean."

"Nah, I'm good. Had my share of weirdos and creeps, thank you. What are you wearing when you go over? Hate to say it like this, but are you giving him enough to work with?"

"YES, THAT'S THE THING! Every time I go the suits get smaller! Any further and I'll be naked!"

"Hmmm..."

"What I wore today could have gotten me arrested. Maybe I should just... kiss him?"

"Ehhh, I think maybe not. You said you met him at a party. Your friends or his?"

"Mostly his, I guess, but it's someone we both know."

"Ok, so maybe ask around a little bit before you go sticking your tongue in his mouth."

"Ewww, don't be gross."

"You're the one who said it. You want me to stop by and feel him up? I mean, out?"



"I'm hanging up. You're disgusting."

"Fine. Be careful though, and ask around. Love you."

"Love you too mom..."

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A waxing moon low in the sky faintly lit the pool. The fence was done, and he was the tired new owner of a suburban oasis in the green desert of upstate New York. Now what? It had been several days since he'd seen her. Maybe she was out of town. Maybe she had a boyfriend. Maybe she had said everything she wanted to say. Fine. But not good. How long had it been since he'd had those kinds of conversations? He missed them. Maybe he'd never even go in the pool. Maybe he'd sell the house.

Such were his thoughts when the gate opened and she walked in, wearing a breezy teal cover. She slipped out of her sandals without saying a word and went to the steps, dropping the cover. There was nothing under it. She entered the water and disappeared. A shimmering image of her glided below him, leaving only a small

trail of bubbles that rose to the surface and popped. He sat transfixed as she surfaced at the far end and ascended, water washing over her body. He wished the sun were out. He thought he heard rotor blades spinning. And then she was standing before him, shivering and human. Her eyes were blue.

"Towel?" was all he could say. She put the towel down and stood on it, close enough now to see the scarred-over hole in his chest, just above the heart. She held out a hand: "Swim with me."

"Summer, I..."

"Please," she cut him off, "swim with me. I know all about it. It's ok. I can never be her. I can only offer you me, little Summer Baily, never-been-anywhere, never-done-anything Summer Baily." She began to weep. "Look at me! This is me! All of me! There's nothing else! I know that I could never replace her, or fill that hole where the..."

"Shrapnel," he offered.

"...where it went into your heart and killed you both. I am truly sorry. If I had known,

I never would have bothered you. I just thought you were..." She couldn't finish.

"Older? Wiser? Troubled? Widowed? Resurrected on the same helicopter that carried her back to Kabul, part of the dashing husband-wife war correspondent team from WCLA ..."

He grew silent, watching the way the dead white cloth of the towel embraced the living pink skin of her toes. "What if I told you I feel exactly the same way about you except with the constant condemnation of knowing I don't deserve anyone like her ever again, or anyone like you, or anyone at all... This was her dream, this pool. We saved up through Baghdad, Basra, Fallujah, Ramadi. By Marjah we had enough. And now this is me. All of me. There's nothing else..."

The night grew still, like the otherworldly period of time immediately after an IED cooks off, when life and death are identical. She nodded, holding back tears, and extended her hand again. This time he took it, gently, so gently, and rose to his metal feet.

# The Gift of a Flower

By Lloyd Johnson  
—Rutland, VT

She was beautiful—waist-length sun-bleached brown hair, ankle length skirt, sandals, broad brimmed hat emblazoned with a flowered hatband, white shirt, leather vest and strings of beads around her neck—the quintessential southern California flower child of the '60s. It was a look that was in vogue for many young ladies of the day, a look I had become accustomed to before



I joined the Marines. It was the look of my teenage generation, and I found it to be very attractive and sexy. And she was staring at me.

I had been in Vietnam for the previous 13 months, stationed a few miles below the DMZ, an existence devoid of any Western women. My rotation home started at Dong Ha with a flight to Da Nang, then a civilian airplane to a two-night layover on Okinawa, and then on to Anchorage, Alaska, and another flight to Los Angeles, where I would catch a plane to Boston and then a short car ride home. It couldn't have been much more than 72 hours from dirt and barbed wire to being back in the United States, and the excitement of being around women was beginning to dominate my thoughts.

I was one of the first passengers off the plane at LAX. I was wearing my Marine dress greens and I noticed her standing there looking at me as I walked away from the gate area. She continued staring at me as I got closer, as if she were waiting for

me, and then she started walking toward me. There was something exhilarating about someone so appealing approaching me after 13 months in Vietnam, and my youthful ego was getting in the way of any semblance of common sense as I wondered what was about to happen.

I had been so transfixed by her stare that I hadn't noticed that she was holding something in her hand until she got right up to me. Then she removed a single flower from the bunch she had and held it out to me. "We forgive you," she said, and then she turned away. My eyes followed her as she proceeded to greet the next serviceman exiting the plane and hand him a flower. At the time I didn't know what to make of it, didn't know what to say or do as I continued walking down the concourse. Suddenly, the meaning of her gesture sank in. I paused and admired the beauty and aroma of the flower, and then I deposited it in the first waste receptacle I came to.

I was never spat on, had garbage or feces thrown at me, been called a baby killer or

subjected to some of the other unjustified indignities that came to symbolize the antiwar sentiment that so many had bought into at that time. Later, when I talked to other vets who experienced terrible treatment upon their return, or heard or read about it on the news, my memory would always go back to my experience at LAX. I guess I was lucky not to have gone through the experiences that so many other vets had to endure upon their return, or maybe

mine was just as bad.

As time passed and I recalled the experience more often, I started to feel anger over this individual handing me a flower and forgiving me. Who was the "we" she was representing when she forgave me, and what exactly was she forgiving me for? I had proudly and honorably served my country as a U.S. Marine.

I don't have memories of who met me at the airport in Boston, my first hug from my mother, a greeting from my dad or my siblings. The years have erased them all. But I do vividly remember the flower child who greeted me in Los Angeles. In a way, she robbed me of those other memories, and I find it troubling that she had managed to get in my head and stay there all this time.

If I could meet her again, if I could be granted that wish, I'd hand her a small American flag and say "I forgive you."

# The Eagle Feather

By Gene Groner  
—Prescott, AZ

A Navajo friend recently made me a beautiful necklace that included a turquoise medicine wheel and two eagle feathers carved from bone.

In Native culture, the eagle is considered the strongest and bravest of all birds. Eagle feathers symbolize what is highest, bravest, strongest and holiest. It represents strong medicine and healing.

An eagle's feathers are given in honor and are displayed with dignity and pride. They are handled with great regard. In fact, if an eagle feather is dropped during a dance, a special ceremony is performed before picking it up, and the owner takes great care to avoid dropping it again.

The eagle feather is also used to adorn the sacred pipe because it is a symbol of the Great Spirit, who is above all and from whom all strength and power flows.

Like many Native American symbols, some people tattoo feather images on their bodies to help them on their journey or to tell their story. Waving the eagle feather over anyone conveys a blessing of peace, prosperity and happiness.



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BVL AWARD, SERVING MY COUNTRY

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## I Am a Veteran

By Gary Haskell  
VA Medical Center—Togus, ME

I am a veteran.  
Let me tell you what that means to me.  
It means I made sacrifices  
to keep my country free.

It means doing many things  
I really did not want to do.  
But, when given orders,  
I would follow them through.

It means spending many nights  
away from those that I love.  
“Let me live to see them again”  
was my prayer to God above.

Yes, I made sacrifices  
but mine were very small  
when compared to the thousands  
who sacrificed their all.

It means I joined a fraternity  
that existed for many years.  
Truly a brotherhood  
of blood, sweat and tears.

I am a veteran.  
For that I take great pride,  
some for things I did but much more  
of the heroes who have died

protecting this way of life  
where choices can be made.  
We kept this the land of the free  
and we made it the home of the brave.  
I AM A VETERAN!

## Walking

By Ben Hawkins

VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

Walk for health.  
Walking allows you to keep one foot on the ground,  
proceed at your own pace  
and experience many of God's exciting sights and sounds.

Possible benefits of walking include  
mood improvement, weight loss, blood pressure drop  
and a longer life.

Walking a short path will allow for more  
exercise, relaxation and love of life  
than the emptiness of idleness.

Walk in peace and walk me to death.  
"Walking is man's best medicine."

*HIPPOCRATES, The father of medicine and the  
Hippocratic Oath.*

## To Honor the Dead

By Dwight D. Jenkins

—Rensselaer, NY

The phrase rings in my head  
Like rifle fire unprotected,  
As if there were another kind.  
Maybe it's because I'm  
On the commode as it fires  
This thought unprotected,  
As if there were other commodities.  
Do the dead need honoring  
Or do we need to honor?  
Answer this question right,  
Tinnitus, and your ears will ring  
Forever.

## What Do Veterans Do?

By James R. Janssen

VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS

Veterans join an elite fighting force,  
Laying their lives on the line,  
Defending each American without remorse,  
Marching into a hell all others decline.

Intentionally taking on bad memories  
To defend our freedoms and rights,  
Without notice called from the armories  
In all conditions, plights and nights.

Counting down the days on a calendar  
While praying to receive a loved one's letter,  
Viewing a loved one's picture as a reminder  
Of the warm loving arms at home they remember.

Witnessing the loss of a comrade, they move on,  
Back into the shadow of death, praying to survive,  
Gathering every fiber of strength to draw upon,  
Anticipating another fight in hopes to remain alive.

The day finally arrives to return back home,  
Eyes glazed over though stilled with a known stare  
And thoughts of recollections just beginning to roam  
Into a new unfamiliar fight of PTSD repair.

Transitioning from familiar commands and actions  
Lies a challenge of adaptation with painful sights,  
Making ready with head held high to endure reactions,  
As a warrior to remain determined to win the fights.

## Service Dog

*By Charles Ray Hood*  
*VA Medical Center—Columbia, MO*

Two years of training,  
Knowing only work and sleep,  
Enjoying food and the vest,  
Cold concrete my home at night.

I get to meet a person to work with.  
He doesn't like me and is cruel.  
Sixteen hours feel like years.  
He takes me back and says I'm no good.

I work harder; I try my best; I will be the best.  
People come and go; other dogs come and go.  
I stay here; I'm no good.  
I keep trying and doing my best, but I know I'm no good.

A vet comes in who seems nice; he will choose someone else.  
They all choose someone else.  
They are taking me to the workroom. Why?  
Do I have to teach another puppy?

That nice vet is here; he is waiting.  
He tells the workers he wants my hair cut to look like his.  
He pets me and is nice; I know it won't last.  
We work together; he has another dog; she is big but nice as well.

Soon I get to go home with him.  
I sleep on carpet and a bed.  
I get to eat at the same time as the man and woman.  
They even have squeaky things; I'm not sure about them.

The man calls himself Dad; the woman is Mom.  
They will take me back; I'm no good.  
Days become weeks; then weeks turn to months.  
Is the little human giving me commands?  
He calls Dad, "Pop Pop."

He and I are the same age. Man, is he bossy!

I love him with all my heart.  
I am part of a family: I have a sister, three brothers,  
a grandson and most important a mom and dad.  
I have found a home.

I am Good; I do Good; I help my vet.  
We can go out now and he feels safe.  
He doesn't jump as much  
and he can do the things other people do.  
I also help him walk farther.  
I tell him when he needs to sit down.

Dad loves me and needs me.  
He cares for me and I care for him.  
We work well together.  
Mom doesn't have to worry as much with me on the job.

My name is Gunner Hood.

## Old Medicine

*By Dwight D. Jenkins*  
*—Rensselaer, NY*

The earth bled black  
From a wound  
Within a wound  
Within a scar.  
All the nations leapt and cried  
And sent half-a-million  
Doctors with guns  
Like flies on a wall  
Shiny green and steel  
To congeal on the wound  
Until the bleeding  
Would never, ever heal.

# Hope, Belief and Understanding

*By James Janssen*

*VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS*

We live in a world of turmoil and deceit.  
The road we travel often has many hills.  
Sometimes we fall into a valley with no relief,  
Giving us doubts and fears, tears and chills.

Holding fast to a belief that it's all worthwhile,  
Grasping an understanding of life's wins and losses,  
Enduring hardships and going that extra mile  
With hope in our hearts, we overcome all causes.

Knowing our next turn around the corner is a win,  
Mickey Mantle was once baseball's home run king,  
Known for having that record until his end.  
Most strikeouts the price he paid to do his thing.

The young warrior flung into battle,  
Fighting to survive with a heart full of fear,  
Feeling alone like on a boat with no paddle,  
Not prepared to die. Out slips a tear.

Training and school spent learning for years,  
Suddenly traumatized in this shadow of death,  
This agony engrained by a stream of tears,  
Forced to learn in seconds, not years.

Recorded memories never to forget,  
Ongoing future inevitable playbacks,  
Haunted we live with strife and regret,  
Possessing numerous PTSD flashbacks.

Turning to focus on learning to cope,  
Avoid triggers with a replaced belief,  
And with effective coping skills and hope,  
Enhanced by a plan of action for relief.

The safety net for suicidal thoughts,  
Call the Veterans Suicide Hotline @988.  
They support without prejudice but do give  
Great support and come "Highly Recommended."

# Life, Liberty and the Pursuit of Happiness

*By Dennis Edward O'Brien*

*VA Medical Center—Wilkes-Barre, PA*

Remember the crew of the USS Stark;  
they gave their lives for liberty.  
Say a prayer in your heart  
because they died for you and me.

We will bring the Air Force  
into the twenty-first century;  
we will stand proud and become  
what we can be.

It is up to each one of us  
to learn what we can do,  
to see our goals realized,  
to follow them through.

Look up at the Eagle flying;  
witness as the Hornet soars.  
Do your best; keep on trying  
for peace we need on foreign shores.

We are the chosen within our branch;  
we represent the citizens of our homeland.  
For us to be chosen, it wasn't by chance;  
as leaders we'll stand proud to take command.

The "Pursuit of Happiness"  
is within our grasp;  
sometimes it takes forgiveness  
if we want peace to last.

## I'm Free

By Michele Roxanne Johnson  
VA Medical Center—Albany, NY

The nightmares have ended,  
the memories have faded out.  
The pain provides a pillow of comfort  
that allows me to rest my head  
if only for a moment.  
PTSD, Anxiety and Depression  
are my diagnoses, but they are not me.  
I am free, free to live life  
the way I want and on my terms,  
because I am free.

## Know to Draw the Line

By Norman L. Jones  
VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

An artist isn't far enough from boundaries.  
Some are timid; others are aggressive.  
It depends on the territories.  
Not knowing can be expensive  
Mentally and spiritually.  
Seeking to find a level is fine  
When you know to draw the line.

Listen to the Father for corrections.  
Heed the Mother's instructions.  
Soon we'll know life's generous rations.  
The trust of God is a great action,  
Putting those in the right direction.  
If we ask Him, He'll rebuke  
Our trouble, discerning our past.  
We must fear God's designs.  
Know to draw the line.

## Self-Control

By Norman L. Jones  
VA Medical Center—Columbus, OH

Many use others, no matter what,  
To elevate any pain from the mindless gut.  
Purity of the heart is quite sane  
For the body of our immortal soul.  
Only the future from the past can grow  
Through the shameless power of self-control.

Try as we may to ignore ignorance  
Of any and every damn thing.  
Reject the chase of circumstance.  
Let your personal spirit bring  
A chance to be perfectly whole  
From the endurance of self-control.

## Contemplating Speech

By Carl Kerwick  
VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA

I started with no grudge at all.  
Of course, I was very small.  
I was influenced by whom I don't know;  
Now I am free like the wind blows.  
At times, when my life raft begins to sink,  
I sit and start to think.  
I try to think of what I can say  
To bail out my way.  
I stand contemplating of what to speak  
As I drown with water up to five feet.  
Here comes a sailing dingy;  
I climb aboard and start to think.  
Before I can speak I'm alone  
On an island far from home.  
Home I am but have grown in many ways,  
Though others here think the same old way  
I can speak and think all at the same time;  
Things at home aren't that fine.  
My life is starting to float;  
I look out for myself in my own boat.  
I may not be perfect,  
But I sure as hell can try.  
Now I'm learning how to fly.

# Return of the Combat Veteran

By Michael Kuklenski  
—Rowlett, TX

TELL ME:

What:

I should speak  
I should feel  
I should do  
I should share

Why:

I should speak  
I should feel  
I should do  
I should share

When:

I should speak  
I should feel  
I should do  
I should share

Who:

I should speak to  
I should feel for  
I should do with  
I should share with

Where:

I should speak  
I should feel  
I should do  
I should share

WHAT NOW?

# Not Just a Dog

By Lawrence W. Langman  
—Portage, IN

I held you when you were small, just like a child.  
You were full of vigor and vim, never really mild.  
Our home was loud; at times it was deafening.  
We'd always come home to a surprise reckoning.

As you grew, so did your appetite for food and fun,  
running in the backyard as if you were chasing someone.  
You would take up half our bed as if you really tried,  
stretching out your legs, digging them into our sides.

We would take you for rides; oh, how you loved those!  
You would get so excited, licking us both head to toe.  
You would cry until we rolled down the back windows,  
sticking your head outside, jowls just flapping as we go.

Days turned into weeks, weeks into many, many years,  
grey starting to show on you, causing me some tears.  
We all knew that your life span was so unfair to ours,  
that someday you'd be gone from us, way up in the stars.

In my lap you would lay till my entire legs fell asleep.  
I petted your head and ears until you finally fell in deep,  
snoring so loud I couldn't even hear my television show.  
Then you started crying a lot and to the vet we would go.

From this point, everything has become a blur in my mind.  
We heard the vet tell the news; you didn't have very much time.  
They told us there was nothing more that they could do.  
That was the moment it was taken; your love I had to lose.

Now you're gone; my chair feels empty; my leg is not asleep.  
This house is empty without a single noise, not even a peep.  
I sit and stare at the dog bed and your toys strewn everywhere.  
I'm holding your favorite one right now, wishing you were here,

For the loss of you was very hard because you were family.  
No one could ever say, "That's not the way it's supposed to be."  
Even though some time has passed now, you're still on my mind.  
I see a dog running, causing special memories I would find.

## A Child's Curiosity

By Lawrence W. Langman  
—Portage, IN

A small child at a funeral asked me one day,  
“Why do our loved ones get taken away?”  
and sadly he added, “At such a young age.”

This question he asked me took me by surprise.  
For a child to wonder this placed tears in my eyes.  
I thought deeply, I fumbled, I searched and I tried  
to come up with an answer for his inquisitive mind.

His eyes affixed on my lips, anticipating each sound.  
I replied with these words that my mind had found.  
Angels have been up in heaven for as long as time can tell.  
They've watched over us; they've guided us away from hell.

They've steered us and kept us pure of heart and mind,  
so when our time comes to leave this earth,  
our souls stand out and shine.

The little boy stood up and he began to leave.  
I asked him where he was off to  
as he stumbled from his knees.

He replied, “My friends are calling me;  
they're wanting me to play.”  
Then all of a sudden it came to me;  
I knew just what to say.

I wondered if he wanted to know the answer  
to the question he had asked?  
It was standing right in front of us  
as the little boy ran past.

The angels call our names when our time  
on earth expires.  
They're searching for our friendship,  
for this they do desire.

They're longing for our lives and vicariously live through  
each and every one of us, deeming which ones of us are true.  
For only the best do they call upon so young,  
with their bright smiles gleaming, greeting all loved ones.

By their sides they stand proudly; at the gates they do say,  
“Welcome all to our kingdom. Now children, let's play.”  
Taken for their laughter, their smiles and their wits,  
They're here to pass it on to others. This quality is their gift.

This contagious aura these special souls can wield  
puts this all in perspective, their destinies now fulfilled.



## St. David's

By Frank X. Mattson  
VA Medical Center—Spring City, PA

God shows  
The dreams  
Of  
Millions  
Of  
People  
Through  
The rolling  
Hippie  
Clouds  
Above  
the  
Town in Wales  
Of  
St. David's,  
Above  
All the  
Saints  
And Sinners  
When I  
Lived  
There.

# I Wish They Were Little Again

By Michael Ludwig  
VA Medical Center—Bedford, MA

I wish they were little again;  
I think about it now and then.

We'd take them to the movies  
or ride on the train,  
play in the sunshine,  
the snow or the rain.

We would walk them to school  
and later teach them some more,  
maybe hike through the forest  
or take a drive to the shore.

They would jump on me  
and wrestle me down;  
I'd let them win  
and pretend to frown.

They'd play with their pets,  
neighbors and friends,  
and visit their relatives  
on holidays and weekends.

We would go shopping as we  
walked through the mall,  
play hide and seek,  
hockey or basketball.

We'd take them to the zoo  
and feed the giraffes,  
then enjoy the ride home with  
their smiles and laughs.

They would wake us up when  
they had a bad dream;  
we'd take them on a carnival ride  
and hug them when they screamed.

If I think back for too long,  
sometimes I'll get sad;  
then I remember how grateful  
I am to be their dad.

I cannot believe time  
went by so fast;  
it's difficult not to  
think about the past.

Those were some of the  
happiest days of my life;  
they may soon have their own  
children and a wife.

I wish they were little again;  
I blinked...and they became young men.

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## DAVA STATE DEPT. OF FLORIDA AWARD

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# A New Day

By Tanya R. Whitney  
VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA

A fog blankets the land,  
the grayish mist hovering  
in the rising dawn.

Flowering buds unfold,  
their brilliant petals  
coloring the morning.

After a peaceful slumber,  
the forest stirs as the day  
begins in the wooded grove.

Timid babies peek out  
from the protective hugs  
and caring of their mothers.

Lakes, once clear and smooth,  
now ripple with famished fish  
feasting on hovering insects.

The breeze begins to stir.  
Whispering through the leaves,  
it rustles amongst the canopies.

Nature's glorious calm reigns.  
The radiant sunrise of a new day  
springs forth in a graceful beauty.

## Driveway to Heaven

By Dan Yates

—Blue Springs, MO

I know that we're not promised, but if I had my way  
this is the path I'd take on my final day.  
There'd be a long and winding road, warm breeze in the air.  
On each side in full bloom, a line of Bradford pear.

On the left is Grandma's house; that would be a sign.  
The smell of homemade bread, clothes drying on the line.  
Her yard is filled with flowers, a smile on her face.  
I'd know without a doubt that this was the place.

If Heaven had a driveway, this is what it'd be:  
lined with people and memories as far as I could see.  
Pastors, friends and family who always prayed for me.  
Smiles, laughs and tears of joy since the day that I was three.

I may not see the band, but music will be heard  
from a choir of angels rather than a bird.  
There'd be no signs of hatred; rather there'd be love  
as I made my way to Heaven up above.

With each step I take I'm farther from the ground.  
Loved ones who've gone before me standing all around.  
Up ahead on the right I'd see those pearly gates.  
The Father waiting for me saying, "Welcome, Danny Yates."

## Dare I Ask?

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

May I ask  
Where is your mask?  
And if it is my task  
To hoist my flask  
And free you from viral harm,  
I'll help you take it in the arm.  
Remember the virus is on the way,  
So take your shot today.  
And just like bogus probates,  
And just like cancel culture,  
More control, politicizing, weaponizing  
Are needed for the new world order to come.

## The Yesterday That Is Today, Tomorrow

By Douglas MacNeil

—White River Junction, VT

Did you know that the God of randomness was awake today?  
I mean yesterday, the yesterday that is today, tomorrow?  
I mean like the human that flew through the window  
of randomness  
and died flapping on the floorboards of the insecure,  
I mean obscure.

I mean he'd never seen it, heard it, never felt it coming  
as it arrived in the dark, bright morning that was yesterday.  
I mean tomorrow wrapped in the hollow hands of the screaming,  
rocking onwards and outwards to the internal cadence of chaos.  
I wonder when it was that I lost you? That I found you,  
that I lost you  
in the ever-running race of trying to return home?

Standing over the bedside, I wonder if you would have screamed  
in Kuwait  
as we stacked the bodies and the parts of bodies on flatbed  
trucks as the war raged on.  
I know I couldn't, I couldn't scream because everything  
inside of me  
that was capable of screaming was already dead, dead that day,  
and dead the day before, and dead every day after.  
So today I will do for you what no one could do for me.

I will take you home,  
I will hold you awake,  
watch you sleep  
and love you  
in hurt ways that will take decades for you to understand.  
And then like that bird through the window, like that nail  
that fell from the horseshoe,  
we will lose the war and each other in the dim tides  
of the random.

And that is when you will remember  
how I held you and loved you,  
how I worried sleepless at night  
as you slept in the nightmare of car accidents.  
And it is when the wings stop flapping,  
the wheels stop rolling that you will  
find the love in the yesterday that is today, tomorrow.

## Broken

*By Tanya R. Whitney  
VA Medical Center—New Orleans, LA*

A pure heart, once whole and unscathed,  
believed to be strong and unbreakable  
like a statue carved in a granite stone.

Now hardened by the constant anguish  
of the harsh circumstances in life,  
then a fissure in the stone implodes.

The heart shatters like broken panes of glass.  
Fragmented into tiny sharp pieces,  
the shards are honed into dagger-like points.

Razor-edged shards inflict painful wounds  
into an organ once beating with love,  
now bleeding free from the lacerations.

Thoughts no longer intact or untouched,  
no longer capable of reasoning.  
Rational thinking is lost to the dark depths.

A soul destroyed by a constant barrage.  
A body is crushed by the weight of the world.  
The mind is beaten into submission.

A spirit is broken like a wild stallion,  
subdued and tamed by rawhide whips,  
defeated by endless suffering.

## Army

*By Kenny C. Trujillo  
VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV*

I followed in my dad's footsteps  
in joining the Army.  
And I am glad that I did  
because I ended up with very good benefits.  
I learned so much about life in the Army.  
I was in the Army for two years  
and I was taught about teamwork,  
self-confidence, honor and love for family.  
Thanks to the Army.

## Asking for Forgiveness

*By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.  
VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA*

Please do forgive me.  
Whatever I have done or said  
That may have offended you,  
Whether it be of my ignorance  
Or my disregard for your feelings,  
I ask for your forgiveness.  
I would never intentionally or willfully  
Set out with the intention  
To do you any harm,  
To show you any disrespect,  
To place any demands upon you,  
To make any request of you  
Which would be harmful or distressful,  
That might disrupt  
Your peace of mind.  
From the very first time  
I set eyes on you,  
You have always had  
My love and devotion.  
I have nothing but great love for you.  
I may have disagreed with you  
From time to time.  
This has nothing to do  
With my love for you.  
Right or wrong,  
I will stand by your side  
With love and devotion  
For your well-being and peace of mind.  
Your life has always been  
Highly valued by me.  
It brings me great pain and sorrow  
To think that I have done you wrong.  
Please return your love to me  
So that I may have  
Joy in my heart once again.  
There's nothing on this earth  
More valuable  
Than the love of family and friends.  
The one and only treasure  
And great pleasure of life is the value  
We place in love.

## A Tribute to Michael Jackson

*By Michael Pride Young*  
—Fond du Lac, WI

To rock-and-roll pop singer Michael Jackson,  
we proudly in honor dedicate this song to you.  
We speak to millions of your fans and loved ones  
throughout the entire world, made by the Honorable God,  
who honor, respect and treasure you and your music.  
We are proud that your fans are in all colors and ethnic groups.  
We know you have left the stage but your music plays on.  
The music man who worked magic on the stage,  
who had the great, unique voice of many super music men,  
who danced and twisted around as fast as a 747 jet,  
who worked super magic on the music stage  
that caught the attention of many millions of eyes.  
To rock-and-roll pop singer Michael Jackson,  
we speak to the millions of fans and loved ones you have.  
You have left the music stage that hurt your fans.  
The good thing is that your music will still play on.  
Michael Jackson, you were on the Ed Sullivan show as a kid.  
Oh, how Ed Sullivan praised you and your music skills.  
The music man who worked magic on his television show,  
that caught the attention of many millions of eyes.  
The super unique, magic music man Michael Jackson  
who worked super magic on the music stage  
and who danced and twisted around as fast as a 747 jet.  
The good thing is this music man has all types of fans  
in all colors, in all ethnic groups throughout the world.  
You have left the music stage that hurt so many fans.  
The good thing is that your music will still play on.  
Michael Jackson, we dedicate this song to you.



## Contemplation

*By Neal C. Morrison, Jr.*  
VA Medical Center—Hampton, VA

Changing your environment  
Changes your life,  
Changes your mind,  
Improves the quality of your life.  
Negative thoughts  
Can be as poisonous to the mind  
As any toxin to the body.  
Following the tradition of hatred,  
Any form of negativity  
Is like poison festering,  
Deteriorating your mind.  
It limits your ability,  
Places you in a state of stagnation,  
Self-imposed bondage.  
It limits your work,  
Limits where you live,  
Limits where you go,  
Limits your friendship,  
Limits your learning ability,  
Places restrictions on your family,  
Places your convictions  
On your friends.  
Traditional hatred,  
Passed from one generation  
To the next,  
Becomes a self-imposed bondage,  
Restricts and robs you,  
Your family, your friends,  
All whom you love  
Of the many blessings  
God has for you.

## TV Tyranny

By Lynn A. Norton  
—Leawood, KS

The familiar glow of my television died,  
snuffed out by digital murderers, never again  
to display evening news, sports, game shows.

I'm forced to buy a new TV, dump the old  
dysfunctional tube into bins labeled hazardous  
material, reuse, repurpose, recycle.

The new screen performs as advertised:  
images sharper than shattered crystal, colors  
that could make birds of paradise envious.

But high-definition broadcasts horrify show  
hosts, news anchors; showcase bloodshot eyes,  
bad teeth, caldera pores, lava-flow wrinkles.

Low-budget special effects exposed like  
amateur puppet theater, strings and crutch in  
full view, puppeteer hunched under blankets.

Camera software rushes into production,  
blurs images like oil smeared on lenses, secret  
trick of photographers to hide imperfection.

Farewell media collection, Betamax, VHS,  
DVD, incapable of playing clear memories  
until restored, remastered, repurchased.

Nothing I own will ever be good enough.  
Before the scent of new plastic subsidizes, my new  
television is obsolete, next generation on sale.

## Glory Bound

By John L. Swainston  
VA Medical Center—Kansas City, MO

They all thought they were  
“Glory Bound.”  
Sixteen weeks of training.  
Boarded the plane, a long  
flight ahead.

Looking at their faces—  
Confidence  
Fear  
Eyes closed, not sleeping  
Eyes open, seeing nothing  
Little conversation, each  
keeping their thoughts silent.

It did not take long to discover  
they had been—

Hell Bound.

*Author's Note: Written to a writing prompt  
by Barbara Crooker: “There is no end of  
things in my heart.”*

## Tick Tock

By William L. Snead  
VA Medical Center—Iron Mountain, MI

Tickety, Tickety, Tock.  
Tickety, Tickety, Tock.  
Just like an unmoving rock  
Are the moving hands of a clock.  
It's time that moves us through  
An eternity that waits for us all.  
So let us believe it right  
And be seated in the proper hall.  
Christ said, “...I am the way, the truth, and the life:  
No man cometh unto the Father, but by me.”  
Strive to enter by the narrow gate.

## Or a Verbal Attack

*By Dennis Edward O'Brien  
VA Medical Center—Wilkes-Barre, PA*

It's so nice to meet another vet  
even though your name I do forget.  
But your serving in the Army for ten years  
was sure to end any known tears!

For we who served did fear thee not;  
we did it for friends and family we got.  
There was never a second thought in mind;  
I did my eleven years and seventeen days of time!

If given the chance we'd do it again,  
perhaps to see all war end.  
But that's something of which we can't be sure  
when there are innocent victims of war!

Yet, serving we became victims, too,  
losing a few friends doing the "do."  
Do you ever really wonder about  
what we've all gone through, there is no doubt!

It's more than just a tale to spin.  
Did you protest war, way back when?  
Where or when did our story begin?  
It was the war, not the serviceman.

So, if in need, go to a veteran;  
they'd help you any way they can.  
They'd give you the shirt off their back,  
so, why should there be spit or a verbal attack?

Honor the Source of Your Freedom!  
Yes, Honor the Source of Your Freedom!

## No One Asks Why

*By Ken Palmrose  
—Meridian, ID*

Why those who lied in the past to their gullible followers  
never realized the powerful cost of those words.  
Blindly, never knowing that fields of gray granite stone  
would be needed to launch 60,000 brave angels.

Those angels that politicians could not return  
through their ballot boxes borne of hell.  
Their morality of actions not taken excused them all  
until strange soil turned red from the blood  
of their sickness and ignorance on high.

Many views of this sickness in the world seem  
to be only reconciled by not seeing what others are.  
By not understanding there is no correct morality for  
Mother Earth when she sustains all upon her.

Even now, we have not questioned the lies;  
the ignorant are still listening to the powerful din  
from the noise of today's clueless unenlightened.

Once again, the world sees the cost of serving  
the immoral food of ignorance to the deceivable of today.  
More angels flying, more soils are crimson stained...

And still, no one asks  
WHY?

## War Is Hell

*By Kenny C. Trujillo  
VA Medical Center—North Las Vegas, NV*

I can understand both of our situations  
due to not wanting to start World War III.  
War is Hell.

I love our country with all my heart and spirit.  
I pray that all our leaders make good choices  
and wise decisions so as not to get into  
World War III.  
War is Hell.

## Raw Thanks at Mojave

*By Charles S. Parnell*

*VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA*

Oh, God above, I thank You for this life.  
To know me better, I spend time today  
in peace. I walk this desert ground alone  
and think toward You as I, myself, disclose.  
The hot sun shines and warms the earth and me  
as I reflect on God and who I am.  
I hold myself and feel myself alone.  
God gave me life; I thank Him as I pray.  
God's care for me I know as I look up  
and see this world He gave to me with love.  
This wealth untold is mine from His kind hand  
to do with what I will until He calls.

## The Few...We Few

*By Charles S. Parnell*

*VA Medical Center—Pittsburgh, PA*

For God and country out there—somewhere  
In the distance between right and wrong  
In the shadow between good and bad  
In the space between us and them—

We took shape at Tun in '75.

When you mention Montezuma and the Halls  
When you tell of Tripoli and the Shores  
When you think of us, link us alongside  
“young Harry”  
and the altar of Honor  
and know this, too, that  
we few, we happy few, we band of brothers—

We proudly guard the streets of Heaven  
with an Ooh Rah and a Semper Fi  
We, who never sleep  
We, who do not rest.

## For My Grandma

*By CJ Reeves*

*VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA*

To the sweetest grandma  
That ever could be  
And I'm so glad  
She belongs to me.  
When I'm in trouble  
A kind word she gives,  
And I shall love her  
As long as I live.

When I am wrong,  
She'll sit me down and say,  
“Do you think God  
Wants you to act that way?”  
After we have talked  
Just a little while,  
I'll think of what she said.  
Then I will smile.

Every little word I've said,  
Every little part,  
From way down deep  
From my heart it came.  
Now I must do my part,  
Make peace with God  
For there is no one else  
To blame but me.



## Small Daughter

*By CJ Reeves*

*VA Medical Center—San Francisco, CA*

Small daughter playing grown-up  
Slips on an evening gown.  
On her curls, she pins a hat;  
High-heeled shoes complete the act.

A drop of this, a dab of that,  
With painted lips and shadowed eyes,  
Around her neck, a string of pearls,  
She looks like any teenage girl.

Spying Mother at the door,  
She tossed her pretty curls.  
“I’m glad I’m not a grown-up  
But Daddy’s little girl.”

## Screaming Nights

*By Sean Richards*

*VA Medical Center—Fort Worth, TX*

Into my nights of fitful sleep,  
Into my dreams they flit and creep.  
The evils of old, they come and go;  
they lodge in my mind and continue to grow.  
Inside my mind, they burrow so deep.

The darkness grows as the evil seeps in;  
it reveals itself as it grows from within.  
These rancid smells, they come and they go  
As nightmares of my mind continue to flow.  
I fight for my sanity, but I’m afraid I won’t win.

As the evil spreads, I try to survive;  
the last of the good still keeps me alive.  
There is nothing quite like the evil I see;  
it is with my teeming nightmares I must strive.  
With my failing strength, I strive to be believed.

## Pickman’s Paintings

*By Sean Richards*

*VA Medical Center—Fort Worth, TX*

They thought he died in twenty-seven;  
He disappeared but never to heaven.  
Now he paints demented lost souls;  
He sold his soul to a witch’s coven.  
His paintings are wild, uncanny to behold.

Pickman ties a soul to every painting;  
Most who have seen them can’t help fainting.  
The pictures contain pure unadulterated evil;  
His portraits are something worth debating.  
Most of his work is really unbelievable;  
The choice of his subjects is inconceivable.

No, he did not die; he just found a place to hide;  
A century later, his time he still bides.  
His new home gives him plenty to do;  
Painting portraits of dregs lost in the tides.  
It’s easy to see why evil loves him so;  
It will be a while yet before evil lets him go.

Just like the denizens in that old Eagles tune,  
Checking out is easy, but leaving is untrue.  
As old Pickman keeps them waiting,  
Time passes slowly here like living on the moon.  
The parties are blowouts; they’re so invigorating.  
But soon everyone tires and they become so boring.

Everyone awaits the time when checking out is due;  
Some last longer, some less and some folks never do.  
They fight only with themselves as their sanity is lost;  
They’re here to avoid the world outside and the one inside, too.  
In here they find a break from the trivial things like trust,  
But go they will, eventually, while giving in to every lust.

So Pickman’s models are for portraits of the damned;  
Once they enter here, by demons they are scammed.  
Now he has a rogue’s gallery of pictures that are never seen;  
Into a cryptic cellar so many portraits are crammed.  
It’s likely that they will only be seen by those they demean  
And are never to be displayed in sunlight on the green.

## Revelations of the Sun

*By William Shepherd*  
*VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS*

When the golden drop from heaven  
disappears into the land,  
we close our eyes and pray to God  
so He'll send it back again.  
And then we wake to find He has  
put it back into its place  
to give us warmth and light our way,  
just so it can be repeated for always.

## The Secret

*By William Shepherd*  
*VA Medical Center—Wichita, KS*

As we travel along the River of Wind,  
we see mountains so high and covered with snow  
as if to say, "No one knows the secret I keep from you."

At dawn comes a new day that brings new excitement.  
As the light from the sun fills in the space around us,  
we look for the land near Crystal Lake which few have seen.

The passage to the Yellow Mountains is impossible to find  
unless you know what to look for and follow the signs.  
Inside the hidden passage is a forgotten land

that no one knows or has seen for hundreds of years.  
A land that has so much gold in it just for the taking,  
just lying on the ground.

## A Cup of Joe

*By Scott Sjostrand*  
*—Hallock, MN*

Morning coffee, a Cup of Joe with President Biden.  
My "Folgers Classic" is what I take great pride in.  
I've got it brewing! C'mon over!  
There's snow now where there used to be clover.  
I can only imagine sippin' on a cup with the "Man."  
Air Force One could bring him closer to Scott D. Sjostrand.  
I can picture us sippin', him as my guest.  
Hey, Sir, I voted for you; you're the best!  
Foreign affairs, domestic policies,  
American troops across the seas.  
Conversation with our President would prove interesting;  
in our nation I am investing.  
I agree with his infrastructure spending package;  
we don't need any more collapsed bridge wreckage.  
His diplomatic skills are being put to the test;  
I can only imagine the pressure, very little rest.  
If he can work things out with Putin in Ukraine,  
he's a true Man of Peace. Need I explain?

## Puttin' Putin

*By Scott Sjostrand*  
*—Hallock, MN*

Puttin' Putin,  
you should build a world-class golf course in Moscow.  
World leaders  
could resolve issues peacefully over golf.  
Holy Cow!  
Former President Trump,  
at Mar-a-Lago, you could play golf together  
The balls would fly  
whichever way the wind blows.  
Augusta, Georgia, home of the Masters,  
The coveted Green Jacket could avert global disasters.  
So, instead of fighting, just play golf.  
World problems will gradually resolve.

## Never Again?

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center—Appleton, WI

That is what we humans say.

“Never again.”

History? Ignored!

Another madman invades innocents

as the world watches

possible nuclear disaster in Ukraine.

Appeasement to the madman?

Going to stop at the end of Ukraine?

Did Stalin? Did Hitler?

So the world watches because this madman

can launch the end of the world.

Well, I am just a man who knows war,

Vietnam, many years ago.

I know war is war—as do the Ukrainians.

Oh, we give just enough so that they can try to hold on.

A no-fly zone? The world watches,

Germany, France, Spain, Finland, Sweden,

The UK, Australia, The Baltics, Ireland, Norway,

even the Swiss as the madman threatens

and kills with ruthlessness and war crimes.

Have we seen this movie before?

Well, I have a solution, my fellow vets.

I don't think you will like it.

But there is a bunch of us in Ukraine

right now trying to help—we fight.

Old and young from many countries

called “The International Brigade,”

every one of them a hero.

Why? Because they know war.

They know how to help.

They know the madman must be destroyed.

They would rather die than see the second time around

of “Never Again.”

NATO? They watch.

In my mind, cowards not paying any

attention to what the madman does.

History?

“I regret that I have but one life to give to my country.”

“Give me liberty or give me death.”

The Statue of Liberty?

Freedom before dishonor as the world watches.

Go ahead, Madman. Launch!

I would rather die seeing a mushroom cloud

than to see him destroy one entire innocent country.

Oh, by the way, Madman, launch and you are dead.

And thus brings the end to humanity!

Wanna play chicken, Jerk?

You already are because you don't mess with nuclear power.

And you don't care.

NATO has no choice. Appeasement, we have seen

from history, does NOT WORK!

How long before the average Russian

wakes up to save the world from their own

madman that will destroy them all.

The world watches and does nothing.

I have PTSD and, my brothers,

it don't mean nothing—nothing at all!

## Elvis Has Left the Building

By Michael Pride Young

—Fond du Lac, WI

Men and Ladies, Elvis has left the building.

Elvis wants his fans and loved ones to know

his appreciation and gratitude go out to them,

and that God may bless his fans and loved ones.

Elvis Presley will not return to this building;

The Elvis songs have not left the building at all.

To all Elvis fans and to those who loved him,

in Elvis' Graceland and in this great land of God,

the Elvis songs will play and rock and roll on.

Yes, people, Elvis has left the building.

You can rock and roll in Elvis' Graceland.

The Elvis songs and movies are in the buildings.

Elvis fans and loved ones rock and roll on.

Did you ever see Elvis on the Ed Sullivan show?

Thank you, sir; we are with Ed Sullivan tonight.

Elvis fans and loved ones can be proud.

Men and Ladies, Elvis has left the building

but his music and movies will play in many buildings.

Elvis wants his fans and loved ones to know

his appreciation and gratitude go out to them.

# Mail Call



Letter to *Veterans' Voices*

Matthew Davison's article appearing in *Veterans' Voices*, volume 70, number 3, was encouraging. He is a longtime advocate for an often forgotten and discarded population of veterans.

Incarcerated veterans experience a loss of agency: the ability to impact their circumstances, environment or life by volitional decision. Prison, not prisoners, dictate every aspect of captivity. Once losing agency one contemplates self-efficacy, competency and belief. Captivity is a barbaric foreign world that reshapes prisoner's identity, in order to survive. Feelings of isolation ensue in the overcrowded environment. Prisoners are void of autonomy, competency, and connectedness. Deeply held spiritual beliefs may be questioned.

An unpopular rarely mentioned travesty can grossly magnify the pain and suffering of incarcerated veterans. Some are innocent and had broken no law. Despite common misconception, absolute innocence cases are seldom accidental or shortcomings of our judiciary system. Nearly all are deliberate and imposed because of ease of conviction upon the socioeconomic disadvantaged. The moral injustice by the government is especially damaging to innocent veterans psyche, physical health, and relationships. Betrayal is not overcome by resilience.

The inclusion of incarcerated veterans in *Veterans' Voices* is not pity, victimization, or neo-liberalism. It is courage.

Thank you, sincerely, **Andrew Smith**, Texas



"For me to write is to heal," wrote **Zachary Space**, Columbus, Ohio. He wrote a piece contrasting Christmas in Madison, Ohio, with Christmas in Vietnam. "I've never shared this experience: not with my family, not with my wife, not with my buddies... However, sharing this story finally brings some peace."



**Charles Kesler**, Hideaway, Texas, wrote:

"Greetings from beautiful East Texas -- towering oak trees and majestic pines. I really enjoyed the writing in the Fall 2022 issue of *Veterans' Voices*. My wife and I laughed with Lynn Norton's 'Medication Blues' and 'Retail Blues.' We wept with 'They Were Warriors First'" by Matthew Davison. 'The Mickey Mouse Watch' by Arthur Wiknik, Jr., made me think about how much I have loved my Mickey Mouse watches through the years. Trina Mioner's '5 Breaths' made me think about the day I stopped breathing after an operation to remove my cancerous right kidney at the VA Hospital in Dallas, Texas. As my consciousness ascended to the ceiling I was looking down at the nurses and others who were working to save me and I believe it helped me to fight to live because I sensed their genuine concern for me. Well, I could go on and on about all this, but I will stop for now." Charles is sending poems to *Veteran' Voices* and is "grateful there is a place for veterans to express themselves."



"Thank you profusely for honoring me with the Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award for the best poem in the Summer 2022 issue of *Veterans' Voices*," wrote **William H. Anderes**, Cresskill, N.J. "It was particularly gratifying because it was the first poem I had ever written. Your recognition is an incentive to continue pursuing my newfound hobby...P.S. He who is bestowed honor is an incredibly wealthy man!"



**Matthew D. Davison**, San Pedro, Calif., said, "As a multiple award-winning contributor to *Veterans' Voices* and an avid follower of our progress, I humbly make this small donation. Congratulations on the Veterans Pen Celebration and on the newsletter. You make all participants proud."

*Continued to Page 62*

# Mail Call



“You may wonder why I send pictures to you,” wrote **Dan Strange**, San Antonio, Texas. “I feel I am able to share some of the good and bad experiences I have encountered throughout life and the military. This allows me a chance to escape the demons I fight... Thanks to Vietnam for some of the medical problems that I now encounter. I just want to thank you for the service you provide. I am sure there are numerous veterans who feel the same way.”



**Boyd Burke**, Canon City, Colo. sent money to provide a subscription to *Veterans' Voices* for a new Navy officer. Boyd was a boiler technician in his service career.



“The VFW Post 10980 Auxiliary is pleased to support VVWP and we are glad to hear of the award this magazine received,” wrote **Shirley Trospen**, Eutawville, S.C.



**Katie Maxon**, chief, voluntary service, Oscar G. Johnson VA Medical Center, Iron Mountain, Mich., thanked *Veterans' Voices* for copies of the magazine for their Community Living Center residents.



“On behalf of the Missouri Humanities Council, we thank you for your continued support,” wrote **Ashely Beard-Fosnow**, executive director. “Your support furthers our mission by increasing access to our program. Please enjoy the copy of the most recent Humanities magazine from the NEH as part of your member benefits.”



**Rich Wangard**, Neenah, Wis., wrote regarding *Veterans' Voices* recent editorial awards (see page 67):

“Congratulations! The VVWP board and magazine staff deserve honors. Your hard work proves how much you care for those of us who served our country. The magazine gives veterans a place to write about their innermost thoughts and feelings when they often feel there is no one else to listen. I’ve written for your magazine for the last seven years and you almost always publish something I’ve submitted. Do you know what this means to an old Nam vet with PTSD? It makes me proud!” He signs off, “Thanks for above and beyond the call of duty!”

# Publication in *Veterans' Voices* Qualifies Writers for Special Prizes

Please note *Veterans' Voices* prize structure includes three Founders' Awards honoring Elizabeth L. Fontaine, Gladys Feld Helzberg and Margaret Sally Keach. Contributors to *Veterans' Voices* receive \$10 for every published story, poem, artwork or photograph. Published submissions also qualify for special awards made possible by generous donors. Those awards are listed below.

*Medical Center staff  
is encouraged to  
reproduce this page in  
patient publications.*



## FOUNDERS

### **Elizabeth L. Fontaine Memorial Award:**

Story expressing compassion and understanding (Perpetual) .....\$50

### **Gladys Feld Helzberg Memorial Award:**

Best Poem (Perpetual).....\$50

### **Margaret Sally Keach Memorial Award:**

Story or Poem about What *Veterans' Voices* Means to Me (Perpetual) .....\$50

## STORIES—*Fact or Fiction*

**Gladys M. Canty Memorial Award**, by Northern Virginia Chapter 33, WAC Veterans Association.....\$15

**DAVA, State Dept. Of Kansas Award**.....\$25

**VFW Auxiliary, Dept. Of Kansas Award: Personal Story** (Perpetual) .....\$25

**Pallas Athene Best Story Award, by National Women's Army Corps Veterans Association** (Perpetual).....\$25

**Robert T. Rubin Award: Restoring and Maintaining My Mental Health** (Perpetual).....\$35

## POETRY

**BVL Award, Serving My Country: What It Means to Me**.....\$50

**DAVA, State Dept. Of Florida Award** .....\$30

**Sally-Sue Hughes Memorial Award** (3 Poems).....Each \$15

**TH Norton Award: Editor's Choice**.....\$25

**WOSL Members' Appreciation Award: Editor's Choice, by Doris Cobb** .....\$15

## SPECIAL CATEGORIES

**Joseph Posik Award:** Given to a veteran who encourages other veterans to write;

Medical Center administrator nominates; publisher approves .....\$50

# Heal Through Visual Art

**Watch for your artwork in a future issue!**

This issue of *Veterans' Voices* includes a special section featuring art from military veterans. We already showcase your writing, now the editors highlight your art as well!

Robert Rubin, M.D., Ph.D., a military veteran and retired V.A. staff psychiatrist, is the inspiration for this initiative. He is convinced the arts can heal. He has observed how veterans heal by writing their thoughts and feelings on paper and he knows other art forms possess the same potential.

Validate Dr. Rubin's confidence in the healing power of art. Send us your drawings, paintings and photographs. Follow the Submission Guidelines below and help fill the pages of *Veterans' Voices* with colorful art!

## Instructions for Artwork Submissions

For more than 65 years Veterans Voices Writing Project has provided an outlet for military veterans to experience solace and satisfaction by sharing their stories, poems and artwork. Send your submissions today!

- Entries must be submitted as a digital file, either online or by U.S. mail.
- All art must be original and submitted by a military veteran or active service member. (List branch of military service and years served.)
- Media may include: acrylic, airbrush, assemblage, casein, charcoal, color pencil, graphite illustration, drawings, ink, oil, pastel, printmaking, tempera, watercolor, and traditional and digital photography.
- An artist statement is preferred to convey the artist's inspiration behind the artwork.
- Image requirements for entries: JPG files (Please try to keep the file size under 2MB to ensure proper uploading). For publication these files should be 300dpi when saved at approximately 8x10 inches (2400x3000 pixels), ideally, and 5x7 inches (1500x2100 pixels) at minimum.
- Submissions will be considered on an ongoing basis for subsequent issues.
- If you have questions, contact us at [support@veteransvoices.org](mailto:support@veteransvoices.org) or (816) 701-6844.



**Submit Today!**  
For a Future Issue

Calling for  
Photographs,  
Drawings and  
Paintings



## Artwork Submissions

*Online or By Mail*

[www.veteransvoices.org](http://www.veteransvoices.org)

Veterans Voices Writing Project, Inc.  
406 West 34th Street, Suite 103  
Kansas City, MO 64111-3043

*Please reproduce this announcement to encourage others to share their art!*

# Submission Guidelines for *Veterans' Voices*



Any military veteran or active service person may submit original writing or artwork for publication consideration by the editors. Material previously published in a VAMC publication is ACCEPTABLE; copyrighted material is NOT ACCEPTABLE for the magazine. Once work has been submitted, **please do not resubmit** the same story or poem. Instead, wait and watch for the material to appear in the magazine, on the VVWP web site, and/or on Facebook. Be patient and remember that editors work up to six months in advance of the magazine publication date.

## Instructions for Writing Submissions.

The editors prefer that writers and artists submit their work online. To submit writing online, go to [www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/](http://www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/) or [www.veteransvoices.org](http://www.veteransvoices.org) and select **Registration**.

Once on the page, complete the registration form by typing your name, username, password, and email. If you don't have an email, please use one from a relative or friend. Scroll down and click **Open Section** under Military Association and choose your branch of military service and years served. Continue down the page and select **Open Section** under *Your Details* and fill out your contact information. **Your address is required.** Now click **Register** and you will be directed to a login page. Log in by entering your username and password that you just chose.

Once you have successfully logged in, start by adding your submission headline. This will be the title for your writing. When you have finished adding your headline, click **Add New** and you will be directed to a new page. Click **Open Section** under *Writing Type* and choose the type of writing you will be submitting. Then click **Open Section** under *Writing* and use this area to add your written piece by typing or copying and pasting into the text box.

Once you have finished scroll down and click **Open Section** under *Notes* to type additional information, for example you might add details about someone who is helping you as a writing aide or the name of your typist. If you are uploading a file, select **Open Section** under *Upload File* then click anywhere inside of the dotted box, or drag and drop your file. You can upload a Word file to submit your writing. Also you can submit artwork using *Upload File*.

Once you have uploaded and completed this section, click **Submit For Review** and your work will be successfully submitted. You can click **Save For Later** if you would like to save it and submit at a later time.

## Guidelines for Local Contests.

Writing contests can encourage others to write. Announce such contests through publications and bulletin boards. Prizes might be cash, books, gift certificates, or publication in a hospital newsletter. Send Award-winning stories, poems or artwork to VVWP for possible publication in *Veterans' Voices*.

### SUBMIT ONLINE:

[www.veteransvoices.org](http://www.veteransvoices.org)

### SUBMIT BY MAIL:

Veterans Voices Writing Project, Inc.  
406 West 34th Street, Suite 103  
Kansas City, MO 64111-3043

### QUESTIONS:

[support@veteransvoices.org](mailto:support@veteransvoices.org)  
(816) 701-6844

## Mail Submission Sample.

When submitting creative work by mail, attach an 8.5" x 11" sheet of paper with the following information:

Author Name \_\_\_\_\_

VAMC Name \_\_\_\_\_

VAMC City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Author's Permanent Street Address \_\_\_\_\_

City, State, Zip Code \_\_\_\_\_

Phone Number \_\_\_\_\_

Email Address \_\_\_\_\_

Branch of Service \_\_\_\_\_

Conflict or Era \_\_\_\_\_

Approximate dates served \_\_\_\_\_

I certify that I served in the U.S. military.

Date Submitted to *Veterans' Voices* \_\_\_\_\_

Title: *Example: What America Means to Me*

Text: *Example: I consider the United States of America "My Country." This is because I have spent at least 14 years in Europe and in the Far East.*

Writing Aide: \_\_\_\_\_

Typist: \_\_\_\_\_

# Thank You



Contributions to *Veterans' Voices*, both the writing and the financial gifts, are an inspiration to the editors and publishers of the magazine. The writers who submit their stories and poems as well as those who read and subscribe to the magazine encourage veterans everywhere to express their thoughts and feelings in writing. The financial contributions, no matter how large or small, make possible the publication of the magazine. Those who have made larger financial gifts since the last issue of the magazine are listed here.

– VVWP Board of Directors

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## **Gifts of \$5,000 or more**

*Anonymous, Kansas City, Mo.*

## **Gifts of \$2,000 or more**

*DAV Auxiliary State Dept. of Minnesota, Hutchinson, Minn.*

*Doug Iliff, Topeka, Kan.*

*Sheryl Liddle, Independence, Mo.*

## **Gifts of \$1,000 or more**

*James Eisenbrandt, Overland Park, Kan.*

*Hallmark Cards, Inc., Kansas City, Mo.*

*Lynn Mackle, Palm Beach, Fla.*

*P. Thompson, Yorktown Heights, N.Y.*

*Thompson Family Foundation, Shawnee, Kan.*

*Rich Wangard, Neenah, Wis.*

## **Gifts of \$400 or more**

*Chris Iliff, Overland Park, Kan.*

*VFW Auxiliary 7573, New Baltimore, Mich.*

*VFW Auxiliary 9283, Southgate, Mich.*

*Women's Overseas Service League, Springfield, Ill.*

## **Gifts of \$200 or more**

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*Marianne Watson, Wheatland, Mo.*

## **Gifts of \$100 or more**

*David Albright, Tuscaloosa, Ala.*

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*Kay Watts, Springfield, Mo.*

*Dan Yates, Blue Springs, Mo.*

## **Gifts in Kind**

*Dazium Design, Kansas City, Mo*

*Kansas Audio-Reader Service, Lawrence, Kan.*

*Kaw Valley Computer, Kansas City, Kan.*

*Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.*

*The National World War I Museum and Memorial,*

*Kansas City, Mo.*

*VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.*

# Veterans' Voices Captures Top "Philly Awards" from Nonprofit Connect



*Veterans' Voices* magazine captured top honors in the prestigious "Philly Awards" presented by Nonprofit Connect for excellence in marketing, communications and fundraising. The announcement was made at a gala awards ceremony in November 2022.

The magazine published by Veterans Voices Writing Project (VVWP), received a gold award in the Magazine/Newsletter category. In addition, in two overall categories, *Veterans' Voices* won gold in Best In-House and Best in Class.

The awards were based on scores earned by entrants in 16 categories.

Nonprofit Connect, based in Kansas City, Mo., lists more than 800 business and individual members. It's stated mission is to "link the nonprofit community to education, resources and networking so organizations can more effectively achieve their missions."

*Veterans' Voices* magazine has published three issues per year since 1952. Its prose, poetry

and visual arts are exclusively by veterans. Its mission is based on the belief that creative expression can serve as a form of therapy, a motivation for sharing life experiences or an outlet for recreation.

VVWP Board President Sheryl Liddle said the awards honored both the organization's efforts and those of the veterans who create the magazine's content.

"When *Veterans' Voices* received the Gold Philly Award, we were overjoyed that the submissions of our veterans were honored by the nonprofit community of greater Kansas City," Liddle said.

"However, when *Veterans' Voices* was awarded the Best In-House and Best in Class awards, we were all awestruck and elated that people outside our sphere understood what *Veterans' Voices* is all about. Awards tend to honor the hard work of people who put things together, and these awards do that. However, these awards also validate the writings and visual art of these veterans who put their hearts into words for the world to see."

**In their scoring comments, judges praised *Veterans' Voices* for both its content and its mission.**

Among the comments:

- The mission, content and approach are so poignant.
- Absolutely love the premise and content in this piece! Veterans creating the content is just phenomenal – very innovative.
- The concept, content and creation of this publication are so important and well curated. Thank you for doing this vital work!
- The simplicity of the content allowed for the reader to focus on absorbing the content and really immersing themselves into the stories; I liked the authenticity represented and the close attention given to the target audience.



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Looking for earlier issues of *Veterans' Voices*,  
check the website at [VeteransVoices.org](http://VeteransVoices.org).

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