

Devoted exclusively to the writings
of military veterans for over 65 years.

Fall 2018

VETERANS' VOICES

**Veterans, Write
Your Story!**

by Dr. Matthew Naylor

Spirit Sister

by Richard Wangard

Sweet Kill

by Mark Andres Richards

Power of the Pen

by Dan Yates

Vol. 66, NO. 3
ISSN 0504-0779

VeteransVoices.org

Guest Editorial

Veterans, Write Your Story!

By Dr. Matthew Naylor

“It’s taken a long time, four years and half of the sort of thing that France has been through is tremendous... I was talking last night with a [French] mother who gave her two boys and her husband and now is all alone who told me “Why should not I be glad? My two boys and my good man are gone it is true, but there are so many others. The war, it is finished, thanks to the good God.”

– November 11, 1918, Ned Henschel

As we approach the centennial of the armistice that helped end World War I, the writings of those men and women who lived and died during “the war to end all wars” continue to resonate among Americans. It is their written words and oral histories that not only inform the scholarship surrounding this important event, but also act as integral parts of the National WWI Museum and Memorial, which tells that global story.

As historians, we consider these accounts vital to our understanding of the past. Whether fiction, like Ernest Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms* or Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front*, or nonfiction, like Ernst Junger’s *Storm of Steel* or Hervey Allen’s *Toward the Flame*, they provide their audience with a testament of the war experience. Such accounts are invaluable, as there are no longer any similar living connections to the Great War.

Although World War I has been cast as a “forgotten war,” recent scholarship attests to the fact that World War I veterans originally shared their stories on levels like that of other wars throughout the 20th century. The growing ambiguity regarding American involvement in the war, however, combined with the onset of the Great Depression in 1929 and American entry into World War II in 1941, largely relegated the numerous volumes of poetry, prose, fiction, and nonfiction, to the sidelines of history. With the 50th anniversary of the country’s entry into the war coinciding with the height of the Vietnam War, the potential resurgence of war writings was greatly minimized.

Research also shows that sharing the veteran experience empowers the serviceperson and benefits their community. It informs our present understanding of both the military and the veteran experience, fostering a connection between the two while also deepening the connection between society and the military. This is important, given the visible presence of veterans in communities across the country and the continued U.S. military presence overseas. The need for and reliance on veteran writings will be no less important to future generations than those of the First World War are to us now.

In the 21st century, digital media allows those willing to tell their story to share it with a global audience. To do so takes the same courage and dedication veterans have already demonstrated through their military service. As we reflect on the importance, and often cathartic nature, of veteran writings from World War I to the present, I encourage you to write and tell your story. As a veteran, you can write for yourself or to share with others through various media, including *Veterans’ Voices*. The magazine’s editors hope you will share your writing with them. (See the VVWP website or page 66 of this magazine for submission guidelines.)

You are also welcome to find connections to World War I, whether it’s through a visit to our nation’s official Museum and Memorial or by searching our online collection at theworldwar.org website where you can read countless letters detailing the experiences of those who bravely served 100 years ago.



Dr. Matthew Naylor – Dr. Matthew Naylor is the president and CEO of The National WWI Museum and Memorial in Kansas City, Mo. A native of Australia, Naylor began his tenure at the museum in June 2013 and possesses more than 25 years of leadership in the nonprofit arena. The museum has achieved unprecedented success during his tenure there, breaking records for attendance, event participation, website traffic, and media impressions. Under his leadership, the museum presented its first outdoor exhibit in the United Kingdom and select U.S. cities. Naylor earned a Ph.D. from Curtin University in Perth, Australia. For the past several years he has welcomed VVWP to the museum where the project holds its annual Veterans Pen Celebration.

Veterans' Voices

Fall 2018 Vol. 66, No. 3

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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, Inc.) to address the physical and recreational 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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Donations

The work of VVWP, a 501 (c) (3) nonprofit, is made possible by donations from foundations, military organizations and individuals, with circulation assistance from the Department of Veterans Affairs.

Magazine Subscriptions

Cost for an annual subscription (three issues) is \$35. Veterans participating in the writing project, as well as educational institutions and libraries, qualify for special magazine rates as follows: \$10 per issue or \$25 per year. VA medical centers, writing aides and other volunteers who assist veterans with their writing receive complimentary copies of *Veterans' Voices*. Veterans, whose work appears in the current issue of the magazine, also receive one complimentary copy of the issue.

Audio Version

An audio version of *Veterans' Voices* provided by Audio-Reader Network is available for blind, visually impaired and print disabled veterans. The latest edition can be found at <http://reader.ku.edu/veteransvoices> and can also be heard on Lions Telephone Reader Service. For more information contact Audio-Reader at (785) 864-2686.

Submission Guidelines

Manuscripts, photographs and artwork submissions are accepted online or by U. S. mail. Follow the guidelines on page 66 of the magazine or as listed on the web site. Artwork submitted online should be at least 300 dpi and smaller than 3 MB.

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.

Veterans' Voices

Fall 2018 Vol. 66, No. 3

Guest Editorial: Veterans, Write Your Story!	2
<i>By Dr. Matthew Naylor</i>	
Mail Call	63
Thank You	64
Write for Veterans' Voices and Win a Prize	65
Submission Guidelines	66
Goodbye for Now	67

Prose

The Night John Came to Visit	7
<i>By Matt Davison</i>	
A New Trick for an Old Veteran	8
<i>By Mel Brinkley</i>	
Captain Jack	9
<i>By James William Miller</i>	
Why Ships Are Called She	11
<i>By J. Allen Whitt</i>	
Sweet Kill	11
<i>By Mark Andres Richards</i>	
Heaven Is Real	14
<i>By Colleen Stanhouse</i>	
A Letter from Mom Although She Has Passed On	14
<i>By Lawrence E. Rahn</i>	
Spirit Sister	15
<i>By Richard Wangard</i>	
Project Healing Waters Saved My Life	16
<i>By Harold L. Watters</i>	
Serving My Dad Breakfast	17
<i>By Dale Brian Hall</i>	
PA-RADE, REST!	18
<i>By G.E. Murray</i>	
Last Thoughts	19
<i>By Tony James Craidon</i>	
My Granddaughter Visited	21
<i>By Samuel J. Hall</i>	
The Love of War	22
<i>By Samuel J. Hall</i>	
A Letter to the President	22
<i>By Albert A. Hernandez</i>	
What America Means to Me	24
<i>By Kenneth Harvey</i>	

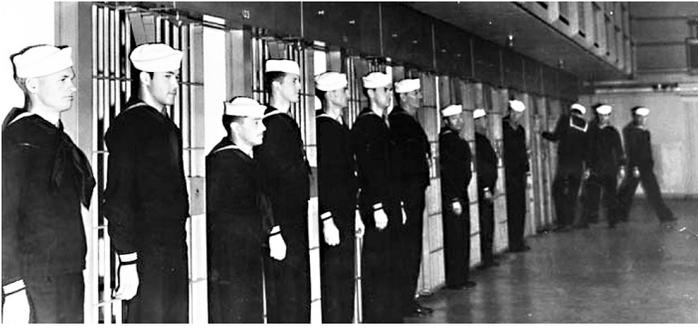
The Sandman Cometh	24
<i>By Scott Hubbartt</i>	
Martial Arts, Reentry	24
<i>By David Cahn</i>	
The Orderly Room Guy	26
<i>By Harold (Hal) Fulton</i>	
Awestruck	26
<i>By Richard Wangard</i>	
Old Toy	27
<i>By Deborah C. Welch</i>	
The Old Rocking Chair	28
<i>By Kay Baluta</i>	
Raw Recruit	28
<i>By G.E. Murray</i>	
Semper Fi: From a FMF Corpsman	29
<i>By Albert A. Hernandez</i>	
Life Is Short	30
<i>By Steven Carver Lambert</i>	
I Thought We Could Chat	30
<i>By James William Miller</i>	
Four Walls and Wire All Around	31
<i>By Lawrence E. Rahn</i>	
The Olive Tree - A Symbol of Life	31
<i>By John Muza</i>	

Poetry

Becoming a Hero	32
<i>By Samantha Jane Kinzer</i>	
Oh, Come All Ye Faithful	32
<i>By John Bradley</i>	
55-Year High School Reunion Presentation	33
<i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>	
Power of the Pen	34
<i>By Dan Yates</i>	
Ghost Fighters in the Sky	34
<i>By CJ Reeves</i>	
The Autumn Leaf	34
<i>By Peter Rompf</i>	
A Whole Sand Dollar	35
<i>By Daryl Eigen</i>	
Charon	35
<i>By Andrew Napier</i>	

Bosnia	36	There Are New Politicians on the Scene	
<i>By Edward W. Luzadder Jr.</i>		That Make No Sense	42
The Squirrels and Bonaparte	36	<i>By Charles Sturges</i>	
<i>By Judith Sweet Guittar</i>		Merry Christmas	42
In His Dreams	36	<i>By Kenny C. Trujillo</i>	
<i>By Kimberly Green</i>		Stand Up, Young Soldier	43
Into the Autumn Season	37	<i>By Jason Kirk Bartley</i>	
<i>By John E. Jones</i>		War Story #202: Prayer of the SVIED?	43
Dance of the Leaves	37	<i>By Paul David Adkins</i>	
<i>By David Samson</i>		The Right Touch	43
Thanksgiving Day	37	<i>By Scott Sjostrand</i>	
<i>By John E. Jones</i>		The Answer	44
Hey You	37	<i>By Richard Wangard</i>	
<i>By Helen Anderson Glass</i>		Freedom's Wagon	44
Here Is a Funny Poem	37	<i>By Douglas Pederson</i>	
<i>By David Samson</i>		Christmas in a Small Town	45
Point Man	38	<i>By Daniel Yates</i>	
<i>By Phil Hosier</i>		Empty	45
Why Should I Write?	38	<i>By Dennis Silas</i>	
<i>By Dennis Silas</i>		Making Choices	45
"Twas the Night Before Christmas	38	<i>By Clinton Jarrett</i>	
<i>By Richard Wangard</i>		The Smell of Horses	46
An Oasis of Peace	39	<i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	
<i>By Dannie Lee Baldwin Jr.</i>		Tomorrow...I Promise	46
The Eagle	39	<i>By Linda McKinnis</i>	
<i>By Daniel Adjei</i>		Fine Navy Day	46
I Smell Bacon	39	<i>By Scott Lehman</i>	
<i>By Mel Brinkley</i>		Lost	47
Chalk Spinet On	39	<i>By Billie Dee Johnston</i>	
<i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>		A Letter to My Father	47
Chinese Philosophy of the Han Dynasty	40	<i>By Sean Richards</i>	
<i>By John Bradley</i>		Deep Inside an Injured Soldier	47
How I Feel About the American Flag	40	<i>By Jacob Jay Copenhaver</i>	
<i>By Charles Sturges</i>		These Mountains	47
Ladies and Gentlemen,	40	<i>By Christine Rose Hazuka</i>	
<i>By Paul David Adkins</i>		Kill, Kill, Kill 'Em All	48
Tapestry	40	<i>By Nicholas Lopez</i>	
<i>By Rickey L. Bennett</i>		Searching for Life After the Army	48
Oblivion Express	41	<i>By Jacob Jay Copenhaver</i>	
<i>By Anthony Kambeitz</i>		Thank You for Your Service	48
Stranded	41	<i>By Chad M. Gaydos</i>	
<i>By Scott Lehman</i>		What's Wrong With America?	48
The Broken Vessel	42	<i>By Karen A. Green</i>	
<i>By Sanford Tollette</i>		Wishful Thinking	49
Dissent	42	<i>By Arvell L. Duckworth</i>	
<i>By Allen Burns</i>		Christmas Brings a Gift of Peace	50
The Factory	42	<i>By Anthony Coccozza</i>	
<i>By Kamal Bowen</i>		Graduation Day	50
		<i>By Daniel Paicopulos</i>	

I Am That I Am 50 <i>By Rodney Robinson</i>	Survivor 58 <i>By Mark A. Aguayo</i>
I Know What This Is All About 51 <i>By Conrad Webley</i>	In This Place 58 <i>By Clive Livingston Brown</i>
I'm Sorry 51 <i>By Jill Marie Baker</i>	In These Moments 59 <i>By Charles S. Parnell</i>
Listen to Our Veterans' Voices 51 <i>By Helen Anderson Glass</i>	Limbus Patrum 59 <i>By Nicholas Lopez</i>
Reflections of a Soldier 51 <i>By Penny Lee Deere</i>	Missing You 59 <i>By Tanya R. Whitney</i>
Our Neighbor Boy 52 <i>By Stu Carlson</i>	O God 59 <i>By William L. Snead</i>
She Was One of Us 52 <i>By Rosalie Cooper</i>	The Defender 60 <i>By Rosalie Cooper</i>
The Boy From Roy and Marge's Store 52 <i>By Mel D. Carney</i>	The Angel Christmas Eve 60 <i>By Anthony Cocozza</i>
The Coup 53 <i>By Chad M. Gaydos</i>	It's Still There. It Doesn't Hurt 60 <i>By Peter Rompf</i>
To the Nurses of the Dallas VA Cardiac Intensive Care Unit 53 <i>By Sean Richards</i>	The Tear 61 <i>By Robert John Valonis</i>
Life Outside 53 <i>By James Carlton Benn</i>	The Final Admittance 61 <i>By Charles S. Parnell</i>
Vanishing Point 54 <i>By K. W. Peery</i>	The Judge 61 <i>By William L. Snead</i>
Winter Show 54 <i>By Robert Levasseur</i>	Would You Recognize Jesus? 62 <i>By Karen A. Green</i>
America's Honor Roll 54 <i>By CJ Reeves</i>	Crossroads 62 <i>By Diane Wasden</i>
Warrior Strength 54 <i>By Kimberly Green</i>	
Dog Tags 55 <i>By Brendon O. Smith</i>	
Flying for Fun 55 <i>By Walter A. Wheat</i>	
I Am No Angel, But I Am Me 56 <i>By Diane Wasden</i>	
MOM 56 <i>By Clinton Jarrett</i>	
I might as well go... 56 <i>By Frank X. Mattson</i>	
On the Front 57 <i>By Douglas Pederson</i>	
The Flag 57 <i>By Scott Sjostrand</i>	
Circus 57 <i>By Tim Segrest</i>	
Lord, Show Me 57 <i>By Clive Livingston Brown</i>	



**DAVA, ARLINGTON-FAIRFAX CHAPTER 10 AWARD
1ST PRIZE**

The Night John Came to Visit

*By Matt Davison
— San Pedro, CA*

Although I had been inside the Federal Correctional Institution at Terminal Island many times, it was always during the day. Coming into the institution at night was surreal, kind of like going to a night baseball game. You could see clear across the north yard back to where men were playing handball or basketball, and you could see people moving around in their lit cells. The chaplain who met us at the front entrance escorted John and me into the chapel where chairs had already been arranged. A podium and live microphone were also in place. Incarcerated veterans were already lining up to sign in for tonight's presentation. In the end, 60 veterans signed in and took their seats.

It was February 4, 1967, when Captain John Fer along with six other airmen were dispatched in a Douglas EB66C Skywarrior over North Vietnam. About 40 miles from the China border, in Bac Thai Province, the aircraft was hit by two missiles from a mobile tracking station, breaking the aircraft in half. Three of the Airmen, including John Fer, were captured. The remains of two others were returned, and one still remains missing. Bleeding from shrapnel wounds and dressed only in shorts and undershirt, John was at first afraid that the prevailing winds might have taken him into China, from where he would never emerge. Fortunately, that was not the case. Forty-five minutes after touch down, John noticed crowds of people tracking him and waving aged rifles. Marched by the militia along paths lined with peasants holding sickles, he came to a building which was the village leader's house where a picture of Uncle Ho hung. John breathed a sigh of relief, realizing that he had not been blown into China after all. Chants of "war criminal" and "air pirate" filled the air for hours until a truck with John's navigator inside pulled up and drove the two to Hanoi. It was February, and it was cold.

An interrogator called "the Eagle" came into the room where John sat waiting. The Eagle asked John the name of his unit. John

responded with name, rank and serial number. He was smacked in the face. The Eagle asked a second time what John's unit was. Again, John replied with his name, rank and serial number. Again, he was smacked in the face, only harder this time. After a third attempt by the Eagle failed, John was handcuffed and his arms stretched out behind him and strapped in such a way that all circulation was cut off. The Eagle left the room and John called out, "Okay, I'll tell you the unit." The Eagle returned, untied John, and the circulation rushed back. "What was your unit?" "I can't tell you that," John answered and was back in the straps again. John later learned that the key to avoiding painful torture was to give false information. But, you had to remember what information you gave because the interrogators took notes.

B-52 bombing runs from Guam frightened the North Vietnamese captors, and provided some breathing space for John and the other POWs. During this time, while in isolation, John began a prayer ritual. From a small piece of rope, he formed a rosary, which became part of a daily ritual of pacing five steps up and back while praying early in the morning, exercising, and praying again. For the North Vietnamese, isolation was key to breaking down allegiance to your country. For the POWs, communications would be instrumental in maintaining their sanity. A 5x5 alphabet matrix was developed, in which communications could be transmitted by tapping on the wall. If the sent message was understood, two taps followed. If not understood, a series of taps followed. It was a simple, yet ingenious way to communicate. On Sundays, during his four months of solitary, church services began camp-wide with a tap on the wall signaling individual recitation of the Lord's Prayer followed by the Pledge of Allegiance while facing east toward the United States. Before sleep, tapping would spell out "Good Night, God Bless You" (actually spelled out GN, GBU).

Another key to remaining sane was mental exercise. Learning aerodynamics or a foreign language were great ways to maximize quiet time. One POW memorized the 350 names of his fellow POWs alphabetically. John learned Spanish, French, German and Russian during his stay. It was important to occupy your mind. Feeding the spirit was also vital. Each religious denomination had a chaplain. John McCain was the Presbyterian chaplain. Every Sunday, there would be church services with an opening prayer, reading of scriptures that were memorized, and hymns that were written by a POW and distributed to all who wished to take part.

In six years, John was only allowed to receive four letters. No packages or photos were given him. A solid spiritual life, faith in God, and exercise kept him in balance. In 1973, it was over.

Speaking directly to his captive audience, John reminded them that they had a lot in common. They had served this nation, accepted their fate, and would move forward in their lives. He reminded the audience that he and they had many parallels in their life experiences. And he reminded them that we are all sacred, made in God's image.

One Navy vet happened to have served with a Captain who John knew quite well. Another vet asked if he was free to talk while in captivity. John told them absolutely not; the code was their only form of communication. The question of one-on-one psychological tactics was raised, and John spoke about the interrogators trying to pit one POW against another. After an interrogation took place, the POW being interrogated tapped out the questions to other POWs so that they could be prepared with their responses. Asked if the survivors held reunions, John replied that they are held every five years. Many are held in Southern California, but they are also held in Washington, D.C., in a Vietnamese restaurant. If you ask John what he missed most during his captivity, his answer would be the sound of children's laughter. It's fitting that John would become an elementary school teacher, surrounded by the laughter of children every day.

In terms of advice to the veterans incarcerated in attendance, John advised them to assert their own individuality, stay strong in the face of adversity, and find the balance between the spiritual and the intellectual in their lives. He urged the men not to get caught up in self-pity, but to realize that there are many who are far worse off than they. He recalled a moment that he referred to as a miracle, when he was bound in such a way that he thought of himself as a basketball. And he remembers a guard picking him up like a basketball and tossing him into the corner of the room. In excruciating pain, John said a prayer to the Blessed Virgin Mary. When he finished, the guard returned, untied John, and left the room.

The veterans incarcerated referred to John as a hero, which he quickly dismissed, and every one of the 60 in attendance came up for a handshake, hug or autograph. Then, one of the prisoners asked if John would lead them in prayer, which he did without hesitation. The veterans of FCI Terminal Island will be speaking about the time when John Fer came to visit for a long time to come.

**DAVA, ARLINGTON-FAIRFAX CHAPTER 10 AWARD
2ND PRIZE**

A New Trick for an Old Veteran

*By Mel Brinkley
VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ*

About eight years ago, a friend of mine asked me, "Can an old dog learn a new trick?"

I smacked my lips with anticipation. "Speaking of old dogs," I said cheerily, "I had a conversation with the owner of a greyhound the other day."

My friend made a low growl, "Yeah?"

"Yeah. He said his dog had retired from racing."



Joe lapped up his coffee and snarled, "Was the greyhound too old? Is that why it retired?"

"No, the owner told me his dog was not too old when she retired."

Joe howled, "Did the dog get hurt racing?"

"No, the owner told me his dog never got hurt racing."

My friend barked, "Well, I guess this greyhound wasn't winning any races, then. That must be the reason it retired."

"No, according to the owner, his greyhound had won races right up to the day she retired."

My friend wolfed down the rest of his coffee, banged his mug on the table, and howled, "Well, why on earth did the greyhound retire then?"

"The owner told me that his greyhound quit racing when she discovered that she had been chasing fake rabbits."

My friend shook his shaggy head violently like he was trying to shake out a bad memory and then stared at me. Not getting a laugh, I sat there hangdog-like for the rest of our time together, chewing over the possibility that maybe my aspirations to be a stand-up comedian might not pan out.

The next week, my friend asked, "You know that joke you told me the other day? I guess it was a joke, right?"

I answered cautiously, "Yeah."

"Well, I've been thinking about what you said and I guess I've wasted a lot of my life chasing fake rabbits."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," he said. "When I got back from Nam I made it a point to stay pretty well numbed up, as you know."

Trying not to sound judgmental or sanctimonious, I offered as gently as I could, "You think it's time for you to learn a new trick?"

Joe wagged his head up and down and then banged his coffee mug on the linoleum-covered table at our booth.

Soon after that, Joe joined an AA support group, found a sponsor, and got clean and sober.

My old friend died this year. Agent Orange finally finished the job of killing him, as it had started almost 50 years ago in the jungles of Vietnam. At his funeral, I had the privilege of telling his story: how an old Vietnam veteran learned a new trick.

Author Note: This is a true story.



**DAV, ERNESTINE SCHUMANN-HEINK CHAPTER 2:
MILITARY SERVICE AWARD
1ST PRIZE**

Captain Jack

*By James William Miller
VA Medical Center – Topeka, KS*

I was getting lackadaisical about my Post Office job. I sit at a case and throw mail from a tray for eight hours a day. Most of the day, I sit at my case and daydream that maybe I can get a job with an airline where I would fly from state to state, or country to country, experiencing something new and exciting each time out.

I think to myself, "How about working on a cruise ship?" with adventure on the water and a girl at every port. Now, that's a job worth waking up to every morning. After work today, I'm going to the employment office and make my dreams come true.

At the employment office, there weren't any airline jobs like I wanted. I didn't want to load the planes — I wanted to fly in them. I didn't see any cruise ship jobs either, but I did see this one job advertised for working with a shipping company. "EARN \$60 A DAY," it started out. "Work on a tugboat that pulls barges. No expenses, meals free on board. AVAILABLE NOW: 30-day assignments. HIRING IMMEDIATELY. Thirty days out and 30 days off between assignments. Paid for a full 30 days."

It wasn't my cruise ship, but it was a start. No expenses, \$1,800 a month, and a 30-day vacation every other month. I thought, "This job sounds great. Tomorrow I'll apply." The next day, I called in

sick to the Post Office and went to the shipping company to apply for the job.

"May I help you?" the receptionist asked. "Yes," I said, "I read a poster that said you have some positions available. I'm interested in applying for a job."

"Of course," she said. "Fill out this application and have a seat. Someone will be with you shortly. Help yourself to some coffee, if you'd like. One of our boats brought it back from Columbia. It's simply delicious." "Wow! They have boats going to Columbia." I was hooked. I simply had to get this job!

The interview went well. The position they had open was for a cabin mate. The interviewer explained this was an entry-level position. He asked if I could go to one of their company doctors that same day and take a physical. If I passed, I was hired. They would get in touch with me by phone. I took the physical that day.

Three days later, the interviewer called to tell me I had passed the physical. "Do you still want the job?" the interviewer asked.

"Yes sir, most definitely!" I said.

"We have a boat leaving in four days. Be at the dock at 0530 hours. You'll meet the rest of the crew. The boat leaves at 0600 hours. You'll need some steel-toed boots, and a good pair of gloves. Bring us the receipts if you have to buy them, and we'll reimburse you. Also, bring some warm clothing; it gets cold on the waters at night. Good luck, and have a safe trip."

I applied for, and was granted, emergency extended leave without pay from the Post Office. I don't remember what story I made up to get the leave, but it must have been convincing. I know I didn't tell them that I needed the time to chase a dream. A dream I had thought up while sorting their mail.

On the dock that first morning, I met my fellow crew members. They were some of the meanest, biggest, roughest-looking guys I had ever seen, especially the captain. "Captain Jack is my name," he told me as he engaged my hand in a handshake that almost broke my finger bones. "This is my first mate, Martinez, and these are my two cooks, Rudy and Roscoe, and this is the other cabin mate, Treetop." Treetop was every bit of six feet, six inches tall.

Captain Jack explained to me my duties as a cabin mate. I worked two six-hour shifts every day, and we worked seven days a week. The shifts were called "watches." My watches were from 1200 hours until 1800 hours, and then from 0000 hours (midnight) until 0600 hours.

Suddenly, it occurred to me that the \$60.00-a-day broke down to \$5.00 an hour, and the full 30 days' pay added up to a full 30 days work. He showed me where Treetop and I bunked. Treetop and I worked alternating shifts. He showed me the kitchen, which was called the "galley," and told me that the cooks worked alternating shifts too. There would always be a cook present in the galley. We

ordered our meals from a menu, just like in a restaurant, and we could always have seconds.

That morning consisted of tying barges together, and then hooking them to the tugboat which, by the way, was named "Agony." We tied the barges together with steel cable. We then untied the barges from the wharf (that's what I heard them call the dock). They were tied up with thick heavy ropes attached to tiers along the dock. We had to wear our gloves when handling the ropes because threads were sticking out all over the massive ropes. The gloves protected us from rope burn. When we had untied the ropes, we tossed them back on the barges, and each rope felt like it weighed a ton. When we finished, Treetop signaled to Captain Jack. Captain Jack sounded Agony's horn and we were on our way.

My watch didn't start until 12 p.m. At 11 a.m., I went to the galley to get something to eat. The galley was small: in it was a half-round counter, behind which was a stove and a large refrigerator-freezer. In front of the counter were three bar stools. I sat down on one of the stools. Roscoe was on duty.

I ordered a steak, a baked potato, asparagus, and a slice of lemon meringue pie. Roscoe put a plate in front of me the size of a platter. "How do you want your steak cooked?" he asked. "Medium-rare," I said. "Two medium-rare steaks coming up," he said. "I'll cook you two, because these steaks are so delicious, I'll bet you won't settle for one." He was right: the steaks were delicious. I ate both of them, plus two slices of pie.

"Where you from, greenhorn?" he asked when I was eating. "I'm from Chicago" I told him. We were sailing the Chicago River. ""They run out of jobs in the city?" he asked. "No," I said. "I saw this job advertised and I thought it might be exciting." "So did I when I was a young'un like you," he said. "I thought I was going to sail the seven seas, see the world, and have a girl in every port. But, look at me now — been a cook for 14 years, and I ain't been past Detroit yet. Did Dolly, the receptionist, put that 'coffee-from-Columbia' line on you? Yeah, she put that on me, too, 14 years ago."

After that meal, I wanted to lie down for a minute. I went to my cabin and lay down on the bed. Suddenly, I felt dizzy; bed was swaying from side to side. My stomach felt queasy. I was sick! I ran up to the deck, hung my head over the side, and regurgitated my delicious two-steak dinner into the river. I don't know if I had eaten too much or was just seasick.

On watch, every hour on the hour, we had to check the steel cables holding the barges together, the cargo, and the hook-up to the tugboat. We also had to stay on deck the entire watch. During daylight hours, watch wasn't so bad. I would stand on the deck with my foot propped up and watch the scenery. Every now and then, a fish jumped out of the water and submerged again. People along the shore would wave, or hold up a string of fish they had caught.

I could see Captain Jack on the navigation deck, steering Agony,



and I could hear voices and laughter coming from the galley. But at night, I felt horribly alone. There was a pitch-blackness surrounding me, a devastatingly piercing stillness broken abruptly by strange noises coming from the water and the shore. And then there was this presence I always felt at night when I went on my rounds, as if someone or something was following me.

I was constantly turning around quickly and shining my flashlight in all directions, only to see nothing. I turned around so quickly one night, the presence was so strong, that I slipped and almost fell overboard. I also imagined at night that something, maybe one of those noises, was going to reach out and grab my leg and pull me into the water. I dreaded the night watch!

During the day, while riding between rounds with my foot propped up, I did a lot of thinking. I thought about what my dad had told me, "Son, your Post Office job pays good money, it's a secure government job, and it has great benefits. What do you really know about that shipping company job? I think you're just sowing your wild oats."

The job wasn't so bad, except for being scared out of my wits at night. Maybe I'd adjust to that. It wasn't continuous hard work, even though it seemed that everything we handled on the boat weighed over 50 pounds — even the flashlight was heavy. The only time we did any real physical labor was tying and untying the barges, especially when we exchanged barges mid-river with other tugboats.

Then there was going through the locks. We had to wait while the water was raised to our level before we could pass through. That was a different experience. I did like the freedom I felt being away from the hustle and bustle of the workday world of 9 to 5. I could even stomach Captain Jack, who liked to bellow orders at his crew.

One day when we had come alongside a dock to unload, I was trying to lasso a tier from a barge. I kept missing. Captain Jack became furious. "Somebody teach that rookie how to throw a rope before that barge drifts out to sea!" he shouted at the top of his voice.

"The hell with him," I thought. Who did he think I was? Bronco Billy?

I thought about the pay. Was \$1,800 a month a lot of money? I had to pay rent, utilities, a car note, car insurance, and groceries. Could I pay all that and still have enough money for other things? Where was this job leading – for a cook like Roscoe, a first mate like Martinez, or a captain like Captain Jack?

Would this job give me the experience to eventually work on my glamorous cruise ship? Would I follow this through against all odds, or would I go back to my safe and secure government job until I retired? I didn't have any of the answers. All I knew was that when we docked, and this trip was over, I'd have 30 days to think about it.



**DAV, ERNESTINE SCHUMANN-HEINK CHAPTER 2:
MILITARY SERVICE AWARD
2ND PRIZE**

Why Ships Are Called She

By J. Allen Whitt

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

After two and a half years of Vietnam service aboard the aircraft carrier USS Coral Sea (CVA-43), I understand why ships are called "She." Even though Coral Sea was not a living thing, I felt she had become so. She had a distinct personality, quirks and moods. She seemed capable of sadness, exultation and indifference, as well as dashing boldness, pride and unpredictability. She housed us, fed us, carried us across oceans and kept us safe. She took us through a massive typhoon with 130 miles per hour winds that sent gray 40-foot waves spilling over the flight deck.

She was easily recognizable from a distance and could entrance us as she gracefully slipped through still seas, cutting symmetric bow-waves that spread across the surface. In time, the ship became mine, and I fell in love with her. Long after I deserted her, I listened for news of her, and felt that I still knew her intimately. A sailor's attachment to his ship is frequently strong and abiding.

The attachment is also to fellow crew members, a movable community of those who live, eat, sleep, face dangers and work to keep the ship and her mission going. All sailors, from those who first dared to venture out onto the waters, to those who sail

in today's technological marvels, are members of a family with shared knowledge, experience and skills. They understand the power, mystery and appeal of the sea.

In combat, or when a ship and her crew have suffered a great tragedy, this attachment to ship and crew may be greater still. The battleship USS Arizona (BB-39) has been at the bottom of Pearl Harbor since 1941. When it was sunk, it took 1,177 men with her, most entombed inside the ship, beyond rescue. Arizona was righted, her superstructure removed, and her guns salvaged for use on other Navy ships. No longer commissioned, the ship still flies the American flag. She is considered a war grave.

When visitors stand on the Arizona memorial, every few minutes they can see dark blobs of fuel oil escape from the mangled and corroded hull of the ship. Through the transparent water, the blobs slowly bubble to the surface of the harbor, and spread out in a sheen over the water. To those who know the story of Arizona and her men, these small, seemingly insignificant drops of oil, are known as Black Tears.

Few Arizona survivors are still alive. Occasionally, after visitors have left the Arizona Memorial for the day, the Navy takes the family of an Arizona survivor out to the Memorial in a Navy launch. A ceremony is conducted for the deceased veteran, and an urn carrying his ashes is given to a Navy diver. The diver swims down to the ship, places the urn inside the hull, and leaves it. More than 30 Arizona survivors have been buried in this way.

Seven decades later, these once-young sailors have rejoined their ship and their shipmates under the now peaceful waters of Pearl Harbor.

**VFW AUXILIARY, DEPT. OF KANSAS
AWARD**

Sweet Kill

By Mark Andres Richards

— Chandler, AZ

"I'm sitting in a jump-seat on the port side of a Sea Stallion helicopter, flying high and fast over Helmand Province, Afghanistan. I reach up and shove the headphone buds deeper into my ears. The noise of the aircraft is impossibly loud, and a high-pitched mechanical whine still throbs in my head despite my best efforts. Hydraulic fluid drips from the mass of tubes and hoses above me. I watch the droplets swirl and spatter on me and around me, dark red like movie blood. Jeff, another contractor, sits next to me. He fixes generators. Jeff tracks my gaze, and leans in until our Kevlar helmets touch. He has to scream to be heard over the din, "That's actually a good sign! If it ever stops leaking, that's when you need to worry! Means all the fluid finally leaked out!"

He cackles and slaps my shoulder. I just nod my head. Two Marines sit across from me. One is a young captain, the other a middle-aged first sergeant. Twenty years of military service and a decade of continuous war have chiseled the features into a permanent angry mask. He points to my chest and leans in to say something to the captain. I can't hear what he's saying, but I look down at the front of my body armor. The only thing of note is a plastic earplug case, with a very worn set of crossed cannons on the side, hanging from a loop on my plate carrier. (The insignia of the field artillery is crossed cannons.) Then I get it. I see a patch with crossed cannons on the assault pack between the first sergeant's feet. He's a fellow artillery man, a Red Leg like I am. Like I used to be, I remind myself. I'm just a Navy contractor now, no longer a warrior. I fix things now, instead of killing them.

I crank up the volume on my iPod, and the machine-gunner manning the .50 cal on the back loading ramp appears to gyrate in time to the music as he scans for targets. It's a song by Metric, "Gold Guns Girls." I laugh out loud at the irony as I imagine that this is the music video and I'm in the middle of it. I'm happy, almost euphoric. How am I getting paid to do this?

I've only been in Afghanistan for three days, and this is my first "site visit." I'm a civilian field service representative, specializing in ISR assets. ISR stands for Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance. I'm headed to Marine patrol base Geronimo. The Marines are tough, but even they don't like to go on patrol without eyes and ears in the sky, if they don't have to. Unfortunately, someone broke their expensive toys, so they sent me out to fix them. This may be my first time in Afghanistan, but not my first rodeo. I escorted convoys in Iraq, so all of this feels vaguely familiar. The Sea Stallion banks sharply, snapping me out of my reverie. We're descending, I guess we have arrived. It's already late afternoon when we touch down in a giant brown swirl of dust. I scramble out the back with the handful of other passengers. Jeff goes his own way, and I trudge through the loose gravel toward a plywood building sprouting a bunch of antennas. I cleverly deduce that it must be the TOC (Tactical Operations Center). As I start toward the building, a hand grabs my shoulder. It's the Marine First Sergeant. He stabs a finger at the crossed cannons on my chest. "What's your affiliation?"

"I was Field Artillery for six years, Top," I reply.

He eyes me suspiciously. "FDC or gun line?"

"Gun line!" I proclaim, with a bit of mock indignation thrown in. "Em-one-niner-eights!" The First Sergeant smiles. "Towed howitzers! That's where it's at! Ever fire the triple-seven?"

"No, they entered service right when I left," I reply.

"Well, we have a battery of them here. Come on down and pull tail. We'd love to have you!" he says. "Hell yes! Thanks, Top!" I shake his hand, and head off towards the TOC, honored that he offered to let me fire one of his guns.



It's getting dark fast. The dim red orb of the sun is dropping out of the sky like it has somewhere better to be. It probably does. I'm walking around, looking for the TOC entrance, when I spot the big metal platform and the Aerostat. The Aerostat is just a giant helium balloon that can carry a few hundred pounds of really expensive surveillance gear, really high, for a really long time. If it's working, it should be way the hell up in the sky, all the time. Not sitting on the platform, six feet off the gravel. The control center (GCS) for the aerostat is just a dozen meters away. I never make it to the TOC, because a man in cargo pants and a Metallica shirt walks out of the GCS and spots me. It's not a stretch for him to assume I'm there to fix his broken stuff, since almost every other human on the patrol base is clearly a Marine, and I'm clearly not. He trots over to me and introduces himself, "Hey, I'm Gathan, the site lead. You the FSR?"

"Yup, that's me. Mark."

Gathan shakes my hand, "Well, Mark, the commander's all over my butt. He hasn't sent out any patrols for the past two days because this area is crazy hot and he wants full situational awareness. He knows the Taliban is taking full advantage of their new-found freedom of movement, and it's driving him nuts not knowing what they're up to."

"Hey, I get it. That's why I'm here!" I respond. Then Gathan launches into a rapid-fire description of everything he has tried for troubleshooting. I know he's under the gun, but I need to do my job my way. I hold up a hand, interrupting him, "I know you did a lot of stuff, and I appreciate that. But I have a process. Just let me do my thing for a bit." Gathan trails off. Just like that, he doesn't like me. Since I'm the jerk now, I guess I better get things fixed to redeem myself. I immediately go to work, and quickly discover that there is no communication with the aerostat. Nada. Zilch. No data, no video, nothing. If you have never had to troubleshoot anything, I'm about to give away the most closely-kept secret of technicians: 99 percent of the time, it's a physical connection. I start working inside the GCS, and I check every single connection. I work my way outside, to the fiber-optic connector. Still all good. It's full dark now, and this little patrol base adheres to strict light discipline. I'm forced to use a dim red light, so I get on my knees and inspect every inch of the pencil-thick fiber optic cable running from the GCS to the aerostat platform. Still nothing!

I sit for a moment on the edge of the platform, getting my mental bearings, and after some consideration, I decide to crawl under the platform to where the fiber optic cable goes up into the base. The platform has a stationary portion on the ground, and on top of that, there's a free-spinning part that can rotate with the wind. That was it! The fiber got caught in the rotating portion of the platform, and tangled so bad that it had broken. Found the problem! I race to the tents where the aerostat team stays, bursting through the door.

"Guys, your fiber is snapped! Grab another spool of tactical fiber and meet me at the platform!"

There was frantic activity for a while as they help me replace the fiber, I confirm communications with all the onboard systems, and then we launch the aerostat up into the inky blackness. Once we are at altitude, I take over the operator position in the GCS to make sure everything is working properly. It isn't. I spend a couple hours fixing various settings, and re-configuring the network. That's what happens when the team tries to troubleshoot before I get there. They break more stuff. Anyway, after a couple hours of tweaking things, the system is looking good. I study a map taped to the wall, noting some priority grid coordinates. These are known trouble spots, where the Taliban like to either do bad things or prepare to do bad things. I doubt that anyone outside the wire saw the aerostat launch, so we might have the element of surprise on our side. I set the system to automatically scan the preset trouble spots. There's nothing for a while, and I start to get sleepy from the monotony and the fact that it's about 0200. Then, as I sit staring at the monitors with fatigue-glazed eyes, I see something suspicious. Looks like a couple dudes doing something nefarious in an intersection of two major roads. I take manual control of the system and zoom in for a closer look. I see two guys digging in the middle of the road, and then I see one of them man-handling an object into the hole. It's a goddamn artillery shell. With wires sticking out of it. There's a third guy nearby, pacing around. I guess he's the lookout. I can't believe it. I use the laser range finder and get a good grid on their position, then I pick up the phone to the TOC.

"Get me the battle captain."

Just then, Gathan enters the GCS to check on the system. He gestures and mouths, "What the hell is going on?" I point to the video on the screen, and his eyes go wide when he sees the bad guys burying an IED.

On the phone, I tell the battle captain what I'm watching. I'm surprised when he doesn't want to come see for himself. Instead, he tells me to keep eyes on the target and he'll call back in two minutes. I answer on the first ring, eyes glued to the events unfolding on the screen in front of me. The bad guys have two more artillery shells to bury, and they're working tirelessly. The Battle Captain tells me that he has a sniper team in the area, and they just confirmed what I reported. "So, are they going to take them out?" I ask.

"Nope, the sniper team says they can't take them out cleanly, so you are. With a little help. I'm patching you through to the triple-seven battery. Are you confident you have a good grid?" I check the coordinates against the physical map. "Yes, sir!"

"Okay, send it!" He orders. I give the grid coordinates to the FDC (Fire Direction Control), and they do their calculations. I'm still on the phone when I hear them call a fire mission to the gun line. Moments later, I both hear and feel the BOOM of the mighty 155 mm howitzer firing.

Suddenly, the thermal infra-red image on the screen blooms and goes completely white. As the fireball recedes, an entire human leg arcs through the air, tumbling lazily across the screen from right to left. They're gone! The outgoing artillery impacted perfectly, setting off the shells that the would-be bombers were placing, and that leg I saw was probably the largest body part left. I feel an incredible rush of adrenaline. My body is buzzing, and I'm completely elated. I probably just saved the lives of some Marines, or innocent civilians.

"Dude," Gathan says, "Sweet kill!" He gives me a fist-bump and tells me to go get some sleep. He's grinning, so I guess I redeemed myself. Gathan assures me that he's got the system covered for the rest of the shift, so I stumble out of the harsh glare of the GCS and into cold, pitch-black air with my heart still racing. Once outside, the elation evaporates. How did I go from fixing computer issues and adjusting video encoder settings, to killing people in the course of ten minutes? I just stand there for a while, waiting for my eyes to adjust. They never really do. I wander off to some corner of the patrol base, as far as I can get from any tents or buildings or people. I sit in the dirt, in the darkness. All energy leaves my body, and I feel limp and clammy. I let the cold sink into my bones, and a deep sadness swallows me up. I did the right thing. I know I did. I would do it the same way a thousand times if I had to. But that's just not a comfort right now. There's no joy in taking human life. As I start to shiver from the cold I say out loud, "Sweet Kill, Mark. Sweet Kill."



Heaven Is Real

*By Colleen Stanhouse
VA Medical Center – Memphis, TN*

Let me start with the facts. Before June of 2016, I questioned life and death a lot more than I do now. Many describe the face of God and his image as a dove, or ray of hope or light, but I can tell you firsthand it is the kind of peace that allowed my soul to rest completely free of worries.

I got extremely ill when I did not know that I had a kidney stone blocking my urine. The urine's inability to freely flow led to blood poisoning, and a very bad case of it. I died three times at Memphis VA Medical Center in June and over half of July 2016. I was sent to a nursing home afterward to get my strength back. I was so weak that I could not even get out of bed without assistance.

The first two times I nearly died, I barely remember anything, except feeling like my body had detached from my soul. The third I remember very well. They were calling a Code Blue in my room. I looked down and saw all the nurses and doctors working on me with their shock paddles. I saw myself leaving the room and floating upward. I saw a bright golden light, kind of like the rays of sun coming through a cloud. I never felt such peace before anywhere. I was happy, content and carefree, feeling like a child running toward the light. Never had I felt so loved before. God's angels do not have wings, they fly on faith. The inner peace is quite overwhelming. I felt so loved, and to this day, I have not found that same kind of peace.

The light draws you nearer. Everyone knows each other and talks without using a mouth. I cannot describe a soul to you; it's real and that you can believe. They say death is the end but for me, it felt like a beginning. I saw loved ones I longed to hold and talk to. Above me was layer upon layer of mansions. The Bible verse ran through my head, "In my house, there are many mansions, if not I would have told you so." The streets and mansions are gold to the eye and pleasing to see. I heard the voice of Jesus as I came to the golden ray and heard the voice of God telling me, "I am not finished with you, yet."

I suddenly fell back into my body and gasped for air after I heard my daughter calling, "Mama don't die; I need you!" To this day she checks my room to see if I am breathing. I tell her God is with us and everything will work out.

Heaven is real. I know this beyond a shadow of a doubt, in my soul. The peace and light draws you near. It's a peace that you will never feel on this earth. Keep your faith; you will never see anything like it here. Heaven is real!

A Letter from Mom Although She Has Passed On

*By Lawrence E. Rahn
VA Medical Center – Minneapolis, MN*

A rose, a beautiful flower; delicate, precious in every way conceivable! Showing God's intricate handy work displayed for all those admirers, to be dazzled by its beauty. Yes, he created the rose, especially for all those who express true love and joy for one another, although it blooms only for a brief time once plucked from the vine. Yet this flower seems to know its purpose in life and then it must end. The way God made all his creation. A time to be born and a time to die that is the way I created all life. This is the only way it must be for everything, old and young alike.

"Yes, my son; you never said, 'I love you, Mom' while I was with you on earth. Yet I know you do and always have. A rose for a lady, as you always say when you visit me. A gift from the heart. Thank you for thinking of me on that special day—for remembering loved ones. Even though you realize I'm no longer there. You still bring me a rose to lay upon my grave. You say a silent prayer for just the two of us to hear, with the Lord in between."

At the time, it wasn't in your nature to show your love to anyone. You kept everything bottled up inside you, which turned your blood to bitter ice, excusing yourself from the real world. That was one of the reasons keeping you from experiencing true love and happiness in your life. Although you desperately searched to find it, lonely as you were inside. Both Dad and I never realized how you felt, we should have seen the signs. I know you tried so desperately not to go there, but it was for you a one-way slippery slope to hell. With what little love and companionship you did find, the older you became the more inward you became, leaving an open wound to fester, becoming infected with everything you touched. Those cries! Yes, those cries for help that go without being heard. 'Save me please, someone! Please!' you often cried out.

"There were signs, but you kept them hidden well from the world and put on a front, leaving the impression there was nothing wrong with your life. Yes, all those years we had blinders on our eyes as far as your concerns. If only you would have come to us and explained how you felt. Then how could you with the gap a mile wide between us?"

"What's wrong with our oldest son Larry' we would have asked one another. He seems to be so different than our other five children." We would discuss this at length, then leave the discussion. Giving up on you as a lost cause, too hard to reach we told ourselves. Better to lose one than the rest of the family. Not

needing us, we felt you had all the answers for yourself and all you needed for your life.

"I do know this and want to explain to you my son. It's not too late to become that person you so desire! God heard your cries and picked you up when no one else would. He will give you a solid rock to stand on, so lean on him; his yoke is strong. Yes, you can be that Jonathan Livingstone Seagull you so desire. Yearning to be more than just ordinary. I've come today to tell you: God does have a plan for you, my son. In my eyes you are living it. Always remember: God loves you and so do I. Love always, MOM"



Spirit Sister

*By Richard Wangard
VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI*

Ever meet someone who is not related to you but thinks and feels the same way you do? It is very rare! I met someone like that in the most unusual way, over the telephone and through email. I don't even remember how I came across her contact information. It happened well over three years ago, now.

She has done nothing but help me, encourage me, provided solace, helped me advocate against veteran suicide, made me a better writer, provided helpful materials, and been a great long distance friend. She will always be my friend!

However, she is not just my friend, she is a friend to all veterans, no matter their era, age, sex, political persuasion or religion. She holds compassion, respect, caring empathy, and sympathy

in her heart like few people are able. And, then she spreads it nationwide for the betterment of humankind and those of us who served our nation, especially the ones with deep seated problems left over from doing the right thing and never giving up as we struggle day to day to find answers where there are none. So we write and share and relate through her hard work—her love for us. She constantly is loyal and goes above and beyond every day as she shows up at her post. She is my true hero: one who has accomplished much for this nation. She has given 15 years of service to all veterans and we don't know how many lives she may have saved.

I have nothing to give her except my deep thanks and respect, knowing there is nothing she really wants. She deserves the world on a platter, but is such a classy lady she would have none of that! She doesn't do what she does for any material purpose. Like many of us vets she just puts one foot in front of the other and says things like, "I was just doing my job."

When I worked for the VA, I would see the DD-214 of the vet who said that. I would see the bronze star with V device, Silver Star, CIBs, air medals, commendation awards, good conduct medals, as well as schools attended, including: airborne, ranger, sapper, sniper, pilot, and the list is endless. Just like her they had intellect! I can't compete with that, but I can write like she has taught me through her undying encouragement.

And so, many of the vets here wanted a tribute to her and I agreed to put it in final form. We presented it to her last year. (See Summer 2017 issue of *Veterans' Voices*.) She is the only person to receive this award and now we present her with a second one. We consider it the highest honor.

When a vet wins a second award for heroism that goes above and beyond, he or she doesn't receive another medal but a device that attaches to the original medal. Usually they are oak leaf clusters and they are few and far between in any branch of the armed services. It takes uncommon valor to earn such. The citation written describes how the recipient has earned the award. So, I will write a citation for this special person. I hope it will be published in *Veterans' Voices* and I would like to present it in person at the Veterans Pen Celebration this October in Kansas City. She has earned this honor many times over.

She is my Spirit Sister and her name is Pris Chansky. Pris has been the Administrative Director for VVWP for the past 15 years. She is responsible for the day to day operations of the organization. She is the voice of VVWP and *Veterans' Voices*. By the first of this year she plans to retire to pursue other interests. I, as well as all the other vets she has encouraged to write, want to say thank you! Truly, her heart is made of gold.

The citation for Pris, the veterans' Spirit Sister, follows. When the award is presented it will include a medal and ribbon, as well as the citation. It comes from all the veterans served by her

work, sacrifice, dedication, loyalty, and love of country. She is an incredible lady and there is no one more deserving of awards. Thank you, Pris Chansky!

The Veteran Order of the Compassionate Heart

Second Award

(With Ribbon and Gold Heart Attached)

Be it known to all on this date of October 27, 2018, Pris Chansky is hereby awarded for the second time the Veteran Order of the Compassionate Heart:

For unwavering loyalty to all veterans and for going above and beyond the call of duty, again! For the undying love she has shown to all branches of the Armed Forces.

For her dedication to easing the pain of those veterans who suffer from wounds both physical and mental. For her fighting spirit that never allows her to give up!

For her courage and bravery in overcoming insurmountable odds to keep *Veterans' Voices* alive and well.

And, for reaching out to make this world a better place.

Signed: Rich Wangard, Sgt. USAF, retired

September 8, 2018



AMERICAN LEGION, ELVIS PRESLEY POST 249
RESISTING SUICIDE AWARD

Project Healing Waters Saved My Life

By Harold L. Watters
VA Medical Center – Spokane, WA

I guess I should start by saying, I was admitted to the Seattle VA hospital in 2010 because I wanted to kill myself. I didn't want to see or talk to anyone. I was tired of living with the pain from my past.

At the hospital, I was trying to hide in the corner behind the bed when two male nurses told me I would be going to the dining room to "TIE FLIES." You can fill in the blank about what I was thinking. No way, I thought to myself.

"No, Harold, you will join the group," I was told by the nurses. They were with the Project Healing Waters, a program that takes disabled veterans and teaches them to tie flies and then gets them out on the water. Under pressure from the staff, I complied.

In the dining room, I was met by a really old guy who said he was from Healing Waters, and he was going to teach me how to tie flies and take me fishing. The table was full of feathers, hooks, and what looked like pipe cleaners. There were small stands around the table (tying vises).

I took a seat at one of the stands with my back to the wall, so I could see both doors. If this guy only knew what I was thinking when I showed up. I'm not sure if I thought I'd be able to be helped. I was angry, I didn't want to be there.

After what seemed like three hours, I finished my fly. "Congratulations, Harold, you just tied a Woolly Bugger. This fly is to look like a leach and it is my go-to fly." He continued, "I do want to know. What were you thinking about while you were tying?"

I had to admit I hadn't been in my head, because I had to concentrate on what I was doing. He told me, it looked good, and I would be going fishing with them that weekend. I was on suicide watch, and I wasn't sure if this was his way of making me feel better. But some way, he got me released and we went fishing. With that Woolly Bugger, I caught my first fish while fly fishing.

After a few weeks, I was sent home to Spokane where I started looking for Healing Waters in Spokane. It took me a few months, but finally I met with Norm Scott, the program leader for the area and started tying with the new group. Next thing I knew I was told four of our group were to go fishing with Trout TV, the ultimate destination fly fishing channel. Two of us went each day.

I went to Crab Creek, located in eastern Washington, and I was introduced to our guide for the day, G.L. Britton. He had leased a portion of the creek from the private property owner. It was untouched by the outside; no planted fish.

I learned so much that day. He took great care of us, even though I made a fool of myself sitting in the creek before the camera was rolling! Yet, I was the first dressed in waders and fishing vest. Holding my fly rod, G.L. told me to come down to the creek and get started. He said just cast about 30 feet out toward some bubbles. I took my rod and casted. The line went straight up and came straight down around me.

Not knowing what to do, I tried to get out of the way, but I was standing in ankle-deep muck so my feet stayed there and I ended up on my butt. I did okay my second time fly fishing.

Next, I was invited on a trip to Montana with Ed Nicholson, the founder of Project Healing Waters. We first fished the Clark Fork River and then moved on to Ovando, Mont., where the entire town came out to meet us and get us fishing on the Blackfoot River. As a Vietnam veteran, I had never been treated so well.

I continued with the program. I noticed that veterans in the Peninsula Healing Waters program had tied a Purple Heart fly. I wanted one and would pay for it. But when I contacted them, I was told it was made by veterans for veterans and there would be no cost. I decided that once I was "good enough," I would tie Purple Heart flies for other Purple Heart vets.

I asked for permission to tie them, and got it. So far, I have tied more than 275 Purple Heart flies. I have presented them to other veterans who have earned and received the Purple Heart.

I have gone full circle. After being taught how to tie a Woolly Bugger, I now teach and tie with veterans in the Spokane VA hospital, helping them fight their demons and find a new way to deal with their dark areas. It helped me. If I can help one individual, I am satisfied.

The bottom line is; I do this for me. If I had not been "escorted" to the dining room that day to tie a fly, I am sure I would have found a way to end the pain.

We lose about 20 veterans each day to suicide, and if I can help reduce that number by encouraging them to come out of their basements and into the light of a slow-moving stream, maybe, just maybe that number will decrease.

**ELIZABETH L FONTAINE MEMORIAL
AWARD**

Serving My Dad Breakfast

*By Dale Brian Hall
VA Medical Center – Chillicothe, OH*

Ten Days Ago...

I just finished serving my dad breakfast. He had biscuits and gravy with scrambled eggs.

He said he was originally from Dearborn, Mich. I told him I wouldn't hold that against him. His wife however, he said, was a true Buckeye from Findlay, Ohio. He met Delores at a baseball game in 1951. They were married eight weeks later and four months after that he was fighting communism in Korea.

He and his wife had no children. Being 34 years old when he was sent to Korea, he said he had considered all of the younger guys in his Army unit his kids.



Delores, he told me, died in 2002. She had a stroke while planting a rose bush. That bush never did get planted, he said. Instead it withered and turned brown on their front porch steps.

That day my dad was named Earl.

My title is FSW WG3 which stands for Food Service Worker, Wage Grade 3. I work at the Chillicothe, Ohio Veterans Administration Medical Center, the first Veteran's Bureau operated hospital in the U.S., admitting their first patient in June of 1924. Every day I prepare and serve our veteran residents three nutritious meals. Most of the time they even say it tastes good, too.

Eight Days Ago...

Lunch on the ward today was hectic. We had three new patients get processed right before I served chicken tenders and red skin potatoes. Being an intake ward, things can be a little off center until the newbies get into our routine. Once I got them settled at our dining tables, they all three ate like they hadn't been fed in ages. I certainly knew that wasn't the case, but I was glad they liked our food.

One of the new patients was named Victoria. She said she was born in Steubenville, Ohio, in 1928. She said that I reminded her of her younger brother, David. I said well he must be a handsome fella then. She said he was, but he died a long time ago. I told her I was very sorry for her loss. She said that was OK. I told her my name was Dale and for the most part I would be the one serving her meals. She smiled and repeated that she had a younger brother named David and I reminded her of him. I said, "Thank you Victoria."

The other two new patients we received today were a large Hispanic man named Manuel and a very thin and pale man who said I could call him Major. I didn't know if that was his name or his rank.

Despite the newbies, at the end of my shift I wanted to tell Victoria that I would see her later for dinner. So, after I cleaned my area and put on my coat, I walked over to where she was sitting in her wheelchair. I smiled at her and tipped her a little wave. She waved back and said, "Bye bye, David."

Five Days Ago...

I came back to work today after two days off and I found out that “my dad” had died last night. His name was Leon and he was a Vietnam veteran from Columbus who had lost his right leg below the knee to a Viet Cong land mine. His son, he said, was named Virgil and the last he had heard of him he was a heroin addict living on the street in the Short North area of Columbus. We had talked before about music, (Jimi Hendrix and Ray Charles), Art, (Jackson Pollock made his head hurt), and the fact that the Cleveland Browns always seemed to need a new quarterback. I truly enjoyed our talks. Leon had been 70 years old. I tried to remember exactly what the last thing we had talked about was, but, try as I might, I couldn't remember. I just hope it had been something at least a little comforting to him.

It has been three years since I lost my real dad. I took him to urgent care because he thought he had a pulled rib muscle or maybe a hernia, but turns out what he really had was lung cancer. That spring I learned new word combinations, things like PET scan and surgical survivability. My dad was a former SeaBee in the U.S.Navy, but he rarely talked about those days. One time, I found a picture of him clowning around with his Navy buddies in a tropical setting; he looked so young and fit. His death certificate says he died of non-small cell carcinoma, but what really killed him was the chemo and the radiation therapy. He started cancer treatment a man who would work in his garden and enjoyed bass fishing, but within a couple weeks his hair turned white and wispy and all his strength was gone. Soon he couldn't get out of bed. My father, James Robert Hall, was diagnosed with lung cancer during the first blooms of April and died with the first killing frost of November.

Two Days Ago...

During dinner today J.D., an 85-year-old former Marine sergeant, knocked over his cup of milk creating a white lake on the table he shared with Manuel and Victoria. I could tell he was embarrassed about his increasing lack of motor control. Smiling, I grabbed a towel and attacked the mess. In a loud voice I said, “Hello! If that's the worst thing that happens today we will be alright.” This must have resonated in some way with Victoria as she then burst into a rousing version of “Hello Dolly!” Even J.D. laughed and clapped when she was done. With a grin, I shook my head, never a dull moment here.

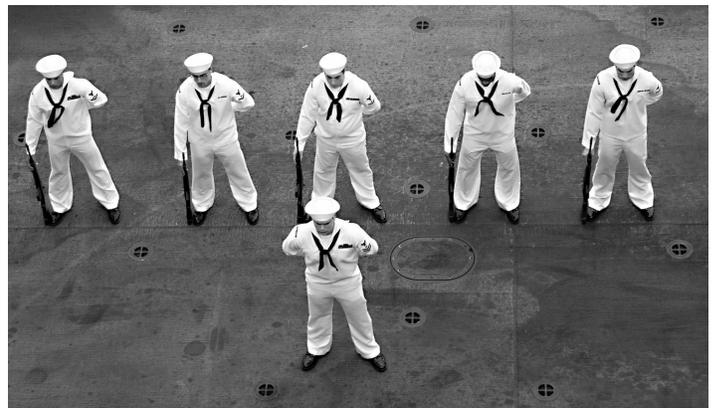
This Morning...

It's 0620 and I am sitting in my truck in the parking lot of the Food Service building at work. I usually start my shift at 0700, but I wanted to come early today to finish this story while in the environment of the VA Medical Center. It seems fitting to me. It's dark and very foggy this morning, and even though I'm sitting within 25 yards of the residential buildings that house our long term veterans, I can barely make out the buildings' shapes in the early morning gloom. Even the bright lights standing tall outside

the buildings are just a muted yellow glow. Viewing this scene, it's quite easy to imagine that an enemy patrol could slip silently out of the mist, armed to the teeth, looking to kill innocent Americans. But, I'm certain that's not going to happen. I know that I am safe. The reason I know this is because at some time in their lives all United States veterans, some that are right at this moment struggling to put on their sweaters or needing help to slide into their wheelchairs and are housed in the very buildings that I am now looking at, raised their right hand and swore an oath to protect this land against all enemies. Know some veterans fought and some didn't, but each and every one wrote the same blank check to the people of our country. This check was written for the amount up to and including their very lives. They each in their own way stood the line and said, “Not on my watch.”

I, as well as my fellow co-workers, try to show our gratitude and appreciation for their efforts every minute of every day.

Well, I'm going to wrap this up. I see by my truck's dashboard clock that I need to head inside and begin my work day. It's time for me to go serve my dad breakfast. I just wonder what his name will be.



PALLAS ATHENE BEST STORY AWARD
NATIONAL WOMEN'S ARMY CORPS VETERANS ASSOCIATION

PA-RADE, REST!

By G.E. Murray
— Gardner, KS

It was September 1958, at the United States Naval Training Center in San Diego, Calif. First Class, CO Wolf liked to set the company at parade rest, lecturing us endlessly on Navy doctrine and procedure, always on the hottest of afternoons.

Parade rest, is where you stand with your feet wide apart, holding your left-hand flat on the small of your back and your right hand holding your rifle. It's called a “piece”, and don't worry, it's not loaded, nor could it be.

Wolf walks in among us, growling and yelling, occasionally kicking the rifle out of an unsuspecting recruit's grip, where he launches into a barrage of profanity and raging insults and orders the hapless seaman to sleep with his rifle that night. Time and time again, he'd kick a rifle with the same results.

I was standing there, sweating like a politician, and my mind wandering, when I noticed a shadow appear at my feet. I'm next, I thought.

But before that, I should tell you about my summer, just before enlisting, I spent three solid months participating in speed swimming (playing tag) at the local public pool back home. All the guys, and occasionally a girl or two, did nothing but play tag: endless sprint swimming. That will really whip a young man into shape. I was 155 pounds, of nothing but raw muscle.

When I saw the shadow appear from behind me, I tensed up tighter than a bowstring, with a vise grip on my rifle that a Mack truck couldn't budge. When Mr. Wolf kicked that peace, to him, I can imagine, it was like kicking a tree stump. I swear, I barely budged and he yelled out in pain. There was a long silence.

Soon, he limped around to stand in front of me and looked deep into my eyes. My eyes are black-brown and they're difficult to read, showing little emotion. I'm sure all he saw was a glint of extreme pride that I was able to withstand his attempt to humiliate me. He shook his head and limped away. I wonder why he didn't like me.

**DAVID A. ANDREWS, JR., MEMORIAL
AWARD**

Last Thoughts

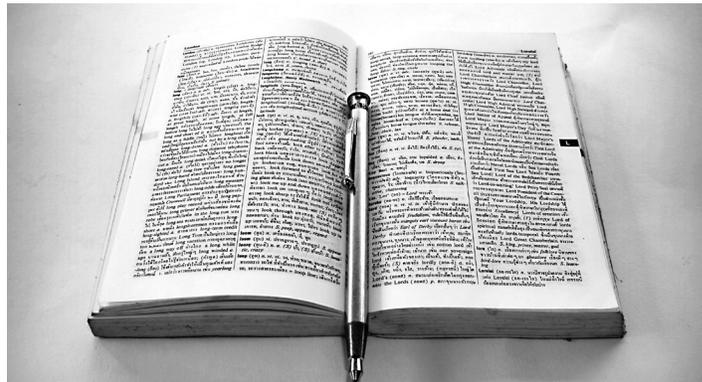
*By Tony James Craidon
— Maple Grove, MN*

I sit at my desk with the lights off. As I rock back and forth in what will soon be an antique leather swivel chair, I thumb the outsides of my beloved Bible. How many times have I done this? It was a habit I picked up as a boy, and 50 years later my subconscious tick was a clear indication something was troubling me. But as I sit alone there's no one to take advantage of my weakened frame of mind. With the lights off, visitors may assume I'm not home. I do not have a phone or computer in my study, and I'm trying desperately to outlive the personality-draining cell phones. I live for these moments of quiet reflection.

Looking down at the worn cover of the holy book, I am reminded of my first day of church. How fresh the feeling of "being saved" seemed in my youthful perspective. As young as I was, I knew

with a great certainty I was going to be a man of God, and cover my flock with the protection of holiness. Now those early certainties were quickly fading.

"Is it treatable?" I had asked Dr. Wheeler, with a modicum of hope. I hadn't been feeling quite right for some time. It became gruesomely painful to stand for more than a few minutes. My white kerchief was often a deathly crimson by dinner time. The blood in my lungs made physical exertion impossible. Until this point, I had relied solely on the power of prayer. But prayer had proven ineffective.



After running a few tests, the good doctor had revealed the worst. I was in the late stages of lung cancer, and it had metastasized to many of my other organs. Operating was deemed impossible. Chemotherapy was offered with little enthusiasm. You want to know the hell of it? I've never smoked a day in my life. My diagnosis was given to me four days ago. I was supposed to start the treatment three days ago.

I haven't told anyone. Not a single bird from my flock. Not even my soulmate of 42 years, Scarlet. I question if I'll ever tell them, or simply let them discover my maladies on their own. So far, everyone had remained perfectly polite and looked the other way while I hacked into my kerchief. They remained consciously oblivious when my robes would glisten from sweat after a lengthy sermon.

"Bah! Who cares anyhow?" I whisper in a raspy voice as I throw my Bible on the hardwood floor.

What if there is no God and everything I've lived for has been for nothing?

"Is it possible?" I ask no one in particular. I touch my lips, as if hoping to stop any more of my soul escaping. My fingers fall numb as I let another breath go. I cannot feel the warm moisture with my hands! This only angers me as I turn my wrath toward the heavens. I shake my fist at the ceiling. Quickly, I am overwhelmed with exhaustion. I steady my breathing before resuming my meditation.

What if all this consciousness is made possible by pure chance and random acts of chaos?

That would mean I have spent all my time serving a deity that couldn't possibly exist. A part of me suspects God is judging me at this very moment, but these questions permeate my faith. However, if my new considerations are correct, I needn't worry about my soul being damned to an everlasting coldness in the black pits of hell.

Not without struggle, I stand and walk to the window overlooking a vastness of forest. The seclusion was comforting. My grandfather had commissioned this house to be built in his prime. It was once a majestic beacon, discovered only after a considerable walk down a narrow drive. Now, it creaks and cracks from a lack of maintenance. Much like myself.

I have to hold myself steady from the corner of my sturdy oak desk. I almost miss the desk entirely and stutter step to avoid falling to the floor. I reach down and pick up my discarded Bible. Holding the book in my left hand, I gesture the familiar cross over my body with my right. I close my eyes for just a moment to regain my stream of consciousness. When I open my eyes, I fall in love with nature for the infinite time. A beautiful red dusk. The sun seemed to burn the top of the pines in the uneven horizon. As its blazing glow agonizingly torches its way to rest, I close my eyes again. I want to remember the most perfect sunset I've ever witnessed. I creep back to my chair and sit with a heavy sigh.

There are so many versions of God. So many directives. Some directly conflict with one another, others seem entirely open to subjective interpretation.

I am reminded of a poem written by my favorite undiscovered author. I unlock a secret drawer from my desk, and pull out a small stack of weathered and withered pages. Midway through, I find it. I read it again, as if for the first time.

"In the beginning; was God and the stars. God loved the stars 'cause they were good to eat. Around one small sun, he happened to meet a creature called man on a planet called Earth.

Never before
Not since my birth
Have I seen such a thing
As this blue planet Earth.

God did not understand, so he watched and waited, waited and watched. Man was a busy little creature, and it seemed to God, Earth's novel feature. Man invented love, and it made God weep. Man invented hate and it made God rage.

Damn good thing
Earth is a cage
You fleshy little things
On a rampage.

God did not understand, so he waited and he watched. Watched and waited. Man invented science and it made God wonder. Man invented war and it made God smile.

Silly little things
So viciously vile
Digesting yourselves
In your very own bile.

God did not understand. He waited and watched, watched and waited. God saw the beginning of one of man's great wars. He saw a flash of light, then another and another and another and another. Suddenly, God understood. The Earth had become a star! And with a God-like giggle, He ate it." – C.J. Runn

I consider this man's creative construction of God. It seemed ridiculous, but now, I suppose Runn's interpretation of God could be just as correct or incorrect as anyone else's.

What a waste. This life given in service for another created from the imagination of scared children. Why do I consider this now? So many years given in blind faith. I recall the comfort and security washing over me when I was baptized. There couldn't be any other alternative, this had felt so right. Now, that blanket of security was threadbare, and it no longer kept me warm at night.

I had relied so heavily on the power of prayer while my body replicated cells it wasn't supposed to, and chaos reigned among the soft tissue of my brain. My faith had led me to a point of no return, I knew. Chemo was another false comfort. It was too late now. It doesn't seem fair. With a grunt, I wipe the left side of my desktop clear of clutter and wince when it all crashes to the floor. If Scarlet was home, she'd surely come running to the door with a deep sense of concern. I waited. Scarlet did not come running. I was alone. That seemed only natural.

The more I think about it, the more clarity I have. Just like the ancient Greek myths about multiple gods responsible for every aspect of our puny existence, the idea of a single omnipotent being simultaneously controlling our destiny while gifting us with free will appeared childish. What's considerably more likely – as soon as we taught ourselves to communicate with one another, we considered our existence. The lack of knowledge is often frightening. Without answers, a parent created the idea we were not responsible for our actions, and tucked her child into a bed of soft dirt and leaves. With a kiss on the head, the exchange was complete. But that child's imagination is a powerful thing, and soon more and more details were constructed about our benevolent/malevolent creator.

Children, as we know, can be unruly little creatures. The idea of an unseen judge helped keep the children in line with society's standards.

"Yes Abel, there is a mighty God. He is always watching you, waiting for you to do wrong. He has 10 simple rules you should abide by." This is a golden opportunity to construct a society where everyone abides by the same guidelines. "Thou shall not... if you follow these rules, he will reward you handsomely in heaven."

Perhaps that's how it all started. With each passing generation, the interpretation of those rules bent, and sometimes broke. It stands to reason, if I so willingly succumbed to comfort, so many who lived before me did the same. It's the interpretation that led to so many crimes, so many wars, so much blood spilt in the name of...who? Such hypocrites! I suppose that makes me a hypocrite as well. It may be true I haven't participated in bloodletting in any of the global wars without any particular end. But haven't I lived with the same belief as those who would bloody their swords in the name of righteousness?

All this contemplation leads to a singular endgame. There couldn't possibly exist a God who is judging me for my lack of faith. If I'm wrong, I could just pass the blame back to the Father. After all, he controls our destiny, right? But if I'm right...If I'm right, would it hurt to finish my days as a pastor? Yes, it would hurt. It becomes a matter purely of dignity and honor. If I die ignorantly believing someone will take my soul and reward me with an eternity of peace, I will have completely wasted my life. Since I am a result of random chaos of stardust and fusion, I only have this one life. A life nearly at its end. No, from here on out, I will live my life as a free agent. Free, dammit!



"Umph," I mutter as I reposition myself in my chair. I feel exhausted. All this skeptical thinking has taken its toll. I feel my head become heavy. I bob my head once, twice, and I fall into a comfortable deep sleep. I can sleep easy. It may have taken me 62 years, but I finally learned. Tomorrow, I am going to do everything I've ever wanted, physical ability pending. I know I will have sweet and pleasant dreams tonight.

At a quarter to midnight, the old pastor stops breathing. Everything needed for life comes to a halt. He died without the knowledge of what happens after death. In his case, nothing. His soul is snuffed from existence, never having told his wife where he was going. That's okay though, he isn't going anywhere. Humankind is my experiment. I am simply recording the results. Fewer and fewer believe in me. It doesn't matter what version of me they believe. As long as they believe they can move on to the next stage of my experiment: what is their independent vision of heaven? What might be heaven for some, would undoubtedly be an eternal hell for others. It's rather entertaining to have my subjects play a game where the rules are only discovered once the game ends. Humankind can be an intriguing specimen to be sure. But alas, I grow bored with the lot of 'em. And I am hungry.



**GLADYS M. CANTY MEMORIAL, NORTHERN VIRGINIA 33
WAC VETERANS ASSOCIATION
AWARD**

My Granddaughter Visited

By Samuel J. Hall

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

This past Memorial Day my granddaughter visited and what a thrill her visit was. A little history: my daughter gave birth to three lovely daughters and I was present at all three births. My daughter had her first little girl with all the happy parents present. A year later my daughter was due to give birth to her second little girl, but she hid the fact that she was pregnant for some time during the pregnancy. She was not doing well with the care of her first child.

I stepped in and suggested she think about giving the second child up for adoption through the Catholic Church. The church would find a nice healthy family to raise the child. My daughter finally agreed with me after a lot of coaching. She had no job, no car, and no place to live. My suggestion of adoption was the best bet for the newborn child.

The second child arrived and at her birth, there was my daughter, a nurse and myself. We all took part. I called my ex-wife so she could come down and see the new baby. She was not interested in seeing a baby if she would not be a part of her life. I was crucified by the family for wanting to give up the child and told that giving up a child was a most difficult thing for a mother.

I assured my daughter the church agency would find a good family with a mom and dad to raise her daughter and give her a better chance in life. I told my daughter that if things were good, we might be able to meet up with her daughter in the future. We were giving the new baby a new chance. The adoption went on as planned. The new family had a newborn baby to raise as their own. My daughter wrote to the family in hopes of a reunion in the future. Our hopes panned out.

A reunion did occur. When the child turned five, my daughter, along with her first daughter, and a new daughter who had arrived since the adoption, were able to meet the sister. After the visit, the adoptive family moved out of state, but I was able to visit

my second granddaughter the next year at her new home and every year over the next 15 years or so.

One year I took my first granddaughter with me and stayed a week to visit her sister and to see what a different kind of life there is out there. We all had a good week's visit. I was pleased to see my second granddaughter happy and doing well. I visited my second granddaughter every year, and every time I went by their home when I traveled close by. My wife and I attended her graduation from high school. We contributed toward her future college effort.

Now, as I am disabled, my second granddaughter comes to visit me at my home. She has attained her associate's degree and has had a daughter of her own. I am happy she was raised by another family. That family did a fine job giving her a better chance in life. Both my granddaughter and my great granddaughter are doing super. My ex-wife has never made an effort to contact our granddaughter to see just how great her life has become. I am very proud of the accomplishments my granddaughter has made within her life.



The Love of War

By Samuel J. Hall

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

War is an exciting time in a man's life, especially a young impressionable man. I was that young man once, living a life facing all the problems and making all the mistakes a young man can make. I was inexperienced at life, and wartime made my life even more exciting. I figured I would face all my problems and live with my mistakes. I never dreamed I would be confronted with all the hazards some older adults would make for me. I didn't care. I thought I could handle anything they threw at me.

I encountered some real problems with the people I thought loved me. I learned to live through that with tough love. Wartime made everything seem more exciting. I lived harder. I loved harder. I took more chances in life. Everything seemed to be more real. I enjoyed the life I was living. I just lived it too fast. I should have taken more time to appreciate the times I was living through.

I believed in people and what they said to me. I saw no reason for people to lie. There was no reason. I lived my life as truthfully as I could. On the other hand, I had people lie to me and be unfaithful to me, living with other people all while I was off at war. I found that disrespect to be hurtful.

As exciting as war was, I had a lot of fear going on along with all that excitement. I needed more truth than fear when I returned to the home front. During the times I was off to war and preparing for war, I was running on lots of emotion and hormones as well as the excitement. I both loved it and feared it at the same time. I expected love and trust from my family and loved ones at home.

Each day I was gaining knowledge as I was moving through my life. War was filled with long periods of boredom and shorter periods of extreme excitement as well as fear. I have concluded that people want to be with you for who you are, then they want to change you. I would like to be more than another paycheck in a relationship. I have my own ideas about life. I would like to have a chance at living those ideas. I have found that people should step back and take a good look before taking and doing any major steps during wartime. War makes life more exciting, but time shines a lot of light on any subject.

A Letter to the President

By Albert A. Hernandez

VA Medical Center – El Paso, TX

I am a disabled Vietnam War veteran. It has come to my attention by the DAV, VFW, and the American Legion, that there is a provision in your budget plan containing a proposal that would scale back the VA's Individual Unemployability (IU) program for thousands of American veterans.

Be advised that the IU program was designed into law for veterans who are determined to be unemployable as a result of service-connected disabilities at the 100 percent rate. It is for veterans who have serious medical problems preventing them from working, and for their families to pay for essentials such as food, transportation, rent, a mortgage, and utilities, all of which have risen in cost. For example, our water, electricity, and gas fees have increased considerably. Each year it gets harder to pay these expenses on fixed and limited incomes.

The elimination of IU compensation for disabled veterans will cause great and undue hardship on those veterans and their families. It would not only affect the veterans' family income, but other critical ancillary benefits, such as Dental Coverage, Survivors' and Dependents' Educational Assistance, the Civilian Health and Medical Program of the VA (CHAMPVA), commissary and exchange privileges, and the value of Social Security benefits. Additionally, this would impact access to some state benefits

such as property tax exemptions for veteran homeowners, free vehicle registration and free access to state parks (parks are good therapy for veterans with PTSD). These are crucial for a veteran's livelihood and for an acceptable quality of life.

Another area impacted would be the economy. If veterans do not have money to spend, that struggling waitress with a family who works at our favorite restaurant will not see a generous gratuity anymore. That car dealer who sells us our vehicles will go out of business. Organizations dependent upon donations will also feel the impact. These are just a few examples of how the economy would be affected.

As veterans, we are already strained in obtaining the medical care we need. We don't need to worry about paying our bills. We have enough problems in our lives. Our days are numbered. Many of us are simply suffering. When you're rated as disabled and unemployable, it means you have a serious medical condition or conditions; you are not having fun.

Balancing budgets on the backs of veterans is not right. It will only hurt those who depend upon their pensions to survive. A veteran's pension is his/her livelihood. For most, it's the only income they have. In fact, most veterans are living well below the poverty level. Reducing or taking away our benefits is morally wrong and unwise. It is vehemently unacceptable.

As a Vietnam War veteran (combat medic/Navy Corpsman) who has seen and buried the dead, I often wonder, what did we go to war for? What did we fight for? Did we do it so someday we'd debate about who can go to what bathroom? Did we do it so that politicians could sign bills that would spin us into poverty? Did we do it so that someday the government would betray us and take away the benefits we've earned? No! We went to war for our country at a time when it was not a popular thing to do, when we didn't have a choice. We've paid our dues.

Our wives have seen our anger and tears. They've heard our screams at night because of the constant nightmares of war. They've witnessed our addiction to drugs given to us by the VA for our ailments (a huge problem in the VA right now). They've taken us to the emergency room and to our VA appointments more times than most of us care to admit. And now, our government wants to take away our "benefits?" Those who have not served in the military do not realize the boundaries they should not cross. Cutting veterans' benefits is a dangerous boundary to cross, Mr. President.

I served this country honorably and faithfully. I went to war for it. I obeyed the law. We veterans are the backbone of this country; not the politicians, not our institutions, not our banks, not even our churches, but those men who know what the price for freedom is. I speak not only for myself, but for all veterans and their families, and especially for those who shed their blood for the freedoms that you, yourself, enjoy. Yes, Mr. President, we deserve much better than this.

However, I must alert you. Cutting veterans' benefits could result in very serious ramifications such as rampant bankruptcies, increased homelessness, massive suicides, and violent protests, problems our country doesn't need right now. The shooting on June 14 in Alexandria, Va., when a congressman, his aide, and two officers were shot, is a clear example of what can happen when someone gets angry enough. They were shot by an American citizen who was fed up with the politics of the times. According to reports, he specifically targeted politicians. One senator said it was a wake-up call to all politicians. I mention this, Mr. President, because I have overheard the hostile chatter between veterans at the VA where I go for my appointments. I don't like what I hear; some of it is very disturbing. Also, the tragedy that occurred at this VA in January of 2015, in which a veteran and ex-VA employee shot and killed a VA psychiatrist, then himself, shocked everyone. People thought that something like that could never happen at this VA, but it did. To this day, many have not gotten over it. In fact, many have left. My own VA doctor resigned the very next day after the incident. Hundreds of patients were affected. This is what everyone should know, what you should know. Cutting, reducing, taking away veteran's benefits could cause havoc in this country. Cuts in Medicare, Medicaid, Social Security, and in health care altogether, would have very serious ramifications. This is not an opinion, it is a fact.



One more thing, Mr. President: we vote. Yes, veterans vote. We are very astute as to who to vote for and why. Many veterans voted for you. We voted for you because you assured us of our rights and benefits as veterans. You vowed to improve the VA health care system, a system that is in "critical condition," in your words. You appointed a new VA secretary to straighten out the VA. You promised us we would lack nothing. We trusted you. Now, we face losing a critical benefit and right that was awarded to us for our service to our country.

America owes an apology to every veteran who went to war for this country, and who now faces the possibility of having his/her benefits stripped. Is this how our country repays our veterans? Please, Mr. President, reconsider. Cutting or taking away veterans' benefits is NOT the way to "Make America Great Again."

Very Respectfully,
Albert A. Hernandez

What America Means to Me

By Kenneth Harvey
VA Medical Center – Richmond, VA

America is precious, seen at times like, "a diamond in the rough!" In my eyes, America is a symbol of healthiness, the pill which allows every American to enjoy freedom. It is a great vitamin pill, the one-a-day kind taken to rise daily, feel that one has internal hope. America gives me the right to think and to be filled with the promise that this nation will hold true to the words promised! When we as Americans pledge allegiance to our flag, it gives meaning to the word, freedom.



The Sandman Cometh...

By Scott Hubbartt
— Schertz, TX

January 1991

It was the first day of the war. We cheered and celebrated the waves of fighters and bombers passing overhead — to demolish, slap down, exterminate, Saddam and his flea-infested Republican Guard. It was exhilarating. Nothing like it before or since. We were the kings of the hill and the whole world would know it after tonight. Or, so we thought.

Once the exhilaration began to ebb and the early hours of the next day took over, we died down a bit. High fives, back to the tents. Talked of going home. It had only been a couple of months, but more than long enough. Just as I slipped off to sleep, with Armed Forces Radio droning on in the background, I heard a new noise. "ALARM RED!" blared over the camp's loudspeakers.

"They're firing back," I thought to myself as I grabbed my mask, fumbled my feet into rubber boots and headed out of the tent to our recently dug shelter. "Damn," I said again, to no one in particular as we all scrambled into the freshly dug ditch next to our tent. There were just sirens and the metallic warning repeated over and over by the giant voice, "ALARM RED, ALARM RED!"

Then, one last guy shuffled into the low shelter. This guy was huge. I mean, he was a giant, massively big. Like hulk size, times two. His shoulders seemed three feet apart. He was enormous. I just can't shake that impression of him. He plowed into the remaining small space of our tiny shelter, and just as he squeezed about as far in as he could, the sirens stopped.

And, it was quiet.

Just raspy sucking and blowing noises through mask vents. But my eyes were still on this giant in the doorway of our shelter. He was not from our tent nor any nearby tents; I would have remembered him. He lifted his arm and pulled up the sleeve of his charcoal impregnated chem top to reveal a digital watch. He pressed a button and the bright red digits clearly showed the time 03:33. He smiled. His teeth glowed in the darkness, contrasting against his dark skin. He said, in a calm deep, muffled-by-his-mask voice, "The Sandman cometh." I'll never forget it. That's exactly what he said, smiling, "The Sandman cometh..."

The silence was shattered when Patriots launched with their twin booms. Then there was a huge flash in the sky which outlined this man and his massive girth. And just like that, it was over.

March 2017

I am asleep. I see him. The giant. He is standing over me and he's smiling. Those bright teeth. I am not at all surprised. It's almost as if I expect him, "The Sandman cometh," he says, smiling. Then like countless nights before, I wake in a sweat and I'm panting. I look at my bedside clock. It is 03:33.

The Sandman cometh, indeed. Again."

Martial Arts, Reentry

By David Cahn
VA Medical Center – Wilmington, DE

As with many veterans coming home with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and/or a Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) the world was different and so was I. What I once enjoyed was no longer. What I once was able to easily accomplish was now a challenge. The overwhelming feeling of the death of my ability to control my own destiny is extremely frustrating. Fortunately, through the guidance of friends and family, I found my way to the VA. The therapists are outstanding (the administrators, however, need counseling) and together we found ways to deal with this new reality. There is no cure at this time although we did find strategies and tools to minimize the symptoms and effects.

Traditional methods of treatment for PTSD are intense psychotherapy and medication. Battling this particular fight, we can find our own healthy means of "closing with and destroying the enemy." One form of combat in this campaign is martial arts

where it is not important to be better than someone else. What is important is to be better than you were yesterday. Martial arts is not a therapy, but is therapeutic. It is not meant as a replacement for other therapies, but it is a coping mechanism. For some individuals with PTSD the mind is no longer truly connected with the body. Emotions are shut down and everything seems mechanical. Practicing basic movements repeatedly is a great way to begin the restoration of that shattered connection. With traditional martial arts forms, concentration—usually acutely debilitated — is so intense that nothing is left over for anything irrelevant such as rumination or disturbing memories. How you breathe is an indication of your state of mind. Veterans with PTSD often experience shallow and incomplete breathing. Martial Arts assist in diminishing this unhealthy behavior. This rule-bound, goal-directed system of physical action provides a measure of clarity as to how well you are performing. Martial arts lead to improved balance, increased self-worth and maybe even social connectedness. In addition, exercise is vital for mental and physical fitness. It reduces stress, assists with much needed sleep and causes the release of endorphins, the body's natural painkiller.

I always enjoyed the martial arts. Earlier in my military career, I reached the level of Black Belt. However numerous deployments, responsibilities, schooling and other obligations curtailed training. True Martial Arts Black Belts do not need to advertise their skill and very few people knew of this practice. It did come of use a few times in the states and once in Iraq where, fortunately for me, the maggot didn't realize what happened until it was over. I always aspired to return to Martial Arts. However, since the realization and acceptance of my condition, I am very concerned that I may unknowingly and unintentionally harm someone. PTSD symptoms include hyper-arousal and flashbacks. Once triggered, flashbacks may only last a few seconds to a few minutes but the person may become dissociated for a longer period of time. In this state, the mind may go blank and the person may say or do things without realizing it. Sometimes the individual remembers what occurred, other times they have no recollection. Hurting an innocent person or damaging property while training, or otherwise, is unacceptable.

To know victory, the initial opponent is yourself. Once that is conquered, other triumphs are within your reach. So, with much trepidation and anticipatory anxiety, I walked into a martial arts school. It was a different style than the one I previously trained which was good, as my memory was not what it once was and I wanted to begin this journey anew. Martial arts is a journey, not a race. The instructors and students appeared very knowledgeable, accepting and friendly. I accepted their offer of a uniform and two weeks training at no cost. This was a new style and as I no longer trusted my abilities I began, once again, as a white belt. While putting the uniform on for the first time, I remembered how to properly tie the belt. This simple act built up a small amount of lost confidence. It felt strange and comforting. The classes were taught by the owner of the school as well as senior black belts. The other students were, and rightfully so, proud of

what they knew and were willing to assist lower belts, sometimes without the lower belt asking. Although this was a different style, there was much similarity. The language is different but the commands translated, kicks, punches, blocks, some forms as well as self-defense techniques are very comparable. Initially only the senior instructor knew of my previous training. Eventually the instructors and other students made statements such as "You are really picking this up fast" and "How did you do that?" Word got out that I had previous training. These statements surprised me, yet the years of training and muscle memory began to surface. If I could truly experience confidence, this would be it. The school also offered me a sense of serenity. In the world of PTSD and the ensuing lack of emotion and sense of security, this calmness is much needed.



As the training continued to unfold, I began to experience "flow." Flow is being so completely involved in something that the mind is focused solely on one movement to the next. Flow can be seen as losing yourself and finding yourself at the same time. Flow leads to loss of your surroundings and in itself can be a form of meditation. Just the fact that you are able to focus is amazing, as with PTSD it is often difficult to maintain a thought for even a short period of time. With any endeavor training and education are essential. So, I also trained at home, and as I was doing so, found that I was, in a healthy way, getting in touch with the fighting spirit, I began to actually relax. Through the physical movements I found stillness. Though the other students live and work in my area, no one knows my military or martial arts background and I plan to keep it that way. Yet, with the commonality of enjoying this art, I do find myself socializing after class with the good instructors and students of the school. Interacting and conversing with nonmilitary people is fairly new to me, and although it remains difficult, it may continue to point toward a healthy, less symptomatic lifestyle.

A black belt is a white belt who never quit and has learned enough to see how little he or she really knows. Higher ranking at this time offers no appeal. However, being a Black Belt is a state of mind, competence, and ability and that is what I would like to regain. White Belts don't usually spar. Right now, that is still a good thing as I don't yet trust myself. However, sparring, just like success in the military, requires you to stay calm, be relaxed, knowledgeable, and present as well as maintain mental discipline and gain endurance. As time goes by and I attend classes, this may still be possible.



The Orderly Room Guy

By Harold (Hal) Fulton
— Wooster, OH

Bart was a Remington raider in a world of ramp rats, tin benders and airplane drivers. His was a war of morning reports and duty roosters, endless fodder for the military paper machine. He typed promotion orders, and also the other kind. He solved problems, and he knew how to correct our frequent screw-ups. In a world of "fubar," he was a "go-to guy."

He was an Air Force careerist who never touched an airplane, a good man to have on your side. Bart was my friend. I'd like to think I was his. He was a drinker, but not all that choosy, drinking beer, wine, and something really potent called Shake-Em Up. They say that an alcoholic is a rich drunk. That wasn't him.

Bart was a working drunk—a six-year, three-striper making one-fifty a month. A guaranteed job, three "hots and a flop" make it a pretty good deal. In those days he was one of many, a good GI with an untold story and a clouded past.

Not too fat, not too sloppy, and never a poster boy, he stayed barely, just barely, on the good side of acceptable. He wore khakis, machine-washed and footlocker-ironed. His GI oxfords were polished "just good enough." A garrison cap (USAF, blue, shade 84) covered a gradually receding hairline.

He was never gigged. Working for the CO has its advantages.

Bart was an aging buck sergeant with little hope of promotion. He did his work and found a home. In the 97th, he was an important man. There were many like me, but only one Bart.

One night he set his mattress on fire. He pissed on it and shoved it out a second-floor window. No fuss, no muss, no bother, and he resolved the missing mattress compliments of a buddy in supply.

He once fell down a flight of stairs, bounced then fell two more into the latrine, a bit bruised but nothing broken. Being drunk makes you limber. Wartime makes the military more tolerant, and Bart was never busted. Peaceful drunks who do their work have many friends.

We all have our stories. Bart was a loner; we occasionally talked, and he knew more about me than I about him. I regret that I never knew more.

What happened? Was it a woman and a troubled marriage, maybe some bad times on the lines? Who knows where we come from, and what roads we've traveled. He was educated; he spoke well and was a reader. He introduced me to good authors and good literature. He was one of the best-read men I ever served with. He became a mentor to the one-stripe newbie in an open-bay barracks. "Get the hell out of this" he once said, "and make something of yourself".

I hope I did and I'm still a reader.
Thanks, Bart.

Awestruck

By Richard Wangard
VA Medical Center – Appleton, WI

I had it all! Forty-three years old, married and happy. Three grown children all doing well, and successful. Eight super grandchildren from ages six months to age 20. A decent house (paid for), nice cars, a drop dead beautiful Harley Davidson motorcycle, good hunting equipment, a love of nature, and best of all, an understanding wife. I worked hard for the first 20 years of marriage before becoming disabled due to a spinal disease that cost me the job I loved. I was not a quitter! Even after several major operations I retrained and went back to school between operations and started another of my passions: passion for my fellow brothers and sisters. A passion for vets. It took me four years to complete what a normal student could accomplish in two. The disease took a toll on me and left me in chronic pain. I fought every day.

I got a big break, and even though I could have stayed at home to be with my kids, I took a new job working at a Vet Center to help my brothers and sisters. Most were all Nam vets at that time and so many came in not knowing why or what they were entitled to. "Just did my job" was the most common answer. Most were decorated even up to silver stars. I never lost sight of the greatest decoration of all—The Vietnam Service Medal—and never looked over what they went through, because I understood. I too was in Vietnam. For three tours, it was the only place I wanted to be. I lasted at that job about a year. I loved that job, too! Even more than the first! But my body was broken and another big operation was needed. Hopefully it would be the last one on my neck but it was going to be a six-month recovery. I did not have enough sick time to cover it so I had to resign. After that I never worked for pay again. I worked, and still do, just not for money.

That was 1999. All this time even from early on in 1972, there was always a churning inside of me that I could not understand. It manifested in strange and unpredictable ways. Sometimes a short temper, sometimes unexplained depression, sometimes feelings of being unsafe and making sure my perimeter was safe with

weapons always at the ready, unable to stand in line or wait my turn, being “point blank” and way too frank in conversations, not paying attention to people's feelings. Becoming hyper-vigilant, I knew better but could not seem to be in control of whatever this was. My physical problems, as tough as they were, did not compare to my mental health problems that seemed to only get worse even after I understood PTSD, and that I needed help. I got help and still am not ashamed! After all I am educated, intelligent, caring, and have everything a man could possibly hope for.

At my lowest point, I lifted the 45 slowly to my head making sure a 45 hollow point was in the chamber. Finger on the trigger. I had had enough. No more! The mental pain was too great, the demons too powerful! I wanted peace not constant taunting by a force so powerful that I indeed understood but was powerless to control. Fifty years of churning can do that to a man.



So what stopped me? I am not a religious man. I am a bad Catholic, but I do have a faith. In all my time in any church or talking with clergy I have never ever heard anyone express anything about how brave and courageous Christ was. Now remember he is God, only in human form. He could have snapped his fingers and done away with those who were killing him. He was all powerful! But no, he took all the cruelty humankind could dish out, mocked, humiliated, beaten, spat on, tortured, a terrible way to die! Evil at its very worst! And he took it! All he had to do was get even, kill back, snap his fingers. Or just think thoughts. How much guts did that take? Probably as brave and courageous as many men I have met in my lifetime. Sacrifice, something a vet knows all about.

So I thought as my finger but more pressure on the trigger, if Christ could put up with the way he died and was so brave, courageous, and full of sacrifice—just what in heaven's name am I about to do? I took my finger off the trigger and lowered the gun. Just what the hell do I have to complain about compared to that?!

I look forward to meeting Christ and expressing my admiration and respect, for he is my brother too. A veteran of the war raged against him. And he keeps me alive!



Old Toy

*By Deborah C. Welch
VA Medical Center – Buffalo, NY*

Yes, allegorically speaking, I am an old toy. Phased out, the mold has been broken. Played with for many years, it was decided I would be retired. Toddler days, those first four years of my life, have been magically erased. There is no recollection, except for having my head pushed through a storm window and bearing a scar on my cheek for 30 years.

New off the shelf, I was quite the fad. Many friends played with me: fun, interesting, a little exciting, non-conforming, yippee! Military days were a different sort of play: some enjoyable instances and then not so much. I learned the hard way, “Work hard, Play hard.” (Groovy Girl Lily Doll 1970)

I was then given a new look, new instructions, “Play nice, Don't get rough.” (1980s Super Turbo Train Toy)

The toy model changed over the years. I saw a difference and didn't want to play, as I did before. (Looney Tunes Bugs Bunny and Daffy Duck Vintage Clock 1990s toy Warner Brothers)

Hard choices and big decisions to say the least in so many words here, gentle reader. (2000s Cosmic Shock Phaser Photon Lights Blaster Laser Sound Ray Gun Atomic Space Toy) I had to discern play, love, and sin. Someone was sent to give the toy a new lease on life, but what kind of life? I was too ignorant about worldly toys; hey, I was an old-fashioned toy, remember?

What's this all about? I didn't have a clue. Well, maybe a few hints, but it took me nearly 20. By then, the toy was missing parts, the appearance faded, discounted and taken off the shelf. I now have a deep cutting and a wiping away of the desire. I'm an anomaly, a deviation from the rule. So being an irregularity, I'm like a bird that cannot fly. Shoot! Even the Salvation Army would have none of it, this old toy. Are you kidding me? Is there a place for old toys like me? I'm not interested in recycling, but there's always the novelty stage of life where memories never die.



The Old Rocking Chair

By Kay Baluta

VA Medical Center – Wilkes-Barre, PA

I'm rocking in my old rocking chair. My body reeling with pain and my head of all gray hair. Vaguely remembering my mother rocking me to sleep singing sweet lullabies with tears falling from my eyes. It seems like only yesterday that Mom passed away. The old rocking chair still sits in the same place.

As years pass by, now it is my turn to sing lullabies to three little bundles of joy. Three precious baby boys. That was the start of our family tree. Now I am rocking in the same old chair which is about as old as I. I'd like to put old man time on hold and just for a spell let me forget I'm old, as time is swiftly going by. As I am getting closer to the sky.

This is to the veterans that go to the VA hospital. Since I was discharged from the Navy in 1946 when World War II ended, I've been affiliated with our VA here in Wilkes-Barre, Pa. I cannot praise the services I am still getting as a veteran enough. I know there are some veterans who are very unhappy for all different reasons. As for me, I have no complaints.

Over the years, I've seen many directors come and go, for whatever reasons from my VAMC. I also see doctors quitting their jobs because of being overworked, causing them much stress. I also know a lot of benefits are being taken away, which is absolutely horrible. The hospitals are in dire need of nurses. As for me and my husband who is 100 percent service connected disability, we have no complaints. In fact, we are so grateful for everything the VA offers us.

My conclusion is that it is the responsibility of us veterans to let our voices be heard by local congressman and senators whom we elect. They can take our opinions and needs to Washington in the manner in which we have spoken. Once again, our sincere gratitude to our local VA here in Wilkes-Barre for all the services we are getting.

Author's Note: In regard to Veterans' Voices magazine which I wait patiently for, when I finish reading it, I pass it on to other veterans who are not familiar with the magazine. Keep them coming!



Raw Recruit

By G.E. Murray

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

The second week of basic training in 1958, I was at the U.S. Navy Recruit Training Center in San Diego, Calif., where every man must suffer seven days of service in the mess hall. Do you remember how scared you were in basic? However, I was raised on the farm and I'm pretty much not afraid of anything, except I have a great respect for a swarm of bumble bees.

So, I'm swabbing the mess hall deck after a meal when this chubby little guy comes up behind me and passes by, brushing my shoulder, walking out across my wet floor.

"Hey!" I yell at him. He stops and turns slowly to stare daggers at me for speaking to him in such a disrespectful manner; a raw recruit.

"Son, do you see this badge?" he asked, tapping the master-at-arms shield pinned to the pocket of his shirt.

I responded immediately, "Next time, wear it on your ass where I can see it."

He was so taken back with my bravado that he just stood there and laughed. In a moment, he spun on his heels and walked away, shaking his head.

No, I never did spend any time in the brig. I knew when to keep my mouth shut.



Semper Fi: From a FMF Corpsman

*By Albert A. Hernandez
VA Medical Center – El Paso, TX*

The motto of the Marine Corps is “Semper Fidelis,” Latin for “always faithful.” Until 1871 it was “First to Fight,” a motto that still applies. Through the years, Marines have shortened it to “Semper Fi.” It is the universal Marine greeting.

FMF stands for “Fleet Marine Force.” As an FMF Navy Corpsman, I am very proud to have served with the greatest fighting force in the world, the United States Marines.

From Camp Pendleton to the rice paddies and jungles of Vietnam, these are the guys I was privileged to train and serve with. They are my brothers in arms. In the darkest hours of the war, I was with them and they were with me. In fact, they took care of me more than I took care of them, something few corpsmen will admit. It broke my heart when I would see a wounded Marine. It tore me up when one was lost. A part of me died every time a brother died. To this day, it torments me because seeing one of my guys—my Marines—lost in battle is something no corpsman can forget. Ever. And I have seen more than I can explain.

There is no soldier like a Marine. Always sharp, impeccably dressed in his blues. No one even comes close to matching the pride of the uniform he wears. No one. As a corpsman, I have worn the Marine uniform, the dress greens. Not even my Navy dress blues could match such a display of pride. In fact, I am more Marine than I am Navy. The regular sailor cannot understand this. I don't mean to demean anyone. We all have our place of honor and pride in the American military. But when it comes to the U.S. Marines, they're second to none. You see, not just anyone can be an FMF Corpsman. Even today, I work out. I've been trained to keep fit. I owe that to the Marines. A Marine does not believe in weakness or in giving up. It's not an option. That training has paid off, it keeps me alive, it gives me a reason to live. I don't dare die without a purpose. And at my age (71) every day has to count.

On the wall in my study, you will see a large picture frame engraved in copper weighing almost 100 pounds. It's the Marines and a corpsman raising the American flag at Iwo Jima. It's the classic symbol you see everywhere signifying the American spirit and might. You will see paraphernalia of Marine Corps power. And when I go anywhere, I wear my “Fleet Marine Force Corpsman” cap with the rest of my outfit that says in gold print “U.S. Navy Corpsman” with the medical symbol and “Vietnam 66-67.” On my license plates there is the Navy and Marine Corps Medal. I drive my car with great pride. It turns heads when I drive into the VA's parking lot. I like that.

One of the reasons I made it back from Vietnam was because of a special Marine we called “Chief.” He was an American Indian. He protected me. “Stay low, Doc,” he would tell me when we were on patrol. I'll never forget Chief. He was tough, strong. Indians are not to be messed with. It behooves you to be their friend. I was invited to attend a special VFW ceremony held several years ago for POWs here in El Paso. I was presented with an Indian pendant by the chief of the tribe of Marine Corps veterans. While pinning the pendant on me, he called me “An Angel of Mercy.” Praised and saluted, I was overwhelmed with pride and emotion. I'll never forget those words. The ceremony was for POW veterans, but somehow, I was the one who felt most honored.

There are many stories I could tell about my Vietnam experience as an FMF corpsman. I already have shared some of them in previous issues of *Veterans' Voices*. But this one is a very special one. It's for the Marines and not about me. You see, it's a Marine who stands guard at the White House. It's a Marine who stands at attention when the President boards and steps out of Marine One. It's the Marines who stand ready for battle on all fronts of the world for your freedom and mine.

“Semper Fi!” is the greeting when a Marine veteran sees me. Man, you can't beat that.





Life Is Short

By Steven Carver Lambert

Listen to me my son. I'm old, tired and in great pain. Let me go my son.

Oh Dad, we will miss you so much. My Dad was 89 when he passed away and he was such a great, great man. My Dad had baby-blue eyes and a gracious smile wherever he went. His passions were a mechanic by trade, the serenity of the outdoors and that old Emken flat-bottom boat. My Dad had a big heart and was such a loving, kind and compassionate man.

I became so empty and lost after losing my Dad. Through acquaintances and friends, I shared good memories, photographs and reminisced about his life. I made a pledge to honor his wishes before the transition to heaven.

I can feel my Dad's presence—he is indeed watching over us and we keep him in our thoughts and prayers.

It has been said, "Death is not the end of life, it is the beginning of an eternal journey."

I love you Dad and I miss you, but one day we will be reunited and have eternal life together as father and son.



I Thought We Could Chat

*By James William Miller
VA Medical Center – Topeka, KS*

I became a disabled veteran in 1971. I walked by her office in the VA Medical Center and I saw her sitting there. I backed up and I walked in. She said, "Can I help you?" I said, "I would marry you in a second."

We married two days later. I was happy that I married a professional who had worked for the Department of Veterans Affairs for eight years. However, she quit her job after she married me and told everyone she knew we would have so much money living off of my VA disability pension.

Our baby came a year later. The U.S. government paid me another 16 dollars a month because of the child. My wife was disappointed, and she burst out saying, "That is only enough to buy one package of diapers."

As our emergencies happened, such as car wrecks, we had to borrow money from her relatives. We also had to pay off my bank loan for college. She said, "Why did you get out of college course sequence? Because of that, you didn't finish college and you were drafted into the U.S. Army to become just a Vietnam War drug addict. You have no foundation for the work ethic and to hold down a job. You cannot take care of yourself with your new V.A. rate of 70 percent disability. "I cannot work because I have to take care of you because I love you. If that is all the U.S. government is going to pay us, then I don't want it."

My wife's friends asked me if I was going to live off of my wife's money the rest of my life. That hurt me. We divorced and my wife told me that she would financially take care of our child. I have been in V.A. Medical Centers as a patient since then, 13 times, in 10 states. I miss my family.



Four Walls and Wire All Around

*By Lawrence E. Rahn
VA Medical Center – Minneapolis, MN*

Here I am stuck in this colorless, dark gray dungeon of what seems a taste of hell. For how long, it's anybody's guess. It could be a year or two for me. Or, perhaps a lifetime, you see I haven't a clue.

Since coming here I've learned a lot, especially how to control my temper. The staff does give me orders that I take seriously. They order me to do this or to go there. If I don't listen or if I act up, they put me in the box. I haven't seen the outside world, except for the grounds and what few field trips they take us on.

I'm making all sorts of things and sharpening my skills in the workshop. These skills can be used when going into business for myself once I'm out. I do realize it was my own doing that put me here. The judge did send me to a place that didn't have hardcore citizens. The staff tells me that I'm doing great, just to encourage me I think.

The part I do miss are my relatives and the loneliness it causes wishing some of them would come to visit. They tell me it's just too far to drive. When I call to say hello I wish I could ask them not to reverse the charges because it's too expensive. I would do that, but they don't seem to understand. I've only got enough money for a candy bar, occasionally.

God does answer prayers. I will be out soon living in a halfway house. Above all, people are now coming to visit me.



The Olive Tree - A Symbol of Life

*By John Muza
VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO*

The olive tree, to look at it, it grows in a twisted way, and is bigger than an apple tree. Its leaves are of two drab colors, gray and faded green. The beauty comes out of the ugliness. Its small oval fruit can be eaten green, or ripe as a relish, or pressed when ripe to extract its life-giving olive oil. Usefulness lies in its growth. Its olives have to be pressed and squeezed to extract its oil.

We also have to be pressed for us to perform; even the potter has to form us. We are pressed and shaped like the olive tree. God uses all of us in different forms and places. Beauty is found in its usefulness.

The olive tree needs not a lot of attention. It needs little water to grow. Perseverance is also in the olive tree. It will grow in rocky soil. The beauty of the tree: you can cut it down and it will grow back.

We are also like the olive tree. We can be cut down and come back. We are all as an olive tree. Its beauty is in all human life. Struggle twists our lives. With the struggle comes the strength.

All life is a struggle. Let God water you in his word. God is real, let him take charge of your life. His beauty shall be as an olive tree. Its existence is life-giving and a healing food supplied by God our Father.

Becoming a Hero

*By Samantha Jane Kinzer
— Barstow, CA*

Becoming a hero
means having to live long distances
from the people you love and often feeling alone.
It means early mornings and late nights.
It means waking up in pain and going to bed
knowing there will be no relief the next day.
It means learning how to live with your “symptoms”
and trying to live your life like a “normal” person.
It means bottling your emotions in fear of being seen as weak.
It means CT scans, MRIs and losing countless hours
of your life in a waiting room.

Becoming a hero
is prioritizing your sleep by your pill count.
It means repeating yourself a thousand times
because no one cares about what is happening in your mind.
It’s putting a Band-Aid on a bullet wound.
It’s smiling when you’re screaming inside.
It’s feeling alone in a room full of people
who have no idea what the world is like for you.

Becoming a hero
is hiding your scars when society strips away your armor
and takes away your defenses.

Becoming a hero
is having to relive your regrets any time someone says,
“Thank you for your service,”
when you struggle every day to erase it from your mind.
It’s searching for outlets
to take the weight of your guilt off your spirit.
It’s loving your country when it doesn’t love you back.
It’s begging your family to understand
when they can’t relate to your experiences.
It’s drowning in sympathies when all you need is empathy.
It means hiding your issues with substances
because nobody told you it would change your very core.
Becoming a hero
is never trusting again.
It’s never seeing good in people
because you’ve witnessed the evil that people are capable of.
It’s pushing people away because it’s easier to be alone
than to live through the arguments and fights
about your tainted points of view.
It’s never unseeing what you wish you had never seen.
It’s finding comfort in silence when your mind is louder
than your willpower.
It’s always being on guard.
It’s becoming an expert wall builder.

Becoming a hero
is feeling at home when your world is crashing ‘round you.
It’s feeling expendable.
It’s hurting the people you love
to protect them from you hurting them more.
It’s waking up in tears.
It’s missing the places and activities you once enjoyed.
Becoming a hero
means being on a constant search
for the person you were before the fight.
It’s learning to love people two years at a time
and having to start all over again.
It’s losing your individuality
because your identity isn’t mission essential.

Becoming a hero
is watching your peers pursue their professional careers
while you feed your family with your VA Disabilities.
It’s being sick and tired of politicians trying to capitalize
on your pain by making empty promises for your vote.

Why would anyone want to become a hero?

Oh, Come All Ye Faithful

*By John Bradley
VA Medical Center – Nashville, TN*

Oh, come all ye children,
Trusting and compliant,
Oh, come ye! Oh, come ye!
To McDuffyland!
It’s by far number one,
None other can compare
To McDuffyland’s dominant market share
Or its profit-to-earnings ratio
That’s extra-ordinaire!
Come ye all and patronize him!
Come ye all, idolize him!
Come ye all and subsidize him!
Come ye all, enrich him!
McDuffyland, king-o-peace and trans-fat grease!
Oh, sing ye choirs of parents,
McDuffyland serves what’s best for kids to eat!
Though non-nutritious, it tastes delicious!
Priced so low, it’s ridiculous!
Each McDuffyland is color coordinated,
Spiffy, clean, neat, ideal surroundings
For serving an artery-clogging greasy treat!
Every triple-decker is packed
With pre-measured amounts of sugar, salt and fat,
Artistically blended with chemically enhanced meats!
Oh, come all ye children to gluttony!
Smiling, laughing happily as you eat yourselves to obesity!
Generous McDuffyland includes a toy for you,

Even exotic-sounding salmonella, Shiga toxins,
E. coli bacteria for a select few!
Oh, parents and children, ye all know
Santa came but one day each year,
But now that one day plus 364 more.
McDuffyland, the beloved, is open and very near!
Oh, come ye!

**GLADYS FELD HELZBERG MEMORIAL
AWARD**

55-Year High School Reunion Presentation

*By Daniel Paicopulos
— San Diego, CA*

I've been thinking
a lot
about war lately,
especially the most important one,
you know what I mean,
the one that happened to us.
I've been thinking
about bravery,
and fear,
how the absence of one
does not define the other.
I've been thinking
about how
no one hates war
more than the warrior.
I need not think
too long on this.
It is a given.
It is for sure.
No one hates war
more than the warrior.



When we were kids,
we were oh, so serious
about playing war.
We had the leftover helmets
from somebody else's
most important war.
A few of us had BB guns,
most of us used sticks,
pretending to rat-a-tat-tat.

When we were still only teens,
some of us in our twenties,
we were still kids,
even though we thought
we were grown men and women,
just because we were stationed
so far from home.
Some of us,

a very few,
thought we were
still playing war,
though most of us knew
it was a deadly serious game.

Now that we are older,
even old,
we know
how foolish we were.
How silly of us to think
any of it was ever a game.

So yes, my brothers and sisters,
the only war that seems to matter
is the one we fought in.
All warriors have this understanding.
All veterans have this agreement.
There have been so many wars,
yet only one was the worst.
Because it happened to us.
So many battles,
so many dead and wounded,
even when there was nothing to win.

My brothers and sisters
did not then,
do not now,
fight for territory,
nor for some higher authority,
maybe not even for the nation,
nearly never.

My brothers and sisters,
my comrades,
fought and still fight for each other,
keeping their pledge,
abiding by their oath,
operating with ruthless honor.
They fought and still fight together,
protecting the living
and attending to their higher duty,
remembering the dead.

I love them,

I appreciate them,
I honor them.

Even when
I have not met them,
I know them,
my brothers and sisters,
the veterans

**MARGARET SALLY KEACH MEMORIAL
AWARD**

Power of the Pen

By Dan Yates

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

It happened again, I awake with a start,
Another nightmare that pierces my heart.
I feel the sweat, remember that day,
I try to forget but my mind won't obey.

I sit on the bed, my chest is pounding,
In the back of my mind that bomb still sounding.
My eyes flicker left, then to the right,
I'm all alone in the dark of the night.

Though back home from that burning sand,
I try to talk but they don't understand.
They say they listen but they don't hear
The battle raging between my ears.

I go online to find a cure.
How much more can I endure?
I find a site that offers hope
With a pen, not a rope.

I read a story, then another
Of the pain from a brother.
He says that words are now his friend,
A new beginning, not an end.

I read a poem, then I sigh,
Knowing that page won't deny
How I feel, why I cry
Should a tear form in my eye.

I sit and wonder, could I write?
Destroy the dark, bring back the light?
I'll never know unless I try,
So I ask, why not this guy?

I begin to write, the words flow free,
They fill the page in front of me.
There'll be no grade, no critique
On how I write, instead of speak.

I close my eyes and say a prayer,
Glad *Veterans' Voices* was out there.
So when I next wake in the night,
I'll grab my pen and start to write.



**DAVA STATE DEPARTMENT OF KANSAS
AWARD**

Ghost Fighters in the Sky

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center – San Francisco, CA

A pilot in his silver plane
Was cruising through the sky,
And as he soared into the blue,
He watched the clouds float by.

And all at once a score of planes
Came soaring so near by,
And in them were the souls of men,
Ghost fighters of the sky.

Some had no wing, some had no tail,
Some never had a prop,
But were guided by the spirit
Of men who dare not stop.

And without a body,
The soul went on ahead,
Fighting for our liberty,
The heritage of the dead.

And as the planes soared into space,
He heard this mournful cry,
“We wait for you to join us,
Ghost fighters in the sky.”

**DAVA STATE DEPARTMENT OF KANSAS
AWARD**

The Autumn Leaf

By Peter Rompf

VA Medical Center – Syracuse NY

Catching the corner of my eye
Up in the turbulent sky
Yellow like the sun
Once green, its life almost done
Like a sailboat in the bay
At sunset far away.
An autumn leaf all alone
Like a sailboat far from home
Its stem like a rudder cutting through the breeze
Handling life with such ease.
I close my eyes and smile,
I think of her, it's been a while.
Opening my eyes, the yellow leaf is gone,
Vanishing like a sailboat in the storm.
I see the bare trees, branches like fingers

Reaching out to the open air,
Reaching out to nowhere.
The splendor of summer is gone,
The bitter winter is born.
I close my eyes and cry,
I think of her, it's been such a long while.
Looking above my head,
There it is now yellow and red,
Soon to rest, soon to go,
Soon buried beneath the snow.
Somewhat dormant, lying on the ground,
Born again like new love found.
I close my eyes and she is gone.
The sun is high, the water is calm.

**DAVA STATE DEPARTMENT OF KANSAS
AWARD**

A Whole Sand Dollar

*By Daryl Eigen
VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM*

Early evening on the North Oregon Coast.
Whole sand dollars, fragile sisters of the stars,
Whose smashed skeletons litter the bar.
Pants rolled up above wet feet, searching.

Screaming birds nesting on the monoliths
Paint white abstractions.
A seal pup takes refuge on the beach,
Exhausted, yelping weakly,
Having eluded a stalking great white
Rocketing through the swaying kelp forest.
Tidal pools reflect grey clouds and shelter brilliant life.
Coastal mountains misty in the distance.
Careful, don't get trapped by a rogue wave,
And swept out to sea in 53 degree water.

Combing the harsh zone where destruction reigns,
Making worthless currency in the sands of time.
Slowly, rhythmically, waves rumble,
Rolling in and out in tune with tidal forces.

A bright dancing kite heralds the turning earth.
The sea gobbles the sun; a celestial chord of color stuns.
Wet sands shine, mirroring the saffron sky,
And I search hunched and eager.

Feet know the way an eye can see.
Perfection round and whole just ahead,
Completely rare with mystical tattoo.
Only God knows what a whole sand dollar can do.

**SALLY-SUE HUGHES
MEMORIAL AWARD**

Charon

*By Andrew Napier
VA Medical Center – Miami, FL*

Panicked sentences are reduced to words.
The color gradually leaves his face.
His grip on my hand begins to loosen.

Endless noise in the trauma room becomes silent.
I begin to focus on the sound of his breath.
Inhalations are labored and begin to slow.

I wonder, "What is my role here?"
Sworn to save, but now I idly watch.
His life slips away with every second.
"This isn't fair; he's too young to fight in this pointless war.
Why are those damn fuel lines underneath those seats!"
His skin is now clammy and begins to feel cool to the touch.

He calls out for his mother once more.
Does she know something is wrong?
His pupils are now dilated.

"I didn't enlist to work in a morgue,
and I'm not a ferryman of the dead."
Now his body lies completely still.

Amidst this inner turmoil, I realize
my consciousness will never find rest.
Yet now this young soldier has found peace.



SALLY-SUE HUGHES
MEMORIAL AWARD

Bosnia

By Edward W. Luzadder Jr.
— Arlington, VA

Watching TV and seeing the faces
Of soldiers in far away places.
Their eyes I see are hard and cold,
For nothing can hurt the brave and the bold.

Onward they look showing no fear,
Waiting for the angry crowd to clear.
A government this country wanted to mold,
Or so these brave men were so often told.

Drawn into someone else's great civil war,
With bloody killing fields longing for more.
Millions of people have fought and died,
Millions of families mourned and cried.

Peace in the region we will bring,
And put a stop to this bloody thing.
But when we leave what will we see—
Peace and love or a killing spree?

SALLY-SUE HUGHES
MEMORIAL AWARD

The Squirrels and Bonaparte

By Judith Sweet Guittar
— Louisville, KY

The squirrels!
They're trained, you know.
It costs millions...
Just to train the squirrels.
Oh, yes. Make no mistake.
They do not run, see,
But wait for peanuts by the bench,
All of them as though a secret chain
Binds them and obliges them
To wait.
Yes, clever little squirrels.

I have a friend who thinks
He's Bonaparte incarnate
In his shabby red pajamas.
What a sight!
I shut my eyes afraid that he is right.
And if he is,
Perhaps the squirrels will run today.
They're trained, you know.



They're not afraid of me.
And neither am I
Except sometimes at night
When I am no longer sure
About the squirrels or Bonaparte.

Last week I knew the secrets
Of a nation and was respected.
Yes, then suddenly no one
Would believe me anymore.
Except for the squirrels and Bonaparte,
I haven't one friend left
Who doesn't shut his eyes,
Afraid that I am right.
Too much pressure? Nonsense!
Ask the squirrels! Ask Bonaparte!
Me, I'm busy shelling nuts
For the squirrels.
They're trained, you know.

WOSL MEMBERS, APPRECIATION AWARD
EDITOR'S CHOICE, BY DORIS COBB

In His Dreams

By Kimberly Green
— Fort Smith, AR

In his dreams he breathes
Without the help of this machine.
This machine he plugs in each and every night,
So that he can breathe without having to fight.

This newfound friend, this machine,
Something he would have never dreamt
He'd be dependent on just to help him live.

Why him and, of course, all the rest?
Was this his just reward
For his tours of duty in Iraq?

And, yes, he thinks.

I've got a right to be mad,
Me and all the rest
For all the environmental waste
We were breathing, probably lead.

And laying down he does,
Placing the mask upon his face.
Drifting off he knows he'll never breathe
like he did before...
Because he's a soldier of a toxic war.

Into the Autumn Season

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

Standing outside in the autumn fresh air,
I see the beautiful scenery everywhere,
Leaves turning colorful in the trees,
Peace everywhere, all at ease.

I capture the sunshine energizing my soul,
See lovely flowers unfolded, one and all.
Nature is changing; the season's still new.
Under the clear sky, the sun shines through.

The autumn weather changes, summer forgotten,
I feel a cool breeze touching me often.
Birds of a feather appear; they're hardly around.
The morning frost is starting to cover the ground.

We secure transportation for travel by air, land and port
As life is prepared to keep warmth and comfort.
We live through autumn, feel changes within.
New insights reach out when a new season begins.

Dance of the Leaves

By David Samson

VA Medical Center – Omaha, NE

In the fall, when the sky turns cold,
The leaves turn to red and gold.
The leaves drop from the trees,
And they do a dance in the breeze.
Swirl, twirl, they do a dance,
Hayrack rides for romance.
In the wind, they do a kiss,
They do a dance, they never miss.
Take a girl by the hand,
What a nice gentleman.
In the fall, when the sky turns cold,
The leaves turn to red and gold.
The leaves drop from the trees,
And they do a dance in the breeze.



Thanksgiving Day

By John E. Jones

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

The greatest miracle we have and know
Is within the light of Jesus Christ's everyday show.
Since time reaching from the past,
God gave us hope to always last
Through the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ he forever has.

Awaken, Thanksgiving Day, within the light of sunshine.
God-given grace has sent us faith for all times,
Living within the spirit of Jesus Christ.
God provides everywhere.
We're thankful to God for people to share and care
And worship with at holy settings in prayer.

God gave us love that nobody can take.
We live without despair; we're thankful not to hate.
In life we're never alone, and always grateful say,
We're thankful to God for his love every day.
Through time's changes, our souls
Within his spirit he holds.
We believe in our holy position
And always give God recognition.

Hey You

By Helen Anderson Glass

VA Medical Center – Tuscon, AZ

There's another veteran we overlook
who may never be in the history book.
When I yell at him saying, "Hey You"
He doesn't get mad as others do.
He's a buddy, a comrade, a brother, you see,
And in his own way I think he likes me.
He follows orders, never shirking this war,
Never questions what we're fighting for.
It's a pity and, to my shame, in the beginning
I didn't know his real name.
I knew it was long and began with a "U"
So "Hey You" is what he answered to.
I do know I'll be lost without my friend
If and when this war comes to an end,
Or if one or both of us "bite the dust."
Saying how I feel right now is a "must."
So, my friend, before it's too late
And one of us has met our fate,
I'll stand at attention and proudly say
You are my hero as I'll salute, by the way.
And you will wag your tail in reply
As each in our own way says, "Goodbye."

Here Is a Funny Poem

By David Samson

VA Medical Center – Omaha, NE

A banana split
'Cause this is it.
That ice-cold treat
I like to eat,
But then I spilled it
On my seat.

Point Man

By Phil Hosier

VA Medical Center – Prescott, AZ

Get your mind right.
Quit worrying about what might happen.
Sharpened senses and eagle eyes—
These are the things that keep men alive,
Moving along, looking for any sign,
Listening for sounds of any kind,
Always asking yourself, "Why."
If the answer is wrong, read it right
Or it won't be long.
Hearts beat faster; you can hear me sweat.
I'm playing the game; I ain't lost yet.
Fists come up head high,
Danger close, need to know why.
Hold up, boys!
Safeties off, everyone tense.
Point man moves slowly trying to make sense.
Signal given, danger passed, everyone's in the groove.
Patrol resumes with everyone watching their moves.
This can go on for hours or days on end.
Doesn't matter, I'll be out front till the bitter end.
This is who I am and, come what may,
Protecting my brothers is my duty this day.

*This poem is dedicated to my friend Roger Flood,
USMC Vietnam Combat Veteran*

Why Should I Write?

By Dennis Silas

VA Medical Center – Danville, IL

Why should I write?
To impress my self-esteem
Or be the best of the best.
Why should I write?
When that feeling comes along,
I am like a junkie needing a fix.
I have to write to make my physical
And mental stability whole.
I use my pen or pencil
Whichever one is available.
Then I commence to put poetry in motion.

'Twas the Night Before Christmas

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

The night before Christmas
And all through my squadron
We worked on those C-130s

"A" models they were
Not powered by reindeer
But T56s
Great Allison engines they were.
Blood always flowed freely
From our mechanics' hands.
Safety wire as sharp as razors
Always caught skin.
We all flew on them, too,
To aid the broken
Who knew where we were
Except in Vietnam.
All four corps we flew
Never knowing where one would break down.
Then mid-air diverted by base command
Some poor unit just got slaughtered.
Drop our load and rerig for medivac
We did.
UP UP and AWAY
Engines one, two, three and four,
We have lives to save
The gore of war.
The engines roared
Straight up we flew
To avoid enemy fire.
We arrived as fast as we could
Straight down now
Holding on for dear life.
We were all scared
No idea what awaited
Just proud Airmen Helpers
Like Santa's elves we were.
Common Joe, let me help you,
I'll rewrap that bloody bandage.
Soon we're gone
No time to waste even a second
Guys hurt so badly
Had to get them help.
Once again let those Allison's ring out!
'Twas Christmas Eve
No rest for the weary
Straight down again, all were strapped in.
Medics and nurses ran out to meet us
Saints they were to help all those wounded.
The fixing and missions finally stopped.
After three tours I was completely a mess.
Of all things I, too, was medivaced out
On one of my own planes.
Three months it took to regain
My composure!
Christmas in '69
Like no other
UP UP and AWAY
Engines one, two, three and four,
We have lives to save
Let's do it once more.



An Oasis of Peace

By Dannie Lee Baldwin Jr.
— Woodbridge, VA

An oasis of peace
will I find
or just a mirage
I see within my mind
where there's a bounty
of water, dates, olives
and shade,
where I can rest and pray
my worries away,
a place where God
will replenish
my tired soul
from a world that has gone mad
and seems to be cold,
where the clouds
of thunder
give way to the sun
with the sign
of a rainbow
that a new life has begun.
Yes, an oasis of peace.

The Eagle

By Daniel Adjei
VA Medical Center – Orlando, FL

Eagle, eagle, flying high,
Hawk, your relative.
A mighty hand
Thoughtfully frames
At night a dance
To the evergreen,
A swift flight.
I saw an eagle grab a fish.
At first, a sight wondrous to the eye,
Orange, yellowish, something red.
Fledgling's dish, ready to fly
In the clouds
Above so high.
Eagle, eagle, flying high.

I Smell Bacon

By Mel Brinkley
VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ

What's that sizzling in the frying pan?
Could it be some bacon for me?
I don't like food that's from a can.

Only crispy bacon satisfies me!
Satisfies me!

I smell bacon, crispy bacon,
I smell bacon all crispy and brown!
I smell bacon.
Maybe someone's making me a pound.
A whole pound.

Thin cut or thick cut, I don't care.
I'd do tricks if you'd only share.
Otherwise, I'll just stare and stare.
You've been warned, so beware!
Beware!

Applewood smoke drifts in the air.
I whine and wag my tail.
I shake my butt with lots of flair.
My human moves just like a snail.
Just like a snail.

See me circling for a bite.
Bacon makes me lose my cool.
Look at me dance upright.
Now I'm moonwalking in my own drool.
In my own drool.

I smell bacon. It's still warming.
It's still warming, how charming it smells!
I smell bacon.
Maybe someone's making me a pound.
A whole pound.

Chalk Spinnet On

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

Christmas.
The birth
Of the
Christ.
Carolers.
Oh, Holy
Night.
Goodness
And
Light.



Chinese Philosophy of the Han Dynasty

By John Bradley

VA Medical Center – Nashville, TN

A man's life does not fill a hundred years,
Yet a man's life can seem to fill a thousand years
with woes and rages.
If he chooses to make it so
as the years come and go,
He frowns instead of smiles
He is rough instead of gentle
He is selfish
He hoards benefits he might share
He withholds from rather than gives
to others...
Love.

How I Feel About the American Flag

By Charles Sturies

— Danville, IL

I say it's tarnished because it's been through the ugliness
of the sixties,
what with the divisiveness the Vietnam War caused.
I have an acquaintance who has a T-shirt that says,
"These colors don't bleed," and then shows the American flag.
I say they're bleeding now because of the unnecessary blood
shed by our boys in Vietnam mixing, perhaps, with the red blood
of America as symbolized by the red stripes on the flag.
All because there were these chicken-shit draft dodgers,
at least in my own opinion, who with their squawking
about serving seemed to egg the war on and on
and the unnecessary bloodshed it caused.
I do respect the symbolic nature of the beauty
of the American flag and can recall
when I was still rather patriotic suggesting to my father,
a retired West Point combat army colonel, to get a flag pole
in our front yard at one of the houses we lived
in the Champaign-Urbana area, and fly the flag every day
long before it was done even in other parts of the country.
I could be wrong there. Anyway there was an article
in the local paper about it, near as I can remember,
implying that or else it was at least a first
for Champaign-Urbana.
I think I'm getting patriotic enough again
to definitely want the flag not to be burned or defamed.
Yeah, me and the flag these days.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

By Paul David Adkins

VA Medical Center – Watertown, NY

Tonight, we honor special guests.
This should make you feel better
that you're only watching a game.

Don't worry.
We have been amply compensated.

These men and women did not die.
They were not disfigured.
In their uniforms, they stand resplendent.
They left the explosions at home.

Feel free to applaud them
for their service.
Feel free
not to know a thing.

You may now wave
the toy flags lying
beneath your seats.
You may now squint
into the glare of their honor.
You may shield your eyes.

You may now cup
your caged and fluttering hearts.



Tapestry

By Rickey L. Bennett

VA Medical Center – Sheridan, WY

Prior to war my confidence was set,
My commitment with God had not one threat,
And my competence was for sure no sweat.

From my angle I was invincible.
My undoing was inconceivable
Since my service was indispensable

Till I was in the triage trauma tent
And witnessed something that I would lament.
It was worse than I have ever dreamt.

Then one-by-one from that godawful fight
There appeared a snag or two with a fright
That was camouflaged in the dark of night.

A glance of my life's fabric from afar
May resemble that flowering blazing star,
But up close and personal it's bizarre.

A closer view gives a truer picture,

That my self-portrait has a weird fissure
Where you'd guess freedom there was a tether.

Perplexity lurks on both side and end.
The first thread pulled was on whom to depend
When my faith in a loving God would end.

Eyeing the backside of my life's rubric
Will give the effect that it's erratic,
Offering nothing that's therapeutic.

Since the first day of my unraveling
Even the frontside art is baffling,
And the confusion is dismantling.

The remaining pattern mimics mirthless
Existence that's tantamount to faithless
Service whose significance is worthless.

Till the Master Weaver steps on the scene
And reveals what otherwise was unseen,
To the naked eye it did look rather obscene.

The Designer's gaze looked deep within me
Ignoring my idiosyncrasy
And did deliver his royal decree

Saying, "All that the locust has eaten
Will be restored and surely sweetened.
Beauty from ash will prove you're unbeaten!"

He asked me to put down my hero cape
So from my dilemma I could escape,
And with His assurance I did undrape.
He removed more threads to my sheer surprise
Before I could get a word in edgewise.
His works alone did my life harmonize.

With the skill set of an ancient craftsman
The damage the Master did countermand
With all the wisdom from his master plan.

The thread of terror has now been replaced.
In its stead calmness has been interlaced
With tranquility and strength that's embraced.

The cord of distrust has now been unstitched.
In its place belief has now been sandwiched
'Tween faithfulness and control that's enriched.

The depression strand has now gone away.
In its niche hope is now an interplay
Of love and joy as a miracle play.

The fibers of loneliness are undone.
In its gap gentleness is now homespun
With the truth and humble spirit reborn.

This side of time my cloth won't be perfect.
It will have some flaws but in retrospect
It'll reflect the traits of its Architect.

Seeing for the first time my tapestry,
A blending of grief and grace strategy,
It's my design to live triumphantly.

Oblivion Express

By Anthony Kambeitz
VA Medical Center – Albany, NY

Between the ears and eyes there lies
A vast plain like endless skies.
You can travel with me if you dare
In between and everywhere.
Rainbow clouds out of the corner of my eye,
Gentle voices whisper to me,
Don't be afraid.
Worry not. You've got it made.
In the distance appear castles made of sand.
Aren't they beautiful?
Honey, take my hand.
To my right ride seven horses colored white,
Riders dressed in black.
It makes me stop and wonder
Are they ever coming back?
Not a word was spoken,
Quiet as a tomb.
As I grew closer to the riders
They began to disappear.
Awake! Awake! You're ONLY sleeping.
Dreams can't be stolen.
They will always be remembered uniquely as my own,
And can never be exclusively told.

Stranded

By Scott Lehman
VA Medical Center – St. Louis, MO

Wintertime Sunday,
Playing in the snow
Because my car won't go.
Catch my drift?
My tires spin and spin,
The snowplow buried me in.
I need a tow truck to come real soon,
I've been shoveling all afternoon.
Here comes a ride,
But he just waves, "Hi."
What else can go bad
As the sun goes down?
How many miles to the next town?
I push and push and it finally goes,
Leaving me there with frozen toes.

The Broken Vessel

By Sanford Tollette

VA Medical Center – Little Rock, AR

The Potter saw a vessel
that was broken by the wind and rain,
and he sought with so much compassion
to make it over again.
O, I was that vessel that no one thought was good.
I cried, Lord, you're the potter and I am the clay,
make me over again today.
Then God picked up the pieces
of my broken life that day.
He made me a new vessel,
and revived my soul again.

My friend, if you're broken
and scattered by the storms of life,
and you've looked in vain for the answers
for all your turmoil and strife,
just look to the Saviour
who'll save your soul from sin.
Cry, Lord, you're the potter and I am the clay,
make me over again today.
Then God will pick up the pieces
of your broken life that day.
He'll make you a new vessel
And restore your soul again.

Dissent

By Allen Burns

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

Once the bleeding hearts have bled out,
they'll have no reason to shout.
The Left wants to bring down Trump,
but they'll be the ones to get dumped.
They've overplayed their hand.
The Trumpists will be the last to stand
and carry out their plan
to "Make America Great Again."
The sore losers of the Left are all but bereft
of their senses.
Love-life leapers and sanctuary seekers
are on the outs.
Alien criminals all will depart.
I'm happy to report
the rest are welcome to stay and share a bright new day.
Though there's dissension in the ranks,
we can all give thanks.
Leadership has returned, and Old Glory won't be burned.
Things have turned for US, and that is a great big plus.

The Factory

By Kamal Bowen

VA Medical Center – Richmond, VA

A four-sided room.
Boxed in
A dark room
Ideas waiting to be recognized
Not a thing is going on.
It's quiet...shhhhhhhhh!
I need to get their attention
Something from the outside.
The white of my eyes is their light
Trying to figure out the best time
To come out.
Every day they are planning
To be seen and heard.
Every day gets closer
To that day they can come out.
When the toe tapping
And the nail biting stops
And my organized daydreams
Become reality,
The Factory.

There Are New Politicians on the Scene That Make No Sense

By Charles Sturies

VA Medical Center – Danville, IL

Especially Pence.
They claim to be Conservative,
but they're giving away
the taxpayers' money
in torrents
just like Democrats do.
They might have cheated
with the Russians to get elected,
but everyone knows communism
is our arch enemy.
Sexual harassment
shouldn't be anyplace
in today's politics.

Merry Christmas

By Kenny C. Trujillo

VA Medical Center – Phoenix, AZ

Merry Christmas to all.
And nothing was crawling
Not even a roach,
And personalized art was left
Behind just for Santa to see.

All night long Santa brings forth gifts
 To all girls and boys,
 One location at a time.
 As the dawn comes close,
 Santa rides his sled
 From near and far.
 And no matter the weather
 Santa makes it possible
 To make all children happy.
 Thank you, Santa,
 For coming through
 And all that you do.
 Merry Christmas
 To you all.



When you shrug me on,
 you're really puttin' on the Ritz.

So forgive me
 if I dislodge and tenderly cradle the heart
 from its once-virgin cavity.

Have mercy as I unkink
 the thirty feet of bowels,
 squeeze the contents
 like a tube of Crest.

You see.

You see what you came to see:
 the leg, mid-stride,
 shriveled balloon of stomach,
 foot stuffed in boot housing.

This, for God's sake, is the difference.

For His sake,
 and that absolute falling
 back into the world
 without the wings we were promised.

Stand Up, Young Soldier

*By Jason Kirk Bartley
 VA Medical Center – Danville, IL*

Stand up, young soldier,
 You've done well.
 You served your country,
 Your nation well.
 You've braved the rocket fire,
 And dodged the grenades,
 Made it safe through another day.
 What about the others
 Who will not make it home?
 Some have made the ultimate sacrifice,
 Others are MIA.
 Stand up, young soldier,
 You're still in the fight.
 The least little noise,
 Does it keep you up at night?
 The enemy is always lurking,
 Ready for attack.
 You haven't had sleep for days,
 You want to hit the sack.
 Do you have memories
 You'd rather forget?
 Stay strong in the battle
 And please never quit.
 We love you.
 God bless our troops.



The Right Touch

*By Scott Sjostrand
 — Hallock, MN*

"Picky" Olson, an old friend,
 Is in the nursing home. He's on the mend.
 He was in the Army, building airstrips in Vietnam.
 There were snipers, mortars, an occasional bomb.
 He was a heavy equipment operator with a "special touch."
 To the South Vietnamese, his presence meant much.
 After the war he returned back home.
 Here he worked for Harold Soteraski,
 And it wasn't a war zone.
 Picky ran the backhoe for Harold's crew.
 They replaced old pipe and made sewers new.
 I was a trench man and watched his finesse.
 As an operator, Picky was the best.
 He worked magic with the old Cat track hoe.
 He laid miles of pipe, that is truly so.
 It looked so easy watching him perform his job.
 I tried it once. "How's he do it?" He smiled with a nod,
 Years of experience under his belt.
 I'm sure when he retired his absence was felt.

War Story #202: Prayer of the SVIED?

*By Paul David Adkins
 VA Medical Center – Watertown, NY*

Allow me, in the name of God,
 to wrench each tooth that I touch
 from its socket,
 unhinge upper jaw from jaw,
 and saw the tongue-limb free of the root.

The Answer

By Richard Wangard

VA Medical Center – Milwaukee, WI

Rotten troubling month.
Family crisis hits
Go into action
Trying to save as usual
Training learned 50 years ago.
After initial day
Cut off
No way out.
Overrun emotionally
By own family
No answer
No communication.
My mind running worse
Than a chicken with its head cut off.
PTSD triggers.
Now I MUST HAVE AN ANSWER!
Can't break through
Perimeter secured by family.
I worry like crazy and find
Drinking and chain-smoking
No answer.
Deeply troubled I turned to the VA.
Thank God for Kim,
My counselor so wise and smart,
But the answer does not come
Until today. Over a month
Has gone by.
My daughter saved his life
Her brother's life.
My best friend showed up today
At my home.
I was already drunk
Made him ribs
Rainy day but grilled anyway
Moved to garage
Right next to the Harley.
We ride everywhere
Always together.
He is a 'Nam vet, too!
We pull no punches
Talk frank, we do.
I explained everything to him
He listened intently
Then gave me the answer
That I could not figure out
By myself
A two-word answer
That made all the sense.
My mind eased and now I knew
Why my family did what they did.
The answer was not what
I wanted to hear but very true.
I have always quipped,
"Age is not a time of life
But a state of mind."

I was wrong
And I was pushed aside.
The answer was,
"You're old!"
Invisible I became
I seek no sympathy
Or even empathy.
I was spared the pain of action
But I did not understand.
Vanish, old man,
You did your time
Now get out of the way
So I can do mine.
Adult children watch out for each other.
I guess I did something right
Now relaxed no need to get drunk
And chain-smoke.
I am old
And that is no joke.

Freedom's Wagon

By Douglas Pederson

VA Medical Center – Bedford, MA

Misty rain falls upon those paying their respects,
Does not forestall the march of this kind.
Fellow soldiers followed the horse-drawn wagon
Headed to the burial grounds of sacrifice.
A fallen soldier was laid to rest.
No rainbow can alter the gray skies that cover,
A burst of sun will not lessen the pain that stifles
Valor among men, honor to all.
Inscribed gravestones with bronze markers at the side
Tell us those who rest here
Will never be forgotten for their service.
We're freed from our foes,
But we lost our men who fought for us.
We now fight the tears from that sacrifice.
Their bravery was exemplified; our flag still waves.
Freedom rings, but freedom brings back the wagon,
Horse leading with empty saddle and boots in the stirrups.
When it passes, salute or bow.
Where freedom lies here, soldiers also lie.
Our nation gained victory, but yet they died.
They united to fight so we might live.
Freedom took our men; what will you give?



Christmas in a Small Town

By Daniel Yates

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

Christmas in a small town is nothing like the others.
All your family lives there, your sisters and your brothers.
Old tales are told again, yet we always seem to laugh.
Is there any truth to them? Sometimes only half.

We gather 'round the fireplace made to keep us warm,
With a cup of cider that's always been the norm.
Don't let the fire go out, throw on another log.
Be careful when you get it, not to step upon the dog.

Dinner is on the table, we're all seated at our place.
When it's finally quiet, Father can say grace.
Thirty minutes later you can hear a sigh.
Though we may be stuffed, there's always room for pie.

The men head to the parlor, the women do the dishes,
The grown-ups share old memories while the children
share their wishes.
Mother loves the carols, so she breaks out in a song,
Knowing that it won't take much for us to sing along.

The tree is filled with ornaments made in grammar school
By all the family members. Today they still look cool.
Underneath the Christmas tree are gifts of every size.
When Grandma opens hers, tears always fill her eyes.

Darkness fills the sky as we grab our coats to go,
Knowing we could walk home through the blowing snow.
It seems we just arrived. My, how time does fly.
Hugs and tears are shared as we say, "Goodbye."

As we walk out to the car, I turn and raise my hand,
And wave once more to those who still live upon this land.
I see them standing hand in hand, just inside the door,
And thank the Lord for small towns where love is so much more.

Empty

By Dennis Silas

VA Medical Center – Danville, IL

I've been havin' a strange
Feeling for the last several
Days. Empty.
Nothing.
Spaced out.
No, I am not on drugs,
Alcohol or any kind
Of non-prescription medication.
I just feel empty.
I can't write.
I can't sleep or eat,
Or function.

Empty.
I tried to pray but
What do I say?
I believe in you, God.
I trust you, Jesus.
Can you hear my
Cry?
I am just an empty guy.
No, I don't feel like I am going to die.
I want to be
Around
To see my grandkids
Great-great-grandkids
Become a certain age
Where they're in control
Of all their faculties,
Mental, physical, spiritual
Religious, moral.
I want to be
Around
When they walk across
The stage to get their diplomas.
I want to be around
When they get their
Driver's licenses.
I want to be there
When they start
Their own families.
But it's not up to
Me.



Making Choices

By Clinton Jarrett

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

We learned we had Hepatitis C
about the same time.
I stopped drinking, you said.
"We all have to die sometime."
Then your bout began.
Starting in your liver, it spread.

A doctor assigns chemical torture.
You move a fork of cold eggs from your lips,
sip warm juice and push the full plate over
the edge. Your robe sags around bony hips.

The chemo's too much; you decide to quit
the treatments. Years pass. You wake with blurred eyes.
I know you are tired of fighting this shit,
I won't judge whether your choices were wise.
The doctor says nothing more can be done,
Now the damn cancer has finally won.

The Smell of Horses

By Penny Lee Deere
VA Medical Center – Albany, NY

I think, what is it that I really like about the horses?
I wonder if it's the smells
located in the country on a mountaintop,
crisp clean air.
Horses understand, no words required,
greenery is everywhere
blankets and tack
all senses engaged,
hearing sounds like the birds
seeing my dog wandering around
smell of leather
smell of hay
texture of hay
feel of green
smell of grain and horses
and for her hide, cassettes called the manure.
I just love the smell of maneuvering.
It clears my lungs
and touches people.
Those who love to be around horses
seem to be receptive to others.



Tomorrow, Lord,
Every day and year you watch over the earth and your people.
Free will you give us to make decisions
without your counsel,
And when these decisions turn into
Obstacles and hard consequences,
Wrong actions and risky judgments,
All that will cost my life, my family, and my job,
but you save me.

Tomorrow, Lord,
I promise I will
Love my neighbor as I do myself. (Do I really love myself?)
I will be more compassionate and kind to others,
Spend more quality time with my children,
attend every event they have.
I promise to say to my spouse, "I love you,"
even when we don't always agree.
I will be thankful more, pray more, attend church,
worship you
And understand you got me, not myself.

Tomorrow, Lord, really! I promise!
Tomorrow, tomorrow, tomorrow, Lord.
Tomorrow is not promised to you.
I Am Sorry.

Tomorrow...I Promise

By Linda McKinnis
VA Medical Center – Troy, NY

Tomorrow, Lord,
I will learn to be grateful for life and all the things
you do for me,
For I know I have a purpose in life,
But I'm too busy chasing a dream.
Tomorrow, Lord, I would say, "Thank you," I promise.

Tomorrow, Lord,
When things seem to be getting better, I tend to forget
it was not myself.
You know every breath I breathe, every hair on my head,
the sound of my heartbeats.
You know my dreams, wishes, desires, ambitions and needs.
You know every family member, my friends, the many jobs
I had and myself.
Yet, throughout all that, I can't say, "Thank you,"
But I will soon. But for now, I promise.

Tomorrow, Lord,
In your word, you said, "You will provide all my needs,"
and you have
Regarding good and bad situations.
I am a new creature with you, I know, I know
all these things, but
Tomorrow, Lord, I will say, "Thank you," I promise.

Fine Navy Day

By Scott Lehman
VA Medical Center – St. Louis, MO

Swing low sweet carrier
Comin' for to carry me home.
Sometimes I'm up
Sometimes I'm down
Sometimes I break the sound
Barrier. Ka Boom.

Swing low sweet carrier.
Look over Jordan
What do I see
A band of Blue Angels
Comin' after me.
The catapults put me up
The afterburners, what a sound,
Cables bring me down.

Go Navy! All the way!
Workin' on the flight deck
Seems like yesterday.
Knock knock. Who's there?
Sailors. Sailors have more fun.
We get the job done.



Lost

By Billie Dee Johnston
— Hutchinson, KS

They are poured out
in bottles. Their souls
are tattered clothes
amidst the rubble.
Who they are is unseen.
There is no bed
to comfort them.
They are unknown
soldiers, homeless
and forgotten.
For how long?

A Letter to My Father

By Sean Richards
VA Medical Center – Fort Worth, TX

As a child I was vexing, perplexing
and sometimes out of control
until my foster dad took control and changed my lifetime path.
He brought me closer to the Lord and back home with love.
His positive forms of punishment, mixed with love,
taught me to have compassion and tolerance for others.
As I grew, he taught me love, honor, faith in God
and compassion.
He taught me hobbies and games to occupy my time.
He was instrumental, judgmental and temperamental,
but always with an encouraging word.
For more than forty years, I have tried to walk in his shadow.
I hope and pray to God that I have done enough to honor him.
I have tried to honor and live up to the man
who took me under his wing.
He taught me how to teach and respect all men.
I love you with all my heart and unending respect.
Thanks, Dad.

Deep Inside an Injured Soldier

By Jacob Jay Copenhaver
VA Medical Center – Lebanon, PA

Once I was a boy
who just wanted some toys.
But when I was bad,
my dad would get mad.

He'd slap me and beat me,
once he actually kicked me.
My mother was a wreck
who didn't stop it a speck.

Hurt is my core
which is still very sore.

The mother who loved me
allowed my dad to hurt me.

As I got older,
my love grew colder.

This feeling inside
is as if I had died,
crawling lonely and slowly,
deep and deeper inside.

If not for my Savior
and a change in behavior,
my love would be lost,
and my soul would be the cost.

Though hurt is my core
Which is still very sore,
I take stride by stride,
for love is deepest inside.

These Mountains

By Christine Rose Hazuka
VA Medical Center – Albany, NY

I was gone from the Hudson River
Valley and foothills of the Catskills
for over ten years. Finally, I returned
home and had to write down my
heartfelt feelings:

I will never leave!
Born to them—I will die happy.
Gone from the hills, I was lost.
My spirit broken,
happy heart no more.
Wandering thoughts lived within.
Harsh winds and painful strife I had.

I will never leave!
Mountain trees and hills so full.
Among the leaves and soils,
gentle breezes
and blankets of snow.
My long lifetime of friends,
unhappy heart no more.
I will never leave!



Kill, Kill, Kill 'Em All

By *Nicholas Lopez*
VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

Miss Ladybug
You lay your eggs
In our make-do post
At Sahl Sinjar, Iraq.
You have confused us
With what you love most,
Devouring freedom in bountiful amounts.
Your tyrants, the aphids
And us, have confused this war
With a fight of lore
As Hollywood produces movies
Of heroes and patriots back home.

Your red decedents
Bring life to the desert plain,
But you and I have overstayed our welcome,
And we set fly traps.
Soon you will be lured into our net
And my fingers will crunch
Your red and black shield
As the death orchestra plays,
And the M240 golf machine gun sings,
“Die, Mother Fxxxx, Die”
Across the battlefield.

I am sorry, Miss Ladybug,
But in war you must kill
Till they lose their will.

Searching for Life After the Army

By *Jacob Jay Copenhaver*
VA Medical Center – Lebanon, PA

When I looked to my left,
And looked to my right,
There were no smiles
That came into sight.

A head looked down,
His mouth in a frown,
No happiness, no joy,
Just a scared little boy.

But the boy was a man
Who had a sad face.
As he looked around,
He recognized this place.

So he looked straight ahead,
And saw a world was dead,
For the face that he sees
Is the face of just me.

This sadness inside
Is the place we reside.
It's the reflection of me,
Who I don't want to be.

So when I look to my left,
And I look to my right,
It's going to be a long journey,
It's going to be a long fight.

The enemy of mine
Has been me the whole time.
When searching for life,
There is always strife.

Thank You for Your Service

By *Chad M. Gaydos*
— Nilwood, IL

Thank you for your service.
You don't know who I am.

Respect, you deserve it.
I destroyed distant lands.

We support all the troops,
Then stand against all wars.

Not like the other dupes!
Who? Those chanting, "No more!"

Our grandson joined last week,
I'm so sorry to hear.

We're so proud we could squeak!
You don't get it I fear.



What's Wrong With America?

By *Karen A. Green*
VA Medical Center – North Las Vegas, NV

We hear people complaining
about this land,
but we don't have the morals
there were when this country began.

People turn their backs on God
and say it's a waste of time to pray.
Satan runs this country
leading people astray.

Even when I was young
the school day began with a Bible reading,
but now it's illegal.
God's name in public schools is fleeting.

Churches
are closing at an alarming rate,
as people kill each other
with their hearts filled with hate.

God is turned away
at every turn,
yet people think
it's none of their concern.

Our money says
"In God We Trust,"
but how many people really do
or think they must?

Without God
this nation is in a world of hurt,
and Satan knows this
everywhere he lurks.

Some people worry
about stepping on toes
of the ones who don't want to hear
what you know.

It's not politically correct,
some people say,
to talk of God
or go out and pray.

School shootings
are on the rise.
Some think it's a game
to see these students die.

Some don't support
our military,
they talk negative,
some even flee.

Some burn
the flag of our land,
while others are afraid
to lend a helping hand.

Babies
are killed before they are born
by the very doctors whose oath
to save lives they were sworn.

Airplanes full of people
have been crashed and burned,
while our soldiers come home from war changed
by the things they've seen and heard.

Democracy
has become a joke.
With the election that looms,
this country could go up in smoke.

If you see something about America
that you think is wrong,
take a stand
with the others who are strong.

Turn to God
to help this country through.
It could be that one prayer
that depends on you.

Some say
they won't vote in this election.
Then they have no right
to complain on the selections.

This nation
needs everyone's care.
To see things through,
it needs our prayers!



Wishful Thinking

By Arvell L. Duckworth
— Oskaloosa, KS

What if Jesus would let us take a tour of heaven?
I know our chances are mighty slim,
But I would love to see what he had prepared
For those that really love him.

Would you go without questioning him,
Like how long will we be gone,
Or would it be all right with you, Jesus,
If I brought my wife along?

I could never explain to her
The beauty of heaven.
That is something she would have to see.
She wouldn't take much room, Lord.
Can she come along with you and me?

I would love to see the joy on her face
When we see our rewards unfold.
I know it will be so exciting,
It may be more than her little heart can hold.

I know, Lord, this may never happen,
But I had nothing else to do.
I thought it might be very interesting
To have a chat with you.

Oh, yes, Lord, there is just one more little favor
That I would love to ask today.
You know how much we need it.
Would you please bless the USA!

Christmas Brings a Gift of Peace

By Anthony Coccozza
VA Medical Center – Los Angeles, CA

On a clear day,
A cold night in a bed of hay,
A baby in a manger lay.
They called him Jesus,
The newborn King,
And the voices of angels began to sing.
Wishing you joy and peace on earth
As you celebrate our Savior's birth.
Christmas brings a gift of peace
No word can quite impart.
Christmas brings a gift of love
That blesses every heart.
Christmas brings a gift of home
To lighten all the way.
Wishing you a Merry Christmas
And a wonderful holiday.

Graduation Day

By Daniel Paicopulos
— San Diego, CA

After a year of tears,
not from kitchen prep work,
but from weekly PTSD therapy,
where an onion of another
sort was peeled,
I asked if I would get a gold star.
She said no,
you get more homework.
For how long, I asked,
already having the answer,
for the rest of my life.
Knowing it to be
a life sentence,
after a year
we still called it
graduation day.
Time to stand up straight,
shoulders back,
treat myself like someone
I am responsible for helping,
always tell the truth,
(or at least don't lie),
and live my life
with incisive simplicity
and tart common sense.
Oh, and when I encounter
a dog or cat anywhere,
pet it.



I Am That I Am

By Rodney Robinson
VA Medical Center – Hines, IL

“I am that I am.”
There’s something mystical about that expression
That stands out every time. What is “I am that I am?”
All it does is create another opportunity for you
To create something else to broaden your perspective.

You think of the universe, of the galaxies, the stars
That like the sands of the earth cannot be counted.
I do not wander, though between my feet,
I walk among the heavenly, heavenly peace.
The water washed ashore has gripped me by my ankles—
No, not shackled, but captured—
The coolness, the wet and refreshing feeling
I’ve never experienced before,
But what will I experience forevermore?

Could this be a beginning?
If so, let it continue to be my beginning.
Let it come, let it come, I welcome it
With open arms, with open heart,
With my soul.
What I know can be revealed to me
Only when it happens.

Just like a mirror I think, sometimes,
Why are people afraid to look in mirrors?
Yet they create mirrors to see things.
I don’t think people need mirrors to see things.

They already see themselves.
They look exactly the way they have always.
I think they’ve proven that to themselves:
“Do I want to change that which I see in front of me,

"And if so, why? Why am I not happy?
Not satisfied? Is that me or am I imagining things?
Will I ever know the answers to these questions?
Are there answers to these questions?"
One thing’s for sure.
It’ll take a lot more time than I have been given.
People say, “Time is forever, waits for no one.”
Constantly here, constantly there,
Constantly seems to be everywhere.

But so be it. And so let it be me.
What do I want to be?
A child of God, now and forevermore.

That’s my desire.

I Know What This Is All About

By Conrad Webley

VA Medical Center – East Orange, NJ

I know what this is all about,
This self medication, excuse me,
Let me take a sip, a hit.
I know what this is all about,
The teardrops that show up
Uninvited and all,
The nightmares that never end,
The sadness that pops up.
I know what this is all about,
I fear no man, that's for sure,
No fear after where I've been,
Just fear the Almighty for my sins.
It is that combination
That pays a visit to my head,
That makes me anxious, wish I was dead.
Guilt with shame brings on rage
And the anger I feel.
I know what this is all about,
Many strangers had to die
Because I wanted to survive.
Been to the front many times
Then guilt took hold.
Shame and rage blew my mind,
And now I cannot reconnect
With what I was before a vet.
Excuse me, let me take a sip, a hit.
Damn war is hell and PTSD reminds me still.
I know what this is all about.

I'm Sorry

By Jill Marie Baker

VA Medical Center – Sioux Falls, SD

I'm sorry when I get like this.
The feeling of being out of control

Overwhelms me at times
And I don't know what to do with it.

I don't want to take it out on you
Or pull you into the anxiety consuming me.

My tears come, frustrating me even more.
You walk out the door helpless and stressed out

As you always get when this part of me
Creeps out to ruin a perfectly good day.

So, I'm saying it again.

I'm sorry
And I wish I wasn't this way.

Listen to Our Veterans' Voices

By Helen Anderson Glass

VA Medical Center – Tucson, AZ

Hear the music--bells ringing and the sound of joyful singing.
Listen to every word. Veterans' voices are finally heard.
They're not seeking glory. They want to tell their story.
"SO LISTEN UP"
They have something to say, sometimes a price to pay.
Daily life's a game of war, but what are they fighting for?
Far back in history, they gave their lives for you and me.
"SO LISTEN UP"
They're being deployed with no one there to fill the void.
No one can ever replace, nor anything can erase
their look, happy or sad, so put down your "faithful" iPad,
"AND LISTEN UP"
Instead of "texting" or playing a game,
go to "Wounded Warriors" and find a name.
They have a better story to tell,
and the game they play is straight out of hell.
Don't hesitate. Do it today and hear what they have to say.
"STOP, LOOK AND LISTEN"
You might learn a thing or two, but now it's all up to you
to learn and to spread their words.
Help get our veterans' voices heard.
Are you willing to do your part,
and have it come right from your heart?
"NOW YOU'RE TALKING AND WE'RE LISTENING"

Reflections of a Soldier

By Penny Lee Deere

VA Medical Center – Albany, NY

Ebony and Ivory with many shades of gray make a team
and army of one

leading civilians into soldiers
but leaving an empty
shell called veterans
there is no right or wrong just do
the yin and the yang of troops

they say what courage
how trustworthy
Speak of for Valor
then why do we feel like cowards
in despair
have no trust
feel ignored rejected and afraid.

Our Neighbor Boy

By Stu Carlson

VA Medical Center – Salt Lake City, UT

Our neighbor boy lived on that spread down the street
where the fast-flowing ditch and red-chili fields meet.
His home was mud brick called adobe down there
'longside cottonwood trees lofting high in the air.

In the Land of Enchantment under skies azure blue,
Kent grew into manhood as carefree youths do.
Our parents were friends bonding close over time
while their son I scarce knew. Looking back, "What a crime!"

He was younger than me by a decade and thus
our paths seldom crossed as on schoolyards and such.
When I last saw that kid, just a tag-along lad,
hometown life I'd forsaken, career goals to be had.

Years would pass. Then news came from that far Sunbelt state.
Our neighbor boy died, a war death his fate.
One week into Nam land, on Hill 89,
NVA took his life, our Marine true and fine.

And grieving elders had one awesome task to request,
"Would I escort his body for its final rest?"
Their message was stark, choked with tears and regret.
Further, the Corps would fast find me. Active duty I'd get.
Out on Oakland's broad harbor 'neath the Bay Bridge of Fame
lies a small, rocky outcrop, "Treasure Island" by name.
There they stacked up cold coffins holding Leatherneck dead
for those last homebound trips, journeys loved ones most dread.

It was there I got guidance, casket escort routines,
how with protocol proper to deliver remains.
From Frisco's airport we flew east on our flight
with my cohort consigned, wedged 'side cargo stacked tight,
to that historic graveyard in El Paso town
where chiseled headstones note legends o'er those sleeping sound.

Years later Kent's mom and his dad would lodge there
tucked 'mid taut tiers of tombstones under Fort Bliss' stout care.
Both were Army vets proud but from World War II times
thus entitled for space on hallowed landscapes sublime.

Today, this Vietnam warrior 'neath sun-bleached, brown grass
is family united, earth-bound kinship held fast.
Once that tricycle youngster, then a youth growing tall,
always our polite, helpful neighbor...faces all we'll recall.

She Was One of Us

By Rosalie Cooper

VA Medical Center – Buffalo, NY

A female veteran, a defender of our country,
A victim of military sexual trauma,
A mother of two
Learning to be a survivor,
Teaching us how to survive.
Enslaved in her own body by the dark cells
that plagued her inner self,
She was trapped for many years
Trying to escape the torture
by the dark cells that inflicted her.
Her outer self was strong and courageous,
giving us hope for a better tomorrow.
She inspired us all.
At times the cells lay dormant,
giving her hope for a clean escape.
As time went on, the cells got stronger,
Slowly making her weaker.
She never gave up the fight
Until they came.
Veterans that have gone before us
Took her hand
And led her to a world of peace.
She was one of us, a female veteran,
A defender of our country.
Rest in peace, our friend,
Your battle is over.
You march among the brave.

The Boy From Roy and Marge's Store

By Mel D. Carney

— Shawnee, KS

What happened to the boy
That we knew so long ago?
What became of him and where did he go?
He used to milk cows on his Iowa farm
With his calloused hands and suntanned arms.

Hell, I remember him buying penny candy
at Roy and Marge's store,
But I do not see him there anymore.
In '66 they say he joined the army,
The world he wanted to see.
Then came the Infantry Training,
Intense and hard core as can be.

For 14 months they taught him how to kill.

In '69, they sent him to Vietnam to use
his newborn and deadly skill.

As a man in war, he had to stand so very tall,
Watching friends in combat fall.

He came home and was not the same,
And we all hope that he is doing well.
We have not seen him, so we cannot tell
If he got war or war got him.

He grew up in peace and love
But combat's talons killed the dove.
He knows things that few men will ever know.
He's keeps it all inside, certain that it does not show.
Some folks say that he found some peace
in a basement hideaway.
There he listens to Charlie Daniels sing,
"Still in Saigon" which heals his wounds and condones
Hunkering down in his safe place all alone.

He is filled with "Anxieties' Fear."
It has been with him for fifty years.
The boy who bought penny candy
At Roy and Marge's store, he is no more.

As a man he is journeying to see
If he can find a better way to live with PTSD.

The Coup

By Chad M. Gaydos
— Nilwood, IL

Old-self stirs and speaks,
His voice is firm, but weak.
He speaks of revolution
Sure of his solution.
"Topple the addict."
I'm now in a fit.

Propaganda's sent out,
My body shakes while I shout.

Old-self getting stronger
Screams, "Not much longer!"

The coup is on track,
Just one final attack.

Old-self has now been installed.
Rising to my feet, I bawl.



To the Nurses of the Dallas VA Cardiac Intensive Care Unit

By Sean Richards
VA Medical Center – Fort Worth, TX

I reported to the cardiac care ward.
The doctors said I needed a new heart valve.
My first nurse put me on a backboard,
Then offered me a shave and cleaning salve.

Next thing I remember was fighting the tubes,
Then a gentle voice saying, "Tonight I'll be your nurse."
From that time on it was meds, food and ice tubes.
These nurses are forever kind, loving and never terse.

These ICU nurses were forever at my beck and call
Whether it was to pee, a walk or just a smile and wave.
There was never a chance as a team that they would let me fail.
I'll be forever grateful to these nurses
for their kindness and care.

There was always a hi or bye or thank you for our service.
At shift change, they go out of their way
to provide seamless care.
These ladies went out of the way to treat me and still be nice.
These are great nurses and staff with their own kind of flair.

So thank you for your unending service and all that you do.
Thank you for your cheerful and professional care.
For all the situations--the good, bad and perplexing, too--
I say three cheers to all for giving us
your pride and feelings that are rare.

Life Outside

By James Carlton Benn
— Abington, MD

Life "outside" is everything
I thought it would be—exciting.
Not exciting because I didn't have it
while I was in, but exciting
because I can look back on my life
and say I made it.
I was married twice, moved around plenty
and had several good and bad experiences.
My life outside is mine and mine to plan.
No more answering to an entity,
nor do I have to listen
to unnecessary language
just because it's part of the business.
When I say my life outside,
I mean, simply stated,
outside of the me I used to be.

Vanishing Point

By K. W. Peery

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

As leaves of late autumn
Blanket the mud and gravel,
My mind drifts back
Long before this aging battle
Where bloodstained emotions
Were strangled by love,
And dying too soon
Seldom seemed close enough.

Chasing understanding
Out across the blue horizon,
A vanishing point awaits
As your afterburner brightens.
Steady on the throttle
While watching a movie reel,
The vanishing point awaits
Where parallels meet surreal.

Yeah, a vanishing point awaits
Where the parallels meet surreal.

Spent a half a million lifetimes
Over the last thirty years
Trying to write it down
Before it all disappears.
Reserving the moment's judgment
Crippling my ancient tongue,
When leaving this realm too soon
Sometimes meant I was almost done.

Chasing understanding
Out across the blue horizon,
A vanishing point awaits
As your afterburner brightens.
Steady on the throttle
While watching a movie reel,
The vanishing point awaits
Where parallels meet surreal.

Yeah, a vanishing point awaits
Where the parallels meet surreal.

Winter Show

By Robert Levasseur

VA Medical Center – Brockton, MA

The snow is tumbling
tumbling down
descending humbly
upon the ground
frozen dandelions
herald the day

purloin my thoughts
along the way
silent soldiers
marching on
proclaim the coming
of the dawn
they dash and
dance and flit
and flow
a serene scene
this winter show.



America's Honor Roll

By CJ Reeves

VA Medical Center – San Francisco, CA

We dedicate this honor roll
To boys who are brave and true.
America owes its freedom
To lads who were all like you.

You walked alone in the valley,
Your spirits were unafraid.
Thinking of home and loved ones,
You walked along undismayed.

There is many a lad among you
That has lost a comrade brave.
Still you carried onward
That hope for his life he gave.

Now we stand in silence here
And pray that peace is near.
May there be no need for honor rolls
In this land we hold so dear.

Warrior Strength

By Kimberly Green

— Fort Smith, AR

Warrior strength in heaven
Is what I heard when I arrived.
As I looked around
I couldn't believe my eyes.

There was my battle buddy
That died just last week,
And there was Sgt Richardson
Sitting by God's feet.

How did I...me
a low life grunt
Make it to the gold and silver?
How did I get to God's love?

And this is what was sung
By angels on high--
That for my choice to serve my country proud,
I would forever be emblazoned

With all the other angels in the skies.

So weep no more
My mother and dad.
When you look up
Remember I am not sad.

I'm in the wind and the rain,
I walk with my brothers and sisters.
In this beautiful place of love,
We reign.

To all of those who look up and see their love in the sky.

Dog Tags

*By Brendon O. Smith
— Lewisburg, PA*

I wear your plates around my neck.
I don't plan on removing them.
Your dog tags remind me
That you are gone from me,
From everyone,
Forever.

You were wrong,
YOU WERE WRONG!
I miss you every day.
You gave me hope,
Then hope was taken from me.

But your dog tags tell me
You are here with me
Forever
Walking beside me
Talking with me.
Pushing forward
Without you,
I will go on
Just like we are supposed to,
Just like we were taught.
Mission Accomplished.

But what is broken can't be
Fully repaired
No matter how much we fill it.
Everything's conflicted within me.
I want you here with me
The laughter
The tears.
My little brother,
We were supposed to grow old together,
But we buried you before your time.



The lesson was to reach deeper than ever
And fight,
But the fight was lost,
And another was claimed.
I can't even find the words to express our loss.
But until we see each other
Again,
Where the brave will live forever,
I will press on.
I will wear the plate around my neck,
So you are always with me.

Flying for Fun

*By Walter A. Wheat
VA Medical Center – Omaha, NE*

When I was young, I joined the Air Force.
I thought it might be fun.
I dealt with the yelling and screaming
Until basic training was done.
Then, I rejoiced just like the others,
I was proud on graduation day.
I was ready to fly on a real airplane
When the opportunity came my way.

That day came, all of a sudden,
When we got into the Vietnam War.
We knew we fought against communist aggression,
But they would not tell us anything more.
I flew on an airplane while the rockets passed
Very close and near to our cargo door.
There really wasn't much I could do,
But stay glued to the cold and shaky floor.

We flew up north, toward Da Nang
And over the beaches near Camron Bay.
The VCs were all moving fast,
And we had to spot them without delay.
We watched as the F-4 Phantoms
Hit their marks with such accuracy
That we wallowed in the glory by singing
America's "From Sea to Shining Sea."

Those of us who "made it"
Look back with a sense of pride.
We call each other "Brother"
At the hospitals where some of us reside.
I now have a grandson
Who is serving our country well.
Will we win our victory?
I guess only God can tell.

I Am No Angel, But I Am Me

By Diane Wasden
— Millen, GA

I am no Angel, my wings are not real.
What you see on the outside hides how I truly feel.
I am an addict, but not what you think.
My addiction is revenge, an alright overpowering thing.

They say time can heal, but time is not my friend.
I think about what he did to me,
once a day, every day, all day long,
up until the very end.

My emotions are like leaves drifting in the fall,
swirling and swirling, round and round
until they get all rolled up into a ball.
That's when I need my fix.
It's his death I want and wish.
I kill him over and over in my mind.
It won't be pretty and I won't be kind.

DON'T YOU JUDGE ME.

You should have been there in that smoke-filled room
where disgusting and unspeakable things are done to you,
when he overpowers you and there's nothing you can do.

I cried,
and I pleaded with him,
with tears in my eyes falling down
like pouring rain.
But it did not matter.
He was gonna take from me what he wanted,
and it didn't matter what I had to say.

I'm not going to deny it, I WANT HIM TO DIE.
If you could only walk just one hour in my shoes,
you wouldn't need to ask or question me why.

It's just a temporary fix
of happiness and satisfaction.
At first it's like—I could care less—I guess.

But then, who will stand beside me
and catch me when I fall?
When my high wears off
and I start feeling guilty,
whom shall I call?

God will not take it lightly,
to be thinking of such a crime.
That's when I question myself—
should I live or should I die?

They want me to forgive him,
That would be the Christian thing to do.
But true forgiveness can only come

straight from one's giving heart.
It's a hard thing for me to even think of doing,
when this man tore my whole world
APART.

MOM

By Clinton Jarrett
VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

A swat on the behind
ushered forth our first
breath. Before eyes open
little smiles played on our lips.

What thoughts
are in an infant's mind?
This woman, our mother,
never failed to offer support
and seldom proclaimed judgement
even through our worst follies.

In her last hour we, her
children, watched over her
as she battled for each breath.
With her eyes closed,
little smiles played on her lips.

What thoughts accompany
her now?

As with the first, her
final breath arrives
by the will of our Lord.

I might as well go...

By Frank X. Mattson
VA Outpatient Clinic – Spring City, PA

There alone
Not sure why.
Lights over
A purple
Colored sky.
Tears cloud
A single
Guy
Underneath
That purple
Clouded sky.



On the Front

By Douglas Pederson

VA Medical Center – Bedford, MA

Shuddering sounds echoed over the battlefield,
Smoke rose from the cannon's barrage of fire.
Distal vision blunted by the bursting bombs,
Cries of pain from the wounded brave drowned out,
Photos of loved ones pulled out to view and hope.
Weakened arms beckoned for rescue,
Relentless efforts taken, a scrimmage to a safe haven.
Visions of survival emerge in the silhouette of dusk.
Wooden ammo crates brought to the front line,
The wounded carried back by stretcher bearers.
Water ladles dunked in pots to quench the parched,
Trenches laden with shells and bloodstained garments.
Facing perils of war, the brave remain in battle,
Fighting to protect their loved ones on the home front.
Waging war in conflict generates a heavy toll
On those left behind, weighted by the loss of life.

The Flag

By Scott Sjostrand

VA Medical Center – Bedford, MA

"Old Glory"
The "Red White and Blue"
Means a lot to me.
What's it mean to you?
It represents freedom
That came with a price.
It deserves respect,
A salute would be nice.
People burning it
As a sign of protest
Just don't realize
How much they are blessed.
Arlington Cemetery
Is a silent witness
Of our nation's
Courageous fitness.
People have sacrificed,
Let freedom ring.
When they play
Our anthem,
We should sing.
It's a thing of beauty,
Long may it wave
Over the land of the free
And the home of the brave.



Circus

By Tim Segrest

VA Medical Center – Albuquerque, NM

The circus came to town
the fliers flew
the clowns crashed
the tumblers tumbled
the ponies pranced
the tamers tamed
and I sat there
many years ago scared
afraid
because everybody
was bigger
and brighter
than
I.

Lord, Show Me

By Clive Livingston Brown

— Boston, MA

A Song of Deliverance

Lord, show me, please show me
the things about me that I refuse to see.
And if it doesn't grow me in the ways I should be,
Lord, I pray you take it away from me.

(Verse 1)

Lord, I know there's no condemnation
for those of us who are in you.
Still, I feel in my heart, conviction
every time I do the things I don't want to do.

(Verse 2)

Down life's winding road I sometimes get weary,
facing mountains high and valleys low.
Precious Lord, I need you near me,
guiding me in the way that I should go.

(Verse 3)

Lord, you are my strength and my salvation.
Precious Lord, you are my song.
I will sing of my redemption.
Lord, when I was weak, you made me strong.

Survivor

By Mark A. Aguayo
VA Medical Center – Prescott, AZ

The story begins in the year of 1968.
A young mother is scared because her baby is late.

The doc assures her that the boy will be all right,
but to survive, the rest of his life he will need to fight.

The struggle, as predicted, will be truly hard.
I cannot deny at times I wanted to pull my own card.

Learned to hustle on the streets, fighting in the ring and out.
School of hard knocks will teach me what life is all about.

Old man says he's had enough, tells me to never come back.
I was only 13!

I'll never forget what the punk said,
"You'll never make it as a Marine."

Next four years, criminal record gets a running start.
The Marine Corps is calling. From the streets I will depart.

Used the old man's comments to motivate my way.
Forget him! Who does he think he is anyway?

Born in Tucson, raised in the Corps,
one of the few, need I say more?

Made it home, now 21 and with a smile,
because no more hitting on this child.
Now a professional at getting buck wild.

I took a giant leap back to the streets. It's totally insane.
Spent the next 10 years drunk, wired and selling cocaine.

Straight crazy and wild, just 22 and still young.
I never leave the pad without packing a gun.

Blessed with my first boy at 23.
Damn, that little child looks just like me.

I will commit to love, teach him respect and discipline,
lessons of life from his father that come from within.

Never crossed my mind to hit my kid.
I had no worries, and what I asked is what he did.

By my side, my only child till his 12th year.
It's 2010 now and his little brother is here.

Very proud these two boys make me.
Naturally, I named them Mark and Anthony.

The choice, by Anthony, is to be raised by his mother.
I thank God to this day he still talks with his brother.

Life threw me a curve back in 2010.
A change in my world made my head spin.

I was blessed one more time. It's a girl!
Daddy's little angel, I call her Baby Squirrel.

Thank God for her mother, my beautiful wife.
She showed me love, how to believe in myself,
literally saving my life.

What she saw in this little hood, I will never know.
I can promise you this: dealing and to the streets
I never will go!

Now the plan is simple: finish school and get my degree.
I'll mentor Tucson's kids.
When they need help and advice, they will come to me.

A new life, this journey has begun.
No more looking over my shoulder, no more packing a gun.

Those days have passed. A gun I carry no more
since God knocked on the door to my heart,
and I opened that door.

In This Place

By Clive Livingston Brown
— Boston, MA

From where comes these incessant wounds
like forgotten soldiers
who bleed and march inside my head
and crush my heart till it is dead.

Here in this place,
ravaged by dark intrusions,
restless sleep and peaceful days
are but fleeting illusions.

Where is this place?
Though it feels like hell,
there are no embers in this darkened space
to thaw the coldness of death's stone hands
encasing this shallow grave.

Alone immured in this sordid place
where faceless demons hound my fate,
how terrible this horror, this dread
of living as the waking dead.

In These Moments

By Charles S. Parnell

VA Medical Center – Pittsburgh, PA

On the radio you hear Pavarotti singing
"Nessun Dorma"
as you do your sit-ups and other exercises.

Then you receive a card in the mail (for no reason)
from a friend, and you realize, once again,
why Emily Dickinson wrote her poems.

And later on, out of nowhere, the cat jumps
into your lap as you sit, lost in thought,
wondering what should be done next.

There are moments in the day that make
"Little Christmases" for us,
and a good day might even have more than these.

Appreciate these moments, each moment, every moment.
These are the things that give some meaning
and sense to it all. Things that last.

So, at the ballpark, when you feel the hairs stand up
on the back of your neck as you hear
the "Star Spangled Banner" playing, and you see
the flag waving in the wind,
and as the moisture forming in your eyes tells you
that you are still alive, you know life is good!

Treasure these moments. Yes, savor them,
and know that God is in his heaven,
and that he shares his heaven with us
in these moments.

Limbus Patrum

By Nicholas Lopez

VA Medical Center – Kansas City, MO

Through the obscure
You navigate the footprints
Of the souls
Who have come before you,
A distant light
Guiding your procession.
You asked to be on the list.
The priest guaranteed admission.
You believe life after death
Would continue beyond
At the Kingdom
Of your God.

Mourners
Who share your faith
Gather at the temple
Crying with a smirk.

The priest guarantees
You are in a better place,
Evil temptations no more.

Saint Peter waits ahead
But no gates in sight.
You pray to God
But no answer appears.
You dread
There is no heaven,
Death the only guarantee.
Why, father?
Why do you believe?

Missing You

By Tanya R. Whitney

VA Medical Center – New Orleans, LA

A gentle caring man
With a passionate deep love
For family, friends and community.

Giving always of himself
With a heart full of joy
To anyone who needed a helping hand.

A legacy that can never be surpassed
Though we will no longer hear his voice.
He will forever live on in my heart.

O God

By William L. Snead

VA Medical Center – Iron Mountain, MI

Take me out of this misty
cloud of gloom.
Lift me into your
Heavenly arms of softness.
Christ, your great Son,
Died for me.

Let your radiant light
Capture and enshroud me
Unto life everlasting
And into life Eternal
With Jesus, the Lamb of God.



The Defender

By Rosalie Cooper

VA Medical Center – Buffalo, NY

She joined the military to defend and protect,
Protect our freedom, our liberty.
Her duties she did not neglect,
She served with integrity.

Though the Army was her first choice,
She decided to change course.
She listened to her inner voice,
Joined the United States Air Force.

She still wears that uniform of blue
while she is in college.
A career she wanted to pursue,
She needed to gain knowledge.

To become a social worker is her desire,
Soldier, student and a mother.
In May, her degree she will acquire,
She wants to help many another.

Women veterans with MST and PTSD,
Women who have been abused,
With pain you cannot see,
Her care and compassion will be used.

Defending and protecting the red, white and blue,
Her intentions are sincere.
Helping women like me and you,
she will defend and protect us from fear.

The Angel Christmas Eve

By Anthony Coccozza

VA Medical Center – Los Angeles, CA

Christmas in the morning,
Christmas in the afternoon,
Christmas in the evening
With Santa and reindeer on the moon.
Christmas in my home,
Christmas for the families,
Christmas to help celebrate
With all my friends sincerely.
I hear the Angel sing
Above the cloud in the sky.
I hear the band playing
To celebrate Christmas for you and I.
Christmas is Jesus' birthday,
Christmas we all are praying for.
Christmas in our heart and soul,
We love Jesus, our Lord.

It's Still There. It Doesn't Hurt

By Peter Rompf

VA Medical Center – Syracuse, NY

Sitting here in this old oak chair
with the stain and varnish worn,
I remove my hands from the upholstered
arms, seeing how they're yellowed and torn.
I zip my jacket to hide my white stained shirt.
It still bothers me even though it doesn't hurt.
My morning coffee, now turned cold,
no longer a pleasure to smell or hold.
I put the cup down on the table nearby
while waiting for the phone to ring as the day goes by.
Looking at the photographs on the wall,
I notice they are crooked, faded, about to fall.
Cracks spreading on the plaster like stepping on thin ice,
webs in the corners reaching to entangle someone's life.
Checking the time, I look at the clock.
The room is silent except for the sound
of the empty tick tock.
I turn my head and look at the phone,
it hasn't rung. I am still all alone.
Opening the curtains to bring in more light,
staring at the sky, not blue, not bright.
Clouds so large, clouds so gray, it's almost
hard to tell it's day.
Choking the curtains, closing them with a jerk,
I stare at the phone, it smiles back with a smirk.
I look in the mirror on the door,
I see my reflection, I see it all.
I see the stain on my shirt,
the jacket still on, it doesn't hurt.
I look at my face
I judge every imperfection.
I look deep in my eyes
black pupils filled with rejection.
Running my fingers through my hair
reflecting on memories good and bad.
Memories of good times gone by
memories which refuse to die.
I pull my mind from deep space
back to the present, back to this decaying place.
Looking down at my shoes, the laces are broken.
I tie them together, and hide the knot so it is not showing.
Waiting for the phone to ring all day
I get up and walk away.
Down the long hall, I walk to my room
step by step. Another day will be over soon.
Turning the knob and opening the door
still trapped in this life I've led before.
Laying down and falling asleep, I sigh.
Maybe it will all change next week.

The Tear

By Robert John Valonis
— Stuart, FL

From nowhere it comes
Yet hidden within,
But shows itself
Time and again.

First grey then blue
Turning to black,
Darker and darker
A relentless attack.

Streams of pure anguish,
A storm of life's woe
Coming from nowhere
Disrupting the flow.

Sinking lower and lower,
Thus into despair
To unknown depths
Beyond one's repair.

Diminished embers
Become the result
Of constant bombardment
And endless tumult.

From beneath the ashes,
A smoldering hiss,
The beginnings of moisture
Form an abyss.

Droplets now form
A constant upheaval.
They look for an outlet,
They want to leave.

Making their way
To openings above,
Each finds paths
As they push and they shove.

Now on a ledge
Standing one at a time,
Not wanting to jump
But a push from behind

Causes a droplet
To fall gently down,
Lazily drifting
To the curves of a frown.



The Final Admittance

By Charles S. Parnell
VA Medical Center – Pittsburgh, PA

Like the Phoenix
Rising from the ashes
I am here.

The saving light
Lifted me from the dark
Into life.

The floundering about
In years of struggle
Seemed hopeless.

The way was unclear
The path uncertain
The journey pained.

Nobody had an answer
Nothing made things better
Even religion suffered.

At last, my final admittance
To the ward at the VA hospital
Where the proper medicine "clicked!"

Now, I am well again.
I'm back in "Group" and church
And am grateful.

The Judge

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

Great God of goodness
Judge me with honor
Judge me with mercy
Judge me with righteousness
Judge me with all of your heart
That I might be made clean.
Judge me in fairness
So that justice from you
O God will be my eternal
Light.



Would You Recognize Jesus?

By Karen A. Green

VA Medical Center – North Las Vegas, NV

Would you recognize Jesus
if you saw him face to face?
He always will forgive you
with his amazing grace.

Jesus could be
the bag lady on the street,
or the man on the corner
begging for something to eat.

He could be
the policeman on patrol,
or the convict
who is out on parole.

He could be
the teacher in a school,
or the biker
playing pool.

He could be
the child abused by her dad,
or the winner of a race
all excited and glad.

He could be
the driver of a cab,
or the patient in the ER
who had been stabbed.

He could be
the person you just called crazy,
or the hoarder
you think is just lazy.

He could be
a pilot in control of a plane,
or a farmer
harvesting his grain.

He could be the homeless man
in torn and dirty clothes,
or the florist
selling you a rose.

Would you recognize Jesus
if you saw him face to face?
He always forgives you
with his amazing grace.

Crossroads

By Diane Wasden

— Millen, GA

I am standing at the crossroads
of my life or my thinkable death.
I have been living a life sentence
to never forget.

I remember everything
that these men did to me.
Like an 8mm camera,
it plays over and over for me to see.

Their smell, their touch,
the memories are hard.
And for years it's been
a huge, painful, emotional scar.

You can't erase it,
it will always be there.
And sometimes in my walk uphill,
it's been more than I could bear.

There are times something can trigger a memory,
and like a huge boulder it will roll you over,
and send you backwards
from your recovery.

The road uphill is not always easy,
there can be a price to pay.
You never know by looking
how your road is paved.

Every road is different,
some can be happy or they can be sad.
But you must always remember
you hold your life in your own hands.

Do you turn right,
or do you turn left?
One way you will live,
and the other will be your death.

Each road is filled
with potholes, twists and turns.
One way you will make it through,
but the other will be your end.

So when you come to your crossroad,
you have to think it through,
because if you don't,
it could be the end of you.



Mail Call

Several *Veterans' Voices* authors have recently been published.

Richard J. Dillon, Peoria, Ill., has 10 poems published in *Echoes of the Prairie*, a 75th anniversary anthology of the Peoria Poetry Club.



A novel, *Hope in the Shadows of War*, written by **Tom Reilly**, Chesterfield, Mo., will be released on Veterans Day. It chronicles the day-to-day struggles of a combat veteran after he returns from the Vietnam War. The author, a combat veteran and psychologist, weaves one survivor's pain, struggle, and hope into an inspirational story that is realistic and magical. Readers will want to believe in the power of positive outcomes.



Martha F. Anderes, Cresskill, N.J., daughter of our founder, writes, "What a delightful surprise to find the wonderful heartwarming tribute to my mother on the inside back cover of the Summer 2018 issue of *Veterans' Voices*... We (she and husband, Bill) were flabbergasted to see such a wonderfully written summary of Elizabeth's dedicated devotion to HVWP. Her passionate zeal to make a difference in the lives of those who had sacrificed so much for their country never waned during her lifetime... I can't begin to thank you enough for shining a light on Elizabeth's life story and commitment to HVWP. Your tribute to her will hopefully help inspire the new generations of VVWP volunteers to carry on her cause. God bless you all!"



Thank you letters for providing copies of *Veterans' Voices* have come from the St. Albans Community Living Center in Jamaica, N.Y., the Detroit – John D. Dingell VAMC, and the St. Louis HCS – John Cochran Division.



As the representative for *Veterans' Voices* at the Hines VA, **Pat Kranzow**, Countryside, Ill., had the opportunity to share some of the writing from the Summer issue with patient, Rodney Robinson, whose poem was published in this issue. "As usual, Rodney was delighted to share some of the pieces with me as well as revisit his own work," she wrote. Pat had a writing workshop planned for September and hoped to get more submissions.



"Thank you again for the *Veterans' Voices* magazine and the opportunity of expressing our feelings and thoughts through the art of emotional and spiritual writing," **Albert A. Hernandez**, El Paso, Texas, wrote.

Shon Pernice, Moberly Mo., wrote, "Kimberly Green from Ft. Smith, Ark. wrote, 'I'll Never Be the Same as I was Before.'" I want her to know that she is not alone. We (combat veterans) need to network so we don't feel like we are totally alone and nuts. We peas need to fill the pod and heal our wounds." Shon has also been corresponding with another *Veterans' Voices* writer, Rich Wangard, Neenah, Wis. "We are walking the same walk," Shon says.



"I enjoy your *Veterans' Voices* magazine," wrote **Cheryl Castilow**, Clinton, Mo., a VFW Auxiliary member. "The life experiences of each veteran is like a history book that no one has read except the soldier him/her self. While reading the stories tears flow down my cheeks just thinking what the men and women have done for us to keep us free. I am an ordained minister and when I am asked to speak at a funeral, I use some of the poems that our veterans write because I know they come from the heart."



Thanks to Shon Pernice (right) and members of Vietnam Veterans of America, Chapter 70, in the Moberly Correctional facility in Missouri, a check for \$250 was presented to VVWP Board President Sheryl Liddle (left) at a dinner in June. Board Treasurer Marianne Watson and Administrative Director Pris Chansky, also attended the recognition event.

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.

Gifts of \$20,000 or more

Gifts of \$15,000 or more

Gifts of \$10,000 or more

DAV Charitable Service Trust (grant), Cold Spring, Ky.

Gifts of \$5,000 or more

Gifts of \$3,000 or more

Grantham University (grant), Lenexa, Kan.

Gifts of \$1,000 or more

Sheryl Liddle, Independence, Mo.

Gifts of \$500 or more

Women's Overseas Service League, San Antonio Unit, Texas

Gifts of \$200 or more

Howard (Buzz) Bigham, Omaha, Neb.

Randolph Byrd, Woodridge Ill.

Samuel J. Hall, Albuquerque, N.M.

Local Independent Charities (Combined Federal Campaign)

Pat's Knights, Pat Kranzow, Countryside, Ill.

Sarah Schroer & Kobi Mamun, Overland Park, Kan.

Vietnam Veterans of America 70, Moberly, Mo.

Rich Wangard, Neenah, Wis.

Gifts of \$100 or more

Helen Anderson Glass, Tucson, Ariz.

Don Brady, Tampa, Fla.

Disabled American Veterans No. 10 Queen City, Independence, Mo.

Stephen Fellman, Clintonville, Wis.

Jasper County Vietnam/ERA Veterans, Newton, Iowa

Karen Johnson, Westwood, Kan.

Deann Mitchell, Olathe, Kan.

Joyce M. Paltzer, Appleton, Wis.

VFW Auxiliary 2233, Detroit, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 4282 Fischer-Walter Memorial, Perryville, Mo.,

VFW Auxiliary 6248, Decatur, Mich.

VFW Auxiliary 8586, Perrysville, Ohio

VFW Auxiliary 9283 Southgate, Mich.

Gifts In-Kind

Grantham University, Lenexa, Kan.

Kansas Audio-Reader Service, Lawrence, Kan.

Kaw Valley Computer, Mission, Kan.

Summit Litho, Lee's Summit, Mo.

The National World War I Museum and Memorial,

Kansas City, Mo.

VA Medical Center, Kansas City, Mo.

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 or drawing. Photographers receive \$5 for every published 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' AWARDS

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*

David A. Andrews, Jr. Memorial Award: Prose reminiscing about learned values by Kathy Andrews.....\$ 25

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Kansas Award (Story).....\$ 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

WAC Veterans' Association, Arizona Roadrunners Chapter 119 Award: Written by a woman veteran.....\$ 25

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

POETRY

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

DAVA, State Dept. of Florida Award.....\$ 30

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

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

SPECIAL CATEGORIES

Joseph Posik Award: Given to a veteran who encourages other hospitalized veterans to write.

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

Larry Chambers Spirit Award: "How Meditation and/or Prayer Helped My Recovery"

by Anthony J. Williams (Story or Poem).....\$ 20

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.

SUBMIT ONLINE:
www.veteransvoices.org

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

Instructions for Writing Submissions



To submit writing online, go to www.veteransvoices.org/user-registration/ or www.veteransvoices.org and select registration. Once on the page, complete the registration form by typing your name, desired username, password and email (not required). Scroll down and click "Open Section" under "Military Association" and choose your branch of military service and how you served. If you would like to keep this information private click "undisclosed." Continue down the page and select "Open Section" under "Your Details" and fill out your contact information. Now click register and you will be directed to a login page. Log in by entering your username and password. Once you have successfully logged in, type a headline or title for your submission in the textbox.

When you have finished 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 Selection" under "Writing" and use this area to add your written piece by typing or copy and pasting into the textbox. Once you have finished scroll down and click "Open Section" under "Notes" to type additional information. If you are uploading a file, select "Open Section" under "Upload File" then click anywhere inside of the dotted box. Once you have uploaded and completed this section, click "Submit For Review" and your work will be successfully submitted.

Guidelines for Local Contests



Writing contests can encourage others to write. Announce such contests through VA Medical Center 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*.

QUESTIONS:
info@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	_____
<input type="checkbox"/> I certify that I served in the U.S. military	
Date Submitted to <i>Veterans' Voices</i>	_____
Title: Example: <i>What America Means to Me</i>	
Text: Example: <i>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.</i>	
Writing Aide:	_____
Typist:	_____

Goodbye for Now

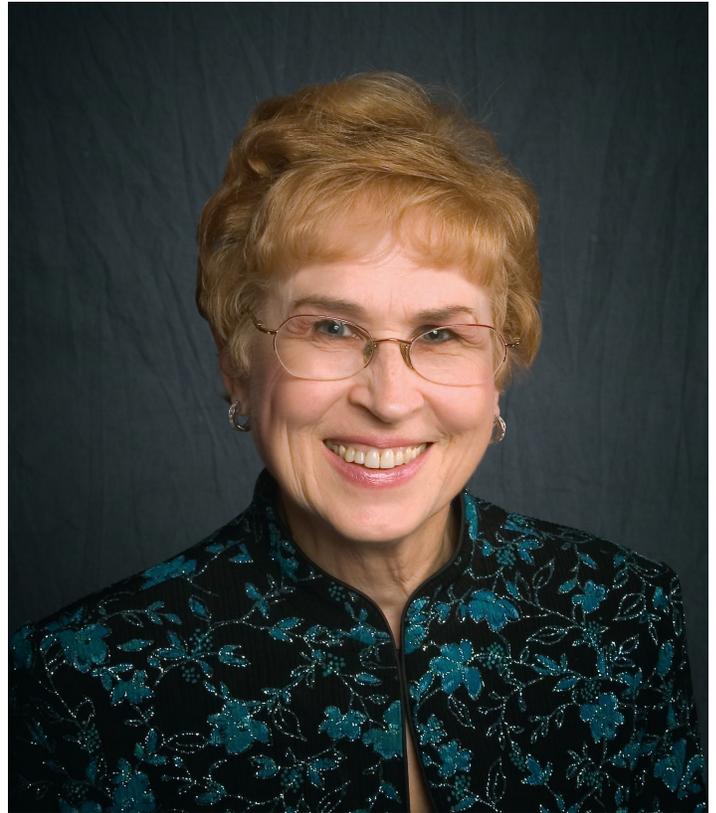
The heart and voice of Veterans Voices Writing Project will retire at the end of this year to pursue other interests and, we hope, transition back to volunteering for VVWP. By January 1, Pris Chansky will turn over the office keys to a new administrator and we will experience the end of an era. She is one of the very few associated with the project who knew the founders, Elizabeth Fontaine and Margaret Sally Keach. Sally Keach always called her Priscilla, but we call her Pris.

Pris came to work for Hospitalized Veterans Writing Project on Nov. 13, 2003, working three days a week from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m. On that first day, there were piles everywhere, including a stack of checks waiting to be processed, as no one had been in the office for more than two months. There was no email, the office was equipped with an outdated computer and a dot matrix printer. An old electric typewriter was used to address envelopes.

Since then, Pris has expanded her hours and become a true administrative director. She has guided various board administrations through a number of changes that include the establishment of efficient office systems, oversight of a move that took the VVWP office across town, assistance in the creation of a web site, decisions regarding an organizational name change, and accommodations for *Veterans' Voices* production resulting in the addition of an online version of the magazine. It has been a busy 15 years and she has accomplished much for an organization she first worked for as a volunteer in the mid-1960s.

A journalism graduate of the University of Kansas, Pris spent 17 years in public relations at the University of Kansas Medical Center and several years doing the same for the Liberty (Missouri) Hospital and Comprehensive Mental Health Services. She was co-owner of a weekly newspaper for seven years and has many years of association management for the National Federation of Press Women, United Federation of Dolls Clubs, Piano Technicians Guild, and Mid-America Congress on Aging, among others.

Pris has been recognized by several organizations for her community involvement and is a winner of several writing awards. She is a past volunteer board member of VVWP as well as many community organizations. Currently, she is vice president of Kansas Professional Communicators, an affiliate of the National Federation of Press Women, of which she is a life member. She is also a life member of the University of Kansas Alumni Association, Beta Sigma Phi and the Kappa Phi Club. She is proud to be a 10+ gallon blood donor.



Pris has one son, a grandson, and three step-grandchildren. She enjoys time with her family, including a recent trip to Alaska. When she retires she plans to spend more time with them, reading for pleasure, and playing her piano. The VVWP board of directors and the many writing veterans she has encountered as administrative director hope she will quickly transition from staff member back to working as a project volunteer. Thank you, Pris! Enjoy your new role and remember us!

I hereby nominate Pris Chansky to serve as a member of the VVWP Board of Directors. Is there a second? All those in favor, say Aye!

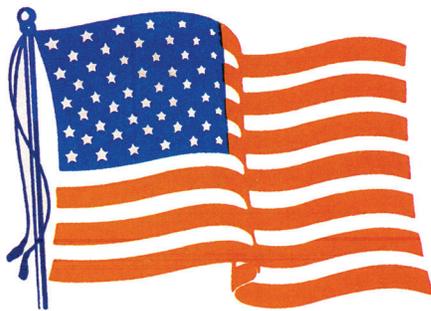
— Margaret Clark, Editor-in-Chief, *Veterans' Voices* and VVWP Board of Directors



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